

**Opinion of the Committee of the Regions — Neighbourhood at the Crossroads: Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2013**

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**I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

**Main points**

1. would like to emphasise the importance of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) as an EU external policy instrument targeted at countries situated to the south and east of the EU, with a view to achieving closer relations between these countries and the EU;
2. stresses the comprehensive and multilevel nature of ENP relations and the policy's multilevel governance. In view of this, support is needed for the ENP's regional and local dimension complementing cooperation at the level of national governments;
3. calls therefore on the newly appointed high representative to involve the local and regional level both in the EU and in the ENP countries in the further development of the policy and to work closely with the CoR in order to improve the design, implementation and acceptance of the ENP on the ground;
4. stresses also the need for more flexible action together with a customised, 'tailor-made' approach to supporting democratic changes and economic reforms in the individual beneficiary countries;
5. emphasises the importance of two initiatives, i.e. the Eastern Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). These are regional dimensions of the ENP, and are not just thematic aspects of EU policy, but also reflect EU Member State foreign policy priorities at central, regional and local level;
6. calls for subnational governance levels to participate more actively and be more closely involved in the process of ENP implementation. The Committee of the Regions' establishment of two platforms for dialogue and cooperation operating in parallel, i.e. the Euro-Mediterranean Local and Regional Assembly (ARLEM) and the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP), provides opportunities to develop this dimension of the ENP further through concrete cooperation and direct dialogue at local and regional level;
7. appreciates the European Union's efforts to support constitutional and economic reform processes through appropriate financial and technical support for ENP beneficiary countries; however, these efforts require further simplification and organisation. Increased EU support for neighbouring countries should be conditional on the progress of constitutional changes, democratisation, respect for the rule of law and gender equality. This progress is even more urgently needed following recent tragic events; it must be made ensuring full respect for human rights, and with the countries concerned granting full citizenship to citizens of all religious and ethnic minorities;
8. points out that the regional and local level has a fundamental role to play in properly forecasting, planning, implementing and monitoring support programmes and instruments; also argues that local and regional authorities (LRAs) should have easier access to funding, and that the associated mechanisms and procedures are in need of simplification;

9. emphasises the need to promote strong and democratic governance at subnational level; draws attention to the issue of local democracy in partner countries, and to problems relating to the work of local and regional government; is therefore in favour of decentralisation, particularly in the field of taxation; also recommends supporting bottom-up initiatives and acknowledging the role of local and regional authorities in carrying out the requisite domestic reforms;

#### ***Introductory remarks***

10. stresses that 2013 saw huge changes in the region covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy. The goal of the ENP is to develop special relations between the EU and individual neighbour countries, in order to enhance security, prosperity and neighbourly relations. Some of these objectives were met last year but a number of important set-backs have also been suffered. The ENP as a whole needs to be critically examined in order to assess if it is adequate in its current form;

11. on the positive side, the pace of difficult democratic reforms in some countries of the southern neighbourhood such as Tunisia, Morocco, and to a certain extent Egypt, was stepped up. Furthermore, November 2013 saw the approval of two association agreements (including documents on deep and comprehensive free trade areas) with two eastern neighbourhood countries, i.e. Georgia and Moldova, and then, in 2014, by Ukraine. The signing of the agreements by the first two countries was the culmination of a lengthy negotiation process, establishing a basis for work on an agenda implementing the commitments set out in those agreements;

12. notes, however, that 2013 was also a period of considerable political turbulence and socioeconomic crises in many ENP countries. Security threats at national and regional level (in both southern and eastern ENP countries) have multiplied. Dramatic events in Ukraine, civil war in Syria and escalation of the conflict between Israel and Palestine mean that the challenge of a consistent European policy to promote stability with a strong local and regional dimension is becoming even greater;

13. calls for appropriate steps to assist local authorities in dealing with the humanitarian crises, in particular the waves of refugees caused by instability in many ENP countries, especially currently in Syria and Ukraine. Migration flows notably in the Mediterranean area, require a long-term and comprehensive approach, with the active involvement of all Member States including local and regional authorities and not only those geographically concerned. The countries, regions and local authorities situated on the EU's external borders should receive appropriate support in controlling these borders and in handling the emergencies, including health emergencies, arising from immigration;

14. notes that there are big differences between the different ENP countries concerning the agendas and the political will to carry out the necessary political, social and economic reforms. Initiatives under the ENP should therefore be adapted according to the real willingness of individual governments to make the necessary changes and deepen relations with the EU, as well as on their determination to promote the reforms and secure public support for them. Local and regional authorities play a central role in this respect but are often dependent on national governments — nevertheless they should be considered as key interlocutors;

15. agrees that building democracy in partner countries is crucial for the EU. Democratisation and decentralisation are essential for socioeconomic development, and are of fundamental importance for transformation processes in the Eastern Partnership region and the Mediterranean basin. The ENP is an excellent initiative to support those processes, and CORLEAP and ARLEM are appropriate platforms promoting partnership and openness in the process of building democracy and civil society;

16. fully supports the idea set out in the Joint Communication that the ENP should continue to act as an attractive cooperation initiative responding to partners' needs. The EU should indeed act as a strategic partner for ENP countries, helping them to steer economic development and work towards better governance, while respecting their sovereignty;

17. recalls that future EU membership is one of the key incentives which the EU has to induce partner countries to embark on reforms. It is therefore of crucial importance that this instrument is used in an appropriate, transparent and realistic manner, depending on the specific situation in the country in question;

18. points out that LRAs play a key role in promoting and shaping democratic processes. They are strategic partners in good governance and achieving beneficial development, and they also have a key role to play in the EU's external policy;

19. at the same time, emphasises the need to also evaluate ENP implementation in future based on the extent to which LRAs and their representatives are involved at supranational level — something which is lacking in the Communication under review;

#### ***Comprehensive, effective and multilevel mutual relations***

20. emphasises the need to enrich the bilateral ENP with regional and multilateral cooperation initiatives, based on the introduction of a mechanism to support cooperation between the EU and neighbouring countries, and also between individual countries. This could take place by upgrading and increasing cooperation arrangements in the context of existing EU initiatives, between regions and networks of European regions both inside and outside the EU;

21. notes that the European Neighbourhood Policy is an interactive initiative, effective implementation of which requires involvement of and collaboration between all stakeholders at different levels of governance. Only then will ENP countries which are willing to carry out domestic reforms be able to work together effectively with the EU, opening the door to EU political support, comprehensive trade agreements, visa facilitation measures as well as technical and financial assistance;

22. notes that differences between approaches in neighbouring countries to carrying out reforms and building close relationships with the EU as well as the diverse nature of challenges recently faced by individual ENP countries have meant that the EU has had to adopt a customised, 'tailor-made' approach to the ENP not only in relation to its geographical dimension (southern and eastern) but also, above all, expectations, possibilities and tasks for specific partner countries;

23. agrees that the EU should invest in sectoral, thematically structured financial instruments. Such an approach is conducive to broader exchanges of best practices and definition of development strategies in selected key policy areas, such as reforming public administration, fiscal decentralisation and territorial cooperation;

24. would like to emphasise the importance of supporting efforts to build stronger democracy and achieve political reforms in partner countries. There can be no doubt that a neighbourhood policy implemented in and by regions can be an effective means of promoting EU fundamental values: human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of people who belong to minorities;

25. calls for particular attention to be paid to the importance and benefits of involving local and regional authorities in concrete projects of cooperation by the EU and ENP countries. Indeed, success in achieving the policy's objectives closely depends on the level of regional development and the capacity of individual countries to govern effectively at central, regional and local levels;

26. calls on the European Commission and Member States to take into account the recommendations and experience of the CoR members in support of the processes of political and economic change in partner countries and more effective collaboration at all levels of government;

27. emphasises that the multilevel nature of individual countries' foreign policies is also relevant. A basic challenge here is to generate synergies between national and subnational foreign policy dimensions in individual countries. In this connection, CORLEAP and ARLEM are ideal forums enabling the identification of needs and exchange of experience;

***Effective action and coordinating cooperation at different governance levels***

28. would like to point out that, thanks to their international contacts and active involvement in economic life, local and regional authorities are helping to stimulate economic and social development, which is one of the fundamental goals of European integration. Bearing this in mind, local and regional authorities should participate in ENP planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation processes, especially in fields where they have direct competences and experience;

29. is aware that building institutional and administrative capacity is of key importance for the majority of ENP countries. A key aspect of this dimension of the policy concerns local and regional authorities. The CoR and LRAs should therefore play an active role in framing and implementing Comprehensive Institution-Building programmes (CIB) initiated by the European Commission and Member States to support institutional and administrative capacity building in Eastern Partnership countries;

30. encourages local and regional authorities to participate together with central governments in drawing up and applying association agreements, strategy documents and action plans agreed between the EU and partner countries;

31. emphasises the importance of well-coordinated bottom-up initiatives and of support for cooperation between local and regional authorities from EU and ENP countries, thus helping to support the process of developing the structures of local democracy and civil society;

32. feels that it makes sense to support initiatives in areas of practical concern to ENP cities and regions which can be implemented by subnational authorities, e.g. cooperation between partner cities, as well as cross-border, cultural, economic, etc. cooperation;

33. believes that democratic administrative reforms at the level of central government should be complemented by measures at local and regional level. This is of great relevance to institutional capacity building and applying agreements with the EU, for example agreements on association or the development of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas;

34. emphasises that regional development in partner countries should be a key goal for EU funding, with clearly defined criteria for its use based on defined and agreed regional development strategies, specific objectives and results. LRAs and civil society should be appropriately represented in bodies monitoring the use of such funding;

35. calls for the introduction in both ENP dimensions of mechanisms encouraging direct dialogue, the exchange of information and the transfer of expertise, benefiting local and regional levels in ENP countries (e.g. based on the existing Local Administration Facility);

36. wants to see more effective use of support instruments such as Twinning and TAIEX between EU local and regional authorities and their counterparts in ENP countries, with a view to helping ENP countries to develop modern, efficient administrative structures, for example through close cooperation between administrations that includes as a key feature the secondment of officials from a Member State public administration to that of an ENP country. EU regions could also step up their role in supporting potential participants in EU programmes for the 2014-2020 period focusing on third countries such as IPA II (Instrument for pre-accession assistance), the international relations strand of Horizon 2020 and EU programmes involving the participation of EU and non-EU countries, such as the 2007-2013 ENPI CBCMED programme, which will also continue to finance cross-border cooperation during the 2014-2020 ENPI CBCMED programme;

***Strengthening the role of the Committee of the Regions***

37. is convinced that closer CoR involvement in the work of the thematic platforms will enable local and regional authorities to achieve more effective action and higher-quality results. Indeed, the CoR has a key role to play in this respect, thanks to its complementary nature and its support for decisions taken by CORLEAP and ARLEM;

38. stresses the CoR's commitment to advising the European Commission and its services in designing the criteria for EU funding and application procedures, to ensure that such funding is accessible and useful to local and regional authorities from European Neighbourhood Policy countries. However, these criteria must not overlook the need for ENP local authorities to take greater responsibility for both organisation and outcomes;

***Appropriate communication, information flow and exchange of experience***

39. feels that EU efforts to create lasting political and administrative structures should also include training programmes (on-site or distance learning) for representatives of local and regional administration to upgrade their professional skills and enable effective use of funding;

40. recalls the projects already under way in the CoR to monitor and evaluate the devolution of powers in the neighbourhood countries. These tools, including an online platform could be used in the future not just as an information source but also as a basis for developing new priorities or amending existing ones;

41. believes that information on available funding programmes and application procedures for EU funding should be provided to all those concerned in ENP countries. For their part, LRAs should communicate their needs for training and other measures in support of 'good governance' at local and regional level to the appropriate national and supranational partners. Effective communication and dialogue between partners should be what holds the European Neighbourhood Policy together;

42. recommends drawing up an e-guide to ENP countries and to available funding instruments which are targeted at and available to local and regional authorities in ENP countries, based on the existing Inforegio regional policy website. This guide could be used to provide local and regional authorities in both the EU and partner countries with clear and up-to-date information;

43. finally, calls on the European External Action Service (EEAS) to appoint 'contact persons' in each EU representation office in ENP countries. On the one hand, such contact persons could provide information to host country territorial organisations and LRAs on planned and existing initiatives at subnational level, and on the other they could pass on messages from the CoR to partners in ENP countries.

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*The President  
of the Committee of the Regions*

Michel LEBRUN

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