

## 12 Theses from the 12<sup>th</sup> Danube Participation Day

More than 70% of EU rules must be put into practice at the local level. This makes it essential for local authorities and other community-level actors to understand these policies and have the skills to implement them. They also need opportunities to share their experiences and expectations with the EU. Civil society organisations add important value too — acting as policy experts, connectors, and watchdogs that strengthen European democracies.

With this in mind, representatives from civil society, public authorities, research institutions, European bodies, and businesses came together to discuss how we can better involve local communities in candidate countries in the EU accession process. They explored challenges and opportunities from the perspectives of municipalities, civil society organisations, and young people. The outcome: the **“12 Theses from the 12th Danube Participation Day.”**

### **1. Translate EU values into concrete actions**

EU values like democracy, freedom, and equality must be reflected in everyday life through practical measures. This means strengthening transparent governance, ensuring equal access to education and healthcare, promoting citizen participation in decision-making, and protecting fundamental rights. Macroregional cooperation within the EU Strategy for the Danube Region can accelerate this process by fostering cross-border projects, sharing best practices, and supporting inclusive policies. Turning principles into visible results builds trust and shows that EU values are not abstract ideals, but real commitments that improve communities across the region.

### **2. Simplify language...BUT do not oversimplify messages**

Simplifying language for inclusion is not only a matter of using easy to understand language, but also creating spaces to learn and acquiring the skills and capacities to better understand how (EU) policies work and how they can be shaped.

Clear and accessible communication is key to ensuring that everyone can engage with EU policies and values. Simplifying language helps break down barriers, making complex ideas understandable to a wider audience. However, true inclusivity means more than just using easy words—it requires preserving the depth and integrity of the message. By explaining objectives and processes step by step, and creating spaces for learning and capacity-building, we empower people to not only understand but also actively shape policies. Simplification should be seen as an opportunity to open doors, foster dialogue, and strengthen trust—without compromising knowledge or reality.

### **3. Close the information gap**

Engagement starts with knowing what policies are about, how decisions are made, and where people can get involved. Yet many local stakeholders don't know *when* or *where* their expertise is needed. On top of that, many organisations lack the time and staff to follow policy developments, plan projects, or engage in advocacy — which often leads to

overworked teams and burnout. Closing this information gap is something we can only do together. Stronger networks between civil society and public authorities at all levels are one of the most effective ways to share knowledge and create meaningful participation. Larger civil society organisations can also support smaller ones by helping direct their contributions where they matter most.

Events like the National Participation Day in the EU Danube Strategy show how powerful this can be: they bring together strategy coordinators, civil society, municipalities, researchers, and businesses to exchange information, explore cooperation, and discuss shared priorities. These kinds of activities can be repeated across policy fields and contexts — building trust, creating community, and enabling real participation when they happen regularly.

#### **4. Provide physical space for people to come together**

Building trust is closely linked to in-person exchange. Likewise, building communities requires spaces to meet and engage with each other. Hence, building communities that trust each other needs to be supported through physical space, where people can come together.

Especially, initiatives that work with young and/or vulnerable people show how spaces such as community centres where starting points to provide services, to share and develop ideas, discuss, and learn together and from each other.

#### **5. Enhance programmatic perspective (vs. project perspective)**

While projects are an important tool to design policies and methodologies, there is always one question looming: What happens after the end of the project? The valuable knowledge and trust that project bring about needs to be embedded in a broader perspective. Hence, understanding projects as a building block of a strategic mission, helps building a community and sustain knowledge and project results beyond the project duration. Macro-regional strategies support this endeavour through their various working groups and networks as well as with their actions providing a strategic, long-term orientation. Likewise, planning on a programmatic vision supports the systematic progress of change through strategic planning of single projects that provide their own contribution to the bigger picture and, therefore, create more gravity to attract stakeholders.

#### **6. Strengthen the Partnership Principle**

The Partnership Principle is a core element of EU Cohesion Policy, ensuring that public authorities and civil society work together in planning, implementing, and monitoring EU funding. Despite step-by-step improvements of legal and procedural provisions, the way the Partnership Principle is put into practice still differs significantly across countries. Its quality largely depends on whether public authorities create genuine opportunities for cooperation and whether civil society organisations and municipalities have the skills and knowledge to participate meaningfully.

Strengthening the Partnership Principle therefore means ensuring that collaboration is truly meaningful and that all partners are equipped to contribute effectively. Technical assistance and mutual learning within the Danube Region and beyond can help improve how the principle is applied. Furthermore, a more legally binding nature of the Partnership Principle

would facilitate respective monitoring and assessment of the Partnership Principle and more active support from European institution for implementation.

This approach should not be limited to EU Member States. Candidate countries should also be involved so that participatory planning and implementation practices can be established early on.

## 7. Enhance coordination & cooperation of civil society organisations for greater visibility

Civil society organisations differ widely in size, resources, and capacity—yet these differences are often overlooked when discussing their role in policymaking. Smaller organisations may struggle with limited staff and funding, while larger ones navigate political and administrative systems with greater ease.

That's why strong networks matter. By connecting small and large organisations, networks boost capacity, support mutual learning, and strengthen advocacy. Smaller groups gain access to knowledge, resources, and policy insights, while larger organisations amplify their impact with a broader base of supporters.

Better coordination and cooperation help civil society focus its energy on clear goals, pool resources, and build a critical mass that increases visibility and influence.

## 8. Recruit & train committed staff in municipalities to improve knowledge on European cooperation & recognising local needs

Recruiting and training committed staff in municipalities is essential to strengthen knowledge on European cooperation and ensure that local needs are effectively addressed. Small municipalities often face resource constraints and lack the expertise to apply for EU funding, which limits their ability to engage in sustainable development and implement the EU acquis. Establishing certified academies that provide targeted training for municipal officers can bridge this gap by equipping them with practical skills and a deep understanding of EU policies and funding mechanisms. Such initiatives, already successfully implemented in some EU member states, can be replicated through EU projects or national programs, creating learning spaces that connect European priorities with local realities. This approach is particularly relevant for EU candidate countries, where empowering local administrations with these competencies fosters stronger integration, accelerates development, and ensures that European cooperation translates into tangible benefits for communities.

## 9. Invest in (young) people

Young people in candidate countries often feel connected to the European idea, but this connection is more abstract – linked to quality of life and future opportunities. While these aspirations are rooted in principles such as peace, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, and human rights, socialising youth in these values remains an important goal for building a shared European future. At the same time, addressing the challenge of brain drain is crucial: many young people leave in search of better opportunities abroad. To reverse this trend, candidate countries must become places where youth see a promising future—where they can actively shape policies, contribute to their communities, and participate in

decision-making processes – and thus, realising European values on the spot. Investing in young people means creating inclusive spaces for dialogue, offering opportunities for skills development, and ensuring that governance is participatory and transparent. More broadly, investing in people requires equipping them with the tools to navigate complex systems, fostering trust, and promoting lifelong learning. When individuals feel valued and capable of influencing their environment, societies thrive.

## 10. Interact at eye level & value each other's cultural heritage

Mutual respect is the foundation of cooperation between EU member states and candidate countries. Whether in political accession talks or in joint projects and networks, partners must engage as equals. Any hint that candidate countries' cultures are "lesser" undermines trust and can lead to disengagement.

For collaboration to thrive, all exchanges between people and institutions must honor and value each partner's cultural heritage. Likewise, capacity-building efforts should avoid paternalistic, teacher-student dynamics. Instead, they should foster peer-to-peer learning, where all sides contribute, support each other, and move forward together.

## 11. Embrace the emotional side of EU accession/enlargement

EU enlargement isn't just about rules and economics—it's about people. In many candidate countries, especially in cities, citizens already feel European and want to join the EU family. But slow and complicated accession processes, particularly in the Western Balkans, risk creating frustration and a sense of being left behind.

While reforms matter, the emotional side often goes unnoticed. To address it, the EU and its member states should actively promote a narrative of belonging, show real interest in candidate countries, and engage in open dialogue that recognises both hopes and worries. By building trust, highlighting shared values, and tackling scepticism early, enlargement can become a genuine, inclusive journey—not a distant promise.

## 12. Invest in Trust

Building trust is the foundation for meaningful participation and successful cooperation, especially in EU candidate countries striving to align with European values. Trust creates social capital, strengthens relationships, and ensures that all stakeholders believe in each other's commitment to both the process and its outcomes. When challenges arise in policy development or implementation, trust sustains dialogue and collaboration. Investing in trust through participatory governance tools—such as participatory budgeting—empowers local communities and public administrations to learn, share, and apply inclusive practices. These actions not only enhance capacities and knowledge but also foster confidence in democratic processes, paving the way for deeper integration into the EU framework.

## About the document

The content of the '12 Theses from the 12th Danube Participation Day' is based on stakeholder discussions at the 12th Danube Participation Day - "Local Voices, European Future. The Crucial Role of Communities in Shaping EU Policy and Driving Enlargement" - in Sarajewo (BiH) on 4 November 2025. The results of the discussion have been summarised and were presented at the 14th Annual Forum of the EU Danube Strategy on 5 November 2025. The document has been edited by the coordination of Priority Area 10 "Institutional Capacity and Cooperation" of the EU Danube Strategy, commented by the Danube Civil Society Forum (DCSF).

## About the Danube Participation Day

The Danube Participation Day is an annual event that gathers representatives from civil society organisations, local, regional and national public authorities, universities and research, and businesses from the 14 EUSDR partner countries, along with representatives from the EUSDR governance, European and international organisations. The aim is to foster cooperation and participation for better development in the Danube Region. Thus, the Danube Participation Days serve as a platform for exchanging views and perspectives to build trust and strengthen mutual learning. The Danube Participation Day is a forum to share good practices of participatory governance and projects, as well as for getting involved with decision-makers and experts.

The Danube Participation Day is organised by Priority Area 10 "Institutional Capacity and Cooperation" and the Danube Civil Society Forum together with local partners, as well as with support from and in close cooperation with the EUSDR Presidency.

More information:

<https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/danube-participation-day/>

<https://danubestrategy.eu/about-the-participation-days>

*The 12<sup>th</sup> Danube Participation Day is supported by:*