



EUROPEAN
COMMISSION

HIGH REPRESENTATIVE OF THE
EUROPEAN UNION FOR
FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND
SECURITY POLICY

Brussels, 20.3.2013
SWD(2013) 85 final

JOINT STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT

Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2012 Regional Report: Eastern Partnership

Accompanying the document

JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

EUROPEAN NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY: WORKING TOWARDS A STRONGER PARTNERSHIP

{JOIN(2013) 4 final}
{SWD(2013) 79 final}
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1. INTRODUCTION

In 2012, significant progress was made with the implementation of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), both on the bilateral and the multilateral track. Despite this achievement, in some partner countries limited progress in democratic reforms, respect for human rights and the rule of law continued to pose a challenge for achieving the objective of political association and economic integration with the EU.

An important step for the EaP was the joint communication from the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy / European Commission Vice-President (HR/VP) and the European Commission of 15 May to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions ***Eastern Partnership: A Roadmap to the autumn 2013 Summit*** and the two accompanying joint staff working documents ***Eastern Partnership Roadmap 2012-13: the bilateral dimension*** and ***Eastern Partnership 2012-13: the multilateral dimension***.

The Eastern Partnership Foreign Ministers Meeting in July 2012 stated that the Roadmap was a basis for guiding and monitoring further implementation of the EaP objectives set in the Prague and Warsaw Declarations until the next Summit in Vilnius in autumn 2013. The ministers also welcomed the launching of cooperation in new areas, such as public administration reform, transport, migration and asylum, and the increased engagement of the Civil Society Forum (CSF) in the EaP's work. In all six EaP countries, CSF national platforms have been set up, providing civil society organisations with a chance to engage in the implementation of the EaP at country level. Moreover, the CSF is now a regular and active participant in most EaP meetings. The EaP Ministers Meeting also stressed the importance of increasing the visibility of the Partnership.

Substantial progress was made on **Association Agreements** including a **Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area** (DCFTA). Negotiations on the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement were finalised and it was initialled. In its Conclusions of 10 December, the Foreign Affairs Council reaffirmed its commitment to signing the Agreement, including a DFCTA, as soon as the Ukrainian authorities demonstrate determined action and tangible progress in three areas: holding 2012 parliamentary elections compliant with international standards and follow-up actions; addressing the issue of selective justice and preventing its recurrence; and implementing reforms set out in the jointly agreed Association Agenda. Good progress continued to be made in negotiations on association agreements with the Republic of Moldova,¹ Georgia and Armenia. Progress was also made in the negotiations with Azerbaijan. The EU also indicated by the end of 2012 that it was ready to launch negotiations on Association Agendas as soon as possible, in line with the Roadmap. As regards **citizen's mobility** in a secure and well-managed environment, the EU made headway towards the goal of visa liberalisation for short-term travel, in due course, with five of the six EaP countries.

The **comprehensive institution building programme** entered the implementation phase with the aim of strengthening the administrations of partner countries, as their capacity to manage and push forward and monitor the reform process will be critical to its

¹ Throughout this document, 'Moldova' refers to the Republic of Moldova.

success.

The EU has provided significant **funding** to support partners' reform efforts. For the period 2010–2013, some EUR 1.9 billion in bilateral and regional cooperation (including EUR 350 million of fresh resources) is available. A more systematic application of increased policy conditionality and the application of the 'more for more' principle benefited the three partner countries (Moldova, Georgia and Armenia) in terms of increased financial assistance.

The **multilateral track** of the Partnership was strengthened to help provide a forum for all six partners and EU Member States to exchange best practice in terms of approximation to EU standards. The four thematic multilateral platforms met regularly to cover the main areas of cooperation. An assessment of the EaP **flagship initiatives** is also provided in this report. The Partnership reached out beyond governments to **involve civil society** and other key actors, including national parliaments, the business community, social partners (employers' organisations and trade unions), regional and local authorities.

Throughout the year, the EU continued its approach of critical engagement with **Belarus**, following the crackdown on civil society and the opposition after the December 2010 presidential elections. A 'European dialogue on modernisation' was launched by the EU with Belarusian civil society on the reforms necessary to support the modernisation of the country. The EU increased its support to civil society. Belarus continued to participate in the multilateral track of the EaP, including platforms and panels, and took part in the EaP Foreign Ministers Meeting in July.

To support political actors striving for democratic change in their countries, in 2011 the High Representative and the Commission proposed to establish a **European Endowment for Democracy (EED)**. Important steps were taken in 2012 to organise and launch the EED as an independent European non-profit foundation, with the participation of representatives of Member States, the European Parliament, the European Commission, the High Representative and civil society organisations. The Commission and a number of Member States already committed funding of EUR 15 million (of which EUR 6 million from the Commission), which should allow the EED to become fully operational in 2013.

This report covers the progress made in the implementation of the Eastern Partnership in 2012. It is an Annex to the Joint Communication on the implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2012, and should be read in conjunction with the Country Reports on Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, which describe in more detail the progress made by the individual partners in implementing the EaP.

2. DEEPER BILATERAL ENGAGEMENT

2.1. Political association and economic integration

>> Association Agreements (AAs)

Ukraine: An Association Agreement, including a DCFTA, was initialled in March. Technical work, including translation of the text into EU official languages and

Ukrainian, is ongoing. This would leave the way open, provided political conditions permit, to signature and ratification.

Moldova: Very good progress continued to be made. Negotiations on all 24 chapters covering economic and sectoral cooperation and five chapters on the people-to-people contacts were closed. Negotiations on other chapters were either provisionally closed or are very well advanced. A few important issues remain. Negotiations on the DCFTA component started in February and very good progress was made in four negotiation rounds.

Armenia: Progress was made on the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Justice, Freedom and Security (JFS) titles, most of the text of which was agreed at four plenary meetings. Very good progress was also made on the Sectoral Policies title (25 chapters closed out of 27). Discussions started on the 'Institutions' part of the Agreement. Three rounds of negotiations on a DCFTA took place.

Georgia: Five plenary meetings were held in Brussels and Tbilisi. The majority of the text under the CFSP and JFS titles was agreed except for a few issues. Very good progress was also made on the 'Institutions' part of the Agreement and on Sectoral and Economic Policies (23 chapters closed out of 26). Four rounds of negotiations on a DCFTA took place.

Azerbaijan: No plenary meetings were held. However, negotiations took place on all aspects of the AA including trade issues. Negotiations resumed in October and progress was made on Sectoral Policies (14 chapters closed out of 28), Trade and JFS. It was agreed to hold additional videoconferences on CSDP (Common Security and Defence Policy). The next plenary is scheduled for early 2013.

Belarus: Due to domestic political circumstances, Belarus did not participate in the bilateral track of the Eastern Partnership.

One of the objectives of the Eastern Partnership Roadmap is that negotiations on AAs with Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan should be well advanced, if not finalised, by the autumn of 2013. By the end of 2012, the negotiations were on track to meet that objective and the EU indicated that it was ready to follow the Roadmap further by launching negotiations on Association Agendas as soon as possible. At the same time, the multiannual programming exercise (2014–2017) for EU financial assistance which began in 2012 is paying specific attention to capacity and institutional needs linked to the challenges of negotiating and implementing these Agreements.

>> DCFTAs

DCFTA negotiations with Ukraine were completed with the initialling of the Agreement in March, while those with Georgia and Moldova continued at a good pace with four substantial rounds each, following their launch in December 2011 and February 2012 respectively.

By the end of 2012, three rounds of negotiations with Armenia on a DCFTA had been held and good progress was made. This progress means the EU is on track to meet the Roadmap objective that DCFTA negotiations with Armenia, Georgia and Moldova be

well advanced if not finalised by autumn 2013.

>> Strengthened human rights dialogues (HRD)

In May, the EU held the third round of its HRD with Moldova while in November an ad hoc human rights experts meeting with Moldova took place. Local NGOs were invited as observers. In June, the fifth round of the HRD with Georgia was held in Tbilisi and the fourth meeting of the EU-Armenia HRD followed in December. In June, the EU and Ukraine held a discussion on human rights questions within the JFS sub-committee. Issues related to democracy and human rights were also discussed with Azerbaijan in the sub-committee for JFS, Human Rights and Democracy in November. The HRDs were complemented by **joint civil society seminars** in Armenia on anti-discrimination policy and in Georgia on the criminal justice system and on labour law.

>> Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) cooperation

In November 2012, Georgia was invited to enter into negotiations on a framework participation agreement to govern its participation in CSDP missions and operations and in December 2012, Moldova signed a framework participation agreement enabling its participation in CSDP missions and operations. Ukraine's presence in CSDP missions and discussions on extending the cooperation continued. Armenia expressed its wish to conclude a Framework Participation Agreement in order to be able to participate in EU CSDP missions.

>> Macroeconomic dialogues

In 2012, macroeconomic dialogues were strengthened with the six EaP countries in line with the Roadmap in various formats including dedicated Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) sub-committee meetings with Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine, Moldova and Azerbaijan. These dialogues took into account the on-going EU macro-financial assistance programmes, linked to IMF packages, in order to help partner countries address short-term balance-of-payments deficits. Details of operations financed can be found in the relevant country reports. A second macroeconomic dialogue with Belarus covering the macroeconomic outlook, fiscal, tax and monetary policy and structural reforms took place.

>> Implementing the 'more for more' principle

In 2012, the new Eastern Partnership Integration and Cooperation (EaPIC) programme was launched to make additional resources available to countries that make progress in building deep and sustainable democracy and in implementing related reform objectives under the 'more for more' principle. The EaPIC programme provided additional funding of EUR 130 million for the period 2012–13 on top of the EUR 1.9 billion already committed to the EaP countries for the period 2010–13. A first round of country allocations was announced to benefit Moldova (EUR28 million), Georgia (EUR22 million), and Armenia (EUR15 million). EaPIC contributes to new or existing projects targeting democratic transformation and institution building, sustainable and inclusive growth, and economic development.

2.2. Mobility and other Justice, Freedom and Security Issues

The EaP has made a clear commitment to strengthening cooperation on **justice, freedom and security** and the EU put forward concrete proposals aimed at boosting political and operational cooperation with a view to establishing a Common Justice and Home Affairs Space between the EU and EaP countries. For Ukraine and Moldova in particular, the Visa Liberalisation Action Plans (VLAPs) proved to be key incentives for pushing forward reform in the JFS area.

Progress was made on **migration**, but the need to set up modern and effective systems for **asylum and international protection** has yet to be addressed in most EaP countries. In the area of **border management** Armenia and FRONTEX signed a working arrangement in February.

At the same time, **reform of the judiciary and the fight against corruption** in the EaP countries continued to be a major concern. Georgia adopted a new **data protection** law in December 2011. The law entered into force in May 2012, but will not apply to the private sector until 1 January 2016.

Progress was registered also in the area of **data protection**. Following ratification by Armenia of the Council of Europe Convention on Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data, all EaP countries – members of the Council of Europe – have ratified this important convention.

Fighting illegal **drugs** continued to be high on the agenda and relevant dialogues took place in Brussels in April 2012 with Moldova, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. Cooperation with the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) progressed well. In July 2012, Moldova and the EMCDDA signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to structure their cooperation, notably on the exchange of information on monitoring, preventing and tackling the use of drugs.

>> Mobility Partnerships

Implementation of the Mobility Partnerships signed with Moldova, Georgia and Armenia proceeded in 2012, with a number of new initiatives approved. In November, the EU and Moldova held a high-level meeting which reviewed the progress made so far and identified areas for future cooperation. A conference on the progress of the EU-Armenia Mobility Partnership was held in Brussels in October. Talks started on a possible Mobility Partnership with Azerbaijan after it had confirmed its interest, thereby moving closer to the Roadmap provision in this area.

>> Action Plans on visa liberalisation

Moldova made substantial progress on the implementation of the VLAP and the first-phase benchmarks were met, in line with the Roadmap. Under the VLAPs with Moldova and Ukraine, intensive cooperation and exchange of information took place. Moldova adopted several important legislative acts reforming the judiciary and fighting discrimination. The first phase of the VLAP was completed. Ukraine made progress on implementing the VLAP. It adopted legislation and policy but needs to increase efforts to

meet its first-phase benchmarks, especially on anti-corruption measures, data protection, combating discrimination and protecting minorities. A visa dialogue was launched with Georgia in June, in line with the Roadmap. The dialogue on visa liberalisation between the EU and Georgia aims at examining all the relevant conditions for visa-free travel to the EU for Georgian citizens, including reform of the judiciary. In the second half of 2012, work started on the preparation of Georgia's VLAP. The VLAP was formally handed to Georgia in early 2013 in line with the Roadmap.

>> Visa facilitation and readmission agreements

Implementation of the **visa facilitation and readmission agreements** between the EU and **Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia** continued. Negotiations on visa facilitation and readmission agreements with **Armenia and Azerbaijan** started in early 2012 and three rounds took place. After the third round, Armenia and the EU initialled both agreements in October and signed the Visa Facilitation Agreement at the EU-Armenia Cooperation Council meeting on 17 December. In October the Armenian Government signed a decree abolishing visa requirements for EU citizens by January 2013. Azerbaijan held the third round of negotiations in November and negotiations will continue. The amended EU-Moldova Visa Facilitation Agreement was signed in June 2012 and the amended EU-Ukraine Visa Facilitation Agreement in July 2012. Both agreements are expected to enter into force in 2013. The work on visa facilitation is in line with the objectives of the Roadmap which are very likely to be met. As regards Belarus, the EU reiterated its readiness to launch negotiations which would enhance people-to-people contacts to the benefit of the Belarusian population at large; the Belarusian authorities did not reply to the Commission's invitation of June 2011 to start negotiations.

>> Application of the Visa Code

During 2012 efforts continued to establish effective local Schengen cooperation between Schengen consular services of EU Member State embassies in the EaP partner countries. This should facilitate implementation of the EU Visa Code, including the obligation to give reasons for a visa refusal, to allow appeals and to fully use all the possibilities offered by the Code.

2.3. Comprehensive institution building (CIB) programmes

In 2012, CIB programmes were in place in all EaP countries except Belarus. They provide targeted assistance to 'core institutions' involved in negotiating and implementing the new agreements with the EU set out in the Roadmap. CIB-driven policy development made significant progress; most of the institutional reform plans envisaged were adopted. CIB resources (a total of EUR 167 million over the period 2011–13) complement existing support for sector reforms and regulatory approximation. In Armenia, for example, a new programme was launched to support DCFTA-related reforms, while in Ukraine CIB funds for dealing with migration have been merged with a wider action on integrated border management. In Georgia, part of the additional EaPIC resources made available in 2012 will be used for a new project on integrated migration and border management which includes preparatory activities to accompany the visa dialogue. Partner countries were invited to proactively engage in coordination, steering

and monitoring of the CIB process, in order to keep it fully in line with the pace of negotiations on the new agreements.

2.4. Sector cooperation

>> Justice

Justice sector reform is a key area for advancing good governance and rule of law commitments of EaP countries which are enshrined in bilateral agreements. Given the political importance of the reform of the judiciary systems for the EU and the Eastern partners, justice-related issues were discussed in several political and technical fora. Large sector programmes in all EaP countries except Belarus provided financial and technical assistance for reforms. Moldova, Georgia and Armenia, which benefited from the EaPIC programme in 2012, used part of the additional ‘more-for-more’ resources to scale up their justice reform programmes, focusing specifically on human rights, anti-torture measures and upgrading penitentiary conditions in line with CoE standards. All partners initiated new legislative proposals to strengthen the independence of the judiciary. Many progressed with amending their legislation on judges’ appointment and careers, professionalising their training and boosting work to ensure effective justice. While some countries have taken major legislative steps, effective implementation is still lacking in most and needs to be tackled to achieve the Roadmap objectives for autumn 2013.

>> Regional development and pilot regional development programmes (PRDPs)

The 2009 communication on the Eastern Partnership proposed sharing the experience of EU cohesion and regional policies with partner countries and helping them address internal regional socioeconomic disparities, through policy dialogue and through pilot regional development programmes. Additional funds were provided for this initiative for 2012.

Intensive dialogue with the different governments led to the development or implementation of different programmes in this area in 2012, each specific to the country’s situation.

In Moldova, the PRDP which was launched in support of the ongoing policy dialogue focuses on regional statistics, regional planning and project pipelines for three development regions. In Azerbaijan, policy dialogue with the EU is just starting but preparatory institution-building activities have been launched. In Ukraine, a programme on regional development is being implemented; it includes a PRDP component (with a call for proposals from local and regional authorities and a capacity building programme).

In Georgia, the government participated in a round table at the end of November which re-launched the regional policy dialogue, to be followed by study visits and seminars. A large sectoral programme on regional development had meanwhile been launched in 2011 and was under implementation. New follow-up actions in support of wider ongoing sector reforms were being designed, which will include a PRDP component.

In Armenia, policy dialogue is starting and preparations were made for a support programme for 2013 which will include a PRDP component.

Belarus is not participating in the PRDPs.

>> Agriculture, rural development in line with ENPARD

Following the 2011 joint communication ***A new response to a changing neighbourhood***, increased emphasis was placed on agriculture and rural development as sectors conducive to sustainable and inclusive growth. In 2012, a large sectoral support programme on agriculture was launched in Georgia, in line with the Roadmap. In Moldova, an existing programme on economic stimulation in rural areas was extended and scaled up with additional EaPIC resources. Support programmes on agriculture and rural development were under implementation in Armenia and Azerbaijan. In Ukraine, some elements of rural development policy may be incorporated into regional development actions under preparation. The EU worked to ensure that all these actions were in line with the ENPARD approach. This included, also as envisaged in the EaP Roadmap, the Commission contracting Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations to provide it with an assessment of the agriculture and rural development sectors in each of the six EaP partner countries and identify common challenges to be potentially addressed at the regional level. Simultaneously, to allow the EaP partner countries to give their opinions on the initiative and to share their experiences and best practices, in November the multilateral Platform 2, Economic Integration and Convergence with EU policies, established a multilateral EaP Panel on Agriculture and Rural Development.

>> Energy

Throughout 2012, the EaP partner countries aimed, albeit with different emphases, at gradually entering EU energy markets by strengthening interconnections between the energy networks and gradually bringing their energy market rules closer to those of the EU. A common or similar legislative framework and a more integrated energy network — both targets of the EaP Roadmap — will be mutually beneficial and will enhance energy security both in the EU and in partner countries. Bilateral cooperation took various forms such as implementing PCAs, with energy issues reviewed at institutional meetings, and negotiating Association Agreements including a DCFTA with Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia, plus Memoranda of Understanding with Azerbaijan and Ukraine. Involving EaP countries in the Energy Community set out in the EaP Roadmap strongly supported such integration, pursuing the goal of common energy security. Growing importance was given to introducing sustainable energy policies following the EU example. The presence of Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia in the Energy Community, although their status differs, provided an additional instrument to foster progressive integration of the respective energy markets and helped to achieve the EaP Roadmap goals in this sector. Georgia expressed its wish to upgrade its status in the Energy Community. In January 2013, Georgia, currently an observer, applied to become a fully fledged member of the Energy Community.

The Neighbourhood Investment Facility supported major investment projects in energy — both at regional and at country level — in cooperation with European financial institutions.

One initiative of particular relevance is the implementation of the Southern Gas Corridor. Progress included the first commercial decision linked to the development of the Azerbaijani Shah Deniz gas field, the selection of pipeline transportation options and the conclusion of an intergovernmental agreement between Azerbaijan and Turkey on the construction of a gas pipeline across Turkish territory which would help to diversify energy supplies, an EaP Roadmap goal.

>> Transport

EaP countries pursued their gradual integration with EU transport system in line with the 2011 communication *The EU and its neighbouring regions: a renewed approach to transport cooperation*. This was taken forward through regulatory approximation and definition of priority infrastructure connections under the Eastern Partnership Transport Panel. Concrete deliverables from this work should be endorsed by the EU and Eastern Partnership Transport Ministers at their second meeting in autumn 2013. Informal Eastern Partnership transport dialogue meeting was held in February 2013 to prepare this. Work on the EaP Roadmap objective of concluding and implementing aviation agreements advanced well. A Common Aviation Area Agreement was signed with Moldova in June and the first preliminary Joint Committee that oversees the implementation of the agreement took place in February 2013. Similar first preliminary Joint Committee as organised with Georgia in September. Negotiations on an aviation agreement resumed with Ukraine in September and should be concluded in 2013. Negotiations with Azerbaijan on a Common Aviation Area Agreement were launched in January 2013. Negotiations on a similar agreement with other partner countries could be launched based on their readiness and expression of interest.

>> Environment

Cooperation on the environment in the EaP region proceeded well at regional level. Projects on waste management and air quality advanced. A new project on greening economies was launched in October. At bilateral level, the EaP countries took several steps to improve their environmental legislation (e.g. the water sector in Moldova) and implement their national environmental strategies (e.g. Ukraine). Partner countries are urged to strengthen their environmental legislation and administrative capacity, to develop consistent application of procedures for environmental impact assessment and to pay particular attention to public participation. Most of the countries supported civil society and environmental NGOs but to varying degrees. However, their role still needs to be strengthened. The Regional Environmental Centres for the Caucasus and in Moldova continued to operate. Improvement of environmental governance is needed across the region, as are enforcement of environmental laws and compliance with multilateral environmental agreements, in order to meet the EaP Roadmap objective of convergence with crucial EU environmental legislation, on which progress so far is satisfactory.

>> Climate change

The EU shared knowledge gained from practical implementation of its financial instruments and provided information on available EU climate assistance instruments. Close interaction with all partner countries took place in the assessment of their climate

needs as a basis for developing the Clima East project which was launched at the end of 2012. Partner countries are urged to build capacity and engage in the new carbon market mechanism following the 18th Session of the Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Partners are also urged to fully implement the Cancun, Durban and Doha agreements and in particular to devise a low-carbon development strategy.

>> Common Knowledge and Innovation Space

Cooperation on research, coordination and networking between stakeholders is essential for the development of a Common Knowledge and Innovation Space with the EaP countries. Greater efforts are required from the partner countries to build research capacity and increase collaboration with EU researchers and research organisations. Their present active participation in the EU's Seventh Research Framework Programme (FP7), which is fully open for participation by researchers and research institutions from the partner countries, is an important factor in reaching this objective. It is worth mentioning that Ukraine is among the top ten of the most active (non-associated) third countries participating in FP7. The EaP countries so far have had 318 participations in 179 FP7 projects amounting to more than EUR 500 million of EU contribution, in areas such as environment, transport, health, ICT, social sciences and humanities. The call for proposals on international cooperation published in July 2012 included activities specifically targeted to the EaP countries. The successful establishment, with EU support, of the EaP Regulators Network in September was a major step in encouraging closer cooperation, starting to exchange best practice and taking advantage of the EaP cooperation process in electronic communications regulation.

>> Participation in EU programmes and agencies

Throughout the year, dialogue continued with partner countries to identify their key interests with regard to participation in EU programmes and agencies on the basis of partners' first indicative priority lists drafted in 2011. Enhanced policy dialogue took place with each country on the conditions of such participation and future implications in terms of sector cooperation and regulatory approximation. The EEAS held information meetings in Azerbaijan, Moldova and Ukraine in 2012 and in Armenia and Georgia in early 2013 on the general approach to participation in programmes and agencies. The process of negotiating protocols allowing EaP countries to participate in EU programmes open to them continued. In December 2012, in line with the EaP Roadmap, the EU and Armenia signed a protocol to the PCA on Armenia's participation in EU programmes. Negotiations with Azerbaijan and Georgia on similar protocols started.² Moldova was associated to the FP7 from January 2012. Cooperation between EU agencies and the EaP countries continued in 2012. The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction signed a MoU with Moldova in July 2012³ strengthening cooperation and information exchange. Following cooperation between Ukraine and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, health security support was provided after an outbreak of measles in Western Ukraine in early 2012. A Cooperation Agreement between CEPOL and Moldova was signed in December. The EU launched an assistance

² Protocols allowing Moldova and Ukraine to participate in EU programmes entered into force in 2011.

³ A similar MoU with Ukraine was signed in 2010.

project that will allow preparatory measures to be supported from early 2013, facilitating cooperation between the EU agencies and the partner countries and with a view to increasing their participation in line with the EaP Roadmap. The total budget for this initiative is EUR 3.7 million, equally divided between the Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods.

3. STRENGTHENING MULTILATERAL COOPERATION

All four EaP multilateral thematic platforms met twice in 2012 to assist partners with pursuing their reforms. Active contributions, support and expertise for seminars and training programmes were offered by partner countries, EU Member States, EU institutions, international organisations and the EaP Civil Society Forum. Other international organisations and international financing institutions also provided assistance via various channels.

3.1. Democracy, good governance and stability

In 2012, Platform 1, which aims at promoting democratic principles, good governance and stability by improving key sectors of governance, focused mainly on work on public administration reform, asylum and migration, improving the functioning of the judiciary, the fight against corruption, CSDP and the safe management of State borders. The Platform's activities were supported by the Council of Europe (CoE) under a CoE facility covering activities on electoral standards, judicial reform, good governance, the fight against corruption and cooperation against cybercrime. The European Commission began its support for the work of the CoE by providing leadership and expertise regarding the EU legal framework on the fight against corruption and improved reform of justice.

There was a noticeable increase in active engagement on the part of EU Member States in the implementation of the multilateral part of the EaP Roadmap objectives in various areas of the Platform.

In the field of **integrated border management** (IBM), the **EaP IBM Panel** met twice in 2012, in Riga and Brussels. In line with the EaP Roadmap, the meetings continued to take stock of implementation of the relevant flagship initiative in 2012. Continued discussions on jointly operated crossing points, including in relation to the fight against illegal migration, took place at these meetings. New training on the fight against trafficking of human beings was added to the IBM strategies capacity-building programmes run by ICMPD. In December, the **Eastern Partnership Police Cooperation Programme** (EUR 5 million) was approved, aimed at increasing police cooperation on issues related to cross-border crime between EU and EaP countries and among EaP countries.

The **Panel on the fight against corruption** continued working with the support of the CoE's EaP Facility. The Panel met in Kiev in March, focusing on good practice in designing, implementing and monitoring anti-corruption policies. The Commission expressed its willingness to lead the expert work of the Panel and prepared a draft Work Plan to be adopted by the Platform in the near future. Good expert cooperation continued with the EaP Civil Society Forum.

The **Panel on Improved Functioning of the Judiciary** agreed on a separate Work Plan for 2012–13 in order to reinforce the bilateral work undertaken to secure greater judicial independence, effectiveness and impartiality of justice. The Panel tackled the facilitation of civil and criminal legal assistance through bilingual forms, in close cooperation with the Polish Ministry of Justice. A seminar on victim protection and support took place in January 2013 in Brussels. Meanwhile, the CoE continued to implement the justice component of its EaP Facility and published two studies. The recommendations arising from these studies should be taken into account by the EaP countries.

A number of initiatives are being implemented to accompany the policy dialogue held in Platform 1. The **Council of Europe Facility East** (EUR 4 million) supporting enhanced reform processes in the six partner countries through a multilateral approach and aiming to bring them closer to Council of Europe and EU standards on electoral systems, judiciary reform, cybercrime, and anti-corruption measures continued to be implemented. The **Eastern Partnership Labour Mobility** study on current and potential costs and benefits of labour migration from the EaP countries to the EU also continued.

The second and third meetings of the **Panel on Public Administration Reform** took place in Tbilisi in June and in Chisinau in December. The Panel started monitoring its six-pillar Work Plan implementation. Thanks to several EU Member States and partner countries, work successfully advanced in a number of areas towards achieving the EaP Roadmap objective. The Panel was to review the implementation of the Work Plan at its next meeting in advance of the Vilnius Summit.

The **new EaP Panel on migration and asylum** started implementing its work programme by exchanging best practice in two main areas: circular migration in connection with skills recognition (and the role of employment agencies), and standards for refugee status determination procedures. This should help to achieve the EaP Roadmap objective of improving asylum and migration systems. The second and third Panel meetings were held in Tbilisi in May and in Chisinau in October.

Cooperation on the **CSDP** saw a leap forward, in line with the EaP Roadmap. A Swedish-Polish high-level strategy course, organised with the support of the EaP Academy of Public Administration and the Folke Bernadotte Academy, bringing the partner countries together in a subsequent Eastern Partnership Workshop on CSDP, proved the high degree of interest among all six partner countries in engaging in regular multilateral consultations on the CSDP. The Platform asked the European External Action Service (EEAS) to draft terms of reference for the **CSDP Panel, due to start its work during 2013**, thereby meeting the specific EaP Roadmap objective well in advance of the Vilnius Summit.

The EEAS and the Commission supported the Polish-French project on **Cooperation between Ombudsmen** (2009–2013) which should help to enhance ombudsman institutions in partner countries as envisaged in the EaP Roadmap. Two events were held in 2012 in Paris and Warsaw, focusing on discrimination and promotion of equality especially in the areas of children's right to protection, ombudsman activities, the judiciary, and the labour rights of older people and people with disabilities.

3.2. Economic integration and convergence with EU sector policies

A. Areas of work covered by the Platform

The seventh and eighth meetings of Platform 2 in May and November addressed cooperation in the field of information and telecommunication technologies, enhanced cooperation on taxation and public finance and cooperation in the field of agriculture, rural development, environment, transport and SMEs. The establishment of a structured dialogue on employment and social policies remains an open issue.

B. Areas of work covered by Panels

Concerning **Trade and Trade-related Regulatory Cooperation linked to DCFTAs**, the 11th **Trade Panel** was held in June. EU law and rules in the field of market surveillance and standardisation were presented to all partner countries, who in turn gave an overview of their national systems of technical regulations, standardisation, conformity assessment and market surveillance. The meeting and subsequent specialist seminars significantly contributed to the EaP Roadmap objective of bringing partner countries' legislation closer to that of the EU by exchanging best practice and providing information. A number of recommendations were produced that will make it easier for partner countries to meet EU and international requirements for legal and systemic solutions in a number of areas, thereby moving closer to achieving the EaP Roadmap objectives.

In the **SME Panel**, a seminar on 'SME Policy Assessment' was held in Kiev in April, at which the main areas needing further improvement were identified. The third **SME Panel meeting** in October launched the SME Policy Index, finalising a two-year project combining policy evaluation with regional SME policy dialogue. The SME Policy Assessment and its operational guidance will help partner countries to structure their policy reform agenda to identify challenges and opportunities for SMEs and to remove policy barriers limiting SME growth to create an enabling environment. It will also assist in bringing their respective legislation in line with EU law – a provision of the EaP Roadmap.

The most recent meeting of the **Transport Panel**, in July, explored closer cooperation in all transport modes. In maritime transport, partner countries bordering the Black Sea were invited to signal their interest in closer cooperation with the SafeSeaNet vessel traffic monitoring system. This will be taken forward in part by a new regional technical assistance project, TRACECA-Maritime Safety and Security II, agreed in December. In early 2013, a rail policy workshop will be held to share best practice and explore further options for rail cooperation. On aviation issues, discussions in the Transport Panel focused on how the ongoing technical assistance projects could best be deployed in modernising the partner countries' air traffic management systems. Two regional technical assistance projects on safety and security in the civil aviation sector, under the TRACECA umbrella, deal with these issues. The European Aviation Safety Agency is involved in all aviation safety aspects of these projects. On transport connections, the EU and partner countries discussed a draft regional transport network and priority projects to help connect partner countries with the EU's transport network. This should support the setting up of a regional transport network, which is an EaP Roadmap objective.

In 2012, the **Panel on environment and climate change** promoted dialogue on environmental governance, including opportunities for the green economy, in particular

following up the Rio+20 Summit. A seminar on 'Green economy in the Eastern Partnership partner countries after Rio+20Conference' took place in October. The Panel provided a forum for exchanging best practice in reducing carbon emissions and emissions trading. The findings and recommendations of this Panel fed into the design of new regional cooperation projects, such as EaP-GREEN (Greening Economies in the Eastern Neighbourhood) and Clima East, thereby generating further progress in the implementation of the EaP Roadmap objectives. Other regional projects facilitated cooperation on mitigation and adaptation to climate change. To meet the EaP Roadmap objectives by the end of 2013, partner countries will need to give clear priority to measures to harmonising their rules with the EU *acquis* and fully incorporate environmental and climate change objectives into national development and reform strategies. On the EU side, all appropriate bilateral and multilateral fora and financial instruments will be used to support partner countries in this endeavour and to support the development of national emission trading systems.

Regional cooperation on the environment in the EaP region proceeded satisfactorily. The project on waste management will end in 2014 and has produced waste management strategies in pilot regions which are expected to serve as models for national strategies in the respective countries. The project on air quality has also advanced with special support for implementing the EU Directive on Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control (IPPC) and the UNECE Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution (CLRTAP). The contract for a new project on greening national economies in the Eastern neighbourhood was signed in December and its implementation started on 1 January 2013. Steps forward were made in the water sector, where countries' commitment to implementing water management policies more in line with the EU Water Framework Directive has been tangible. In this light, a new project aimed at improving partner countries' ability to perform marine environmental monitoring following the principles of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive was signed in December and launched in January 2013. Partner countries that have not yet signed the agreement with the Food and Agriculture Organisation are urged to do so to confirm their participation in the project to tackle hazardous substances, including obsolete pesticides, launched in April 2012. The EaP countries are all engaged in the project carried out by the European Environmental Agency to develop a Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS) together with the partner countries from the ENP South and with Russia.

A new **Panel on Agriculture and Rural Development** was set up under Platform 2. The Panel will foster exchanges of experience and best practice in sustainable development of agriculture and rural areas in the EU and EaP countries; promote the ENPARD approach and increase synergies between national and regional initiatives.

C. Conferences, seminars and other activities

In the field of **labour market and social policies**, a study is ongoing to assess the current and potential costs and benefits of labour migration from the EaP countries to the EU. A seminar was held on the reform and modernisation of social protection, focusing on the role of social protection for activation and transition in the labour market; EU Member States shared best practice with partner countries, thereby moving further on the EaP Roadmap. On **enhanced cooperation in the field of taxation and public finance**, a seminar on approximation of excise taxation policies was held in May to foster

information exchange and advance towards meeting Roadmap objectives, with a special focus on the fight against cigarette smuggling. In the area of **customs and trade facilitation**, a seminar on Authorised Economic Operators (AEO) was held in Poland in September 2012 with the objective of exchanging information on the EU's and partner countries' AEO systems and discussing the perspectives for convergence. Another seminar on customs representation took place in Brussels in November 2012 with the aim of fostering convergence of legislation and procedures in this area.

The **EaP Regulators Network** for electronic communication was officially launched at a meeting in September. Technical assistance for Electronic Communications Regulators of the EaP countries (EUR 1 million), is helping EaP countries to gain a better understanding of and make better decisions on various regulatory issues with regard to electronic communications and the information society.

A workshop on improving e-Infrastructures in EaP countries was held in Chisinau in December and focused on the needs of large-scale research activities.

3.3. Energy security

As indicated in the EaP Roadmap, activities in 2012–13 will focus on further integration of energy markets with the EU market through comprehensive energy market reforms and improved energy infrastructure and interconnections. Efforts will continue to be made to promote energy efficiency and the use of renewables to attain the goals set out in the Roadmap. To pursue cooperation in these areas, a workshop on regulatory energy convergence was jointly held with the European energy regulators in Vienna in May. The workshop allowed a thorough discussion of the role and power of energy regulators in partner countries and an assessment of future developments; it should support work on establishing a regulatory and legislative framework — an EaP Roadmap objective. The work of the platform is supported by the INOGATE programme.

In the area of energy infrastructure, the seventh meeting in June 2012 of Platform 3, which deals with energy security, saw presentations on the latest developments in energy infrastructure in partner countries and in the EU, including a presentation on the 'energy infrastructure package'. The eighth meeting of the Platform was held in November and focused on energy efficiency in the EU and in partner countries. The new EU Energy Efficiency Directive was presented, followed by presentations and round table discussions on the implementation of energy efficiency initiatives in partner countries.

Another area of cooperation is the promotion of a stronger nuclear safety culture developing a legally binding regulatory framework in line with international treaties and conventions. One of the objectives is that partner countries concerned finalise 'nuclear stress tests' as soon as possible. Ukraine completed nuclear stress tests in 2012 and Armenia should finalise the Medzamor Nuclear Power Plant stress tests at the beginning of 2013, later than expected in the Roadmap but still well before the Vilnius Summit.

3.4. Contacts between people

Platform 4 supports interaction between EU and partner countries' citizens, focusing in particular on students, teachers, researchers, young people, artists and cultural professionals. In 2012, this work continued to be organised in a number of **EU international cooperation programmes**, in the areas of higher education, youth, culture and research. The additional budget available for Eastern Partnership countries under **Erasmus Mundus** in 2012 enabled an increase in the following areas that allowed all of the EaP Roadmap objectives to be met: first, the number of partnerships financed, with greater mobility as a result; second, the number of scholarships to participate in Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters courses. The budget allowed 57 additional scholarships to be awarded to candidates from EaP countries. Moreover, this higher number is to be maintained in 2013, allowing for the selection of similar numbers of partnerships and scholarships.

In 2012 EUR 29 million were available for the Eastern Partnership countries under **Tempus** in 2012, more than twice as much as in 2011 (EUR11.4 million). This enabled the EaP Roadmap objectives to be met, with the selection of 30 new Tempus projects involving the EaP universities, compared with 16 the previous year. A seminar on reform strategies in **vocational education and training (VET)** held just after the second meeting of Platform 4 in November 2012 was the occasion to present a cross-country panorama of trends and priorities in VET policy reform and to discuss opportunities and challenges for future regional cooperation on VET. The Central Support Service, which manages the **eTwinning** platform, created a new web portal (eTwinning Plus) for EaP schools, thereby fulfilling the objective set in the EaP Roadmap. The platform will be available online for EaP schools from 2013.

In March 2012, about 100 young people, youth workers and youth policy makers were shown the opportunities offered by the EaP Youth Window at the Platform 4 Youth Event in Yerevan. The event helped to make potential beneficiaries aware of policy priorities and new funding opportunities, as envisaged in the EaP Roadmap. The Commission has substantially increased funding to support projects with EaP countries as part of the Youth in Action Programme under the so-called **Eastern Partnership Youth Window**, which has now EUR 29 million at its disposal, in addition to the EUR 2.5 million received in 2011. In 2012 and 2013, the EaP Youth Window will finance 1500 additional projects involving about 21 000 young people and youth workers from Youth in Action and EaP countries in youth exchanges, European Voluntary Service, and training and networking activities for youth workers, thereby achieving the objectives of the Roadmap in this field.

The project ***Capacity building in the youth sector*** (EUR 3 million), signed in December 2012, aims to support and strengthen the response of the EaP countries to the needs of young people through regional cooperation between policy institutions, youth organisations, youth workers and young people.

The EaP **Culture Programme** supported the development of local cultural policies. It involved capacity building in institutions, monitoring, coaching and coordination of projects, and collection and dissemination of results. The Regional Monitoring and Capacity Building Unit, which began work in 2011, held the first regional conference for the EaP Culture Programme in October in Tbilisi, where participants agreed on more effective cooperation between all stakeholders. In the context of policy dialogue, an

expert seminar on **cultural policy** was held in September 2012 in Brussels. The main objective of the event was to prepare for the high-level ministerial conference on culture to be held in summer 2013 according to the work programme for Platform 4.

In the field of **research and innovation**, all Eastern partners continued to participate actively in FP7, as planned in the EaP Roadmap. Participation by researchers and research organisations in FP7 continued to increase, notably in the Marie Curie International Research Staff Exchange Scheme and in the second European Research Area-wide call, both of which in part target the EaP region. Following the conclusion of an MoU with the EU, Moldova is now formally associated with FP7. All EaP countries have appointed FP7 contacts for the Marie Curie actions. Armenia, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine appointed legal and financial contacts for FP7. A dedicated Panel on Research and Innovation under the current EaP platform IV "Contacts between people" was initiated and will be launched in 2013. It will notably contribute to improving coordination between EU and EaP countries' policies and programmes by sharing information and experiences, as well as the development of joint activities. The dialogue and the concrete activities organised in the framework of the Panel will build-up on the achievements and experiences developed through the FP7 programme and bilateral cooperation programmes established between EU Member States and EaP countries. Two panel meetings will be organised in 2013, including one co-located with the planned EU Presidency Conference to be organised by Lithuania (second semester 2013) focused on EU-EaP countries cooperation on Science, Technology and Innovation.

Work on **information and communication technologies (ICT)** focused on mapping stakeholders, identifying research potential and priorities, organising training and assistance and enhancing ICT policy dialogue. Additionally, work continued on improving high-speed connectivity with EaP countries under the Black Sea interconnectivity initiative.

3.5 Assessment of flagship initiatives

>> Flagship initiative on integrated border management (IBM)

The activities of the **IBM flagship initiative**, which aims to support exchanges of good practice among EU and EaP countries, training and capacity building, and to fund pilot projects, continued. The training project — with a budget of EUR 2 million — was extended to the end of June 2013 to focus on capacity building, the exchange of best practice and improved cooperation. With over 800 officers trained so far, the project surpassed the EaP Roadmap target of 700 people trained. The implementation of two pilot projects on the 'green' and 'blue' borders between Belarus and Ukraine and the Ninotsminda-Bavra border crossing point between Georgia and Armenia started at the end of 2012. Two further projects (on the pre-arrival exchange of customs information between Belarus and Ukraine and on the Bagratashen-Sadakhlo border crossing point between Georgia and Armenia) were approved in 2012 and four proposals (two on the border between Moldova and Ukraine, one on the Georgian-Azeri border and one on the Belarus-Ukrainian border) were submitted for funding under the 2013 budget. These projects help to reach the EaP Roadmap target of increased effectiveness and security at

border crossings and improve the overall effectiveness of the border agencies and customs officers of the partner countries.

>> Flagship initiative on prevention, preparedness and response to natural and man-made disasters (PPRD-East)

The PPRD-East flagship initiative helped build up the participating countries' capacity for disaster prevention, preparedness and response at local, national and regional levels. Work advanced on an electronic regional risk atlas — an EaP Roadmap goal — for which a needs analysis and an assessment of available technology in the region was completed. Countries are encouraged to share all data necessary for the development of the electronic regional risk atlas. EU civil protection 'info days' were held in all partner countries, as were information exchange sessions with the EU Monitoring and Information Centre. Work on analyses of the regulatory and institutional frameworks was under way in all countries with the aim of strengthening capabilities in each country. A communication and awareness strategy was developed to serve as a basis for preparedness and response for all stakeholders.

>> Flagship initiative on small and medium-sized enterprises

The SME flagship initiative continued its work targeting the macro and micro level. Overall, the business environment improved in all EaP countries as can be seen in their improved rankings in the relevant annual reports of the World Bank/International Finance Corporation. Progress was achieved within all three components of the flagship, namely:

- Small business support programmes: implemented by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) with EU funding, the Business Advisory Services and the Enterprise Growth Programme have so far provided individual technical assistance to more than 500 SMEs, with the emphasis on SME's competitiveness and consolidation of local business consultancy.
- East-Invest. So far, more than 200 SMEs have been trained on EU rules and internationalisation and 15 business associations are being supported through twinning arrangements with business support organisations from the EU. In 2012, more than 50 EaP SMEs participated in trade fairs in France, Italy and Spain — mostly related to agri-food and wine, one of the main competitive industries in the EaP countries.
- SME Finance Facility. A successful risk-sharing cushion was designed to raise loans for SMEs. So far, almost the entire available budget has been contracted by the participating partners (the European Investment Bank, EBRD and the Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW)), through the intermediary of local financial institutions, to support lending to SMEs (guarantees schemes and interest-free loan co-financing).

Future work within the SME flagship initiative should focus on practical implementation.

>> Flagship initiative to promote good environmental governance

The environmental governance flagship initiative was mainly implemented through the 'shared environmental information system' programme. Although the programme

progressed well, further strengthening of administrative and technical capacity, including the capacity to produce environment statistics to according to EU and international standards, in partner countries is needed for full implementation. The European Environment Agency played a pivotal coordinating role in this programme by seeking synergies with regional and international bodies in the neighbourhood and in Russia that deal with environmental information gathering and management (the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), the Black Sea Commission, etc).

>>Flagship initiative on regional electricity markets, energy efficiency and renewable energy sources

Further progress has been achieved through the implementation of the **flagship initiative on regional electricity markets, energy efficiency and renewable energy sources**. This initiative focused on improving integration of the electricity grid and addressing security of energy supply via encouraging sustainable exploitation of energy. The regional cooperation programme INOGATE contributed to this initiative by combining regional activities with an expert facility that responds to country-specific requests in priority areas of the energy policy dialogue and provided EUR 46 million in assistance in the period 2010–12.

800 stakeholders benefited directly or indirectly from the rapid ad hoc assistance facility created under INOGATE to support energy market convergence and sustainable energy. Some **160 representatives** of energy regulators and ministries from the INOGATE partner countries were trained on issues such as renewable energy regulation, regulatory implications of district heating, sustainable energy regulation, vulnerable customers and social aspects of pricing and energy efficiency policies linked to sustainable energy regulations. Support has also been provided on energy efficiency both through an INOGATE project on energy savings in the building sector and a project of EUR 6.5 million providing support to the extension of the **Covenant of Mayors** in the Eastern Partnership region.

Extending the **Covenant of Mayors**⁴ to partner countries is a key activity under this flagship initiative. Sixty-one cities in partner countries have so far signed up to the Covenant of Mayors and branch offices have been established in Lviv (Ukraine) and Tbilisi (Georgia). Activities under the Covenant contributed at local level to reforms in the energy sector, the use of renewables, energy efficiency campaigns and the diversification of energy sources — which are all EaP Roadmap objectives.

3.6 Cooperation with International Financial Institutions

The EIB and EBRD were represented at the Eastern Partnership Foreign Ministers meeting on 23 July 2012, and also participated in meetings of the multilateral Platform on Economic Integration and Convergence with EU policies and the Platform on Energy Security.

The Activities financed under the Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) flagship initiative (total budget of around EUR 34 million for 2010-2013) continued to support

⁴ www.eumayors.eu.

SMEs in the EaP countries and to provide an external stimulus to growth and employment. The SMEs Funding Facility Project, involving the EIB/EBRD/KfW, is provided by the EU as a risk-sharing cushion to leverage loans for SMEs from European financial institutions through the intermediary of local financial institutions. The Enterprise Growth Programme (EGP) and Business Advisory Services (BAS) are technical assistance programmes, implemented by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and funded by the EU (€10 million for the period from 2010 to 2014). A further tranche of €5,3 million was released in 2012. More than 500 SMEs received tailored technical assistance through the EBRD Small Business Programmes EGP and Business Advisory Services (formerly known as TAM/BAS).

The Neighborhood Investment Facility (NIF) financed 6 projects in the sectors covered by its strategic orientations for a total of €37,4 million and an expected cofinancing from IFIs (mainly EIB, EBRD) of over €950 million. The EaP Technical Assistance (TA) Trust Fund, an EIB supported financial vehicle, created in 2012 to provide TA support and mobilize investments financing under the EPF (Eastern Partners Facility) contributed to the preparation of initiatives in the field of transport, environment, municipal development and private equity/micro finance, thus replicating similar projects already ongoing in the ENP South region.

3.6 Relations with other stakeholders

>> Euronest Parliamentary Assembly

The Euronest Parliamentary Assembly held its second ordinary session in Baku in April. It adopted four resolutions: on challenges for democracy in EaP countries and the EU, on strengthening civil society, on trade agreements with EaP countries and on energy security. The Euronest also adopted a resolution on the situation of Yulia Tymoshenko. The resolutions call on governments to accelerate the advancement of the EaP agenda in these fields.

>> Conference of Regional and Local Authorities of the EaP (CORLEAP)

The CORLEAP Bureau met in May and adopted an Action Plan (2012–13). The annual meeting of CORLEAP co-chaired by the President of the Committee of the Regions and the Mayor of Chisinau took place in Moldova in September and agreed on a set of priorities for 2013: public administration reform, fiscal decentralisation and territorial cooperation.

>> Civil Society Forum (CSF)

The CSF continued to be involved in implementing the EaP, by contributing to numerous EaP panels and the four EaP platforms, in which it obtained permanent participant status. CSF representatives participated in the EaP Foreign Ministers Meeting in July and outlined the following Forum's priorities for the upcoming months: free and fair elections, freedom of media and counteracting corruption. In September 2012, a permanent secretariat of the CSF Steering Committee has been officially established to

coordinate Forum's activities. The EU is providing an operational grant to support the functioning of the secretariat.

The EU has also increased its support to the CSF national platforms through the Neighbourhood Civil Society Facility.

>> *Information and coordination group*

Finally, the informal EaP information and coordination group met for the third time in November, bringing together donor countries, international financial institutions and regional players. Members of the group were briefed on the state of play on the EaP and discussed support to civil society in the EaP region, as well as programming of their assistance in the years ahead.