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# **Mid-term Evaluation of the first phase of the implementation of the EU-CoE Programmatic Cooperation Framework in the Eastern Partnership Countries**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Mid-Term Evaluation of the first phase of the implementation of the European Union–Council of Europe Programmatic Cooperation Framework (PCF) in the Eastern Partnership Countries was conducted from July 2016 to January 2017. The findings of the evaluation are presented in the current report.

As the feedback from national and international stakeholders consulted for the evaluation demonstrates, the Programmatic Cooperation Framework is regarded as an initiative of considerable importance. It addresses a range of key challenges faced by the countries of the Eastern Partnership region, providing a united response by the European Union and Council of Europe, promoting European values and adherence to European standards. In some aspects, the Council of Europe, via PCF, is the key, or indeed sole, international organisation providing this response at this critical juncture.

It is therefore crucial that the PCF performs effectively, and that its results can be clearly established and measured. The report demonstrates that, while there are signs of achievement, the current approach to the implementation and reporting of PCF activities does not allow for accurate assessment of achievement against the intended targets. Improvements are needed in the application of Results-Based Management in PCF.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Executive Summary relates to the Final Report of the Mid-Term Evaluation of the first phase of the implementation of the European Union–Council of Europe Programmatic Cooperation Framework (PCF) in the Eastern Partnership Countries (EaP). The evaluation was conducted from July 2016 to January 2017, and covered data relating to the implementation of PCF in the period January 2015 to December 2016. The findings and conclusions of the evaluation are based on the analysis of evidence provided by documentary review and stakeholder consultations, including feedback from national stakeholders and beneficiaries of PCF activities in all six countries of the Eastern Partnership. The key findings of the evaluation are summarised below, followed by the set of Recommendations.

As the feedback from national and international stakeholders consulted for the evaluation demonstrates, the Programmatic Cooperation Framework is regarded as an initiative of considerable importance. It addresses a range of key challenges faced by the countries of the Eastern Partnership region, providing a united response by the European Union and Council of Europe, promoting European values and adherence to European standards. In some aspects, the Council of Europe, via PCF, is the key, or indeed sole, international organisation providing this response at this critical juncture. The need to intensify efforts to achieve tangible results that benefit the citizenry of the Eastern Partnership region is emphasised in the Joint Staff Working Document ‘Eastern Partnership - Focusing on key priorities and deliverables’ of December 2016.

It is therefore crucial that the PCF performs effectively, and that its results can be clearly established and measured. The report demonstrates that, while there are signs of achievement, the current approach to the implementation and reporting of PCF activities does not allow for accurate assessment of achievement against the intended targets (as shown in the PCF 3-year Results Matrix and the associated Annual Plans of Action). Improvements are needed in the application of Results-Based Management in PCF.

**Programmatic Approach:** With regard to the perceived **Relevance** of PCF projects, a generally strong level of endorsement was recorded by the evaluation based on the feedback from stakeholders, with support particularly noted in those aspects of PCF where the added value of CoE as a standard-setting and monitoring organisation is prominent. Where this added value is less evident to external stakeholders, the Relevance of PCF activities is less salient to some external stakeholders, and the potential for overlap with the work of other international donors is increased.

Here the issue of **identification and formulation** of the set of 50 PCF projects deserves attention. The report notes the positive aspects of PCF programming, with regard to the CoE’s use of its broad knowledge of developments in the EaP region in these priority areas, including reference to monitoring activities, the results of previous project-level engagement, as well as needs assessments, and the inputs of national stakeholders of the EaP countries into the process of identification and formulation. However, the report also examines the factors that led to almost one quarter of projects incurring delayed starts, in a number of

cases of significant length. While the report notes the reliance of CoE on securing agreement with the governments of the EaP countries in order to proceed with implementation, the delays also can be traced to certain shortcomings in the programming phase of PCF, in which insufficient time and attention was paid to agreeing the course of action between CoE and EU sides. Lessons need to be learned prior to Phase II, in order that the delays, and the overlaps and clashes with projects of other donors, including the EU itself, are avoided, and that the lengthy inception phases seen in some PCF projects in Phase I are not repeated.

Alongside issues relating to **coordination with the EU and other donors** during the identification and formulation phases, the report also notes the relative paucity of **engagement with civil society** in the programming of PCF as a whole, and of its projects and activities. In those cases where civil society has been involved (which is more often during the implementation phase, and to some extent in monitoring), projects have benefitted from this interaction and trust among civil society actors appeared to be enhanced.

The report examines the performance of the **PCF 'architecture'**, to gauge its effectiveness in operationalising the goals set before the PCF initiative. As perceived by CoE, PCF has proven to be an effective mechanism for the management of the 42 PCF interventions ('actions'), while for the focal points in the EaP countries (the 6 National Coordinators appointed by the respective Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the countries), PCF has provided a streamlined vehicle with which to interact with CoE, and by extension the EU, and also internally, with national stakeholders, over the coverage of the thematic priorities covered by PCF activities.

The report questions, however, the extent to which the superstructure of the PCF architecture can currently be seen to be exploiting the full potential of the **synergies** that lie both within the PCF initiative, across projects, Themes, and countries; and with external partners. The evaluation has identified a need to give a relatively more prominent role to the 14 Thematic Programmes, as a means towards achieving the goal of PCF to be more than the sum of its constituent parts, and to facilitate engagement with PCF by external stakeholders, including the EU as partner organisation.

The review of the mix between **regional and bilateral projects** has shown that while regional projects appear to be cost-effective, and provide added value through the coverage of several or all EaP countries in their activities (thus ensuring that Azerbaijan and Belarus are engaged with and benefit from PCF interventions), the rationale and role of regional projects is often not sufficiently clear or well known to national stakeholders, EU counterparts, or indeed CoE Country Offices.

**Implementation of PCF Activities:** The current report provides a review of the process of PCF implementation based primarily on qualitative evidence gained through documentary analysis and stakeholder consultations. This evidence points to positive signs of achievement across the five PCF themes, and in all six Eastern Partnership countries. In particular, beneficiaries interviewed for the evaluation provided positive assessments of the work of the PCF projects they have interacted with.

However, the evaluation has not been able to provide an assessment of PCF achievements as measured against the Results Matrix, for the following reasons:

- PCF reporting, both internal and external, does not sufficiently adhere to a Results-Based approach to reporting. As a consequence, reporting against *targets* specified in project workplans, the Annual Plans of Action of PCF Themes, and the PCF 3-year Results Matrix is not systematically conducted.
- The evaluation has identified a range of issues relating to the formulation and use of Indicators in PCF that inhibit the tracing and measurement of progress against the targets embedded in the PCF documentation.

These issues affect all aspects of the monitoring of results against targets, as recorded in the report's sections on Effectiveness, Efficiency, and Impact. The report presents a 'reconstruction' of perceived performance to the extent this is feasible. This has allowed the report to come to tentative conclusions regarding the achievements of PCF, for instance with regard to the characteristics of what are perceived to be well-performing PCF projects, the nature and extent of perceived potential, emerging and actual Impact of PCF activities, and the perceived Contribution of PCF to responding to the needs of the EaP countries. The report also notes the concerns regarding PCF achievements voiced by some external stakeholders, including EU staff and representatives of civil society. The report analyses the issue of gender-mainstreaming in PCF, and concludes that there is considerable variation in approach seen across PCF projects. In a small number of cases the report notes good practice, and the use of the CoE's guidelines on gender-mainstreaming. There is a need to build on and spread the best-practice approaches across PCF as a whole.

The report provides a detailed analysis of the PCF budget performance, including a comparison of the allocations to PCF projects against the planned activities as per workplans, and the expenditure incurred. This analysis demonstrates a lack of correlation between project workplans and budgets on the one hand, and low levels of budget absorption among PCF projects in general, on the other. The patterns vary across the 50 PCF projects, but the overall picture gives cause for concern. A review of the PCF project management approach, to assess its alignment with a Results-Based approach, needs to be conducted during the remainder of Phase I of PCF and prior to the launch of Phase II.

**PCF as Partnership:** The concept of PCF acting as a clear expression of the partnership of the European Union and Council of Europe acting in unity through PCF is strongly supported by stakeholders on all sides, as shown by the evidence gathered for the evaluation. However, while there are positive examples of the ways in which this partnership has been tangible and visible, to the partners and to external stakeholders, the evaluation has also received evidence that points to concerns with regard to the functioning of the collaboration between EU and CoE.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The report concludes with the following set of Recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Take measures to strengthen the application of a Results-Based Approach to project management in PCF.

Recommendation 2: Analyse the PCF budget in order to establish the realistic budget absorption capacity of PCF.

Recommendation 3: Develop a set of written procedures regarding decision-making on the formulation and implementation of PCF.

Recommendation 4: Provide increased opportunities for EU as partner organisation to participate in project identification and formulation.

Recommendation 5: Strengthen the approach to gender-mainstreaming in PCF.

Recommendation 6: Increase the involvement of civil society in the PCF initiative.

Recommendation 7: Reinforce the Visibility of PCF Thematic Programmes.