

Monitoring report on Local and regional democracy in Norway. CG/2015(28)5PROV

Plenary sitting 28th Session of the Congress, Thursday 26 March 2015

Statement by Jardar Jensen, State Secretary at the Ministry of Local Government and
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Mr. Chair of Congress Plenary Session,
Distinguished members of the Congress,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Introduction

I am very pleased to have been invited here today.

I`m going to hold, as you put it in your jargon, "an exchange of views with Congress members".

Exchanging views - open and free debate - is central to the democratic traditions we value in Europe.

The fundamental principles which underpin European societies, are those of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

The Council of Europe has a proud record of promoting these core values.

Everything this organisation does should uphold these values.

Whether it is by Governments through the intergovernmental programmes, through the Parliamentary Assembly, or by this Congress, which brings together representatives from each of the 47 member states.

And as recent events have clearly shown, this Organisation's work in these fields is important and necessary.

Norway appreciate that the Congress promote and strengthen those core values.

The subject you have chosen for this session of the Congress:

"Local responses to human rights challenges – migration, discrimination, social inclusion", is timely and relevant.

There are indeed a number of worrying trends.

Democracy is not sustainable without its local dimension.

At the end of the day it is in our local communities and regions that we respond most effectively to the challenges.

It is in our municipalities that we promote respect for diversity, foster tolerance and counter extremism.

The monitoring report of Norway

Today, we shall be discussing your monitoring report concerning Norway.

We welcome the conclusion that the level of local and regional democracy is very high in Norway.

However, with regard to *the European Charter of Local Self-Government*, the report has two specific remarks.

First, that the principle of local self-government is not expressly recognised in the Constitution and legislation.

Secondly, that local authorities seems to lack appropriate judicial remedies against decisions of Central government.

As pointed out in the report, there are ongoing processes in Norway to introduce both constitutional and legislative changes. Let me comment on them briefly:

Three different proposals on changes to the Constitution concerning municipal autonomy and local democracy have been submitted to the Parliament. Hopefully it will be possible to reach a constitutional majority for one of these proposals.

The Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, in co-operation with other ministries, is now considering how legal disputes between the Government and the municipalities can be solved.

We are also considering ways to reduce the authority of the county governors to overrule the discretionary assessments of locally elected bodies.

Although I am unable to enter into every facet of your monitoring report, there are two subjects that I want to elaborate on:

First, the excellent co-operation we have between the Government and the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities and secondly, our local government reform that will change the municipal map of Norway.

1. Consultations between Central government and The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities

The Government has developed a framework for dialogue between the Central government and the municipalities, represented by the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities.

An agreement on regular consultative meetings between the Central government and the local authorities was reached in 2000.

It consists of 3 political meetings per year.

The meetings are organized in order to correspond with the main milestones in the Government's preparation of the budget.

2. Local government reform

The coalition between the Conservative Party and the Progress Party, backed by two other parties, provides a basis for a majority in the Parliament.

These four parties agree that a local government reform shall be implemented.

The reform will ensure that necessary resolutions are made during the parliamentary term, which ends in 2017.

The reform will result in larger municipalities that can take on additional responsibilities and more autonomy.

The Government will also conduct a review of the duties of county authorities, county governors and the Central government.

The ambition is to transfer more power and authority to more robust municipalities.

The Government aims to diversify authority, limit Central government micromanagement and give more latitude to individuals, families, local communities and enterprises.

The process forward

The processes are organized regionally, ending autumn 2015/spring 2016 with resolutions in each municipality of whom to merge with.

These processes are organized regionally by the county governors, in co-operation with the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities, which are invited to co-operate regionally.

Last week, the Ministry presented a comprehensive proposal on the tasks that can be transferred to larger, more robust municipalities in a White Paper to the Parliament.

The Ministry proposes that a number of tasks in several different sectors can be transferred to all municipalities, such as: dental care, rehabilitation, child welfare services and civilian police tasks. In addition, the Ministry proposes that the responsibility for secondary education and public transport can be transferred to the largest municipalities.

Additional tasks will give municipalities the opportunity to develop a more comprehensive and unified range of services for users. Hopefully it will foster greater interest in local politics. The transfer of tasks will be followed by complementary funding.

The White Paper also include proposals on how to limit Central government`s micromanagement of the local level, and a plan for reform of the regional level.

The Government will present a proposal for a new structure to the Parliament in the spring 2017. Thereby giving the Parliament the opportunity to reach a decision before the end of the parliamentary term.

The Local Government Boundaries Act states that inhabitants shall be consulted before the municipal councils make resolutions concerning new partners and bigger municipalities.

Such consultations can take place through a referendum, opinion polls, meetings or similar activities.

Conclusions

Perhaps needless to say, a very lively debate is going on in Norway, nationally, but not least locally and regionally.

The aim of the reform is to strengthen the local level's ability to carry out important tasks; simultaneously we need to provide the means for the local democracy to continue to be as vital as it is today.

A key to this is to involve the citizens in this reform processes. Legitimacy through citizen's involvement is what we aim for.

A reform which has a solid base in the population will most definitely have a higher chance of success. This can only be achieved through local processes where all views are taken into account.

Combining the best abilities of both the local and national level, lays a solid foundation for a reform being strong on legitimacy and results.

Finally, I should like to offer you my heartfelt thanks for giving me this opportunity to share my views on the report and the Government's plan for a new local government reform in Norway.

Thank you!