

EaP CSF Thematic policy papers on the effects of COVID-19 in the Eastern Partnership Countries

Overall budget: EUR 40,000 EUR

Background

In light of the current COVID-19 pandemic, EaP CSF aims to contribute to shaping the public policies in the EaP region, using the potential for change offered by the crisis. In the course of the upcoming months (September 2020 - February 2021), EaP CSF will produce a series of policy papers assessing the impact of COVID-19 on the following thematic areas identified as a priority by the Working Groups (WG) of the Forum:

- Decentralisation and local government in the EaP countries (WG1)
- Freedom of speech and media in the COVID-19 context (WG1)
- SMEs digital transformation in the EaP countries in COVID-19 times: challenges and digital solutions (WG2)
- Waste and water management and transition to circular economy (WG3)
- COVID-19 effects on transport (WG3)
- Digital literacy in EaP countries (WG4)
- Access to online and offline education in EaP countries (WG4)
- Impact of COVID-19 on labour migration from EaP countries to the EU (WG5)
- Framework policy paper integrating the findings emerging from the above-mentioned policy papers that will serve as an umbrella for the series of eight policy papers

The papers will:

- Analyse how the crisis affected certain policy areas identifying threats and opportunities for the medium and long-term
- Assess the implementation of specific EaP 2020 deliverables identified as priorities in each policy paper;
- Demonstrate policy-driven solutions and recommendations (development of mitigation and adaptation strategies will be an essential part of the papers);
- Provide a comparative regional perspective and identify lessons learned from both the EaP and the EU;
- Be based on consultations with EaP CSF membership;
- Be peer-reviewed;

Although each policy paper will have a specific thematic focus, they will fit under one broad common vision and will be produced under one umbrella as part of an EaP CSF series.

The primary target audience of the papers are EaP governments and EU decision-makers; secondary - civil society, academia and broader audience.

The papers will be elaborated by hired research teams. They will be in charge of coordinating the entire process and developing the papers in line with agreed methodological and publishing standards.

External experts, with the support of the Secretariat and Steering Committee task force will elaborate the terms of reference the papers setting the standards and timeline for development of the policy papers. The selection commission for the research teams will include in equal numbers SC members, Secretariat and external experts. To avoid the conflict of interest EaP CSF SC members will not be eligible to apply as part of the research teams.

The policy papers will be developed by early February 2021 latest; the part on the assessment of deliverables of each policy paper will be delivered in November to feed in to EaP policy process assessing the current EaP roadmap and developing the new one.

Short introduction into the topics of the policy papers

Working Group 1 (WG1)

- 1. Decentralisation and local government in the EaP countries** - the world is currently facing several challenges, of which the coronavirus outbreak, climate change, immigration and demographic issues are arguably just some of the most pressing. In this context, civic initiatives and CSOs operating at the local level will be even more crucial to build resilient and successful communities. This process shall be realized through further implementation of the European principles of decentralization. The paper will assess the level of decentralization in the EaP countries as well as implementation of the structured engagement with a wider range of civil society organisations and civic initiatives with local authorities with focus on engagement of youth, marginalized groups and gender equality on a local level. These issues are falling under the current cross cutting deliverable on structured engagement with civil society. The second part of the paper will suggest next steps in the process of decentralization facilitating the building of resilient communities in the post COVID-19 period.
- 2. Freedom of speech and media in the COVID-19 context** - during the COVID-19 crisis, several EaP governments attempted to curtail the freedom of speech and media with possible effects lasting beyond the crisis. The free media across the region have been suffering from economic problems during the crisis, reinventing their ways of operation meanwhile the need for information has been critical. The paper will assess the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on independent media and freedom of speech, as well as the implementation of the cross-cutting deliverable supporting the plurality and independence of media. The paper will outline major challenges and solutions for the post COVID-19 period in the area of freedom of speech as well as further steps in order to support the independent media in developing their digital (including content for digital platforms) and technical abilities, sustainability models, and working procedures.

Working Group 2 (WG2)

- 1. SMEs digital transformation in the EaP countries in COVID-19 times: challenges and digital solutions** - containment, social distancing measures and different degrees of lockdown, while essential for diminishing the spread of the pandemic across the EaP countries, have had unprecedented economic consequences for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). With SMEs across the region struggling to keep afloat – many have already lost close to 80 per cent of their turnover. Civil society and business actors from the EaP countries recalled the importance of accelerating digital transformation and harnessing digital skills as key threads in the post-COVID-19 world. COVID-19 crisis made a strong impact on countries to accelerate business digitalization. Measures to fight the pandemic have motivated governments and businesses to move more of their operations and services online. SMEs are trying to increase efforts for maintaining their operations by offering online opportunities for their employees and exploring online-based business models. In this situation governments can leverage digital technologies to improve the quality and accessibility of business services and administrative procedures. The paper will assess the implementation of Deliverable 4 (Improve the Investment and business environment and unlock Small and Medium-sized Enterprises' (SMEs) growth potential) and special attention will be dedicated to digitalisation, as an avenue for SME development (that could be achieved only through the implementation of Deliverable 7 focused on HDM). The paper will bring a forward-looking perspective over the potential of digital transformation for SMEs in the EaP region by outlining the challenges encountered by SME during the COVID-19 pandemic and the potential digital solutions which could facilitate survival and development of SMEs across the region.

The suggested structure of the paper is:

- Brief performance assessment of deliverable 4 and 7
- COVID-19 challenges for SMEs in the EaP region (in each country and across the region in general)
- Digital solutions in SME in Eastern Partnership region driven by the COVID-19 implications (best practices on the governmental, business and civil society levels in each country and summarizing trends across the region in general);
- Possible window of opportunities for governments to leverage digital technologies in favor of EaP SMEs (including analysing possible obstacles in implementing relevant solutions);
- Recommendations for action: how government, business and civil society can boost SME digital transformation in the EaP countries in COVID-19 times.

Potential research questions include: How digital technologies could contribute to the SME survival (in the short term) and development (in the long term)? Could COVID-19 be a catalyst for SME digital transformation in the EaP countries? What policies should be put in place to facilitate the process?

Working Group 3 (WG3)

- 1. Waste and water management and transition to circular economy - COVID-19 pandemic** led to an increase in general and medical waste and worsened an already difficult situation. The paper will look at the state of play of waste management in the EaP. How can EaP countries manage the waste generated by the COVID-19 emergency (masks, gloves etc.). Can this situation create the opportunity to turn things around and facilitate the circular economy? The paper will contribute to assessing deliverable 16 (Support the environment and adaptation to climate) and the objectives set around water management.
- 2. COVID-19 effects on transport** - COVID-19 has had negative effects on public transport. The use of private transport increased, and the stop or limitation of public transport created problems to many users who do not have private means of transport. The paper should take stock of this phenomenon, with a focus on mobility plans and how to adjust the mobility plans in EaP countries to new circumstances. The paper will contribute to assessing deliverable 13, as it will intersect mobility plans and road safety.

Working Group 4 (WG4)

- 1. Digital literacy in EaP countries** - with the dramatic increase of online activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of digital skills and digital literacy among the EaP populations becomes a crucial challenge. An increased number of fake news and disinformation about the COVID-19 exacerbate the problem especially among the vulnerable groups of population. The paper will focus on identifying and analysing digital literacy needs in EaP countries, providing at the same time recommendations on areas, where civil society could cooperate with local and national authorities to increase digital literacy, namely of the vulnerable groups of populations. The analysis will comprise the assessment of deliverable 18 in the current set of 20 Deliverables for 2020, looking into detail on how the investments into skills among young population of EaP has improved their digital literacy and prepared them for the COVID-19 in comparison to their peers, who have not participated in similar educational offers.
- 2. Access to online and offline education in EaP countries** - the COVID-19 pandemic changed the landscape of the educational systems in EaP countries dramatically. In the shortest period of time the schooling needed to transform from the classical offline teaching operations to an online mode. Yet, the increasing activity of learning online has highlighted a common problem in the EaP: the lack of access to equipment and internet. This problem concerns especially large families and people living in rural areas. Moreover, teaching staff lack the necessary skills or devices in order to successfully conduct online teaching. Thus, the aim of this paper is to analyse different preparedness of EaP countries educational systems to online mode as well as indicate challenges and opportunities for each EaP country that will have further impact on the development of the educational systems in the region. The paper will focus on how to ensure access and what type of support and capacity building is needed to ensure a functioning hybrid educational system after the acute phase of the

pandemic is over. Since physical mobility is in danger due to COVID-19, a part of the analysis will focus on the impact of COVID-19 on the educational mobility in higher education, thus touching upon the deliverable 17 - Mobility Partnerships. Several universities in EaP countries already announced their online offers only to international students, which questions both the mobility perspective and the quality of online education offered to international students in the EaP countries.

Working Group 5 (WG5)

- 1. Impact of COVID-19 on labour migration from EaP countries to the EU** - as COVID-19 pandemic continues to ravage the world of work, migrant workers are among those the most at risk due to poor living conditions, limited access to health services and basic unemployment benefits, poor working conditions, high risk to lose their jobs and financial means to support themselves and their families, mobility restrictions and inability to safely return home without facing risking both their health and jobs, uncertainty, etc. Since the beginning of the outbreak, EaP migrant workers living in the EU have also experienced the consequences of the pandemic (on the individual level and on the migrant-powered sectors in which they work). The policy paper aims at assessing the impact of the COVID-19 on EaP workers in the EU MS and the foreseeable consequences of the outbreak for the EaP migration flows in the aftermath of the pandemic. Although EaP migration per se is not mentioned in the 20 Deliverables for 2020, the paper will briefly analyse the implementation of Deliverable 17, namely the progress achieved so far in terms of visa liberalisation dialogues and mobility partnerships.

Potential research questions include: How were the outbreak and its consequences on EaP migrant workers managed across the EU MS? What policies have been put in place to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic on migrant workers and what are the possible scenarios in terms of EaP migration flows to the EU in the foreseeable future? What are the implications of the current crisis for the process of visa liberalisation? How mobility partnerships and cooperation between EaP and EU MS will continue to be fostered in the post-pandemic world?

Framework policy paper integrating the findings emerging from the above-mentioned policy papers that will serve as an umbrella for the series of eight policy papers.

Tentative timeline for the elaboration of the policy papers

August 1 - September 1 – open call for external experts to coordinate the recruitment of research teams to develop nine policy papers on the effects of COVID-19 in the EaP countries

September 3 – selection and signature of the contract with expert(s)

September 16 – first draft of the TOR

September 20 – final TORs for the selection of research teams and launch of the call for research teams

15 October – selection research teams and contracting process

30 October – refinement pre-research details

November 1 – January 31 – Implementation period – research and drafting of the policy papers, including the collection of the EaP CSF members input and consultations with EaP CSF WGs, as well as peer reviewing of the draft policy papers

November – December – delivery of the assessment of deliverables for each topic of the policy paper (to feed in to EaP policy process assessing the current EaP roadmap and developing the new one.)

January 8 – Submission of whole draft policy papers to the task force and the Secretariat

January 22 – Deadline for feedback, comments and suggestions by the task force and the Secretariat

January 25-31 – Finalization of the policy papers by the expert teams, including final proof reading and preparation of the texts for standard layout in compliance with joint publishing standards for the policy papers

February 1-5 – Finalization of the policy paper series by the Secretariat, distribution of the policy papers to the stakeholders