



## CONFERENCE OF THE REGIONAL AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES FOR THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

### ACTION PLAN 2025-2029

#### GENERAL

The Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP), established in 2011, continues to serve as a crucial political forum for local and regional authorities (LRAs) from the European Union (EU) and Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries. Built on the principles of mutual interest, shared ownership, and responsibility, CORLEAP has consistently advocated for the active involvement of LRAs in advancing the goals of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), ensuring that these objectives resonate at the level of governance closest to citizens.

Since the publication of the Joint Communication on ‘Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020’<sup>1</sup>, significant geopolitical developments have reshaped the regional context and further underlined the importance of the EaP framework, with an emphasis on synergies and regional cooperation. The ongoing Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, continued instability in Belarus, widespread disinformation campaigns, volatile situation in the wider Black Sea region, also seen through the spectrum of the changing Transatlantic relations, remain central challenges. The evolving political and economic trajectories of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova and Georgia have also led to new regional dynamics with profound implications for the future of the Eastern Partnership, requiring a renewed commitment to resilience and cooperation.

In June 2024, Moldova and Ukraine officially opened EU accession negotiations and reinforced their bilateral relations with the EU. Previous cooperation within the EaP largely paved the way for this success. Georgia’s government in November 2024 unfortunately decided to suspend the country’s EU accession process until 2028. At the same time, in the EaP countries currently not on an EU enlargement path, the EaP remains a vital platform for approximation with EU standards, fostering stronger cooperation and regional dialogue.

On 28 May 2025, the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy published the Joint communication on the European Union’s strategic approach to the Black Sea region<sup>2</sup> (‘Black Sea Strategy’). At its 4th meeting of the current term of

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<sup>1</sup> [1\\_en\\_act\\_part1\\_v6.pdf](#).

<sup>2</sup> [eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52025JC0135](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52025JC0135).

office, the Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs (CIVEX) of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) decided to draft an opinion on the Black Sea Strategy.

The Black Sea region is defined broadly in the Black Sea Strategy, and it includes all five EU partner countries currently participating in the Eastern Partnership (EaP). The Strategy's intention is not to replace, but to complement EaP. The Black Sea region has great geopolitical importance, since it is crucial for connecting Europe to Asia and has significant potential for economic development and strategic transit routes, especially for energy resources. Through the Strategy, the EU aims to enhance cooperation with countries in the Black Sea region, focusing on security, economic development, and democratic consolidation.

The implementation of the Strategy opens numerous new opportunities for the cooperation of cities, municipalities, and regions in the EU and their counterparts in EaP countries. CORLEAP, as the main forum for cooperation of local and regional authorities in the EaP, has a central role to play in this endeavour.

CORLEAP remains committed to strengthening the role of local and regional authorities in the EaP countries, promoting local democracy and economic development, facilitating cross-border and broader cooperation between the local communities and regions in the EaP area, and supporting the long-term stability and resilience in the European Union's Eastern Neighbourhood.

This Action Plan for 2025-2029 seeks to continue CORLEAP's mission of contributing towards the setting-up of an EaP Academy for Public Administration serving local and regional authorities and tailored to the specific needs of public administration at sub-national level, promoting decentralisation/devolution of powers and resilience of the region through better governance, innovation, sustainability and support to youth.

## **KEY TOPICS**

In this new period, and giving a flexible response to the new and constantly evolving geopolitical circumstances, CORLEAP will continue being the local and regional dimension of the Eastern Partnership, focusing on the following key topics:

### **1) Progress on decentralisation / devolution of powers, including fiscal decentralisation**

The insufficient progress in fiscal decentralisation has been identified by CORLEAP as one of the most pressing issues. Formal transfer of competences as defined by legislation is often not accompanied by legally defined secure and sustainable own financial resources for the local and regional authorities, independent of the good will or a lack thereof of the central government. Such a situation is a serious obstacle for the local and regional authorities in EaP countries in their efforts to foster sustainable economic development at local and regional level, and open new opportunities to young people, families, and citizens in general, countering negative demographic trends prevalent in many EaP regions. In many cases, it may even impede local and regional authorities from properly performing even their most basic functions, such as ensuring efficient public transport, street lighting and cleaning, ensuring the stable and generalised supply of drinking water, and efficient waste and

wastewater management. This complex issue is one of the greatest challenges for faster and more sustainable development of local communities and regions in EaP countries.

CORLEAP will therefore persevere in promoting the ongoing decentralisation processes and upcoming reforms by organising debates on how decentralisation, including fiscal decentralisation, helps to consolidate democracy, improve local governance, local economic development and justice, and accelerate local and regional development.

The updated CoR work on the ‘Division of Powers’, which will also address all EaP countries, will serve as a useful benchmark framing the discussions<sup>3</sup>.

## 2) **Engagement in the discussions on the future of the EaP**

Local and regional authorities are those closest to the citizens and therefore rightfully demand a role in the ongoing discussions about the future of the Eastern Partnership. CORLEAP has been instrumental in this respect up to now and is the best place to articulate the local and regional perspective on the future of the EaP in the years to come.

## 3) **Promoting cooperation in the EaP area at local and regional level, based on shared values**

Values of human rights and freedoms, democracy, social market economy, good governance, and the rule of law are common to all EU Member States and countries of EaP.

In our time, when geopolitical and international economic circumstances are changing, sometimes rapidly and often for the worse, there is a great need and numerous opportunities for local and regional authorities in the EaP area for their engagement and mutual support through exchange of best practices and various forms of practical cooperation to protect and develop local democracy and economic development at the local and regional level.

Such cooperation, in the context of CORLEAP, places special emphasis on cross-border cooperation and cooperation across administrative boundaries to foster reconciliation and mutual understanding and to find better solutions to common challenges.

## 4) **Countering disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference**

Foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) is a term coined and used by the European External Action Service (EEAS) to describe activities that involve disinformation and manipulation of information by foreign actors. These activities pose a threat to the security and democratic processes of the European Union, as well as in the EU candidate countries and the countries of the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood.

To successfully counter disinformation and broader FIMI, nurturing and developing **media freedom and media plurality**, including at the local and regional level, is of the utmost importance.

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<sup>3</sup> [Division of Powers | European Committee of the Regions](#).

**Media freedom** is the ability of various forms of media (print, electronic, digital) to operate independently without undue interference from the government or other entities. It encompasses the right to express, publish, and share information, ideas, and opinions freely. This freedom is essential for democracy as it allows for the dissemination of information, public debate, and holding those in power accountable.

**Media plurality** involves the presence of a diverse range of voices, opinions, and media outlets within a media system. It is useful to distinguish between the **internal pluralism** (diversity within individual media outlets, ensuring a variety of perspectives and analyses), and **external pluralism** - coexistence of different types of media (print, radio, TV, digital), and ownership models (public, private, cooperative, and mixed). Media plurality is crucial for a healthy democracy as it ensures that citizens have access to a wide range of information and viewpoints, enabling them to make informed decisions.

LRAs are on the frontline of countering disinformation, as they are closest to citizens and can play a crucial role in building trust, countering false narratives and promoting media literacy. CORLEAP can support the building of local capacities to fight against disinformation by providing training and tools for LRAs to detect, debunk and counteract disinformation, encourage the creation or support of already existing regional fact-checking networks, support local education programmes on media literacy and support LRAs in the adoption of stronger cyber security measures.

#### 5) **Capacity building of local and regional authorities**

Following the decisions of the 13th CORLEAP Annual meeting, held in Rzeszów, Poland, on 21 January 2025, and previous CORLEAP conclusions on the establishment of EPAPA – Eastern Partnership Academy for Public Administration at local and regional level, efforts are underway to establish a platform for matching available offer and real expressed needs of LRAs in EaP countries to meet their capacity building needs in a pragmatic, results-oriented, and tailor-made manner, through a number of online, hybrid, and in-person courses, programmes, and projects for classic and peer-to-peer learning to address the constant challenge LRAs in EaP countries are faced with: difficulty in hiring and retaining the best and brightest in the workforce, resisting the attraction of central public administrations, the public sector, or emigrating abroad.

The CoR and CORLEAP will pursue their activities in this respect in close cooperation with the partners, most notably (non-exhaustive list): College of Europe (Natolin Campus in particular), Regional School for Public Administration (ReSPA), International Centre for Black Sea Studies (ICBSS), SIGMA (a joint initiative of the OECD and the EU), DG ENEST, and others.

#### 6) **Cross-border cooperation on the preservation of cultural heritage, confidence-building measures, empowering youth and preventing ‘brain drain’**

Between some EaP countries there is a recent history of armed conflict, which leaves deep physical and emotional wounds on their local communities and regions. The path to reconciliation and normalisation of relations and good cooperation is often neither easy nor quick. Cross-border cooperation on culture, including through safeguarding the cultural heritage left outside the national

borders, could go a long way. City diplomacy, people-to-people contacts, and small cross-border projects have a prominent place here. The experience from the Western Balkans could be very helpful.

Brain-drain poses a serious challenge to local development, depriving communities of talented young people for innovation, economic growth and reforms. To reverse this trend, the creation of incentives for young people to build their future home is needed. This could entail expanding entrepreneurship hubs and supporting youth-led businesses, supporting local vocational training, creating youth councils and participatory decision-making structures and encouraging youth involvement in regional policy dialogues and cross-border youth cooperation.

7) **Protection of environment, addressing the consequences of climate change, and ensuring energy efficiency**

In the forthcoming period, CORLEAP intends to pay significant attention to the issues of environmental protection, tackling the challenges of climate change, and increasing energy efficiency

In addition to the environmental and climatic challenges that are identical or similar to those in other parts of Europe and the world, the Russian aggression against Ukraine and other conflicts in the area (including the so-called ‘frozen’ conflicts) have disastrous consequences for the environment, in particular on soil and water. This exacerbates other common environmental challenges, such as water, air and soil pollution caused by the traffic of internal combustion engines, manufacturing industries and mining, and mass agriculture (pesticides and so on).

As with so many other seas and water bodies in the world, the level of the Black Sea and many other water bodies in the EaP area is rising, while the Caspian Sea is shrinking. Floods, droughts and extreme weather events are becoming more frequent.

While hydrocarbons are abundant in some parts of the EaP area, and renewable energy sources such as hydropower, sun and wind in most of it, it is crucial to engage more to ensure energy efficiency of public buildings.

Local and regional authorities can and should do a lot to tackle these issues, which are the same or very similar across administrative boundaries and national borders.

CORLEAP is to serve as a forum for the exchange of experiences and best practices, and for fostering concrete cooperation projects in this regard.

These are the main topics, but the list is by no means exhaustive. CORLEAP is to react to the changing circumstances, challenges and opportunities, and to introduce in its discussions and work any topic that may be relevant to its objectives and beneficial to the citizens.

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