

CIVEX meeting

CoR Opinion entitled Enlargement: Inclusion of Western Balkans Local and Regional Authorities in the EU's Macro-Regional, Cross-Border and Other Transnational Cooperation Initiatives

European Integration...

CONTEXT:

Since March 2017 there are positive signs from EU leaders to reaffirm commitment to support stability and deepen political and economic ties with and within the region reverting a tendency of rather low attention and priority of the region on the EU agenda. The Western Balkans are back on the EU radar screen after a period of being out of sight and put on hold!

KEY MESSAGE:

- For EU integration to be successful in time a **BOTTOM-UP APPROACH** is required for the region.
- Change processes can only be sustainable and generate the desired impact if they are supported from the local level upwards.

➤ Decentralisation and Democracy...

CONTEXT:

These past 10 years the region faced in general terms a situation characterised by reform stalemate, impatience and rising scepticism regarding EU membership and signs of increasing instability. Progress made before to promote democratic reforms back-slided and gave way to more autocratic forms of government and a re-concentration on central government as the dominant government layer.

KEY MESSAGE:

- Decentralisation as a pillar of the democratic reform process is crucial for social cohesion, stability and peace in the Western Balkans and for the future of Europe.
- If Europe strives to be close to its future citizen, then it has to go local! A functional bottom-up approach is built on an effective coordination and cooperation between local and central government level (Strategic Partnership for Sustainable and Inclusive Development).
- The promotion of **LOCAL DEMOCRACY** is key to contribute to reconciliation and stabilisation in the region and the preparation of EU integration of the Western Balkans.

Note:

In most of the countries in the WB, regions don't exist, therefore bigger importance of supporting local governments in using EU funds and participating in all stages of implementation is even more prominent!

Dialogue facilities EU - local level....

CONTEXT:

Local Governments in the region via their National Associations are not **sufficiently** considered as integral part of the regular consultations and negotiations in the frame of the EU accession process.

KEY MESSAGE:

- Since Local Governments are both policy makers and service providers, a more inclusive consultation process at all stages on planning and decision-making on issues affecting Local Governments is required.
- NALAS strongly advocates to include the local government dimension in strategic and operational planning for EU Enlargement.
- Local Government Associations should be considered as strategic interlocutors in multi-stakeholder dialogues on issues related to EU integration and reform processes.

Note:

Even when involved, LGAs and LGs are part of the third sector, in the same group with CSOs, which prevent LG position to be always visible!

Reform challenge of public administrations....

CONTEXT:

Complex political situations are a common denominator to all Western Balkan countries with politization of state institutions and public administration as a major challenge for transparency and the fight against corruption.

KEY MESSAGE:

- More attention needs to be dedicated to the root-causes behind politization and the capture of public administration by political parties.
- NALAS is convinced that de-politicization of public service starts by building trust, confidence and accountability between civil service and citizen at local level.
- EU needs to monitor closely ratification and implementation practises of civil servant and state employee legislation and their respective adherence to the principles of merit and transparency.

Proposal:

Elaboration of EC Country Progress Reports: LGs to get involved and directly consulted (not through the ministries), to pay more attention to analysis of local sector and their involvement in PAR activities. Eventually support LGAs to prepare analysis of progress reports from the angle of local governments (following the example of CSOs).

Note:

See EU Commission Progress Reports and European Fund for the Balkans Analysis on *“The Western Balkans’ Bumby Quest for EU Integration”*!

EU support instruments....

CONTEXT:

The Multi-Country Indicative Strategy (2014-2020) IPA II does not address local authorities as layer of governance. The lack of components designed for local development and the specific needs of cities, towns and local government entities speak for themselves. Local Authorities are not considered as key actors under IPA II.

KEY MESSAGE:

- EU to assure policy instrument coherence throughout different geographical areas.
- Promote introduction of thematic programme “Civil Society Organisations (CSO) and Local Authorities (LA), coordinated by the EU Commission DG DEVCO, for the Western Balkans.
- Local Government Associations should be part of the IPA negotiation, programming, monitoring and evaluation process.
- Improvement of EU funding instruments that can best be summed up as: *Simplification of EU rules!* – Bottleneck of IPA are pre-and co-financing requirements and cumbersome application procedures limiting the participation of LGs.

Note:

Make sure that additional funding is available through national programmes to those territories that have less access to CBC.

Allow focus on infrastructure projects and concrete initiatives in the field.

Promote the set-up of Bridge Funding Facilities for LGs at national level!

LGAs as strategic partner...

CONTEXT:

The EU supports a number of regional networks in the Western Balkans coordinating the work of the central government level to foster and prepare the countries of the region for EU integration. However, no strategic partnership has been concluded with a regional network representing the local government level.

KEY MESSAGE:

If the EU wants to increase local cooperation in the Western Balkans then it should foster and **support regional initiatives** of local government associations such as NALAS.

- LGAs should be considered as strategic partners since they are powerful knowledge hubs and promoters of EU integration at local level.
- Framework Partnership Agreement EU-NALAS could be a step to empower local authorities to prepare for EU integration. (The EU could strengthen associations of local authorities as actors of governance in order to increase their impact on policy-making processes, good governance and general development in a partnership for stability and growth.)
- Empower NALAS to contribute to implementation of SEE 2020 Strategy on Economic Growth and Job Creation currently led by Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the Ministries of Economy.

Note:

Support NALAS through direct grant in the same ways as ReSPA, RCC and other thematic regional networks, especially because of the role and responsibility defined in the implementation of SEE2020.

Opportunities for LGs in EU Macro-Regional, CBC and Other Transnational Cooperation Initiatives ...

CONTEXT:

In terms of macro-regional strategies, the problem is that they divided the WB region instead of bringing them closer.

KEY MESSAGE:

- EU macro-regional strategies should consider the Western Balkans as a whole and treat the region accordingly promoting cohesion, stability and growth!
- The New European Consensus on Development aligns EU Policy on Development with the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development at global level recognizing LGAs and LGs as main stakeholders and key actors in “Localizing SDGs”!
- EU Policy coherence at global level should follow its logic at regional level and consider LGAs and LGs as main stakeholders and key actors in “Localising SDGs” in the Western Balkans!

In order to be able to contribute properly to the negotiations and EU integration process, LGs have to be continuously capacitated to provide quality input, to be ready on time. As the set of programmes is available to national governments for that purpose (TAIEX, technical assistance, twinning) good practices could be disseminated. Here the CoR and its members can play significant role by:

- i) Inviting LGs from the region as partners on the transnational and CBC projects they are implementing!
- ii) Promote NALAS/LGs from the region with initiatives at EU levels
- iii) Sharing of their best practices to peers in the region

Note:

Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia do not participate in Danube programme and while Albania is involved with few other countries in Adriatic Ionian Strategy, Macedonia and Kosovo are left behind. Similar funding opportunities is available through Balkan Mediterranean programme to Macedonia and Albania but only with Bulgaria, Greece and Cyprus.