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Decentralised cooperation: an added value for Eastern Partnership Countries

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Abstract

Decentralised cooperation as an instrument for engaging local and regional authorities in international cooperation for development has been very successful in this last two decades. It represented also a natural strand of the EU integration that gave a relevant role to local and regional authorities in the field of development. The benefits of decentralised cooperation are both ways and are relevant for EU and non EU partners, since reciprocity is at the very basis of the activities. The initiatives are engaging civil society into local governance and build conditions for trust and exchanges between communities. Given certain conditions – that needs to be followed and improved, like decentralisation and strengthen role of local authorities and support CSOs – decentralized cooperation could be a useful mean for European support to development, democracy and stabilization of the Eastern Partnership countries.

This paper is primarily intended for EU policy makers and practitioners in the field of development cooperation, for staff of national, local and regional authorities of Eastern Partnership countries, and provides an overview of the challenges and opportunities linked to decentralized cooperation in these countries.

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1. What is decentralized cooperation for development and its main features

THE MAIN CONCEPT

Decentralized cooperation for development is a new approach for supporting developing countries, where local authorities represent a subject of such cooperation. According to the principles of international cooperation, the main actors are governmental structures or NGOs receiving public funding for implementing programmes agreed. In that case, recommendations and priorities are elaborated by central government, defining, for instance, target countries for supporting them and developing cooperation. In decentralised cooperation local governments possess some extent of autonomy, allowing them to establish relations with similar structures in other countries, even though with some restrictions. Currently, decentralized cooperation continues developing, and today we often talk about a cooperation of local communities, meaning that the subjects of public life are not only local authorities but also representatives of civil society, schools and educational systems, entrepreneurs and other groups. Altogether, representatives of one complex, but **integrated society** represent important and powerful partners in international cooperation.

MAIN FEATURES

1. It is clear that for implementation of decentralized cooperation certain conditions have to be respected. This model of cooperation can exist and function only within the context of genuine local democracy, based on the autonomy of local authorities from the State and Government. This condition should be respected if not fully, then, at least, in principle. The principles of Local democracy are reflected in European Charter of Local Self-Government. Elections of

local representatives, consistent with competencies and resources, represent the main focus of the document. Without compliance with these principles, the possibilities of local governments to represent citizens' interests are significantly limited. In case local authorities are willing to develop cooperation with their partners in other countries, the possibilities and scale of their actions depend on the existence of local democracy. When Local Authorities represent Central government, we cannot talk about decentralized cooperation.

It is easy to guess that Local democracy is recognized in all the European Union countries, whereas facing significant obstacles in the countries of Eastern Partnership, where local authorities are not always elected and possess small amount of their own resources, other than governmental ones.

2. As it has been already mentioned before, the existence of independent local authorities represent an important condition for decentralized cooperation. Equally important is the existence of active civil society, including both state and private actors. It means the presence of many strong associations, which can balance Local Authorities power and cooperate with them in decision-making process at local level. Therefore, strengthening civil society enhancing its capacities to represent citizens' interests is a very important action for reaching this objective.

3. Another characteristic of this cooperation is an involvement of all the stakeholders willing to contribute **on equal terms**. In this case, all the participants benefit from the process and genuinely take part in it. The key element of decentralized cooperation is **interact**.

4. Our cooperation is **not the project, but the process**. We implement projects in a broader context and within a **long-term perspective**. This means that our cooperation is long lasting and allows us to reach positive and sustainable results.

5. In particular, when we talk about the **content of cooperation**, we often think about the activities that can:

- **Contribute to enhancing capacities of local authorities** through education, exchange of experiences, projects, which allows to improve their capacities to provide services to citizens;

- **Contribute to strengthening capacities of citizens and associations** for taking part in decision-making process at local level. Opened and constant dialogue between local authorities and civil society contribute to economic and social development. This cooperation facilitates the expression of needs and interests of citizens.

Infrastructural projects or projects requiring significant financing are rarely implemented within decentralized cooperation. In the vast majority of cases, it aims at supporting projects pursuing the objectives of **developing skills and enhancing capacities**, where participants do not substitute local authorities or government.

Examples¹

Taking into account democratic power structure in the majority of the EU countries, characterized by strong local authorities and active civil society, the cooperation of local authorities and regions with partners from other countries is quite common. Regions and municipalities have a separate budget for taking an active part in international cooperation. They can use these resources independently following the defined direction, whereas the government recognize their role and importance.

¹ These information provides only some examples of decentralized cooperation

In France

Decentralized cooperation is particularly widespread phenomena in France. There is a special department developing actions of local authorities in this area and assisting them. Each year, the government choses projects and cover 35% of total expenses, whereas regions and municipalities contribute with remaining part. Some local authorities manage this cooperation without governmental assistance, which is the case of big and rich local authorities, such as Paris or Marseille region.

5000 Local authorities in France cooperate with 10.000 local authorities in other countries. According to recent reports, around 13.000 projects were implemented in cooperation with 145 partner countries.

The city of Strasbourg works with the city of Kutaisi in Georgia. The projects implemented were focused on developing youth participation and strengthening their capacities to contribute to society development. Partners are currently working on educational project «What does Europe means to me» within which youth will discuss the topic in schools and visit Strasbourg upon its completion. Both cities of Strasbourg and Kutaisi are supporting this project.

Region Lower Normandy² works with cities in Macedonia on the development of tourism based on historical territory. The places of historical importance are situated in both countries: place where the troops landed are situated in Normandy, while there is a historical Eastern Front of the First World War in Macedonia, on the border with Greece.

Association of municipalities of Vichy region works with municipalities of Romania on strengthening economic development based on harvesting.

² From January the 1st new territorial reform took place in France. Lower Normandy was united with Upper Normandy in Normandy with the capital Rouen

In Poland

The recent development of Poland after the demise of the socialistic political system, especially after joining the EU, is significant. It is widely recognized as a very successful example of consolidating democracy, improving social and economic situation, which has been achieved into a great extent thanks to administrative reform and strengthening the capacities of cities and regions. Some successful regions became the real engines for the country development. They put their experience at disposal in cooperation with Eastern Partnership countries.

Lower Silesia works with Lviv and Dnipropetrovsk region in Ukraine on the programmes supporting youth and civil society.

There is a special department on developing cooperation between Polish and Moldavian municipalities. It proposes useful ideas for local development.

In Germany

Germany actively works in the field of international cooperation. Of course, this country represents one of the main sponsors in Europe and in the whole world. Thanks to the national programmes, it supports population in other countries. Decentralized cooperation represents one of the methods of cooperation and is financed from both the State and German regions.

Until 2015 local authorities in Germany were proposing opportunities for cooperation in Cameroon. A number of German municipalities elaborated a plan for improving local transportation system in Cameroon through joint research and technical support. Especially interesting was the implementation of the programmes on creating services for citizens, effective management of which was reflected in the improvement of living standards of population.

2. The role of Local Authorities in the process of European integration

Our topic is closely related to development and strengthening of decentralisation and territorial reform. Local Authorities need to be autonomous in order to be real actors in cooperation to development.

Political integration and economic development in Europe also works in this direction. The more effective integration was becoming the stronger was becoming decentralisation. Therefore, each country was strengthening the role of regional authorities (legislation, own budget, own taxes etc.). Cities and villages were included into the process and acquired a significant independence. In this context, the central government became the coordinator of independent authorities. Since local authorities express the voice and interests of citizens, this management appeared to be more democratic and appropriate within the context of European integration. Even though the European integration does not seem to be as strong as it was 10 years ago, this system still exist and distinguishes Europe from other countries.

The power of regions and local authorities in comparison to the power of central government is reflected in the concept of “Europe of regions”. The majority of policies of development in Europe are based on the interests of the regions, with data collected at this level as well as interventions taking place (programme implementations). The budget of European support is based on requests from regional and local authorities. The process of collecting information is a long-term process and involves all the stakeholders interested in

participation. The result of this approach is a map of Europe, based on various requests, levels and conditions of the development of the regions and not the map based on the countries borders solely. Creation of common integrated European space is an aim of the process of strengthening local and regional authorities. Decentralised cooperation represents both a cause and a consequence of decentralization in Europe. Thanks to the principle of powerful and independent regions, the EU develops policy and programmes of transborder cooperation creating single economic and historical space working with the regions of different countries. Some of examples are Baltic region, Danube region and Adriatic region.

The policy of the EU assists this process. Local authorities gained their formal role in Europe: they have their own Committee – Committee of the regions, in which the representatives of the regions and municipalities take part. They provide advice and express opinions on the projects of European legislations and other issues. During the last years the EC has provided local authorities with many financial possibilities for implementing their own projects on the variety of topics. Within the context of many opportunities local authorities have, they work both autonomously and in cooperation with the EU. 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.

3. What are the advantages for the EaP countries

Obviously, one of the main problems faced by the EaP countries is good government and good governance. The demise of the Soviet Union created a great chaos in all the systems and the process of transition still not yet finished. The balance between powers is established in countries' Constitutions, but often is not respected in the practice. Stability and economic development requires democratic governance and government, which is difficult to achieve in EaP countries. In particular, all the countries of the region undergoing the processes of public administration reform as well as territorial re-organization. Some countries have succeeded more, whereas other have not, but still, all of them are trying to reach the favourable situation.

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.

With the assistance of other partners and local authorities based on the concrete projects of exchange of experiences we can work on improving and on strengthening the self-confidence and responsibilities of local leaders. The Cooperation aimed at strengthening decentralization is necessary for the development of EaP countries.

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. 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.

Countries of the EaP (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) signed the agreement establishing the Partnership in 2009. They strive for becoming closer to the EU and discover new possibilities for business and citizens (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 the conditions of cooperation with the EU. In this context, **the projects of decentralized cooperation allow participants to meet and get to know partners from the EU countries.** Indeed, friendship and relationships between people is a very effective way for convergence between Eastern and Western Europe. This is of particular importance in fighting prejudices. Nothing can be more effective for overcoming biases!

The list of economic and political difficulties of the EaP countries seems to be infinite. 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 in 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. Maybe it seems strange, but big money are not always able to bring such a positive effect. They rather lead to corruption and do not require genuine participation of citizens and partners. Thanks to the constant projects, even if they are small-scale, decentralized cooperation represents a very effective solution for assisting societies and countries. Indeed, the approach based on small steps leads to better results if compared to investments made.

4. Recommendations for development

The conclusions after this reflection on the opportunities of decentralized cooperation for the EaP countries are clearer: its support and improvement can bring advantages for citizens of Eastern European countries. The results will contribute to reaching common objectives.

The following recommendations for developing cooperation between Local Authorities in EaP countries and the EU can be suggested:

- **Strengthening local authorities**

- **Cooperation and work of local and regional authorities have to become one of the priority targets of programmes and policies of the European Union and EaP countries**

Of course, it often means the necessity to implement reforms, including constitutional ones. Decentralisation represents a challenge for these countries, but, can, at the same time, be a solution to their problems. Many European politicians and organizations having influence on the situation in EaP countries work in this direction. However, this question should be in the centre of attention. The coordination among programmes should also be strengthened.

- Strengthening capacities of local authorities should include the **opportunities of establishing relations with local authorities in the EU**. This cooperation will be the cause and result of their development.

- Recognition of the importance of activities aimed at **exchange of experiences** that can contribute to the development of constant cooperation

- **Inclusion of the experience on decentralized cooperation** in the process of strengthening local authorities.

- **Enhancing capacities of civil society**

- **Strengthening capacities of civil society and its projects as well as opportunities for cooperation with local authorities**. This means education of civil society regarding the role of regions and municipalities, strengthening self-confidence and capacities to participate at local level as well as support of collaborative projects.

- **Enhancing capacities of civil society** to become an active actor **in decentralized cooperation**, especially in relation to the EU (ALDA and LDA).

- **Support to small-scale projects, including local authorities and civil society**. We can remember the experience of small support to the groups of civil society or towns. Association of Local authorities and other similar organization of civil society can become coordinators of these small projects, and, thus, reach the systematic (comprehensive) impact.

- **Strengthening approach and support in programmes and policies on decentralized cooperation**

- It means to improve participation of **representatives of the EaP countries at the events in Brussels** or where the relevant topics will be discussed

- Include the possibilities to use **Russian** during these events. To explore the **possibilities to develop** decentralized cooperation between EaP countries and the EU.



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