



**European Committee
of the Regions**

CIVEX-VI-046

137th plenary session, 4 and 5 December 2019

OPINION

Local and regional authorities shaping the future Eastern Partnership

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- values the Eastern Partnership and supports its further development;
- has become actively involved through developing and consolidating the initiative at the level of regional and local authorities;
- believes that local and regional authorities play a significant role in ensuring that the Partnership's objectives are achieved and calls for wider participation of local and regional authorities in EU programmes implemented in the EaP countries;
- recommends strengthening the institutional basis of CORLEAP, so that the Conference better supports the process of stepping up decentralisation in EaP countries;
- advocates strengthening the capacity and quality of public administration and supports the CORLEAP initiative to create an education platform for online training and set up a school of public administration in one of the EaP countries;
- recommends ensuring stronger support for initiatives to boost local and regional entrepreneurship, particularly among SMEs;
- points out that cross-border cooperation initiatives are an important tool which could help achieve EaP goals;
- believes that expansion of communications networks should be an important element of strengthening cooperation.

Rapporteur-general

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Reference document

Structured EU consultation on the future Eastern Partnership launched on 26 July 2019

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – Local and regional authorities shaping the future Eastern Partnership

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

General comments

1. values the Eastern Partnership (EaP) programme established ten years ago as a joint initiative between the European Union, its Member States and six Eastern European and South Caucasus partner countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The CoR points out that Poland and Sweden were the driving force behind the creation of the EaP as a structured policy that would support regional cooperation and strengthen the EU's relationship with its partners from Eastern Europe. The CoR believes that, over the years, the EaP has become an important instrument of European Union influence in the countries situated to the east of its borders. Over the decade that the EaP has been in effect, a series of projects and initiatives have been introduced supporting the implementation of essential reforms in the EaP countries and development of civil society there;
2. supports further development of the EaP in the next decade of cooperation with the EU, and advocates stepping up the involvement of the EaP countries with Union institutions and agencies, as well as EU sector-specific programmes, including involvement in decisions taken on the programmes and their application in the EaP countries. The Committee recommends progressively increasing the role of local and regional authorities, in the EaP countries in managing Union programmes implemented in those countries;
3. specifically urges that the legal framework determining the shape of the EaP be broadened, e.g. adding annexes to the association agreements signed by Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova enabling them to take part in the next EU programmes. The Committee therefore welcomes the European Parliament's initiative to widen cooperation with those three countries; the process of strengthening cooperation with them must be with a view to their becoming EU Member States. It is noted, however, that cooperation also needs to be extended with other EaP countries, which should include setting common partnership priorities for the EU and the individual countries, priorities that will form the basis for concluding framework agreements for further cooperation;
4. has become actively involved in EaP work, through developing and consolidating the initiative at the level of regional and local authorities. In a series of initiatives, such as setting up the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP) or the task forces supporting decentralisation reforms in individual countries (Ukraine), the Committee has helped to strengthen local and regional government in the EaP countries, as well as regional cooperation both between individual EaP countries and between those countries and EU Member States;
5. recommends strengthening the institutional basis of CORLEAP, so that the Conference better supports the process of stepping up decentralisation in the EaP countries. To this end

cooperation should be increased within the CORLEAP framework between representatives of the largest associations of local and regional authorities from the EU and those from the EaP countries;

6. points out that gender equality is enshrined in the constitutions and legal systems of all Eastern Partnership countries and that all EaP countries have ratified all of the most important international conventions in this area without reservations. The principle of gender equality is also firmly anchored in the EU Treaties. Article 8 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union requires the EU to aim to promote equality between women and men in all of its actions, and therefore also in the Eastern Partnership. It also encourages EU institutions to provide assistance through exchanging best practices in promoting women's political participation in local and regional authorities in EU and EaP countries;
7. believes that in terms of the EaP's next planning phase, local and regional authorities will also play a significant role in ensuring that the Partnership's objectives are successfully achieved. Thus the Committee expects that at the planned EaP summit under the Croatian Presidency of the Council of the EU its recommendations and opinions, drawn up in cooperation with the levels of government closest to citizens, will be taken on board by the European Commission and leaders of EU Member States;
8. points out that civil society and local and regional authorities (LRAs) have an important role to play in strengthening the rule of law: LRAs in EU and EaP countries constitute a fundamental level of democratic legitimacy and have a central role to play in promoting a rule of law culture and in monitoring compliance with the principles associated with it;
9. supports further decentralisation reform in the EaP countries, while respecting their autonomy with respect to their territorial and institutional set-up. The Committee therefore fully endorses the conclusions of the ninth annual CORLEAP meeting, which took place in Turku (Finland) on 12 September 2019, concerning the strategic approach to strengthening regional and local initiatives aimed at democratisation and decentralisation, including decentralisation of public finances;
10. backs the calls of some European associations of local and regional authorities to allow wider participation of local and regional authorities in EU programmes implemented in the EaP countries associated with the EU, including programmes for expanding sustainable planning and economic and social development, stimulating investment, and also in relation to local and regional infrastructure. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) should be a guiding principle for the EU and EaP countries and promoted as a basis for cooperation in all areas covered by the SDGs. Examples of such action might include EaP countries' participation in the URBACT programme and the Europe for Citizens Programme, as well as climate protection programmes such as LIFE. We also advocate extending participation in the TAIEX programme and twinning programmes to include local and regional authorities in the EaP countries;
11. supports the participation of local and regional authorities in the EaP countries in setting EaP goals and subsequently achieving them, while recognising the concept of different degrees of

involvement of individual EaP countries, and also upholding the principle of not creating antagonism between those countries;

12. recommends updating the 20 deliverables for 2020 based on the 17 global Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda, to support their implementation in the Eastern Partnership countries;
13. the European Union remains committed in its support to the territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty of all its partners. Full commitment, respect for and adherence to the purposes and principles enshrined in the UN Charter, the 1975 Helsinki Final Act and the 1990 OSCE Charter of Paris are fundamental to our shared vision for a peaceful and undivided Europe;
14. supports renewed efforts to promote the peaceful settlement of unresolved conflicts in the region on the basis of the principles and norms of international law. The resolution of conflicts, building trust and good neighbourly relations are essential to economic and social development and cooperation. The CoR welcomes efforts and the EU's strengthened role in conflict resolution and confidence building in the framework or in support of existing agreed negotiating formats and processes, including through field presence, when appropriate;
15. welcomes stronger engagement with all partners in modernising education, research and innovation systems, and improving their quality performance and competitiveness, while ensuring respect for rights already exercised of persons belonging to national minorities as enshrined in UN and Council of Europe Conventions and related protocols, non-discrimination of persons belonging to minorities and respect for diversity and fully taking into account the expertise of Council of Europe bodies when reforming these systems;
16. particularly advocates peaceful resolution of the conflict in the eastern region of Ukraine and the problem of the illegal Russian annexation of Crimea;

Supporting good governance in the EaP countries

17. advocates strengthening the capacity and quality of public administration in the EaP countries at all levels, particularly that of local and regional authorities. The Committee supports improving civil servants' qualifications and increasing transparency in the recruitment of public employees and in public decision-making, including implementing anti-corruption standards and making decisions on the basis of democratic mechanisms;
18. therefore welcomes the Union's *EU Anti-Corruption Initiative in Ukraine* programme (EUACI) being implemented by the Danish International Development Agency, which is financed through EU funding and co-financed by Denmark. The aim of the programme is to help local government reduce the risk of corruption, including through establishing sound and transparent administrative procedures, thus increasing transparency over the work of public authorities for the benefit of citizens, local civil society organisations and the media;
19. appreciates here the role of the National School of Public Administration in Warsaw, which following the Eastern Partnership Summit in 2011, under the Eastern Partnership Academy for

Public Administration programme, held nine training sessions for public administrators at different levels of government in the EaP countries;

20. notes here that from a total of 500 or more administrators being trained, only a small number were employees of a regional or local authority. It is urged that training courses organised by countries or EU institutions to boost administrative capacity in the EaP countries include more local and regional administrators. Governments in the EaP partner countries frequently argue that directly implementing and running Union projects by local and regional authorities in their countries is hampered by those authorities' lack of administrative capacity;
21. therefore supports the CORLEAP initiative to create an education platform for online training and set up a school of public administration for eastern Europe in one of the EaP countries, with the task of providing comprehensive and coordinated training, drawing on best European practice, for administrators at various levels in the partner countries. This would standardise the training process for staff in those countries (e.g. improving English skills) and would give them high professional and ethical standards;
22. commends the EU pilot programme, implemented through the TAIEX-REGIO PEER 2 PEER mechanism, for public administrators in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine; based on the principle of job-shadowing, this allows experience to be acquired in the EU Member States and that knowledge and expertise then to be passed on to participants' own authorities in the EaP countries. The Committee suggests increasing the participation of administrators from local and regional authorities in this programme and advocates opening it up to all the EaP countries. We welcome the launch of the European Commission programme seconding national experts in professional training (NEPT), which was designed for the EaP countries, as well as the announcement of a new phase of the programme for young professionals (EU4Youth) for those countries. Another way of improving administrative skills in the EaP countries could be for them to take part in the JASPERS initiative, which provides help in preparing EU projects;
23. supports partnerships between local and regional authorities of EU Member States and relevant authorities of EaP countries, as well as similar partnerships between local and regional authorities of EaP countries. Cooperation between regions, towns or cities and municipalities is an example of this type of partnership. Such partnerships could be an opportunity to share information and experiences, and for cultural and youth exchanges, organising training, expert visits, and work experience for administrators, as well as other activities;
24. is therefore pleased to note the success of the pilot programme for partnership between cities and regions from the EU Member States and similar entities in Ukraine (under the *U-LEAD with Europe* programme). This 12-month programme of cooperation under the auspices of the Committee of the Regions supported decentralisation in Ukraine, with a particular focus on improving economic governance, e.g. in the spheres of energy, tourism and rural development;
25. proposes that support for good governance at local and regional level in the EaP countries include promoting analytical and expert work on local and regional development, and that the most critical problems and barriers to development identified at this level be resolved. This

expert work could be set up by local civil society organisations (think tanks) and other analytical or scientific bodies in cooperation with similar bodies from EU Member States;

26. sees technical and organisational support for civil society organisations, local media and associations of local and regional authorities as an important aspect of good governance at local and regional level in the EaP countries.
27. considers another important aspect of supporting good governance to be that local and regional governments respect the rights of national minorities and include them in making, and subsequently implementing, decisions;

Supporting economic and social development

28. endorses all initiatives to support economic and social development in the EaP countries, particularly at local and regional level, and consequently welcomes the European Union *Mayors for Economic Growth* (M4EG) initiative, launched in 2017, which operates in the framework of the EaP. This should, among other things, enable local authorities to boost economic growth, e.g. through introducing regulatory changes, improving access to finance, developing infrastructure and human resources, and improving capacity to attract external investors;
29. with reference to CoR opinion CIVEX-VI/030, reiterates its call for official high-quality statistics to be made available in the EaP countries at local and regional level so that social and economic development can be managed more effectively and strategically. Wherever possible the statistics should be broken down by gender;
30. notes that the lack of such high-quality statistical data has made it impossible to reliably estimate the economic potential of individual regions or areas at local level and assess the effectiveness of socio-economic projects implemented by them, and has also impeded anti-corruption efforts and prevented the introduction of transparency in the social sphere;
31. also supports experience-sharing and expert assistance from the EU Member States in strategic management of local budgets, more efficient management of local services and introduction of participatory budgeting with citizen participation, etc.;
32. recommends ensuring stronger support for initiatives to boost local and regional entrepreneurship, particularly among SMEs, in the EaP countries, as well as promoting the principles of social entrepreneurship;
33. furthermore, recommends introducing programmes to support energy efficiency and development of renewable energy in the EaP countries, taking into consideration the need for these programmes to be decentralised to the local and regional levels, and therefore welcomes the *Covenant of Mayors East (CoM East)* initiative to promote and implement EU energy and climate policy targets in the EaP countries. This should in particular help local authorities in those countries to introduce sustainable energy and guarantee security of energy supply, and also to adapt to climate change;

34. supports increased participation of the EaP countries in the Erasmus+, Creative Europe, COSME and Horizon 2020 programmes, as well as other initiatives of this type, under the next EU multiannual financial perspective. At the same time, the Committee recommends establishing preferences in relation to how the EaP countries' participation in such programmes is organised, e.g. setting up of consortia between entities from EaP countries and EU Member States;
35. recommends promoting the principles of transparency and prevention of corruption in EaP countries in the case of joint projects carried out by local and regional authorities and local market operators including, for example, SMEs as well as foreign investors;

Development of cross-border cooperation

36. points out that cross-border cooperation initiatives are an important tool which could help achieve EaP goals, including in particular cooperation between the EaP countries and EU Member States, as well as local and regional development;
37. therefore welcomes the development of EaP territorial programmes (Eastern Partnership Territorial Cooperation Programmes/EaPTCs), involving selected local and regional authorities from four country pairs: Armenia-Georgia, Azerbaijan-Georgia, Belarus-Ukraine, and Moldova-Ukraine. These territorial cooperation programmes should be implemented as they have been to date between EaP countries, as well as between border regions of EaP countries and EU Member States;
38. points out that cross-border cooperation should have the following goals: development of people-to-people contacts; cultural and youth exchanges; experience-sharing among civil society and on the subject of how local media operate; scientific and expert exchanges to support decentralisation and local and regional development, and to help improve the functioning of public administration; and partnerships between local and regional authorities;
39. notes that cross-border cooperation could be organised along the lines of similar programmes operating in the EU. To that end it would make sense to apply the good practices of the Interreg programme, which has been successfully implemented in border regions of the EU for over 20 years;
40. with regard to the cross-border programmes, draws particular attention to the human element in ensuring that border areas of the EaP countries, as well as the EU, become areas of cooperation and often also of reconciliation. Small-scale people-to-people (P2P) projects, which might be separated administratively from larger programmes, have the potential to attract broad interest. P2P projects are designed to involve as little red tape and be as accessible as possible to potential beneficiaries (schools, hospitals, youth and religious organisations, etc.) by reducing the contribution required from these stakeholders; for the future development of permanent structures with legal personality, it could also be analysed whether a sort of "EaP Grouping of Territorial Cooperation" (similar to EGTC) could be envisaged;

41. believes that cross-border programmes should channel financial resources to selected local and regional authorities in the EaP countries and accrue experience on that basis, initially working as pilot projects;

Communications

42. believes that expansion of communications networks – road, rail, telecommunications, etc. – should be an important element of strengthening cooperation between the EaP countries and between them and the EU Member States;
43. therefore welcomes the creation of the *Neighbourhood Investment Platform* (NIP), whose activities are funded partly by the European Fund for Sustainable Development (EFSD) and partly from other sources based on a combination of grants and loans ('blending'). The EFSD also provides financial guarantees for these investments. By 2019, some 15 projects for EaP countries had been initiated or approved through the NIP, with funding of EUR 151 million, while as much as EUR 1.8 billion in total could be mobilised from all sources. Much of this investment has been earmarked for developing network infrastructure, including transport infrastructure. Some of the investment is earmarked for local infrastructure (under the *Municipal Infrastructure Investment Programme*);
44. points out that transport initiatives should not only be carried out with EU funding directly earmarked for the EaP, but also through programmes that draw on a combination of funding instruments ("blending"). The Committee therefore welcomes investment in the EaP countries under the indicative TEN-T Investment Action Plan and the possibility of activities under the Connecting European Facility. Some of this investment is also local in nature and is helping to develop communication links between the towns and regions of the EaP. Opportunities to draw on other EU investment resources and programmes should be increased, and the EaP countries should be given easier access to these funding sources;

45. believes that the EaP objectives would be better achieved by raising the ceiling for EU funding in the next financial (post-2020) perspective, and welcomes the European Commission's proposal to increase by around 25% funding for the new instrument earmarked for external action (*Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument*). It is important that there be a comparable increase in funding for the EaP, however. In addition, the possibility should be considered of dedicating specific resources from this instrument to implementation of the objectives by local and regional authorities in the EaP and for cross-border cooperation.

Brussels, 5 December 2019

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions

Karl-Heinz Lambertz

The Secretary-General ad interim
of the European Committee of the Regions

Pedro Cervilla

II. PROCEDURE

Title	Local and regional authorities shaping the future Eastern Partnership
Reference documents	Structured EU consultation on the future Eastern Partnership launched on 26 July 2019
Legal basis	Article 307(4) TFEU
Procedural basis	RoP Rule 41(b)(ii)
Date of Council/EP referral	Structured EU consultation on the future Eastern Partnership begun on 26 July 2019
Date of Commission letter	European Commission/EEAS letter of 16 July 2019
Date of Bureau/President's decision	25 June 2019
Commission responsible	Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs (CIVEX)
Rapporteur	Tadeuš Andžejevski (LT/ECR)
Analysis	18 July 2019
Discussed in commission	Exploratory debate on 14 November 2019
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Previous Committee opinions	
Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation	