Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Policy and Operations Evaluation department (IOB)

A seat at the table

Evaluation of the centralised and decentralised
Matra instruments (2017-2023)

October 2024

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Executive summary

The Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) has evaluated the Matra programme of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) during the period 2017-2023.

The Matra programme
The Matra programme targets (potential) candidate Member States of the European Union (pre-accession countries)[1] and countries of the Eastern Partnership (EaP).[2] The overarching goals are twofold:
- To contribute to sustainable societal transformation by supporting reforms in the areas of rule of law, good governance and democracy;
- To strengthen and improve the bilateral relations between the Netherlands and Matra programme countries.

The Matra programme is based on the premise that a sustainable, stable society is rooted in a healthy relationship between the state and its citizens. An independent judicial system, accountable both the government and citizens, is considered an essential prerequisite for a legitimate and stable relationship between the state and its citizens. By contributing to this process, the Matra programme aims to limit potential instability and security risks for the benefit of people living in programme countries, the EU and the Netherlands.

The total budget of the Matra centralised and decentralised instruments in the period 2017-2023 was approximately EUR 64 million (see graphs 1 and 2 for a breakdown between instruments and programme countries).

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Graph 1: *Total spending on centralised and decentralised instruments per year in 10 Matra countries*

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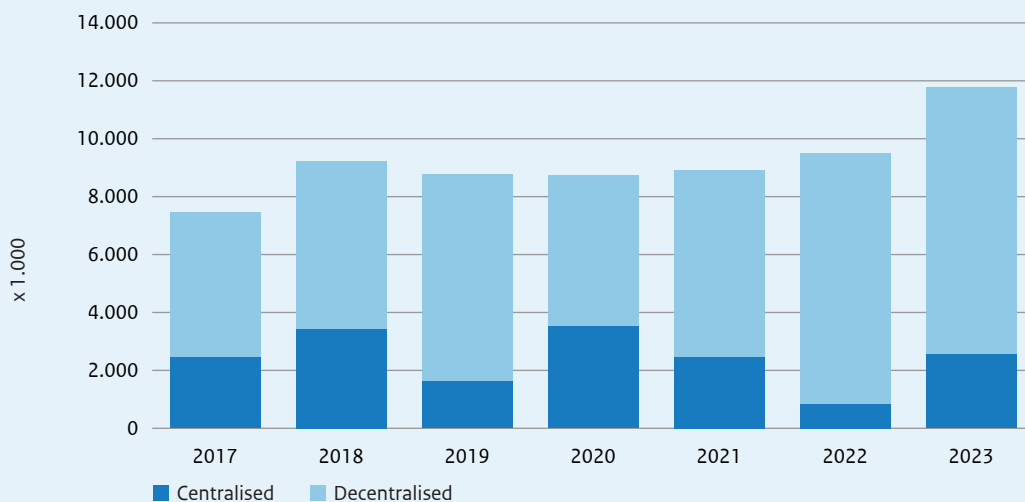
1 Pre-accession countries are those in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia) and Turkey.
2 Eastern Partnership countries are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus.

Graph 2: *Matra spending per country 2017-2023*
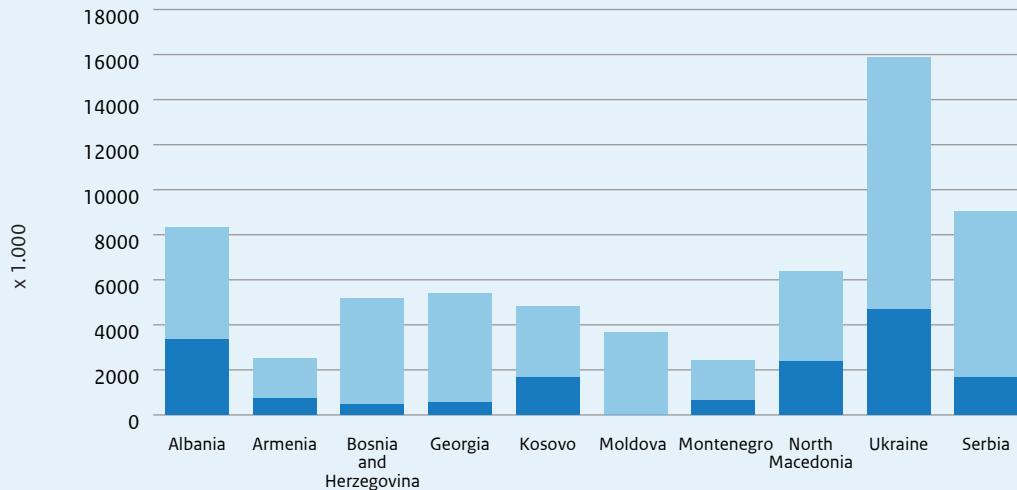
The evaluation

The Matra programme is an integral part of the government of the Netherlands' budget, Chapter V Foreign Affairs, Article 2 for Security and Stability. As part of the obligations under the Government Accounts Act (Comptabiliteitswet, article 3.1), the government of the Netherlands is required to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of public spending every five to seven years. Moreover, this evaluation aims to facilitate learning by providing the Europe Department (DEU) with information on the relevance, coherence and effectiveness of (parts of) the Matra programme. Based on the specific knowledge needs of DEU, IOB has provided insights that can contribute to the programming cycle from 2024 onwards and to the new policy framework for 2025-2028. The key evaluation question of this evaluation is as follows:

To what extent have the centralised Matra instrument and decentralised Matra instrument been effective, coherent and relevant in a changing (geo)political context and what lessons can be drawn from this?

Sub-questions include:
1. Relevance: To what extent have centralised and decentralised Matra instruments proven relevant in changing circumstances?
    a. How have the objectives of Matra in terms of societal transition corresponded to the problems faced by the Matra programme countries?
    b. What are the conditions for Matra to thrive as a programme?
2. Coherence: To what extent does the Matra programme complement other Dutch, donor, EU and local efforts?
    a. What has Matra's added value been in relation to programmes on plural democracy and the rule of law implemented by other donors in the programme countries?
    b. How does Matra complement the priorities of local initiatives (both NGO or government) in the programme countries?
    c. What has Matra's added value been in relation to other Dutch programmes?
3. Effectiveness: How do the Matra centralised and decentralised instruments contribute to Matra's goals?
    a. How have the Matra G2G and the delegated funds contributed to a process towards democracy, rule of law, and dialogue between government and civil society?
    b. How have the Matra centralised and the decentralised instruments helped to strengthen bilateral relations with the Netherlands?

Type of analysis
The research process consisted of four steps. First, the theory of change (ToC) of the Matra programme was reconstructed based on an internal document analysis and three focus group discussions. In a second step, an evaluation matrix was created linking research questions to a set of indicators. Third, data was collected on the ToC and the indicators of the evaluation matrix. This data included (a) a total of 91 in-depth interviews with staff of the MFA, including embassy staff, project implementers, foreign government officials, beneficiaries, other donors active in the same field and external experts; (b) field visits to case study countries Albania and Armenia, during which a second round of interviews took place and more detailed information was collected; (c) a document review of project proposals, mid-term and final evaluations of selected projects and (d) an in-depth analysis of external reports and databases on rule of law development and democratisation to provide additional background on the case studies. In the fourth and final step, the collected data was used to answer the research questions and to test the assumptions of the reconstructed theory of change.

A major challenge faced in this study was to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the Matra programme. The effects of Matra projects could only be assessed at the level of outputs and short-term outcomes. Assessing the impact of the projects at a higher level has been challenging. More specifically, it has not been possible to attribute observed changes in democracy, the rule of law, and the capacity of local government and civil society to the two Matra instruments. This is due to the programme's limited scale and the relatively small size of individual projects in relation to the overarching goals, as well as the variety of themes and activities supported by the two instruments. In addition, many other external factors influencing political and societal developments are beyond the control of this study's scope.

Main findings and recommendations
Two **main findings** can be drawn from this evaluation. **First**, Matra is a useful tool for improving bilateral relations with countries that seek to enhance their relations with the EU and its Member States. However, in programmatic terms projects have flawed relevance and effectiveness. A notable finding in reconstructing the theory of change for the Matra programme is that many MFA respondents identified the enhancement of bilateral relations as the 'real' *raison d'être* of the programme. This is not surprising, given that the focus of the MFA's Europe Department is inherently political – i.e. policy coordination and development at the bilateral and European level – rather than programmatic. This political nature of Matra is reflected in the finding that, although the extent to which the programme has contributed to macro-level changes in the societal transformation process remains unclear, the instruments evaluated were found to contribute to the strengthening of bilateral relations.

A paradox thus emerges between programmatic effectiveness and political utility. While programmatic success entails formulating and achieving tangible, measurable outcomes based on predefined objectives for the Matra programme, the political utility of Matra involves keeping the programme's objectives deliberately broad or ambiguous so the programme can be utilized by aligning it with political interests and evolving agendas.

Second, Matra is not used strategically and instruments operate largely in silos. Despite previous IOB recommendations to anchor the use of Matra instruments in a theory of change, there is still no Matra-wide intervention logic. As a result, there is no overarching level of monitoring and evaluation, which means that information on the achievement of goals is largely absent or anecdotal. Such a situation leaves virtually no room for strategic, feedback-based management of the various instruments and their coordination. While potentially valuable, the outcomes of one instrument are not used to reinforce the projects of another.

Recommendations
- Allow for sufficient scope for the political realities in which Matra operates, while maintaining a sustained focus on programmatic activities;
- Define more clearly the level of ambition of the Matra programme, including through a Matra-wide intervention logic, while maintaining the overall flexibility of the programme and its ability to adapt to political interests;
- Establish a Matra-wide intervention logic that leaves sufficient scope for the political realities described in main finding 1, while providing a framework for strategic thinking and course correction of the programme;
- Link the different instruments through information sharing;
- Identify opportunities where projects from one instrument could reinforce activities from another and stimulate cross-instrument learning.

In terms of the **relevance** of the Matra instruments examined, this evaluation finds that the centralised instrument does not have a sufficiently demand-driven approach. The design of the project criteria and the limited number of available implementers means that the organisational focus of the implementers can become a driving factor in the focus of the projects, rather than a solid needs analysis. This does not mean that the projects fail to respond to local needs, but rather that planning is driven by the implementer rather than being initiated by the beneficiary. This may reduce the relevance of the centralised instrument compared to decentralised projects. The decentralised instrument, which is directly overseen in-country by embassies, is closer to local needs and therefore more likely to be demand-driven. Its relevance is therefore higher. From a macro perspective, all examined projects, both centralised and decentralised, were aligned with gaps identified in key EU policy documents.

Such gaps identified by the EU often fuel the domestic policy agenda, as many Matra programme countries have aspirations to join or associate with the EU. As such, EU criteria can become a driving factor for local requests for assistance. The relevance of both Matra instruments remains high in programme countries that are seeking closer ties with the EU, as the instruments' thematic priorities partially align with those of EU accession criteria. In contexts where there is no credible accession of association offer, or where such offers are significantly less viable, the relevance of the centralised instrument is much lower.

Relevance: Recommendations
- Improve support to programme countries in translating larger reform ambitions into a specific needs agenda that links to their accession or association aspirations, such as the Copenhagen criteria or other international standards.

Regarding the centralised instrument:
- Involve Dutch embassies in the thematic choices of the centralised instrument (as included in the subsidy frameworks);
- Include a more diverse group of implementers for Matra centralised projects;
- Ensure sufficient local ownership of Matra projects and allow local authorities to define priorities and programming themselves as much as possible;
- Involve local implementing partners in design and implementation;
- Increase engagement with local authorities prior to project design and ensure that there is sufficient buy-in and available institutional capacity to carry out the proposed project.

Regarding the decentralised instrument:
- Facilitate and ensure access to the decentralised instrument for smaller civil society organisations.

On the issue of **coherence**, this evaluation finds that there is a lack of coordination between the central and decentralised instruments, with both operating in silos. This leaves room for improvement and opportunities to strategically align the use of both instruments. Although there is some thematic overlap with the decentralised Human Rights Fund on paper, no concrete overlap was found in practice, attesting to the different implementation modalities and the different political purposes of the different instruments. At the policy level, Matra is broadly coherent with Dutch foreign policy goals in the region and can reinforce the political work of the embassies, but sometimes fails to align with the institutional priorities of the Dutch (semi-)governmental institutions involved in centralised project implementation. In terms of external coherence, the evaluation found that the centralised and decentralised instruments are broadly coherent with the efforts of other donors. They occupy a small but specific niche in a crowded donor landscape in Matra donor countries.

Coherence: Recommendations
- In order to increase relevance and effectiveness (follow-up, upscaling, synergies, learning), the different Matra instruments should be better aligned. This could also promote mutual learning and the exchange of best practices between the two instruments;
- Consider organising an annual (online) conference where best practices and mutual learning opportunities can be shared and explored;
- Arrange regular touch-base meetings between the RVO/DEU, embassy staff and Dutch implementers;
- Encourage embassies to regularly share overviews of decentralised projects with colleagues in The Hague, including policy officers at the ministry and the RVO. The RVO and Dutch implementing organisations should also keep the embassy informed of developments in centralised projects;
- Ensure that the differences between the various funds are clear to embassies and the implementing organisations, while making clear when combining funds is allowed and even encouraged;
- Leave room for flexibility and input from implementers in Matra, as this is seen as a major advantage of the programme compared to other Dutch funds;
- Provide sufficient resources for programme management and implementation and establish mechanisms for strategic and political guidance;
- Before starting a project, consider the specific niches and potential incubator functions that Matra projects, both at the centralised and decentralised level, could fulfil.

In terms of **effectiveness**, almost all projects in this evaluation achieved their planned outputs and contributed to the anticipated short-term outcomes. However, projects cannot always demonstrate how short-term outputs contribute to the intended long-term outcomes, resulting in projects being implemented without clear strategic direction or guidance. This makes it difficult to assess the progress or the effectiveness of both centralised and decentralised projects. A closer examination of the two instruments reveals that the contribution of 'Dutch added value' is useful in the centralised instrument, but it is not a prerequisite for project effectiveness, as demonstrated by the decentralised instrument. The centralised instrument focuses mainly on transferring skills and knowledge from the Netherlands, but it lacks a demand-driven approach and suffers from weak local ownership. In contrast, the decentralised instrument offers significant advantages over its centralised counterpart, including stronger demand-orientation, better reach to smaller initiatives and organisations, and greater flexibility. However, decentralised projects are sometimes disconnected and fail to reinforce each another, resulting in relatively small funds being scattered across many different sectors in the name of contributing to societal transformation.

Despite the fact that projects may be successful on an individual basis, the overall impact of centralised and decentralised instruments in terms of their contribution to societal transformation in the area of rule of law and democratisation remains unclear. Attributing macro-level changes in the societal transformation process to the Matra programme is not possible due to the discrepancy between the

overarching objective at the Matra programme level and the objectives (and outputs) set at the project level, leading to a misalignment between the programme's objectives on paper and the projects' effectiveness in achieving these objectives in practice. In the absence of a clear logical framework to complete the missing links between projects and the overall programme, the contribution of projects to higher level objectives cannot be determined.

Regarding Matra's second objective, in practice there is little evidence that the centralised instrument has established relationships between Dutch (semi)governmental institutions and their counterparts in the programme countries. Rather, the research found that despite the ambiguity of the objective, the centralised and decentralised instruments contribute to the strengthening in the bilateral relations in the programme countries in three ways. First, Matra makes a positive contribution to the visibility and reputation of the Netherlands; second, Matra helps embassies to establish strong diplomatic networks in the area of rule of law and democratisation; and third, Matra strengthens the Netherlands' information position in programme countries.

Comparing the results of the programme's ability to achieve the two objectives, it becomes clear that there is a discrepancy between the unclear results of the achievement of objective I and the evident, though unplanned, results of the achievement of objective II. Moreover, the promotion of bilateral relations is not linked to the programme's effectiveness in bringing about changes or making valuable contributions to the societal transformation of the programme countries. The lack of clarity in intervention strategy and the avoidance of a concrete definition of the programme's objectives could be explained by the political context of the programme. While this approach may be a preferable choice for a political department, it is important to acknowledge that such ambiguity ultimately diminishes the capacity to strategically direct the use of available Matra instruments.

Effectiveness: Recommendations
With regard to Matra's contribution to societal transformation (objective I):

Project level:
- Instruct project implementers to demonstrate a clear link between their projects (and outputs) and the overarching objectives of the Matra programme through a logical framework.
- Instruct project implementers to provide a monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) framework system that connects to a broader ToC for the Matra programme;
- Clarify for each instrument what 'Dutch added value' is and how it should contribute to societal transformation;
- Identify areas where 'Dutch added value' is needed and consider its (optional) use across instruments;
- Regional centralised and decentralised projects should be initiated by the programme countries themselves, once they see the added value of a regional approach;
- Articulate the added value of a regional approach for each target country involved;
- Encourage mutual learning regardless of the regional focus of a project. Mutual learning should not be confined to regional projects or to the implementation of identical projects in different countries. Instead, it involves learning from both the differences and similarities between programme countries, while sharing best practices.

Programme level:
- Specify and explain the practical implementation and assessment criteria for the Matra objectives. Formulate clear country-specific objectives to which all stakeholders should contribute, and move away from the scattered approach by undertaking a multitude of different initiatives simultaneously.

With regard to the strengthening of bilateral relations (objective II):
- Steer more proactively on the achievement of this objective for the centralised instrument. In coordination with the Ministry of Justice and Security, conduct a scoping exercise on the available capacities and thematic and regional priorities of the involved(semi)governmental organisations before committing their roles in centralised Matra projects;
- Instruct project implementers to clearly demonstrate the availability and benefits of involving Dutch semi-governmental institutions in the project inception phase;
- Translate the objective of strengthening of bilateral relations between the Netherlands and the Matra programme countries into country-specific, more tangible and realistic goals that are clear to all stakeholders involved.

1 About this evaluation

1.1   Rationale

The Matra programme for societal transformation in Central and Eastern Europe is one of the longest running programmes of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[3] The programme's overarching goals are twofold:

- To contribute to sustainable societal transformation by supporting reforms in the areas of rule of law, good governance and democracy;
- To strengthen and improve the bilateral relations between the Netherlands and Matra programme countries.

The Europe Department (DEU) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has, in its capacity as the department responsible for the Matra programme, requested the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) to carry out an evaluation of the centralised and decentralised instruments of the Matra programme for the period 2017-2023.

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[3]   The Matra programme was launched in late 1993 in the wake of societal changes in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Matra is the Dutch acronym for societal transformation ('maatschappelijke transformatie').

DEU's preparations for a new policy subsidy framework for the Matra centralised instrument 2025-2029 started in spring 2024, which highlighted the need for the department to receive timely input on the functioning of the centralised instrument, a component of the Matra programme. In addition, the department was interested in the relevance of the Matra programme in a changing (geo)political context. The preliminary findings of this evaluation were shared in April 2024 with DEU to inform the new programming cycle. This final report builds on those preliminary findings and presents its final conclusions and recommendations.

The Matra programme is an integral part of the government of the Netherlands' budget, Chapter V Foreign Affairs, Article 2 for Security and Stability. As part of the obligations under the Government Accounts Act (Comptabiliteitswet, article 3.1), the government of the Netherlands is required to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of public spending every five to seven years.

1.2   Research questions

The key evaluation question is: To what extent have the centralised Matra instrument and decentralised Matra instrument been effective, coherent and relevant in a changing (geo)political context and what lessons can be drawn from this?

Sub-questions include:
1. Relevance: To what extent have centralised and decentralised Matra instruments proven relevant in changing circumstances?
    a. How have the objectives of Matra in terms of societal transition corresponded to the problems faced by the Matra programme countries?
    b. What are the conditions for Matra to thrive as a programme?
2. Coherence: To what extent does the Matra programme complement other Dutch, donor, EU and local efforts?
    a. What has Matra's added value been in relation to programmes on plural democracy and the rule of law implemented by other donors in the programme countries?
    b. How does Matra complement the priorities of local initiatives (both NGO or government) in the programme countries?
    c. What has Matra's added value been in relation to other Dutch programmes?
3. Effectiveness: How do the Matra centralised and decentralised instruments contribute to Matra's goals?
    a. How have the Matra G2G and the delegated funds contributed to a process towards democracy, rule of law, and dialogue between government and civil society?
    b. How have the Matra centralised and the decentralised instruments helped to strengthen bilateral relations with the Netherlands?

1.3   Research methodology

Instruments and evaluation period
The evaluation period covers the years 2017-2023 and is limited to the Matra centralised (G2G) and decentralised instruments. Matra's centralised instrument consists of a government-to-government (G2G) component and a rule of law training component. This evaluation will focus on the G2G component.[4]

The Matra programme also includes the Matra Political Party Programme (MPPP) of the Dutch Fund for Regional Partnerships (NFRP) financed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and implemented by the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, and the Matra Diplomat programme. IOB published an evaluation of the Eastern Partnership part of the Matra programme on 1 September 2015, covering the period 2008-2014.[5] The consortium of MDF Training & Consultancy and APE published an evaluation of the

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[4]   In this evaluation, the use of the term 'centralised Matra instrument' refers to the G2G component of the centralised instrument.
[5]   IOB – 'Evaluation of the Matra programme in the Eastern Partnership countries (2008-2014)', 1 September 2015.

Matra Pre-Accession programme covering the period 2012-2014 in April 2015.[6] Other parts of Matra have been evaluated in more recent years, such as the MPPP 2017-2019 by Significant/APE[7] and the Rule of Law training programme by Col-lab 2020-2022.[8] Given these previous evaluations, IOB decided that this evaluation should focus on the Matra centralised and decentralised instruments for the period 2017-2023. These two instruments account for the majority of the Matra budget (up to 80%) during the evaluation period and correspond most closely to the information needs of the relevant policy directorate of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

DEU has used the preliminary findings of this research/report to prepare for the upcoming procurement round of the centralised instrument.[9]

Selection of countries

The evaluation deals exclusively with the 10 Matra programme countries that are part of the Dutch 'strict, fair and engaged' approach according to the reconstructed theory of change (ToC) of the Matra programme.[10] This category comprises Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine as EaP countries, and Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Kosovo as pre-accession countries, excluding Belarus and Azerbaijan.

The case studies of Albania and Armenia were purposefully selected to illustrate how the Matra centralised and decentralised instruments work in practice. Given the focus of this evaluation, these case studies were chosen based on whether both centralised and decentralised projects had been recently implemented. Within this category, the largest beneficiaries of Matra funding were selected. In addition, countries were selected based on the Netherlands' current relationship with the authorities, in order to assess the level of actual government-to-government cooperation. Although Ukraine met these criteria, it was not selected due to accessibility issues for IOB's research team as a consequence of the ongoing war.

Selection of projects

This evaluation focuses on the two Matra instruments that make up the bulk of the available funding: the centralised and decentralised instruments. Across both instruments, 12 projects were selected for further analysis (see Annex 1 for project selection methodology). The projects were selected based on their budgets, thematic coverage and timeliness in the evaluation period to adequately represent the project portfolio in terms of project scale, thematic coverage and data availability. It was decided to select relatively recent projects to ensure the most comparable context with the present and to offer opportunities for learning based on recent experiences. For the centralised instrument, three projects were studied in depth, consisting of two projects in Albania and one in Armenia. For the decentralised instrument, nine projects were examined,[11] of which four – two in Albania and two in Armenia – are presented in this report.[12] The seven projects provide an insight into the workings of the centralised and decentralised instruments in Albania and Armenia and can provide lessons for future programming. The list of selected projects in focus is included in Annex 2 of this report.

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6   MDF / APE, 'Evaluation Report Matra Programme (in pre-accession countries: Western Balkan and Turkey) 2012-2014', April 2015.
7   Significant/APE, 'Eindrapportage Evaluatie NFRP Politieke Partijen Programma 2017-2019', 11 November 2020.
8   Col-lab, 'Final Review of the Matra Rule of Law Training Programme', 28 October 2022.
9   Rijksdienst voor Ondernemend Nederland, *Matra Overheid tot Overheid - Matra G2G* [website], https://www.rvo.nl/subsidies-financiering/nfrp-matra/matra-g2g, (accessed 24 October 2024).
10   This approach focuses on being able to take a critical stance in terms on rule of law and democratisation dynamics by engaging in projects and activities that seek to improve these dynamics.
11   Five projects were considered in Albania and four in Armenia.
12   See Annex 1 and Annex 2 for more details on the projects and the project selection process.

Type of analysis

The analysis outlined in the Terms of Reference for this evaluation was based on a contribution analysis.[13] However, due to time constraints, IOB was not able to carry out all the steps that are typically included in a contribution analysis. The methodology used to carry out the analysis was therefore streamlined and carried out in four steps:

1. First, the theory of change of the Matra programme was reconstructed. As there was no ToC available for the Matra programme prior to this evaluation,[14] a new ToC was developed through focus group discussions with policymakers from the Europe Department and local embassy staff.

2. In a second step, an evaluation matrix was created linking research questions to a set of indicators.

3. In a third step, data was collected on the ToC, including the validity of its assumptions and the practical implementation of the identified approaches, as well as on the indicators from the evaluation matrix. This data was primarily of qualitative nature and included:
    -   91 in-depth interviews with staff of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), including embassy staff, project implementers, foreign government officials, beneficiaries, other donors active in the same area and external experts. In a first round of interviews, MFA and embassy staff from all Matra programme countries were interviewed to gain an understanding of the workings of the examined instruments in all 10 countries. In a second round of interviews, more detailed information on the case studies was collected through field visits to Armenia and Albania. A purposive sampling technique was used to identify respondents. The interview data was then coded and analysed.
    -   For the selected projects, a document review was carried out that included project proposals and mid-term and final evaluations of projects.
    -   External reports and databases on rule of law development and democratisation were analysed to provide additional background on the Albania and Armenia case studies.

4. In a fourth and final step, the collected data was used to answer the research questions and to test the assumptions of the reconstructed theory of change. For the research question on effectiveness, a limited contribution story was written to determine the extent to which the examined Matra instruments can plausibly contribute to the overarching goals of the programme.

1.4   Limitations

The choices made in terms of case selection, country visits and respondents inevitably led to limitations in this evaluation. A relatively small sample of projects specific to the case studies could be further analysed through interviews and desk research. An in-depth analysis of more projects in other Matra countries was not possible due to the large number of countries, the large number and small size of the projects, and the limited time available for the evaluation. To partially mitigate this, desk research was conducted for the remaining countries, including interviews with policy officers and embassy staff responsible for all 10 countries. Nonetheless, the information gathered is inevitably less comprehensive and detailed than the data collected in the visited countries.

A major challenge faced in this study was to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the Matra programme in contributing to societal transformation. The effects of Matra projects could only be assessed at the level of outputs and short-term outcomes. Assessing the impact of the projects at a higher level has been challenging. More specifically, it has not been possible to attribute observed changes in democracy, the rule of law, and the capacity of local government and civil society to the two Matra instruments. This is due to the programme's limited scale and to the relatively small size of individual projects in relation to

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13   As described by Van der Knaap, Pattyn, Hanemaayer 2023, p. 208
14   The ToC is discussed in Chapter 2, The Matra programme.

the overarching goals, as well as the variety of themes and activities supported by the two instruments. In addition, many other external factors influencing political and societal developments are beyond the control of this study's scope.

1.5   Quality control

Research for this evaluation was carried out by IOB researchers Zeineb Romdhane, Johannes Claes, Yvonne Stassen and Erik van Oudheusden. The final report was written by Zeineb Romdhane and Johannes Claes. IOB evaluations are overseen by an internal and external peer review group. Both groups have provided feedback on the different phases of the evaluation, such as on the draft terms of reference and the draft evaluation report. The internal peer review group for this evaluation consisted of IOB researchers Bastiaan Limonard, Caspar Lobbrecht and Michelle Homans. The external peer review group consisted of Marike Abrahamse, Matra coordinator at the Europe Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Dimiter Toshkov, associate professor at the Institute of Public Administration at Leiden University; and Wouter Zweers, research fellow at the EU & Global Affairs Unit of the Clingendael Institute. In addition, feedback on the research process and draft reports from Arjan Schuthof, Koen Sizoo and Alexander Otgaar has been integrated in this final version.

2 The Matra programme

2.1 Key policy developments

The Matra programme is part of the government's overarching policy on security and stability, which aims to enhance Dutch and international security and stability through targeted bilateral and multilateral cooperation and the promotion of democratic transition in priority areas.[15] The Matra programme was established in 1993 in response to the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. In this context, the Netherlands sought to reconnect with the countries in Central and Eastern Europe and, based on its own experience, to support the desired changes in the relationship between citizens and the state, thereby also seeking to export its own democratic values and view on regional stability.[16]

Due to the fluctuating situation in Matra programme countries and shifting political priorities, the programme has been revised several times over the years. In 2007, the Dutch government underscored the importance of strict compliance with the Copenhagen criteria for EU accession. In addition, the EU reaffirmed its interest in fostering strong relations with neighbouring countries, based on close

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15 Ministerie van Financiën, *Artikel 2 Veiligheid en Stabiliteit [website]*, https://www.rijksfinancien.nl/memorie-van-toelichting/2022/OWB/V/onderdeel/1079063, (accessed 24 October 2024).

16 Tweede Kamer, *Matra gemoderniseerd [website]*, https://www.tweedekamer.nl/downloads/document?id=2009D53633, (accessed 24 October 2024).

cooperation and shared values.[17] As a result, Matra evolved from supporting the societal transformation of former Eastern Bloc countries to becoming a bilateral complement to the European pre-accession process and neighbourhood policy.[18] This included a reclassification of the programme's target countries into two groups. The first category includes countries with an EU accession perspective, i.e. candidate countries and potential candidate countries. The second category includes countries for which there is no accession perspective, including EaP countries.[19] With this reorganisation of countries, the programme explicitly redirected its focus to ensuring stable neighbouring countries that would increasingly align their societal structures and legislation with the EU, and which would increasingly become 'space of security, prosperity and liberty, based on European values.'[20]

The vision of Matra as an instrument to ensure security and stability permeated through the programme's priorities in the years to follow, including the programme's propensity to assist pre-accession countries in fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria and adopting the EU's *acquis communautaire*. This focus on EU accession indirectly excluded the EaP countries, which were not considered to have EU membership prospects, leading to the decision to phase out the Matra programme in EaP countries in 2012.[21] However, as Matra's focus remained rooted in ensuring security and stability in the ring around Europe, the EaP countries remained Matra programme countries of growing interest, particularly due to Russian influence in the region.[22] This eventually led to the reversal of the decision to exclude the EaP countries from the Matra programming in 2016.[23] 2016 also marked the year of the establishment of the Dutch Fund for Regional Partnerships (NFRP), which aims to invest in opportunities for individuals and enhance the resilience of societies.[24] The decision to establish the NFRP and make Matra part of it also aligned with broader Dutch priorities, which focused on promoting democratic transitions in priority areas within the ring round Europe, rather than being limited to pre-accession countries.[25]

In recent years, particularly in light of changing geopolitical dynamics, there has been a shift in the Dutch stance towards a more supportive position on EU enlargement, while still emphasising the need for countries to comply with the Copenhagen criteria for EU accession. A similar shift has taken place in several other European capitals, resulting in the opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and the granting of candidate status to Georgia in December 2023, which marks the first time that EaP countries have been granted candidate status.[26] Moreover, the war in Ukraine has stressed

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17 Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, *Samen werken samen leven*, https://www.parlement.com/9291000/d/tk31070_1bijl.pdf, (accessed 24 October 2024).
18 This was also due to the fact that eight previous Matra beneficiary countries joined the EU in the period 2004-2007. Matra gemoderniseerd, October 16, 2009. Tweede Kamer, *Matra gemoderniseerd*, https://www.tweedekamer.nl/downloads/document?id=2009D53633, (accessed 24 October 2024).
19 Ukraine and Belarus were among the countries where the programme was launched in 1994. Armenia, Georgia and Moldova became eligible for Matra in 2006, followed by Azerbaijan in 2010. Matra gemoderniseerd, October 16, 2009, p. 20. Tweede Kamer, *Matra gemoderniseerd* [website], https://www.tweedekamer.nl/downloads/document?id=2009D53633, (accessed 24 October 2024).
20 Tweede Kamer, *Matra gemoderniseerd* [website], https://www.tweedekamer.nl/downloads/document?id=2009D53633, (accessed 24 October 2024).
21 In 2011, it was decided to phase out the Matra programme in EaP countries from 2012 onwards, but this did not happen. This decision was officially reversed in 2016, when the EaP countries officially became part of the policy subsidy framework. IOB evaluation of the Matra Programme 2008-2014, 1 September 2015.
22 Advisory Council on International Affairs, Instability around Europe: Confrontation with a New Reality, AIV advice no. 95, April 2015.
23 Particularly after a bleak picture of the rule of law developments in a number of member states of the Council of Europe, including Matra programme countries, was presented in 2017. Kamerbrief, mede namens MinBZK en MinV&J, 'Kabinetsreactie op AIV-advies 'De wil van het volk? Erosie van de democratische rechtsstaat in Europa', 26 January 2018.
24 Vaststelling van de begrotingsstaten van het Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (V) voor het jaar 2016.
25 Ministerie van Financiën, *Artikel 2 Veiligheid en Stabiliteit [website]*, https://www.rijksfinancien.nl/memorie-van-toelichting/2022/OWB/V/onderdeel/1079063, (accessed 24 October 2024).
26 Enlargement: Commission recommends starting accession negotiations with Ukraine, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and candidate status for Georgia, *European Commission* [website], https://commission.europa.eu/news/enlargement-commission-recommends-starting-accession-negotiations-ukraine-moldova-bosnia-and-2023-11-08_en, (accessed 24 October 2024).

the geopolitical significance of the region for the Netherlands, thereby increasing the importance and strategic relevance of the Matra programme and the broader objective of ensuring security and stability to the Netherlands.[27]

2.2   Objectives

Matra is based on the premise that a sustainable, stable society is rooted in a healthy relationship between the state and its citizens. Furthermore, an independent judiciary, accountable to both government and citizens, is considered an essential prerequisite for a legitimate and stable relationship between the state and its citizens. By contributing to this process, the Matra programme aims to limit potential instability and security risks for the benefit of people living in the programme countries, the EU and the Netherlands. Accordingly, the goals of the Matra programme are twofold.

First, the programme aims to contribute to sustainable societal transformation by supporting reforms in the areas of rule of law, good governance and democracy.[28]

The main themes and goals that fall under this objective can be outlined as follows:
- establishing and strengthening pluralistic, democratic rule of law states;
- strengthening central governments;
- developing and strengthening civil society;
- supporting a healthy and sustainable relationship between citizens and government; and
- supporting the accession process to the European Union for pre-accession countries.[29]

Second, the programme seeks to invest in bilateral relations between the Netherlands and Matra programme countries.[30] It is noteworthy that although the first goal is more often mentioned by respondents,[31] the second goal is more often mentioned as the 'real' *raison d'être* of the programme.

2.3   Reconstructed theory of change

IOB reconstructed Matra's theory of change (ToC) for the examined instruments based on a review and analysis of relevant policy documents and focus group discussions with key policy stakeholders at the MFA. This ToC is only applicable to countries that fall under the Dutch 'Strict, fair and engaged' approach. This approach is applied in countries where there is a certain degree of willingness to pursue reforms towards a democracy based on Western legal principles and fundamental values, even if relations with each country are not entirely optimal.[32] Rather, relations with countries to which the 'Strict, fair and engaged' approach applies fall on a spectrum where the full range of Matra instruments can be used, and government-to-

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27 The invasion of Ukraine led to a one-time increase of EUR 2 million for the Matra programme. Tweede Kamer, vergaderjaar 2021–2022, 35 925 V, no. 66.

28 Internal document. The first objective used to be 'Supporting social dialogue and government accountability through the strengthening of civil society and the improvement of government performance'. This objective has been clarified over time and is now more in line with the European pre-accession and neighbourhood policies. The second objective has remained unchanged, although the context has changed significantly. Whereas the second objective was formulated at a time when the Netherlands had to reacquaint itself with 'new' countries after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, Matra now focuses more on strengthening relations with potential candidate states.

29 Internal document and Matra gemoderniseerd, 16 October 2009. Tweede Kamer, *Matra gemoderniseerd* [website], https://www.tweedekamer.nl/downloads/document?id=2009D53633, (accessed 24 October 2024); and Ministerie van Financiën, *Artikel 2 Veiligheid en Stabiliteit [website]*, https://www.rijksfinancien.nl/memorie-van-toelichting/2022/OWB/V/onderdeel/1079063, (accessed 24 October 2024).

30 Internal document.

31 MFA staff and embassy staff were interviewed and participated in focus group discussions to provide input for the reconstruction phase of the ToC.

32 This ToC applies to Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine as EaP countries, and Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Kosovo as pre-accession countries.

government collaboration is possible. The categorisation of countries is often complex, occurring in a grey area that involves many unknown variables and is constantly influenced by shifting geopolitical dynamics. The contextual assumptions for Matra's ToC are presented below in Table 1.

Table 1

	Contextual assumptions
1	In changing contexts (crises, geopolitical changes), Matra can remain a relevant programme
2	Through its demand-driven approach, adaptive programming and flexibility, Matra can better respond to the needs and priorities of programme countries
3	By leveraging Dutch knowledge on democratisation, rule of law and human rights, Matra has added value in the local context
4	The Matra programme contributes to the broader Dutch foreign policy towards programme countries. By taking an integrated approach, Matra can complement and reinforce other Dutch foreign policy initiatives
5	The Matra programme complements EU policy/aid and that of other donors. Improving coordination and cooperation with other actors increases the effectiveness of Matra

In its communication to the countries in question, the Netherlands may adopt a firm tone on matters such as rule of law, corruption or other necessary reforms (= *strict*). This critical tone is accompanied by Dutch action in the form of collaboration, which makes the message more palatable. Through the implementation of support projects, the Netherlands demonstrates that it is not only critical but actually committed to promoting improvement (= *fair and engaged*). Accordingly, the Netherlands can implement various Matra instruments, both at a centralised level and at a decentralised level with local civil society organisations. Following this logic, IOB identified several fundamental assumptions underlying the Matra programme and its various instruments. The pathways-to-change assumptions are presented below in Table 2.

Table 2

	Pathways-to-change assumptions
6	Matra instruments are the right way to transfer the Dutch added value on democratisation, rule of law and human rights
7	Matra's effectiveness is enhanced by a regional and country-specific approach
8	By acting as an incubator/accelerator with small funds, Matra can have an impact in niche sectors that can be taken up by larger donors
9	Through the use of centralised and decentralised instruments, Matra increases the visibility of the Netherlands in programme countries, and as such contributes to better bilateral relations

2.4   Instruments, approach and stakeholders

The examined Matra instruments seek to achieve the aforementioned two goals using two approaches. On the one hand, the programme invests in capacity building for both local authorities and civil society (objective I), and on the other hand, it aims to foster formal relationships between institutions (objective II). As shown in Figure 1, the two examined instruments operationalise these approaches in different ways.

Figure 1: *Visual representation of the programme logic of the centralised and decentralised instruments*

The Matra Programme
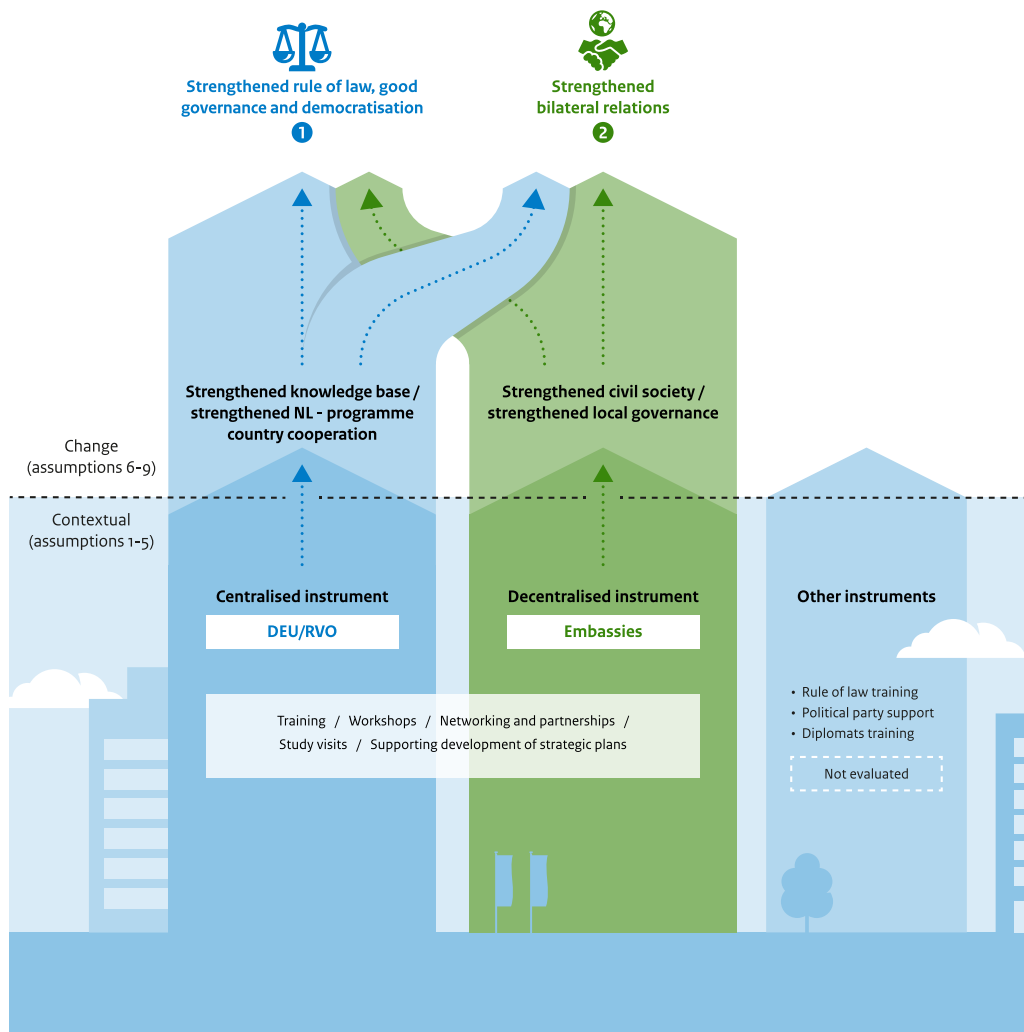
The centralised instrument aims to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and skills between Dutch (semi) governmental institutions and their counterparts in the Matra region, focusing on pluralistic rule of law and democratic and good governance.[33] A key capacity building initiative of the centralised instrument is the organisation of training sessions for key stakeholders in democratisation and rule of law development. During these sessions, Dutch experts aim to equip participants with a range of skills on various topics related to these overarching topics. Another common capacity building practice is to support programme countries in establishing sub-departments of governmental and judicial institutions and to transfer the necessary skills to run these newly developed departments. Furthermore, Matra centralised projects are implemented directly by Dutch non-governmental organisations and semi-governmental institutions. The

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33   Overheid.nl, Staatscourant van het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden 2024, 15454 [website], https://zoek. officielebekendmakingen.nl/stcrt-2024-15454.html, (Accessed 24 october 2024).

budget for the 14 centralised projects approved under the two subsidy tender frameworks, which were mainly implemented between 2017 and 2023, ranges from EUR 800,000 to EUR 2 million per project.[34] The centralised projects are usually implemented over a period of two to four years.[35]

The Matra decentralised instrument aims to contribute to stronger and more resilient civil society organisations in the Matra programme countries, thereby supporting local civil society in its efforts to promote democratisation, strengthen the rule of law and further develop processes of good governance.[36] The decentralised projects seek to facilitate communication between government agencies, creating communication bridges between various parties.[37] The decentralised instrument encourages interaction between public institutions and civil society organisations, while at the same time urging public institutions to see civil society as an equal partner. The aim is to make public institutions more receptive to giving civil society organisations a seat at the table in the societal transformation process, but also more receptive to incorporating the recommendations and input from civil society organisations into their decision-making processes.[38]

Typically, decentralised projects are implemented by local civil society organisations in the target country. However, where there is a lack of established civil society organisations or due to the relatively recent opening of Dutch embassies in programme countries, Dutch NGOs have also been involved in the project implementation of the delegated Matra programme. The preferred financial range for decentralised projects is between EUR 25,000 and EUR 300,000, with most projects erring on the smaller side. In addition, decentralised projects tend to have a shorter duration in practice, generally ranging between one and two years, although on paper the maximum duration for delegated projects is three years.[39]

Graph 1 and 2 provide an overview of the total spending on Matra's centralised and decentralised instruments. Graph 1 presents the breakdown between centralised and decentralised, showing that the centralised instrument is smaller in terms of money spent in the evaluation period compared to the decentralised funds. Graph 2 shows Matra spending for all 10 countries.

Graph 1: *Total spending on centralised and decentralised instruments per year in 10 Matra countries*

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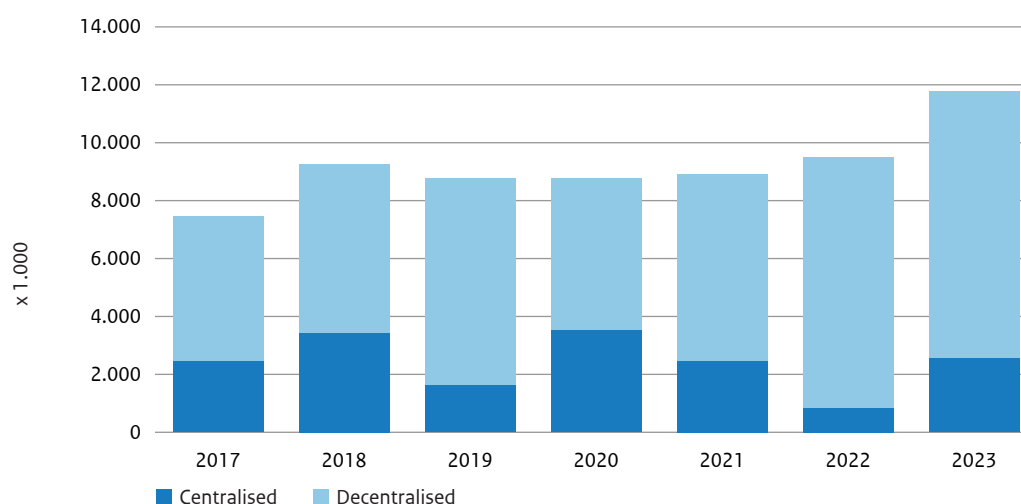
34   The new centralised subsidy policy framework 2025-2029 has a subsidy cap of EUR 7.5 million.
35   Overheid.nl, Staatscourant van het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden 2024, 15454 [website], https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/stcrt-2024-15454.html, (Accessed 24 october 2024).
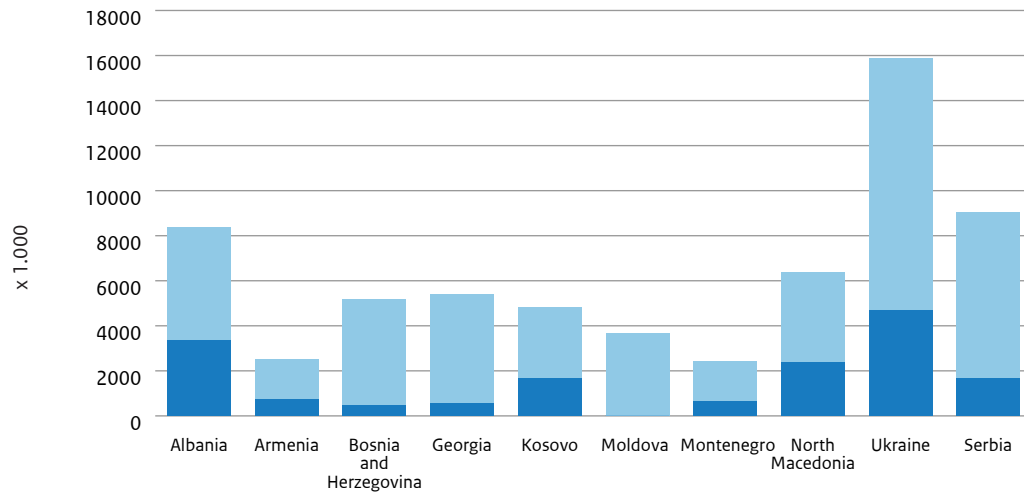36   Internal document.
37   Interviews with embassy staff and project implementers.
38   Interviews with embassy staff.
39   Internal document.

Graph 2: *Matra spending per country 2017-2023*

3 Relevance of the Matra programme

This chapter discusses the relevance of the Matra programme. For the purposes of this study, relevance is interpreted in a broad sense.[40] On the one hand, this chapter aims to answer the question of whether the goals of the Matra programme and the operationalisation of these goals are aligned with the needs of the target groups and stakeholders. On the other hand, this chapter will explore broader considerations in terms of the relevance of the Matra instruments and the conditions under which they can be optimally used in the programme countries. The second section will place the instruments in the context of the programme countries' EU accession or association aspirations and examine the extent to which the Matra programme – and particular its centralised and decentralised instruments – are able to adapt its activities to changing contexts and how this has impacted its relevance.

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[40]   For a definition of relevance as an evaluation criterion, see OECD Library, *Understanding the six criteria: Definitions, elements for analysis and key challenges* [website], https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/543e84ed-en/1/3/4/index. html?itemId=/content/publication/543e84ed-en&_csp_=535d2f2a848b7727d35502d7f36e4885&itemIGO=oecd &itemContentType=book#:~:text=Definition%20of%20relevance%3A,do%20so%20if%20circumstances%20 change, (accessed 24 October 2024).

3.1 Relevance at project level

To determine the relevance of Matra projects, this section will examine how the centralised and decentralised Matra instruments respond to the needs of programme countries and the extent to which they adopt a demand-driven approach.
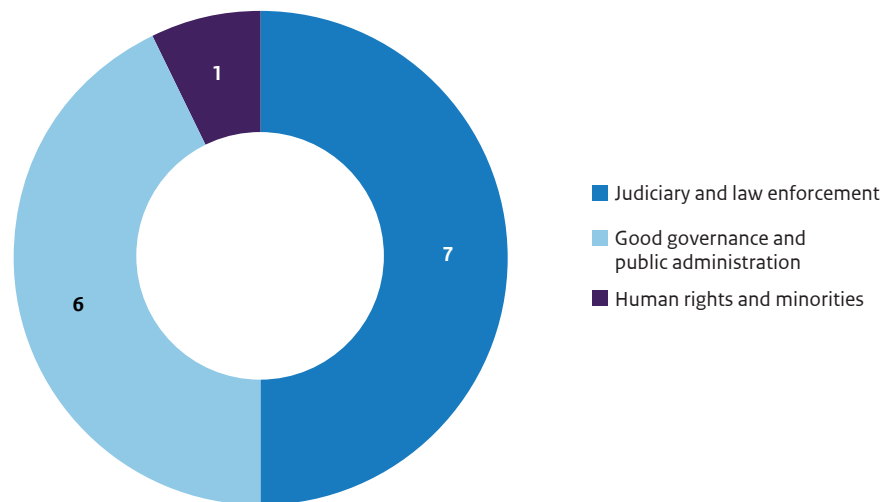
Centralised projects

The project cycle for centralised projects is overseen by DEU of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which has budgetary responsibility over Matra's centralised funds. A multi-annual subsidy framework determines the scope, thematic focus and other qualifications for Matra projects.[41] Two such frameworks were implemented during the evaluation period.[42] In the course of 2023, the daily management of the centralised project portfolio was handed over to the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO). Implementing organisations can submit project proposals to the ministry based on the guidelines set out in the subsidy frameworks. Centralised projects should last between two and four years and have a budget of between EUR 500,000 and EUR 2 million. Potential implementers of Matra centralised projects must have nonprofit status and demonstrate a track record of implementing similar projects.

The funding priorities for centralised Matra projects are included in these subsidy frameworks. For these projects, the priority topics from pre-accession and AA/CEPA were formulated as follows:
- Pluriform rule of law
- Professional and modern judiciary
- Human rights
- Media freedom
- Good governance
- Inclusive and democratic governance[43]

Graph 3: *Implemented Matra centralised projects per theme (2017-2023)*

- Judiciary and law enforcement
- Good governance and public administration
- Human rights and minorities

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41 The countries where Matra centralised projects can be carried out for the pre-accession countries are: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey; for the EaP countries: Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

42 One framework ran from 2017 through 2020, and another from 2020 through 2024.

43 Rijksoverheid, *Besluit en beleidskader voor subsidie NFRP-Matra-programma 'Overheid tot overheid' 2020-2024* [website], https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/besluiten/2019/09/13/besluit-en-beleidskader-verlening-subsidie-nfrp-matra-programma-overheid-tot-overheid-2020-2024, (accessed on 24 October 2024).

Proposals are selected in several phases through a tendering procedure based on pre-established quality criteria. Among other things, these criteria require the involvement of a Dutch (semi)governmental organisation to be paired with its counterpart(s) in the Matra programme country. Such a requirement underpins the Matra programme's assumption that Dutch institutions' knowledge of rule of law and democratisation can add value in the Matra countries. Combined with the requirement to demonstrate a clear track record, it narrows the list of potential implementers to a relatively small group of Dutch implementing organisations that have carried out most of Matra's centralised projects and have a network of Dutch government organisations that enables them to design projects according to the established quality criteria.

This means that the bulk of project implementation relies heavily on the same organisations, which do not always have an operational presence in all the programme countries listed in the subsidy framework. In addition, the organisations do not always cover the entire spectrum of sub-themes outlined in the framework. Consequently, there is a risk that an organisation's operational presence or institutional priorities, rather than a sound analysis of needs, become the determining factor in project design, rather than a link to local priorities and contexts.

Figure 2: *Involvement of organisations in Matra centralised projects on the Dutch and programme country side*
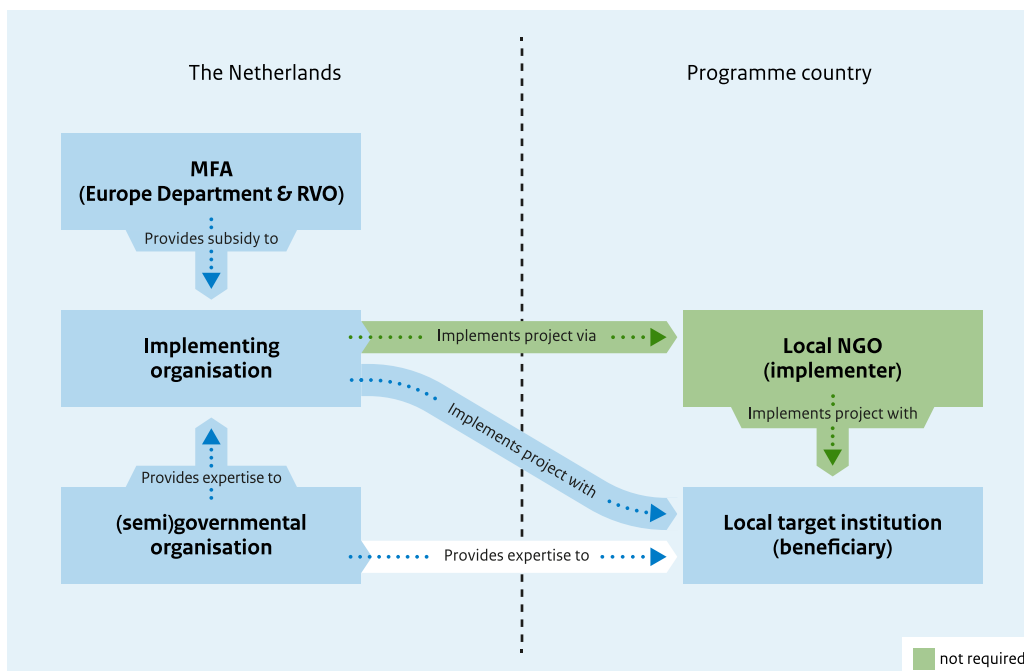
This risk is exacerbated by several factors. First, there is no formal requirement in the subsidy framework to work with a local implementing organisation in the programme country. This further reduces the chances of increasing local ownership and ensuring that projects are driven by local demands. Second, ensuring ownership depends on the 'solid context and stakeholder analysis' that is required of project implementers, as well as on letters of intent that must ensure sufficient buy-in from the organisations involved in the project, including from the programme country institution that will be the beneficiary of the project.[44] However, respondents from implementing organisations indicate that these letters of intent do not guarantee government ownership of a project. In addition, such letters do not provide any

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44 Rijksoverheid, *Besluit en beleidskader voor subsidie NFRP-Matra-programma 'Overheid tot overheid' 2020-2024* [website], https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/besluiten/2019/09/13/besluit-en-beleidskader-verlening-subsidie-nfrp-matra-programma-overheid-tot-overheid-2020-2024, (accessed on 24 October 2024). A letter of intent is in some cases preceded by an inception mission of the implementing organisation to the country of potential project implementation.

information on the priority of a theme in the local context, nor on the capacity of the programme country government institution during implementation.[45] Last, Dutch embassies are only minimally involved in assessing the quality of centralised project proposals (as well as in overseeing project implementation), which is a missed opportunity to assess the quality of the context and stakeholder analysis.[46]

This weak ownership and supply-driven nature of centralised projects should be tempered by the overall level of government ownership of similar projects in Matra programme countries. First, interviews with the donor community and beneficiary institutions in Albania and Armenia reveal that it can be a challenge for governments in Matra programme countries to articulate concrete needs that foreign donors can subscribe to.[47] This is particularly the case when, further down the policy line and away from strategic policy considerations such as a rapprochement with Western countries or reform of the justice sector, local authorities and individual institutions struggle to translate high-level ambitions into concrete action plans.[48] The EU for instance, through its annual progress reports of pre-accession countries, formulates recommendations at the sector level for reforms. Countries with accession ambitions are likely to underwrite such recommendations at the sector level, while struggling to translate them to clear action plans for all involved institutions. This can lead to situations where (local) authorities turn to Western donors requesting assistance without clearly stipulating what is needed. In the absence of concrete requests, donors – or in the case of Matra, Dutch implementing organisations or semi-governmental institutions – sometimes have to fill in the blanks themselves, often using international standards (or the *acquis communautaire* or Copenhagen criteria for pre-accession countries) as guiding principles.

Second, the risk of a lack of ownership in project design does not mean that projects cannot align with areas where reform is needed. The projects all addressed themes that were indicated as priority policy areas in EU Progress Reports (in the case of Albania) or the Single Support Framework (in the case of Armenia).[49] For example, the AISPIRA project was implemented in the context of a newly created probation service in Armenia,[50] and the PRIS II project was aligned with the need for implementing measures following the establishment of a new criminal court for juvenile justice in 2018.[51]

Decentralised projects

Unlike centralised projects, decentralised projects are not managed from The Hague but by the Dutch embassies in Matra programme countries. The ministry delegates the decentralised funds to the Matra country embassies, which enjoy a great deal of freedom in determining the project cycle and funding priorities. The Matra decentralised instrument targets more countries than the centralised instrument.[52] Matra decentralised projects are smaller than centralised projects, ranging between EUR 25,000 and EUR 300,000. Their maximum duration is three years, although in practice projects typically run for one or two years. The funds are intended to support local NGOs and educational non-profit organisations. Projects can either be implemented directly by the beneficiary organisation or be used to strengthen the capacity of local government organisations.[53]

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45 Interviews with project implementers.
46 Interview with embassy staff.
47 Interviews with embassy staff and donors.
48 Interviews with beneficiaries.
49 For instance European Commission, *Albania 2023 Report* [website}, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/ea0a4b05-683f-4b9c-b7ff-4615a5fffd0b_en?filename=SWD_2023_690%20Albania%20report.pdf, (accessed 24 October 2024); and European Commission, *Programming of the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) - 2017-2020 - Single Support Framework for EU support to Armenia* [website], https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2018-10/armenia_ssf_2017-2020_final.pdf, (accessed 24 October 2024).
50 Interviews with beneficiaries.
51 Interviews with beneficiaries.
52 For the EU pre-accession countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey; for the EaP countries (situation during the evaluation period): Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. However, for this evaluation, Turkey, Azerbaijan and Belarus were not considered.
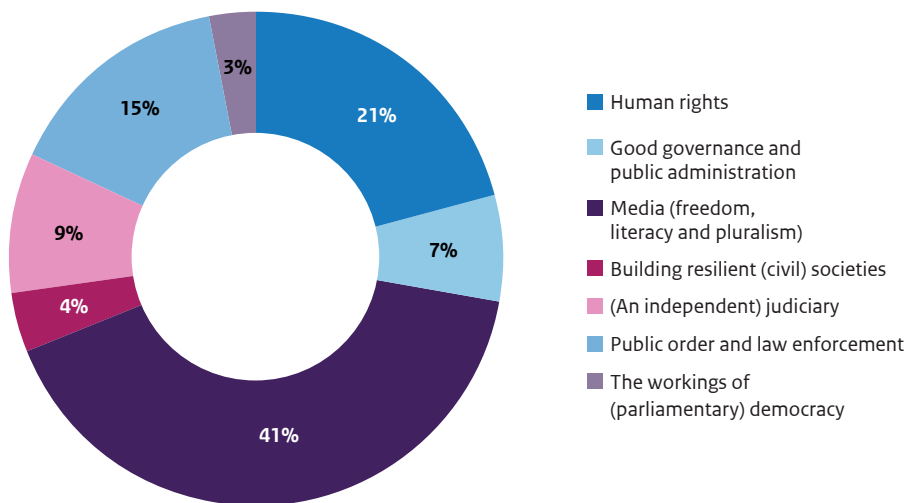53 Internal document.

Figure 3: *Involvement of organisations in Matra decentralised projects on the Dutch and programme country side*

The Matra decentralised funding priorities can be broken down as follows:[54]
- public administration and good governance, including anti-corruption, the promotion of integrity and accountability;
- media (freedom, literacy and pluralism);
- the workings of (parliamentary) democracy, including the functioning of parliament, electoral processes and procedures, upholding the separation of powers and democratic participation and inclusion of minorities;
- (an independent) judiciary;
- public order and law enforcement;
- conflict resolution and post-conflict reconciliation; and
- building resilient (civil) societies.

Graph 4: *Financial distribution of funding per theme on decentralised projects in Albania (2017-2023)*

Legend:
- Human rights
- Good governance and public administration
- Media (freedom, literacy and pluralism)
- Building resilient (civil) societies
- (An independent) judiciary
- Public order and law enforcement
- The workings of (parliamentary) democracy

Pie chart values: 3%, 21%, 7%, 41%, 4%, 9%, 15%

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54 Internal document.

Graph 5: *Financial distribution of funding per theme on decentralised projects in Armenia (2017-2023)*

Legend:
- Human rights
- Good governance and public administration
- Media (freedom, literacy and pluralism)
- Building resilient (civil) societies
- (An independent) judiciary
- Public order and law enforcement
- The workings of (parliamentary) democracy

Values shown on chart: 26%, 6%, 21%, 27%, 8%, 12%
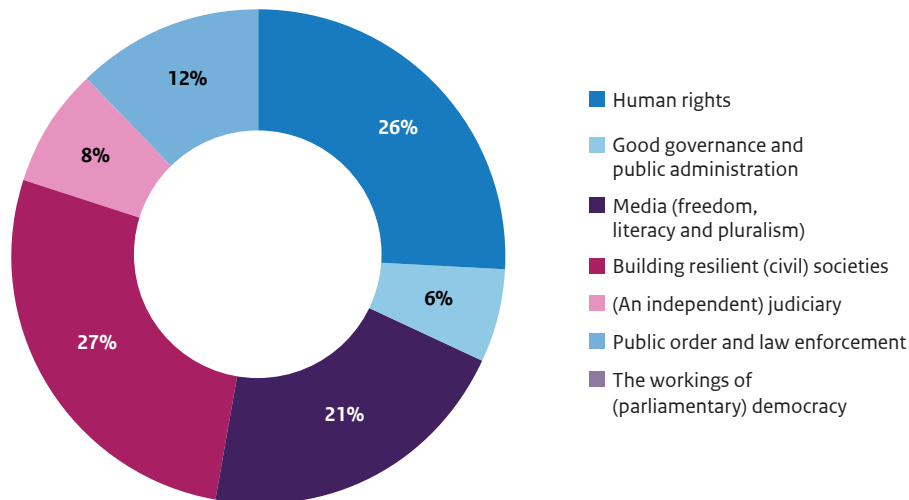
Project development under the decentralised instrument is not standardised among all Matra embassies. Embassies can decide for themselves which form and themes are most suitable in the local context.[55] In addition, each embassy has country-specific priorities.[56] The flexibility of the decentralised instrument enables embassies to adapt the themes as they see fit. This adaptability allows embassies and local implementing partners to respond quickly to emerging needs in programme countries.[57] In practice, this means that embassies, with the assistance of local civil society organisations, identify the needs of each country and adjust the themes accordingly, seeking to reflect the latter in the (bi)annually selected projects. Such an approach allows embassies to explore different formats, calls for proposals and the number of decentralised projects. This is closer to local needs than the centralised instrument and therefore ensures the demand-driven nature of projects.[58]

The requirements of decentralised Matra instruments are described by local implementers as 'relatively undemanding', making the programme accessible to smaller organisations. The application procedures and reporting requirements are perceived as much more lenient and less time-consuming than those of other donors.[59] In addition, several local implementers have pointed out that the instrument has financed crucial gaps that have not (yet) been financed by another donor or by other means.[60]

Nevertheless, there are limits to the extent to which the instruments is responsive to local needs. This is linked to the fact that civil society in Matra programme countries is still maturing. Organisational instability within civil society organisations can lead to their dissolution, resulting in the unsuccessful completion of a project.[61] Although this does not happen often,[62] the fear of it can lead embassies to rely too heavily on the same civil society organisations over and over again, at the expense of innovation

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55 For example, some embassies use a call for proposals, others work with open calls.
56 Embassy of the Netherlands in Bosnia and Herzegovina, *MATRA 2024: Open call for proposals* [website], https://www. netherlandsandyou.nl/web/bosnia-and-herzegovina/w/news/matra-2024-call-for-proposals-2, (accessed 24 October 2024); and (combined Matra and HRF): Embassy of the Netherlands in Georgia, *Proposal form 2024*, [website], https://www.netherlandsandyou.nl/web/georgia/proposal-form-2024-above-gel-69000, (accessed 24 October 2024).
57 Interviews with MFA staff, embassy staff and project implementers.
58 Interviews with MFA staff, embassy staff.
59 Interviews withs embassy staff and donors.
60 Interviews with beneficiaries.
61 Interview with embassy staff.
62 Interview with embassy staff.

and support for upcoming and smaller civil society organisations in the field.[63] This dynamic is reinforced by the fact that the decentralised instrument is not designed to support organisations and initiatives over a longer period of time or to provide core funding to organisations, which is regretted by local NGOs.[64] As such, over time a bias may develop towards funding larger and more established civil society organisations that are better staffed and more capable to develop project funding ideas that fall within the Matra decentralised remit. This is also reflected by the programme's limitations in involving new and upcoming grassroots organisations in project implementation, as they tend not to qualify under the current funding criteria.[65] This pattern can also reinforce the urban-rural divide, as the more capable civil society organisations tend to be located in capitals, resulting in relatively few initiatives outside of the capital, despite the need to include and target all regions in the Matra programme countries.[66]

3.2 Broader considerations relating to relevance

The Matra programme does not operate in a vacuum. Given its objectives, regional focus and the department within the MFA that oversees it, the programme is inherently political rather than technical in nature. Considerations of relevance should therefore be broader than a purely programmatic or project focus and require an analysis of the underlying dynamics in which the programme operates. In this section, we will place the programme against the backdrop of these broader dynamics to refine the evaluation of its relevance.

The rule of law and democratisation dynamics in the Western Balkans – comprising Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia – have been complex and multifaceted, with both progress and setbacks since 2017.[67] Some of the key challenges throughout the region include ensuring the independence of the judiciary, corruption, shrinking civic space and media freedom.[68] Similar to the dynamics in the Western Balkans, the dynamics in the Eastern Partnership (consisting of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) vary greatly from country to country. The rule of law and democratisation dynamics in the region have developed differently. While the Partnership was originally designed to provide a common framework for relations with the EU's eastern neighbours, relations have developed at different speeds over time. For some countries, it has become a gateway to accession talks, as demonstrated by the European Commission's recent recommendation to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, and to grant candidate status to Georgia.[69] Other countries such as Belarus and Azerbaijan, have seen their relationship with the EU and other Western partners strained over regional geopolitical and security issues.

These different dynamics within the Matra area of focus mean that its perceived relevance will be linked to where a programme country finds itself in terms of credible accession prospects and its openness to collaborate on rule of law and democratisation. A credible and predictable accession pathway has

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[63] Interview with MFA staff.

[64] Interviews with embassy staff and project implementers.

[65] Interviews with embassy staff.

[66] Interviews with embassy staff.

[67] While some of these dynamics are similar, it is important not to apply the prism of one homogeneous bloc, as this negates important differences between countries.

[68] Some Matra projects can also be classified under Chapter 24, which deals with the capacity of law enforcement agencies to better manage issues such as border control, visas, external migration, asylum, police cooperation, the fight against organised crime and terrorism, cooperation in the areas of drugs, customs cooperation and judicial cooperation in criminal and civil matters. European Commission, *Chapters of the acquis* [website], https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/conditions-membership/chapters-acquis_en, (accessed 24 October 2024).

[69] European Commission, *Enlargement: Commission recommends starting accession negotiations with Ukraine, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and candidate status for Georgia* [website], https://commission.europa.eu/news/enlargement-commission-recommends-starting-accession-negotiations-ukraine-moldova-bosnia-and-2023-11-08_en, (accessed 24 October 2024).

historically been one of the driving factors for reform in candidate countries.[70] Countries with accession prospects can seek to meet the requirements of the EU's Copenhagen criteria,[71] which include the 'stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities' as well as the implementation of the *acquis communautaire*, Chapters 23 and 24 of which focus on the judiciary and fundamental rights, and justice, freedom and security respectively.[72] These criteria are reflected in Matra's thematic priorities. Countries with no current accession prospects but with a high level of willingness to cooperate, may interpret the recent opening of accession talks with EaP countries as a hopeful sign and develop a domestic agenda for alignment with international norms and standards in terms of rule of law and democratisation.[73]

For the Matra programme, this leads to a differentiated reality in which instruments may be relevant in one context but not in another. The diagram in Figure X illustrates a simplified version of the different contexts in which Matra can operate. A credible accession or association process is the key variable that determines whether Matra projects will respond to the needs of the intended target groups – local authorities and NGOs.

Figure 4: *Relevance of Matra instruments in different contexts*
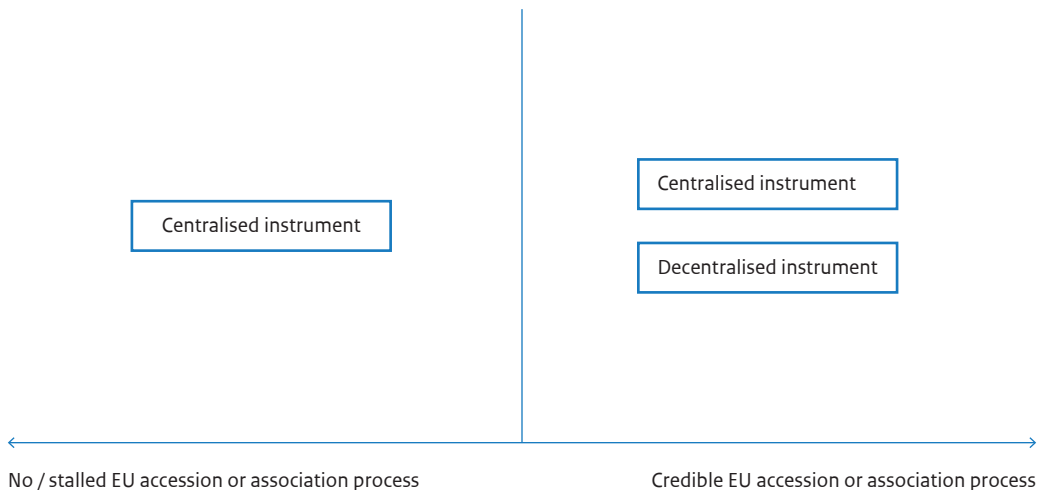
The relevance of the centralised instrument, which targets government institutions and involves government-to-government cooperation through an implementing organisation acting as an intermediary (see Figure x), is highest in a context where there is a credible EU accession or association process. A credible offer from the EU will facilitate buy-in from the programme countries' authorities and is likely to increase local ownership of Matra projects. In such contexts, Matra has inherent value as its thematic focus will be linked to such efforts. The beneficiaries interviewed are well aware of the benefits that Matra's centralised projects offer, particularly in demonstrating their commitment to the Copenhagen criteria or international norms and standards in terms of rule of law.[74]

70   Bruegel, *Ukraine's path to European Union membership and its long-term implications* [website], https://www.bruegel.org/policy-brief/ukraines-path-european-union-membership-and-its-long-term-implications, (accessed 24 October 2024).

71   European Union, *Accession criteria (Copenhagen criteria)* [website], https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/accession-criteria-copenhagen-criteria.html, (accessed 24 October 2024).

72   European Commission, *Chapters of the acquis* [website], https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/conditions-membership/chapters-acquis_en, (accessed 24 October 2024).

73   Interview with expert.

74   Interviews with beneficiaries.

The decentralised instrument is less affected by changing contexts and can be used more flexibly. In a context where a credible EU accession or association process is on the table, the instrument can be used both to support local authorities and to develop an open civil society that can comment on the process. In a less permissive context, the decentralised instrument can be used to keep civil society afloat in a shrinking space for critical thinking. As such, the decentralised instrument is more 'immune' to a changing political context and retains its relevance. If a programme country's progress towards accession stalls, or if the conditions for implementing rule of law programming change from favourable to non-permissive, the decentralised instrument still allows for programming to continue. This confirms the assumption in Matra's theory of change that the programme as a whole can remain relevant in a changing context, albeit not with the full range of instruments at its disposal.

3.3   Conclusion

The centralised instrument is less demand-driven than the decentralised instrument. The design of the project criteria and the limited number of available implementers means that the specific organisational focus of implementers may become a driving factor in the focus of the projects, rather than a solid needs analysis. This does not mean that the projects fail to respond to the needs of local authorities – several successful projects were identified in this regard – but rather that planning is driven by the implementer rather than being initiated by the beneficiary. This may reduce the relevance of the centralised instrument. The decentralised instrument, which is directly overseen in-country by embassies, is closer to local needs and therefore more likely to be demand-driven. Its relevance is therefore higher.

Such gaps identified by the EU often fuel the domestic policy agenda, as many Matra programme countries have aspirations to join or associate with the EU. As such, EU criteria can become a driving factor for local requests for assistance. The relevance of both Matra instruments remains high in programme countries that are seeking closer ties with the EU, since countries with accession or association ambitions are likely to underwrite EU recommendations for reform and instruments' thematic priorities partially align with those of EU accession criteria. In contexts where there is no credible accession of association offer, or where such offers are significantly less viable, the relevance of the centralised instrument is much lower.

4 Coherence

This chapter examines the coherence of the centralised and decentralised instruments.[75] The first part looks at the internal coherence of the two instruments, both in relation to each other and to other Dutch funds active in the same field. The programme is also assessed in terms of its broader internal coherence with the policies and institutional priorities of the involved stakeholders. The second part analyses the external coherence of the instruments, i.e. in relation to other donors present in the countries covered by the Matra programme.

4.1 Internal coherence

Internal coherence within the Matra programme

There is a general lack of coordination between the centralised and decentralised instruments. The involvement of Dutch embassies in centralised projects is limited to an advisory role for the DEU in the application process. Moreover, the exchange of information on the progress of projects is limited to debriefings by Dutch implementing organisations during field visits. Consequently, embassy staff tend to have limited or no knowledge of the centralised projects being implemented in their respective countries.

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[75] Following the OECD DAC definition of coherence this evaluation differentiates between internal and external coherence. See OECD Library, *Understanding the six criteria: Definitions, elements for analysis and key challenges* [website], https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/543e84ed-en/1/3/4/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/543e84ed-en&_csp_=535d2f2a848b7727d35502d7f36e4885&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=book, (accessed 24 October 2024).

Similarly, knowledge of the decentralised instrument in The Hague is limited. Requests for information and progress reports on decentralised projects by DEU are often ad hoc and tend to be linked to the preparation of working visits to Matra programme countries or parliamentary debates. Similarly, Dutch implementers of centralised projects are unaware of the embassy's decentralised project portfolio.

As a result of the lack of information sharing, centralised and decentralised projects remain in silos, hindering the possibility of aligning approaches and finding complementarities between the two instruments. This limited alignment between the two instruments is a missed opportunity: centralised projects, some of which are characterised by a limited presence on the ground, could, for instance, benefit from more local civil society involvement, which could be facilitated by Dutch embassies. Conversely, some decentralised projects could benefit from Dutch expertise in the rule of law to increase their reach and credibility with local government institutions. Furthermore, both instruments could be used more strategically, with the flexible and small-scale decentralised instrument identifying funding priorities for the larger centralised instrument. Such strategic steering did not take place during the evaluation period. The disconnect between the two instruments therefore hinders mutual learning within the Matra programme as a whole, as the programme fails to facilitate the exchange of valuable best practices.

Other Dutch funding instruments in the Matra countries

In the various Matra countries, a number of other Dutch funding mechanisms are partially operational on themes similar to those of Matra.[76] Some of these instruments – such as the centralised Stability Fund – are managed by the MFA in The Hague, whereas decentralised funds are managed by Dutch embassies. The Human Rights Fund, like Matra, has both a centralised and decentralised component. Graph 6 shows the financial weight of both Matra instruments compared to the other main Dutch financing instruments in the 10 programme countries that are the focus of this evaluation. Matra typically provides over half of the funding disbursed in the 10 programme countries. (Note: The shift in relative weight since 2022 is mainly attributable to a significant increase in disbursements from the Stability Fund to Ukraine since 2022, and is not caused by a decrease in Matra funding.)[77]

Graph 6: *Disbursements from similar Dutch funds in 10 Matra programme countries*
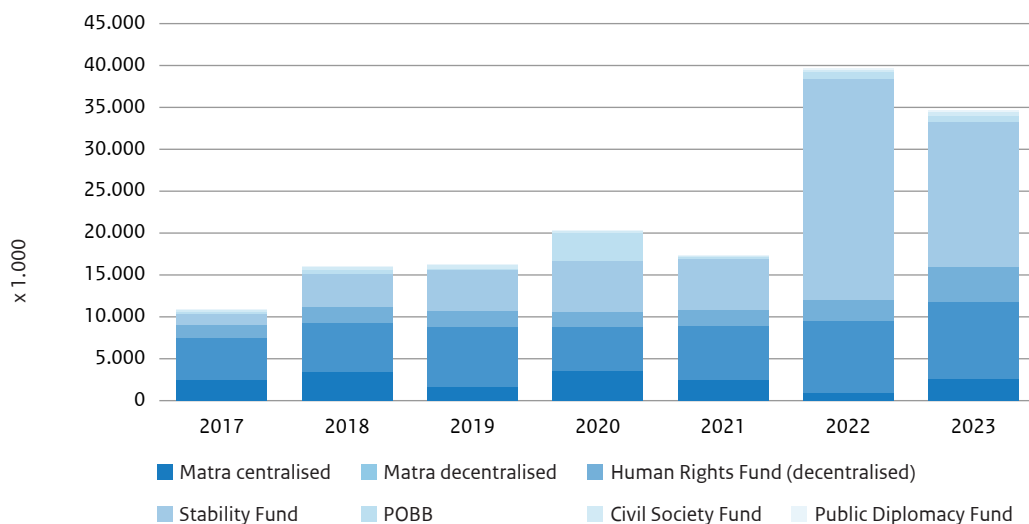
76 The comparison in graph 6 takes into account funds that focus either on (aspects of) rule of law and democratisation, or with the specific purpose of enhancing bilateral relations or the image of the Netherlands abroad.
77 Ukraine accounts for over 90% of the Stability Fund's disbursements to all Matra programme countries.

There is a slight overlap between the Matra and the Stability Fund in terms of mediation and cohesion issues, although in practice the difference between the two programmes is clear.[78] Rather, the two funds are said to complement each other: the Stability Fund contributes to stability and security issues, after which Matra is used to help establish and enforce the rule of law and democratic processes in a programme country.[79] Moreover, given the differences in budgets, the Stability Fund offers more funding opportunities, and has therefore also been used by embassies to scale up decentralised Matra initiatives, as was the case in Ukraine.[80]

No centralised Human Rights Fund projects were financed in the Matra countries during the evaluation period. The decentralised Human Rights Fund shows some overlap with Matra in terms of funding priorities.[81] This is particularly the case for projects dealing with democratisation, media and human rights.[82] At the embassy level, both funds are used interchangeably to finance human rights project proposals, with some of the projects that were not funded by the (smaller) Human Rights Fund being offered financing through the Matra decentralised instrument. Thus, the overlap does not lead to a duplication of efforts, but rather to a process in which both funds are used for the same purpose. This means that the same project can be funded from two different funds, and that a choice is made between the eligible funds. The latter is also confirmed by the tendency of some embassies to issue joint calls for proposals, giving local NGOs the opportunity to submit project proposals for funding under both Matra and the decentralised Human Rights Fund.[83] In these joint calls, embassies point to the different scope and priorities of the two funds, but also to their complementarity and to the flexibility they have within their budgets to use both funds as they see fit.[84] In this sense, the decentralised Matra instrument and the decentralised Human Rights Fund are not seen as similar funds, but rather as partially adjacent funds, which allows embassies to enjoy a certain degree of freedom in transferring project proposals between the funds.[85] Moreover, given the shorter duration of projects financed by the Human Rights Fund and its smaller overall budget, the decentralised Matra instrument is sometimes used to scale up certain human rights projects that are at the core of Matra projects.[86]

With regard to the decentralised Public Diplomacy Fund, no overlap was found with the Matra programme.[87] The fund mainly aims to contribute to a positive image of the Netherlands abroad and to use soft power to achieve better relations between the Netherlands and the programme countries, which is a different approach from the politically sensitive projects financed by Matra and their often critical stance.[88] The last decentralised fund active in the same field as Matra was the Accountability Fund (2016-2020),[89] which was rebranded as the Civil Society Fund in 2020. The Civil Society Fund seeks to help local NGOs contribute to public debate in society on sensitive issues and to support government

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78 Interviews with MFA staff, embassy staff and project implementers.
79 Interviews with MFA staff and project implementers.
80 Interviews with embassy staff.
81 Interviews with MFA staff and embassy staff.
82 Interviews with MFA staff and embassy staff.
83 Interviews with MFA staff.
84 Interviews with embassy staff.
85 Interviews with embassy staff.
86 Interviews with embassy staff.
87 The Public Diplomacy Fund has a similar objective to the second objective of Matra, which is to strengthen bilateral relations.
88 Interviews with embassy staff.
89 The Accountability Fund was part of the Dialogue and Dissent Framework (2016-2020), which aimed to strengthen the lobbying and advocacy capacities of NGOs in programme countries. Government of the Netherlands, *"Dialogue and Dissent". Strategic partnerships for 'lobby and advocacy'* [website], https://www.government.nl/topics/grant-programmes/dialogue-and-dissent-strategic-partnerships-for-lobby-and-advocacy, (accessed 24 October 2024).

action and/or accountability.[90] While in theory the objective of this fund seems to overlap somewhat with the decentralised Matra instrument, as it also encourages the involvement of civil society, in practice no overlap was found due to the specific funding conditions of the Civil Society Fund.[91]

The Foreign Policy Support Programme (POBB) is a fund that finances a broad spectrum of activities that 'support the overall objectives of Dutch foreign policy'.[92] Some of its thematic priorities show significant overlap with the Matra programme. They include both the improvement of bilateral relations and, among other more security-oriented objectives, support for democratisation and good governance and international cooperation in the area of law and justice. Project selection is based on the disqualifying feature that initiatives already funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are not eligible for POBB funding.[93] This means that, in theory, overlap between Matra projects and POBB-financed projects is avoided. However, caution should be exercised, as the limited flow of information on decentralised projects to the ministry's departments in The Hague may result in insufficient information being available to continuously exclude overlaps.

Although there is some overlap, particularly with the Human Rights Fund and to a lesser extent with the Stability Fund, the ultimate goals of the various funds are mostly different. They have partly different implementation modalities and serve different political purposes. The distinguishing feature of Matra centralised is its clear focus on sharing Dutch expertise on rule of law and democratisation. This is unique in the context of other Dutch funds. Moreover, there can be overlap in cooperation with local NGOs in the programme countries, sometimes in working with the same organisation (as is the case in Ukraine for Matra centralised and the Stability Fund), and sometimes in the thin lines of different focus areas, as can be the case in supporting media organisations, democratisation, human rights or LGBTI issues.

Broader aspects of internal coherence

In addition to centralised-decentralised coordination and potential overlaps with other Dutch funds, several broader observations can be made with regard to internal coherence. First, in a general sense, the Matra programme is coherent with the ambition of the Netherlands to signal involvement in its programme countries. The gradual withdrawal since the 2010s of Dutch ODA funding in Eastern European countries meant that the Netherlands was no longer as active and present as during the 1990s and 2000s. As the Netherlands reduced its presence in the eastern neighbourhood by decreasing ODA funding, the Matra programme filled this gap – with a much smaller financial commitment – by providing non-ODA assistance to the region. As such, it signals the continuation of a certain level of commitment to the region, which is relevant and beneficial for bilateral relations between the Netherlands and the countries in the region.[94] This political coherence is also reflected at the policy level. The Matra programme is part of the ministry's security and stability policy. The policy aims to promote security and stability through targeted bilateral and multilateral cooperation and to support democratic transition in priority regions.[95]

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[90] The Civil Society Fund was part of the Strengthening Civil Society policy framework, which aimed to support civil society organisations to contribute to reducing inequality, combating corruption and strengthening the voice of citizens to stand up for their rights. Government of the Netherlands, *Policy Framework Strengthening Civil Society* [website], https://www.government.nl/documents/policy-notes/2019/11/28/policy-framework-strengthening-civil-society, (accessed 24 October 2024).

[91] Armenia benefited in 2022-2023 from a project under the Civil Society Fund, focusing on the prevention of hate speech for EUR 280,000.

[92] Overheid.nl, *Beleidsvoornemen Programma Ondersteuning Buitenlands Beleid (POBB)* [website], https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0014414/2002-12-22#:~:text=Het%20programma%20Ondersteuning%20Buitenlands%20Beleid%20(POBB)%20richt%20zich%20op%20de,van%20het%20Nederlands%20buitenlands%20beleid, (accessed 24 October 2024).

[93] Interview with MFA staff.

[94] Read more about enhancing bilateral relations through the Matra programme in Chapter 3 on effectiveness.

[95] Rijksoverheid, Besluit en beleidskader voor subsidie NFRP-Matra-programma 'Overheid tot overheid' 2020-2024 [website], https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/besluiten/2019/09/13/besluit-en-beleidskader-verlening-subsidie-nfrp-matra-programma-overheid-tot-overheid-2020-2024, (accessed on 24 October 2024).

The emphasis on rule of law, democratisation and corruption is consistent with the Netherlands' position in debates on enlargement (in the Western Balkans) and neighbourhood relations (the Eastern Partnership).[96] As such, the Matra programme is in line with Dutch foreign policy priorities in the region.

Second, despite this broad convergence of goals, there are some challenges in embedding the programmatic aspects of the Matra programme in the political nature of the involved department. The focus of DEU (which is responsible for implementing the Matra programme) is inherently political rather than programmatic. As a result, limited resources have been allocated to monitoring project implementation.[97] Over the course of 2023, most of the project management was handed over to the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO). While outsourcing has increased the available capacity for direct project management, it has also increased the distance of the department to projects and resulted in missed opportunities for strategic or political oversight.

Third, Matra, and in particular the decentralised instrument, can reinforce the political work of the embassies and therefore may align well with the political priorities of the diplomatic network. Embassy staff stress the importance of small and flexible initiatives for their political work. Other donors confirm Matra has an advantage over their often less flexible funding instruments in supporting an embassy's positioning. This observation is less valid for centralised projects, as there is a lack of exchange of information on centralised projects with Dutch embassies. This can even be problematic, such as in the rare case where a centralised Matra project activity ran counter to the position of the Dutch embassy.[98]

Finally, coherence with the institutional priorities of the involved (semi)governmental institutions in centralised projects is not always on the mark. Respondents from involved institutions indicate that the (geographical and thematic) scope of Matra projects does not always coincide with the institutions' own priorities. As described in the previous chapter, requests for assistance from the programme countries' authorities are not always clearly defined, which means that Dutch semi-governmental organisations are sometimes asked to simply 'do something'.[99] The added value for these institutions in participating in Matra projects is therefore sometimes unclear. This is further compounded by staff shortages in some of these institutions, making it difficult to find the necessary experts for centralised Matra projects. As a result, there is frequent rotation of experts or, in some cases, a reliance on retired experts to fill the gaps.[100]

4.2   External coherence

This section discusses the consistency of the reviewed projects with the interventions of other donors. It also outlines the extent to which projects are implemented in coordination with other donors.

The relative weight of Dutch spending in Matra programme countries
Matra operates among several other donors and donor organisations that focus on rule of law and democratisation. The European Union is the largest donor in most Matra programme countries. Apart from being the largest donor, the EU is a key diplomatic player in Matra countries, helping governments to comply with the European rules and regulations, including on rule of law and democratisation, as a precondition for potential EU membership or closer cooperation. Other prominent multilateral donors that fund topics similar to Matra are the United Nations, the World Bank and, to a lesser extent, the

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[96]   'At the same time, the Netherlands feels that countries should not be allowed to join until they meet all conditions. This means, for example, that candidate countries must fully respect the rule of law, human rights (including the rights of minorities) and democratic principles.' Government of the Netherlands, *The Netherlands and developments within the European Union (EU)* [website], https://www.government.nl/topics/european-union/the-netherlands-and-developments-within-the-eu#:~:text=At%20the%20same%20time%2C%20the,of%20minorities)%20and%20democratic%20principles, (accessed 24 October 2024).

[97]   During the evaluation period, only 0.5 FTE were allocated to the management of the Matra programme.

[98]   Interviews with MFA staff.

[99]   Interview with project implementer.

[100] Interview with project implementer.

Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).[101] In addition to these multilateral donors, the donor landscape includes a number of bilateral donors with similar approaches and programmes on themes similar to those of Matra. The most prominent donors are the United States, Sweden, Switzerland and Germany. The United States, through USAID, is the second-largest donor organisation in the Matra programme countries.[102]

Graph 7: *Top 5 donors on rule of law and democratisation themes in 10 Matra programme countries*[103]
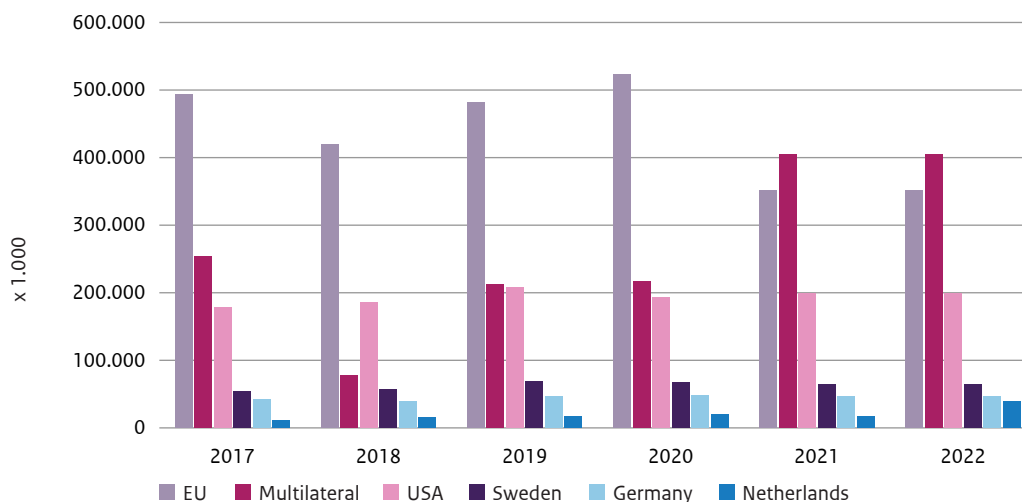
Graph 7 illustrates the relative weight of disbursed funding on government and civil society based on data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development/Development Assistance Committee (OECD/DAC) in the 10 Matra programme countries that this evaluation focuses on. For the Netherlands, this includes not only Matra centralised and decentralised funding but also similar funds that are discussed in more detail in section 2.2. of this chapter. It is clear that the Netherlands is a relatively small donor compared to other donors (Graph 7). However, compared to other European countries (not all of which are shown on the graph), the Netherlands ranks fifth. It can thus be considered a medium-sized donor in its peer group.

Nevertheless, the amounts disbursed by the Netherlands cover only a small part of the total funding made available to these countries for rule of law and democratisation. During the evaluation period, Dutch spending in those sectors accounted for an average of 0.72% of total donor spending. If only Matra's centralised and decentralised spending are taken into account, the share even drops to 0.31%.

Matra's complementarity with other donors

The assumptions behind the Matra programme are that it should 'complement EU policies' and that its projects have a 'niche function' and can act as an 'incubator' for projects of larger donors. Following this logic, Matra projects would seek out specific opportunities where other donors are not yet present,

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[101] The work of the Council of Europe is dedicated to assisting national authorities in programme countries to continue to bring national legislation, institutional practices and policies fully into line with their obligations stemming from their Council of Europe membership. The Council of Europe mainly provides technical assistance rather than funding. Like the Council of Europe, the work of the OSCE aims to help host countries implement their OSCE commitments and build local capacity through concrete projects.
[102] USAID's spending in all Matra programme countries in fiscal year 2020 amounted to approximately USD 685 million.
[103] The data in this graph are based on ODA and OOF disbursements reported to the OECD under the sectors 'government and civil society, general' and 'social dialogue', which broadly cover the topics covered by the centralised and decentralised Matra instruments.

or where a Matra project can fulfil a pilot function that can later be taken up by a larger donor. These assumptions are based on the condition that a sufficient level of donor coordination is present in the programme countries. Otherwise, a niche or incubator function would not be possible.

However, the evidence of functioning donor coordination in Matra programme countries is not convincing. Respondents from embassies in Matra programme countries often indicate that donor coordination is sub-optimal at best. Government-led donor coordination mechanisms formally exist in many of the Matra countries and are often facilitated by UN agencies or the World Bank, as is the case in Albania and Armenia.[104] Respondents in several Matra countries indicate that government-led donor coordination meetings rarely take place in practice, and that a strategic discussion of priorities and donor coordination is often lacking.[105] To illustrate this, respondents in Albania pointed out that the government seems to have lost interest in donor coordination in recent years and that the current structure is neither very clear nor working well.[106] Instead, donors coordinate among themselves, often within the framework of EU Member States[107] or like-minded partners, although this approach does not always function efficiently.[108] For example, the EU delegation did not receive a timely invitation to a round-table on EU accession as part of a decentralised project.

The donors interviewed in the Matra programme countries indicate that they are well aware of Matra's activities and remit, but mostly as a result of bilateral contacts rather than formal donor coordination.[109] Overlap is avoided by the Dutch implementing organisations themselves. Due to their limited presence in the programme countries, they are not always successful in avoiding the duplication of existing efforts. However, if overlaps are identified during project implementation, the centralised projects are flexible enough to change course or link up with existing efforts by other donors. For example, the PRIS II project in Albania complements broader EU efforts to reform the prison system.[110] In close cooperation with the beneficiaries, the project has been modified to prevent overlap.[111] The much larger EU intervention is implemented at sector level and addresses a broad range of issues, whereas the PRIS II project targets a specific niche within the sector, namely a particular juvenile institute. A similar observation can be made about the AISPIRA project, which complements (and deepens) the broader efforts of Council of Europe and EU-funded projects.[112]

Not every centralised project focuses on a niche sector. For example, the BESP project actively sought to follow up on an earlier GIZ-financed project.[113] Nonetheless, Matra's niche-seeking behaviour has been observed in many other Matra countries and has proven to be a successful strategy for positioning relatively low-budget Matra centralised projects in a crowded donor space.[114] Accordingly, the evaluation did not find major signs of overlap between the examined projects.

At the decentralised level, coordination with other partners is more direct, as the Dutch embassies directly oversee the process of project selection and implementation. However, there are factors that make coordination difficult. The small size of projects and the swift and ad hoc nature of project development (which does not always happen through formal calls for proposals) mean that formal coordination mechanisms are often not suitable platforms for exchange. In addition, in some Matra

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104 Interviews with MFA staff, embassy staff and project implementers.
105 Interviews with embassy staff.
106 Interviews with embassy staff and donors.
107 Interviews with embassy staff and project implementers.
108 Interviews with embassy staff.
109 Interviews with donors.
110 Netherlands Helsinki Committee, *Towards a Safe, Stimulating and Rehabilitative Prison Environment for Children and Juveniles in Conflict with the Law in Albania, Final Report PRIS II* (Unpublished, 2023).
111 Interview with beneficiary.
112 Interviews with beneficiaries and expert.
113 Interview with project implementer.
114 One example where the Netherlands has a clear profile and niche in both Albania and Armenia is in the area of probation, where few other donors have capacity in or focus. Interviews with project implementers and embassy staff.

countries, particularly those where Western embassies have shown increased interest in engagement, donor competition to fund a still maturing civil society can strain coordination and tend to result in initiatives not being widely shared, even among like-minded partners.[115]

There seems to be a general lack of coordination efforts among the reviewed decentralised projects, which is acknowledged by both Dutch embassies and respondents representing other major donors.[116] Where coordination does take place, it is mostly ad hoc and based on regular contacts with like-minded partner countries or personal connections. The specific focus on civil society, the short turnaround time between proposal and implementation, and the willingness to take risks and fund projects that other donors might shy away from make the decentralised instrument stand out and therefore less likely to duplicate the efforts of other international actors.[117] In addition, several cases have been observed where decentralised Matra projects have been scaled up into larger projects by other donors, and interviewed donors with larger funds confirm their interest in continuing funding in cases where Matra financing is discontinued.[118] The opposite situation, where a Matra project is the first to provide financing for a specific initiative, which later receives follow-up funding from other donors, was observed several times during the evaluation period.[119] In these cases, too, there was no significant overlap between the reviewed projects .

4.3   Conclusion

In terms of internal coherence, coordination between the centralised and decentralised instruments is largely lacking and both instruments therefore operate in silos. This leaves room for improvement and opportunities to strategically align the use of both instruments. Overlap with other Dutch funds is most significant at the thematic level with the decentralised human rights instrument, but no concrete overlap was found at the project level. At the policy level, Matra is broadly coherent with Dutch foreign policy goals in the region and can reinforce the political work of the embassies. However, the programme sometimes fails to link up with the institutional priorities of the Dutch (semi)governmental institutions that are involved in centralised project implementation. In terms of external coherence, this evaluation finds that the centralised and decentralised instruments are coherent with most other donors' efforts. They occupy a small but specific niche in a crowded donor landscape in Matra donor countries.

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[115] Interviews with donors and embassy staff.
[116] Interviews with donors.
[117] Interviews with project implementers and beneficiaries.
[118] For example, Sweden took over a parliamentary monitoring project in Albania that was funded by Matra at an earlier stage. Similarly, the UK took over a media partner and project from Matra in Albania. In Armenia, USAID stepped in with additional funding after Matra decentralised projects on both local governance and support of Armenia's constitutional court. Interviews with embassy staff, project implementers and donors.
[119] Interviews with beneficiaries, project implementers, MFA and embassy staff.

5 Effectiveness

This chapter first discusses the effectiveness in relation to objective I of the Matra programme, i.e. the programme's contribution to transformation in terms of rule of law and democratisation. The effectiveness of objective I is evaluated in terms of the projects' plausible contribution to the programme's objective and the effectiveness of the instruments used. The chapter also tests the assumptions of the reconstructed theory of change that can be applied to the effectiveness of the Matra programme.[120]

The chapter begins with the effectiveness of the three centralised projects in focus, and then discusses the approach of the centralised instrument in terms of the strengths and weaknesses of the instruments. The same structure is used for the four decentralised projects in focus and the decentralised instrument. The regional approach used by both the centralised and decentralised instruments is then discussed. This section concludes with the projects' overall contribution to societal transformation.

The second part of this chapter assesses Matra's contribution to objective II, namely the strengthening of bilateral relations between the Netherlands and the programme countries. First, a better understanding of 'strengthened bilateral relations' is established. Second, the plausible contribution of Matra to the enhancement of bilateral relations is discussed.[121]

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[120] Matra's effectiveness is enhanced by a regional and country-specific approach; Matra instruments are the right way to transfer the Dutch added value on democratisation, rule of law and human rights.

[121] As objective II is not monitored at the project level, it will not be assessed at that level.

The chapter concludes with a broader reflection on the objectives of the Matra programme and their overall attainability.

5.1 Objective I: Societal transformation

Effectiveness of centralised projects in focus

Nearly all three of the centralised projects reviewed achieved their planned outputs and contributed to the anticipated short-term outcomes, although not always to the extent intended.[122] Short-term outcomes at the project level for the centralised instrument included skills and knowledge acquisition, enhanced staff capacity, the development of monitoring and control mechanisms, the integration of new working methods, and public awareness campaigns in Albania and Armenia. Accordingly, the projects mainly led to changes within the organisations or individuals directly involved, as illustrated by the example of the appointment of the first female head of a penitentiary institution in Armenia. However, the degree to which outcomes are leveraged depends on various other factors. In addition, some of the centralised projects lack a monitoring framework, making it difficult to trace how specific outputs may have contributed to higher-level outcomes.[123] In addition, these projects do not discuss the changes or effects that may have occurred as a result of these outputs.[124]

Towards a Safe, Stimulating and Rehabilitative Prison Environment for Children and Juveniles in Conflict with the Law in Albania – PRIS II

In 2017, the Albanian parliament approved the Criminal Justice Code for Minors, promoting the reintegration of minors in conflict with the law.[125] Ever since, Albania has made progress in the use of alternatives to detention and probation services for juvenile offenders.[126] The PRIS II project aimed to increase the chances of successful reintegration of juvenile detainees into society by improving the capacity and working methods of practitioners working with juveniles in correctional facilities and by institutionalising them.[127]

The outputs of PRIS II consisted of skills and knowledge acquisition in the form of training and training-of-trainers sessions, the integration of new working methods[128] into the standard training of penitentiary staff working with juveniles, and the production of booklets providing a basic overview of the correctional legal framework of the prison system, distributed in 62 municipalities.[129] Moreover, in terms of short-term outcomes, the newly introduced methodologies had a spill-over effect on other parts of the justice chain in Albania, including the training of correctional staff from adult prisons and the integration of other new working methods[130] by staff from the Crime Prevention Centre of the Ministry

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[122] For instance, AISPIRA had difficulty engaging beneficiaries, which led to a complete shift in focus. As a result, the project had to develop a small-scale pilot aimed at improving cooperation between the prison and probation services in one area, rather than aiming for a system-wide change.

[123] Marjolein Kok, *Towards a Safe, Stimulating and Rehabilitative Prison Environment for Children and Juveniles in Conflict with the Law in Albania*, *End Evaluation Report Pris II* (Unpublished, 28 February 2023), p. 25.

[124] Kok, *End Evaluation Report Pris II*, p25.

[125] The act also protects the rights of minors when they are witnesses and/or victims of criminal acts. "Juvenile Crimes and the Need for Support in Their Reintegration," *Euronews Albania*, accessed September 9 2024, https://euronews.al/en/juvenile-crimes-and-the-need-for-support-in-their-reintegration/.

[126] European Commission, *Report on Albania: 2023 Country Report*, SWD(2023) 690 final, 2023, accessed 24 October 2024, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/ea0a4b05-683f-4b9c-b7ff-4615a5fffd0b_en?filename=SWD_2023_690%20Albania%20report.pdf, p. 5.

[127] Netherlands Helsinki Committee, *Towards a Safe, Stimulating and Rehabilitative Prison Environment for Children and Juveniles in Conflict with the Law in Albania*, *Final Report PRIS II* (Unpublished, 2023).

[128] This included the TOPS! method. TOPS! is a customised working method designed to train correctional staff in teaching juveniles responsibility and anger management.

[129] These booklets were produced as a result of a knowledge gap that came to light during roundtable sessions and aimed to raise awareness of due process Of the 62 municipalities, more than a third committed to actively use these booklets in their daily work. Interviews with project implementers and beneficiaries. NHC, *Final Report PRIS II* (Unpublished, 2023), p. 7. Kok, *End Evaluation Report Pris II*, p. 13.

[130] COPOSO stands for 'Contributing Positively to Society', and refers to an experience-based method for juvenile (ex-) detainees aimed at successful reintegration through urban arts and sports.

of Justice.[131] In addition, of the 22 juveniles released from the Institution for the Detention of Minors in Kavajë in 2023, 2 individuals reoffended, another 2 emigrated, and the remaining 18 were rehabilitated and successfully reintegrated. While this is an increase in the number of successfully rehabilitated individuals compared to previous years, the institute has limited housing, which means that many juveniles have to be integrated by the community rather than by professionals.[132]

Moreover, although not immediately envisaged, anecdotal evidence suggests that PRIS II has indirectly contributed to two unintended outcomes.[133] PRIS II, as one of a limited number of initiatives in this field, has played a significant role in generating increased interest and engagement by the Albanian government, as shown by the government's commitment to increase funding for the field and invest in a rehabilitation and reintegration institute for juveniles in conflict with the law.[134] However, although the project contributed to a greater emphasis on addressing the needs of juveniles in the prison sector,[135] the integration of outcomes and the institutionalisation of methods remain highly dependent on the commitment of the beneficiaries. The final evaluation of the project reported that stakeholder commitment could have been enhanced if key stakeholders had been involved from the beginning and throughout the project.[136]

The Balkans Enforcement Strengthening project in Albania – BESp

In Albania, since 2005, enforcement procedures have been transferred from the jurisdiction of the courts to private enforcement agents in an attempt to increase the efficiency of enforcement systems.[137] Years later, the capacity of the administrative court system remains limited, leading to a growing backlog and an increased need for bailiffs.[138] The BESp project seeks to strengthen the private enforcement agents (PEA)[139] system by enhancing agents' capacities, improving monitoring and control, and ultimately contributing to an increase in the transparency of the judicial chain of enforcement systems.[140] In terms of outputs, BESp focuses on developing tools to stimulate monitoring and control mechanisms, including an analysis of the enforcement law and a regulatory framework, followed by a round-table with representatives of the Ministry of Justice, judges and enforcement agents in Albania.[141] BESp also assisted the National Chamber of Private Bailiffs in raising public awareness of enforcement through a public campaign.[142] Furthermore, BESp devoted considerable attention to promoting the HCCH 2019 Judgments Convention.[143] This included organising a regional conference as well as hosting several meetings and round-tables with the participation of key legal experts.[144] A notable outcome of the

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[131] Interview with project implementer. NHC, *Final Report PRIS II* (Unpublished, 2023), p. 7.

[132] Interviews with beneficiaries; NHC, *Final Report PRIS II* (Unpublished, 2023), p. 28.

[133] Anecdotal evidence gathered during field visits to beneficiaries and local project implementers.

[134] The government allocated EUR 37 million for the second rehabilitation strategy, compared to 5-6 million for the first strategy. Interview with beneficiary.

[135] Interviews with project implementers and beneficiaries. Kok, *End Evaluation Report Pris II,* p. 25.

[136] Kok, *End Evaluation Report Pris II,* p25.

[137] Center for International Legal Cooperation, *Balkans Enforcement Strenghtening Project, Progress report year 3* (Unpublished, 30 November 2023), p. 5.

[138] European Commission, *Report on Albania: 2023 Country Report*, SWD(2023) 690 final, 2023, accessed 24 October 2024, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/ea0a4b05-683f-4b9c-b7ff-4615a5fffd0b_en?filename=SWD_2023_690%20Albania%20report.pdf, p. 17.

[139] A private enforcement agent, also known as a bailiff or judicial officer, is responsible for enforcing court orders and judgments.

[140] CILC, *Project Proposal* (Unpublished, 20 February 2020), p. 5.

[141] Interviews with project implementers. Center for International Legal Cooperation, *Balkans Enforcement Strenghtening Project, Progress report year 3* (Unpublished, 30 November 2023), p. 16.

[142] Interviews with project implementers. Center for International Legal Cooperation, *Balkans Enforcement Strenghtening Project, Progress report year 3* (Unpublished, 30 November 2023), p. 15.

[143] "Judgments," *Hague Conference on Private International Law,* https://www.hcch.net/en/instruments/conventions/specialised-sections/judgments (accessed 24 October 2024).

[144] Interviews with project implementers.

project was the signing of the Convention of 2 July 2019 on the Recognition and Enforcement of Foreign Judgments in Civil or Commercial Matters on 13 September 2024, making Albania a Contracting Party to 16 HCCH Conventions and instruments.[145]

However, the project has been negatively affected by a frequent turnover of staff and a general lack of capacity.[146] More specifically, internal communication and cooperation with the National Chamber of Private Bailiffs proved more challenging in practice than anticipated.[147] In addition, there was a difference in views on enforcement between the National Chamber of Private Bailiffs and the Ministry of Justice, which hampered the progress of the project.[148]

Assistance in Implementing the Strategy of the Penal System in the Republic of Armenia – AISPIRA
In 2019, the government of Armenia adopted the Strategy for the Penitentiary and Probation Field (2019-2023). This strategy contained various priorities, including ensuring a zero-tolerance policy towards criminal subculture, optimising penitentiary facilities and equipping probation services.[149] AISPIRA's specific aim is to help Armenia work towards a more rehabilitative penal system. Outputs include guidelines and curricula for the training centre of the Ministry of Justice, a three-day training course on restorative justice and a training of trainers for all staff, which is yet to take place.[150] In addition to these outputs, a study visit to Estonia[151] was provided, as the Estonian prison system had previously experienced similar issues with criminal subcultures.[152] In addition, mediation training was introduced at the request of prison staff.[153]

Anecdotal evidence suggests a modest change in thinking and approach to managing female prisons in Armenia.[154] Prisons in Armenia are usually managed by male staff and managers, which is at odds with the gender-specific needs of women and with international standards.[155] The AISPIRA project's emphasis on these standards resulted in the appointment of a female head of the Abovyan penitentiary institution, Armenia's only prison for females.[156]

Nevertheless, the project had to be redesigned several times during project implementation. The knowledge base proved insufficient for the AISPIRA project to build on, making it difficult to define beneficiaries' needs and to use the project to their advantage.[157] Moreover, AISPIRA suffered from a lack of buy-in from the Armenian Ministry of Justice, resulting in a mismatch between the ambitious objectives and the limited commitment demonstrated by beneficiaries. The project's mid-term review suggests that the lack of commitment to contribute to the reform of the criminal sanctions system may have been due to the Ministry of Justice's desire to comply with the wishes of European donors, rather

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[145] The Judgments Convention is an international agreement for a standardised global framework for recognising and enforcing foreign judgments. ALBUO2, UO15. "The 2023 Judicial Dialogue on the Hague Conventions," *Hague Conference on Private International Law*, https://www.hcch.net/en/news-archive/details/?varevent=1003 (accessed 24 October 2024).

[146] CILC, *Project Proposal* (Unpublished, 20 February 2020), p. 6.

[147] Interviews with project implementers.

[148] Interviews with project implementers.

[149] "New Penitentiary and Probation Strategy – Challenges and Solutions," *CSI*, https://www.csi.am/en/new-penitentiary-and-probation-strategy%E2%80%93-challenges-and-solutions (accessed 24 October 2024).

[150] Interviews with project implementers.

[151] The Netherlands still had Covid-19 restrictions in place at the time of the study visit. Therefore, Estonia was chosen as a comparative study for Armenia as it used to have similar issues with criminal subcultures.

[152] Currun Singh and Rosa Vane, AISPIRA PROJECT MID-TERM REVIEW (Unpublished, May 2023), p. 8. Participants who attended this working visit formed a working group on their return to exchange ideas on how to implement the acquired knowledge and experience gained during this trip. Interview with the beneficiary.

[153] Interviews with experts, beneficiaries, project implementers.

[154] Interviews with project implementers.

[155] Interviews with project implementers. United Nations, *Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders* (Bangkok Rules) (adopted 21 December 2010), A/RES/65/229.

[156] Interviews with project implementers.

[157] Interviews with project implementers.

than a genuine interest in establishing a sound probation system.[158] Such a finding reflects the general tendency of the programme country authorities described in the relevance chapter, and illustrates the difficulty of working in a genuinely demand-driven way when trying to ensure local ownership.

Effectiveness of the centralised instrument

Centralised projects focus on capacity building and transfer of relevant skills to different stakeholders in the rule of law sector. They are designed to provide the necessary expertise to strengthen local capacities in programme countries. Even though they have a relatively small budget compared to other foreign partners or donors, they still provide visible and concrete outputs through staff training and capacity building.

While such results are noteworthy, there tends to be a mismatch between the proposed intervention and the knowledge and skills available in programme countries.[159] This shortcoming is related to the supply-driven nature of centralised projects described in the relevance chapter. The weak sense of local ownership was a clear pitfall in the three centralised projects that were reviewed.[160] As a result, the assumptions and contextual analysis on which projects are based are sometimes off the mark, leading to difficulties in project implementation and completion. In some cases, this lack of ownership goes hand in hand with a lack of capacity and frequent staff turnover.[161] In other words, the programme country does not always have the capacity to provide the necessary support for the successful completion of a project.[162]

The weak sense of ownership and the mismatch between the intervention and the available knowledge of the target countries can be linked to the approach of Dutch NGOs that implement centralised projects. Dutch implementing organisations have a limited physical presence on the ground, which can hamper the ability to adapt quickly to changing circumstances, for instance when local parties show a lack of commitment.[163] Furthermore, implementers tend to replicate their good practices from one country to another without always taking into account the differences and nuances unique to each country.[164] Moreover, Dutch implementing organisations do not always maintain regular contact with embassies in programme countries during project implementation, which further complicates the link with local dynamics and sensitivities.

Effectiveness of decentralised projects in focus

All four decentralised projects reviewed achieved their planned outputs and contributed to the anticipated short-term outcomes.[165] Short-term outcomes at the project level for the decentralised instrument included informing policy discussions, promoting exchanges between governmental and non-governmental organisations, improving the capacity of selected media outlets, NGOs and election authorities in Albania, and improving communication and knowledge of the courts and involving selected communities in participatory decision-making in Armenia. Accordingly, similar to the centralised projects, short-term outcomes of the selected decentralised projects mainly led to changes within the organisations or individuals directly involved. In other words, while most of the intended short-term outcomes were achieved, no structural changes could be identified. Similar to centralised projects, decentralised projects lack monitoring as well as logical frameworks and therefore risk losing visibility of how outputs contribute to outcomes, making it difficult to assess progress or the effectiveness of interventions.

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158 Singh and Vane, AISPIRA, p11.
159 Interviews with project implementers, beneficiaries, MFA and embassy staff.
160 Interviews with project implementers and beneficiaries. Singh and Vane, AISPIRA, p9, 18 and 24.
161 Interviews with project implementers.
162 Interviews with project implementers, MFA staff and experts.
163 Interviews with project implementers and beneficiaries.
164 Interviews with project implementers and beneficiaries.
165 For instance, AISPIRA had difficulty engaging beneficiaries, which led to a complete shift in focus. As a result, the project had to develop a small-scale pilot aimed at improving cooperation between the prison and probation services in one area, rather than aiming for a system-wide change.

Improved Policy Debate and Accountability to Delivering on Fundamentals First, through the Establishment of Cluster One EU Negotiations Platform – C1-EU-NPA (Albania)

C1-EU-NPA aimed to improve policy debates while emphasising the strengthening of accountability and the importance of involving civil society organisations in the EU negotiation process in Albania. The outputs were formulated in line with EU recommendations on improving public communication on the EU accession process.[166] This included the production of 27 reports to date, with the support of experts, based on a domestic political perspective. These reports have been disseminated to various Albanian public institutions and have informed policy discussions and decision-making.[167] Moreover, a platform has been created to facilitate and encourage exchanges between governmental and non-governmental stakeholders, including civil society. C1-EU-NPA has organised consultations, workshops and dialogues to enhance the inclusiveness and democratic nature of the process. In addition, the project has generated several media appearances and various interviews, presenting policy documents and sharing opinions on the European integration process on Albanian television.[168]

Although some structures have been put in place to promote an enabling environment for civil society, the creation of a supportive environment for civil society is still largely dependent on funding from external donors.[169] Nonetheless, the project has been extended to a second phase.

Strengthening Elections' Transparency in Albania – SETA (Albania)

SETA supported the implementation of transparency and oversight mechanisms regarding campaign financing and the use of public resources in the 2021 parliamentary elections. The project produced a communication campaign in an attempt to inform the public about the provisions of the electoral code.[170] This resulted in an increase in denunciations from the public regarding the use of state resources during the election period compared to other election years, including 21 denunciations from NGOs and 18 reports from citizens.[171] Moreover, SETA monitoring reports were produced to serve as guidelines for electoral authorities, NGOs, media and students to strengthen their capacity to monitor the implementation of electoral reform.[172] The latter was also achieved by 'naming and shaming practices', and the training of 15 activists and 25 local journalists.[173] SETA also improved the capacity and use of transparency mechanisms by the Central Election Commission.[174] The project hosted two capacity building workshops for 50 CEC observers and auditors. Finally, SETA also provided an opportunity to educate voters about the use and misuse of state resources in the electoral process.[175]

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[166] European Commission, *Report on Albania: 2023 Country Report*, SWD, 690 final, 2023, accessed October 22, 2024, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/ea0a4b05-683f-4b9c-b7ff-4615a5fffd0b_en?filename=SWD_2023_690%20Albania%20report.pdf, p. 10.

[167] Interviews with project implementers and beneficiaries. Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance, *Improved Policy Debate and Accountability to Delivering on Fundamentals First, through the Establishment of Cluster One EU Negotiations Platform – Albania (C1-EU-NPA), Final report* (Unpublished, January 2024), p. 5 and p. 9.

[168] CSDG, *C1-EU-NPA Final report*, p. 8.

[169] European Commission, *Report on Albania: 2023 Country Report*, SWD, 690 final, 2023, accessed October 22, 2024, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/ea0a4b05-683f-4b9c-b7ff-4615a5fffd0b_en?filename=SWD_2023_690%20Albania%20report.pdf, p. 12.

[170] Of the 91 respondents, 76.4% confirmed that the information campaigns and the promotion of SETA's monitoring reports were their main source of information on the provisions of the electoral code related to the use of state resources. This campaign consisted of:
- sending an informative letter to 250 public institutions;
- distributing two informative posters (8,000 copies) and their placement at the entrance of more than 1,200 public institutions; and
- 4 informative video spots and 40,000 brochures widely distributed in public spaces across 7 targeted regions.

[171] Academy of Political Studies, *Final Narrative Report, Strengthening Elections' Transparency in Albania* (Unpublished, 2023), p. 2.

[172] Interviews with project implementers and beneficiaries. Academy of Political Studies, *Final Narrative Report, Strengthening Elections' Transparency in Albania* (Unpublished, 2023), p. 2.

[173] Interviews with project implementers.

[174] Interview with beneficiaries.

[175] Interviews with project implementers and beneficiaries.

However, while the Central Election Commission imposed sanctions on local administrators who misused state resources for campaign purposes, these were not enforced at the central level of the Albanian government.[176] This lack of accountability risks undermining short-term project outcomes, as citizens may be less inclined to report irregularities in a culture of impunity.

Support to the Institutional Reforms on the Constitutional Court (Armenia)

This project aims to improve the quality and primarily the visibility of constitutional justice administered by the Constitutional Court of Armenia. Outputs include developing the Court's methods and strategies, establishing ethics and integrity guidelines, providing professional training and improving communication with the public, NGOs, the media and the academic community.[177] Annual summer schools have been established, the first of which saw judges deliver lectures to law students from various Armenian universities, culminating in the distribution of certificates and educational materials. Moreover, a pioneering meeting with NGOs facilitated discussions on the role of the civil society sector in supporting the Court, including the potential for *amicus curiae* submissions.[178] A meeting was also held with journalists to provide them with guidance on how to cover the Court's proceedings. This initiative includes preparing video programmes to explain important Court decisions to the general public and the professional community in a clear and accessible manner, such as Armenia's obligations as a signatory to the Rome Statute.[179] The project also assisted Armenian authorities in the post-ratification process of the Rome Statute.[180] Moreover, a visit to The Hague, the Supreme Court of the Netherlands, the Amsterdam Court and the International Criminal Court took place in April 2024, with the aim of developing cooperation between the courts.[181]

However, public perception of the Constitutional Courts remains sceptical.[182] Even though the project has helped the Constitutional Court to slightly increase its visibility to the general public, the impact of such efforts on the institution's position in Armenian society is minimal.

A Helping Hand for New Consolidated Communities (Armenia)

This project sought to assist two newly consolidated communities in developing capacities and skills for strategic planning of key municipal services.[183] The project promoted a participatory approach to decision-making on community investments, allowing representatives from each community to take the lead in identifying three to five priority project proposals for their respective communities.[184] Two projects were selected, resulting in the listing of the Melik-Barkhudaryan residence[185] as a historical monument for the Tegh community and the construction of a football field for children and youth recreation for the Ijevan community.[186] Moreover, the project encouraged the municipality of Ijevan to supplement the project funds with a financial contribution to provide a recreational facility for children and youth.[187] Due to its proximity to the Azerbaijani border, security concerns have deterred private investment in the project area.[188] As a result, the Matra decentralised instrument was able to

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[176] Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, *Election Observation Mission Report: Republic of Albania - Parliamentary Elections, 25 April 2021* (OSCE, 9 November 2022), https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/d/553972.pdf (accessed 24 October 2024), p. 16.

[177] Interview with project implementers. Europe in Law Association, *Project Full Proposal, Support to the Institutional Reforms of the Constitutional Court* (Unpublished, 2023), p6.

[178] Interview with project implementers.

[179] Interviews with project implementers and beneficiaries.

[180] Interviews with project implementers and beneficiaries.

[181] Interview with beneficiaries.

[182] Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2024 Country Report: Armenia*, https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2024_ARM.pdf, (accessed 24 October 2024), p. 11- 12.

[183] The Urban Foundation for Sustainable Development, *Narrative Report, A Helping Hand for Newly Consolidated Communities* (Unpublished, 15 January 2023), p1.

[184] Interview with project implementers.

[185] In the village Tegh, one of the notable landmarks is the Melik-Barkhudaryan mansion .

[186] Interview with beneficiaries. The UFSD, *A Helping Hand for Newly Consolidated Communities*, p5.

[187] Interview with beneficiaries.

[188] Interview with beneficiaries.

reach a hard-to-access region. Reports suggest that the project has promoted understanding and good communication with different segments of the consolidated community, giving citizens a sense of involvement they had not experienced before.[189] After the project ended, a similar project was initiated by USAID, but with a larger scope and targeting a larger group of cities.[190]

Effectiveness of the decentralised instrument

The decentralised instrument involves local civil society organisations directly in projects. The distinction between the centralised and the decentralised instrument highlights a critical aspect of the assumption regarding the transfer of Dutch skills. While the centralised instrument facilitates the transfer of Dutch skills through training and capacity development, the decentralised instrument does not transfer 'Dutch added value'. Rather, the decentralised instrument transfers ownership of the projects – and, indirectly, of the supposed societal transformation process to which Matra contributes – to local civil society organisations. The decentralised instrument offers notable advantages in terms of being demand-driven, reaching smaller initiatives and organisations and being a flexible instrument, suggesting that the underlying assumption of prioritising the transfer of skills may overlook the aforementioned benefits of the decentralised instrument. Moreover, it remains unclear what exactly the 'Dutch added value' is and how it can be instrumentalised for societal transformation.

Although the decentralised Matra instrument actively seeks to involve local civil society organisations in the implementation of decentralised projects, there are instances where these organisations do not meet the required standards or even stagnate over time.[191] Moreover, Matra themes are so broadly defined under the decentralised instrument that individual projects are sometimes disconnected and fail to mutually reinforce each other. Embassies try to contribute to both Dutch and local emerging priorities by continuously identifying new initiatives to support with the delegated funds at their disposal. This results in relatively small funds being scattered across many different sectors under the guise of contributing to societal transformation. The lack of concentrated funding may hinder the ability of individual projects to achieve meaningful outcomes, albeit at the project level. For instance, while the SETA project laid the foundation for election transparency and the reporting of state resources, the lack of enforcement of sanctions at the central level hindered the project's final outcomes. It would therefore have been beneficial to fund a follow-up project to ensure that the project's efforts were sustained and not left unaddressed.

Nonetheless, as mentioned before in the chapter on coherence, there are several examples of Matra projects capitalising on their small size by fulfilling a pilot function that is later taken up by a larger donor. Such an incubator function has the potential to enhance outcomes by fostering collaboration and drawing on diverse skill sets. For instance, the decentralised instrument in Albania led to the drafting of the whistleblower law, an issue on which the EU Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) had planned a project. By the time the law was adopted and the Matra decentralised project was completed, the EU launched its project on the enforcement of the whistleblower law. This law and the protection of whistleblowers continues to be upheld and implemented, with 11 cases registered in 2021 and 13 cases in 2022.[192] Although the latter is illustrative and there is no certainty that acting as an incubator will by definition increase effectiveness, it is a strategy worth pursuing by embassies and implementing organisations as it can ensure long-term efforts.

Centralised and decentralised regional projects

Both the centralised and decentralised instruments have regional projects, including the illustrative projects PRIS II and BESp. Regional centralised and decentralised projects are based on themes defined by the Dutch MFA and/or offered by Dutch implementing organisations. While the rationale behind the

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189 Interviews with project implementers and beneficiaries.
190 Interviews with project implementers and beneficiaries.
191 Interviews with embassy staff.
192 European Commission, Albania Report 2022 (European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, 12 October 2022), https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/albania-report-2022_en, (Accessed 24 October 2024), p26.

regional approach[193] is to increase cooperation and learning between countries while addressing issues,[194] which is also reflected in the underlying assumption for regional projects in Matra's programme logic, regional centralised and decentralised initiatives tend to replicate the same projects across borders. As a result, regional projects not only overlook the fact that the addressed priorities align with Dutch priorities, but also fail to take into account a country's unique, often context-specific problems.[195] Thus, the assumption that the effectiveness of projects improves when adopting a regional approach is refuted.

Both centralised and decentralised projects ignore the fact that different countries work at a different paces and tar different countries with the same brush.[196] This variation complicates the supposed exchange of information between countries, especially when implementing organisations carry out different activities in different countries.[197] Moreover, regional centralised and decentralised projects suffer from a lack of genuine cross-border initiatives and an over-reliance on the role of regional conferences in promoting inter-country cooperation.[198] It remains unclear how and to what extent the limited number of initiatives designed to create regional added value – including regional conferences – actually achieve this. In addition, the grouping of countries in a project does not always appear to be conducive to creating regional added value. For example, a centralised regional project was implemented in four countries, two of which had strained relations. The disagreement between the countries was too great to overcome and resulted in one of the countries not attending the regional conference.[199]

Plausible contribution to objective I

Having considered the outputs and short-term outcomes of the projects in focus and the analysis of the two Matra instruments, two observations can be made. First, the outputs of the majority of the centralised and decentralised projects examined led to changes within the organisations or individuals directly involved in both Albania and Armenia. While many projects focused on enhancing the capacities and skill sets of both individuals and organisations, the practical application of these capacities largely depends on various contextual factors that are beyond control of the Matra programme. Moreover, without monitoring frameworks, centralised and decentralised projects lack visibility into how outputs contribute to outcomes, making it difficult to assess progress or the effectiveness of interventions. In addition, both instruments lack systematic, instrument-wide MEL initiatives, making it difficult to identify successes, challenges, or areas for improvement for future initiatives. As a result, the instruments function without guidance, feedback or strategic direction.

Consequently, it remains difficult to impossible to link these project-level results to broader developments, such as the overall performance of the rule of law or the broader development of civil society in a programme country. The programme's objective of contributing to societal transformation in terms of rule of law and democratisation in the Matra programme countries is set at the macro-level, while the project objectives for the centralised and decentralised instruments are set at the micro-level. There is therefore a discrepancy between the overarching objective at the Matra programme level and the objectives (and outputs) set at the project level, leading to a misalignment between the programme's objectives on paper and the projects' effectiveness in achieving these objectives in practice. In the absence of a clear logical framework to complete the missing links between projects and the overall programme, the contribution of projects to higher level objectives cannot be determined. While projects

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[193] Whereas centralised regional projects are not limited to a specific Matra region, decentralised regional projects are less common due to their limited budget and are restricted to the Western Balkans. Decentralised regional projects have an average total annual budget of EUR 300,000. No regional decentralised projects were selected as part of the case studies due to their scarcity and their limitation to the Western Balkans.
[194] Interviews with project implementers and embassy staff.
[195] Interviews with project implementers, MFA and embassy staff.
[196] Interview with project implementer.
[197] Interview with project implementer.
[198] Interviews with project implementers.
[199] Interviews with embassy staff and project implementers.

may be successful on an individual basis, and there is anecdotal evidence, as outlined above, of projects achieving impact beyond the immediate project sphere, the overall impact of the instruments in terms of their contribution to societal transformation in terms of rule of law and democratisation remains unclear.

5.2 Objective II: Enhancing bilateral relations

This section examines Matra's contribution to improving bilateral relations between the Netherlands and Matra programme countries. First, it will discuss what is meant by the promotion of bilateral relations. Second, it will discuss the plausible contribution of Matra to the enhancement of bilateral relations.

What's in a name?

The two Matra instruments assign different definitions to the nature and extent of the strengthening of bilateral relations. The centralised Matra programme aims to establish relations between Dutch (semi) governmental institutions in the areas of democratisation and rule of law with counterparts in programme countries.[200] The decentralised programme seeks to invest in bilateral relations with programme countries (e.g. government organisations and NGOs) by networking through Matra projects.[201]

However, 'the strengthening of bilateral relations between the Netherlands and programme countries' of the Matra programme is not clearly defined, nor are there clear objectives to be achieved with this goal. Bilateral relations fall within the scope of bilateral diplomacy, which aims to establish mutually beneficial relationships with foreign countries and is based on four main pillars: political, economic, public diplomacy and consular diplomacy.[202] In other words, bilateral relations are not only shaped by those initiatives that are explicitly designed to contribute to the promotion of bilateral relations, such as the Matra programme. Rather, the strengthening of bilateral relations is something to which countries around the world seek to contribute to through their diplomatic presence, dialogue, and also diplomatic initiatives and actions in each of the respective four areas. This makes it challenging to identify the specific role of the Matra programme in contributing to the improvement of bilateral relations.[203]

Another challenge is that, apart from a brief mention of the objective in Matra's policy documents, the objective is not explicitly defined in terms of its practical implementation and assessment criteria. The objective fails to specify the potential benefits of strengthening bilateral relations for each party involved – the Netherlands and the programme countries. The objective does not specify what the Matra programme will achieve in relation to this objective, nor does it provide a baseline measurement against which the objective can be assessed. Moreover, the projects do not specify outputs or outcomes in pursuit of this overarching objective. Furthermore, there is no requirement for project implementers to report on this objective, so it is effectively left unattended. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to trace the impact of a specific project on the achievement of this goal. As a result, no distinction is made between the programme and project levels.

Furthermore, the analysis of policy documents and respondents' accounts shows that this objective is not even known to all ministry and embassy staff involved, nor is there a consensus on how to conceptualise and operationalise this objective in practice.[204] In general, Dutch diplomats indicated that bilateral relations play a prominent role for the programme, asserting that the strengthening of bilateral relations is considered the more important objective compared to the societal transformation objective.[205] In sharp contrast, several Dutch centralised and decentralised project implementers were unfamiliar with

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[200] Overheid.nl, Staatscourant van het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden 2024, 15454 [website], https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/stcrt-2024-15454.html, (Accessed 24 october 2024).
[201] Internal document.
[202] K.S. Rana, 'Bilateral Diplomacy', in G. Martel (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Diplomacy*, Wiley Blackwell, Chichester, 2018, p2-3.
[203] Rana, 'Bilateral Diplomacy', p. 3-6.
[204] Interviews with embassy staff and project implementers.
[205] Interviews MFA staff.

this particular objective.[206] Where centralised project implementers were aware of the objective, there was a tendency to regard it as secondary to the primary goal of Matra, i.e. the programme's contribution to the societal transformation process, although the bilateral relations' objective was not intended to be secondary. This lack of clarity as to what constitutes the strengthening of bilateral relations for the Matra programme, as well as the lack of knowledge as to the existence or importance of this goal, renders the objective ambiguous and implicit, thereby impeding a clear evaluation of its effectiveness.

Plausible contribution to objective II
As the objective was neither conceptualised nor operationalised, the analysis focused on identifying and gathering information that was consistent with the overarching goal of strengthening bilateral relations.

Despite the ambiguity of what exactly is meant by strengthening bilateral relations and how the Matra programme is supposed to contribute to it, the objective appears to be more significant than initially anticipated by embassy staff and Dutch and local project implementers. The majority of participants provided examples of what could be considered strengthening bilateral relations. Even stakeholders who were initially unfamiliar with this objective provided examples of what could be considered strengthening of bilateral relations. In addition, despite the differences on paper as to how the centralised and decentralised instruments are meant to contribute to this second objective, there is no indication that this difference is evident in practice. This means that even though the centralised Matra instrument is meant to contribute to the establishment of links between Dutch (semi)government institutions in the areas of democratisation and rule of law with counterparts in the programme countries, and the decentralised programme is intended to strengthen bilateral relations with the programme countries by networking through Matra projects, no clear difference between the workings of each instrument towards objective II could be confirmed in practice.

Although the centralised Matra programme aims to establish relations between Dutch (semi) governmental institutions and their counterparts in the programme countries, there is little evidence of this in practice. The research found that Dutch implementing organisations of centralised projects rather than Dutch (semi)governmental institutions tend to establish and maintain relationships with the (semi)governmental institutions in programme countries, raising the question of ownership of the relationship.[207] This can be explained by the limited organisational capacity that (semi)governmental institutions bring to Matra projects, as explained in Chapter 3 on coherence.

Regarding the objective set for the decentralised programme, Matra's network function was frequently mentioned by several stakeholders of the decentralised programme.[208] Decentralised projects are more numerous and more widespread due to the variety of initiatives and projects financed each year, and therefore more naturally linked to different civil society organisations and governmental institutions on an annual basis. From this perspective, decentralised projects appear to have contributed more clearly to the intensification and optimisation of embassy networks, ensuring that embassies are well connected to civil society in the Matra programme countries. However, the networking function is not limited to the decentralised programme, as the research also found clear examples where the centralised programme contributed to the networking function.[209] This is due to the fact that although the difference between centralised and decentralised initiatives is clear to Dutch MFA and embassy staff, this is not the case for the target country and its local stakeholders. For them, it is either 'Matra' or 'the Netherlands' that contributes through a project, and not the centralised or decentralised instrument, making it difficult to distil which instrument contributed to which aspect.

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206 Interview project implementers.
207 Interviews with project implementers.
208 Interviews with embassy staff.
209 Interviews with embassy staff, beneficiaries and donors.

The findings on how the centralised and decentralised instruments contribute to the strengthening of bilateral relations in the areas of democratisation and rule of law in programme countries can be summarised in three main categories. First, Matra contributes positively to the visibility and reputation of the Netherlands as an active and 'engaged' partner in programme countries. Second, Matra supports embassies in establishing vigorous diplomatic networks in programme countries. Third, the Matra programme strengthens the Netherlands' information position in the programme countries.

Dutch visibility

The Matra programme supports the diplomatic activities of the Netherlands and enhances the visibility and reputation of the embassies in the programme countries. In the words of one respondent: 'Matra's reputation precedes it', signifying that Matra projects are known to make a small but effective contribution in programme countries.[210] Through Matra, the Netherlands manages to achieve significant visibility with minimal resources, maximising its impact in the Matra programme countries.[211] While in some programme countries Matra is considered a 'brand' in itself – predominantly in the Western Balkans –[212] in other Matra programme countries the word Matra is not familiar per se, as they simply see it as synonymous with the Netherlands' involvement in their respective countries.[213]

Moreover, the visibility associated with Matra helps the Netherlands to gain a diplomatic advantage, as it presents the Netherlands as an actively involved and 'engaged' partner in the Matra programme countries.[214] More specifically, according to various accounts, Matra also helps with the argumentation used in the programme countries and gives the Netherlands a certain weight in demanding necessary changes and reforms.[215] This means that even when the Netherlands is critical of the progress made or stalled in a particular programme country, the Netherlands continues to provide support through Matra projects, which was appreciated by several respondents.

For instance, when the Netherlands repeatedly blocked Albania's EU accession talks, relations between the two countries were described as being at an all-time low.[216] However, several local stakeholders pointed out that the Netherlands did not only criticise Albania for insufficient progress on necessary reforms.[217] Rather, the Netherlands remained engaged through the various Matra projects aimed at facilitating the EU accession process. Instead of merely criticising, the Netherlands, through various Matra projects, helped Albania to work on the fundamentals for EU accession.[218] This example illustrates how Matra contributes to the engagement of the Netherlands in spite of tough conversations. In other words, Matra gives the Netherlands a seat at the table as an engaged party, despite the difficulty of certain discussions and the relatively small size of the funds.[219]

Network function

Matra contributes to the creation of a good and broad diplomatic network in the programme countries.[220] As mentioned above, Matra offers the Netherlands a seat at various tables in the areas of democratisation and rule of law, which also provides the Netherlands with various networking opportunities. Moreover, Matra projects, both centralised and decentralised, help to improve and strengthen embassies' links with local civil society, which puts them in a good position to gain insights into social, cultural, political and economic developments in their respective countries.[221]

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210 Interviews with project implementers, donors and MFA staff.
211 Interviews with project implementers, MFA and embassy staff.
212 Interviews with MFA staff, embassy staff and project implementers.
213 Interviews with embassy staff and project implementers.
214 Interviews with embassy staff.
215 Interviews with MFA staff and embassy staff.
216 Interviews with embassy staff and project implementers.
217 Interviews with beneficiaries and embassy staff.
218 Interviews with beneficiaries and embassy staff.
219 Interviews with MFA and embassy staff.
220 Interviews with project implementers and MFA staff.
221 Interviews with project implementers and embassy staff.

In addition, some parties noted that in the past, Matra had cultivated relationships with individuals who went on to hold later attained high-level positions in government or become members of parliament, providing high-level access to the embassies.[222] Some embassies also maintain a substantial alumni network consisting of Matra beneficiaries, although this is not a widespread practice among all Matra embassies.[223] Moreover, Matra events tend to have a high-level presence from the country concerned, but also other valuable links and potential partners for the Netherlands. The benefits of Matra's networking function extend beyond the embassies, as the information provided by the valuable networks also reaches The Hague through diplomatic reporting by the embassies. In addition, incoming missions from The Hague, including ministers but also policy officers, tend to meet with Matra stakeholders during their visits to programme countries.[224]

In addition, the diversity of Matra initiatives means that the Dutch network is constantly being expanded through events. As a result, Matra leads to an ever-growing network of key stakeholders in the areas of rule of law, democratisation and EU accession in the respective Matra countries.

Dutch information position
Matra strengthens the Dutch information position in the programme countries.[225] By being directly involved in projects and initiatives that support societal transformation processes, the Netherlands can be directly involved in the latest developments in the country.[226] Access to information about progress and developments in programme countries is an important component in shaping bilateral diplomacy. Reports from various respondents indicate that Matra facilitates fruitful contact between embassy staff and local project implementers.[227] Even when certain projects are not selected for Matra funding, the applicants become part of the embassy's network.[228] Maintaining contact with the organisations ensures a continuous flow of information to the embassies about ongoing developments in their respective countries.[229] This ongoing relationship allows the embassy to call on these organisations for updates and insights as needed. This exchange of information provides the embassy with valuable insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the target country. By understanding these aspects, the embassy can better navigate diplomatic relations and make more informed decisions that align with both the objectives of the programme and broader developments in the programme countries.

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[222] Interviews with project implementers, MFA and embassy staff.
[223] Interview with embassy staff.
[224] Interviews with MFA and embassy staff.
[225] Interviews with project implementers and embassy staff.
[226] Interviews with project implementers and embassy staff.
[227] Interviews with embassy staff.
[228] Interviews with project implementers and embassy staff.
[229] Interviews with embassy staff.

5.3   Programmatically questionable, politically successful

Comparing the results of the centralised and decentralised instrument in achieving the objectives of the Matra programme reveals a discrepancy between the unclear results in achieving objective I and the clear, though unplanned, results in achieving objective II. The absence of a clearly established and programme-wide theory of change and results framework, although recommended in the last IOB evaluation of the Matra programme in 2015, leads to a lack of results-based programming and, more fundamentally, points to a persistent lack of programmatic thinking throughout the Matra programme. It also means that any attribution of successes and failures remains somewhat arbitrary and dependent on the interpretation of objectives and their ex-post operationalisation. In such a programmatic vacuum, several issues arise that ultimately affect the relevance and effectiveness of the instruments and their ability to contribute to societal transformation.

At the same time, however, the Matra instruments have a particular political value for DEU and the MFA as a whole in terms of their ability to demonstrate continued engagement and cultivate closer ties with countries in the EU's eastern neighbourhood. Moreover, this evaluation found that success in improving bilateral relations does not depend on the programme's effectiveness in bringing about change or making valuable contributions to the societal transformation in the programme countries.[230] In other words, even if Matra projects fail to deliver on their planned outputs and outcomes, or if a programme country stagnates or deteriorates in terms of its democratisation process or rule of law, it is still considered beneficial to continue supporting Matra projects and initiatives, as the programme still contributes to a good diplomatic network, a strengthened information position of the Netherlands abroad and Dutch visibility.[231] Despite the relatively small amount of money, the activities are visible and dynamic and contribute to the image of the Netherlands in the programme countries, even if the Matra projects do not produce clear results.[232]

This political utility of the Matra programme thrives on its ability to respond to arising opportunities in changing contexts. For some countries, a stricter insistence on achieving results is desirable, for instance in the context of ongoing political discussions about EU membership. For others, such insistence would be neither productive nor beneficial to the bilateral relationship. Deliberately maintaining a vague intervention logic and not making programme goals operational could thus be explained by the political environment and might be a desirable option for a department with an inherently political mandate. Ultimately, however, such vagueness reduces buy-in and the ability to strategically guide the use of the various Matra instruments.

5.4   Conclusion

Seven projects have been used to illustrate the workings of the two instruments in Albania and Armenia. Almost all projects achieved their planned outputs and contributed to the anticipated short-term outcomes. However, projects cannot always demonstrate how short-term outputs contribute to the intended long-term outcomes, resulting in projects being implemented without clear strategic direction or guidance. This makes it difficult to assess the progress or the effectiveness of both centralised and decentralised projects. A closer examination of the two instruments reveals that the contribution of "Dutch added value" is useful for the centralised instrument, although it is not a prerequisite for project effectiveness, as demonstrated by the decentralised instrument. The centralised instrument focuses mainly on transferring skills and knowledge from the Netherlands. However, it often lacks a demand-driven approach and suffers from weak local ownership. In contrast, the decentralised instrument offers significant advantages over its centralised counterpart, including stronger demand-orientation, better

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230 Interviews with embassy staff.
231 Interviews with embassy staff.
232 Interviews with MFA and embassy staff.

reach to smaller initiatives and organisations, and greater flexibility. However, decentralised projects are sometimes disconnected and fail to reinforce each another, resulting in relatively small funds being scattered across many different sectors in the name of contributing to societal transformation.

Despite the fact that projects may be successful on an individual basis, the overall impact of centralised and decentralised instruments in terms of their contribution to societal transformation in the area of rule of law and democratisation remains unclear. Attributing macro-level changes in the societal transformation process to the Matra programme is not possible due to the discrepancy between the overarching objective at the Matra programme level and the objectives (and outputs) set at the project level, leading to a misalignment between the programme's objectives on paper and the projects' effectiveness in achieving these objectives in practice. In the absence of a clear logical framework to complete the missing links between projects and the overall programme, the contribution of projects to higher level objectives cannot be determined.

Regarding Matra's second objective, in practice there is little evidence that the centralised instrument has established relationships between Dutch (semi)governmental institutions and their counterparts in the programme countries. Rather, the research found that despite the ambiguity of the objective, the centralised and decentralised instruments contribute to the strengthening in the bilateral relations in the programme countries in three ways. First, Matra makes a positive contribution to the visibility and reputation of the Netherlands; second, Matra helps embassies to establish strong diplomatic networks in the area of rule of law and democratisation; and third, Matra strengthens the Netherlands' information position in programme countries.

Comparing the results of the programme's ability to achieve the two objectives, it becomes clear that there is a discrepancy between the unclear results of the achievement of objective I and the evident, though unplanned, results of the achievement of objective II. Moreover, the promotion of bilateral relations is not linked to the programme's effectiveness in bringing about changes or making valuable contributions to the societal transformation of the programme countries. The lack of clarity in intervention strategy and the avoidance of a concrete definition of the programme's objectives could be explained by the political context of the programme. While this approach may be a preferable choice for a political department, it is important to acknowledge that such ambiguity ultimately diminishes the capacity to strategically direct the use of available Matra instruments.

6 Conclusions and policy recommendations

This chapter begins with two overarching findings that draw on several chapters of this evaluation. The findings are then grouped according to relevance, coherence and effectiveness in order to answer the research questions outlined in Chapter 1.

6.1   Main findings

Finding 1.1. Matra is a useful tool for improving bilateral relations with countries that seek to enhance their relations with the EU and its Member States. However, in programmatic terms projects have flawed relevance and effectiveness.

A notable finding in reconstructing the theory of change for the Matra programme is that many MFA respondents identified the enhancement of bilateral relations as the 'real' *raison d'être* of the programme. This is not surprising, given that the focus of the MFA's Europe Department is inherently political – i.e. policy coordination and development at the bilateral and European level – rather than programmatic. This political nature of Matra is reflected in the finding that, although the extent to which the programme has contributed to macro-level changes in the societal transformation process remains unclear, the instruments evaluated were found to contribute to the strengthening of bilateral relations.

A paradox thus emerges between programmatic effectiveness and political utility. While programmatic success entails formulating and achieving tangible, measurable outcomes based on predefined objectives for the Matra programme, the political utility of Matra involves keeping the programme's objectives deliberately broad or ambiguous so the programme can be utilized by aligning it with political interests and evolving agendas.

Recommendations:
- Allow for sufficient scope for the political realities in which Matra operates, while maintaining a credible focus on programmatic activities;
- Define more clearly the level of ambition of the Matra programme, including through a Matra-wide intervention logic, while maintaining the overall flexibility of the programme and its ability to adapt to political interests.

Finding 1.2. Matra is not used strategically and instruments operate largely in silos.

Despite previous IOB recommendations to anchor the use of Matra instruments in a theory of change, there is still no Matra-wide intervention logic. As a result, there is no overarching level of monitoring and evaluation, which means that information on the achievement of goals is largely absent or anecdotal. Such a situation leaves virtually no room for strategic, feedback-based management of the various instruments and their coordination. While potentially valuable, the outcomes of one instrument are not used to reinforce the projects of another.

Recommendations:
- Establish a Matra-wide intervention logic that leaves sufficient scope for the political realities described in finding 1, while providing a framework for strategic thinking and course correction of the programme;
- Link the different instruments through information sharing;
- Identify opportunities where projects from one instrument could reinforce activities from another and stimulate cross-instrument learning.

6.2   Relevance of the Matra programme

Finding 2.1. At a programme level, the relevance of the Matra programme remains high in contexts where a credible EU accession or association offer is on the table. Its thematic focus links well with the programme countries' EU accession or association aspirations and with broader domestic reform agendas.

Many Matra programme countries have become more reform-oriented in recent years and have turned to Western countries for assistance. The relevance of the Matra programme as a whole is linked to where a programme country is in terms of credible accession or association prospects and, consequently, whether it is open to cooperation on rule of law and democratisation issues. The fact that Matra's thematic priorities partly reflect the Copenhagen criteria links them to the countries' accession or association aspirations and creates the potential to drive reform efforts in the broad sense.

However, requests for assistance from the authorities in the programme countries are not always clearly defined or translated into concrete action plans further down the political chain, which can lead to a lack of clear articulation of needs. Together with finding 1.1., this has the potential to further reduce ownership.

A changing (geo)political context can change the relevance of the centralised instrument, while this is less likely to impact the decentralised instrument. When a context changes from permissive to less permissive, and direct government-to-government cooperation – with the centralised instrument – is no longer possible, the decentralised instrument still remains relevant as it is also linked to the needs of civil society.

Recommendations:
- Improve support to programme countries in translating larger reform ambitions into a specific needs agenda that links to their accession or association aspirations, such as the Copenhagen criteria or other international standards

Finding 2.2. While centralised projects are relevant to the programme countries, their local embedding is sometimes insufficient due to a lack of ownership and project design issues. The decentralised instrument is more demand-driven and better linked to local needs.

In general terms, the centralised projects reviewed are relevant. However, the centralised projects analysed lacked local ownership, due to structural issues in the operation of the centralised instrument. Over-reliance on a limited number of project implementers leads to supply-driven project design. In addition, the context and needs analysis of centralised projects was often insufficiently informed by local knowledge. This is exacerbated by the fact that during the evaluation period there was no formal requirement to involve a local implementer in the design or implementation of centralised projects, nor were embassies adequately consulted or integrated in the design and implementation of centralised projects.

In general, decentralised projects, such as those managed by Dutch embassies, are more responsive to local needs and take a more demand-driven approach to project design. They are flexible in nature and can quickly respond to emerging needs identified by embassies. In terms of challenges, the decentralised instrument is not always well connected to grassroots civil society in contrast to more established civil society organisations.

Recommendations:

Regarding the centralised instrument:
- Involve Dutch embassies in the thematic choices of the centralised instrument (as included in the subsidy frameworks);
- Include a more diverse group of implementers for Matra centralised projects;
- Ensure sufficient local ownership of Matra projects and allow local authorities to define priorities and programming themselves as much as possible;
- Involve local implementing partners in design and implementation;
- Increase engagement with local authorities prior to project design and ensure that there is sufficient buy-in and available institutional capacity to carry out the proposed project.

Regarding the decentralised instrument:
- Facilitate and ensure access to the decentralised instrument for smaller civil society organisations.

6.3   Coherence of the Matra programme

Finding 3.1. There is a lack of coordination between the centralised and decentralised Matra instruments. The activities carried out under Matra centralised and decentralised remain in silos, which hinders the possibility of aligning approaches and finding complementarities between the two instruments.

Even though the centralised and decentralised Matra instruments have similar overarching goals, there is a lack of coordination between the instruments. As a result of the lack of information sharing, centralised and decentralised projects remain in silos, hindering the ability to potentially align the approaches and find complementarities between the two instruments. This is a missed opportunity, given the significant potential for synergy between their different approaches. Furthermore, the disconnect between the two instruments hinders mutual learning within the Matra programme. In addition, the programme fails to facilitate the exchange of best practices between the two instruments, particularly with regard to cross-cutting issues.

Recommendations:
- In order to increase relevance and effectiveness (follow-up, upscaling, synergies, learning), the different Matra instruments should be better aligned. This could also promote mutual learning and the exchange of best practices between the two instruments;
- Consider organising an annual (online) conference where best practices and mutual learning opportunities can be shared and explored;
- Arrange regular touch-base meetings between the RVO/DEU, embassy staff and Dutch implementers;
- Encourage embassies to regularly share overviews of decentralised projects with colleagues in The Hague, including policy officers at the ministry and the RVO. The RVO and Dutch implementing organisations should also keep the embassy informed of developments in centralised projects.

Finding 3.2. With the exception of the decentralised Human Rights Fund, the overlap between the different Dutch funds in the Matra programme countries is limited.

The overlap observed between Matra and other Dutch funds was limited. The decentralised Human Rights Fund and decentralised Matra instrument showed significant overlap in terms of thematic priorities. The overlap thus does not lead to a duplication of efforts, but rather to a process in which both funds are used for the same purpose. In this sense, the decentralised Matra and the decentralised Human Rights Fund are not seen as similar, but rather as partially adjacent funds, which allows embassies to enjoy a certain degree of freedom to exchange project proposals between the funds.

Recommendations:
- Ensure that the differences between the various funds are clear to embassies and the implementing organisations, while making clear when combining funds is allowed and even encouraged.
- Leave room for flexibility and input from implementers in Matra, as this is seen as a major advantage of the programme compared to other Dutch funds.

Finding 3.3. The evaluated instruments are broadly coherent with Dutch foreign policy priorities. However, they have received little capacity to monitor implementation and are not always aligned with the priorities, capacities and needs of the (semi)governmental institutions involved in centralised projects.

The activities of the centralised and decentralised Matra instrument are broadly linked to Dutch foreign policy goals in the regions where they are implemented. They also signal a willingness to continue engagement through non-ODA assistance.

Given the political and non-programmatic nature of the Europe Department, the resources made available for project implementation are scarce. This, together with the outsourcing of the project management of the centralised instrument, means that opportunities for strategic or political guidance are missed.

Recommendations:
- Provide sufficient resources for programme management and implementation and establish mechanisms for strategic and political guidance.

Finding 3.4. Dutch funding for rule of law and democratisation efforts in Matra programme countries is a small part of the overall donor effort. Matra projects seek to fill a niche in a crowded donor landscape.

Matra is a small fund in a country context where there are many and larger donors present. Combined centralised and decentralised Matra spending between 2017 and 2022 accounted for 0.31% of all donor spending on similar programmes in Matra programme countries. The added value of the programme lies in its niche-seeking behaviour, i.e., the fact that Matra projects focus on a small sub-theme within the broader funding efforts of larger donors such as the EU.

In the case of centralised projects, avoiding overlap is prevented by the Dutch implementing organisations themselves. Due to their limited presence in the programme countries, they are not always successful in avoiding the duplication of existing efforts. However, if overlaps are identified during project implementation, centralised projects are flexible enough to change course. Accordingly, the evaluation did not find much evidence of overlap in the projects examined.

In the decentralised process, overlap is avoided at the embassy level. In the absence of functioning formal donor coordination, the main way of avoiding duplication of existing efforts is through bilateral in-country consultations with like-minded donors, which has been a successful strategy for avoiding duplication among the projects reviewed. The niche of decentralised projects stems from their specific focus on civil society, the short turnaround time between proposal and implementation, and the willingness to take risks and fund projects that other donors might shy away from.

More generally, both centralised and decentralised projects have at times acted as incubators for activities that have subsequently been scaled up by larger donors.

Recommendations:
  • Before starting a project, consider the specific niches and potential incubator functions that Matra projects, both at the centralised and decentralised level, could fulfil.

6.4 Effectiveness of the Matra programme

Finding 4.1. Short-term outcomes of the selected centralised and decentralised projects mainly led to changes within the organisations or individuals directly involved.

Almost all projects achieved their planned outputs and contributed to the anticipated short-term outcomes. However, most projects fall short in demonstrating how outputs contribute to outcomes. This makes it difficult to assess the progress or the effectiveness of centralised and decentralised projects. In addition, the lack of monitoring, evaluation and learning frameworks for decentralised projects and occasionally centralised projects, means that the discussion of changes or impacts that may have occurred as a result of the outputs is missing. As a result, the instruments operate without guidance or strategic direction.

Recommendations:
  • Instruct project implementers to demonstrate a clear link between their projects (and outputs) and the overarching objectives of the Matra programme through a logical framework;
  • Instruct project implementers to provide a monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) framework system that connects to a broader ToC for the Matra programme.

Finding 4.2. While the contribution of "Dutch added value" is useful in Central projects, it is not a prerequisite for project effectiveness, as demonstrated by the Decentral instrument.

While the centralised instrument facilitates the transfer of Dutch skills through training and capacity development, the decentralised instrument does not transfer 'Dutch added value'. Rather, the decentralised instrument transfers ownership of the projects – and, indirectly, of the supposed societal transformation process to which Matra contributes – to local civil society organisations. Given the success at the project level of the decentralised instrument, including Dutch expertise in Matra projects is not always required to obtain results. Considering finding 3.3. about the scarcity of human resources in Dutch (semi)-governmental organisations, this warrants a discussion about the necessity of including their expertise in projects.

Recommendations:
- Clarify for each instrument what 'Dutch added value' is and how it should contribute to societal transformation;
- Identify areas where 'Dutch added value' is needed and consider its (optional) use across instruments.

Finding 4.3. A regional approach rarely has particular added value or relevance in the Matra context.

The rationale behind the regional approach is to increase cooperation and learning between countries. Regional Matra projects appear to lack direct added value and are sometimes perceived as contrived. There is a lack of genuine cross-border initiatives and an over-reliance on the role of regional conferences in promoting cooperation between countries. It remains unclear how and to what extent the limited number of initiatives intended to create regional added value actually do so. To further complicate matters, the grouping of countries for a project does not always appear to be productive. A Matra project does not need a regional approach to facilitate the exchange of information between programme countries.

Recommendations:
- Regional centralised and decentralised projects should be initiated by the programme countries themselves, once they see the added value of a regional approach;
- Articulate the added value of a regional approach for each target country involved;
- Encourage mutual learning regardless of the regional focus of a project. Mutual learning should not be confined to regional projects or to the implementation of identical projects in different countries. Instead, it involves learning from both the differences and similarities between programme countries, while sharing best practices.

Finding 4.4. While projects may be successful on an individual basis, the overall impact of the centralised and decentralised instruments in terms of their contribution to societal transformation in the areas of rule of law and democratisation remains unclear.

Attributing macro-level changes in the societal transformation process to the Matra programme is not possible due to the discrepancy between the overarching objective at the Matra programme level and the objectives (and outputs) set at the project level, leading to a misalignment between the programme's objectives on paper and the projects' effectiveness in achieving these objectives in practice. In the absence of a clear logical framework to complete the missing links between projects and the overall programme, the contribution of projects to higher level objectives cannot be determined.

Recommendations:
- Specify and explain the practical implementation and assessment criteria for the Matra objectives;
- Formulate clear country-specific objectives to which all stakeholders should contribute, and move away from the scattered approach by undertaking a multitude of different initiatives simultaneously.

Finding 4.5. Although the centralised Matra instrument aims to establish relations between Dutch (semi)governmental institutions and their counterparts in the programme countries, there is little evidence of this in practice. No clear difference in the way the centralised or decentralised instrument works towards objective II could be confirmed in practice.

Dutch implementing organisations of centralised projects rather than Dutch (semi)governmental institutions tend to establish and maintain relationships with the (semi)governmental institutions in programme countries, which raises the question of ownership of the relationship. This can be explained by the limited organisational capacity that (semi)governmental institutions can bring to Matra projects. Moreover, the added value for these organisations is sometimes unclear, which is problematic at a time of staff shortages.

Recommendations:
- Steer more proactively on the achievement of this objective for the centralised instrument. In coordination with the Ministry of Justice and Security, conduct a scoping exercise on the available capacities and thematic and regional priorities of the involved(semi)governmental organisations before committing their roles in centralised Matra projects;
- Instruct project implementers to clearly demonstrate the availability and benefits of involving Dutch semi-governmental institutions in the project inception phase.

Finding 4.6. Despite the lack of operationalisation of this objective, the Matra's centralised and decentralised instruments contribute to the strengthening of bilateral relations in the programme countries in three ways.

Even though the strengthening of bilateral relations is not explicitly defined in terms of practical implementation and assessment criteria, several positive effects have been observed that can be classified under this objective. First, Matra makes a positive contribution to the visibility and reputation of the Netherlands in the programme countries. Second, Matra supports embassies in establishing strong diplomatic networks in the areas of rule of law and good governance in the programme countries. Third, the Matra programme strengthens the Netherlands' information position in the programme countries. However, these achievements do not fully reflect the potential outcomes of the programme, had it clearly defined its criteria for successfully strengthening bilateral relations.

Recommendations:
- Translate the objective of strengthening of bilateral relations between the Netherlands and the Matra programme countries into country-specific, more tangible and realistic goals that are clear to all stakeholders involved.[233]

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[233] This recommendation has already been presented to the MFA in an earlier evaluation of the Matra programme in EaP countries in the period 2008-2014.

Annexes

Annex 1: Project selection for case studies

The selection of projects in Albania and Armenia was determined by a number of considerations. While all projects were considered equally during the field visits, it was decided to limit the focus to three centralised projects and four decentralised projects.

- For the centralised projects, it was decided to include the two most recently implemented projects, which also have a significant financial weight. This decision was more limited in the case of Armenia, as only one centralised project had been carried out recently.
- For the selection of decentralised projects, five projects were considered in Albania and four in Armenia. The projects were selected based on their budgets, thematic coverage and timeliness in the evaluation period. For the projects in focus, the two largest in terms of financial size were selected from the two most important themes in both countries.
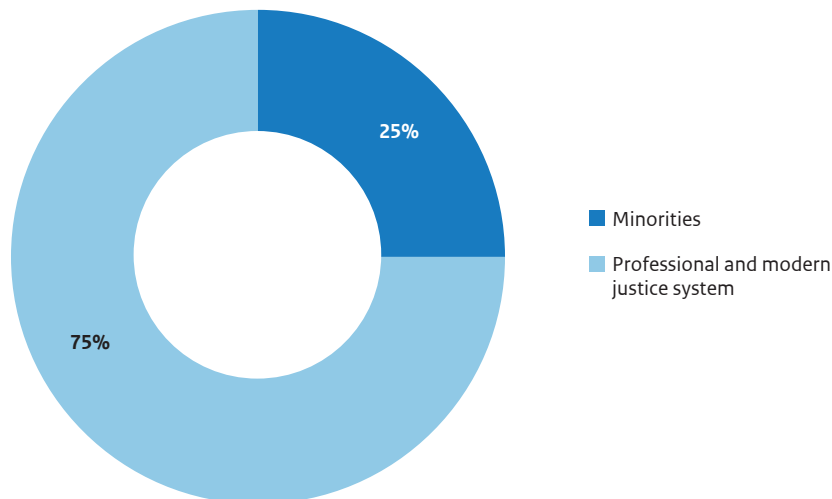
Albania

Centralised

Project(s) in focus:

1. Tender 2016-2020 - NHC: Towards a Safe, Stimulating and Rehabilitative Prison Environment for Children and Juveniles in Conflict with the Law in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia (2017-2023[234]);
2. Tender 2020-2024 - CILC: Balkans Enforcement Strengthening Project (2020-2024).

Graph 8: *Thematic Breakdown of Matra centralised in Albania (2017-2023)*

- Minorities
- Professional and modern justice system

Decentralised

Rank of division of themes in Albania (in euros, see Graph 9):

1. Public administration and good governance;
2. (Human rights[235]);
3. The workings of (parliamentary) democracy;
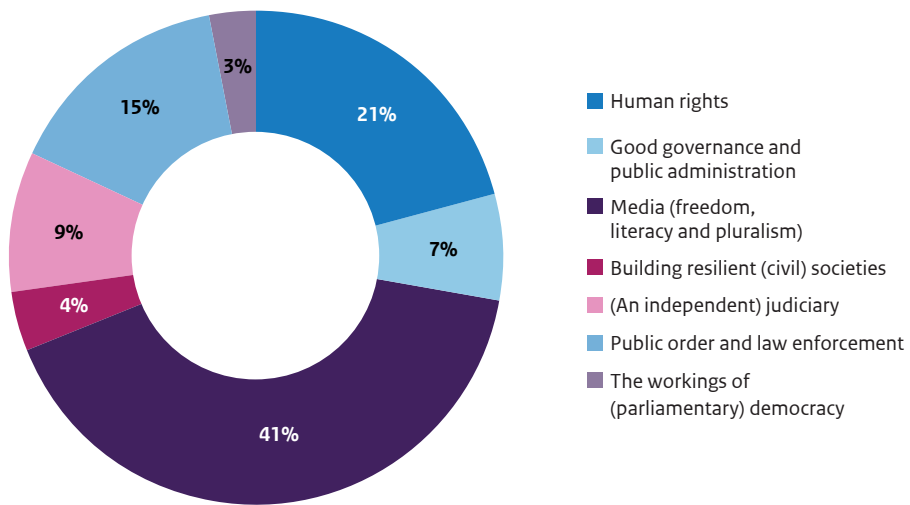4. Media;
5. (An independent) judiciary.

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[234] This project was affected by Covid-19 in its implementation and was therefore prolonged until December 2023.

[235] Human rights have been excluded from the list of themes of the decentralised instrument since 2021. As a result, this specific project is not included in the illustrative projects in focus throughout the report, although it was considered and reviewed during the field visit to Albania.

Biggest projects of each theme (in euros):

1. Public administration and good governance – Improved Policy Debate and Accountability to Delivering on Fundamentals First *(decentralised project in focus)*;
2. (Human rights - Strengthening Albanian Women Entrepreneurship (gender equality and inclusion));
3. The workings of (parliamentary) democracy – Strengthening Elections Transparency in Albania *(Decentralised project in focus)*;
4. Media – Strengthening fact checking journalism in Albania;
5. (An independent) judiciary – All Eyes on Justice – Monitoring the Justice Reform in Albania.

Graph 4 (repetition): *Thematic breakdown of Matra decentralised in Albania (2017-2023)*


Legend:
- Human rights
- Good governance and public administration
- Media (freedom, literacy and pluralism)
- Building resilient (civil) societies
- (An independent) judiciary
- Public order and law enforcement
- The workings of (parliamentary) democracy

Armenia

Centralised

Project(s) in focus:

1. NHC – Assistance in Implementing the Strategy of the Penal System in the Republic of Armenia

Graph 10: *Thematic breakdown of Matra decentralised in Armenia (2017-2023)*

Legend:
- Professional and modern justice system
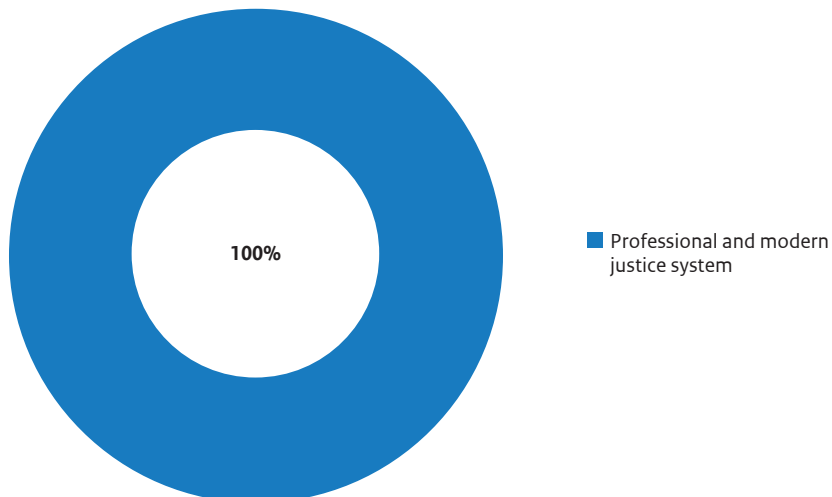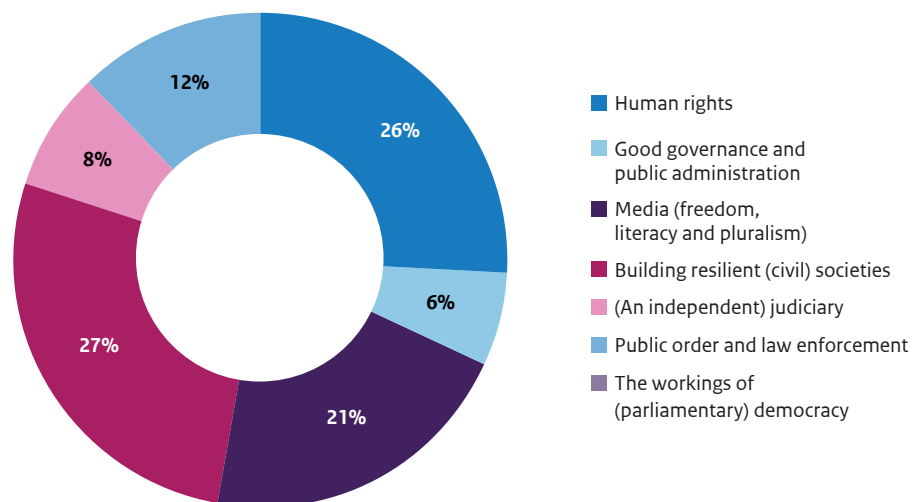
Decentralised

Rank of division of themes in Armenia (in euros, see Graph 11):
1. (An independent) judiciary;
2. Public administration and good governance;
3. The workings of (parliamentary) democracy;
4. Building resilient (civil)) societies.

Biggest projects of each theme (in euros):
1. (An independent) judiciary – Support to the Institutional Reforms on the Constitutional Court *(decentralised project in focus)*;
2. Public administration and good governance – A Helping Hand for New Consolidated Communities *(decentralised project in focus)*;
3. The workings of (parliamentary) democracy; Developing inclusive oversight of Security-DIOS Armenia;
4. Building resilient (civil)) societies – Inform, Empower, Act! Civil Society for Good Budgetary Governance in Armenia.

Graph 5 (repetition): *Thematic breakdown of Matra decentralised in Armenia (2017-2023)*

Legend:
- Human rights
- Good governance and public administration
- Media (freedom, literacy and pluralism)
- Building resilient (civil) societies
- (An independent) judiciary
- Public order and law enforcement
- The workings of (parliamentary) democracy

Values: 26%, 6%, 21%, 27%, 8%, 12%

Annex 2: List of projects in focus

Centralised projects

Towards a Safe, Stimulating and Rehabilitative Prison Environment for Children and Juveniles in Conflict with the Law in Albania – PRIS II (Albania)

PRIS II is a regional project implemented by the Netherlands Helsinki Committee (NHC) in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia.[236] The project – PRIS II for short – ran from September 2017 until 31 December 2022 and built on efforts of the earlier Matra COPRoL[237] funded project PRIS I. The total budget for the project was EUR 1,938,702.[238] The projects focuses on enhancing the capacity of practitioners working with juveniles in correctional institutions.

The Balkans Enforcement Strengthening project – BESp (Albania)

Following the principle that the rule of law can only become a reality if judicial rulings are enforced, *BESp* was called into life by the Center for International Legal Cooperation (CILC). The project is regional, and is currently being implemented in Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.[239] BESp started in September 2020 and was due to end in August 2024.[240] The total budget for the project is EUR 1,901,624.40.[241] BESp seeks to strengthen the private enforcement agents (PEA)[242] systems in Albania by enhancing monitoring and control, improving the capacities of PEAs, and by contributing to an increase in transparency and professionalism of the judicial chain of enforcement systems.[243]

Assistance in Implementing the Strategy of the Penal System in the Republic of Armenia – AISPIRA (Armenia)

Following the introduction of probation in Armenia in 2016, the NHC proposed AISPIRA aimed at enhancing the capacities of the Armenian Ministry of Justice and at developing a strategy that aims to integrate prison and probation services within a rehabilitative framework in Armenia.[244] The project is ongoing and is due to end in September 2024. The a total budget is EUR 952,558.[245] AISPIRA aims to assist Armenia in working towards a more rehabilitative penal system by focusing on skills and knowledge acquisition.

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[236] The project was only considered in Albania as this was the case study chosen for this evaluation. No references will be made to the project and its implementation in Kosovo or North Macedonia.

[237] Matra CoPROL stands for Cooperation with Pre-accession countries on Rule of Law. This used to be the Matra centralised G2G instrument with Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Croatia and Turkey.

[238] The total budget was allocated to Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia; the precise budget per country is not available.

[239] The project was only considered in Albania as this was the case study chosen for this evaluation. No references will be made to the project and its implementation in the other countries.

[240] The project has requested an extension, with August 2025 as the new end date. At time of writing, this request is still pending.

[241] The total budget was allocated to Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia; the precise budget per country is not available.

[242] A private enforcement agent, also known as a bailiff or enforcement officer in some jurisdictions, is responsible for enforcing court orders and judgments.

[243] Project proposal CILC p. 5.

[244] For this project the Netherlands Helsinki Committee (NHC) partnered with Penal Reform International (PRI) and the Civil Society Institute Armenia (CSI). Currun Singh and Rosa Vane, AISPIRA PROJECT MID-TERM REVIEW Final Report, 5th May 2023, p. 4.

[245] Due to a no-cost extension, the project has been extended.

Decentralised projects

Improved Policy Debate and Accountability to Delivering on Fundamentals First, through the Establishment of Cluster One EU Negotiations Platform – C1-EU-NPA (Albania)

C1-EU-NPA focuses on supporting Albania's EU accession negotiations in relation to the Cluster One negotiation chapters.[246] The project aims to do so by improving policy debates while emphasising the strengthening of accountability and the importance of involving civil society organisations in the process.[247] The project had a total budget of EUR 237,837, and ran from June 2021 to 31 December 2023 and was renewed for two additional years.[248]

Strengthening Elections' Transparency in Albania – SETA (Albania)

A free and fair election process is a key condition for the opening of EU accession negotiations with Albania. The Strengthening Elections Transparency in Albania (SETA) project aimed to support effective implementation of transparency and oversight mechanisms with regard to campaign financing and the use of public resources in the Parliamentary Elections of 25 April 2021.[249] The project had a duration of one year with a total budget of EUR 119,900.

Support to the Institutional Reforms on the Constitutional Court (Armenia)

Despite the 2020 constitutional reform improving trust in courts in Armenia, the judiciary still lacks the necessary level of trust required for its role in upholding the rule of law and democratic values.[250] The project was initiated as a result.[251] The project started in April 2023 and was due to end in September 2024. The total budget allocated for the project amounts to EUR 170,280. The project includes developing the Court's methods and strategies, establishing ethics and integrity guidelines, conducting professional trainings on case law and international law branches, and enhancing communication with the public, NGOs, the media and the academic community.[252]

A Helping Hand for New Consolidated Communities (Armenia)

Autumn 2021 was a significant milestone in the Armenian government's territorial administrative reform agenda, as a long-running territorial consolidation process was largely completed across most of the country.[253] The project aimed to support the Armenian government's efforts in completing the territorial-administrative reform by helping two of the newly consolidated communities, Tegh and Ijevan, in acquiring knowledge and skills in their strategic planning of municipal services.[254] The project had a total budget of EUR 74,894 and ran from July 2021 until January 2023. The project promoted a participatory approach to decision-making regarding community investments.

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246 The Cluster I (Fundamentals Cluster) negotiations contain the following chapters: 23 – Judiciary and fundamental rights, 24 – Justice, Freedom and Security, 5 – Public procurement, 18 – Statistics, and 32 – Financial control.

247 Final report C1-EU-NPA, p. 5.

248 Interviews ALBUO5, ALBUO6.

249 Final narrative report SETA p. 2.

250 Project full proposal *Support to the Institutional Reforms of the Constitutional Court*, p. 3, and the BTI 2020 Country Report Armenia, p. 10, p. 33.

251 Project full proposal *Support to the Institutional Reforms of the Constitutional Court* p. 5.

252 Interview ARUO03, Project full proposal *Support to the Institutional Reforms of the Constitutional Court* p. 6.

253 Narrative report *A Helping Hand for New Consolidated Communities*, p. 9.

254 Narrative report, p. 1.

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