

THOUGHTS ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

Overview of the contribution by Mr Raul Mälk, ECEAP Senior Research Fellow to the EaP Structured consultation. Questions are from the EU structured consultation questionnaire.

1. How can we sustainably boost economic and human capital development and prosperity?

We share the opinion that during the next years Eastern Partnership has to focus on the visible improvements of the life of citizens in all six countries of the Partnership. Approximation of the legislation and norms with the EU, continuation of structural reforms and full implementation of the AA/DCFTAs, CEPA and other agreements are among most important tasks for EaP countries to achieve economic progress and improve the life of people. Implementation of the „20 Deliverables for 2020“ document is a good tool to prioritize the EaP everyday work.

In the World Bank´s Ease of doing business index the six EaP countries have made significant progress – Georgia is now 7th, Azerbaidjan 34th, Armenia 47th, Moldova 48th, Belarus 49th and Ukraine 64th. In many aspects the progress was achieved with the EU support. But despite such high rankings the economic progress is still strained and the living standards in most of the countries are rather low. There is still need to develop economic legislation and implement it properly.

Unfortunately many good elements of economic legislation in EaP countries do not work efficiently on the local level. ECEAP has made support to regional and local authorities in conducting reforms in Partnership countries one of its main areas of activities. Our capacity building programmes are based on Estonian successful reform experience. ECEAP projects are aimed at making EaP countries local administrations more efficient, support community building, construct functioning cooperation mechanisms between local authorities and civil society, endorse transparent governance, help to fight corruption and create good conditions for economic and social development, as well as help to increase trust among economic actors, especially SMEs. We see there a need for more longterm, multi-phase, continuity driven projects, including twinning, long term expert presence/mentorship exchanges with EU and other methods.

The EU influences best the economic development of the EaP countries through continuous trade liberalisation and through support to the infrastructure development.

Numerous irregularities that have occurred in financial sector of the Partnership countries show the need to further support the development of the financial and banking supervision, fight against money laundering, strengthening of the anti-corruption, customs and taxation authorities. Important task is very practical support to the complex introduction of the high food standards and adopting the EU technical regulations for industrial goods, without which export of relevant production to EU/Western markets is not possible.

One of the important directions for the next period has to be sectorial cooperation. Adoption in the area of transport of the Indicative Trans-European Network (TEN-T) Investment Action Plan would be a good example for other sectors, that need similar development plans – like energy, telecom connections, digital development, environmental protection and adaptation to climate change, healthcare, education.

EaP has achieved good results in the area of support to the education and Youth activities. It has to be increased with more attention to the skills that are needed in the respective economies. Youth mobility and educational exchanges should also be further encouraged. Also the Union should support the reform of the educational sector in partner countries by helping to reform curricula, support new textbooks and training of teachers.

ECEAP has worked in conducting capacity- and institution building projects in EaP countries also together with not only partners from EU Member States, but also from countries like Norway, Canada, US and others. Especially larger investment projects need real coordination between the EU, Member states, other donor countries and also IFI-s.

2. How can we further strengthen good governance, the rule of law and the security dimension of the Eastern Partnership?

Strengthening good governance, the rule of law and fight against corruption is essential backbone of the EaP cooperation. Progress in that area has serious influence to developing democracy and rule of law, efficiency of economic development and social progress, resilience against outside pressure and crises, trust of the people to institutions.

Both external and internal security dimension problems remain serious issue for majority of EaP countries. Through EaP EU can contribute mostly to improving countries internal security by helping to reform relevant law enforcement and security institutions. Regarding the external security, the EU could help through fostering societal resilience and improved strategic communication. However, there is necessity of a regular security dialogue between the EU and EaP countries directed towards pro-

moting international law and OSCE principles based solutions to security problems in EaP space.

Among important areas of that work is strengthening of the efficiency and transparency of actions of state, regional and municipal administrations. ECEAP has devoted many efforts to support regional authorities and municipalities in EaP countries through improving their rules creation and services, which are closest to the people and influence their economic, social, cultural and other activities. We see a need for longer term and follow up projects, more twinning opportunities. More efforts and better coordination of different international assistance efforts is needed to achieve better results in those fields, including involvement of all most deprived regions of the Partnership countries. An important role here belongs to the development of an active civil society and the ECEAP has shared Estonian reform experience in this field through our training projects.

ECEAP also has wide experience in supporting the development of the rule of law, including strengthening of the law enforcement and anti-corruption institutions and judicial systems in the Partnership countries. There is a long list of areas which need support- for example fight against corruption, organized crime, avoiding of taxes including custom duties, money laundering.

ECEAP has also contributed to society protection projects, which are directed preventing and combatting domestic violence and support of increasing women's role in decision making in society.

As Estonian experience in using digital public services is interesting to many stakeholders in Partnership countries. ECEAP has devoted also efforts to support central but also regional and local authorities in that field. It is an area where a complex approach is essential, including good planning of the services, which is rather problematic nearly everywhere, rising cyber resilience. It is also important to develop digital skills of the more vulnerable parts of the society and to spread knowledge about needed personal cyber-security measures. We also think that EU has to support the use of its high privacy standards in digital world also in the EaP countries and are ready to share Estonian experience.

ECEAP has strong competence and long term experience in the area of the media development and strengthening independent media. We have supported capacity building of local media representatives, developing their professional skills in critical thinking, tackling disinformation and media manipulations, introducing the concept of positive media and journalistic responsibility. Our projects aim introduction of the higher democratic regulatory standards, development of media freedom and honest competition in the sector.

3. How to enhance cooperation between Eastern partners, whilst ensuring inclusiveness and differentiation in their relations with the EU?

EU relations with the Partner countries are on different levels of integration. First of all that situation reflects their own political choices regarding how deep integration they want to achieve with the EU. Therefore we support using the principles „More for More“ and smart conditionality also in the future. But there has to be openness for all six countries for EaP cooperation projects. Multilateral activities of the EaP countries also need to be continued, they have important role in keeping countries with less formalised relationships (without association agreements) also active and involved.

The EU should in general encourage the EaP countries moving forward with regional integration projects in all fields between themselves. It is clear that the level of cooperation between the six EaP countries themselves in many fields is insufficient. In such areas a tourism, reducing mobile roaming tariffs and others increasing cooperation may be very useful and should be supported by the EU. However, sometimes it is rational to move on with a group of countries interested in a more close integration with EU (AA countries).

ECEAP has worked mostly with particular EaP countries on and kept its approach practical, needs based close to the real requirements of every partner, flexible to the local conditions and wishes. Flexibility also concerns development of multilateral EaP projects. As presently an small institution, we also have to take into account of availability of specialists able to work with one or other country, knowing their realities. On the multilateral level, ECEAP is actively involved in EEAS Platform 1 Good Governance and Public Administration Panel, contributing to PAR panel meetings and organising joint seminars for example on local Government reforms.

4. How can we do more to enhance Eastern Partnership and EU visibility?

Eastern Partnership has after ten years a clear image in EaP countries and has contributed there a lot towards enhancing public knowledge about the EU in general and its assistance to Partner countries. From communication point of view it would be useful to keep many current messages about the EaP goals relevant also for later, for example continuation with not yet achieved „20 Deliverables for 2020“ tasks on the cooperation agenda also after 2020.

There are opportunities to use Eastern partnership Summits for wider campaigns utilizing the period of high attention. In most of the EaP countries the public knowledge about EU and support to the cooperation with EU is high and has risen during last years. But in some Partner countries with lower level of knowledge we need additional communication activities which have to be well targeted. There are still serious challenges including how to best use the social media, and how to reach youth and elderly citizens and other specific groups of the population.

In the situation of increasing efforts from outside to influence the societies, issues of strategic communication and rise of media education of the people should stand high on the EU agenda. EaP countries public opinion is sometimes also influenced by some populist political forces from the EU and occasional low quality media coverage in EU countries. We need to pay special attention to the work with public and private media, both on the state and local level, through training of the journalists and support their activities covering life in the EU.

Strategic communication is not only an issue of standing against some fake news or interpretations. Most important is promotion of the European values - human rights and freedoms, democracy, caring about the environment, solidarity and global responsibility in the world where increasingly the power of values is contested by the power of arms. Here both the EU and member states should increase their efforts to help the EaP countries. One idea worth to consider is special support to the export of EU media content including movies and TV-series to EaP countries.

ECEAP has significant experience of work with the press and journalists in EaP countries and has conducted training programmes both for civil servants and journalists, especially local journalists, how to develop free media, increase media professionalism and how to withstand foreign propaganda. Our trainings are based on the Estonian experience. We intend to continue with those efforts and are ready to increase cooperation in this field with other donors.

5. Other proposals and reflections on the future of the Eastern partnership

We hope to have a strong and clear message from the forthcoming Eastern Partnership Summit about the focus of tasks and goals of the EaP for the period after 2020. The EU should especially consider how to move forward cooperation with AA countries, which have clearly stated interest to increase their level of their political and economical integration with the EU.

„20 Deliverables for 2020“ is a very good tool for focusing EaP and also for its communication. It would be good to have such an instrument also after 2020. Many of the 20 deliverables are valuable also for the next years to come.

To be able to be more effective in our support efforts, there is still a need to have better overview of all assistance/development cooperation projects conducted by EU, Member States and other donors. Therefore the idea to create central EU level register and to keep it up to date of all projects in EaP countries continues to be very relevant. EU delegations in EaP countries capitals should also increase their efforts bringing all relevant players together, involving also project implementers where appropriate.

ECEAP has organised annual EaP conferences where many stakeholders had an opportunity to analyze the development of the Partnership and its challenges and pro-

pose ideas how to further develop EaP. As an unique event in this area the conferences have created a possibility to gather new ideas, establish contacts between the stakeholders and spread the experience. The conferences were also a good opportunity to involve representatives from EU, EaP and third countries like Norway, US, Canada. ECEAP is determined to organize the next Conference during the autumn 2020.

ECEAP also intensifies its research work and hopes to increase networking with other research institutions focused to EaP issues in EU and beyond. We hope that our webpage is a useful destination for researchers involved in EaP.