



BULLETIN

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EU Expert Missions to the Eastern Partnership Region: Time for Change

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The EU pursues a number of advisory programmes in neighbouring countries with the aim to help their government administrations implement mutually agreed reforms. The experience of the Eastern Partnership countries shows these programmes face many limits. Although it is difficult for the EU to modernise public administration in this region, its advisory services might be improved by introducing more flexible procedures, multiannual training, and more logistical support.

In a review of European Neighbourhood Policy presented in November 2015, EU institutions announced reform of EU advisory missions, such as twinning and its Technical Assistance and Information Exchange (TAIEX). These tools allow Member States to send experts to help the administrations of neighbouring countries adapt their legislation and institutions to EU requirements per association and sectoral cooperation agreements. However, EU advisory activity in this area also includes technical assistance, high-level missions, and the Support for Improvement in Governance and Management (SIGMA) and Comprehensive Institution Building (CIB) programmes. The advisory services mechanism is based on practices derived from enlargement policy, meaning the EU agrees the scope and term of the reforms with the partner country and then monitors its implementation. The use of expert missions in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) region indicates, however, that this tool does not facilitate the implementation of institutional reforms and the Union should modernise its advisory instruments.

The Advantages of the EU's Advisory Services. EaP countries often use EU expert missions, which are valued as a source of information on EU standards and a way to develop institutional contact. In 2004–2014, for example, 131 twinning projects were carried out, and Moldova and Ukraine submitted the largest number of applications from the EU neighbourhood. In 2012–2014, nearly 600 events were organised within the scope of TAIEX missions, involving about 13,500 people. The EU has also launched three high-level advisory missions to Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine, and in 2009 it established CIB for the entire region.

A strong point for the EU is the diversity of its advisory instruments, which allows it to better adapt them to the situation in the EaP countries. Although the idea of all of the missions is similar, they differ in the level of cooperation with the target administration, e.g., in technical assistance EU experts unilaterally assess progress and develop recommendations, while under twinning, solutions are worked out with the beneficiary administration, which identifies problems on its own and requests projects. Missions also vary in length (ranging from a few weeks to several years), the profiles of the experts, forms of cooperation (workshops, study visits, internships), the scope of the tasks, and in the flexibility of procedures.

The Risk of Uncompleted Recommendations. Despite the frequent use of expert missions and complementary EU financial assistance supporting reform, they can produce only limited results. The EaP countries lack an EU membership perspective, raising the question of whether there is the political will to carry out systemic reforms. There is also the challenge of the EU's overly ambitious expectations and conditions, inspired by enlargement logic. For these reasons, many reforms remain on paper and the Union's financial assistance, while it promotes the adoption of legislation and creation of institutions as part of sectoral reforms, does not result in effectively monitoring the extent to which these solutions are implemented.

EU advisory services unfortunately fit this pattern. They support the adoption of legislation but only to a minor extent its actual implementation, confirmed an evaluation of twinning projects commissioned by the European Commission. In addition, the actions taken under the programmes do not increase the probability of implementation of recommended solutions. Most expert missions only develop recommendations and strategies and organise various training courses and seminars. However, in most cases the missing point is a set of actions enabling implementation of the recommendations by such things as financing equipment (i.e., computers, specialised equipment for food safety, migration control, environment, etc.) or development of specific procedures in the ministries, beyond training in human resources. In some cases, the solutions formulated by EU experts fail to take into account the socio-political context of the respective country because of the low participation of local experts in some projects.

Weaknesses in the Missions. The ability of EU advisory services to obtain sufficient results is also limited by barriers related to their operation. For one, the missions are often located in ministries and away from executives undertaking political decisions. For the EU, it is difficult to generate interest from the target administration because the advisory services are often related to technical aspects of sectoral cooperation. Integration with the EU without an accession possibility renders it not a top priority for many governments of the EaP countries and they focus instead on internal politics. An exception to this are high-level missions composed of former politicians and high-ranking officials and experts who directly advise the main decision-makers. One success story is the mission to advise the Moldovan government on European integration that ran from 2010 to 2015 and then was extended to 2018. The experts helped Moldova fulfil conditions to achieve a visa-free regime with the EU and other goals.

Second, the attractiveness of EU advisory services in the eyes of governments in EaP countries is also limited by excessive Union bureaucracy. The changing political situation in this region requires swift actions from the Union. Instead, the EU instruments come with long bureaucratic procedures delaying appointment of a mission and changes during a project. Twinning takes the longest, with a contracting period of up to 2–3 years. In technical assistance, which accompanies EU financial support for structural reforms, the procedure lasts about two years and missions usually are launched too late, usually at least a year after the start of the programme. Therefore, they do not help to set the conditions for reforms. Importantly, the EU has no mechanism to quickly send experts in the event of a political crisis. For example, while the EU's support group for Ukraine was established in May 2014, it took at least half a year for it to begin its work.

Inefficient Administration. To achieve their goals, advisory missions must have an effective partner for project implementation. In most of the EaP countries, the public administration suffers from inadequate coordination between ministries, lack of transparency, corruption, low wages, changes in staffing for political reasons, or a lack of responsibility for strategic planning. According to a ranking by the Estonian Center of Eastern Partnership in 2014, in the last few years EaP countries, with the exception of Georgia, have not made significant changes to improve the functioning of the state administration.

The EU's experience shows that EaP countries are reluctant to reform their public administration. For example, the EU has tried to encourage this process through the launch of its CIB programme. However, the EaP countries were slow to pick it up and despite its launch in 2009, the programme's documents were signed only in 2011. What is more, the EU institutions have not extended the programme beyond 2013. CIB's failure was primarily because of problems in coordination between ministries and a lack of political will to reform the entire system. This is not surprising because even in countries covered by EU enlargement policy, it is difficult for the Union to enforce public administration reform. Civil service is a politically sensitive area and it is difficult to change the power structures of the various ministries. In this case, EU support brings better results in relation to some aspects of reform of public administration. For example, public finance management was successfully implemented in Georgia.

Among implementation problems, common ones are the poor level of English among officials and a lack of knowledge about EU procedures. There is no long-term, multiannual training modules that are related to the content of the supported reforms or to the management of EU projects. As a result, some of the project responsibilities are taken on by foreign experts, which is not conducive to building institutional capacity, especially in local planning, management and monitoring.

Towards Change. All EU advisory mechanisms, not only twinning and TAIEX, require reform, mainly by better adapting them to the situation in the EaP region. First, in order to increase the involvement of the EaP administrations, advisory missions should be required to be sited in divisions responsible for undertaking political decisions in the ministries. Moreover, the EU should introduce multiannual training programmes related to sectoral reforms, EU procedures and English comprehension. Second, the EU should place greater emphasis on the implementation of the recommended solutions by providing appropriate equipment (i.e., computers, specialist equipment for migration control, environmental monitoring, and food safety) and to help in the development of internal procedures in the ministries. Third, the strategies formulated by the EU practitioners based on Union experience should take into account the EaP socio-political context to a greater extent to ensure the recommendations are relevant. This requires experts with many years of working in the EaP region, meaning more local experts should be part of the mission. Last but not least, the EU should ease and shorten the procedure for appointing expert missions and introduce the possibility to make rapid changes during a project's implementation.