

The Shadow Report 2.0

A civil society reflection on the European Commission's 5th Report on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies

Initiated and coordinated by European House Budapest



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Uneven landscape: Civil society in the EU macro-regions

The situation of civil society organisations (CSOs) differs greatly between countries, shaped by political traditions, histories, and governance models. In some places, CSOs are respected partners in policy-making, bringing expertise and grassroots legitimacy. In others, they are regarded with suspicion, labelled as adversaries, or restricted in their activities. This uneven landscape is one of the most striking features of the EU's macro-regions. The challenge is further complicated by the fact that these macro-regions include both EU Member States and non-EU countries.

At the same time, CSOs themselves increasingly recognise that cooperation across borders is essential. Many of the most pressing issues facing Europe today – climate change, migration, energy security, digital transformation or disinformation – are transnational in nature. They cannot be addressed within national borders. Civil society's capacity to form flexible networks and share knowledge makes it a crucial actor in fostering cooperation where governments may hesitate. A Macro-regional platform, joint campaigns, and cross-border partnerships strengthen resilience and help deliver solutions that reflect the interconnected reality of European societies.

The state of civil society in the EU macro-regions is therefore one of both opportunity and fragility. On the one hand, CSOs demonstrate innovation, adaptability, and a growing commitment to cross-border solidarity. On the other, they continue to face mistrust, superficial consultation, and uneven recognition across countries. Bridging this gap requires genuine implementation of the partnership principle, protection of civic space, and active encouragement of cooperation not only within Member States but also with non-EU countries. Civil society should be treated not as an obstacle but an indispensable partner in building a stronger, more democratic, and more resilient Europe.

Several countries have national and regional platforms to promote civil society participation in macro-regional strategies. However, the inclusion of civil society in strategy governance structures and other working bodies needs to be continuously strengthened and regularly followed up. In the process of articulating and strengthening the voice and involvement of civil society organisations, the European House Budapest successfully initiated the setting up of an inclusive macro-regional civil society organisations network in 2024. This new collaborative arrangement has a cross-macro-regional character and a strong advocacy function.

**Excerpt from the European Commission's 5th Report
on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies**



WELCOME

More colourful and diverse, and more to the point – this is our Shadow Report 2.0, the civil society response to the European Commission's 5th Report on the implementation of the EU macro-regional strategies. It is just as colourful and diverse as the civil society itself, and more to the point than a "classical" report.

It was our intention to divert from the format of our – truly successful and impactful – first Shadow Report. We invented a less traditional, but even more meaningful way of presenting suggestions coming from Connect, our pro-European macro-regional civil society network.

In the Shadow Report 2.0, we summarised in 10 points how our civil society organisations consider macro-regional strategies, coming up with proposals related to crucial topics like cohesion, cross-border cooperation, exchange programmes, or enlargement.

The Commission's 5th Report on macro-regional strategies was an inspiration for us. It helped to define the most relevant areas where we think specific and substantial results could be achieved.

It is now time to dive into the 10 points of the Shadow Report 2.0 – a non-traditional report to read with openness and openheartedness.

Let's be open to working together on the successful implementation of the EU macro-regional strategies. This success relies on genuine partnership and collaboration. **Let's be Stronger Together.**

Miklós Barabás
Director
European House
Budapest

Proposal 1 Partnership in practice

While macro-regional strategies are government-led by design, their success also relies on genuine partnership with other stakeholders, including civil society. This requires a regulated and coordinated CSO presence in MRS governance structures and working bodies. Moreover, why not trust a civil society organisation to lead a thematic or focus area? This should not be seen as impossible, but rather as an opportunity to strengthen citizens' ownership and innovation. Is it so impossible?

EUSAIR

The core of EU macro-regional strategies is coordinating local communities where those are divided by state borders and different legislation. In this context CSOs are fundamental for guaranteeing a strong connection with people's needs and requests, functioning as a reliable transnational democratic base. CSO should be directly included in the management of macro-regional strategies as decision makers and relevant stakeholders both at internal level, inside the governance mechanism of each single Macro-region, and at EU level, with a better integration between EU Commission and EESC.

Erasmus Mancini
European Movement Italy

Proposal 4 Piloting innovative solutions for cohesion

Cohesion policy is one of the MRS priority areas for civil society organisations. Their potential to develop and test innovative and result-oriented approaches to address societal challenges should be systematically used. A position paper with concrete proposals for the post-2027 period will be elaborated focusing on the impact of Cohesion policy on everyday life. A strong sense of ownership feeling among citizens and other stakeholders is essential. They are more motivated to engage, more likely to hold institutions accountable, and more committed to turning its objectives into lasting change in their communities.

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Proposal 2 Civil society strategy strengthens EU macro-regions

As it was initiated at the First Macro-Regional Citizen Agora in December 2023, a civil society strategy is needed in the EU macro-regions to ensure CSOs systematic involvement in policy-making. Civil society brings local knowledge, experience, and direct links to citizens, making policies more effective and legitimate. For governments, this means better outcomes, stronger public support, and smoother implementation. A clear strategy guarantees that cooperation is not only top-down but also inclusive and responsive to people's needs. It is even more relevant as the European Commission prepares its own EU civil society strategy.

Proposal 8 Macro-Regional Youth Summit

To facilitate continuous dialogue and knowledge-sharing, we propose to organise an annual gathering of representatives of established youth structures and similar bodies from the four macro-regions. This innovation should be the result of a process led by relevant CSOs active in the field with the necessary knowledge, experience and commitment. The results of the Summit should not remain symbolic: they should be consolidated into a set of recommendations and action points that are formally used by the various MRS structures and documents.

EUSDR

The fifth Report on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies underscores the Danube Strategy's strengthened role in fostering EU enlargement, with civil society explicitly recognised among the essential actors. Platforms such as D-LAP, DANET, and the European House Budapest institutionalise participation, building trust and enabling meaningful governance. Civil society strengthens bottom-up influence, develops digital tools for inclusive engagement, and brings grassroots perspectives into policy. As the Strategy evolves, civil society must be further empowered to shape dialogue, feed the policy cycle, and anchor EU values at the local and cross-border level. By doing so, civil society will continue to act as a powerful driving force for integration, democracy resilience, and enlargement across the Danube region.

Stanka Parać Damjanović
Local Democracy Agency Subotica, Serbia

Proposal 3 Connect: the Macro-Regional Civil Society Network

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Initiated at the First Macro-Regional Citizen Agora, Connect is a pro-European, collaborative platform uniting 41 registered civil society organisations from the four macro-regions and even beyond. Through its advocacy work, it seeks recognition as the legitimate voice of CSOs on macro-regional issues. Communicating the objectives and benefits of the MRS to citizens must be a priority, and the Network stands ready to serve as an effective channel to support this effort. Connect is prepared to nominate and send representatives to the governance structures of the macro-regional strategies, ensuring that the voice of civil society is consistently present in policy-making processes.

Proposal 9 Enlargement: Beyond rhetoric

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A unique feature of macro-regional strategies is the equal involvement of both EU Member States and non-EU countries, which should be recognised as a clear added value. Civil society organisations are pivotal in preparing societies of applicant countries for EU membership by fostering dialogue, building capacity, and promoting European values. The Connect Network is a strong example of how CSOs can bridge divides and contribute to integration through practical cooperation and mutual learning, and this process will be further continued and strengthened by the Network.

Proposal 6 The Best of macro-regions

The Best of macro-regions is a new initiative designed to make the idea of macro-regional cooperation visible and relatable in people's daily lives. Much like a guide to the best fishing spots, most exciting festivals, or tastiest local traditions, the series will spotlight authentic experiences from across Europe. By collecting common themes from all four macro-regions, it will emphasise what connects them rather than what divides, showcasing a shared identity while celebrating local diversity. In doing so, it brings the strategies closer to citizens, turning abstract policies into tangible stories that inspire pride and foster a stronger sense of belonging.

EUSALP

I really think youth participation in a macro-region brings fresh ideas, energy, and perspectives that institutions alone can't provide. Over the past years with Connect, I've seen how diverse voices enrich debates and connect people across borders. When youth (and every other representation of diversity) are meaningfully involved, decisions become more future-proof and efficient. It's not just about giving them a seat at the table, but about making sure their ideas participate to shape how we build sustainable regions together, with the right tools.

Yoan Pompet

Union Régionale des Acteurs Locaux de l'Europe
en Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes (URALE), France

Proposal 7 Peer-to-peer exchange programme

A peer-to-peer exchange programme among CSOs and across macro-regions should be established to strengthen cooperation, mutual learning, and solidarity. Involving young people at its core, it would foster new leadership, intercultural understanding, and long-term partnerships. With a strong capacity-building character, the programme would enable organisations to share best practices, develop skills, and jointly address cross-border challenges in an innovative and inclusive way.

EUSBSR

Civil society organisations foster civic engagement and participation in macro-regional strategies and strengthen popular support for EU-institutions. CSOs involvement in development of macro-regions is an extension of the national democracy, which makes Europe stronger and more resilient in a time of geopolitical conflicts. CSOs bond citizens and authorities together. They bring politics and strategies to the local level and generate societal values and community spirit. CSOs promote freedom of speech, pluralism of values and respect for human rights, and they are major contributors to social capital, trust and reciprocity.

Ole Meldgaard

Baltic Sea NGO Network, Denmark

Proposal 5 Promotion of cross-border cooperation

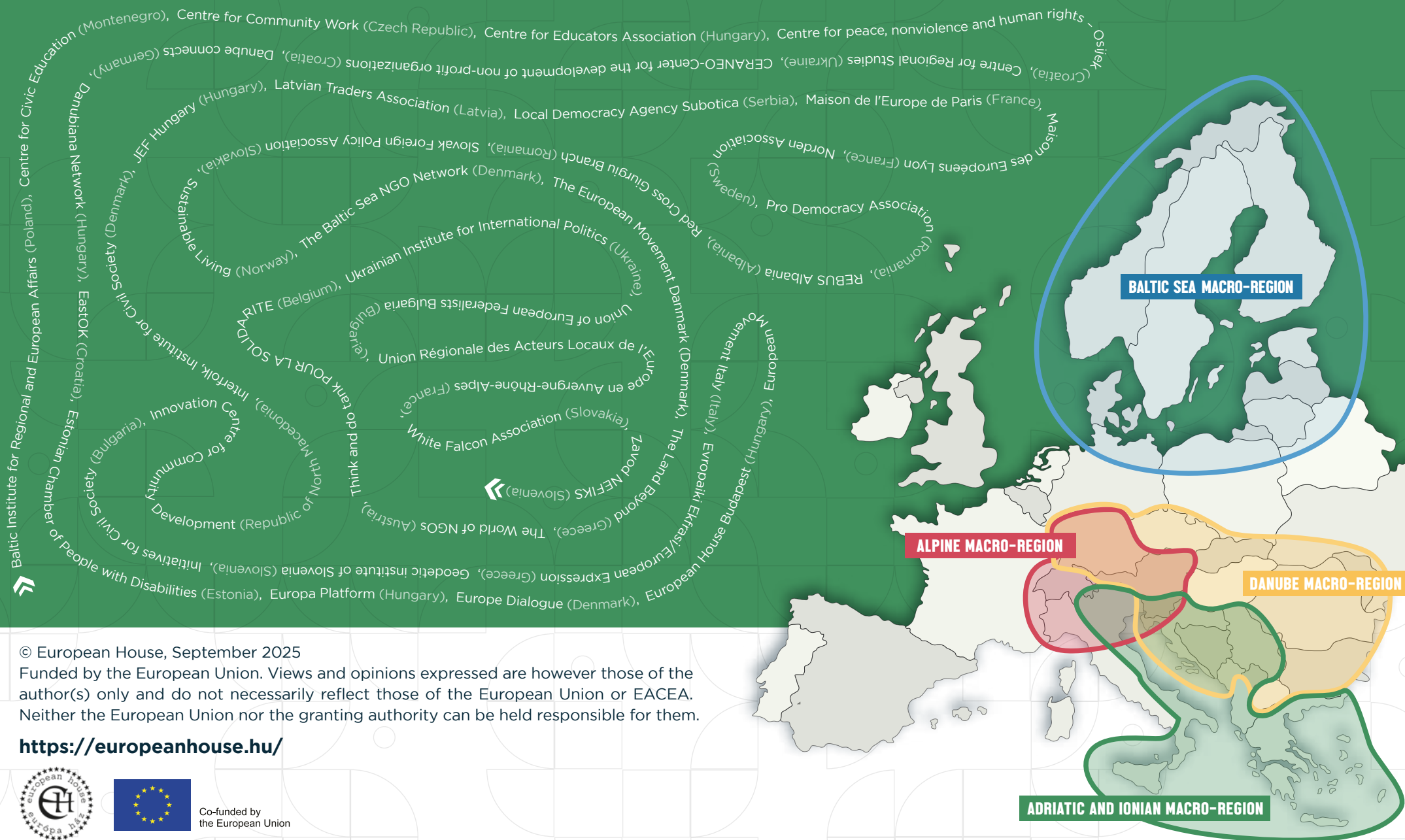
Cross-border cooperation is a well-known notion in the macro-regional context and should be further strengthened to show that common challenges can be addressed through joint solutions. Local communities already benefit from good practices such as joint fire brigades, healthcare services across borders, bilingual kindergartens, and cross-border transport. To make such cooperation routine and effective, Member States must remove legal and administrative barriers, while the adoption of the European Cross-Border Association (ECBA) directive would provide the necessary legal framework to deliver tangible benefits to citizens.

Proposal 10 Funding: From ad hoc to sustainable

Without stable and predictable financial resources, CSOs cannot build the long-term capacity needed to engage meaningfully in governance, contribute expertise, or sustain cross-border cooperation. This funding insecurity leads to dependency on ad-hoc opportunities, undermines continuity, and prevents civil society from realising its full potential as a strategic partner. Dedicated, regular and accessible financial resources, including non-project-based arrangements must be made available to CSOs.

Connect, the macro-regional civil society network

Connect aims to bring together for the first time civil society organisations and like-minded societal entities across the four macro-regions and even beyond under one roof to creatively and systematically participate in and contribute in a pro-active manner to the design and implementation of EU macro-regional strategies. The Network is an open and inclusive pro-European collaborative and legitimate arrangement with an advocacy function. European House Budapest acts as coordinator of the Network.



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