



December 2021

# Joint Recommendations

as a follow-up to the 2021 European Union - Eastern Partnership Local Leaders' Forum  
"Deliver more, serve better: Local Public Administration Reform as a booster for sustainable and inclusive development"

The third edition of the European Union - Eastern Partnership Local Leaders' Forum, took place in a crucial moment for decentralisation and local public administration reforms in the EaP countries. On the one hand, decentralisation reforms have increased the role of local governments in key strategic sectors and while significant progress has been made, on the other hand, major challenges remain in terms of political commitment and advancing the fiscal dimension of trends.

Almost 100 participants and 15 speakers took part in the Forum, discussing the Local Public Administration Reform in the EaP and EU, the renew EU-EaP Agenda - how to make it more local oriented and the EU support to Local Public Administration Reform in Neighbourhood East.

The recommendations below are derived from an intensive exchange among speakers and participants and are vowed to contribute to reach common priorities, in line with EU's recommendations (throughout various official papers)<sup>1</sup> and interests in the EaP Region.

## 1. Keep decentralisation high on the political agenda

Although there are some bright spots on the reform horizon like the commitment of the current Moldovan government towards decentralisation and notable progress reached in Ukraine<sup>2</sup>, the general trend in SEE and the EaP countries is characterised by an adverse trend with a notable grip and move towards more centralist government structures. The slowing down of enlargement enthusiasm goes in parallel with slowing down of the reform process. Besides, the burden of the former soviet centralist past and the mentality of the political class undermines expectations of local autonomy and Public Administration Reform clearly depicting that political commitment is a key challenge!

Decentralisation as a pillar of the democratic reform process is crucial for social cohesion, stability and peace in the EaP countries and for the future of Europe as a whole. Both, decentralisation and local PAR are boosters for sustainable and inclusive development with national Local Government Associations (LGAs) playing a crucial role in the democratisation process of the EaP countries.

## 2. Complexity requires to align priorities

Decentralised Cooperation is one of the essential elements in the implementation of decentralisation and local public administration reform processes. Reforms cannot be applied by a simple copy-paste but must be adjusted to a given reality and existing resources at hand to carry them out. Reforms need to be well conceived and phased with two indispensable key actors: LGAs and external development partners. In this context, a proactive approach in partnership consists in looking for complementarity and aligning priorities, based on the needs on the ground, in mutual respect and refraining from imposing own positions.

## 3. Cooperation to attain common objectives

Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine were invited to move reform and governance related issues ahead together and jointly advocate towards central governments in order get their united voice heard in

<sup>1</sup> [Joint Communication](#): "Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020: Reinforcing Resilience – an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all"; Council [Conclusions](#) on Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020; European Parliament [recommendation](#) to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the Eastern Partnership, in the run-up to the June 2020 Summit; etc.

<sup>2</sup> "Decentralisation and Local Public Administration Reform in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine - Learning from the past – preparing for the future", NALAS, KDZ, PLATFORMA, March 2021, [http://nalas.eu/Publications/Books/Decentralisation\\_GMU](http://nalas.eu/Publications/Books/Decentralisation_GMU)



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Brussels. Furthermore, National associations of local governments from the three AAs signatory countries outlined their [joint vision](#) of how to make a success of the Eastern Partnership. Study visits and **peer-to-peer exchange of public sector expertise** and experience between local administrations of EU and EaP peers, are perceived as appropriate means to support networking and a hands-on learning process. PLATFORMA's EU-EaP Local Leaders' Forum is appreciated meeting the requirement of regional exchange among peers. Concrete proposals called for the set-up of transnational dialogue platforms to enhance the exchange between central and local governments and joint declarations to be addressed via the committee of the Regions (CoR).

#### 4. Decentralisation and local Public Administration Reforms require long term commitment

Decentralisation is not a special EU policy field nor a regulation and there is no specific legislation on it, but it is a political criterion for the EU accession process. Yet, it is very relevant for the EU with regard to the structural set up of partner countries. Both, the subsidiary and good governance principal bear witness of what is more in-depth referred to in the **European Carter of Local Self-Government**.

Decentralisation and local Public Administration Reforms are long-term processes and require a long-term EU commitment for support. Both are relevant for the Eastern Partnership since the EaP countries have historically been burdened with Soviet top-down approach. A functional bottom-up approach depends on an effective coordination and cooperation between local and central government level by actively involving all citizens concerned and by promoting the **inclusive partnership principle** to be successful in leaving no one and no territory behind.

#### 5. Global challenges require for Local Governments the means to confront them

COVID-19 measures taken by Local Governments (LGs) to confront the pandemic and provide basic public services to the local population these past two years have drained local budgets with heavy repercussions.<sup>3</sup> The pandemic displayed an ongoing trend with central government assuming responsibilities at the expense of the local level, constraints to local autonomy and threats to local finance. For 2022 and 2023 anticipated losses are up to 30% compared to 2019.<sup>4</sup> Financial resources are required for LGs to face challenges like Digitalisation, Green Deal and Climate Change as key priorities in the near future. Without the local level being empowered and enabled to face the reform challenges of the future, no reform process will be successfully implemented at all. Reforms need to be anchored at local level in order to be sustainable and inclusive.

### About the organisation of the 3rd Eastern Partnership Local Leaders' Forum

Since 2015 [PLATFORMA](#) together with the [Council of European Municipalities and Regions](#), and its partners has developed an Eastern partnership programme aiming at strengthening local and regional governance, and developing capacity building of national associations of local authorities, in particular in Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

NALAS, the Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe, regroups 14 national associations from 12 countries of the region and is member of PLATFORMA. In this context, NALAS leads joint research and capacity building activities in EaP countries with regard to the ongoing reform process and the strengthening of Local Government Associations in their function of strategic dialogue partners of the central level.

<sup>3</sup> NALAS Fiscal Decentralisation Indicators Report, 8th ed. "Social Welfare at the Intersection of Municipal Finance and Governance in South-East Europe", June 2021, <http://nalas.eu/Publications/Books/2021FDR>

<sup>4</sup> See NALAS, KDZ survey "South-East European Local Governments in post-COVID-19 socio-economic recovery", p.83, [http://nalas.eu/Publications/Books/Covid-19\\_Survey](http://nalas.eu/Publications/Books/Covid-19_Survey)