

ACTION PLAN

2016-2017



CONFERENCE OF THE REGIONAL AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES FOR THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

The European Neighbourhood Policy, in particular the Eastern Partnership initiative, is at the crossroads. Following the Riga summit, which expressed a clear commitment to continuing the multilateral track, the need to explore synergies with the bilateral track has become more apparent. The summit emphasised that strengthening democracy and enabling functioning market economies, improving macroeconomic stability and the business environment, as well as enhancing interconnectivity, mobility and people-to-people contacts open up new opportunities for cooperation and also contribute to trade, growth and competitiveness.

Although EaP countries share a common historical background, they differ in their ambitions and aspirations as regards the intensity of relations with the EU and follow their own specific reform trajectories.

Rethinking the European Neighbourhood Policy raises not only questions of the balance between bilateral and multilateral approaches and the added value of these different approaches. It also requires a definition of their complementarity and articulation in order to achieve the objectives of public administration reform, including through a process of decentralisation, irrespective of the chosen degree of partnership with the EU.

The Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (hereinafter referred to as "CORLEAP") is the political forum of discussion, consultation, supervision and monitoring in respect of all questions relating to the Eastern Partnership at the local and regional level. CORLEAP will continue to pursue the common goal of the EU and Eastern partners, i.e. the establishment of a successful and prosperous neighbourhood based on the recognition of common values such as democracy, rule of law, good governance, the principles of market economy and sustainable development at all levels of governance and will therefore actively support the priorities set out during the Riga summit.

CORLEAP is taking up the challenge to continue its mission in today's dynamics while building on achievements to date, recognising the structural differences between the various Eastern Partnership countries and taking into account their specific aspirations and needs.

The Eastern Partnership objective to develop strengthened, differentiated relations between the EU and its six sovereign, independent partners was reaffirmed, with the scope to be determined by the ambitions and needs of the EU and its partners as well as the pace of reforms.

1. **KEY TOPICS**

For 2016-2017 the three core topics of CORLEAP activity are

- 1.1 Continued focus on decentralisation and public administration reform,
- 1.2 Exchange of best practice of public administration and economic development including in the context of territorial cooperation, and
- 1.3 Funding opportunities for local and regional authorities.

1.1 **Continued focus on decentralisation and public administration reform**

A lack of fiscal decentralisation and autonomy has been identified by the members of CORLEAP as one of the main pressing issues hampering the development of local and regional authorities. Working in close cooperation with its permanent observers, CORLEAP will promote the idea of decentralisation and will organise debates on how decentralisation can help to consolidate democracy, reduce corruption, improve justice and implement regional development strategies and territorial development. These meetings should be held mainly in the partner countries and in different geographical locations, not just the capital, taking the different options into consideration and based on the readiness of the host country. They should also aim to engage civic society, community organisations, trade unions, students, and key actors in the process of decentralisation in these countries. When implementing the EU policies and directives, particularly the Commission's communication COM(2013) 280 "Empowering Local Authorities in partner countries for enhanced governance and more effective development outcomes", the European Committee of Regions, acting through the CORLEAP intermediary, will seek much greater involvement of local governments in monitoring the decentralisation and public administration reform commitments in partner countries, especially those which have signed European Union Association Agreements.

Exchange of best practice of public administration and economic development with a focus on building the capacity of sub-national governments

Regional and local authorities have an important impact on the living conditions of the general public. They are actively involved in a wide range of issues, such as the management of water and energy supply, waste management, environmental protection, transport, education, culture, migration and social policies, as well as in economic development and investment.

The exchange of best practice in specific fields of cooperation creates added value for the political work of LRAs. CORLEAP supports capacity building by facilitating contact between political representatives and by disseminating EU governance standards and management methods.

Furthermore, CORLEAP will continue to advocate the establishment of relevant, specialised seminars/workshops in priority areas (similar to the Local Administration Facility for enlargement countries) in order to assist local and regional authorities in pursuing the goals and objectives of the Eastern Partnership.

Studies may be commissioned, subject to political agreement and budgetary availability, with a view to identifying good practice. This would allow CORLEAP to gain a better overview for assessing the situation on the ground and to keep a record of success stories to be further shared and promoted as an impact-multiplier within the respective countries and beyond.

Through intensive dialogue and the exchange of experiences, CORLEAP could contribute to the process of identifying a concrete means of activating the potential of local and regional authorities in the EaP countries to achieve good governance and create the necessary predictability for economic operators as a prerequisite for economic growth, investment opportunities and sectoral cooperation in areas such as energy cooperation, transport, environment, public health, consumer protection etc. Where appropriate, instruments such as the EGTC, cross-border cooperation and macro-regional synergies and strategies will be used in order to maintain coherence in the search for common solutions to similar territorial problems.

CORLEAP will seek to provide a unique common platform for direct cooperation between sub-national governments and their associations from the region.

1.2 Funding opportunities relevant to partner countries

A topic of particular interest for the work of CORLEAP has always been the availability of EU funds for the Eastern Partnership countries and, more specifically, local authorities' access to EU assistance.

CORLEAP could examine the wider issue of effective and sound public financial management at local and regional level as a precondition of EU funding and combine it with advice on the practical steps a local or regional authority should take to access those EU funds. This work can be supported by providing analytical documents regarding access, barriers and solutions to the challenges involved in using these funds.

Specific attention will be given to the role of public administration in managing international funds and the fight against corruption.

CORLEAP will promote eligibility, access and benefits for local governments from the region, particularly regarding promising EU programs (e.g. Europe for Citizens), with the aim of encouraging greater integration and convergence of partner countries with EU principles, legislation and standards.

2. POLITICAL DIMENSION

2.1 Representation of the local and regional level at the summits of Heads of State and Government

CORLEAP is a recognised partner of the Eastern Partnership policy. CORLEAP has been invited to EaP summits from the outset, representing the voice of local and regional players.

As an overall consideration, the work of CORLEAP should be perceived as a long-term process, supporting LRAs in EaP countries in their efforts to implement the necessary reforms and to confirm their legitimate place and role in the governance process as well as their full involvement in the national and European policy-making process.

The Joint Declaration of the Riga EaP summit in 2015 highlighted that the Eastern Partnership will remain an inclusive framework for cooperation and dialogue with a view to achieving sustainable, long-term, comprehensive reforms.

In Riga the role and place of CORLEAP was once again unequivocally recognised as a legitimate representative of the regional and local dimension of EaP policy.

"Summit participants also welcome the further steps taken by the Conference of local and regional authorities of the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP) in promoting cooperation at the regional and municipal levels of government." (point 25)

The final declaration suggested that local and regional authorities should be supported in an appropriate and targeted manner:

"They {participants} invite the European Commission to ensure appropriate, targeted support to local and regional authorities to assist their role in pursuing the goals and objectives of the Eastern Partnership." (point 25).

This direction will be closely followed by CORLEAP in its future work and will represent a basis for closer and continuous cooperation with the European Commission.

The EaP policy initiative, managed by the European Commission and the European External Action Service, has the possibility of channelling the messages that local and regional authorities wish to deliver to the state level. CORLEAP, by virtue of its strong factual contributions, is actively advocating for governments to recognise the importance of multilevel governance and local democracy. CORLEAP will therefore seek to ensure that the concerns of local governments and their associations from the Eastern Partnership countries are properly represented at the EU level, including through participation at European Committee of Regions sessions as observers where relevant. CORLEAP will also support the involvement of local governments from Eastern Partnership countries at the level of the European Commission and European Parliament as part of the process of monitoring and evaluating partner countries' commitments to the European Union (especially those countries which have signed European Union Association Agreements).

CORLEAP will continue to support the “more for more” principle and will promote consolidated support for partner countries which have signed European Union Association Agreements.

2.2 Contribution to the Platforms

Four platforms support the work of the EaP and constitute the pillars around which a structured debate with partners has been so far built up:

- Platform 1 "Democracy, good governance and stability"
- Platform 2 "Economic integration and convergence with EU sectoral policies"
- Platform 3 "Energy security"
- Platform 4 "Contacts between people"

These platforms are the backbone of the multilateral track and the CoR actively takes part in a number of them, echoing in particular the recommendations of CORLEAP in the context of the first platform. *(An overview of platform participation is provided in the appendix.)*

In this context, CORLEAP will also support EEAS efforts in the area of administrative capacity building. The EEAS Panel on Public Administration Reform working under the Platform 1 has selected the issue of local/regional government and decentralisation as one of its working areas. CORLEAP will therefore provide input to the work of the EEAS and will continue to further support the related activities (In other words, this cooperation will entail the active participation of CORLEAP members in the seminars organised by the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

2.3 CORLEAP as a "Territorial cooperation platform"

The conference and its members should further explore the potential associated with making a combined effort by reaching out to local authorities in partner countries as well as private, public, academic, business and government networks (the "**Territorial cooperation platform**" component of CORLEAP), which are linked by a common interest and objectives, to promote multilevel governance, enhance the credibility and acceptance of a relationship with the EU and communicate the benefits of this relationship for local and regional authorities. The ultimate goal should be to combine action and thus develop a synergy among the various stakeholders united by common objectives. CORLEAP has a role in raising awareness of the EaP partners as regards relations with the EU.

In addition, CORLEAP will undertake the task of further developing contacts between regions in the EU and regions in the Eastern Partnership countries. The CoR will continue its "open door policy" for CORLEAP events in Brussels, in coordination with its CIVEX commission.

Finally, CORLEAP will support the efforts of local and regional authorities in the partner countries to become involved in national decision-making and plans for reforms and modernisation. The consolidation of local government associations' capacities in partner countries will be constantly monitored by the European Committee of the Regions in its dialogue with the EU institutions responsible for EU programmes and funds in partner countries.

3. THE ROLE OF PARTNERS FOR CORLEAP

The members of CORLEAP and their national associations of local and regional authorities act as focal points for the local and regional dimension of the Eastern Partnership within their respective countries.

The Permanent Observers, namely the Congress of the Council of Europe, EURONEST and the Civil Society Forum (CSF) have a number of very important functions:

The role of the **Congress** of the CoE is complementary to the one carried out by CORLEAP. In the most recent policy cycle, CORLEAP co-operated with the Congress in the following areas:

- Common hearings and presentation of the monitoring reports on local and regional government,
- Observation missions for local and regional elections in the EaP countries,
- Presentation of CORLEAP activities in the Congress and of the Congress in CORLEAP-led meetings.

These formats of cooperation should be continued. CORLEAP involvement in monitoring national and international commitments to local government reforms will be consolidated, particularly in those countries which have signed European Union Association Agreements. As in recent years, CORLEAP will also aim to organise, together with the Congress secretariat, a joint meeting with the Congress in order to strengthen relations and complementarity.

A specific thematic field for cooperation is the development of local government. The activities of the **Civil Society Forum** (Subgroup on Local Government and Public Administration Reform) will therefore be welcomed and supported by CORLEAP. In the most recent cycle, cooperation focused on the priority of fiscal decentralisation. Successful work in that area should be continued and deepened. CORLEAP encourages a multi-stakeholder approach to local and regional development within EaP policy, based on close cooperation between local and regional authorities, civil society organisations and citizens. The involvement of civil society is of crucial importance for a successful reform process. Local government associations are one of the strongest constituency-based actors in society. Consolidating them further and strengthening their capacities supports decentralisation, democratisation and public administration reforms.

CORLEAP has been pro-actively increasing its contacts with **EURONEST**. Holding joint CORLEAP–EURONEST events is becoming a regular practice at the CoR OPEN DAYS.

CORLEAP further advanced its cooperation with the European Training Foundation (ETF) and will plan joint activities based on the Memorandum of Understanding signed between the CoR and ETF. In cooperation with the ETF, CORLEAP can identify the success factors for decentralised skills management through targeted optimisation of the vocational education and training (VET) school while reflecting regional and local needs and, more particularly, strengthening the ability of regional authorities to manage their new responsibilities.

CORLEAP, in cooperation with the ETF, will promote the entrepreneurial communities initiative. The possibility of disseminating the lessons learned from entrepreneurial communities in the Eastern

Partnership countries, in particular open innovation, smart specialisation and communities will be further explored.

CORLEAP has also reached out to the European Investment Bank (EIB) and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) in the context of the EaP-focused programmes and financing opportunities available to EaP countries and their LRAs in particular. This cooperation should be deepened, in particular with a view to implementing the 3rd objective of the working programme mentioned above. One of the first outcomes of this cooperation is the overview of funding opportunities which will be further developed and marketed.

In light of the conclusions in the Joint Declaration of the Riga EaP summit, contacts with existing and future EU programmes and initiatives aimed at supporting local and regional authorities in partner countries will be developed. CORLEAP has entered into dialogue with the Covenant of Mayors with the aim of continuing to develop such relations in order to promote and advocate for more engagement of LRAs in the EaP countries with CoM activities.

4. OPERATIONAL DIMENSIONS

4.1 Other possible topics to be addressed by CORLEAP meetings

- CORLEAP can organise debates on regional development strategies and territorial development with a special focus on economic governance, youth challenges and perspectives, as well as on enhancing their performance in providing specialised services. Empirical evidence could be collected and disseminated regarding the experience of the European Union.
- CORLEAP should pay attention to the latest developments in territorial cooperation between territorial authorities in partner countries and the EU cities and regions. In the area of territorial cooperation CORLEAP notes the existence of new instruments such as the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), and of other means of potential cooperation such as the establishment of macro-regions.
- CORLEAP can make use of inter-institutional cooperation between the European Committee of the Regions and DG Home (European Commission) and express its position on the development of anti-corruption instruments and the implementation of anti-corruption programmes in the Eastern Partnership region.
- CORLEAP could tackle the migration issue from the point of view of strengthening the ability of regional and local authorities to address these issues, as well as issues related to emergencies and internally displaced peoples.
- CORLEAP can focus on energy efficiency issues and the scope available to local and regional authorities. In this area CORLEAP could team up with the Covenant of Mayors and Covenant of Mayors East.

- CORLEAP will also offer its members from partner countries access to materials summarising the empirical evidence and experience of the decentralisation process in the European Union. The European Committee of the Regions continues to monitor the distribution of powers in the European Union and enlargement countries¹ and supplements this with data on fiscal powers in various policy areas.
- CORLEAP has produced an overview of EU, EIB and EBRD funding instruments entitled "EU financial assistance available to local and regional authorities in Eastern Partnership countries" which has been disseminated in the form of a booklet and is available in electronic format on the CoR website.

¹ <http://extranet.cor.europa.eu/divisionpowers/Pages/default.aspx>.

TIMETABLE OF CORLEAP RELATED ACTIVITIES AND PROPOSALS FOR ACTION 2016-2017

This timetable is a living document. It lists regular events and proposals by CORLEAP members, CORLEAP observers and stakeholders, as approved by CORLEAP co-chairs. Additional suggestions and proposals by CORLEAP members, CORLEAP observers and stakeholders are welcome and will be incorporated based on the approval of CORLEAP co-chairs. The timetable will be updated in the course of the reference period.

In accordance with its mandate, the CORLEAP plenary session shall meet once a year. The CORLEAP Bureau shall meet at least once a year, on the occasion of the annual meeting. One additional meeting may be held in the period between two annual meetings. The meetings could be held (upon invitation) in the partner countries. In urgent and duly motivated circumstances the co-chairs could convene an extraordinary meeting of the CORLEAP Plenary or Bureau, subject to budget availability and political necessity.

2016

February 2016

- Adoption of the CORLEAP Action Plan by written procedure
- 5 February: Strategic debate on ENP policy revision and the role of local and regional authorities in the CIVEX Commission meeting, with the participation of the CORLEAP co-chair, Anar Ibrahimov.

April 2016

- 22 April: EaP Platform 1 meeting (Democracy, good governance and stability) in Brussels

May 2016

- 12 May: CORLEAP Bureau meeting, Brussels
- 12 May: EaP Platform 2 meeting (Economic integration and convergence with EU policies), Brussels
- 23 May: EaP Ministerial Foreign Affairs, Brussels

June 2016

- 7 June: EaP Platform 4 meeting (Contacts between people), Brussels
- 24 June: EaP Platform 3 meeting (Energy Security), Brussels

September 2016

- 30 September: 6th Annual CORLEAP meeting, Brussels

October 2016

- 11 October: CORLEAP-EURONEST thematic seminar at the European Week of Regions and Cities on "Eastern Partnership territorial and parliamentary cooperation: Advancing economic development, entrepreneurship and research & innovation", Brussels
- 26 October: High-level conference on "Fostering sustainable development in Eastern Partnership countries", co-organised with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of RA, Ministry of

December 2016

- 5 December: EaP Platform 1 meeting (Democracy, good governance and stability) in Brussels
- 6 December: EaP Platform 2 meeting (Economic integration and convergence with EU policies), Brussels
- 15 December: EaP Platform 4 meeting (Contacts between people), Brussels
- 20 December: EaP Platform 3 meeting (Energy Security), Brussels

Events supported by CORLEAP:

- 26 April: workshop “Dialogue between Citizens and Institutions” on local governance in Belarus, organised by ALDA- The European Association for Local Democracy, at the European Parliament, Brussels
- 7 July: Partner meeting for the opening of a Local Democracy Agency in Odessa, Gdansk

2017

February 2017

- 28 February: joint conference with the Congress on "The role of local and regional authorities in preventing corruption and promoting good governance"

March 2017

- 3 March: Opening of Local Democracy Agency in the Republic of Moldova, Cimislia

April 2017

- 27 April: EaP Platform 1 meeting (Democracy, good governance and stability), Brussels

May 2017

- 18 May: EaP Platform 2 meeting (Economic integration and convergence with EU policies)
- 22 May: CORLEAP Bureau meeting, Minsk

June 2017

- 6 June: EaP Platform 4 meeting (Contacts between people), Brussels
- 23 June: EaP Platform 3 meeting (Energy Security), Brussels

September

- 12 September: 7th Annual CORLEAP meeting, Brussels

October 2017

- 12 October: Thematic seminar at the European Week of Regions and Cities in cooperation with EURONEST on "Improving governance and preventing corruption in the EU and EaP countries", Brussels
- 24 October: Conference in Yerevan on "Development and implementation of Community Development Information System", co-organised with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Development of the Republic of Armenia.

October/November 2017

- Platform meetings (Democracy, good governance and stability – Platform 1, Economic integration and convergence with EU policies – Platform 2, Energy Security – Platform 3 and Contacts between people – Platform 4)

Events supported by CORLEAP:

- 15-16 September: event on enhancing cooperation between civil society and local authorities in Ukraine, co-organised by the City of Gdansk and ALDA - The European Association for Local Democracy - within the "Week of Democracy", Gdansk
-