



THE ROLE OF NATIONAL MINORITIES IN THE LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT SYSTEM

REPORT



Armavir 2022



The Role of National Minorities in the Local Self-Government System and the Impact of Consolidation of Communities in Armavir Province

Executive Summary

The local self-government system in the Republic of Armenia is based on the Law “On Local Self-Government” adopted in 1996. Aimed at building a stronger and more sustainable democracy in Armenia, the development of the LSG system reached its next milestone in 2015, through piloting the community consolidation program. The implementation of this program should have created an opportunity for decentralization and proportionate development, increase the quality of services provided in communities and make these more accessible for residents. However, as at the beginning of the process, as well as today, there is a fear among the population of concentration of administrative levers, economic opportunities and goods in the town or village which is the center of the communities to be consolidated.

These fears exist, taking into account the corruption practices rooted in the communities over the past 30 years, the disparities in the distribution of state support between the communities and their own material and technical capabilities.

The picture becomes even more complicated, considering that the RA population, being mostly homogeneous, nevertheless contains various national and religious minority groups. This research focused on the ethnic minority groups. According to the obligations committed under the *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities*, which entered into force back in 1998, the Republic of Armenia should ensure conditions not only for the full inclusion but also for the preservation of the identity and development of such groups.

To this day the issue of the involvement of national minorities in the public life and particularly in the LSG system in Armenia remains incompletely studied: official statistics and sociological data which would allow to clearly define the dynamics of the development of the situation are missing. Meanwhile, the available data about the decrease in the number of the population belonging to national minorities, issues related to learning of mother tongues, the low participation of representatives of such groups in elective positions at the LSG level, allow to assert that there is a problem. This problem can also be seen in that the communities inhabited entirely by national minorities are bypassed by community consolidation, considering the fears of these communities, and, on the other hand, being unable to offer the people of these communities a prospect where their social well-being and identity would not be affected equally.

The presence of communities of mixed population densely populated by Yezidis, communities almost entirely populated by Yezidis, the representatives of the Yezidi community and communities

populated predominantly by Armenians in Armavir province create a good opportunity for the study of this problem.

In the study conducted for this purpose, the methods of focus group discussions among the population and in-depth interviews with community officials were used. The combination of these methods made it possible to describe the main forms of interactions between the population and the municipalities and the existing perceptions about these, the perceptions regarding consolidation, the prospects regarding the greater involvement of the national minorities in the LSG system, as well as the assessments of the officials regarding the current situation and prospects.

As can be seen from the interviews, consolidation of communities in Armavir province had visible results for the population and proved its effectiveness from the administrative point of view. It was assessed positively both by the population and the officials. At the same time, the institution of the Council of Elders, despite the key role it received due to the proportional representation, remains invisible and is unable to fulfill the representative role assigned to it. When interacting with the municipality, the more active residents often prefer the informal, verbal application procedure, which, along with the seeming effectiveness, makes the relations with the municipality non-transparent and creates corruption risks.

As for the national minorities, the problem is left out of public discourse to such an extent that it is mostly ignored both by the population (including the respondents from the national minority groups) and the officials. The teaching of the native language, especially the opportunity to communicate with the LSG in that language, is perceived as unimportant and strange. Although the prospect of involving representatives of the national minorities in elective or administrative positions is on the whole viewed in a neutral-to-positive manner, in some cases it also creates a sharp resistance or is “neutralized” by irrelevant examples.

Within the framework of the project, recommendations were developed for various actors: civil society organizations, local self-government bodies, the executive and legislative powers, the Statistical Committee and the Central Electoral Commission, as well as the political parties which are institutions that play a key role in the development of democracy but are still in the process of being established.

This research seeks to understand the interactions between the new and reshaping local government system, democracy and different groups of people, particularly national minorities. Not claiming to present an in-depth and comprehensive ethnographic, political and economic analysis, this research only takes a look at the legislative framework, the law enforcement practice and the perceptions of community residents and community officials in today’s Armenia. The findings even at this superficial level may be of interest to the sociological community, local self-government bodies and civil society representatives active in anti-discrimination work, policymakers and implementers at state and local levels. Moreover, with its rather obvious gaps, this text can have a guiding role for future research works, which would perhaps be its greatest achievement.