

Connect the macro-regional civil society Network



OPINION OF CONNECT, THE MACRO-REGIONAL CSO NETWORK

on the European Commission's
"Right to Stay Strategy: Your Region, Your Future"

CONNECT, THE MACRO-REGIONAL CSO NETWORK welcomes the European Commission's initiative to develop a "Right to Stay Strategy" aimed at reducing territorial disparities and enabling citizens to live and prosper in the places they call home. We strongly support the recognition that freedom to move and freedom to stay should be treated as complementary rights within the European project.

The challenges identified in the consultation paper – demographic decline, youth outmigration, unequal access to services, regional stagnation and weakening territorial cohesion – are particularly visible in Central and Eastern Europe, especially in border, rural and peripheral regions.

From the perspective of macro-regional cooperation, we would like to highlight the following points:

1. Macro-regions are essential laboratories for the "Right to Stay"

EU macro-regional strategies – the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, the Baltic Sea Region, the Adriatic-Ionian Region and the Alpine Region – already provide valuable frameworks for addressing demographic, economic and territorial challenges across borders.

These macro-regional frameworks:

- connect urban and rural territories;
- facilitate practical cooperation between regions facing similar demographic and economic pressures;
- strengthen territorial resilience and competitiveness through coordinated action;
- encourage knowledge-sharing and peer learning among local authorities, civil society organisations and regional stakeholders.

The future Right to Stay Strategy should therefore explicitly recognise macro-regional cooperation as an important governance and implementation instrument.

2. Strengthening cross-border governance through the European Cross-Border Association (ECBA)

The future Right to Stay Strategy should support the adoption and implementation of the proposed European Cross-Border Association (ECBA) instrument.

Many internal border regions continue to face legal, administrative and institutional barriers that hinder effective cooperation in areas such as public services, transport, labour mobility, healthcare, education and territorial planning. These obstacles directly affect citizens' quality of life and often contribute to outmigration from border regions.

The ECBA could provide a practical governance framework enabling local and regional actors to:

- manage cross-border public services more effectively;
- implement joint development strategies;
- strengthen functional cross-border regions;
- reduce administrative fragmentation;
- improve citizens' everyday access to services and opportunities.

The ECBA should therefore not be regarded merely as a technical legal instrument, but as a strategic tool for territorial cohesion supporting the right to stay in Europe's border regions.

The European Commission should relaunch political support for the ECBA initiative, integrate it into the implementation framework of the Right to Stay Strategy, and encourage pilot projects within EU macro-regional strategies.

3. Civil society and local communities must be genuine partners

The "right to stay" cannot be secured solely through infrastructure investment. Local trust, democratic participation, cultural vitality and community cohesion are equally important.

Civil society organisations, local associations, youth organisations and cultural actors play a crucial role in strengthening regional resilience and improving quality of life in local communities. They contribute to retaining young people, strengthening social capital, fostering innovation and local identity, and enhancing democratic resilience against polarisation, disinformation and social fragmentation. Their active involvement is therefore essential for building inclusive, cohesive and future-oriented regions where citizens feel connected, represented and motivated to remain.

The future strategy should therefore:

- strengthen participatory governance;
- provide direct support for community-led local initiatives;
- systematically involve civil society organisations in planning and monitoring processes;
- promote local democratic dialogue as an integral part of regional development.

4. Young people must see a future in their regions

The outmigration of young people is one of the most serious long-term challenges facing many European regions. However, mobility should not automatically be regarded as a loss. Instead of focusing solely on preventing "brain drain", EU policies should promote "youth circularity" by encouraging temporary mobility, return migration, cross-border careers, remote work ecosystems and regional talent networks. The objective should not be to restrict mobility, but to ensure that mobility remains connected to local and regional development.

Young people are more likely to remain in – or return to – regions where they have access to quality education and skills development opportunities, affordable housing, cultural and creative opportunities, sustainable mobility, inclusive and democratic communities, and meaningful employment and entrepreneurship opportunities.

Possible instruments could include:

- macro-regional alumni networks;
- return fellowships;
- macro-regional talent platforms
- cross-border traineeships;
- remote working hubs in smaller towns.

EU policies should therefore better integrate cohesion policy, education, youth policy and innovation policy within a stronger place-based framework, while also linking territorial development to the EU's broader competitiveness agenda.

5. A stronger place-based approach is necessary

We strongly support the Commission's emphasis on place-based policies and multilevel governance. However, implementation must go beyond administrative coordination. A successful Right to Stay Strategy requires:

- long-term territorial investment;
- flexible governance arrangements adapted to local realities;
- stronger local administrative capacities;
- integrated territorial planning;
- improved coordination between EU funds and sectoral policies.

The strategy should avoid one-size-fits-all approaches. Different territories require differentiated solutions reflecting their social, cultural, demographic and geographic realities as manifested among others by the EU macro-regional strategies.

Particular attention should be given to the challenges of border, rural and peripheral regions. The Strategy should address transport poverty, improve access to essential services, support skills development and entrepreneurship among young people, and strengthen access to healthcare and social services for elderly and vulnerable groups. Targeted incentives may also help attract and retain residents and key professionals in these territories.

6. The Right to Stay Strategy must be reflected in the next Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034

The objectives of the Right to Stay Strategy can only be achieved if they are adequately reflected in the future Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). Territorial cohesion, demographic resilience and equal opportunities should be recognised as strategic priorities across the next generation of EU funding instruments. The future MFF should ensure that sufficient resources are available to support regions facing demographic decline, outmigration, skills shortages and unequal access to services.

The future MFF should therefore:

- integrate the objectives of the Right to Stay Strategy across relevant EU funding instruments and programmes;
- maintain a strong and adequately funded Cohesion Policy with a clear territorial (macro-regional) dimension;
- support place-based investments addressing demographic challenges, service provision and economic opportunities in border, rural and peripheral regions;
- strengthen synergies between cohesion, education, innovation, employment and social policies;
- provide flexible funding mechanisms that enable local and (macro)regional actors to develop tailored solutions responding to territorial needs.

7. Territorial cohesion is also a democratic issue

Territories experiencing long-term decline often face increasing political frustration, social distrust and democratic disengagement. The “geography of discontent” referred to in the consultation document is therefore not only an economic issue, but also a democratic challenge.

Strengthening territorial cohesion contributes directly to:

- democratic stability;
- social inclusion;
- trust in European institutions;
- resilience against extremism and anti-European narratives.

The Right to Stay Strategy should therefore be framed not only as a cohesion initiative, but also as part of the EU's broader democratic resilience agenda.

8. “Right to Stay” Innovation Labs

The consultation document rightly underlines the importance of policy learning and exchange between regions.

The Commission should therefore support:

- macro-regional pilot territories;
- experimental governance models;
- social innovation laboratories;
- citizen assemblies;
- participatory regional planning initiatives.

Such initiatives could transform macro-regions into active policy incubators rather than merely coordination platforms.

CONNECT, THE MACRO-REGIONAL CSO NETWORK strongly supports the development of a comprehensive European Right to Stay Strategy grounded in territorial cohesion, democratic participation and macro-regional cooperation. The Strategy should strengthen cross-border and macro-regional governance, support local communities and civil society actors, improve opportunities for young people, promote place-based and territorially sensitive policymaking, and reinforce democratic resilience across Europe’s regions. Ensuring that citizens can choose to remain and prosper in their own regions is fundamental to the long-term cohesion, legitimacy and resilience of the European Union.

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