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LATVIAN ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL
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Consultation “Towards a new European Neighbourhood Policy”

- *Submitting organization: The Latvian Association of Local and Regional Governments (LALRG)*
- *Type of respondent: association*
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The Latvian Association of Local and Regional Governments (LALRG) would like to submit contribution for the consultation “Towards a new European Neighbourhood Policy”, which is the result of discussions taking place during the seminar “Changing the European Neighbourhood Policy: Focus on the Eastern Partnership” (18/06/2015; Riga, Latvia). The seminar was organized by the LALRG and PLATFORMA with the support of the European Commission and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia.

Representatives of the following associations of local and regional governments and organizations were present in the aforementioned seminar providing their opinion on the future of the European Neighbourhood Policy included in this contribution:

- **Eastern Partnership countries’ representatives:** Communities Association of Armenia (**Armenia**); Azerbaijan National Settlement Association (**Azerbaijan**); Lev Sapieha Foundation (**Belarus**); National Association of Local Authorities of Georgia (**Georgia**); Congress of Local Authorities of **Moldova (Moldova)**;
- **European Union Member States’ representatives:** Union of Towns and Municipalities of the Czech Republic (**the Czech Republic**); Association of Estonian Cities (**Estonia**); French Association of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (**France**); Latvian Association of Local and Regional Governments (**Latvia**); Association of Local Authorities in Lithuania (**Lithuania**); SKL International/Affiliated to the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (**Sweden**).

Suggestions on the future direction of the European Neighbourhood Policy (focus on the Eastern Partnership)

First of all, there is clear evidence, that **differentiation and bilateral cooperation** (between the European Union and each of the Eastern Partnership countries) is necessary, however, at the same there should be **one comprehensive policy** as well, showing both joint responsibility for this policy and the strategic importance of the Eastern Partnership policy in the European Union’s external policy.

All the Eastern Partnership countries’ representatives are stressing the importance of **visa liberalization**, which would succeed more **bilateral cooperation, mobility and “people-to-**

people” contacts. Much has been done already regarding this issue during the Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, but still a lot has to be done.

In connection with this there should be mentioned, that the Eastern Partnership Summit, which has taken place on 21 - 22 May 2015 in Riga (Latvia), has affirmed at the highest political level, that those countries, which have signed Association Agreements, should get more support from the side of the European Union by implementing “**more for more**” principle. At the same time, one shouldn’t separate Eastern Partnership countries too much and **regional cooperation** is welcome by all the Eastern Partnership countries. The Eastern Partnership countries’ representatives see the role of the European Union in fortifying the regional cooperation in the region.

Likewise, **closer cooperation in specific fields** is welcome by the European Union and the Eastern Partnership countries’ representatives; to name several these could be **energy efficiency, transport, education and youth exchange**. Concentration more specifically to common interests would increase the participation of both sides – European Union and Eastern Partnership countries. Speaking specifically on the energy field, achieving the **independence in energy field** has been put as one of the most important priorities for the Eastern Partnership representatives; for the countries involved in the Southern Gas Corridor the successful implementation of the initiative was mentioned as important.

Last, but not least, one can’t underestimate the benefits from the **involvement of local and regional governments, as well as their representatives - associations of local and regional governments, - in the development and implementation of the Eastern Partnership policy and strategies**, as municipalities are the closest level to citizens and representing their interests. However, in order to have an effective involvement, **capacity building** of municipalities and their associations in Eastern Partnership countries should not be forgotten, especially taking into consideration the new geopolitical context. This is the only way one can succeed real decentralisation and implement the reforms strengthening local autonomy.