

## 11 AVENUES. 11 PROPOSALS

COMMUNICATION. EUROPE CLOSER TO CITIZENS. SOCIAL MEDIA. VOX HUMANA.

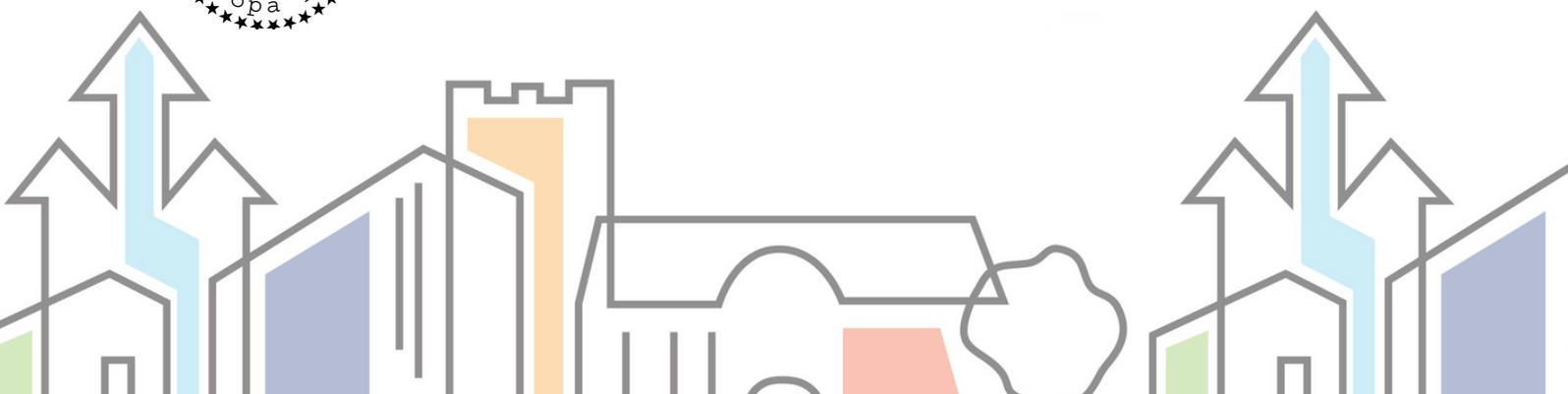
With the adoption of the EU Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027 accompanied by a unique Recovery Plan conditions have been created to develop a more just, resilient and sustainable Europe. A robust and new cohesion policy is one of the cornerstones of this ambitious endeavour.

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.



Co-funded by  
the European Union



Communication of the European Union towards citizens needs to be completely redesigned. New perspectives, goals and innovative ways of communication should be created to bring Europe closer to its citizens. Civil society actors should play a much bigger role in the process of rebuilding the image of Europe. Pro-European civil organisations should engage in this process and develop new approaches, and also use more of the possibilities offered by the digital transition and social media.

The EU needs to build a clear self-image from the ground up and some basic questions will be addressed here: What to communicate? (What is to be sold?), why communicate? (Why sell?) How to communicate? (Who are the “buyers” and how to meet their demand?)

Answering those questions is imperative because “services” and “products” such as the four freedoms of movement of goods, services, people and capital which had made the EU attractive for its citizens, disappeared within only a few days. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe, citizens have been deeply shocked to see the re-appearance of bans on free movement and reduced access to food, medicine and health care.

Moreover, not only products and services have become less available but also rights and freedoms of citizens have been curtailed in daily life. Therefore, the EU needs to manage the health crisis in a more effective way; restart economies; abolish barriers in order to safeguard citizen’s rights and freedoms of movement; and to ensure other main achievements of the European project such as solidarity, equal opportunities and non-discrimination. These are prerequisites for creating an attractive image of the Union and launching an efficient communication with citizens.

Social media channels can also be used to attain these aims. Social media has been turned into an influential tool to let people’s voices be heard. Social media poses challenges as well as opens up new possibilities for communication between the EU and its citizens. Disinformation and fake news distort people’s voice on Europe, particularly in times of digitalization and in the present health crisis when social contacts are reduced, and the reliability of information is hard to check. Disinformation and fake news have become a threat to communication between the EU and its citizens.

The Covid-19 crisis has directed the attention of citizens to areas that were priority fields of EU communication before the outbreak of the pandemic:



Youth employment, health and social issues such as access to services, taking care of elderly people, e-health solutions, education and training topics including learning problems of students with migration background at schools, early school leaving, lifelong learning with focus on non-formal education of adult and older learners to improve their knowledge and skills in the digital transition. These fields, in particular, employment and health are attracting strong public attention during the pandemic.

The fields listed above should be central topics of a newly designed EU communication. Accordingly, the communication domain has been incorporated into the Cohesion Policy as well. More concretely, the EU intends to support locally-led development strategies and sustainable urban development strategies which help to bring Europe closer to citizens. Thus, the EU communication goals have been brought into the regional/territorial dimension which requires from civil actors that they develop new approaches in order to participate in this process. In addition, a new EU instrument, “European Cross-Border Mechanism” has been established within the scope of the Interreg-programme for 2021-2027 with the aim of removing historical obstacles, administrative and legal barriers to cooperation between the border regions and countries. The Mechanism can thus strengthen the sense of European citizenship in the regions and countries.

Although, important steps have been taken to establish a more effective communication, at present, the EU does not have a single communication strategy targeting civil society. Sources such as grants and applications are not sufficient and are available for a limited number of civil organisations. These fragmented structures are not a substitute for the complete redesign of the EU’s communication toward its citizens.

## Follow-up, proposals

Combatting disinformation and fake news is a crucial part of a new civil contribution to EU communication issues. Citizens and their organisations should develop new approaches to handling disinformation and fake news that distort people’s voice on Europe. Civil organisations have started similar initiatives in Central Europe. Those actions should be monitored closely.

Cohesion Policy also offers several new opportunities for civil society stakeholders who have already been involved in local and urban development strategies. Civil actors could add a “citizens-centred” approach to deepen this process of dialogue, partnership and cooperation. Threats and opportunities associated with climate change, digital transition, the devastating consequences of the health crisis for employment and edu-



cation are core issues which can foster a new approach and innovative actions under ownership of civil society stakeholders. Following this line, such actions can be linked to communicating future local and urban development projects aimed at tackling common European challenges that strongly affect local communities and the urban population.

In a similar way, innovative civil actions can be connected to cross-border and macro-regional cooperation as well. It is worth thinking about setting up an online platform with civil partner organisations dealing with communication issues and participating also in cooperation in the four macro-regions. The aim of the platform would be to provide a discussion paper with proposals including identification of policy fields where innovative actions should be launched in order to reach citizens more effectively and address their expectations and needs in the macro-regions.

The new EU instrument, “European Cross-Border Mechanism” can also assist the implementation of civil innovative actions. The aims and functioning of the Mechanism should be taken into consideration when elaborating future civil communication projects.

© European House Budapest, 2021

Published in the frame of the 'Meet the Citizen 2.0' project.

Contents of the publication do not necessarily reflect the opinion or the position of the European Commission.

The project is co-funded by the European Commission.

February 2021



Co-funded by  
the European Union

