

## 11 AVENUES. 11 PROPOSALS

### PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY. THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS. CITIZENS' INVOLVEMENT. TRUST-BUILDING

With the adoption of the EU Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027 accompanied by a unique Recovery Plan conditions have been created to develop a more just, resilient and sustainable Europe. A robust and new cohesion policy is one of the cornerstones of this ambitious endeavour.

The 'Meet the Citizen 2.0' project of the European House covers 5 countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CZ, HU, HR, RO and SK); all of them are massive beneficiaries of the EU Cohesion Fund. Our 11 working papers indicate possible avenues how to use effectively these financial instruments in remote, less developed areas of these countries highlighting not only the importance of EU assistance in daily life of citizens but simultaneously contributing to reducing the still significant gap between the citizens and the EU institutions.

Each paper of ours offers not only a brief analyses of an important aspect of cohesion policy in Central and Eastern Europe but proposes also practical solutions for the involvement of citizens, their organisations and other stakeholders in practising partnership for making cohesion policy a success.



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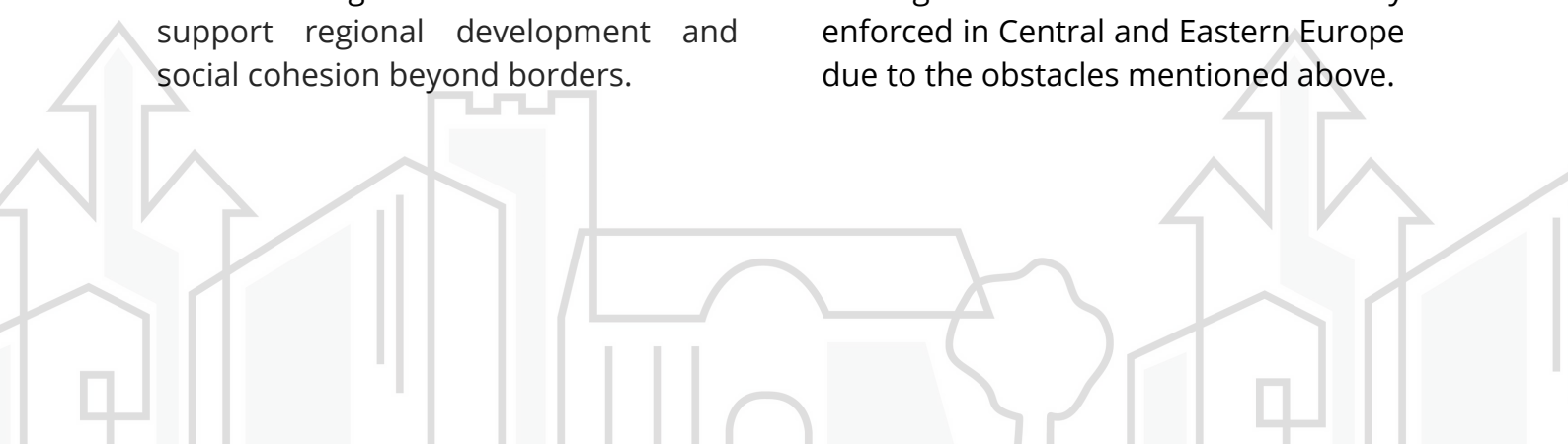
There are new possibilities for citizens and their organisations to take a more active role in the democratic life of the Union. A greater civil involvement is needed in the policy-making processes at different levels (rural, urban, regional and macro-regional). Civil participation should be more policy-oriented e.g., in fields such as health, employment, education, climate change and digital transition which affect the every-day lives of citizens. The new Interreg programme for Central and Eastern Europe supports transboundary civil actions in this regard.

Challenges such as digitalisation, health or climate crises do not stop at borders and affect the Central and Eastern European area in similar ways. Those challenges can be best handled by multi-level governance that includes key political actors such as decision-makers of macro-regional and regional strategies. In this context, the new Interreg programme for Central and Eastern Europe includes a priority area (“A better Interreg governance”) that can promote a greater involvement of citizens in participatory democracy and the decision-making process of different governance systems in Central and Eastern Europe. Multi-level governance is suited for achieving this aim and the Interreg programme helps to extend this model to the region. Multi-level governance can better support regional development and social cohesion beyond borders.

A better, integrated governance can help to overcome structural problems or deep-rooted difficulties in the Central and Eastern European region. Multi-level governance should be made attractive to citizens and encourage them to participate more in political decision-making, for example in the case of the four macro-regional strategies that cover the Central and Eastern European territory.

However, making all this work for citizens requires first of all removal of obstacles of various kinds. Central and Eastern Europe is highly heterogeneous in territorial, socioeconomic, historical and cultural terms. Different mindsets, historical obstacles, political culture, legal and administrative barriers hamper the good performance of multi-level governance in maintaining a continuous and well-designed dialogue with citizens and civil society organisations in the region. As a consequence, an effective civil participation that could foster social innovation in concrete policy fields and carry out more tangible results at transboundary level, is still lacking.

Furthermore, the integrated and place-based approaches of multi-level governance to fostering bottom-up processes and inclusion of local stakeholders in the political decision-making are often not sufficiently enforced in Central and Eastern Europe due to the obstacles mentioned above.



All this puts further pressure on multi-level governance to forge closer ties with the aims of the Cohesion Policy and those of macro-regional strategies, namely, to increase territorial and social cohesion as well as to promote the principles of equal opportunities and subsidiarity across Central and Eastern Europe. Inequalities and gaps still exist between the prosperous regions and rural areas that are lagging behind.

In addition, as regards subsidiarity, this principle is closely linked to participatory democracy and to strengthening the role of citizens and civil society organisations in multi-level governance. Civil stakeholders should monitor development trends and policy performance; identify development opportunities and territorial challenges in the Central and Eastern European region. In this way, civil stakeholders can foster new approaches to subsidiarity and partnerships for solving problems that exist at local level. Problems that currently exist in the Central and Eastern European region will gain an even more transboundary character over the years to come and the solutions provided by partnerships involving a broad range of civil stakeholders will strengthen the adaptability of their solutions at macro-regional, transnational level. Therefore, civil engagement in elaborating viable solutions to local problems should be

better incorporated in multi-level governance and the policymaking of macro-regional strategies. In full accordance with this demand, the new Interreg programme for Central and Eastern Europe encourages and enables transnational cooperation and partnerships with guidance and knowledge. Partnerships which bring together public organisations, private sector and civil society and increase trust beyond borders should be supported. The Interreg programme finances transnational actions to develop, test and implement solutions that are urgently needed to make Central and Eastern Europe more resilient in the face of external shocks and attractive to live in, where the needs of citizens can be better met. More concretely, transnational projects which aim to involve more citizens in the decision-making process and promote equal opportunities in public governance are supported.



## Follow-up, proposals

To collect best practices of transnational projects which focused on participatory democracy issues of the Central and Eastern European region. There are best practices that realised a greater involvement of citizens and their organisations in governance-related issues of transboundary cooperation and macro-regional strategies. Most of these practices helped to promote citizens' participation in the implementation phase (communication, dissemination events). Multi-level governance in Central and Eastern Europe can be more efficient if it supports civil involvement and extends it to the policy-making process of macro-regional strategies. Based on an evaluation of those practices, new civil initiatives should be launched at transboundary level. The new initiatives should follow a strong bottom-up approach in order to support viable solutions and to trigger the creativity of people to identify these solutions. Use of new methods such as a combination of policy-oriented approach with education,

training and participatory tools of e-Governments, e-Participation and European Citizens' Initiative; all these items are core parts of joint civil preparations to generate transboundary projects. These projects should result in viable solutions being implemented under stronger civil ownership in order to improve participatory democracy and trust-building between citizens and multi-level governance in Central and Eastern Europe.

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