

Decentralised cooperation and community approach as a tool for a strengthened cooperation between the European Union and Eastern Partnership Countries

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1. Abstract

Local authorities and local communities are the most effective problem solvers if they have the possibilities to have their own decision-making and resources. The process of decentralisation and empowerment of local communities and the participative approach is one of the most challenging ones of these last years in the Eastern Partnership countries. Thanks to decentralised cooperation, which engages local authorities and local communities in international cooperation, it is possible to develop projects and activities that support local democracy and economic and social development. They are also creating strong links between communities and citizens, creating dialogue and trust.

Decentralised cooperation is an exercise of shared values of good local governance and citizens' engagement and community approach to decision-making process. It could therefore be further strengthened and valorise to make closer the different communities from the EU and from Eastern Europe on a value based relationship. Examples and showcases support this evidence.

Countries of Eastern Partnership (as detailed in the present paper) have a great potential to cooperation with local governments and local communities in the EU despite difficulties and challenges. In order to unlock all the possibilities of decentralised cooperation in Eastern Partnership countries, engaged with local governments and communities in the EU, it would be highly recommended:

- To support further decentralisation and full autonomy of local governments and regional governments in EaP, attributing to them resources and competences to have their own decision making process and so being fully actors of local development and also capable to be engaged in decentralised cooperation
- To support clearly the cities and regions, and communities, in the EU willing to engage in Decentralised cooperation and therefore contributing to decentralisation and local governance in EaP with an excellent ratio between resources invested and good results and actions

- To support decentralised cooperation to find a sure and alternative ways to work against prejudices among different communities and countries
- To support all possible activities engaging a mutual cooperation between Civil Society and Local Governments as examples and tools of democratic and participative problem solving
- To support the programme of the Local Democracy Agencies, run by ALDA, as one of the most effective instrument supporting decentralised cooperation and creating synergies for the municipalities, regions and community engaged.

2. Keywords

Decentralised cooperation: Is the form of cooperation, which engages local governments and regions from different countries. It develops long-standing cooperation and projects and it engages reciprocity of actions. It is also based on twinning agreements or relationship between sister cities. But it can also be based on projects and more thematic and ad hoc cooperation. It is usually involving not only institutions but also communities, civil society organisations and citizens. It wants to support local democracy and local developments with best practices exchanges and project where both the communities are contributing. It is also a form, in some cases, of “City diplomacy” where local elected officials are sharing contacts with their counterparts and help to solve local problems and overcoming more national issues.

Local Democracy²: Local self-government outlines the right and the ability of local authorities, within the limits of the law, to regulate and manage a substantial share of public affairs. In a local democracy this right is conferred to councils or assemblies composed of members freely elected by secret ballot and directly accountable to their own local constituency. This adheres to the principle of subsidiarity, which ensures that problems are addressed by those institutions and civil society groups that are most competent and closest to citizens. Local democracy cannot be understood as a mere subdivision of the powers of the state or state institutions at the local and regional level. Appointed representatives of the central government (without accountability to local communities) - such as prefects and regional/local commissions of the state - do not enhance the possibility of *local democracy* as accountability runs upwards to central government. It includes:

- **Full and exclusive exercise of power:** in accordance with the law, local authorities’ prerogatives should not be undermined by the central or regional level;
- **Appropriate financial compensation:** local authorities should receive adequate financial resources, proportional to the exercise of the office – alongside **budgetary autonomy** – local authorities should control their own financial resources, which should partly derive from local taxes and charges;
- **Self-determined administrative supervision:** any administrative supervision of the local authorities’ activities by other bodies may be exercised only if in compliance with the law;

² <http://www.epd.eu/wp-content/uploads/EPD-Fact-Sheet-Local-democracy.pdf>

- **Legal protection:** local authorities may have recourse to a judicial remedy in order to secure free exercise of their powers and respect for principles of local self-government.
- The legal and structural profile of local democracy should be embedded in a broader community approach to be successful. This implies a **participative approach** to local decision-making, involving different people in the community through practices such as participatory budgeting at the local level or citizens' panels.

Local Governance: Local governance is the rules and ways adopted for managing local authorities and communities at the local level. It is engaging public institutions but also civil society and private actors.

Community approach: It is a way of local governance that puts the dialogue, consultation and partnership at the core of the problem solving addressed by local and regional authorities³.

Local Democracy Agencies⁴: The Local Democracy Agencies are permanent platform of cooperation between communities (local governments and civil society groups) from the EU and from cooperation countries. They are registered Civil Society organisation and are a constant stimulus of local governance and decentralised cooperation engaging local stakeholders and international partners. They exist in the Balkans, in Eastern Partnership Countries and in the Mediterranean area. They are promoted and coordinated by ALDA – The European Association for Local Democracy.

³ <http://www.coe.int/en/web/ingo/civil-participation>

⁴ <http://www.alda-europe.eu/newSite/lda.php>

3. Objectives

The objective of the research is:

- To outline the **existing level and content of cooperation between local governments and their communities in the European Union, in the Eastern Partnership Countries**
- To identify **added value and difficulties** of this cooperation as for its potential to advance dialogue and mutual understanding between institutions and citizens in the EU, EaP
- To suggest paths for future **cooperation and empowerment of these instruments of cooperation**

4. Introduction

The strengthening and further *democratisation* of local governments⁵ in the countries of the Eastern Partnership⁶ is among the institutional challenges and innovation that followed the end of the Soviet Union. Introducing a more democratic approach would mean necessarily to valorise the role of elected council and further develop practices of citizen dialogue at the local level. By joining the Council of Europe - with the exception of Belarus⁷ -, these countries have engaged in a process of decentralisation and creation of a system of elected and autonomous local governments. This institutional setting was mostly put in place in the troublesome years from 1990 to 2005. The new members of the Council of Europe ratified, with some relevant limitations, the European Charter on Local Self Government. The Congress of the Council of Europe is regularly carrying out monitoring missions of the implementation of the Charter and providing the institutions of these countries with recommendations or highlighting major discrepancies between commitments and the real implementation.

The process of decentralisation and strengthening of local democracy (which should be translated into elected local councils accompanied by decentralised competences and resources) brought great expectations but also disappointment. Real decentralisation is not a blunt administrative process but it aims at de-concentrating powers and resources from central institutions in countries where the political structure is often highly centralised in the governmental structures, in the best case, or in a small group of individuals' hands, in the worst one⁸.

On the other hand, all the EU Member States broadly share decentralisation and local governance as a transversal concept of good governance. Local governments are stakeholders of action and project for a strong cooperation in order to enhance dialogue

⁵ Local Governments referring general to a more global concept of non-central government. They can be municipalities, regions, provinces or any other that will be further in detail described.

⁶ Moldova, Belarus, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia

⁷ Belarus is however partner of the Eastern Partnership, together with the other five countries.

⁸ For more info, an example is the Ukraine case. See Carnegies' work here :

<http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=64847>

and mutual understanding with the countries of the Eastern Partnership. Local Governments having a more pragmatic approach for solving problems (than national institutions or politics) and being less entangled in international and macro politics, are engaging naturally in a dialogue and cooperation with citizens. They could actually be an effective instrument for better cooperation and knowledge between different communities, in these times, which are building division and barriers rather than mutual understanding.

This cooperation is now known as city to city cooperation or, community to community cooperation. It also has the name of Decentralised cooperation and we shall assess here the potential of this cooperation in creating dialogue and understanding between the EU and the Eastern Countries of Europe.

5. Development

With up and downs, with hopes met and those missed, the process of consolidation of local governments and local democracy are among the targets of the European Union policies for supporting good governance, democracy, peace and stability in Eastern Europe. This regards the constitution of more appropriate settings of territorial governance and subdivisions⁹ as well as various legislative processes (even constitutional) that would allocate resources and competences to local and regional governments for better governance, transparency and accountability. This option for the future of the Eastern Partnership countries is not questioned even difficult to be achieved.

Local governments as actors of cooperation between EaP and EU stakeholders, the essence of decentralised cooperation

While they acquire autonomy, resources and competences, local governments become actors of their own territorial and social development. It includes, or should include, a local democracy perspective and a community approach with a more direct and tight relationship between citizens and civil society and local elected leadership and its administration. On one hand, the first link between local governments and citizens is based on elections. On the other hand, it is also enshrined in a constant dialogue and joint work, which is essentially composing the broader spectrum of what *local democracy* should be about. Decentralised co-operation is also a tangible effect of decentralisation of the competences of the State.

Contacts and cooperation between local governments and communities from the European Union and the Eastern Partnership Countries already exist in different forms: some are more old fashioned, like the well known institutional city-twinning, some are more recent like community development and Decentralised Cooperation or even only based on single projects and actions. The funding allocated for this cooperation can be either local/regional (directly coming from the partners involved¹⁰) or from the national and international institutions. The EU programmes are also sponsoring and focusing on this kind of cooperation with focused programmes and funding¹¹. The programmes regard both democratic aspects of the governance (i.e. how to engage with citizens and civil society organisation) and technical aspects of local government (i.e. how to provide services to citizens, how to develop a plan for urbanisation, pilot projects for one stop shop in local governments, etc.). Territorial cooperation promoted by the EU is also providing good basis for the community-to-community approach (i.e. Cross Border Cooperation programmes, and EGTC – European Group of Territorial Cooperation¹² - for EaP countries).

⁹ Territorial reforms have been going on recently in Armenia and in Ukraine and they took place earlier in Georgia. Most of them looking for a reduction of local governments but also in strengthening the new ones with more competences and resources.

¹⁰ For instance, almost all Italian regions, for instance, have their own resources for being engaged in international cooperation and they support their civil society and local governments with these means

¹¹ Ref to the programme NSA/LAs of the European Commission – Non State Actors and Local Authorities

¹² http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/cooperation/european-territorial/egtc/

The added value of this local government/community to community cooperation has been highlighted in the recent publication of the Local Democracy Library of ALDA - the European Association for Local Democracy Agency¹³. **This kind of cooperation reaches a very good ratio between results and financial investments (since it engages often more human capital and other sources of knowledge than financial support) and a capacity of direct relationship between communities, bypassing more structural divisions either cultural (prejudices) and practical (these communities would rarely have the chance to meet and know from others if not through these programmes).** A recent assessment presented at the General Assembly of ALDA in Paris in May 2016 showed that the supported offered by the partners of Decentralised cooperation was multiplied twenty times by the Local Democracy Agencies, within a few years, with programmes and activities supported locally and internationally.

Another valuable element to be highlighted is the potentiality of decentralised cooperation and community cooperation to open new possibilities of contacts and relations, which are *bypassing* more “highly political and sensitive” settings. It creates a constant level of cooperation between people with exchanges, day-to-day work, groups of students and community approach, which is avoiding blockades of suspicion and, sometimes, fears. In some case, as it could happen with some territories of the Eastern Partnership, it could be the only rare contact with EU communities and it could open up then people’s approach and understanding. That is also valid the other way round, by giving the opportunity to European citizens to get in touch directly with institutions and citizens from the Eastern Partnership Countries and potentially, reducing the distance and prejudices between them. It is maybe here useful to refer to the important and positive experience made in the Balkans where decentralised cooperation has been one of the major elements of cooperation during the recent wars as well as in the immediate post-war situation. In particular, during the embargo imposed on Serbia run by Slobodan Milosevic, decentralised cooperation and community approach, left the channels of cooperation open and paved the way for a future joint work. We also often quote here the concept of City Diplomacy as a potential further tool in stability and peace building support¹⁴.

The EU and global support do Decentralised Cooperation

Local authorities have been recognised – as determined by most of the European countries’ legislation – as potential actors of international cooperation.

The beginning of this trend has been, first of all, recognised formally in the *twinning* between cities. This form of co-operation has been, and still is, very important for increasing the direct exchanges and contacts between citizens and their associations inside Europe. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, twinings have been even more important with East European countries. Nevertheless, besides the institutional and registered

¹³ https://issuu.com/alda51/docs/139-paper_eap_issueno1_av

¹⁴ https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/20070400_cdsp_paper_pluijm.pdf

“twinning”, this co-operation has also taken place at a more informal level, with specific activities in social and economic field. Local authorities started developing their own initiatives in international co-operation by transferring their know-how and best field of expertise. New provisions have been included regarding the international decentralised co-operation in Europe and have ratified an on-going process. Formal recognition of a pro-active approach of the local authorities is still slow since it is oriented towards the decentralisation of competencies traditionally belonging to government (such as foreign policy). However, an evident progress in this respect has been confirmed and accentuated over the past years, particularly during the mid of nineties.

Beside the legal issues and the possibility for the local authorities to be involved in the international matters, it is a matter of fact that the international relations became increasingly interesting for them as a segment of “national” policies and priorities. A *de facto* action of local and regional authorities acting at the international level has been visible in different fields. This process was taking place simultaneously with a general opening of the communities to global issues. Today, each citizen might be affected – directly or indirectly – by events taking place anywhere in the world. This concern of being a part of “global” community and, consequently, how the people representing us (the political representatives) are addressing these global issues, is one of the key elements for them to be voted. Interest for international issues may be considered as moral (peace, balanced development, human rights) and economic (stability, development, opening of new markets). In both cases, globalisation of difficulties and opportunities is going deep in everyone’s life in Europe. Therefore, local authorities across Europe are not only invited but also inevitably requested to be active in international matters. In this way an open-minded approach is being accompanied, helping citizens understand better the existing diversities and increase the level of acceptance of different cultures so as to foster the co-operation and exchange programs. The rigid concept of sovereignty has been overcome thus bringing forward active participation of local authorities in international matters.

European Union level: A masterpiece of the role of local governments engaged as actors of international cooperation and development:

COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Empowering Local Authorities in partner countries for enhanced governance and more effective development outcomes¹⁵

The Communication affirms that the Local Authorities represent a fundamental actor for democracy and for development in their country and in cooperation countries. For doing so, they need to be recognized as autonomous authority, based on democratic processes and be given necessary resources to function and deliver services. It envisages some specific

¹⁵ COM(2013) 280 final

supports for **unlocking the potentiality of local authorities** and considers a condition sine qua non the development of decentralization processes as well as a necessary empowerment legislative and administrative but also of human resources, of local authorities. The Communication highlights the need to work on the local authorities in order to address the worldwide issue of sustainable urbanization. A particular attention is also raised on the role of Association of Local Authorities.

The Communication paved the way for the future model of funding from the European Commission to Local Authorities.¹⁶

United National level: Another fundamental milestone enshrining the role of local authorities in development and cooperation matters:

Localizing Sustainable Development Goals¹⁷

The Sustainable Development Goals have been adopted by the United Nations in 2015 and they set the target in the field of Development for the planet till 2030. They represent the follow-up of the past Millennium Development Goals. They have been articulated in 17 major objectives, which start with ending poverty in all its form and everywhere, to gender equality and take urgent steps to combat climate change. One of the goals address specifically “make cities and human settlement inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”. In addition to this, a cross cutting approach to the implementation and the action plan for the future, is trying to have a development with local actors and stakeholders. How will this be able to articulate the major objectives thanks and through the local authorities and civil society is part of the process initiated and called “localization of the SDGs”¹⁸. In this fits the support given by to the decentralised cooperation approach where the local authorities have a major place in development policies.

Decentralised cooperation and decentralisation, a tight relationship and a European feature

The topic of decentralised cooperation is here intrinsically linked to development and strengthening of decentralisation and territorial reform. Local Authorities need to be autonomous and have an independent (from the central government) policy and decision-making process in order to be real actors in cooperation to development.

Political integration and economic development in the EU has been always heading in this direction. The more effective was the integration among the EU member States, the stronger was implemented the concept of decentralisation. The EU is based on decentralised States to achieve better its goals. Therefore, each country was strengthening

¹⁶ See also the position of the European Parliament on the Role of Local Authorities for Development in 2015.
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P8-TA-2015-0336+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>

¹⁷ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>

¹⁸

the role of local and regional authorities (legislation, own budget, own taxes etc.). Cities and villages were included into the process and acquired a significant independence in their policy making. Since local authorities express the voice as well as those of the interests of citizens, this management proved to be more democratic and bottom up and appropriate within the context of European integration. Even though the political back up of the European integration does not seem to be as strong as it was ten years ago, this system still exists as such and features Europe from other regions of the world.

The power of regions and local authorities in comparison to the power of central government is reflected in the concept of “Europe of the Regions”, which actually was in fact put in place. The majority of the policies of development in Europe are based on collection of data and implementation modelled on macro areas (or regions). The budget of European support is based on samples from regional and local authorities. The process of collecting information is a long-term process and involves all the stakeholders interested in participation at the regional level. The result of this approach is a map of Europe, based on various requests, levels and conditions of the development of the regions (or macro regions/space, sharing similarities) and not the map based on the countries borders solely.

Decentralised cooperation represents both a cause and a consequence of decentralization in Europe. Thanks to the principle of powerful and independent regions and local authorities, the EU develops policy and programmes of cross border cooperation creating single economic and historical space working with the regions from different countries. Some of examples are Baltic region, Danube region and Adriatic regions. The policy of the EU assists this process. Local authorities gained their formal role in Europe: they have their own consultative Committee – Committee of the Regions, in which the representatives of regions and municipalities take part. They provide advice and express opinions on the projects of European legislations and regulations. During the last years the EC has provided local authorities with many financial possibilities for implementing their own projects on the variety of topics. Therefore, there are many regions having their representatives in Brussels. As for decentralized cooperation, the EU constantly improves their direct support to local authorities for developing their cooperation with partner countries.

Strengthen Decentralised cooperation, an added value in EaP

Decentralised cooperation going on in EaP and has globally little visibility and it is not enough known and valorised yet, while most of the efforts as for this topics is concerned go to cooperation with Africa and South America, with limited cases for Asia. Eastern Europe and Central Asia remains substantially unknown to the literature and collection of cases on local government and community cooperation and decentralised cooperation. The *Assises of Decentralised Cooperation* organised every two years by the Committee of the Regions of the European Union are basically addressing the topics of Eastern Europe, with a very limited participation of cases and panellists. The *lingua franca* of the region (Russian) has never been used during the meetings. Even the programme on Innovative Partnership (UNDP Art), which focuses on the same approach, has not a

single programme on going in the region of our interest. More has been done by ALDA – the European Association for Local Democracy – by developing programmes and a network of Local Democracy Agencies in the Eastern Partnership countries and liaising between communities in the EU. **For the opportunity offered and the immense need to use all the possible instruments to open a dialogue between the EU and Eastern Europe, more could be done to support Decentralised Cooperation.**

In this exercise of decentralised cooperation, like local governments cooperation and “community to community” engagement, one of the main problems faced by the EaP countries is good government, rather good governance. The collapse of the Soviet Union created an immense chaos in all the systems and at all level and the process of transition still not yet finished. The balance between of powers is established in countries’ Constitutions, but often is not respected in the practice. Stability and economic development requires democratic governance, transparency and accountability¹⁹, which is difficult to achieve in Eastern European countries.

In this regard, cooperation aimed at improving capacities of local authorities and their relation with local civil society, as, for instance, decentralized cooperation, represent a priority. **Decentralised cooperation is also an exercise of shared values of good local governance and citizen’s engagement and community approach to decision-making process. It could therefore be further strengthened and valorise to make closer the different communities on a value-based relationship.**

With the assistance of other partners and local authorities based on concrete projects of exchange of experiences, we can work on improving and strengthening the self-confidence and responsibilities of local leaders.

Decentralized cooperation aims in particular at developing society and its capacities to become a driver for development, involving local authorities representatives as well as civil society with an overall objective of improving living condition in society. These actions positively affect the partners' capacities and, thus, strengthen cooperation and development. This kind of cooperation corresponds to the needs of establishing trust between local authorities and citizens, possible only through interaction and especially needed in the EaP countries.

As known, the countries of the Eastern Partnership (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) signed the agreement establishing the Partnership in 2009. They are working for becoming closer to the EU in standards economy and global socio and political development (such as education, new standards in environmental protection, new laws and rules of managing private sector and government services). Three countries out of six signed the Association Agreement that strengthens even more

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http://www.transparency.org/whatwedo/publication/transparency_in_corporate_reporting_assessing_emerging_market_multinat

the conditions of cooperation with the EU²⁰. In this context, **the projects of decentralized cooperation allow participants to meet and get to know partners from the EU countries.** Friendship and relationships between people is a very effective way for convergence between Eastern and Western Europe. This is of particular importance in fighting against prejudices.

The list of economic and political difficulties of the EaP countries seems to be long. It is hard to say where we need to start. Development and support to villages, cities and their communities is a right direction. **To strengthen local community and economy** on the territories situated far from capitals or big cities is a priority in all the countries. Very often the major part of the country lags behind in its development, which negatively affects the overall development of the country. **Decentralized cooperation works exactly on improving the situation on such territories, creating the possibilities for more balanced development across the country, preventing poverty and the situation of hopelessness.**

In the majority of the cases there is no need of significant investments in organizing the work between local authorities and civil society. This **approach is based on small steps**, often turning out to be very successful. People and societies learn to work together, get to know each other, develop relationships of trust and friendship. Often large amount of money is not always able to bring positive and proportioned effect. They rather lead to corruption schemes and do not require genuine participation of citizens and partners. Thanks to constant projects, even if they are small-scale, **decentralized cooperation represents a very effective solution for assisting community projects with a very positive ration between resources invested and results achieved Decentralised cooperation: some elements country by country**²¹

✓ **Armenia**

Added value: Armenia is a relatively small country but with a quite relevant number of actions in decentralised cooperation and a big potential for its development. Local Government institutions have been established right after joining the Council of Europe and – despite economic difficulties and an absolute relevance of Yerevan, the capital city – respect to the other cities – it is aiming at being decentralised with empowered local governments and a true local democracy. Armenia was also recently beneficiary of programmes of the Council of Europe and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities for developing its local democracy and citizens engagement at the local level. Its relevant diaspora in Europe (and in particular in France) represents an added value for attracting stable partnership with other municipalities in Europe. Armenia is within the target countries of France as for Decentralised Cooperation but it also receives the attention of other countries. Armenians local governments (thanks to their legislation) are open to cooperation and capable to establish long lasting

²⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/eastern-partnership_en

²¹ The country profiles here presented indicates some of the features of each case but do not represent an exhaustive presentation. The responsibility falls only on the author.

community experience. Citizens' engagement is higher in the more urban area and creates a good condition for decentralised cooperation that could then count of participation of different layers of the community. Any support given by municipalities and communities engaged, even being small, can have a huge impact on the community. In such a locked situation and economic difficulty, any sense of friendship and support is welcomed. To open relations with European communities seems also of paramount importance considering the very strong eastward orientation adopted by country recently.

Showcases:

1. **The Local Democracy Agency of Gyurmi**, with the support of the local and European partners (Region Rhone Alpes France, Region Friuli Venezia Giulia Italy, city of Gyumri, Urban Institute Yerevan, Community of Finances officers Armenia, Club Journalists Asparez, Shirak centre NGO), implemented recently two important activities with very little resources engaged with great results such as the refurbishment of some rooms of the local **kindergardens** and a full year **civic education** class for the students of the city particularly focusing on the role of municipalities, as a good example of high ration between financial investments and good and tangible results.

2. **Region Rhone Alpes France and the municipalities of the Shirak Region** (now Rhone Alpes Auvergne) initiated a capacity building and networking activities on the potential of **sustainable tourism (rural tourism)** with local actors and international partners. The process included local authorities, civil society and private sector.

Difficulties: The main difficulty remains the very limited capacities of the municipalities/villages, which engage in dialogue with EU counterparts. The request of support and aid is so strong that any kind of other cooperation would necessarily include a strong humanitarian and first hand support²². They are looking for basic improvement of their local conditions. In rural areas in particular, the local staff of the administration is not able to establish contacts with European partners and needs strong structural support. The on-going conflict in Nagorno Karaback and the closed relationship with Turkey raise considerably the level of attention on every international relations issue. Cooperation can be affected by the position taken by the partners about this issue.

Some data (from Embassies in EU and in Armenia and different literature and research) – not exhaustive but giving an idea of the possible development

France: 35 cities and regions engaged so far, 26 cities engaged in Armenia, Topics addressed: institutional support, sustainable development, rural tourism, cross border

²² Interview with a groups of mayors and local authorities representatives of the Region of Shirak in October 2016

cooperation, cultural cooperation, environment and climate change, cultural heritage, youth exchanges, local governance and citizens engagement

Including the support the Region Rhone Alpes in supporting the Local Democracy Agency of Gyumri

Italy : Region Friuli Venetia Giulia and city of Monfalcone, engaged in Gyumri for economic development and institutional support. Support the Local Democracy Agency in Gyumri

Germany: GIZ support to Integrated Biodiversity Management South Caucasus (IBiS), Integrated erosion control in mountainous Relevant ministries, Integrated erosion control in mountainous, Local Governance Programme Southern Caucasus engaging best practices exchanges Relevant ministries (engaging best practices exchanges)

The Netherlands: VNG Support Fostering regional development in Armenia and Georgia through cross- border cooperation, Good governance, Inter-municipal cooperation, Environment, Communities Association of Armenia (CAA)

Lithuania: Promotion of women's economic activity, support for civil society

Recommendations for Armenia: Decentralised cooperation for Armenia has a great potential for development since local government are active and quite open to cooperation. They do not have any legislative or institutional barriers to cooperation; on the contrary, the government supports cooperation. Topics of cooperation could be either economic, cultural or social and can lead to a long-term cooperation perspective. The case of Armenia could be a good source of knowledge and experiences for the European Union communities and local government.

✓ **Georgia**

Added value: Georgia adopted early after its independence the principles of local government and implemented them fully by joining the Council of Europe as well with the implementation of the European Charter on Local Self Government. Several systems have been so far adopted but to local governance have not been questioned so far. Georgia is also among the most European oriented country of Southern Caucasus and for its political mass and its peaceful cohabitation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, it represents a crucial stakeholder of stabilisation for the whole region and Eastern Europe as such. Georgia is therefore very much oriented to projects that could support local governance. The active role of NALAG (the National Association of Georgian Local Authorities²³) is to be underlined. It strengthened the competences of local government and represented a constant advocate for autonomy of local governments respect to National Government. Local authorities in Georgia also established partnership with some European local authorities that can develop thanks to the economic potential of Georgia and its fundamental role in the sub-region. During the interviews and research held in 2016 in Georgia, it was highlighted a great potentiality for decentralised cooperation with a strongly expressed good will and

²³ Supported at its early stage, among others, by the Council of Europe and the Associations of Local authorities of Latvia and Norway

need of local communities to engage with their peers in Europe. The municipalities do not face any difficulty in engaging with local governments with agreements and programmes. On the contrary, the government facilitates this cooperation.

Local Governments in Georgia are also working on citizens participation and local governance shared with citizens. In this framework, decentralised cooperation and exchanges of practices open new horizons for both sides of the cooperation.

Difficulties: Georgia does not have such strong diaspora as Armenians and therefore the attraction and interest of European local authorities is less visible and straightforward. The Georgian diaspora is mainly working in Russia these days despite the difficult relationship between these two countries. The municipalities also are weak and resources quite limited. Another important weakness highlighted during the course held by ALDA in 2016, was the missed capacities and understanding of the possibilities of exchanges and programme with peer local government in Europe as well as of the possible funding for the activities. Language represents also a limit since most of local officials do not speak any other language than Georgian, with an exception for Russian, which is not a language used with European counterparts.

Showcase: With the **Association of Local Governments of Georgia (NALAG) and LDA Georgia (Local Democracy Agency in Georgia)** was organised a training for civil servants and local politicians to engage in decentralised cooperation²⁴. The programme offered the opportunity to 40 representatives of these municipalities to work on a one week long decentralised cooperation course, which made them aware of this new opportunities.

Project between Strasbourg and Kutaisi: 20 young people of Kutaisi realised a project on the topics “My Europe” and were received in their programme by the city of Strasbourg where they met representatives of the city but also Civil Society engaged leaders so that to exchange experience on lobbying and advocacy. The programme has a follow up in Georgia with the elaboration of a work of art dedicated to Europe.

LDA Georgia also realized a programme for economic animation and help for refugees from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The programme also saw the participation of the partners of the Agency (City of Kutaisi, city of Strasbourg, city of Newport – at that time, Young Lawyers association, city of Tbilisi).

The city of Nantes-France and the City of Tbilisi have a long lasting cooperation based on number of projects and recently dedicated to Youth programmes and empowerment in the community.

Some Data (data from Embassies in EU and in Armenia and different literature and research) – not exhaustive but giving an idea of the possible development

²⁴ Supported by the European Commission, Programme *Mobilized Civil Society*

France: 7 municipalities are engaged from France in Georgia with peer cities from Georgia. It includes the cooperation of Strasbourg with LDA A Georgia. Topics are youth exchanges and summer camps, culture and education, cultural heritage and sustainable development.

Germany : GIZ support to Integrated Biodiversity Management South Caucasus (IBiS), Integrated erosion control in mountainous Relevant ministries, Integrated erosion control in mountainous , Local Governance Programme Southern Caucasus engaging best practices exchanges Relevant ministries (engaging best practices exchanges)

The Netherlands : participatory local budgeting with the support of VNG

Austria : fostering local government with exchanges of practices

Recommendations for Georgia

Georgia has a great potential in decentralised cooperation. Local governments and civil society groups are keen in developing this methodology and also accompany their international commitment on the Association Agreement with the EU. They have also opted for an advanced form of autonomy on local government and could benefit a lot on twinning activities and exchanges of best practices. The support to decentralised cooperation has been strongly highlighted as an added value during the course organised by ALDA and request training and support in local authorities administration that are ready to embark on the challenge.

✓ **Azerbaijan**

Added value: Azerbaijan has few decentralised cooperation in place. The situation as for independence of local authority is relatively low in the country and despite the fact that the European Charter on Local Self Government has been adopted after the independence, forms of local democracy and local governance are basic. Decentralised cooperation could actually offer a possibility of opening the country to different experiences, especially in a context particularly closed. Thanks to decentralised cooperation, one of the main activity would be exchanges of best practices, which could have a less political implication but also a more technical and pragmatic approach. Resources from the Azeri side exist and could actually support programmes and activities of cooperation. In these last years, the Azeri contacts with European towns have been quite numerous and they offered support for projects.

Difficulties: Decentralised cooperation and city-to-city cooperation remains difficult in Azerbaijan also when it comes to engagement of civil society and the broader and deeper context of local democracy. The country is very much run under the centralised rules of the government and its President. Local elected representatives do not have so much relevance and competences as highlighted in the monitoring report of the Congress of a few years ago²⁵ and they do not have the same competences than

²⁵ <https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?p=&id=1982467&direct=true>

their European counterparts, though undermining the efficiency of the exchanges and the reciprocity.

Showcase

The **Association of the Latvian Local authorities (LARG)** has implemented for several years a quite successful exchanges of best practices between Latvian and Azeri local authorities.

Recently, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its department on Decentralised Cooperation undertook action to support cooperation between cities from Azerbaijan and France. The programmes still need to be developed.

Recommendations

In order to progress with decentralised cooperation, Azerbaijan would need a strong support and orientation in decentralisation and empowerment of local democracy, which is today rather weak. The resources at disposal from the national budget being quite relevant and could also be an added value for the development of interesting projects and for mutual benefit. On the other hand, the interest of European municipalities and communities could be further developed since it is so far rather low.

✓ **Ukraine**

Added value: Decentralised cooperation and city-to-city cooperation is of very high added value in Ukraine. Many examples are well known and they regard often a great number of Polish twinning and relationships. In addition to these already well-developed and strong partnerships, the process of decentralisation going in Ukraine, with a strong emphasis in the territorial reorganisation of the territorial administration and merging of very small municipalities in new ones, needs support from peers from the Europe. The question of merging of services and inter-communal services (often tested and used in the EU) could also be shared with best practices exchanges proposed by Decentralised Cooperation programmes. Ukraine is also empowering its local democracy in its local governance by strengthening the competences of local and regional councils. That goes in the direction of a stronger decentralisation and true respect of local democracy rules as indicated in the European Charter of Local Self Government. Many cities and regions in Europe are interested in being active in Ukraine because of the relevance of the country for the economic and political development of the EU. A large Ukrainian diaspora in some of the EU countries, like Italy for instance, make also more attractive this cooperation.

Difficulties: Ukraine remains still a complicated and very big country with different groups of interest and powers are also creating turbulent times even in local and regional governments. The country is large and therefore some areas are of difficult access and many activities of cooperation are rather concentrated rather in the eastern

part of the country. The resources of municipalities are often quite low. On the other hand, the contacts are often put only on economic level with clear orientation for investment rather than on institutional and community-to-community level²⁶.

Showcase

Engagement of Lower Silesia Region (Poland) with Dnepropetrovsk Region and Grand Est. (France)

The Polish region of Lower Silesia has been very active in the Dnepropetrovsk Region liaising with the institutions and civil society for many years. They have founded also the Local Democracy Agency in Dnepropetrovsk (the city is now called Dnipro). They have been active in supporting projects for displaced people particularly numerous in this part of Ukraine at the border with the Donbas area. Associations from both communities are very active to keep active the relationship between these two territories. The region Grand Est. (France) is also active in Dnepropetrovsk region.

The City of Gdansk, in Poland, is very involved to support local governance in Ukraine and they are supporting cultural activities in Odessa and have youth exchanges and support to local government in Mariupol.

Promotion of decentralised cooperation between Germany and Ukraine: The programme of Engagement Global has promoted cooperation between towns from the two countries²⁷. This is part of their global support to decentralisation in the country.

Data

France: the Municipalities and regions of France are actively engaged in Ukraine. Like the city of Marseilles working in different fields with the city of Odessa or the Region Grand Est engaged in the Local Democracy Agency of Dnepropetrovsk. The Conseil Général des Deux Sèvres works the Rayon of Chevtchenko. The city of Sens works with Vychgorod

Poland: Polish cities and regions are very present in Ukraine for historical and for geographic reasons. The process of decentralisation in Ukraine has been in particular adapted from Poland and many experts have been supporting the topics and this path.

Latvia and Lithuania have been supporting strongly decentralisation and municipal empowerment in Ukraine through different projects.

²⁶ Interview with the former responsible of the international relations of the region of Odessa

²⁷ <https://www.engagement-global.de>

The **Association of Ukrainian cities** keeps track records of the twinning activities. According to their data basis, 140 Ukrainian cities have 72 twin cities in 58 countries and about 50 Ukrainian cities.

Recommendations

For Ukraine focusing on decentralisation, Decentralised cooperation represents an absolute must. It has a great potentiality for the proximity to Europe and to important ties, which are existing already. It should be strongly supported for future cooperation. It will also create a better integration between the communities, which are already in touch for the presence of diaspora. On the other hand, the community-to-community dimension is very important for Europeans that could then measure the relevance of the challenge of this country

✓ **Belarus**

Added value: Belarus is relatively closed to contacts with European partners and the fact that it is not yet member of the Council of Europe makes itself more isolated. Any effort paid to create direct contacts between Belarus and European stakeholders represent an added value. Many relationships between communities have taken place since the tragedy of the nuclear plant nearby Chernobyl. Many European municipalities have been receiving groups of children from the area so that to contribute to heal them from radiations. This humanitarian approach of many of volunteers has certainly developed a great attention on this country, which still remains under a strong Russian influence and ties. Local governance and the empowerment of local authorities, even if very weak in Belarus, is a possible path of development for social and economic point of view. The mobilisation of citizens at the local level on policy-making is also easier and more visible at the local level and many experience have been successful so far, paving the way to further empowerment. ALDA has been particularly active and successful with its local partners, the Lev Sapieha Foundation, on the matter²⁸.

Difficulties: Local governance is weak in Belarus and the distribution of powers is still strongly kept at the central level. Decentralisation is more a concept of management of the territories and communities by decentralised organs of the State rather than real local authorities. The local democracy approach, implying community engagement and participative approach, is more perceived in forms of social volunteering than in forms of joint decision making and policy making, shared between local authorities and civil society groups. The contacts with international stakeholders is also made difficult by a complex and often rigid regulations as for funding support and it is not always supported by the institutions, which fears external influences in internal matters.

²⁸ http://www.alda-europe.eu/public/publications/156-spread-rus_hi.pdf

Showcases

Region Sardinia (Italy) is working in Belarus in Chernobyl area but also with Minsk. A relationship that started with the contacts after the accident in the nuclear plant, which went on for several years, has been developed in a more intense cooperation on economic sector and with the support of **professional** training and educational programmes²⁹.

Thanks to this long-standing cooperation, Belarus has been now included in the cooperation countries of Sardinia, which is also supporting financially the engagement of local authorities and civil society for cooperation programmes.

German cities working with Belarusian towns³⁰ - a long lasting cooperation between German towns and Belarusian has focused on bringing closer citizens of the different communities.

Many polish and Lithuanian cities are actively involved with community support in Belarus.

Recommendations

Decentralised cooperation could have a specific relevance for Belarus for two reasons: a) supporting the development of local authorities and decentralisation. Engaging with European local governments and association of local governments could develop and strengthen awareness of Belarusian stakeholders on the importance to work with more autonomous and empowered local authorities and community oriented governance b) opening up the country to neighbours in a quite closed environment.

✓ **Moldova**

Added value: Moldova has also been going through the transitional period of the post-soviet time. It focused in adopting a more decentralised governance with the establishment of local authorities as prescribed in the European Charter on Local Self Government. The approach to decentralised cooperation can find a lot of good will from local governments and a real interest in engaging in contacts with EU partners. The European Policies in the country, based recently on a signed Association Agreement, has developed a plan for Public Administration Reform including support to decentralisation and local governance. The country aims at stabilising its economic and political situation and sees in exchanges of best practices in local governance also a support to anti corruption policies as well as methods and instruments for local

²⁹ <http://www.sardegna-belarus.it>

³⁰ <http://eng.belta.by/society/view/dettmar-town-twinning-movement-brings-people-of-belarus-and-germany-closer-together-92524-2016/>

development. The National Association of local authorities (CALM³¹) is well established and plays a crucial role in supporting decentralisation in powers and competences. Moldova has an autonomous region, Gagauzia, and it offers also some interesting good practices on different territorial organisation, to share with European partners.

Difficulties: Local authorities are small and with a very low budget (with the exception of the capital city Chisinau). That substantially limits the possibilities of engaging in decentralised cooperation. Moldova is also – still – affected by a destabilizing border with the situation of the self-declared independent state of Transnistria. The situation has an impact on geo political implication in international relations. Recently, the country has been heavily affected by cases of public officials' corruption and therefore it has undermined widely the trust between institutions and citizens.

Showcase

Local Democracy Agency in Moldova (in Cimislia) – It has been established in March 2017 and in has the support of CALM (see above), the city of Cimislia, Solidarité Eau Europe (France), Iasci, the project on Migration Nexus, the institute of administrative sciences of the Republic of Moldova. It received also the support of the Decentralised cooperation of France.

The support of Polish cities to Moldovan cities, with the office Centrul de Informare pentru Autoritățile Locale (CIAL)³² with the support of Polish Aid. The programme has engaged local authorities from Poland and from Moldova on concrete projects of local governance and local development.

Data

France: French Decentralised Cooperation has been present in Moldova for some years now engaging 5 municipalities and also the support of a Public Service for Management of Water (SIAAP (Service Public de l'Assainissement francilien)). It is engaging the city of Chisinau, the city of Calarasi, Holercani and the region of Ohrei and Nisporeni.

Recommendations

³¹ <http://www.calm.md>

³² <http://www.centruinfo.org/ru/>

Decentralised cooperation has great potential in Moldova for their tight relationship with European communities thanks to the presence of diaspora. On the other hand, this kind of cooperation can strengthen decentralisation and local authorities by given role and responsibilities to local officials and elected leadership. The contact with the EU stakeholders is of great importance in a context where the society is opting for a more eastern orientation. The presence of small but constructive projects of decentralised cooperation can really give an added value in communities which are rather poor and where any support is welcome, including constant attention and friendship.

6. Points for Practitioners and recommendations

Decentralised cooperation is as an instrument for creating awareness and empowering capacities of local and regional government engaged more broadly with their communities. While we are supporting decentralization, competences and skills of elected leadership and civil servants serving in local government, the possibilities to engage in programmes and long standing reciprocal relationship with European counterparts can be considered as an added value. We would recommend to use this methodology also for engaging in a participative approach civil society groups and citizens that can therefore complement decentralised cooperation with a more community approach, while identifying solutions to problems at the local level. Establishing a dialogue between communities from EU and Eastern Europe (EaP) is a macro target nowadays that can be better reached thanks to the support of projects and processes on local governance established in bilateral and multilateral partnership with local governments from different countries. In supporting decentralization and working on legislative matters, a special point could be dedicated to this cooperation point as it has already been highlighted in some of the need assessment implemented by the author.

7 Methodology

The research has ben carried out:

- **By studying documentation and literature and systemizing the information** on established cooperation between local governments and their communities in the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries.
- **With field visits and interviews with the relevant stakeholders.** The interviews took place from October 2016 to April 2017 at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the different EU Members State as well at the European Commission and other institutions at the national and local level. The author has also interviewed and exchange, in countries of the Eastern Partnership Countries, with different Local Government representatives as well with Civil Society leader and experts in local governance. The representatives of the Association of Local Governments in Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia were also contacted and interviewed.
- **By using extensively the work carried out by ALDA – the European Association for Local Democracy in cooperation with the Local Democracy**

Agencies³³ (present in Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and Armenia). It had both a regional and a country-by-country approach, considering the differences present among all of them.

- **By contacting and getting information from the Embassies of the EU member States** and their references as for Decentralised Cooperation in Eastern Partnership countries. In some of the Embassies and Ministries we founded dedicated offices and people, which facilitated the work. As for the others, a more in depth research has been needed.

The results, being part of a more in depth research, would be a source of information for the EU and for the Council of Europe institutions as well as for other institutions and international organisations working on this topic. The research document will be presented during the *Assises* of Decentralised Cooperation that take place in July 2017 in Brussels in a dedicated panel to Eastern Partnership cooperation.

8. References

- *From September 2016 to December 2016. Collection of data at the EU Embassies of the EaP countries.* The authors has collected data on decentralised cooperation from the EU Member states embassies from France, Italy, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Latvia and Lithuania, Bulgaria and Romania. Information was collected also from different programmes of UNDP, Council of Europe and European Commission.

- *The author had interviews with different stakeholders in decentralised cooperation in all the EaP member States and also the EU*

- *References to site of CRCD and atlas of decentralised cooperation -*
<http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/politique-etrangere-de-la-france/action-exterieure-des-collectivites-territoriales/atlas-francais-de-la-cooperation-decentralisee/>

- *Activity of ALDA and its publications* <http://www.alda-europe.eu/newSite/publications.php>

- *European Charter on Local Self Government:*

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/122>

- *Publication of Platforma :* <http://www.platforma-dev.eu/files/upload/39/coop-rations-d-centralis-es-pour-le-d-veloppement--perspectives-europ-ennes.pdf>

- *Committee of the regions and Decentralised Cooperation*
<http://cor.europa.eu/en/activities/networks/Pages/atlas.aspx>

³³ ALDA works in Georgia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia.

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