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CONTENT

INTRODUCTION	5
CHAPTER 1 The state of civil society in the four macro-regions	6
CHAPTER 2 Democracy and values; bottom-up approach, citizens' ownership; partnership and participation; multilevel governance	8
CHAPTER 3 Meeting the citizens, human contacts, confidence-building; tourism	10
CHAPTER 4 Covid-19; solidarity; lessons learned; increased EU integration	12
CHAPTER 5 Youth involvement in macro-regional policies	15
CHAPTER 6 The Conference on the Future of Europe and its impact on the current legislative term for and by citizens	17
CHAPTER 7 Circular economy/sustainable development/green Europe; visions for 2030	19
CHAPTER 8 Creativity/inventiveness/digitalisation/smart solutions	21
CHAPTER 9 Non-EU member states; possibility of EU accession	23
CHAPTER 10 Communication / presenting macro-regional possibilities	25

Project presentation

EU-dagen i Mariager den 28. august 2021

Welcome

at the info stand run by civil society representatives from
nine European countries!

We came to Mariager to meet you and present the draft result of our Shadow Report project, a genuine citizens' reflection on an EU document on macro-regional policies. Our work addresses several topical issues ranging from everyday democracy to youth involvement in an European spirit.

Make your voice heard and join our endeavour to shape the future of Europe!

How?

Read our proposed Report and contribute to its final wording with a brief text what you should send to us: info@europeanhouse.hu by 15 September 2021.

Thank you for visiting us and putting Mariager, an attractive place on the map of EU Baltic Sea macro-regional activities.

Hope to hear from you soon and looking forward to meeting you again here in Mariager in 2022!

Mariager, 28 August 2021

The EU Shadow Report project team

<https://europeanhouse.hu/the-shadow-report/>

INTRODUCTION

Can an EU document be inspiring? The question may seem provocative, but our answer is a definite yes.

This time, the European Commission prepared a biennial report on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies (covering the 2018-2020 period) – and the end-result is a detailed and well-elaborated document. One might say a typical EU product.

And this is where civil society organisations come in, providing their insights and specific suggestions related to the Commission's report – observations based on the everyday lives and experiences of citizens living in the macro-regions. Eventually, these comments do make the whole debate inspiring, uplifting.

We are not competing in any way with the European Commission's document. Our 'shadow report' is not a political analysis, but a public reflection involving 9 civil society organisations from the 4 macro-regions, as well as a significant number of additional civil contributions. Another great example of the bottom-up approach, demonstrating the benefits of citizens' involvement in shaping a document with stimulating ideas.

Our report addresses not only the topics covered by the Commission paper (e.g., Green Deal, digitalisation, enlargement), but also brings in new elements: state of civil society in the macro-regions, human contacts, solidarity, raising public awareness or increased feeling of ownership.

The strength of this initiative lies in bringing together, for the first time, civil society organisations from the 4 macro-regions – giving them the opportunity to work together on specific issues, well beyond the 'Brussels bubble'.

This is what gives this report a genuine European dimension, hopefully making it a significant contribution to the Conference on the Future of Europe as well. At the same time, putting citizens and CSOs on the political map of macro-regions.

United in diversity, says the EU's motto. This is also true for the present report, revealing the different – and sometimes contradictory – approaches of the contributors. Many direct quotes are included in order to make the document even more authentic and engaging.

In addition, specific suggestions at the end of each chapter present useful ideas and pave the way for next steps.

Civil society organisations contributing to the report accomplish another important task: they promote macro-regions, a relatively new element of EU policy, among citizens. This makes them a strategic partner on the macro-regional level, justifying their increased involvement in the governing structures of macro-regions.

Bringing the European Union closer to its citizens – this is another well-known EU slogan, impressive but difficult to turn into reality. Reports like the one you are about to read now serve exactly this purpose: they reduce the distance between EU institutions and people living hundreds of kilometres away from the 'Brussels bubble'.

CHAPTER 1

The state of civil society in the four macro-regions (Baltic Sea, Danube, Adriatic-Ionian and Alpine)

“Not only business is hit hard by the Covid crisis, but civil society too. Civil society organisations need to get restarted after the pandemic – it is a kind of year zero. We need them and the challenge could be overcome by awareness and support from governments and the EU.” This precise summary comes from Kurt from Denmark.

No wonder that Stefan from Germany also mentions the current coronavirus situation. “The biggest challenge for civil society organisations is to survive in times of Covid and economic crisis. How to overcome this is a tough and good question. It depends a lot on attitude: keeping the faith, looking for solutions, being creative, identifying new coalitions and funding opportunities.”

There is unanimous agreement on one thing: these organisations play a vital role in society. As Blaž from Slovenia notes, “they contribute to better decision-making, presenting new ideas and proposals for better governance on different levels”. The representative of a Polish NGO adds that “they involve local inhabitants in initiatives related to the development of the region, and they promote values of civil society like transparency, cooperation, and non-discrimination”.

As Jitka from Slovakia points out, “it is the common interest of civil society organisations from the 4 macro-regions to play a more active and influential role in shaping macro-regional policies. This attitude leads to an increased ownership feeling.” To make citizens more involved in macro-regional strategies, public consultations could be organised, showing details of the strategies and how they can affect the development of regions.

However, the Covid crisis is not the only problem affecting NGOs of the macro-regions. Magda, a representative of a Polish civil society organisation says: “Barriers that NGOs face are usually connected to low financial stability (cash flow), language barrier (poor level of English command), lack of experience in administrative procedures for international projects or international cooperation, limited knowledge of international networks, people working part-time / on a voluntary basis, meaning they cannot engage 100% as they have a regular job.”

Igor from Ukraine identifies two main challenges: “Poor cooperation between the government and civil society organisations. Civil society organisations' limited access to funding.” He thinks that these organisations need to make their achievements as obvious as possible in order to prove their expertise and the ability to ensure that funds are managed in a transparent and efficient manner.

NGOs' number one expertise, according to László, a Hungarian representative, is that “they know better than politicians how common people think, what the topics affecting their everyday lives are and what their demands and expectations for the future are”. When we talk about ‘bringing Europe closer to citizens’, we must also make efforts to bring local and regional communities closer to the macro-regions in Europe. Communities must be aware of the benefits of being part of a macro-region.

Civil society organisations are also needed when developing targeted solutions to often complex societal challenges – this is an example that Anders from Sweden mentions. He thinks of another problem that the organisations face: they have a hard time recruiting new

members and the members are getting older. The interest in taking part in developing our societies has become lower, and people prefer spending their free time with family, friends and physical training.

Following new trends would be vital for NGOs. “New ways of influencing policies have popped up and the old-fashioned formal way – running an organisation with all its administrative burdens – is not attractive enough,” writes Meelis from Estonia.

Another aspect that everyone agrees with: NGOs have the role of contributing where there is a need in society, but where the state and other institutions do not have sufficient resources to solve it. Iuliana, a colleague from Romania comments: “Most organisations focus on providing services for disadvantaged groups, but I think the most important are NGOs acting as watchdogs. Sometimes governmental authorities deviate from their role of protecting the interests of citizens, and NGOs intervene and mobilize citizens to solve the problem.”

As Marja-Liisa from Finland concludes “ Trust citizens and don’t look at them as a disturbing factor”.

Specific suggestions

- The revival of civil society and CSOs should be a topic in the EU recovery package. An initial point could be doing research about the state of civil society after the pandemic. A recovery plan for civil society could stress the importance of working cross-borders and it could be done macro-region wise. (Kurt, Denmark)
- Organising an annual meeting of civil society organisations from the 4 macro-regions, but not along traditional lines; an event with strong cultural character could be a solution. (Juraj, Slovakia)
- Systematically increase the involvement of CSO representatives on partnership bases in the governance structures of macro-regions (Miklos, Hungary)

Additional quotes

“Civil society organisations are among the most important watchdog organisations in our political system. Against the backdrop of growing right-wing populism and fake news, they are more important than ever before.” (Christiana, Austria)

“The biggest challenge is probably the modern political situation that is quite divided and unstable. There is also the problem of low civic, social and political engagement of citizens, especially of younger generations.” (Stefano, Italy)

CHAPTER 2

Democracy and values; bottom-up approach, citizens' ownership; partnership and participation; multilevel governance

The best motivation for European citizens is to see the effects of their engagement in local participation (for example when politicians discuss their decisions with citizens and invite them to local council meetings), and to see how their opinions have been taken into account, influencing the decisions. "For that reason, it is of utmost importance that such discussions are immediately related to the daily lives of people at the local level," notes a Hannes, from an Austrian NGO.

Involving and informing citizens is something that most civil society organisations find essential. As Éva from Hungary writes: "We need to provide detailed information on what the EU actually does for us, what specific projects it has financed, what specific opportunities it offers, what kind of tenders are available."

Integrating civil society in the development and implementation of macro-regional strategies is an absolute priority. Darja from Slovenia distinguishes two major tasks: "First of all, citizens should be aware of the existence of macro-regions and regional policies. Secondly, it is important to show existing cooperation, integration and exchange among countries of a macro-region, and potentials that could be developed in the future. This way, citizens would see their interest in an active participation."

Anders from Sweden is a bit more sceptical and thinks that in the short run, "it is not realistic to reach a level of general awareness among our citizens of the existence and importance of macro-regional strategies".

When asked about what factors impede organised civil society participation in macro-regional decision-making processes, a Latvian NGO answers: "Capacity and knowledge. If organisations are fighting for their day-to-day living, they do not have enough time to invest in their expertise, and to participate in the decision-making process."

Other problems might also hinder active involvement. As Meelis from Estonia writes, "since the processes are normally kept closed, when opened for consultation, the timeframe is short and would require quite a bit of focusing, therefore the participation remains limited".

Civil society organisations often bring together professional research and project management teams with a good knowledge and clear understanding of particular issues in their macro-regions. Igor from Ukraine has found that "a bureaucratic approach on the European Commission's and the national level is the key obstacle".

What could be done? Aneta from a Slovak NGO suggests that the idea of the Conference on the Future of Europe should be promoted on a macro-regional level, using the various events / programmes. The Conference should not be only a talking shop, but a convincing reference point in disseminating a strong European message among the citizens of macro-regions.

As a Polish civil society organisation adds, "macro-regional policies can focus on promoting macro-regional identities like Central European, Carpathian, Alpine, and other. They constitute parts of a bigger European commonwealth."

Ideally, there should be a greater understanding of the importance of the bottom-up approach and the involvement of the third sector, civil society, and citizens. Erasmo from an Italian NGO says that "it is essential to establish bottom-up cooperation, involving the social

partners, socio-economic agents and civil society organisations, broadening dialogue and cooperation on several levels”. Stefan from Germany underlines that “organised civil society participation is based on creating a structural dialogue in a bottom-up process, and finally displaying different opinions and competence.”

Magda from Poland adds: “Promote more Annual For a; local NGOs can organise mini public events (deliberative forms of democracy) where the idea of macro-regionalism can be presented to citizens and best practices shared. All these should happen on the VERY local level

Regional and macro-regional policies can influence the promotion of pro-European attitudes by encouraging citizens to think pro-European in every way, by promoting a better standard of living, investment, and more generally improving the quality of life. Pejo, a youth representative from Croatia gives an example: “One of the regional policies is sustainable development, a main goal of Europe for the future, because it is planned in advance to ensure a quality environment for the people who will live after us, our children and grandchildren.”

Specific suggestions

- Integrating civil society organisations more as partners into the process of elaboration of regional strategic documents, development programmes, EU programmes, including their representatives into decision-making bodies. (NN, Poland)
- NGOs need to develop consultation and learning tools for more effective participation and influencing policy decision-making. (Stanka, Serbia)
- The new “Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values” programme should be used to promote civil dialogue on macro-regional level as well. (Miklos, Hungary)
- Early education is important to make citizens understand that their involvement is important, they need to be aware from school / college. (Iuliana, Romania)

Additional quotes

“I think democracy in the EU is already functioning quite well. We could improve it by telling more about how the EU works.” (NN, Lithuania)

“The way for citizens to get ownership is to involve them. To invite them to participate in activities in the different topics of the strategy. It means real action, not meeting talking heads from governments and universities.” (Kurt, Denmark)

CHAPTER 3

Meeting the citizens, human contacts, confidence-building; tourism

After the Covid pandemic, what would be more comforting than re-establishing human contacts? This would have beneficial effects on the personal, but also on the economic side.

“When we talk about sustainability, the Covid-19 crisis has to be mentioned. The pandemic has had a devastating effect on tourism and brought significant changes into the sector (high unemployment, health & safety measures, new habits and attitudes of citizens),” warns Helen, a representative of an NGO from Hungary.

European citizens can once again enjoy travelling, and as Ursula from France recalls, “the advantage of travelling is to discover others and appreciate the European motto *Unis dans la diversité*” (United in diversity).

Cultural identities are neither fixed, nor uniform – human culture is made of permanent exchanges and contacts between individuals and groups. Therefore, there cannot be a macro-regional strategy overcoming national borders without as many contacts as possible inside that macro-region.

In other words, the making of a macro-regional policy must not be the privilege of a few politicians or stakeholders. Citizens need to be involved directly to give the whole process a ‘human touch’.

Building trust in macro-regional strategies is about working together, on a cross-sectorial and transnational level. Consultation instruments give citizens the feeling that they are not excluded from processes related to the development and implementation of strategies. You end up learning that we have much more in common compared to what differs.

“Although the EU was not created originally to serve the citizens, but rather the states and public administrations, nowadays everyone knows about the importance of reaching the hearts and minds of citizens. People are not born EU citizens, they need to develop into EU citizens,” as Christiana from an Austrian civil society organisation stresses why it is essential to involve people.

As for cultural tourism and cultural heritage, they cover lots of areas – not only history, geography, culture and arts of communities participating in macro-regional cooperation, but also efficient planning, management skills and communication. This is a rather complex topic civil organisations need to deal with, in cooperation with a large number of stakeholders working at different levels.

Without the necessary management and communication skills, NGOs will be not able to take an active part in funding programmes aimed at promoting sustainable cultural tourism and preserving cultural heritage in the macro-regions. Learning is very important in this complex, multicultural environment – it can be done by developing common ideas, exchanging experiences, and testing pilot projects. As Stefano from Italy says an innovative project could be, for example, participatory tourism which is responsible tourism including every stakeholder of a certain destination in order to create authentic, new products which later on affect their everyday life.

European citizens and their organisations have an important role to play in promoting sustainable cultural tourism and preserving cultural heritage. The main objective is not to promote mass tourism, but rather innovative forms of tourism – more suited to establishing

human contacts. For instance, the growing interest in youth tourism is becoming increasingly important all over Europe.

As all macro-regions have interesting touristic attractions, promoting them also contributes to bringing these macro-regions closer to each other. It is amazing to see how different EU regions are – even the ones closest to each other. At the same time the Obelisk at Jennersdorf in the east of Austria was set up as the common landmark of Austria, Hungary and Slovenia; it became a symbol of connecting people, culture, history and traditions in the Danube macro-region.

Meelis from Estonia gives an excellent example: the cross-border Interreg Estonia–Latvia programme has been able to create many interesting projects for culture (<https://estlat.eu/>). Or, as Stanka from Serbia mentions, the Danube region also offers fantastic cultural tourism sites for active tourism in the Balkans.

“It seems to me that the EU is doing a good job in improving the touristic offer within EU regions. More should be done for regions that also include candidate countries,” writes Aleksandar from Macedonia.

The European Capital of Culture programme – managed by the European Commission – is another relevant initiative. Establishing cooperation between twin cities of macro-regions is one more great way of promoting human, cultural or natural values. United in diversity: a diversity that we should all get to know as much as possible.

Specific suggestions

- My macro-region tourist card – a macro-regional agrotourism / identity tourism digital platform could accommodate the macro-regional tourist card by giving direct access to all regional businesses registered on the platform, as well as providing sizeable discounts. This could connect potential tourists to local producers. (NN, Romania)
- NGOs should use their own international contacts, initiating cross-border programmes, organising exchange programmes, and seeking the necessary financial support. (Istvan, Hungary)
- Developing and continuously updating a calendar of programmes with cultural events of macro-regions (Stavros, Greece)

Additional quotes

“It is obvious that the macro-regional strategies are about people and our lives with challenges and opportunities.” (NN, Sweden)

“Trust is needed to encourage collaboration and human contacts are the best way to develop trust.” (Maria, Belgium)

CHAPTER 4

Covid-19; solidarity; lessons learned; increased EU integration

“People start talking to strangers in their neighbourhood, they are more caring about each other’s health.” Anders from Sweden sees positive changes as well after the Covid pandemic.

However, negative feelings prevail when NGOs from macro-regions recall the impact of the coronavirus crisis. László from Hungary writes: “The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has clearly shown the weaknesses of the European project. The most visible achievements of sixty years of European integration were eliminated within only a few days when border controls and bans on the free movement of people, goods and services were introduced.”

As Jitka, the representative of an NGO from Slovakia puts it, “the pandemic revealed how slow and inefficient the EU decision-making process is when facing unexpected situations. The selfish and inward-looking attitude of governments further aggravated the situation.”

Expectations towards EU leaders have been particularly high due to the economic and social effects of the pandemic. Blaž from Slovenia sums up like this: “social exclusion of all generations, especially elderly people, unemployment”. Anders underlines the negative impact “on specific business sectors like hospitality, tourism and transport. Staff in health care overburdened and exhausted, leaving for other jobs.”

But there might be lessons learned from this European (and global) crisis. Ursula from France is confident: “It was difficult to anticipate the pandemic, but the advantage could be to build more Europe because the Covid situation shows us that together we are stronger.”

Unity and integration are seen as ideal solutions by other NGOs too. As there is no common European approach but only individual responses in each member state, Anders warns that it is even “difficult to provide an answer for the whole macro-region”. He proposes an interesting solution to this new situation: “Travel companies and hospitality industry need to adjust to fewer business trips and fewer conferences, but on the other hand more tourism in the macro-regions. It is important to secure cross-border collaboration also in time of pandemics.”

Local and regional initiatives have indeed gained more importance with the Covid situation. As Meelis from Estonia explains, “the closed borders created a lot of stress for inhabitants whose normal lives have been affected heavily. The Estonian-Latvian Valga/Valka border town solved this for its inhabitants without problem, enabling them to cross the border freely.”

Jan from Sweden thinks that external support would be much needed. “The Nordic and Baltic cooperation has been very much hurt by Covid-19. There should be some kind of recovery and resilience programme targeted at the Baltic Sea macro-region,” he recommends.

The situation of civil society has also been heavily affected in most macro-regions. Christiana from an Austrian NGO, for example, writes: “Many civil society organisations had to close down, either not being able to pay their staff or not being able to deliver their usual tasks. The long-term effect cannot be seen yet, but there are fears that some sectors will never recover.”

At the same time, the increased digitalization accompanying the pandemic may have helped others. Here is an example given by Erasmo from an Italian NGO: “The Covid-19 pandemic has fostered the use of digital media and online conferencing systems and has highlighted

the opportunities that digitalisation offers for citizen participation at different levels. Indeed, in recent months, civic participation has shifted towards online forums and conferences; these modalities have helped to involve citizens in decision-making processes in a faster, broader and more inclusive way.”

The other side of the coin: the pandemic has also highlighted how access to digital tools and the digital world in general is not the same for everyone and often depends on the socio-economic conditions of the individuals. To overcome this problem, civil society has made enormous efforts during this Covid period, trying to provide digital services and tools to those who did not have access to them.

As for the role of civil society actors in the Covid-19 crisis, the delivery of food and medicine, health care, or teaching of children who had to stop normal school education are some demonstrative patterns of the civil contribution to maintaining life in Europe during the pandemic.

László has noted other types of changes as well: “In hard times people may change their attitudes towards life and values. Not so long ago, freedom, democracy, rule of law, and solidarity were perceived as abstract notions connected to political discourses, rather than parts of urgent needs of people as it is the case now. The pandemic has taught citizens to appreciate the practical meaning of European fundamental values and rights which should be strengthened in the EU policy areas, including macro-regional policies.”

Solidarity is definitely one of the European values that will need to be reinforced. As Aleksandar from Macedonia reminds us, “the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated fractures in the concept of EU solidarity. The initial intervention and later the vaccine calamity proved that for many countries their own nation is the ultimate priority. In planning future macro-regional policies, regional (cross-country) cooperation and mutual planning mechanisms should be introduced and well-established.”

Iuliana, a Romanian NGO representative recalls the social consequences of the coronavirus crisis. “From a social point of view, people were divided into pro and contra camps and generated discussions especially in the media and social media. Citizens have become suspicious, distrustful and this led to frustration.”

Information through the media was essential. According to Sabine, an NGO representative from Germany, “the information was not always factual, and fears were sometimes reinforced. Clarification by scientists was important to objectify the discussions, but conspiracy theories and corona deniers also shaped the communication. This showed how important free and independent media are.”

Specific suggestions

- In the implementation of macro-regional policies, more focus should be laid on fields such as health, education, training and digitalization which have gained much greater public attention during the pandemic. (Nora, Hungary)
- Providing digital services and tools to social groups that do not have access to them (Stefano, Italy)
- The European Solidarity Corps initiative should be used more systematically to develop a sense of care and togetherness among young people. (Stavros, Greece)

Additional quotes

“Given the huge dimension of the crisis, it has turned out in daily conversations with citizens that the failure of the EU to order enough vaccines will most probably have devastating long-term effects on the acceptance of the Union.” (Hannes, Austria)

“The Covid-19 crisis has critically affected communication between people. I am strongly convinced that the boost of virtual communication technologies cannot be a substitute for live communication to build new contacts and share ideas.” (Igor, Ukraine)

CHAPTER 5

Youth involvement in macro-regional policies

“Politically, youth engagement is important because young people deserve the right to represent their interests. The civic engagement of young people is also crucial to prepare them to be active citizens in a democracy.” This is how Stefano from an Italian NGO argues for the involvement of younger generations in European issues.

Young people have different, modern and fresh perspectives, in line with the modern political society in which they are growing up. Their exclusion from the regional and macro-regional policies would mean less representation of different ideas in the political system.

As Christiana, a civil society representative from Austria puts it, “young people are often seen as children without power and experience, the engagement of youth is not supported enough in our country”. Even if scientific studies explain how to overcome this situation, as long as politicians do not encourage young citizens to get involved and show them respect, their involvement will remain weak.

Institutions and organisations in all European countries should focus more on connecting with young people, listening to them, interacting with them. Stefan from Germany recalls that “there is a generational conflict as young people feel that the thinking of their parents’ generation is not suitable to bring us into a better future”. So young people need guidance and support, but adults must also be ready to provide leadership and authority while listening to the hopes and ambitions of young people.

“Participation of young people between 15-25 years in the proceedings of the Conference on the future of Europe should be equal to their ratio in the European population (12,7%). It means participation of at least 55 young people out of the 433 members of the Conference plenary” – argues Virgilio from Italy.

There is a double challenge according to a Polish NGO. We should promote themes that are interesting for young people (culture, tourism, innovative technologies, education, employment), but – in the end – they may consider these strategies as documents with little connection to the problems of young people.

NGOs certainly agree that societies must develop policies that better respond to the needs of younger generations, since they represent our future. Young people’s active contributions to the political debates, to the decision-making processes, and to discussions about socio-economic issues can bring democratic values to life.

Aleksandar from Macedonia takes into consideration the time factor as well. “It will take much more time to develop and implement macro-regional policies, thus involving the youth may be essential to project their views on the future (10 years and more), how they see it, and to consolidate policies accordingly,” he says.

What methods could be used to involve the younger generations? A Belgian colleague, Marie gives an exhaustive list: “hackathon, videos, social networks, summer camps, digital competitions, conferences, leaflets of good practices, webinars, trainings”.

However, certain problems might hinder youth involvement. Matej, a young Croatian notes that young people are nowadays quite unambitious, fewer and fewer of them are interested in education. “More and more young people have a problem with communication and social skills, they do not know how to have a quality conversation or how to talk to people.”

Aneta from a Slovak NGO thinks there are several factors contributing to the lack of interest of young people in public life and politics. "I would stress at least two of them: 1. general lack of perception of 'positive engagement'; 2. lack of capacity (limited information, inadequate time management, over-investment in virtual social life)."

All these challenges make it even more important to help the young generations. As Iuliana from Romania recommends: "We should create contexts for the involvement of young people, let them freely express their opinions and put on the table the ideas to be included in the elaboration of policies."

Specific suggestions

- Creating regional tourist-welcoming centres for cyclists, along the Danube, as well as the common participation in thematic discussions could improve youth involvement and build coalitions among youth actors. (Valentin, Romania)
- An important way to involve youth is through their education and it could be done from primary schools to universities. For primary schools by twinning schools in the region, they could work on macro-regional topics. The same could be done at the secondary level, involved schools could make exchanges and do the final presentations together. For university students there could be common bachelor and master thesis projects. (Kurt, Denmark)
- Don't explain Europe abstractly but show the benefits of the EU's macro-regional policy by means of specific projects. (Sabine, Germany)
- Members of the European Parliament should engage in dialogue with young people on macro-regional and other relevant issues. (Juraj, Slovakia)

Additional quotes

"It all starts with removing the stigma towards the younger generation. We need to give them space and listen to them for real." (Erasmio, Italy)

"Youth involvement contributes to innovations and better mobility, as well as to making positive change happen." (Stanka, Serbia)

CHAPTER 6

The Conference on the Future of Europe and its impact on the current legislative term for and by citizens

“We keep a close eye on you! Europe is too precious to leave it only to politicians.” Here is a straightforward message from Jitka from Slovakia to the Conference on the Future of Europe.

But how can you make sure that citizens are actually involved? As Aneta, a representative from a Slovak NGO thinks that many down-to-earth citizen proposals need to be tabled at the Conference platform. Macro-regional structures and programmes should also be used to inject specific proposals to the Conference process.

As for communication tools reaching out to citizens in the debate about the future of Europe, Slovenian civil society organisations present quite ‘trendy’ suggestions: social networks, live Q&A sessions, vlogging, involving influencers with many followers, web gamification techniques, funny and educative quizzes, virtual reality. It is important to note that fun tools can be used for the most serious topics as well.

Katalin, a Hungarian NGO activist would use webinars to involve partner organisations. They underline that smaller civil society organisations should also be invited to take part in the preparatory process.

“Avoid the need to register on the participant website before being able to answer, use different languages, avoid EU bubble jargon that only people in Brussels speak, make the website more intuitive, giving the impression that voices will be heard.” These useful tips come from a Belgian colleague, Marie.

Unfortunately, the name ‘The Conference on the Future of Europe’ is quite remindful of the well-known EU jargon and its long, complex procedures do not make this event more attractive either. It remains to be seen whether the 3 EU institutions – with diverging interests – will in fact find a way to make the Union more citizen-focused with the assistance of the Conference.

Giving the floor to local people is just not enough. As Kurt, an NGO representative from Denmark warns, when you involve citizens, you have to be committed to their involvement. “It should not be only to legitimize existing policies. The proposals should be received with an open mind.” The citizens involved must be told what they can expect – if it is unclear, they can be easily disappointed.

What topics should be discussed to keep European citizens on board during the Conference? Igor from Ukraine mentions nature conservation and restoration, peace and security in Europe, and the Covid-19 pandemic. Stefano, an Italian colleague adds: “Developing a vision for post-Covid-19 Europe is essential, especially with the Conference on the Future of Europe coming soon. We believe now is the perfect time to reflect on the EU and analyse it.” In addition, more attention to a sustainable and environmentally friendly lifestyle will translate into better life prospects, better quality of life, both for present and future generations.

“We ordinary people of the EU expect that European countries will become leaders and will show a personal example of combating climate change. Europe without coal would be the

first step. Social integrity in societies would be the next factor for the successful future of Europe.” This is what Vitas from Lithuania expects from the Conference.

A Serbian representative, Stanka says: “Please find ways and space to listen to the citizens’ voice from the Western Balkans.” According to Aleksandar from Macedonia, the EU must remind itself of its core values and stick to them (rule of law, justice, non-discrimination, self-determination), as well as make Member States respect them.

Civil society organisations must be included in almost every step of the Conference Sessions, writes a German NGO. There should also be spokespersons from the CSOs whom you can contact at any stage.

Video and web conferencing are helpful tools that Iva from Croatia recommends. Another Croatian, Pejo says that communication “should be mostly based on social networks because it gathers the largest number of young people, especially on Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Young people, but also everyone else, spend hours watching contents on these platforms. In addition to all this, public debates, panels and round tables related to burning issues in Europe should be organised because this way everyone can express their opinions and point to problems affecting individuals and the community.”

All these ideas might result in a situation where macro-regionalism becomes one of the flagship projects of the Conference.

Whatever the outcome of the Conference will be, EU institutions need to make sure that its conclusions become reality indeed. Making citizens disappointed is the last thing that European leaders would like to do with the 2024 EP elections on the horizon.

Specific suggestions

- Integrating more citizens' organisations in the decision-making processes related to the Conference (NN, Poland)
- Every participant of the Conference must have a “shadow” from a civil society organisation (expert on one specific issue of the Conference) and talk with this person beforehand. The findings should be made visible during the Conference by the participant in her/his words so that the opinion can enrich the Conference. (Hannes, Austria)
- Try to avoid members of political parties, the Conference is better with members from the broad civil society NGOs. The participation should be diverse. (Kurt, Denmark)
- The ongoing online platform of the Conference should be kept operational after the Conference. This would give citizens, representative associations and civil society the possibility to monitor the follow-ups of the Conference and react to the proposals. (Virgilio, Italy)

Additional quotes

“Get into the dialogue but also get into doing. Talking and acting, both!” (Stefan, Germany)

“We need to keep advocating for the outcome of the Conference to be totally open in terms of possible new policies and Treaty revisions.” (Erasmus, Italy)

CHAPTER 7

Circular economy/sustainable development/green Europe; visions for 2030

“Changing the mindset is key. Start the process already in the kindergarten. And don't commit the same mistake twice!” suggests Jitka, from an NGO from Slovakia.

Changing how we think and act is indeed crucial when it comes to a greener, more sustainable Europe. A recent Eurobarometer survey revealed that climate change was a top priority for citizens, especially amongst young people with 67% prioritising environmental protection.

All this means that environmental and climate issues present an opportunity for the EU to reform its model of governance. The Union is in fact recognising this with the European Green Deal, but this needs to come hand in hand with a new model of governance placing transparency and communication at its heart.

As Stefano, a representative of an NGO from Italy remarks: “Climate change cannot be solved by one country alone. It will need international cooperation and the involvement of the civil society. We all have responsibilities in this crisis, and we must realise that we all have a role to play in the solution.”

Most citizens of EU macro-regions are aware that changing the mindset begins in our everyday life – with individual commitments. “I would definitely give up plastic packaging, bags, straws etc. which really harm our environment. When I go shopping, I always bring canvas bags,” writes Iva from Croatia. Marie from Belgium sums up the most important tasks: “Consume less, recycle more, travel less (at least for work) and travel closer (for personal life).”

Buying less and not necessarily new things – this is another solution offered by Darja, an NGO representative from Slovenia. It would also be helpful to buy more from small local dealers, even though it is less convenient than going to big shopping centres where everything is available in one place.

Besides, we all need to start paying attention to the amount of food we throw away. We can do this by not buying large amounts of food we do not need, and by making portions of meals so that there is no surplus left.

Here is another vow from Elena, member of a Romanian NGO: “When it comes to my lifestyle, I would use my own car less and public transport more, I would schedule my meals weekly to reduce food waste, I would approach living in a minimalist way.”

However, when citizens in the macro-regions are asked about how they imagine the European Union in 2030, other wishes complement the green ideas. “Greener, still open with free movement (it has been tremendously hindered due to Covid), prosperous,” writes Meelis from Estonia.

Unity and integration seem to be keywords when foreseeing what the EU will look like in a decade's time. “More than the vision, there is the hope that Europe (countries, governments, institutions and citizens) in 2030 will realise that unity is strength,” writes Stefano from an Italian NGO. Aleksandar from Macedonia envisions Europe as “hopefully a fully integrated continent, with at least all of the Balkan countries as members, if not Turkey”. Still Marja-Liisa from Finland is less ambitious: “Europe in 2030? I would like to know what happens tomorrow!” – she writes.

Sustainability and unity join forces in the thinking of Arpad, a Hungarian NGO representative as well. “My vision of Europe in 2030 is to establish a united and green Europe. (...) By 2030 the EU will become a leader in high-tech technologies, protect democracy, the rule of law, solidarity and equality, create a single refugee policy and well-functioning border protection. European leaders will make the pension system sustainable and open up the European labour market to international migration due to the declining population.”

As in most topics, the effect of the Covid crisis comes up. Georgiana from Romania says it is sure that “the pandemic changed our life and in 2030 Europe will be more digitalized and technological. Maybe people’s life will change because we will have the opportunity to work from home and participate in different courses, or jobs from different parts of the world.”

Despite all challenges and difficulties, no one foresees dramatic events or warfare in the coming decades – the European Union is expected to subsist and impact our lives. There is a consensus, however, that the EU’s current structure and decision-making mechanism need to be substantially reformed.

An exhaustive – and excellent – list is given by Sabine from Germany: more sustainability, less CO₂, less garbage and plastic, technology and medicine for people, modern housing, more trees in the cities, creating jobs in the countryside, protecting nature and biodiversity sustainably, less consumption, high quality products with longer life, agricultural improvements in the third world, organic farming, no exploitation of resources, more sensible recycling, using digitalization for people's needs, further development of democracy, enlargement of Europe and its ideas.

Specific suggestions

- Promoting green solutions particularly for households (NN, Poland)
- Investing in start-ups for youth dealing with environmental issues (NN, Romania)
- Creating one single policy area that covers environment, agriculture and transport in the EU (Terez, Hungary)
- Sustainable mobility concepts should be created, bicycle routes and sustainable travel must become reality. Cultural heritage can be well-communicated, and history becomes understandable. (NN, Germany)

Additional quotes

“The UN has 17 sustainable development goals to be achieved by 2030. I want Europe to be in front. Europe should lead the world in being sustainable.” (Kurt, Denmark)

“The issue of avoiding plastic is one of the most important aspects of how the environment has to be protected. I myself try to avoid plastic bags when shopping and also I talk about this with other people as often as I can.” (Christiana, Austria)

CHAPTER 8

Creativity/inventiveness/digitalisation/smart solutions

Imagine a cultural centre and an open zone for art where you can meet designers, architects, or film makers, you can print in 3D, buy whatever you need to create street art or simply have dinner. This is Tabačka – Kulturfabrik, a unique initiative from Košice in the eastern part of Slovakia, explains Jitka, a CSO representative.

As an excellent example of what creativity and inventiveness can achieve in a macro-region, Tabačka aims to support the creative industry and the additional civic services in town. The hub provides opportunities for co-working, meetings and creating interdisciplinary projects. What is even more important is the role Kulturfabrik has gained in providing services for the local community. It became a centre for exhibitions, multicultural events, interactive installations, workshops and public debates raising awareness about local issues. Similar cultural hubs have been established in other regional centres of Slovakia, promoting cultural and civic activities for local communities.

A totally different project is mentioned by Igor from Ukraine – successful rewilding activities conducted by civil society organisations in cooperation with the local government. This has resulted in the extension of protected areas and the reintroduction of animals lost many years ago. It has ecological, social and economic effects due to the promotion of nature-based economic activities, eco-tourism, and job creation.

Meelis from Estonia brings in another macro-regional success story, the revitalization of the textile factory in Narva (border town to Russia) to become a culture hub. A Latvian colleague refers to the audio-guided touristic tours in Riga that can be downloaded on your mobile; all tours are also wheelchair accessible.

Creativity does bring out the best in macro-regions. As Iuliana, a Romanian NGO colleague writes, an interesting project based on inventiveness and involvement is that of UrbanizeHub, a start-up, an aggregator of ideas about smart cities and sustainable urban development. Their initiative is called CityMakers – a kind of urban changemakers, people who build communities and projects for the cities where they live. These citymakers can contribute to changing cities and transforming them into active urban ecosystems.

Another urban project is in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. As a Lithuanian civil society organisation recalls, Vilnius has a small area called “Behind the river” where the local community has its own tradition of collaboration: it has a constitution, president and government, post, customs and other attributes of an independent country. Young people, especially artists like the atmosphere of freedom and liberalism that is created here. An art incubator has been established by the municipality of Vilnius and there are premises where artists from other countries, mostly from the Baltic region, have the opportunity to live there for a few months.

A similar project is mentioned by Sabine from Germany: The Conspiracy House (<https://verschwoerhaus.de/>). Young people work on creative digital solutions for the city of Ulm and the region. They can develop creative ideas, they are provided with an office space to exchange possibilities, and workshops are also offered.

Youth inventiveness can be used to find solutions to macro-regional challenges. As Valentin from Romania says: “We believe that the youth in our region can be involved in bio-

agriculture and bio-products, setting quality guidelines and improving bio product traceability. Youth Agro Start Ups could improve production and offer a steady supply of bio products.”

“Digitalisation provides limitless possibilities to creative people, giving easier access to knowledge,” comments a Hungarian NGO. Many civil society organisations agree that digitalisation supports creativity – others, however, are more sceptical. “Increasing alienation, decreasing empathy,” this is how Judit from Hungary sums up the consequences of digitalisation.

A Polish colleague talks about “quicker, more efficient business instruments and easier life as advantages. Weaker interpersonal social contacts as a danger.” Veronika, the representative of a Slovak NGO can see a “drastic increase of simple-mindedness”, while Stanislav from Bulgaria puts it down in one word: “dehumanisation”.

“Digitalisation has definitely improved our lives in terms of employment, quality of life and accessibility of public services to citizens,” argues Iva from Croatia, adding that the far-reaching consequences are mostly positive because this will reduce people's working hours and increase their free time. Free time, in the end, supports creativity.

Specific suggestions

- Digitalisation needs to be well-managed and socially sustainable. People must be prepared for the digital transformation and its long-term impact on their lives, citizens must be provided equal opportunities to benefit from digitalization. (Janos, Hungary)
- Youth is sensitive in many ways and aware of aspects that adults may not be. They must be reached through the right channels (schools/NGOs/social media), and they need to feel listened to. (Elena, Romania)
- Develop a policy paper for a civil pillar of macro-regional strategies accompanied by an action plan with innovative ideas. (Miklos, Hungary)

Additional quotes

“What I think is already a negative consequence of digitalisation are social networks which, despite a large number of advantages, distance us from each other.” (Iva, Croatia)

“For the most part, our school system leaves youth as a passive observer, not an active part of the learning process.” (Erasmus, Italy)

CHAPTER 9

Non-EU member states; possibility of EU accession

“They should be treated on an equal footing, as genuine partners, as colleagues and friends” – this suggestion comes from a Slovak NGO about how joint civil society actions should be established between organisations from EU and non-EU member states. Ursula from France confirms this opinion, arguing that “solidarity is one of the values of the European Union, it has to apply between member states and non-EU countries too”.

NGOs can very much contribute to building closer ties between EU and non-EU countries for the promotion of macro-regional strategies. A Romanian colleague, Valentin thinks that partnerships need to be created at the level of civil societies, “promoting common strategies of citizens' involvement in the decision-making process at a local level, encouraging youth from EU and non-EU countries to participate in common projects related to the EU objectives”.

Although Anders from Sweden agrees that civil society organisations must be engaged in the implementation of macro-regional strategies, he warns that in some non-EU member states civil society organisations are weak and less able to take part in the implementation. First of all, these “organisations need to be strengthened in their own countries before engaging in transnational collaborations”.

Another civil representative from Sweden, Jan, says that the Nordic-Baltic model could be used as it covers both EU members and non-EU members. Non-members participating are not only Norway and Iceland, but also Russia and Belarus. Filip from Finland underlines that it is up to NGOs to convince “political decision-makers about the core role of civil society contacts, exchange across the borders”.

According to Gunta from Latvia, the most effective way to build closer ties between EU and non-EU countries is closer cooperation between specific organisations – for example cooperation of disability organisations from Latvia with disability organisations from non-EU countries. “It gives a lot of common issues which could also be part of the regional strategies.”

A positive aspect is that cross-border or regional cooperation is usually not conditioned on being an EU country. Slovenian civil society organisations cooperated a lot with Croatian partners even before Croatia joined the EU. “We have many good project cases where coalitions/partnerships of organisations from Slovenia and other ex-Yugoslav countries (Bosnia, Montenegro, Serbia, Macedonia) work together on common topics, issues that concern them all, maybe also because of their common history, and cultural understanding,” explains Darja from Slovenia. The organisations have strong networks that can be useful for the promotion of macro-regional strategies.

Stefano, an Italian colleague adds that the cooperation aspects in many EU programmes allow for the much-needed exchange at all levels. For example, in Erasmus+ and Solidarity Corps there are many occasions to foster dialogue and reflection with partners from non-EU member states. These collaborations are often seen as particularly important for non-EU civil society organisations that can network and build additional capacity.

A big number of civil society organisations are already participating in macro-regional cooperation involving non-EU member states. Civil actors have gained knowledge and skills to give further impetus to the accession process of candidate countries. NGOs in the EU

“need to continue this work and play a more active role in shaping macro-regional strategies in order to build closer ties with non-EU countries. Civil actors need to apply new approaches to achieving this objective,” notes László from Hungary.

A short but strong recommendation comes from the representative of a German civil society organisation: “I feel like the best we can do is reach out and connect, offer open ears and exchange contacts. I always try to listen and understand more of their realities and wishes.”

Specific suggestions

- Civil actors should address specific problems arising from transboundary cooperation with non-EU countries. The removal of legal and administrative barriers to these kinds of cooperation is expected to remain a big problem that civil stakeholders will face. (Renata, Hungary)
- The essence lies in participating in joint civil society actions that are provided as a kind of education to people who are not EU members. They should examine all the advantages that the Union provides. (Iva, Croatia)
- Develop common projects with tangible and sustainable results. By establishing links and practising dialogue communities contribute to regional development (Iuliana, Romania)

Additional quotes

“Not being an EU member should never mean being less of a partner.” (NN, Germany)

“Only by creating links and dialogue can communities be developed at the regional level.” (Iuliana, Romania)

CHAPTER 10

Communication / presenting macro-regional possibilities

“In terms of the general public, more info on TV explaining why macro-regional cooperation is needed and how ordinary people benefit from it would be helpful” – this is how Igor from Ukraine summarizes the role of communication in promoting macro-regional topics. Aneta, representative of a Slovak NGO gives an even shorter wish list: “Make an effort and develop a macro-regional identity.”

In the digital era, most civil society organisations agree that online solutions (social media, dedicated web pages) should play an essential role. As a Latvian colleague, Gunta explains, “to provide active and effective communication, it is important to use social media. Interesting and short stories and videos could be useful.” These products need to be prepared in a way that people are eager to share the information because it is funny, interesting, or helpful. Filip from Finland puts it like this: “Short and sharp, regularly directed to different groups.”

Creative solutions are also welcome. Kristýna from Czech Republic recommends, for example, “public space installations or performances tied to online, more profound resources”. Besides traditional communication, direct experiences – site visits, exchange visits, excursions for ordinary citizens – could be organised too.

Other types of events are referred to by Vitas from Lithuania. Communication channels still exist between Lithuania, Belarus, and Russia, and – as he writes – “the main way of arranging communications more often and in a more flexible manner are common cultural events, concerts, camps of artists with common exhibitions, sport events”.

As more and more citizens are keen to address societal challenges (climate change, integration of migrants, ageing population etc.), macro-regional strategies enable them to actually take part. Anders from Sweden notes that “most NGOs have their own communication channels, website and social media, that can be used to inform about macro-regional strategies and how civil society organisations are taking part, sharing good practice”.

Another representative of a Swedish NGO, Jan warns that “communication should not be organised and managed only by the EU national structures (e.g., offices of the European Parliament and European Commission) in the capitals but decentralized all over the countries. Civil society organisations should be heavily involved by taking responsibility through a specific partnership programme of information and participation.” He thinks that the model of ‘Global grants’ of the EU structural funds could be used to organise a swift and non-bureaucratic financing system.

The EU’s communication policy towards its citizens should be completely redesigned, and this also affects how to communicate EU policies including macro-regional issues – this is a suggestion made by László from Hungary. He considers that in times of the Covid crisis, civil society actors play a much bigger role in the process of rebuilding the image of Europe also at the macro-regional level. The Covid pandemic has directed the attention of citizens to areas that became priority fields of the EU communication even before the pandemic: youth employment, health and social issues, e-health solutions, education and training. Many of these areas have been incorporated in the EU macro-regional strategies.

Specific suggestions

- E-learning platforms, social media campaigns, and CSO thematic regional networks could serve as communication tools to bring macro-regional policy closer to citizens across the regions. (Stanka, Serbia)
- Creating Territorial Construction European Groups is a necessity within the macro-regions. TCEGs would facilitate the creation of strategies for sustainable development and would put a spotlight on macro-regional opportunities. (Valentin, Romania)
- I tried to google Danube's macro-region in my national language (Slovak), but the results were very limited – no website devoted to the macro-region itself. As the internet has become an important source of information for people of all ages in the Danube region, online information platforms in each national language would be a useful tool. (Jitka, Slovakia)

Additional quotes

“For most people, the macro-regions and the strategies are well-kept secrets. They are not known to the public. They are known to an inner circle of people working with them.” (Kurt, Denmark)

“I'm always sceptical, double-checking the information and quotes. The most important thing is to consider the credibility of articles and videos and their authors in the first place.” (Darja, Slovenia)