



**STRONGER.** *together*  
2023

# PROPOSAL

## for an EU macro-regional civil strategy

Presented for adoption at the First Macro-Regional Citizen Agora  
Budapest, 7-8 December 2023

### Introduction

The present proposal for an EU macro-regional civil strategy is designed with the aim of empowering citizens and their organisations across the four macro-regions and even beyond to creatively and systematically participate in and contribute in a pro-active manner to the design and implementation of EU macro-regional strategies.

### Vision statement

No united, prosperous and forward-looking Europe is possible without the active participation of citizens and their organisations in shaping their local environment and regions.

### Background

Macro-regional strategies (MRS) are relatively new and innovative but less known forms of EU policy-making. They seek to bring more closely connected geographical areas to strengthen cooperation, allowing stakeholders to jointly address today's often complex economic, social and territorial challenges. There are four macro-regional strategies in the EU: the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) created in 2009, the Danube Region (EUSDR) set up in 2010, the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR) established in 2014 and the Alpine Region (EUSALP) founded in 2015, encompassing 27 countries in total, 19 of which are EU member States, with more than 340 million people. The MRS have their own programmes, ideally with a cross-sectoral, transnational and multilevel approach to co-create solutions promoting European integration. The added value of involvement of civil society organisations in these processes is gradually gaining ground but needs further stabilisation and development.



## The road leading to the elaboration of a proposal for an EU macro-regional civil strategy

In 2020, European House Budapest, together with eight other civil society organisations decided to reflect on the European Commission's 3rd biennial Report on the implementation of macro-regional strategies. This is how the "Shadow Report – An alternative positive voice" was born in 2022 after a long period of in-person and online consultations in the four macro-regions.

The intention of the Shadow Report was not to compete with the European Commission's document. It is not a political analysis but rather a public reflection involving citizens and their organisations representing the macro-regions. All the observations, inspiring ideas and recommendations in the Shadow Report are based on the daily lives and experiences of citizens and their place-based communities from Tallinn through Novi Sad to Palermo.

Based on the positive results and reception of the Shadow Report, and as a response to one of the conclusions of the 4th Implementation Report of the Commission (2022) emphasising the need for systemic involvement of local and regional communities, European House Budapest took the initiative of elaborating a proposal for an EU macro-regional civil strategy; a process with a decisively bottom-up character involved preparatory meetings in Vienna, Rome, Lyon and Stockholm in 2023 leading to the holding of the First Macro-Regional Citizen Agora in Budapest.

## The state of civil society in the four macro-regions

It has been a great challenge for civil society organisations to survive, first in times of Covid, then of economic crisis. Even if CSOs in the four macro-regions operate under different conditions and circumstances, they have common interests in addressing such issues as climate change, the energy crisis, social questions or the war in Ukraine. Using their intermediary function, they have a huge and frequently unused potential of contributing to shaping macro-regional and in a broader context Europe-level policies.

However, these organisations face several obstacles. They are usually characterised by low financial stability (cash flow), lack of experience in administrative procedures for international projects, limited knowledge of international networks, language barrier (poor command of English), and people working part-time or on a voluntary basis, not to mention the frequently experienced shrinking of civil space. Bringing under one roof CSOs from the macro-regions helps them to combine efforts in finding innovative and sustainable solutions to these common challenges. The increased sense of ownership is an additional benefit.

This is all the more important because the current situation is characterised by uneven and rather spontaneous involvement in issues of all-European character: e.g. participation in European Citizen Initiatives (ECI) campaigns is a weak point and the same is valid for the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE) related activities. There is much to learn from each other in the field of cross-border cooperation. On the other hand the European Year of Youth (2022) significantly boosted organised youth involvement in MRS programmes resulting in activities of innovative character. They can serve as a testing ground for new forms of participation.

A common challenge across macro-regions is to find ways to increase the legitimacy and advocacy of CSO presence in the MRS programmes.





## From a positive dissatisfaction to a sustainable engagement

### Civil commitments and recommendations

#### ON POLICY LEVEL

##### Visionary approach

- The structured and intensified civil involvement with a visionary approach in shaping and implementing macro-regional level policy-making is recognised.
- The properly applied partnership and participatory principle greatly enhance a coordinated and structured civil contribution to achieving MRS general objectives.
- The importance and usefulness of citizens' dialogues on macro-regional level is recognised and practiced.
- MRS are an important playing field for EU enlargement. CSOs both from Member States and applicant countries demand to overcome the current stalemate situation.

##### In-between

- Citizen-driven innovative ideas with a value-added character are embedded into mainstream macro-regional policy processes.
- With the application of the "in-between" macro-regional idea, the "Bringing the European Union closer to its citizens" slogan gains an additional dimension and reduces the distance between the EU institutions and the people.
- The cross-sectoral, transnational and multilevel macro-regional approach to co-create solutions is practiced.

##### Vox Humana

- The voice of citizens and their organisations is recognised as a value-added component in the trust-building process among the macro-regional stakeholders.
- Civil society organisations and local communities develop and demonstrate their pro-European identity through (macro) regional identity, thereby contributing to a more resilient and democratic Europe.
- "Vox Humana", a citizen-centred non-conventional communication policy is developed and practiced.

This new policy arrangement with its broad potential and active civil engagement is used to reinvigorate and promote the macro-regional idea.

#### ON OPERATIONAL LEVEL

The intention is to bring together civil society organisations and like-minded local groups/initiatives from the four macro-regions and even beyond using synergies.

##### Institutionalised citizens' dialogue

- Using synergies to address joint challenges such as climate change, the energy crisis, the digital and social transition, or the consequences of the Russian aggression against Ukraine by common actions, exchange of best practices, field visits and study trips, volunteer exchanges, capacity-building courses, training, seminars, and other forms of interactions.

- Establishing an inclusive, transparent and institutionalised citizens' dialogue system across macro-regions. It is based on dialogues organised on regional/national levels on commonly identified societal challenges. This broad framework arrangement includes holding citizens' panels.
- Contributing to the elaboration of major macro-regional policy documents, e.g. the revision of MRS Action Plans, the biennial Report of the Commission on the implementation of macro-regional strategies, or the Cohesion Policy Report; proposing the development of new policy positions on relevant issues.

### Participation

- Strengthening citizens' engagement in macro-regional policy making processes on various levels is a vital common task and an important precondition of success; part of this process is the elaboration of proposals for regulated and coordinated meaningful CSO participation in the MRS governing structures and in other working bodies.
- Setting up a one-stop-shop type guidance/service provider arrangement in the participating countries facilitating contacts and interactions among CSOs and other stakeholders, with special attention to academic institutions.
- Building regular contacts among the youth structures of the four MRS and initiating exchange of information and experience, joint programmes among them; making sure that their members are identified in a transparent manner.
- Initiating and organising a flagship event, the annual macro-regional meeting (Agora) of civil society organisations for stocktaking, policy development and evaluation.

### Citizen's voice

- Working out a citizen-centred communication plan including a newsletter, a yearbook, an information toolkit and the use of social media to raise and maintain continuous public awareness.
- Contributing in a coordinated manner to major MRS events, e.g. the EU Macro-Regional Strategies Week, the European Week of Regions and Cities, the Civil Society Week of the European Economic and Social Committee, Annual Forums and others, articulating the concerns of civil society organisations and local communities from the macro-regions.
- Creating conditions for setting up a permanent MRS civil presence in Brussels.

On the basis of the policy guidelines, **a macro-regional civil network is established** to make the proposals of the operational plan happen. It is an open and inclusive pro-European collaborative and legitimate arrangement with an advocacy function for civil society organisations, local and regional communities and other interested stakeholders ready to assist the implementation of the EU macro-regional idea. This process starts **in the form of a pilot project at the beginning of 2024 with an annual work plan.**

### Monitoring/Assessment

The overall performance of the macro-regional civil strategy is regularly reviewed and assessed at the Agora, the annual macro-regional meeting of civil society organisations.