

## 11 AVENUES. 11 PROPOSALS

### CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION. EUROPEAN CROSS-BORDER MECHANISM

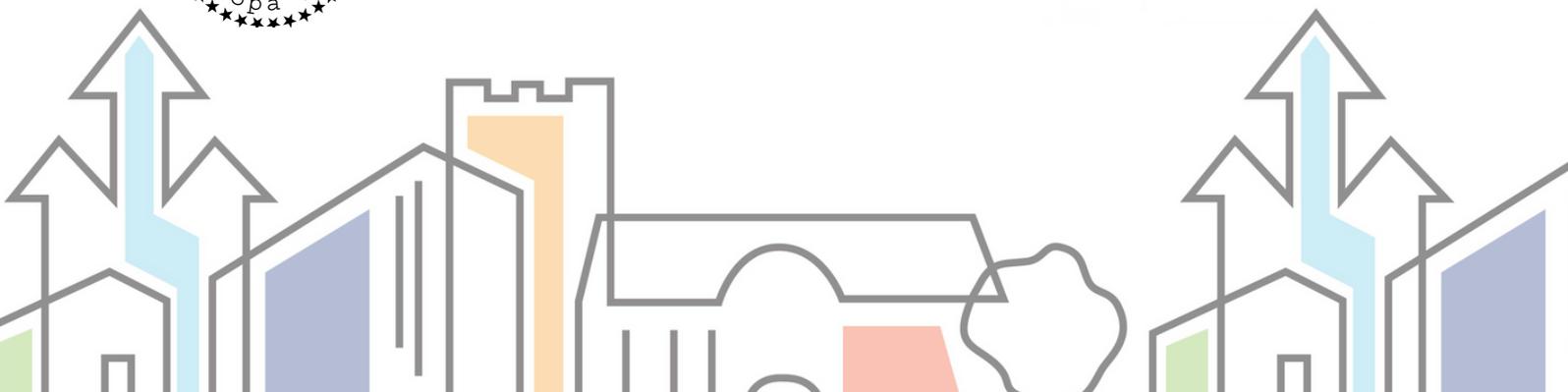
With the adoption of the EU Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027 accompanied by a unique Recovery Plan conditions have been created to develop a more just, resilient and sustainable Europe. A robust and new cohesion policy is one of the cornerstones of this ambitious endeavour.

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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Civil societies need to take a more active role in cross-border cooperation for the Central European region. Civil actors should strengthen partnerships with other key stakeholders in concrete policy fields. A new instrument, “European Cross-Border Mechanism” for supporting cross-border cooperation has also been created which opens new opportunities for citizens and their organisations to participate in new types of transnational projects.

Cross-border cooperation in Central Europe today shows a diverse historical heritage. On one hand, the region includes countries that for 40 years were behind the Iron Curtain. The events of 1989 became milestones for Hungary, Poland, Romania, the former East Germany and Czechoslovakia. The political change in these countries ended the era of the Cold War and let them enter into the European unification process. Other neighbouring countries were parts of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Compared with Central Europe, the Balkan countries underwent a more dramatic transformation in the early 1990’s. The EU accession involved countries of Central and Eastern Europe and Southeast Europe in new ways of collaboration, e.g., transboundary cooperation such as cross-border programmes (PHARE, Interreg) and

macro-regional cooperation that were included in the present EU Strategies for the Baltic Sea Region (2009), Danube Region (2010), Adriatic and Ionian Region (2014) and the Alpine Region (2016).

Three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall and 25 years of transboundary cooperation, an East-West divide can still be observed and numerous challenges and barriers exist in spite of efforts to strengthen mutual understanding, cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue.

A new instrument, “European Cross-Border Mechanism” of the new Interreg-programme for 2021-2027 has been designed to remove historical obstacles, legal and administrative barriers to a closer cooperation between the border regions and countries. The new tool may offer better solutions to problems that still exist at local level. In this way, the Mechanism can achieve its main aim, namely, to strengthen the sense of European citizenship in the local communities, regions and countries.

The Mechanism reflects a new approach to cross-border and macro-regional cooperation by promoting better communication, involving civil society actors, and strengthening the principle of subsidiarity. From a civil point of view, it is also positive to see



that the Mechanism has a bottom-up character, given that it is necessary to involve local actors who have experience and up-dated skills in problem-solving in order to remove long-standing legal and administrative barriers to cross-border cooperation. Implementation of the Mechanism will also involve “Cross-border Coordination Points” in the participating countries. These units will disseminate existing good practices in cross-border cooperation projects and assist also to bring initiatives such as urban development strategies to the macro-regional level. Civil society organisations with expertise and capacity for coordination can have the possibility to join activities of the coordination points.

However, there are also concerns that the establishment of the Mechanism is based on voluntary participation which may result in further fragmentation of legal practices and administrative systems in the border regions. In addition, the Mechanism does not address the problem of law harmonization in the non-EU members of cross-border and macro-regional cooperation. It is likely to be difficult to solve a given problem when the solution exists in a border region, but the solution cannot be applied on the other side of the border because of lack of legislation in force; or there may be no legislation on either side of the border and the solution is provided by a third country.

Furthermore, significant differences may emerge in the less developed regions when practices of the more developed regions are adopted. In this respect it is not the existence of legal barriers that should be mentioned but rather economic-social performance.

## Follow-up, proposals

Civil society actors in Central Europe should use new approaches to work with key stakeholders in concrete fields e.g., dissemination of day-to-day European practice in involving citizens in cross-border and macro-regional cooperation; communication strategies for strengthening the sense of European citizenship in the region; circular economy; green and digital transition; urban and rural development linked to transport connectivity; education; tourism; culture and youth employment. Development of an integrated approach, use of experience, skills and knowledge to deal with these areas are necessary in order to launch transnational civil actions in a professional way and thus to contribute to achieving the main goals of cross-border cooperation. Civil actors should also pay attention to specific problems that may arise from transboundary cooperation.



Removal of legal and administrative barriers between regions and non-EU members is expected to be a big challenge for civil stakeholders. Therefore, exchange of knowledge and the use of good practice are crucial parts of their preparations.

As regards the European Cross-Border Mechanism, it is worth thinking about setting up a “civil” section within the Mechanism. This unit could function as a Civil Monitoring Working Group directly linked to DG Regio. The main aim of the Working Group would be to constantly monitor the steps that are needed to remove legal and administrative obstacles to cross-border cooperation projects that will involve civil stakeholders from the non-EU member countries. The new Interreg programme for 2021-2027 provides funding to finance activities of institutions such as Managing Authorities and Monitoring Committees in each country that participates in cross-border cooperation across Europe.

The funding of the new Interreg programme could also be used for financing the Civil Monitoring Working Group. All this means that the Working Group would consist of units and be integrated into the institutional setting (Monitoring Committees) of each participating country. For this aim, the European Economic and Social Committee should be mobilized; it stresses the importance of continuously monitoring the correct application of the European Cross-Border Mechanism and has made commitments on a greater involvement of civil actors in the implementation of the new Interreg programme. A similar supporting role could be played by the Committee of the Regions.

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