



Citizen participation: an essential tool in local democracy *Chisinau, 16 November*

Factors affecting participation: the challenges and opportunities in Eastern Partnership countries

Antonella Valmorbida, Secretary General of ALDA
The European Association for Local Democracy

1. Rationale

Local Democracy is essentially not a legislative and institutional process. It has its anchorage in local elections, decentralisation processes and public administration reform, of course, but it must be accompanied with a full understanding and involvement of citizens that will experience the laws and these structural process and who will be able to use them and be engaged. Without participative and aware citizens, laws and structure are useless boxes and non-realistic instruments. For this reason, our efforts in building good institutional frameworks, **must include, since the very beginning awareness raising and capacities within both the elected bodies and administration and civil society group and citizens.** Improvements of local and national situation will be the results of this joint work.

The focus on Eastern Partnership countries and its improvement on local democracy and decentralisation is essential within the European policies, both of the European Union and the Council of Europe. Local Democracy has been highlighted as a pillar for peace and social and economic development in the EaP countries and for paving the way of a fruitful cooperation with the other European countries. It is not only a *medicine* that the EU and CoE institutions want to prescribe to the EaP communities to heal the wounds, this is indeed sharing the principles which are the basis of the European construction, which includes the concept of citizenship, subsidiarity, responsibility, good governance, public good and public welfare. It is sharing and empowering here a solution that proved to be successful in most of the cases to support peace and social and economic development for our communities. The stick is high because the EaP countries are both CoE member states (excluding Belarus) and include is a special partnership with higher targets of approximation and cooperation in a broad fields of cooperation.

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2. Factors affecting the participation in EaP Countries

2.1 Challenges

2.2. Culture and relationship

Trust: Local Democracy is not an essentially legislative process but it regards cultural and systemic elements in the community. It is therefore essential to consider the existence of the relation between institutions and citizens. The legislation cannot be developed without considering a constant process of information, dialogue and exchanges with citizens that will establish trust from both sides that will then allow the laws/provisions to have a certain chance of being implemented. From this perspective, trust between public authorities and CSO represent a challenge for all the EaP. In these countries, generally speaking, there is a global problem as for the recognition of the importance of laws and regulations. The legislative processes exist and sometimes can also be very good (i.e. the different legislative provisions existing in the Armenian law as for citizens participation) but the problem stays in its implementation and in the fact that, culturally, there is a gap between legislation and real perception and recognition of its value.

Awareness: Local Democracy and the processes of decentralisation address the organisation of powers, responsibilities and competences. The processes are participated by two essential parties: institutions and citizens. Both need to go through their own process of capacity building, training and development. If we implement training for local authorities (politicians and civil servants) the same should be done for citizens and CSOs. The improvement should address both the part of the governance, institutions and civil society. This lack of awareness and understanding represents another challenge for the interested countries.

Joint approach: These two components of the governance (CSOs&citizens and public institutions) can not have a development and improvement in parallel paths without meeting and crossing each other. They have to be processes developing together and cooperating. Their developed capacities should be built together in a constant exchange and dialogue. It cannot be a target to have a *perfect* legislative system and then start working on citizenship and governance !

Attitude to participation: Participation of policy making (local and national) is not a process that goes only point by point, rule by rule, but should actually be an "attitude" towards participative governance. This attitude should frame the whole approach. It has been often put in evidence that there is a little knowledge and recognition of the soft skills of negotiation, conflict resolution and team building approach, important in this

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field. This limited attitude to participation as a regular process is also linked to cultural elements and to a quite strong vertical approach in dealing with public policies.

2.3. Structural problems

b) **Legislative and institutional limitations:** considering the non finalized processes of decentralisation with a limited capacity of local government to implement their competences, it is often quite difficult to understand at which level consultation and dialogue with citizens is possible, the engagement of citizens can be made difficult or impossible.

b) **Financial and structural limitations.** In all the countries addressed, municipalities and local bodies are still extremely weak and cannot implement fully their expected competences. For most of them, there is only one source for funding from the transfer from the State. Some of the Local governments have hardly resources for a minimum functioning and they cannot represent a real centre of decision-making. Dialogue with citizens is often perceived as the least important part of any development plan

c) Lack of transparency and corruption

Public institutions (national and local) are heavily affected by corruption, which is preventing a virtuous growth in democratic, social and economic terms. This affects a construction approach to participation where citizens being involved in decision-making process would refrain or non constructively be engaged.

d) **The external factor and the security problem.** In many countries of the EaP, the external factor and global partnership and issues (with Russia, with the EU and other stakeholders) and their international security problems (Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Armenia, and Georgia...) are mobilizing attention, resources and energies. In some of the countries addressed, it totalizing to a certain extend that very other issues remain in the agenda of formal reform and plan.

2.2. Opportunities

2.1 New institutional setting including citizens' participation. While working on decentralisation and new legislative setting, most of the countries involved include "citizens' participation" among the provisions of the law. Some of the countries are quite advanced and even in difficult circumstances and political tensions, they proved to be brave and presented innovative way of inclusion, like in Ukraine and in Armenia.

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2.2 Existence of a functioning administration with number of qualified staff and civil society engaged and professional. Not contradicting the above mentioned challenges, we should here mention the fact that – contrary to some of the countries of cooperation with the Europe is involved, the EaP countries have functioning States and in some cases good administration with brilliant staff and elected leaders with whom to work. The Soviet past did not leave only problems but also an educated society capable to undertake professional and intellectual challenges.

2.3 The European Partnership : the European partnership offer a road map in this direction and put citizens participation at the top of the agenda as a condition for cooperation. This represent a real possibility to improve with examples, cases and resources

2.4 Less resources more ideas : certainly, local governments and globally local communities are often not rich. But in these circumstances, any good idea to multiply the local resources, including volunteering, focus on citizens mobilisation, identification of common ideas and paths, are certainly a good start for change.

3. Conclusions

Citizens awareness and participation are not an appendix to local democracy, it is a substantial element. While local democracy and decentralisation are at the core of the development and stabilisation of the Eastern Partnership countries, it deserves our attention and support, both for elected leadership and their staff and for active citizens involved. It is fundamental to work on both side of the chain, with LAs and CSOs involved, to build concrete and fruitful experience of cooperation and valorise practices and results. It could really become a flagship initiative of the European union support to the EaP with an evident and quite visible results for citizens in their daily life.

Other useful references :

Survey on Citizens participation in EaP – ALDA :

<http://www.alda-europe.eu/public/publications/160-active-citizenship-EAP.pdf>

Civil Society participation in PAR – ALDA :

http://www.alda-europe.eu/public/publications/159-Publication_CoopCS%20in%20EAP_AV_Sept%202016_RU.pdf

http://www.alda-europe.eu/public/publications/158-Publication_CoopCS-in-EAP_AV_August_2016_EN.pdf

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Strengthening local democracy in Armenia – CoE:

http://www.alda-europe.eu/public/publications/144-Strengthening-Local-Democracy-in-Armenia_ENG.pdf

http://www.alda-europe.eu/public/publications/143-Strengthening-Local-Democracy-in-Armenia_ARM.pdf

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