

CITIZENS OF MACRO-REGIONS FOR A STRONGER EUROPE 2018-2020

PROJECT CONCLUDING IDEAS

A decorative graphic at the top of the page features a large red circle on the left containing two stylized hands, one orange and one teal. To the right of the red circle is a teal circle with diagonal white lines.

StrongerEU through macro-regions

Since 2009 the European Union has launched four macro-regional strategies such as Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, for the Danube Region, for the Adriatic and Ionian Region as well as for the Alpine Region. Although these strategies offer different approaches, they share a common point namely to involve civil society organisations (CSOs) closely into their implementation process.

Macro-regional strategies created a clear framework for the involvement of CSOs in various policy fields. Some of these domains like environmental protection, education and culture allowed civil actors to interfere more in the policy-making process at local and regional level as well. CSOs obtained at the same time more knowledge and practical skills how to deal with the management of policies mentioned above, for example communication, dissemination of results or use of working methods with representatives of the EU institutions. All in all, macro-regional strategies have been served as an experimental area for learning and participatory processes helping CSOs to shape policy-making at macro-regional and European level.

In this sense, the present project „Citizens of macro-regions for a stronger Europe” brought innovation for CSOs. During the almost three years of its implementation the project has accumulated unique experiences, namely how to increase the potential of CSOs in a more efficient way of influencing policy-making.

“Citizens of macro-regions for a stronger Europe” is a project building on the still unused potential of the macro-regions of Europe. The ten project participating civil society organisations from Austria, Denmark, Germany, France, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia cover in balanced manner all the four macro-regions, the Baltic Sea, the Danube, the Adria-Ionian and the Alpine Regions.

CSOs have learned their lessons from the participation in the four EU-macro-regional strategies. In general, the participating CSOs are agreed that the four EU macro-regional strategies provide great opportunities for capacity-building and exchange of experience. Furthermore, regional strategies have established the necessary structural and organisational framework for CSOs to participate in the development of new cooperation forms, in the implementation and future monitoring of the respective strategies and to strengthen the interregional dialogue and understanding and bridge-building function between civil society and active citizens in the region as well.

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The lessons learnt have also shown that civil actors in the four macro-regions should represent a broader cross-section of society and in a better organised way. In this regard those CSOs could better interfere in the design and implementation process of the macro-regional policies who have been specialised in domains both in terms of horizontal and sectoral policies e.g. environment, education, non-discrimination and equal opportunities covered by the macro-regional strategies.



The four EU macro-regional strategies also reflect the diverging patterns of historical and social development, different attitudes and mindset of local, regional and national decision-makers. All these factors heavily influence the effective participation and involvement of citizens in all aspects of shaping policies at regional level which can have further implications for Europe.

The existing differences mentioned above made CSOs difficult to apply the meaning of the European citizenship or macro-regional identities to actions that support civil actors shaping policies in the macro-regions and through this, generating decisive effects on the future of the European project.

Apart from the specialisation in policy fields many CSOs have been involved in the four macro-regional strategies to discuss EU-matters from a civil perspective which led to a better communication with citizens. In line with this the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) stressed the importance of communication by underlying that all actors should be involved in the communication and at all levels. Project participants of EUSBSR also emphasised that the communication should concentrate more on ordinary citizens and make them more familiar with the benefits and added value of realising macro-regional strategies within the EU.



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Stakeholders of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) laid big emphasis on the improved culture of the horizontal cooperation at national level. In addition, the need for strengthening the dialogue with NGOs had been also prioritised in the EUSDR by admitting that neither local authorities nor NGOs are in general aware of the potential for regional development that can be carried out by the EUSDR. It has been also mentioned that overcoming of organisational weaknesses e.g. by national coordinators of the EUSDR can assist to reaching out the local communities and NGOs and thus to improve the awareness of having a common European identity in the Danube region. The existing weaknesses of the EUSDR pose also a threat for the use of further potential for project development and partnerships.

With regard to partnerships the EUSBSR was successful in creating new networks across all political levels and among actors representing the public and private sector and the NGOs as well. The European Union Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP) gave also impetus to involve civil society actors in its work in a more institutionalised way. Representatives of CSOs joined stakeholder seminars, action groups, Annual Forum and the stakeholders' platform of EUSALP.



With the length of 2,850 kilometres the Danube is the second longest river in Europe. Originating in the Black Forest in central Europe it runs south-eastwards across ten countries with four other countries in its basin to reach the Black Sea. There are 89 cities, 342 bridges and 62 dams along the river. The Danube area covers about one fifth of the area of the European Union with about 115 million inhabitants. Capital cities along the Danube river are Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest, Belgrade.

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The current project proved to be successful in the selection of topics for debating policy issues of the EU-macro-regional strategies at events in six European cities. The following topics were identified to discuss with a wide range of civil participants in the cities as follows:

1. Investing in democracy and values
(Paris, 13-14 December 2018)
2. Human connectivity
(Budapest, 14-15 February 2019)
3. Increased voters turnout at the 2019 EP elections
(Ulm, 6-7 May 2019)
4. Discovering the value of citizens' participation
(Bucharest, 26-28 June 2019)
5. Challenging EU scepticism
(Milan, 26-27 September 2019)
6. Creating citizens' friendly EU institutions
(Bratislava, 28-29 November 2019)

The selected topics highlighted added-values with which the project can contribute to the macro-regional strategies. In the light of big challenges such as rise of populism, migration crisis and climate changes which the EU, its regions, local communities and its citizens recently face with the project placed more focus on hot policy issues that were put on the European agenda.

The major challenges for Europe will have obvious implications for any attempt that aim to achieve a stronger Europe and to define tasks and role of macro-regions in this creation process. In this line the project paves the way for an increased civil involvement in the future in order to continue debating hot policy issues and challenges that can have serious consequences on the macro- and EU-level policy-making. The project will thus take also a further step to strengthen the interface function of macro-regional strategies between the EU institutions and citizens.



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The projects' focus on launching a debate on policy issues connecting to challenges e.g. populism, EU-scepticism, mobilisation for the 2019 European parliamentary elections or the protection of European values of democracy and role of law showed a clear shift from the top-down approach to policy-making and policy implementation which pervaded the design and implementation of the EU-macro-regional strategies in the past years.

The project applied a bottom-up approach that combined the need of citizens' participation in shaping cross-cutting policies with the tasks of managing major challenges that heavily affect the society throughout Europe. The project outcomes have thus been suited better to overcome traditional sectoral policies, hierarchies and boundaries and to promote participatory governance.

As a crucial further element of the bottom-up approach, the project has strived for developing new forms of cooperation with citizens and CSOs in the macro-regions and thus for contributing to an up-to-the-minute, credible communication between civil actors and decision-makers of the local and regional governments.

The project events in the six cities created a common platform for ordinary citizens having a say in the matter of "non-usual suspects" and also for CSOs who have been specialising on concrete EU-policy issues covered by the macro-regional strategies. The project took hence a balanced approach by conveying the messages of ordinary citizens and that of professional CSOs to the local and regional media.



A European Union (EU) macro-regional strategy is a policy framework which allows countries located in the same region to jointly tackle and find solutions to problems or to better use the potential they have in common (e.g. pollution, navigability, worldwide business competition, etc.). By doing so, they benefit from strengthened cooperation, with the aim of making their policies more efficient than if they had addressed the issues in isolation.

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After the project events the civil participants came to the conclusion that a strong Europe should be built up in order to meet the major challenges of today. Neither the European governance nor national governments have been able to tackle challenges that brought fundamental changes into the everyday life of the European citizens. The major challenges leap over the European and the national boundaries. Failures and weaknesses of governance in managing uncertainties, destructive trends and crisis situations arose from those challenges have opened up CSOs new ways to reconsider how to be influential in the policy-making process.

Following this line, during the project events those CSOs were also addressed who played an active role for example in migration crisis that hit hardly several territories of the present four EU-macro-regions. Those CSOs exercised significant political pressure on local, regional, national and European decision-makers. The strong involvement of CSOs in managing challenges that had appeared in the form of migration and refugee crisis and affect directly the life of local communities and regions, helped to mobilise citizens to take a stand in favour of or against those hot issues.

Addressing current European challenge of migration and refugees within the frame of macro-regional strategies can be also followed in the case of the European Union Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR). By taking recent developments in the region into account stakeholders of EUSAIR consider including a new dimension in its strategy and its Action Plan to support youth, cultural and educational exchanges, and the integration of refugees and migrants into the labour market as well.

As regards the challenging policy issue of EU-scepticism a huge number of citizens and CSOs throughout Europe made indisputably a strong contribution to the successful outcome of the European parliamentary election in 2019 when pro-European forces in the European Parliament (EP) gained the power to shape a new Europe designed to safeguard democracy, the rule of law and solidarity in a much better way than before. In this aspect it is interesting to highlight the cooperation patterns that had been created between CSOs and pro-European forces who achieved a clear victory in the EP-elections in those territories which are parts of the existing four EU-macro-regions.



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The involvement of pro-European CSOs in the EP-elections provided evidence that they were able to shape the European project by supporting policies for making a strong Europe and they were also capable to strengthen the European awareness of citizens during the election campaign.

After the EP-elections many of CSOs continued their active participation in EU-level policy-making. Respect of fundamental rights and the fight against racism and intolerance and all forms of discrimination represent those European values for whose protection CSOs together with pro-European parties again have mobilised voters in a big number at local and regional elections. As a result of it populist-authoritarian forces were defeated who declared to undermine the foundations of Europe.

With regard to other types of challenges to the four macro-regions the issue of funding must be highlighted. It is obvious that without adequate funding all efforts of CSOs to encourage citizens to participate in macro- and EU-level policy-making for achieving a stronger Europe will fail. The EU-multiannual financial framework 2021-2027 will be of crucial importance in this regard.

Programmes and initiatives such as Interreg for supporting CSOs to be better involved in the policy-making of the macro-regions shall gain more funding from the next EU-budget. The accessibility and interoperability between the different funding programmes for supporting the involvement of CSOs shall be also ensured from the future budget.

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The new European Commission adopted recommendations on five political goals that shall be accomplished by EU-funding programmes in the next budgetary period. Goals for achieving “a greener Europe”, “a more social Europe” and “a Europe closer to citizens” provide a proper framework to guarantee the accessibility and interoperability between different funding programmes. These goals also reflect the need that CSOs with knowledge, skills and focus on concrete domains such as health, environment, employment, education and communication shall be involved more in programmes and initiatives aimed at increasing citizens’ participation in policy-making at macro-regional and EU-level.

In this line, the Commission’s initiative on launching a wide range of discussions on the future of Europe plays also a crucial role for the European citizens. In the coming years citizens and CSOs who have taken part in many programmes and initiatives aimed at achieving a stronger Europe shall be active again in order to influence the on-going discussions on the future of Europe. Civil actors can give thus a further impetus for shaping the EU-macro-regional strategies by strengthening their bridge-building function and making those strategies successful as an interface between EU institutions and citizens reducing the distance between them.



- 2009 - EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region
- 2011 - EU Strategy for the Danube Region
- 2014 - EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region
- 2015 - EU Strategy for the Alpine Region

THE FIGURES



4

MACRO-REGIONS

19
+
8

EU MEMBER COUNTRIES

NON-EU COUNTRIES



340

MILLION

PEOPLE

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This booklet is published in the framework of the „Citizens of macro-regions for a stronger Europe” project.

Project partners:

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RO Pro Democracy Association

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The project is supported by the European Commission.

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



Co-funded by the
Europe for Citizens Programme
of the European Union

Designed and printed in Hungary

February 2020



