

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on ‘EU support for sustainable change in transition societies’

(2013/C 139/05)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- shares the Commission’s view that the EU should mobilise in a comprehensive, targeted and long-term response to support reform in transition countries with a view to stabilisation and the achievement of real, sustainable change and lasting democratic structures;
- points out that local and regional authorities, which have wide experience of policy development and implementation in the delivery of essential public services should play a key role in the process of sustainable change in transition societies;
- notes that the following barriers exist to the full realisation of the potential of local and regional authorities in the partner countries: lack of financial autonomy and limited fiscal scope; low level of development of local democracy, transparency and citizen participation; limited knowledge of financial aid available to local and regional authorities under EU programmes; lack of capacity for participation in the EU programmes and projects;
- emphasises the possibility created by the Committee of the Regions of support instruments for EU policy in neighbouring states, i.e. a platform for cooperation between local and regional authorities in the form of ARLEM and CORLEAP;
- recommends that participation in TAIEX programmes be extended to local and regional authorities in interested countries;
- intends to support training of LRAs from transition countries to improve local capacity building. The CoR will start a dialogue with the European Training Foundation and other interested stakeholders on this question;
- notes that the Committee is working closely with the European Commission on drawing up an atlas of decentralised cooperation and that it holds an annual conference on decentralised cooperation.

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I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

General comments

1. welcomes the Joint Communication of the Commission and the High Representative on EU support for sustainable change in transition societies, which analyses support to date and puts forward a proposal for improving EU support to partner countries in transition, i.e. countries undergoing major political, social and economic reforms;

2. shares the Commission's view that the EU should mobilise in a comprehensive, targeted and long-term response to support reform in transition countries with a view to stabilisation and the achievement of real, sustainable change and lasting democratic structures. This is particularly important as transition processes are not going to be always successful immediately and carry the risk, in case of failure, of precipitating crises and threatening the stability of the country or the entire region;

3. stresses that events occurring in the EU's neighbouring countries, such as the violent social disturbances and political changes in the Arab countries in 2011, have a direct impact on the EU Member States. In the light of this, the EU's neighbours which are in the process of transition require closer attention and in particular full commitment from the EU countries and institutions at various levels;

4. welcomes the more precise and targeted approach to the use of support instruments for transition societies, based on their specific needs, circumstances and political, economic and cultural characteristics;

5. stresses the need to involve local and regional authorities in measures to support sustainable change in transition societies;

6. repeats the view, expressed in opinion CdR 732/2012, that creating local ownership and promoting democracy at grass-roots level require trust in the political system and in its

representatives. A decentralised structure results in more effective institutions with greater legitimacy and is the most important way of bringing the authorities and the public closer together. Open decision-making processes that respect the subsidiarity principle help to establish democratic principles among the general public, which paves the way for a pluralistic and tolerant society;

7. points out that non-state partners and local and regional government play an essential role in the effective implementation of policy for the promotion of democratic governance, human rights, economic and social wellbeing and peace and stability in a way which is conducive to sustainable social, economic and political reforms as well as reforms in environmental protection and regional integration;

8. emphasises that local and regional authorities have an important role to play in the process of exchanging experience and bringing together the different models of transition, as they have valuable knowledge and experience in areas of importance to the partner countries, e.g. implementing cross-border cooperation projects. Local and regional authorities should thus be recognised as key players in enlargement, neighbourhood and development policy;

9. confirms the main points of its opinion on the European Neighbourhood Policy review (CdR 198/2011) ⁽¹⁾;

10. welcomes the proposal that the EU step up its dialogue and coordination with other non-state partners, including local authorities.

Support for the establishment of conditions for successful transition

11. welcomes the recognition of the key role of civil society and of broad public support for, and commitment to, the processes of reform, successful transition and political dialogue, which local and regional authorities and NGOs play an important part in shaping;

⁽¹⁾ European Neighbourhood Policy review, opinion of the Committee of the Regions, 14-15 December 2011 (CIVEX-V-023).

12. points out that local and regional authorities, which have wide experience of policy development and implementation in the delivery of essential public services such as public health, education, waste and water management, local entrepreneurship, transport and infrastructure, the environment and natural resources, and agriculture, should play a key role in the process of sustainable change in transition societies;

13. notes that local and regional authorities carry a responsibility for the development and protection of genuine democracy, civic education, transparency and respect for human rights which is just as great as that of national authorities;

14. reiterates the recommendations it made in 2011 in its Declaration and Resolution ⁽²⁾ on the southern neighbourhood (Mediterranean countries), namely that it is very important to include the local and regional levels of government in the EU action towards the region, since democracy-building and democratic transition begins first and foremost at the grassroots level and cannot be imposed from above. Local ownership and commitment to working for the local community, from cities and local government to civil society, are of great importance for maintaining democratic stability which is strongly rooted in society;

15. recommends that greater emphasis being placed on achieving good governance and strengthening governance at sub-national level as well as multilevel governance. The Committee has presented multi-level governance as coordinated action by the European Union, the Member States and local and regional authorities, based on partnership and aimed at drawing up and implementing EU policies ⁽³⁾. The achievement of effective multilevel governance in the EU's neighbouring countries undergoing transition may be achieved by providing their local and regional authorities with direct access to financing from EU programmes;

16. points out that the local and regional authorities of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe which are EU Member States are in many cases examples of the effective realisation of systemic, political, social and overall economic transition processes. The achievements of these countries, but also the problems some of them have encountered, may provide inspiration and help to develop appropriate models for the conduct

of reforms in transition states. Hence the need to consider the local and regional authorities of states which acceded to the EU in 2004 and 2007 as major players in the process of exchanging experience with partner states;

17. points to the need for the participation of local and regional authorities in work at national and international level for the establishment and implementation of policies to support sustainable change in transition societies;

18. stresses the importance of local and regional authorities in the context of external relations, as local government plays, and should play, an important role in this area;

19. highlights the needs and requirements of local government in transition states, to which they would like to draw the attention of national governments and European and international institutions; calls on the European Commission to involve sub national levels of government in the discussions with the national governments of transition countries;

20. notes that the following barriers exist to the full realisation of the potential of local and regional authorities in the partner countries: lack of financial autonomy and limited fiscal scope; low level of development of local democracy, transparency and citizen participation; limited knowledge of financial aid available to local and regional authorities under EU programmes; lack of capacity for participation in the EU programmes and projects. Of course these factors apply to differing degrees in different countries. Reducing these barriers requires support: reforms of public administration, including local and regional authorities; further development of citizen participation in the shaping of policy and partnership at local level; exchanges of experience and development of cooperation with EU counterparts in areas of importance for local and regional authorities; capacity building for participation in EU programmes and projects;

21. points out that, if the EU wishes to improve administrative capacity in European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) states, which is a crucial issue for most of them; local and regional authorities must be involved in this policy. Developing the capacity and training of local and regional authorities in transition countries is of key importance here, as politicians and representatives of local government can, with improved skills and knowledge, contribute to the shaping of effective, open and transparent government;

⁽²⁾ Declaration of the CoR presidency of 7 March 2011 on the events in the Southern Mediterranean. Resolution of 12 May 2011 on Dealing with the impact and consequences of the revolutions in the Mediterranean.

⁽³⁾ White Paper of the Committee of the Regions on Multilevel Governance, own-initiative opinion of the Committee of the Regions of 17 and 18 June 2009 (CONST-IV-020).

22. emphasises that, by cooperating with local and regional authorities in enlargement and neighbourhood policy countries, the Committee of the Regions has the opportunity to promote the objectives of this policy. Working groups and joint consultative committees, CORLEAP and ARLEM play an essential part in this cooperation.

Support instruments

23. welcomes the attempt to improve the system of incentives and constraints by more precise and effective setting of conditionalities;

24. points out that incentives and conditions for enlargement and neighbourhood policy states and the allocation of funding and support should be closely linked with progress on reforms, including decentralisation and the involvement of local and regional authorities in governance at the appropriate level of the decision-making process;

25. emphasises the possibility created by the Committee of the Regions of support instruments for EU policy in neighbouring states, i.e. a platform for cooperation between local and regional authorities in the form of the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM) and the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP);

26. points out that ARLEM makes an important contribution in many areas to deepening cooperation between the EU and the Mediterranean countries, particularly with regard to urban development, local water management, renewable energy and small and medium-sized enterprises. It has helped to raise public awareness of Mediterranean cooperation and to give practical expression to this;

27. also highlights the potential of CORLEAP, whose main priorities for action are reform of public administration, tax decentralisation and territorial cooperation, questions of special importance for transition states which are in the process of building sustainable, effective and credible governance at all levels;

28. welcomes the emphasis on the importance of the Civil Society Facility (CSF) as a vital element of the newly established mechanisms for neighbourhood policy states;

29. draws attention to the need for ongoing EU support for the role and position of national local government associations

in partner countries as the collective representatives of the voice of local authorities. Institutionalising and developing the capacity of associations of LRAs in transition countries will strengthen local democracy and multilevel governance;

30. calls for the establishment of contact points for local and regional authorities in EU delegations in partner countries, where the need for support is most urgent;

31. points out that many European local and regional authorities have been involved in decentralised cooperation projects with their counterparts in partner countries for many years. In order to facilitate this cooperation, bring together projects financed by the EU local and regional authorities in one place and identify new projects, the Portal of Decentralised Cooperation for Development, developed jointly by the European Commission and the Committee of the Regions, has been in operation since December 2011;

32. points out that twinning and TAIEX programmes, which have been widely deployed by the EU to bring partner countries closer to the EU, are good examples of practical and focused instruments;

33. recommends that participation in TAIEX programmes be extended to local and regional authorities in interested countries. What is important is the development of twinning and TAIEX projects between local and regional authorities in the EU and partner countries. This will be reflected in the improvement of governance in the partner countries and greater awareness of the importance of multilevel governance structures, both in the EU and in European Neighbourhood Policy countries;

34. intends to support training of LRAs from transition countries to improve local capacity building. The CoR will start a dialogue with the European Training Foundation and other interested stakeholders on this question;

35. will look into the possibility of involving transition countries in programmes similar to the Local Administration Facility, which is a TAIEX programme currently available to candidate and potential candidate countries, aimed at disseminating knowledge of the EU and its procedures.

The role of cooperation at local and regional level

36. stresses the need for further efforts to involve local government both in the EU and in the partner countries, as a component of the dialogue with these countries;

37. stresses the need to recognise the decisive role of local and regional authorities both in the EU and in the partner countries in the drafting of policies and strategies to support sustainable change in transition societies;

38. points to the need to support all forms of exchange between local and regional authorities from the EU and the partner countries: town partnerships, technical cooperation and capacity building. Transition countries must have access to EU instruments for the establishment of sustainable partnerships between local and regional authorities;

39. stresses, in line with its opinion CdR 198/2011⁽⁴⁾, the importance and specific value of social contacts between EU and neighbouring country local authorities. The important thing is to involve the third sector and social groups to

complement formal cooperation between local and regional authorities. This needs special instruments as an important component of neighbourhood policy;

40. emphasises that, thanks to cooperation with local and regional authorities in the enlargement and neighbourhood policy states (e.g. working groups and joint consultative committees, CORLEAP and ARLEM), the Committee is actively contributing to EU support for sustainable change in transition societies and helping to promote the objectives of the communication;

41. notes that the Committee is working closely with the European Commission on drawing up an atlas of decentralised cooperation and that it holds an annual conference on decentralised cooperation.

Brussels, 11 April 2013.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Ramón Luis VALCÁRCEL SISO

⁽⁴⁾ European Neighbourhood Policy review, opinion of the Committee of the Regions, 14-15 December 2011 (CIVEX-V-023).