



**CIVIC
EUROPE**

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

MitOst

comnit



**STIFTUNG
MERCATOR**



Introduction

Civic Europe was a comprehensive, multi-dimensional program geared towards **inspiring, identifying and supporting locally rooted ideas, individuals and organisations** active in the domains of civic education, civic engagement, participation and civic cohesion.

The external evaluation of the program was carried out by Reflectory in the spring and summer of 2022. As a consultancy that promotes reflective research and practice in the fields of facilitating conflict transformation, social cohesion, active citizenship, and participatory democracy, Reflectory's overarching goals of the evaluation were to perform **a retrospective impact analysis**, synthesizing an overall narrative of Civic Europe program's legacy, as well as to identify core strengths and recommendations.

This short version of the report contains the overview of distilled unique elements that contributed to the success of the Civic Europe program.

The evaluation was based on

- ▶ the data collected through primary documents analysis (internal reports, interim and/or monthly partner reports on the Capacity Building and Idea Challenge projects, meeting notes);
- ▶ semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in various Capacity Building and Idea Challenge projects and processes;
- ▶ participant observation notes and documents resulting from collaborative workshops and learning labs;
- ▶ social media and online information harvesting about different Civic Europe-supported initiatives and activities.

While the program was implemented across 12 countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain), Reflectory's evaluation was designed as a deeper insight into the program's impact by focusing on fewer geographic locations: Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Portugal and Romania.

Civic Europe. Beneficiaries 2020-2022

Idea Challenge Program

1391
applications

39 
winners (no. of
projects funded)

4200

direct beneficiaries in application phase,
benefitting from the Idea Challenge platform,
feedback on their applications, visibility and
networking effect

140-150

directly reached beneficiaries of
learning and community events,
and organizational development
coaching



approx.
30.000
people - indirect
outreach through
project work



Capacity Building Program

in Hungary, Poland, Romania

63
applications
35 in HU
16 in PL
12 in RO

24
selected NGOs
and informal
groups

20 directly reached beneficiaries
of learning, co-creation, and
community events (colleagues
from the 4 partner
organizations in HU, PL, RO)

24

project grants

approx.
10.000
people - indirect
outreach through
capacity building



in Bulgaria

118 
applications

34 directly reached
beneficiaries of
learning events,
in 2 cohorts

28
local projects

approx.
800
indirect outreach
through project work

Civic Europe. Capacity Building 2020-2022

Idea Challenge Program

10 learning events

2

offline community meetings



6



online community meetings

Capacity Building Program

in Hungary, Poland, Romania

16

online

2

offline



co-creation meetings

five

online learning events with program partners



15

learning events, mentoring (HU, PL, RO), coaching (HU) and organizational development support (HU, PL) for NGOs and informal groups

in Bulgaria

10

learning events

2

mentoring trainings

mentoring **25** project teams



two

alumni meetings

3

webinars around the online resource platform for Civic Education

over **100** teachers registered already in the first few days after launching

Mapping «civic deserts»

<https://mappingcivicdeserts.com/>



<https://sofiaplatform.org/civic-health-index-2021/>

‘Civic deserts’ are places perceived as offering few to no opportunities to actively participate in and learn about civic life, mainly because of deficient civic infrastructure and low civic literacy.

This report presents the most significant findings from an online questionnaire survey of 183 local civic actors from four regions, identified as ‘civic deserts’ and offers recommendations and examples of promising practices for improving civic cohesion in peripheral areas.

The Civic Health Index is a national representative survey among the adult population in Bulgaria (direct standardized survey via tablet in February and March 2021, in total 1382 adult citizens). The results of the index show that in Bulgaria there is a good foundation for civic participation stemming from the good legal framework, but in reality, civic participation is still relatively low.

Complex Program Architecture

The Civic Europe program's main characteristic was the diversity, scope and the scale of interventions. As such, it constituted a unique **'social laboratory' of different forms of intervention** designed to inspire, strengthen and foster civic education, civic engagement and participatory democracy actions, initiatives and projects. For example, the variety and diversity of methodologies applied in Idea Challenge winning projects constitutes a true kaleidoscope of civic engagement, civic education and civic cohesion-bolstering approaches.



The result

was an exceptional diversity of beneficiaries, approaches applied, target groups involved and conceptualizations of civic education, civic cohesion and civic engagement in so-called 'civic deserts' of Central, Eastern and Southern Europe.

Moreover, each of the program's main pillars had its own intricate architecture:

► The Idea Challenge

supporting 39 locally rooted initiatives identified through a Call for Ideas, local scouting and additional project incubation. These smaller-scale prototype projects would then undergo a learning journey in order to sustain, scale up and grow their initiatives to reach the 'next level' – that of sustainability, and replication.

► The Capacity Building

supporting 24 locally rooted non-governmental organizations working in the field of civic education in Romania, Poland and Hungary to enhance civic participation and active citizenship in their respective communities. Implemented with the help of 4 selected country partner organizations, the capacity building programs, and small project grants were tailor-made and adapted to three languages, reaching six to twelve further organizations, informal groups and local communities from remote areas of the selected countries

► The Ecosystem of Civic Education in Bulgaria

empowering 28 to 40 locally rooted and geographically spread-out civic education multipliers through a professional development program focusing on civic education initiatives, accompanied by micro grants distributed for small-scale civic education projects. Next to the capacity building, the ecosystem was strengthened by an online Civic Education resource platform in Bulgarian language, as well as by the development of a pilot application of Civic Health Index² in Bulgaria, designed to measure the state of civic health and civic cohesion of a community.

Civic (Education & Engagement) Experimentation



Another key finding was that the Civic Europe program serves as **a role model in grant-making** when it comes to fostering creativity, empowering local modes of engagement and strengthening local CSOs' autonomy, ownership and **flexibility in responding to emerging needs** and changing circumstances on the ground.

The flexible framework of program's implementation allowed and encouraged many participating individuals and organisations **to engage in experimentation and piloting** new civic education and civic cohesion initiatives. While many interviewees complained about the constraints of donor-prescribed priorities and frameworks, they found Civic Europe to be a **'breath of fresh air'** in allowing them the chance to experiment and be more courageous with piloting new approaches, methods and ideas they did not have the opportunity to implement previously.

CSOs Professional Development through tailor-made Capacity Building Program

The CSOs capacity building within the Civic Europe program was approached through the lens of professional development for key individuals and activists. This tailor-made or **needs-oriented professional development program**, next to providing needed advice, knowledge and skills-building, also strengthened organisations and their leaders in approaching and viewing themselves differently, by fostering analytical, self-reflective and action-oriented capacity building processes.



The presence of mentors was highly appreciated, as the learning did not happen in a vacuum of online-modules and self-paced learning but was accompanied by **expert coaches** who inspired accountability and commitment. Moreover, during the time of the pandemic, they also provided much-needed understanding, compassion, support and solidarity to civic activists and CSO leaders at a time of great uncertainty and difficulty for many organisations. As one mentor put it, “I could feel the **“therapeutic” side of the mentorship process** for teachers due to the pandemic-induced burnout they experienced.”

Another flexible learning tool was the Civil Society Toolbox for collective action and organizational development (<https://civilsocietytoolbox.org/>), that in own words “aims to support actors who are facilitating organizational development in initiatives, civil society organizations or informal groups who want to develop their working structures to act, collaborate and create impact in times of complexity and uncertainty.” Far more than a manual or a toolkit, the Toolbox is a versatile knowledge resource that can adapt to its user’s needs. The key component of the toolbox process is its journey-like structure with a coach that guides participants through each stage and helps them adapt to the ever-changing circumstances on the ground and in the learning process.

Strengthening Community and Organisational Resilience

One of the driving forces behind this program was the perceived lack of opportunities for those in underdeveloped areas to engage and live their full potential as engaged citizens. As evidenced through interviews and implementation reports, the project succeeded in **inspiring individuals to apply their own power and personal agency**.

An important part of strengthening community and organizational resilience came from enhancing everyone's **dimension of European partnerships and networks**. Civic Europe-facilitated connections continued to yield new ideas for local actions, learning exchanges as well as project proposals and collaborations **even after the program concluded**.

Another resilience-boosting element was some organization's conscious efforts to become more **horizontally inclusive** with their beneficiaries and key target groups. As one person put it, *"it made us ask the question how we can meaningfully involve the local communities more."* Several reported that the participation in the program made them expand the scope of their work by involving different, new target groups that they did not work with previously (for e.g. high school students, the elderly, local authorities), and they did so intentionally in order to make their work more **socially oriented and relevant to the community**.



Individual organisations' as well as, indirectly, civil sector's resilience was strengthened through the improvements that local organisations witnessed in how the public perceived them as result of their implementation of Civic Europe-supported activities. Some organisations experienced that their involvement in the Civic Europe program paved the way for **increased public trust in CSOs work**, which enhanced their ability to educate people and raise awareness about the importance of civic engagement and active citizenship.

Intentional Avoidance of the “Usual Suspects”

There are many reasons why many donors go for the CSOs known as ‘usual suspects’ – they have established structures and procedures, trained staff and high capacity for implementing projects. What the Civic Europe team understood was that despite the absence of some of these capacities in the case of organisations chosen for partnership within the program, the impact was bigger when the potential of an organization or individual unfolded over the course of the project.



For many of these organisations, and especially those for whom this was the first instance of international funding support, the learning curve, commitment and appreciation for their Civic Europe experience was high. Even the organisations that were tasked with dispensing and managing the capacity building program for grassroots CSOs and active citizen-led informal initiatives reported that **their own internal capacity exponentially grew** over the course of the implementation period.

By taking extra effort to **build grantees' competencies** in program design, co-creation, learning approaches and peer learning and exchange, Civic Europe has built sustainable impact that will last well beyond the program's conclusion.

Advocating Focus and Attention for “Civic Deserts” & Civic Health

‘Civic Deserts’ was one of the central concepts in the Civic Europe program. Defined as places with few opportunities to participate in civic life and by having deficient civic infrastructure (little to no civil society sector, informal groups, access to decision and policymaking, community centres, libraries, museums, mobility, volunteering, etc.), the program’s guiding assumption was that in such places, civic competence and active citizenship were particularly important, and would constitute **a powerful deterrent or preventive action for safeguarding democracy** in a world with growing complexity and uncertainties. It was emphasized throughout that the term does not comprise a judgment, but rather flags a problem not on the radar of researchers, media, and politicians.

The Civic Europe program ‘put on the map’ the ‘civic deserts’ focus, advocating and role modelling civic intervention at the local level in many underserved regions and communities far away from the bustling European capitals.

Both the Civic Health Index and the ‘civic deserts’ concepts ought to be applied Europe-wide, to study the levels of civic engagement and the (existing or lacking) opportunities for citizens to get involved in community service and similar initiatives.



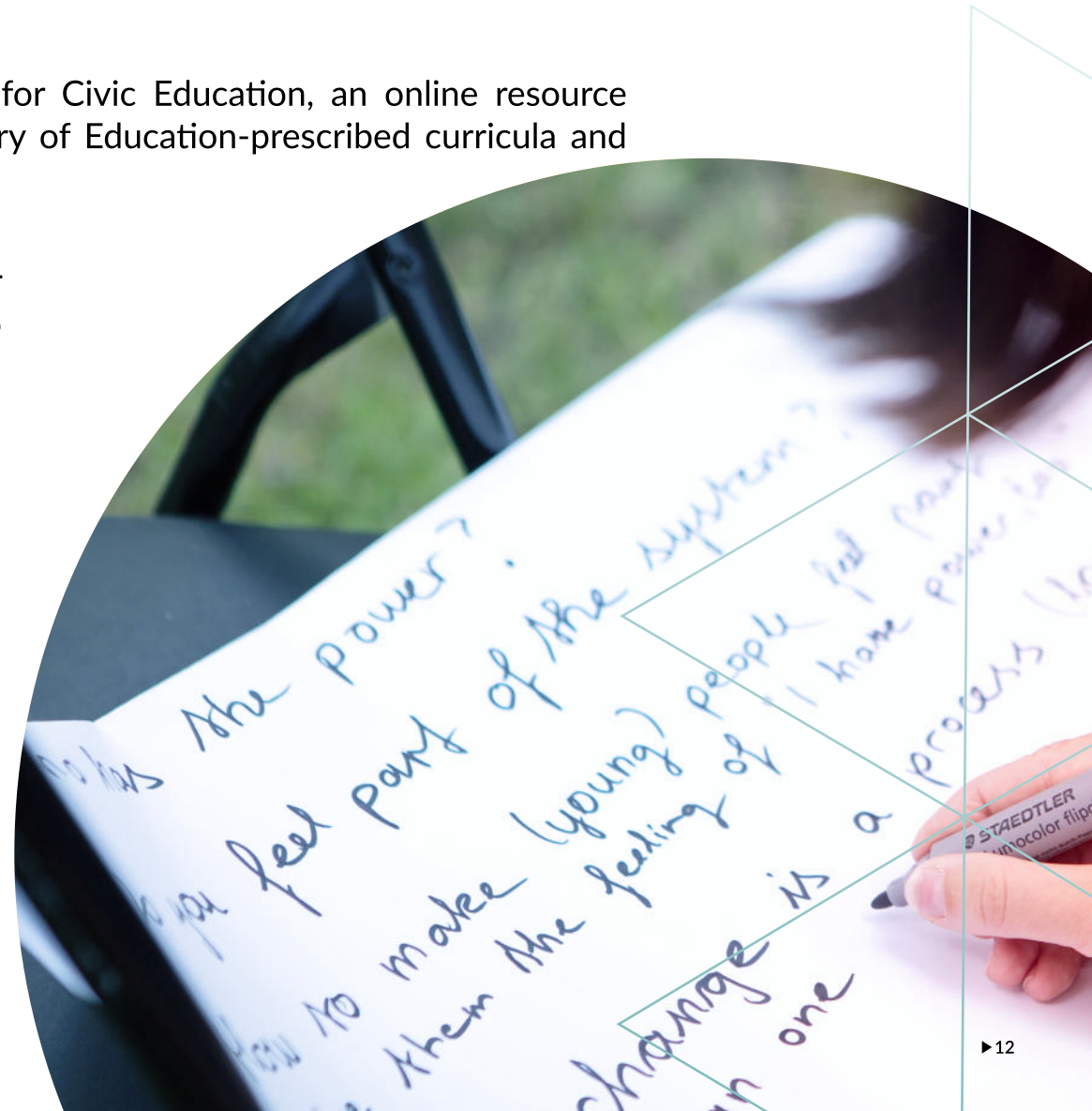
Civic Education Ecosystem Approach

The 'Strengthening of Civic Education Ecosystem in Bulgaria' pillar was designed as a miniature Civic Europe - a multi-level framework in its own right. The intervention was designed to directly inspire civic agency among diverse participants selected to attend the capacity building program.

The ecosystemic approach included creating the Platform for Civic Education, an online resource space with civic education lesson plans aligned with Ministry of Education-prescribed curricula and guidelines.

Extrapolating this approach has the predispositions for success in every country in Europe. The 'formula' ought to replicate the same elements as piloted in Bulgaria:

- ▶ Capturing some of these approaches in how-to easy guides and lesson plan activities and sharing them with the wider world through an online platform
- ▶ Selecting a diverse set of professionals with 'civic entrepreneurship' ambitions;
- ▶ Organizing a capacity building program with peer-education and mentorship elements;
- ▶ Providing funding for small-scale civic education and civic engagement actions, initiatives and mini-projects;



Human(ist)Approach to Grant-Making: Leading By Example

Most interviewees praised the human connection, energy invested in relationship-building and getting to know partners, receiving advice and suggestions when needed, and implementing partners being explicitly flexible and understanding as all having contributed to **a nurturing atmosphere where it was ok to try - and fail, and learn**. This contributed to the **reduction of stress** in participating organisations' team leaders, and also **increased their motivation, energy and enthusiasm**.

This personalized approach to grant making made Civic Europe stand out among other funding programs, and this comparative lens was self-initiated by our interlocutors. Grantees experienced a more personal, partner-type relationship with MitOst and Sofia Platform, as opposed to the impersonal, disconnected and highly bureaucratic approach (example given: the EU).

This way of operating was reported to be **deeply transformative**, as it offered insight and personal **experience of a 'different way of being' and a different way of doing**. The intentional making space for building relations, for learning and understanding the partners and their local circumstances resulted in partners considering changing own ways of work and **following the example of the Civic Europe team** that was found to have a genuine interest, curiosity and care for the people and the project ideas they were supporting.

The Idea Challenge team organized a space for us to learn from our own experience and from other groups experiences (but without overdoing it). We had a lot of “aha moments” during these discussions and reflections with other grantees. One important realisation emerged, which was that we all felt that the Civic Europe team trusted us to do our job well which motivated us a great deal.

(Re)Invigorating Civil Society

Civic Europe's flexible and administratively 'light' management allowed the participating civil society organisations to truly focus on the activity's implementation and on their beneficiaries, which they reported was not the case for most if not all other donors they were accustomed to working with. Or as an interviewee from Croatia put it:



Civic Europe was a very pleasant experience - we did not have such a wonderful partnership relationship with a donor since the pre-EU days! They acted more like a partner than a donor. This was felt from the correspondence onward, everything was smooth and pleasant, for example coffee with Civic Europe was lovely, insightful and constructive. This is in stark contrast to EU-funded projects where there is much less care for numerous aspects of the project, including the beneficiaries, whereas here great emphasis is put on the beneficiaries. The donor not only understands but also cares as well.



Given that the profile of participating organisations from 'civic deserts' included both grassroots and more experienced CSOs, both were positively impacted by this: new, informal and small organisations were encouraged and welcomed to participate as the administrative requirements were not dissuasively complex, while the more established CSOs were inspired to reignite the spark of passion for their missions through invitation to innovate and experiment with new forms and methods of engagement.

Epilogue

Considering the pressures under which civil society organisations have been operating during the pandemic, coupled with the phenomenon of shrinking civic space in some countries that has been underway for several years now, this **program's successful injection of optimism, hope and enthusiasm** in 'civic deserts' of Central, Eastern and Southern Europe is no small feat.

The challenge of advancing civic education and civic engagement in Europe is embedded within the wider context of the **increasing vulnerability and uncertainty relating to democracy as a system** of governance that people trust and rely on to meet and provide their (basic) needs. In Europe where populism has been on the rise in the past decade, civic engagement thrives – though not the pro-democratic, human rights-based kind, but the very opposite. In a world where the things we took for granted over the past few decades are soon set to become the luxuries of tomorrow, we will need creative civic initiatives that build bridges, foster resilience, depolarise communication and thinking, reimagine personal and civic response-ability and enhance social cohesion.

The Civic Europe program constitutes a rich archive of ideas, **a motivating treasure trove of approaches, local level initiatives and intervention designs** that are transferable and applicable across Europe. The challenge that lies ahead is how best to capture and preserve this legacy, so that 'average' active citizens, civic activists, educators, civil society organisations, local authorities, media and all other groups can draw much-needed inspiration, hope and strength from it.

