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Fostering mutual understanding
and co-operation of the EU with Belarus,
Moldova, Russia and Ukraine 2008 - 2012

BRIDGE ODESA DECLARATION ON ENHANCING LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN BELARUS, MOLDOVA, RUSSIA AND UKRAINE IN THE REVISED EUROPEAN NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY

Within the BRIDGE project – Fostering mutual understanding and cooperation of the EU with Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine (2008-2012), which is co-financed by the European Commission, an International expert meeting (IEM) on local self-government and citizens' participation in decision-making processes and local democracy was held on June 1-2, 2011 in Odessa, Ukraine. The IEM was attended by around 80 invited representatives of Belarusian, Moldovan, Russian and Ukrainian academics, researchers, civil society institutions, human rights' practitioners, civil servants and students.

The IEM focused on three major topics: legal, financial and political aspects of local self-government in the context of democratisation and political decentralisation; local self-government and effective civil society participation in decision making on local level as a precondition for successful local, regional and national development; and local communities as promoters of effective cooperation between EU and partner countries.

After thorough and comprehensive discussions have the participants adopted the following recommendations:

1. The EU institutions are invited

- to include the needs of local and regional communities in Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine as the genuine expression of democracy in these countries into the revised ENP and Eastern Partnership in particular, to elaborate adequate instruments for its realisation and to provide in the financial period 2014-2020 substantial means for the achievement of these goals;

Prof.Dr. Silvo Devetak

BRIDGE Coordinator and Director of ISCOMET Institute

ISCOMET – Institute for Ethnic and Regional Studies

NGO enjoying Participatory Status with the Council of Europe

Pupinova ulica 6, SI-2000 Maribor, Slovenia

Mobile: +386 41 699 641

Phone: +386 2 25 00 440

Fax: +386 2 23 55 372

E-Mail: ISCOMET@siol.net

www.project-bridge.eu

www.ISCOMET.org

- to elaborate in this framework the opportunities – similar to those emanating from the functioning of European structural funds - for local and regional communities in Partner countries for developing economic, environmental, infrastructural and similar projects, aimed at achieving sustainable development and improving the life of the population;
- to improve the mechanisms for transparent and accountable functioning of the existing structure aimed at developing cross-border cooperation along the EU external frontiers and to provide adequate financial sources for efficient realisation of this cooperation;
- to consider the initiative of European Parliament to create Local and Regional Assembly of Eastern and South Caucasus countries;
- to support by adequate measures the networking of civil society institutions and organizations of Belarus, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine;
- to ensure the inclusion of interests of local and regional communities in the on-going negotiations between the Partner countries and the EU concerning the instruments of the European partnership and revised agreements with Russia;
- to elaborate ways and means for providing training of people involved in different bodies of local and regional democracy (through TAIX and similar programmes) on democratic and efficient functioning of local and regional self-government;
- to accelerate negotiations on visa elimination agreements with Ukraine and Moldova and visa-facilitation and later visa elimination agreements with Belarus and Russia providing thus the basic conditions for people to people contacts and the unhampered cross-border and territorial cooperation with the EU of local and regional communities in BRIDGE Partner countries.

2. The Council of Ministers of the Council of Europe is invited

- to consider in due time the Charter on regional democracy, which was on 27 of May 2008 adopted by the Congress of regional and local authorities in order to open it as a legally binding international instrument for ratification by the CoE member states.

3. National, regional and local authorities of Belarus, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine are encouraged

- to enhance decentralisation in order to provide democratic ways and means for engagement of people in the decision-making and to complement – where it is appropriate - the decentralisation processes with comprehensive reforms of all spheres of public life;
- to enhance legislative basis for the functioning of efficient local and regional self-government, to clear-cut competencies and responsibilities, and to ensure adequate instruments and financial resources for achieving of these goals;

- to propagate the benefits of local democracy and self-government for the amelioration of living conditions of population, to raise public awareness on this issue by adopting adequate policies and instruments for their realisation, and to ensure the support of activities of civil society organizations and institutions within the local self-government;
- to avoid the extreme politicisation of the local self-government functioning and decision making in particular;
- to ensure the democratic and transparent execution of local self-government among other through the functioning of assemblies, councils and by direct participation of people in referenda, public hearings and similar forms of democratic engagement;
- to provide local and regional communities with legal possibilities to take part independently in cross-border cooperation and to ensure that local and regional communities can without obstacles use the EU funds for realisation of projects that are important for the life of population;
- to improve the existent courses and introduce new programs of civic education on all levels of education with the aim to educate children as citizens who are aware that democracy is a corner stone of stable and prosperous societies and of their human rights and freedoms as well;
- to adopt adequate programmes for training of people who are involved in the functioning of local communities with the aim to improve their knowledge, skills and capacity concerning exercising competences, effective organisation and decision making in one democratic local community;
- to adhere to the Additional protocol to the European Charter of local self-government on the right to participation in the affairs of local authorities of 16 November 2009;
- to adhere to the 3rd protocol to the European outline convention on trans-frontier cooperation of 1982 providing the possibilities for “Euro-regional cooperation groupings (ECGs)”;
- to take into account the principles of the draft Charter on regional democracy of 27.5.2008 adopted by the Congress of regional and local authorities when considering the reforms of local and regional self-government in their respective country;

4. Proposals for Belarus

The BRIDGE Coordinator has informed the IEM participants with the decisions and stand points of the European Parliament, Council, European Commission and EU representative concerning the oppressive measures adopted by the authorities against the opposition and human rights activists in Belarus after the last presidential elections. In addition he has informed them with the current financial crisis in this country and with the possibility that will Russia through the loan enforce also her ownership upon some basic economic facilities and thus enlarge her presence in this country. Belarus is neither a member of the Council of Europe nor has any written agreement on the cooperation with the EU.

After a comprehensive discussion the participants of the IEM came to the conclusion that is necessary to elaborate projects which will be in favour of Belarusian people.

Hence they invited the EU:

- to support with adequate measures and funds the development of cooperation with local communities of Belarus both in the frame of cross-border and – where it would be appropriate - inter-regional and other territorial cooperation as well;
- to support with adequate measures and funds projects and programmes on educational, scientific and cultural fields;
- to make additional efforts to promote activities aimed at developing the civil society in Belarus.

The participants of the workshop requested and authorised Prof.Dr Silvo Devetak, the BRIDGE Coordinator, and Prof.Dr Igor Koval, the BRIDGE National Coordinator for Ukraine to distribute this Declaration the EU institutions, EU member-states and the national governments and regional and local authorities of Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine.

Odessa, 2 June 2011