



CORLEAP/010/2023

12th CORLEAP Annual Meeting
7 September 2023, Batumi (Georgia)

CORLEAP REPORT

What can we do together with our partners?

Continuation of the implementation of proven solutions
and searching for new, effective tools for cooperation
with local and regional authorities from Eastern Partnership countries.

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Identification of threats and opportunities

1. This report is a testimony of the importance given by the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) to cooperation and support for partners from the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in the democratisation process, creating appropriate structures for strengthening civil society, creating strong local and regional authorities and building a corruption-free zone in this region, and thus strengthening identification with the European Union.
2. The war in Ukraine makes us aware, in a brutal way, that the European Union cannot underestimate what is happening in Eastern Europe. It is in the interest of both the EaP countries and the EU itself to support democratisation processes and build appropriate structures guaranteeing the respect and implementation of the fundamental values of the European Union. The EU institutions have a co-responsibility to build predictability and stability in this part of Europe. The EU must counterbalance the Russian policy of violence and argument of strength in international relations.
3. Recent years have been difficult for several reasons: COVID-19, socio-economic challenges such as rising food and energy prices, and unresolved regional conflicts. All these elements translate into slowing down or even stopping the processes of empowerment of local and regional authorities in the EaP countries. The complex situation in the region has become even more unstable in the face of Russia's unpredictability and the resulting war in Ukraine. The constancy of the European Union is all the more advisable. We cannot allow the previous achievements to be squandered and turn back from the path of decentralisation and strengthening local and regional authorities in the EaP countries.
4. Ukraine is a good example of the effectiveness of the actions taken by the EU so far, including by the CoR. Investing in the process of developing local government in this country, fighting corruption and promoting the principles of transparency will contribute to increase citizens' trust in local and regional authorities. EU programs of training and exchange of experience have prepared local leaders who, in the face of the challenges of the war in Ukraine, can effectively lead their communities. The Russian occupiers are also aware of this effectiveness and the importance of local government leaders and try to eliminate them from the public space in Ukraine in a particularly brutal way. These people require support and protection, and any unjustified aggression against them by Russia should be met with firm opposition from the European community.
5. In Ukraine's situation, finding a balance between the concern about coming closer to the EU standards and the real possibilities of a country at war will be important. It is certainly important to ensure that the autonomy of local government in Ukraine does not become a victim of the war-driven consolidation of forces and resources in the central government. It should be emphasised that building a strong representative and participatory democracy is not at odds with stability.
6. Contributing to democratization of the EaP countries should not fall victim to the need to ensure stability in this region. Stability and predictability, yes, but not at any price, and certainly not at the expense of democracy because *democracy matters*.

7. Robust local and regional authorities with solid financial foundations are a pre-condition for functioning in accordance with the values of the European Union. Therefore, further decentralisation and providing local governments with necessary resources are necessary.
8. The increasingly complicated geopolitical situation in the broader Black Sea region, including Georgia, requires decisive steps to help Georgia advance on its path towards the European Union.¹
9. An essential issue in the context of future relations with the countries of the Eastern Partnership will be to pay special attention to rebuilding Ukraine. A *sine qua non* for stabilisation of the region is a stable, secure, well-functioning Ukraine.
10. We must be aware that by implementing the Eastern Partnership, we are not competing only with Russia but also with Turkey, China and, to some extent, Iran. Therefore, the EU offer for partners from the region must be even more attractive, tailored to their expectations. Effective implementation will not be possible without allocating appropriate funds.

Recommendations

11. The EaP should be treated as an instrument of limiting Russian influence in this part of the world, a kind of *cordon sanitaire* and a testimony to the superiority of European values over Russian imperialism. These values include strengthening local democracy, good democratic governance, corruption-free public administration and citizen empowerment.
12. Therefore, at every stage of engagement with the EaP countries, it is essential to emphasize the shared values that should guide our relations, i. e. the supremacy of democracy over autocracy, tolerance and equality over chauvinism, homophobia and hate speech, civil society over authoritarian governance, transparency over corruption. It is also important to offer a wide range of training, courses and consultations.²
13. Since gaining independence, the EaP countries have yet again found themselves at a turning point in their history. The task of the European Union is to help in the ambitious plan to continue the process of moving away from the post-Soviet state model and fostering a pro-European identity. It is key that the EU clearly presents the interdependence of stability and development of close relations with the Union and the implementation of its values.

¹ In his 2016 report for CORLEAP entitled "Developing civic participation as a way to strengthen local democracy in Eastern Partnership countries," Paweł Adamowicz listed Georgia, together with Ukraine and Moldova, as the vanguard, one of the countries most strongly integrating with the idea of the European Union. Despite the current challenges, no effort should be spared to make use of the pro-European enthusiasm of Georgia's population.

² Projects implemented under the broad area of 'reforms, training and general improvement of public administration' account for a large proportion of the assistance undertaken by various actors, including international organizations (EU and its agencies, UNDP) alone as well as in partnership with national ministries, agencies or foundations (e.g. BMZ, GIZ, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, KAS, Eurasia Partnership Foundation).

14. In this context, it is crucial to build the expertise of local leaders through the exchange of experience and training, including under the auspices of the Eastern Partnership Academy of Public Administration.³
15. It is important to create opportunities for partners from the Partnership countries to be present in Brussels. An example is the creation of the Lviv Office at the CoR headquarters. Lviv's ambition is that the office at the CoR should not only be an emanation of its own interests but a platform for cooperation between Ukraine and the European Union at the local government level. That is why it is so vital for this project to succeed. For this reason, and subject to budgetary and logistical availabilities, the CoR should support such initiatives of local and regional governments from other EaP countries and their associations (especially those with accession aspirations), taking into account their motivation to strengthen cooperation with local and regional authorities from the European Union's member states.
16. The CoR should actively participate, in particular through its Working Group for Ukraine, in shaping the policies of reconstructing Ukraine.
17. It is important to take advantage of the potential offered by direct relations between cities and regions from the European Union and their local and regional government partners from EaP countries. Twin/sister city and regions' relations should be further encouraged.⁴
18. It is important to take into account the capabilities of non-governmental partners, organizations and associations which direct their democratic offer towards the EaP countries.⁵
19. The potential of the Belarusian diaspora for the future democratization process of Belarus should not be underestimated.
20. Cooperation of the EU in general, and the CoR and local and regional authorities from the EU member states in particular with their counterparts in EaP countries and their civil society has a great potential and should be strengthened, using all available instruments for this purpose.
21. A very good analysis of the current "state of play" and possible future cooperation of the CoR and the local and regional authorities in the EU member states with their counterparts in the EaP countries, in cooperation and synergy with the partner institutions and organisations, can be found in the study "New avenues for functional cooperation with local and regional authorities in EaP

³ Supporting the sharing of practical experience along with strengthening the legal and institutional framework was carried out by GIZ (German Agency for Foreign Cooperation) in cooperation with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the EU in the South Caucasus region. Another GIZ initiative, "Promoting Public Administration Reform in the Eastern Partnership," engages municipalities in exchanging experiences on reforms through various formats, including e-government and digitalisation.

⁴ Examples of positive effects of this type of relationship include, for example, the involvement of Polish cities in helping friendly local governments in Ukraine affected by the Russian invasion. A good example here is also the organisation by the CoR and the Union of Ukrainian Cities, taking advantage of relations with partner cities, of the 2nd edition of a summer camp for children from Ukraine.

⁵ An example is the ALDA organization and the idea of Local Democratization Agencies that it implements, operating in the Eastern Partnership countries. LDA Mariupol currently plays a special role, which, despite Russia's seizure of this city, thanks to consistent international support, functions thanks to the hospitality of other cities in Ukraine.

countries"⁶, commissioned by the CoR. The study offers a number of useful practical recommendations.

⁶ The study and its appendices are attached.