Civil society perspective: Harmonization of digital markets

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Introduction

Harmonization of digital market between EaP region and EU envisages connection of each partner state to the digital world which requires proper broadband infrastructure and digital literacy and equality. These factors are the main framework conditions for HDM processes and, in fact, create the biggest influence on digital economy and society of every country. This is also confirmed by a number of official documents adopted on EU and EaP levels[1]. The concrete tools for developing broadband infrastructure and digital skills were proposed in Joint Staff Working Document "Eastern Partnership - 20 Deliverables for 2020. Focusing on key priorities and tangible results". However, progress in achieving expected deliverables is slow in most of EaP countries.

The EaP CSF has identified several areas in which concrete recommendations for improvement are proposed, as a way to create needed conditions for fostering the harmonization of digital markets in EaP region.

Civil society recommendations

Institutionalize and prioritize digital skills development processes in EaP region

Digital economy cannot be a success without a sustained effort in raising the level of knowledge and skills of citizens. To fully benefit from its potential both in terms of strengthening their economies as well as improving social situation of its citizens, it is necessary to develop programs to foster digital competencies, encouraging citizens to broaden their skills on par with the demand of the labor market. It is important to promote clearer understanding of new skills needed for employment in a digital society and to provide a clear and sound orientation for all stakeholders who take decisions on recruitment, career paths, potential trainings, skills assessment, etc.

Currently, absence of national strategies and coalitions prevents partner-states from monitoring the situation with digital skills and making balanced decisions in the field. As an additional factor for development e-skills in EaP region, the issue of adoption of e-Competence Framework (e-CF) is not even raised in EaP member-states. Thus, a standard that can be understood across Europe is not applied in the partner countries. The absence of harmonized e-CF makes it impossible to evaluate labor force in the field. Adopting e-CF would help develop the system of standards under the European e-Competence Framework umbrella. This would enable the identification of skills and competences that may be required to successfully perform duties and fulfill responsibilities related to the IT workplace.

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[1] Notably the *Declaration of the Second Eastern Partnership Ministerial Meeting on the Digital Economy* (5 October 2017, Tallinn, Estonia), as well as *A Digital Single Market Strategy for Europe*.

To speed up the processes of institutionalization and prioritization of digital skills development processes in EaP region the EaP Civil Society Forum recommends to the HDM Panel and responsible EaP ministries the following:

1) To establish steering advisory board (involving civil society representatives) on promoting the digital skills in EaP countries that will provide the following assistance:

- collecting expertise in the digital skills among relevant bodies of partner countries, European Commission, EU Member States, e-skills networks, IFIs, civil society;
- providing recommendations on adopting strategies and creating coalitions for all partner states;
- fostering community-based inclusive non-formal and informal educational practices (i.e. not only for SMEs and microbusinesses);

2) To facilitate the adoption of the system of standards under the European e-Competence Framework umbrella in the EaP states through the following steps:

- adding the priority of setting up the e-CFs to the HDM Panel's action plan;
- issuing respective recommendations to the partner states for implementing the e-CF;
- launching an advocacy campaigns on adopting the e-CFs in partner states.

Consider gender equality in the digital field as an essential element of the EaP HDM strategy and include digital gender equality in the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI)

Gender equality is a key element of the EaP agenda and one of the cross-cutting Deliverables. However, the HDM strategy does not always reflect its importance. Some initiatives launched in recent years do not sufficiently take into account the gender perspective. For instance, in Europe the share of men working in the ICT sector was 313% greater than the share of women. As well, women represented only 21.5% of all workers in digital jobs in 2015[2]. In order to address this gap it is essential to:

- establish specific goals in the HDM Strategy for gender equality in digital sector;
- include relevant indicators in the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI);
- work with member states to establish feasible and consistent national targets;
- increase coordination of pertinent initiatives at the EaP level.

Establish clear, effective ad harmonized two-way communication mechanisms in the sphere of e-services solutions and smart city projects both on national and EaP levels

ICT innovation and start-up ecosystems study report in the EaP countries (June 2018)[3] emphasizes the importance of creating international links between stakeholders such as universities, businesses, public research organizations and public bodies and civil society. Public sector innovation efforts since early 2000s have been firmly focused on development of e-government infrastructure and less on service development through innovative solutions created jointly with the civil society. In fact, civil society is not involved or consulted for the formulation and implementation of R&D policies. In order

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[2] For details and data see Women in the Digital Age (2018) https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/84bd6dea-2351-11e8-ac73-01aa75ed71a1/language-en

[3] For details see *ICT innovation and start-up ecosystems study report in the EaP countries* (June 2018) https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/hiqstep/documents/ict-innovation-and-start-ecosystems-eastern-partnership-countries

to establish effective harmonized two-way communications between civil society and governmental institutions in the sphere of e-services solutions and smart city projects both on national and EaP levels, it is necessary to:

- o raise awareness and enable informed decision-making process by engaging people in smart city experiments - the mobile, powerful, and connected equipment makes any citizen a potential source of sensor data about his/her environment, with little or no scientific skill required; thus understood "citizen science" has the potential to improve collective social strategies, as well as stimulating shifts in public opinion with subsequent changes in individual behavior and pressure on policy makers;
- o foster smart city pilot projects based on grass-root approach through opening opportunities to acquiring and developing e-competences.

Improve EaP broadband infrastructure through benchmarking

EaP countries have not yet undertaken significant steps in drawing up national broadband strategies in line with similar EU strategies. Such documents, in fact, should become starting points for benchmarking the processes of improving necessary infrastructure in order to harmonize digital markets with EU. The absence of broadband strategies leads to:

- o a gap between the demand and the technical supply of broadband access;
- o the absence of a coordination center on strategic planning of the development in this field;
- o the absence of a single coordinated methodology for collecting and processing information on developing digital infrastructure.

To foster the improvement of EaP broadband infrastructure, the EaP CSF recommends to:

- o initiate a comprehensive study on broadband infrastructure in EaP countries;
- o develop guidelines on elaboration of broadband strategies for EaP region based on the best EU practices and considering current state of play in EaP countries.

More Information
The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) is a unique multi-layered regional civil society platform aimed at promoting European integration, facilitating reforms and democratic transformations in the six Eastern Partnership countries - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Serving as the civil society and people-to-people dimension of the Eastern Partnership, the EaP CSF strives to strengthen civil society in the region, boost pluralism in public discourse and policy making by promoting participatory democracy and fundamental freedoms.