

REVISED ACTION PLAN

2023-2024



CONFERENCE OF THE REGIONAL AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES FOR THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

Established in 2011, the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP) is a **political forum of local and regional authorities (LRAs) from the EU and Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries** founded on mutual interest and commitment as well as on the principles of differentiation, shared ownership and responsibility.

As the EaP celebrated its ten-year anniversary in 2019, the European Council invited the European Commission and the High Representative to present **new long-term policy objectives** for the years after 2020. After a broad and inclusive consultation launched by the European Commission, to which CORLEAP contributed, five long-term policy objectives beyond 2020 were identified:

- together for resilient, sustainable and integrated economies;
- together for accountable institutions, the rule of law and security;
- together towards environmental and climate resilience;
- together for resilient digital transformation;
- together for resilient, fair and inclusive societies.

These objectives, with resilience at their core, were published by the European Commission on 18 March 2020 under the joint communication *Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020: Reinforcing Resilience – an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all*. The Council welcomed the joint communication in its conclusions of 11 May 2020. The EaP Leaders welcomed on 18 June 2020 these long-term objectives on the basis of the joint communication, the Council conclusions and input from Member States and the Eastern partners. This led to the shaping of concrete priorities beyond 2020 which were captured in the Joint Staff Working Document *Recovery, resilience and reform: post 2020 EaP priorities* published on 2 July 2021. The agenda was structured around two main pillars:

- investment - supported by an *Economic and Investment Plan* and flagship initiatives;
- governance.

The Joint Declaration adopted by the EaP Summit of November 2017 presented **CORLEAP as an effective instrument for LRAs** to advance the objectives of the EaP at the level of governance closest to citizens.

At the foreign affairs ministerial meeting and the high-level conference marking the 10th anniversary of the Eastern Partnership on 13-14 May 2019 in Brussels, the CORLEAP co-chair reiterated the importance of multi-level governance and local democracy in achieving the EaP deliverables on all levels, with tangible benefits for citizens in all EaP countries.

CORLEAP contributions and actions aiming at further developing and increasing the visibility of the involvement of LRAs across the EaP priorities are brought forward via dedicated events (online conferences or webinars), thematic CORLEAP reports, position papers, political recommendations etc. Among these, CORLEAP advocated for the creation of a platform for online training and/or the establishment of an **EaP Academy for Public Administration** serving local/regional governments and tailored to the specific needs of public administration at sub-national level.

In accordance with the tradition, the original Action Plan 2021-2024 covers the period between the EaP summits: more specifically, the EaP Summit of 15 December 2021 and the 2024 EaP Summit. The current revised version 2023-2024, to be adopted at the CORLEAP annual meeting on 7 September 2023 in Batumi, Georgia, takes into account the changed geopolitical realities.

1. A NEW GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

An unprovoked, illegal, and brutal military invasion of the Russian Federation against Ukraine started on 24 February 2022. The war is ongoing, causing tens of thousands of deaths and many more wounded. Despite Ukraine's heroic war efforts, considerable parts of its territory, including Crimea (since 2014) are still under Russian occupation. The war resulted in the largest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II. Geopolitical changes and those in international trade and economy are profound and felt throughout Europe and beyond.

Since June 2022, following their membership application, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova were officially recognised as EU candidate countries, and Georgia was given a "European perspective" and a list of conditions to get such a status. At the same time, Belarus unilaterally left the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and therefore CORLEAP.

Following these developments, many started questioning **the purpose and further functioning of the Eastern Partnership and CORLEAP**. In their meeting on 12 December 2022, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the EaP confirmed the EU's commitment to the EaP and their willingness to make it more flexible and tailored to the needs of partners¹. The European Committee of the Regions (CoR) on 15 March 2023 adopted an opinion on "The Future of the Eastern Partnership from a local and regional perspective" (rapporteur Alin-Adrian Nica)². It considered the "commitment among EU Member States and the current Eastern European Partner countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine) to continue, renew and strengthen the Eastern Partnership (EaP) so that it remains the leading forum and framework for cooperation with the neighbouring countries east of the EU".

¹ Cf. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-ministerial-meetings/2022/12/12/>

² Cf. <https://cor.europa.eu/en/our-work/Pages/OpinionTimeline.aspx?opId=CDR-5113-2022>

For all these reasons, the twelfth CORLEAP Annual meeting, held on 7 September 2023 in Batumi, Georgia, is deciding on the current update of the Action Plan for 2023-2024. Therefore, the priorities have been revised considering also that some points of this Action Plan have not been implemented yet, and some might not be completed even until its expiry in 2024. Furthermore, a review of its implementation in 2024, as a ground for the preparation of the next CORLEAP term of office starting early 2025 will be launched.

2. KEY TOPICS

CORLEAP will continue contributing to shaping the local and regional dimension of the Eastern Partnership in line with the proposed **five policy objectives** and its **two main pillars** (investment and governance).

For 2023-2024 the updated core topics of CORLEAP activity are the following:

2.1 Progress on decentralisation and good governance

The lack of fiscal decentralisation and autonomy has been identified by CORLEAP members as one of the main pressing issues obstructing the smooth development of the EaP local and regional authorities. CORLEAP will therefore persist in promoting the **ongoing decentralisation processes and upcoming reforms** by organising debates on how decentralisation, including fiscal decentralization, helps to consolidate democracy, improve local governance, local economic development and justice, and accelerate local and regional development.

2.2 Revision of the EaP multilateral architecture

In line with the discussions on the adjustments needed to reinvigorate cooperation and increase partners' ownership in relation to the EaP architecture, CORLEAP welcomes the call to reinforce targeted cooperation and reiterates its commitment to play a crucial role together with the EaP key stakeholders, in line with the CoR's call *"that the EaP should be more results-oriented, by adapting its tools and operating formats to respond to the needs of the partners, including by helping the most advanced partners on their way towards EU membership"*³.

2.3 Post-pandemic recovery, resilience and reform

CORLEAP will devote an important part of its activities to the implementation of the guiding three Rs (Recovery, Resilience and Reform) of the current EaP agenda and of the Economic and Investment Plan. EaP Leaders had stressed the importance of solidarity at the time of the COVID-19 crisis, including the EU's substantial support to address the impact of the outbreak in the EaP region, and the Economic and Investment Plan is an important step in that regard.

LRAs had been called upon to provide emergency services, coordinate efforts and mitigate as far as possible the impact on economies. In an effort to contain the impacts of the virus, LRAs have taken

³ CoR opinion on "The Future of the Eastern Partnership from a local and regional perspective" (rapporteur Alin-Adrian Nica), pt 13 (<https://cor.europa.eu/en/our-work/Pages/OpinionTimeline.aspx?opId=CDR-5113-2022>)

various measures in addition to national measures, to reduce the existing risk and prevent future risk associated with biological hazards. The role of local initiatives and processes, such as volunteering networks, has been critical in responding to immediate needs and recovery efforts. CORLEAP will engage discussions and exchanges of good practices in relation to post-COVID recovery and health resilience at EaP local and regional level. Above all CORLEAP will continue experience exchange and advocacy activities on promotion of the concrete tools and instruments for resilience and recovery, such as: (i) protection of local autonomy, which is under different pressures during the pandemic crisis; (ii) fiscal decentralization and adequate financial resources for local governments to meet new competencies and challenges emerged during the crisis; (iii) safeguarding of local democracy; (iv) raising funds for local and regional projects towards resilience and recovery; (v) consolidation of development policies targeting the needs for resilience and recovery; (vi) cooperation and dialogue with the central governments, which gain particular importance and multi-dimensionality during the crisis.

2.4 Contribution to the creation of the EaP Academy for Public Administration

CORLEAP recalls the suggestion put forward in its *Recommendations to the Heads of State or Government of the EU and the EaP countries* at the 5th EaP Summit on the "*creation of a platform under the EaP for online training and/or the establishment of an EaP Academy for Public Administration serving the local/regional governments*" and warmly welcomes its launching as stated in the EC's proposal. CORLEAP intends to contribute to the setting-up of the virtual EaP Academy for Public Administration by promoting and mobilising local and regional expertise.

2.5 Support to the green agenda and the launching of the EaP "green city" award

CORLEAP strongly welcomes the creation of the EaP "green city" award. With EaP mayors being similarly committed to making cities cleaner and healthier, the award will further promote and encourage local action on the way to resilience and sustainability in EaP urban areas. CORLEAP will carry on its work on climate resilience and progress on the green agenda for LRAs in line with the European Green Deal and the Sustainable Development Goals. At the same time, CORLEAP will be instrumental in aligning the global policies to the realities and opportunities on the ground in the Eastern Partnership countries, will advocate for substantial international support and investments in local infrastructure in the fields of climate, green economy, infrastructure and energy efficiency, essential for sustainable results in these fields, especially under the conditions of limited resources in national and local budgets in the EaP countries.

3. POLITICAL DIMENSION

The EU must assist its neighbours in strengthening their resilience by laying the foundations of **better governance** which should also benefit socio-economic recovery and long-term resilience. CORLEAP considers that the territorial dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy should be expanded.

The key challenges in working with neighbouring countries are linked to the lack of political stability, to pervasive corruption, poor justice mechanisms as well as the generally slow advance of reforms. Furthermore, the pandemic has exacerbated the risks to security, democracy, including local democracy,

and media freedom (e.g. disinformation). The rule of law and good governance remains an overarching joint objective of the EU and the EaP partners.

CORLEAP offers a framework for EU and EaP local and regional authorities to shape policies and advocate for their interests through preparation and adoption of reports on one hand, and through active participation in EaP meetings, including EaP summits, on the other.

The CORLEAP focus in 2023-2024 will be:

- a) Assessing opportunities and challenges within the renewed EaP agenda, based on commitments to be endorsed by the EaP summits.
- b) Pursuing a reinforced acknowledgement of the role of CORLEAP and of LRAs in the EaP summit declaration.
- c) Contributing to the conceptualisation of the EaP Academy for Public Administration.
- d) Continuing to support the decentralisation reforms in EaP countries.
- e) Continuous support and advocacy of the local democracy and local autonomy, as a pan-European value based on the European Charter of Local Self-Government
- f) Enhancing cooperation on the economic recovery and climate resilience agenda.
- g) Drawing lessons from the implementation of the new policy framework in view of the 7th EaP summit to be held in 2024.

CORLEAP remains committed to promoting **visibility of the benefits of EaP policy for citizens**. Its events will further seek to reach out to wide, young and gender-balanced audiences in view of promoting an increased and inclusive participation.

4. OPERATIONAL DIMENSION

CORLEAP reports are prepared on topics chosen according to their comparative advantage in terms of profiling a political message, notably related to the role of local and regional authorities and the visibility of their engagement and commendable efforts in those fields. Those reports will eventually feed into Summit recommendations. The topics of the thematic reports will be linked to one of the priorities outlined in the current Action Plan.

The impact of local and regional authorities on EU, national and local policies and strategic communication are significantly enhanced through **cooperation with partners**. Therefore, CORLEAP will continue to strengthen its active cooperation with its permanent observers: the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, the EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly and the EaP Civil Society Forum, as well as with other institutional partners. Cooperation with the European Commission will be further strengthened in the areas of the EaP renewed agenda and also within the continuance of successful experiences, such as the Mayors for Economic Growth. CORLEAP will aim to consolidate cooperation and to reinforce advocacy messages together with European associations of local authorities active in promotion of local governance local democracy and local autonomy (CEMR, UCLG and NALAS).

CORLEAP will also continue to play its role as a **platform for promoting territorial cooperation** between EU and EaP local and regional authorities in areas of common interest and provide visibility to specific projects.

Additional targeted actions will be taken to boost exchange of experience through **peer-to-peer cooperation** between local and regional authorities of the EaP partner countries and CoR members. These efforts can be channelled both through multilateral structures available for this purpose, such as EaP Academy of Public Administration, and through bilateral arrangements, taking into account existing EU programmes that can financially support this form of capacity building for local and regional administrations of the EaP partners.

TIMETABLE OF CORLEAP RELATED ACTIVITIES AND PROPOSALS FOR ACTION 2023-2024

This timetable, subject to eventual adjustments based on latest developments, lists regular events and proposals by CORLEAP members, CORLEAP observers and stakeholders, as approved by CORLEAP co-chairs. Additional suggestions and proposals by CORLEAP members, CORLEAP observers and stakeholders are welcome and will be incorporated based on the approval of CORLEAP co-chairs. The timetable will be updated in the course of the reference period.

In accordance with its mandate, the CORLEAP plenary session will meet once a year. The CORLEAP Bureau will meet either once or twice a year, on the occasion of the annual meeting, and/or in the period between two annual meetings. The meetings can be held (upon invitation) in the partner countries. In urgent and duly motivated circumstances the co-chairs can convene an extraordinary meeting of the CORLEAP Plenary or Bureau, subject to budget availability and political necessity.

2023

7-8 September 2023

- 12th CORLEAP Annual meeting and thematic conference on the Role of municipalities in the implementation of European Neighbourhood Policy in Batumi, Georgia, co-organized with the National Association of Local Authorities of Georgia (NALAG) and the City of Batumi

Autumn/winter 2023

- Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of EaP (tbc)

2024

- CORLEAP Annual meeting (date and place tbc)
 - 7th Eastern Partnership Summit, Brussels/online (tbc)
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