



PISM

POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

BULLETIN

No. 4 (1077), 8 January 2018 © PISM

Editors: Sławomir Dębski • Bartosz Wiśniewski • Rafał Tarnogórski

Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka • Anna Maria Dynier • Aleksandra Gawlikowska-Fyk
Sebastian Płóciennik • Patrycja Sasnal • Justyna Szczudlik • Marcin Terlikowski • Tomasz Żornaczuk

Cross-Border Cooperation: An Opportunity to Strengthen the Eastern Partnership

Adriana Skorupska

One of the main conclusions of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) summit, which took place on 24 November in Brussels, is the need for greater concentration on interpersonal relations. One cooperation platform mentioned during the summit to strengthen ties between EU and EaP societies and supporting the development of local democracy is cross-border cooperation. Previous experience from the Poland-Belarus-Ukraine-EU programme can be used to support contacts between EaP regions.

The cross-border cooperation programme “Poland-Belarus-Ukraine 2014–2020 (PL-BY-UA 2014–2020),” which will be implemented within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Instrument, is a continuation of an initiative by the same name from 2007–2013. Its main goal is to support development processes in the border regions of Poland, Belarus and Ukraine—an area inhabited by nearly 21 million people. With a budget of €183 million (comparable to the amount from the 2007–2013 programme), the first call for projects was announced in October 2016. The whole amount is directed to those regions and any non-profit institutions from those areas.

Most of the “Large Infrastructure Projects,” selected through a direct award procedure, concern the development of border, safety and road infrastructure in the regions covered by the programme. In turn, through a competition procedure, projects will be selected per thematic objectives: heritage, accessibility, security, borders. Under the slogan of accessibility, there will be activities supporting the sustainable development of cities and regions, as well as the development and improvement of environmentally friendly, low-emission transport systems. There is also the possibility to implement projects as needed, such as reducing long queues at the Polish-Ukrainian border.

A requirement of the programme is the participation of at least one entity from Poland in each project. In 2007–2013, 117 projects were implemented: 74 in the Polish-Ukrainian partnership, 29 in the Polish-Belarusian partnership, and 14 in a tripartite partnership. In most cases, the leaders were Polish entities (89 projects), followed by Ukrainian (20), and then Belarusian (8). The experience of Polish local governments from the pre-EU-accession period shows how important it was for them to participate in various programmes focused on cooperation with EU Member States. The EaP countries are in a similar situation. The implementation of projects with entities from EU countries helps them gain experience, not only in conducting large international projects but also in setting directions and standards important for local development and democratisation. The knowledge they acquire will be useful in undertaking their own initiatives in accordance with EU standards and best practices.

Cooperation between EaP Countries. In 2013, the EU announced the Eastern Partnership Territorial Cooperation (EaPTC) initiative. The objective of EaPTC, modelled on cross-border programmes implemented in regions along both the internal and external borders of the EU, is to strengthen cooperation between EU border regions and EaP countries and to improve their social and economic

development. State entities, such as territorial authorities and public service providers (such as hospitals and cultural and scientific institutions), as well as non-state actors, such as NGOs, are eligible to participate. An important requirement is the involvement of partners from any two EaP states, both at the design phase and in the implementation, financing and employment of personnel. The EU is responsible for organising informational meetings at various stages of the programme, but the projects are implemented only by the entities from the EaP countries.

The partners work together on three areas: improvement of living conditions of local communities; solving problems related to the environment, employment, and healthcare; and, supporting cultural, educational and sport activities. The initiative, initially treated as a pilot project, gradually began to be launched in the border regions of EaP countries: Armenia and Georgia; Azerbaijan and Georgia; and, Moldova and Ukraine. For example, in January 2016, the first call for projects on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border was announced. As a result, in November 2017, grant contracts worth €3.3 million were signed for the implementation of 18 projects selected in the competition. The budget of the entire programme is €12.5 million.

Other Cooperation Platforms and Facilitation. A political platform for cooperation between local and regional authorities in the EaP and EU countries is the Conference of the Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP), operating within the EU Committee of the Regions. The conference works to strengthen local democracy in the EaP countries. A report prepared in 2016, “Development of civic participation as a way to strengthen local democracy in the Eastern Partnership countries,” included a recommendation to support the involvement of local communities in EaP activities. This proposal then became one of the conclusions of the Brussels summit in November 2017.

The networks between territorial units of the EaP and EU countries is also essential, especially between cities and partner regions. The activities of Euroregions support common activities. They allow cooperation with units that are from different countries but located close to the border, even despite intergovernmental tensions, for example, those related to the Ukrainian Education Act in the case of Hungarian-Ukrainian and Romanian-Ukrainian contacts. The 15th anniversary of the Carpathian Euroregion, associating local governments on the border of Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, and Hungary, will be a good opportunity to discuss the effectiveness of the existing structure and to consider whether it is worth using another EU tool, the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC). Thanks to a higher level of institutionalisation, EGTC gives a chance to create more durable structures, for example, not having to sign project contracts every time. In addition, other state entities and even national governments may be members of the grouping alongside local governments. These will be important factors facilitating the planning and running of large projects, especially those related to infrastructure or energy.¹

Another important facilitation of bilateral contacts is the opening of new air and rail connections (e.g., Chełm-Kowel, Przemyśl-Kyiv) and the abolition in June 2017 of the visa requirement for Ukrainian citizens with biometric passports. Belarus is also introducing some facilitation. According to a decree by President Alexander Lukashenko from 26 December 2017 and in effect from 1 January, tourists can now enter parts of Belarus without visas, including visiting Grodno, Brest and Augustow Canal Park, for up to 10 days.

Conclusions. Regardless of the development of cooperation between representatives of local authorities from EU and EaP countries, both the Union and its Member States should encourage and strengthen the establishment of contacts between local actors from the Eastern Partnership countries, without the need for the participation of EU partners. The experience that the local authorities of the six countries can acquire through cooperation with the local governments of EU countries will be helpful in establishing links between each other. In the case of the next cross-border cooperation programme after 2020, in which the participants will be more than one EaP country (as in PL-BY-UA 2014–2020), it is worth allowing and encouraging the implementation of projects involving only partners from Ukraine and Belarus. Cooperation among local authorities can be an important factor facilitating or even pushing activities between EaP states to higher levels of administration. In international projects aimed at local development, environmental protection, supporting entrepreneurship, and strengthening civil society, it is valuable to include NGOs or educational and research units.

Apart from the cross-border cooperation programme and the city and region partnerships, there are other large international projects, such as Via Carpathia and the EGTCs. The latter so far have been used only by Polish municipalities to cooperate with EU partners, although EU law also permits participation of a non-EU entity, for example, Hungarians through the EGTC Tisza project with Ukraine.

¹ A. Skorupska, “EGTCs: Assessments and Prospects,” *PISM Bulletin*, no. 59 (999), 20 June 2017.