

GLOBAL CHALLENGES - LOCAL SOLUTIONS

BEST PRACTICES FROM CIVIL COMMUNITIES IN THE CARPATHIANS



2025



Introduction

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN THE CARPATHIANS

Citizen participation in decision-making is vital for fostering a democratic society, as it empowers people to actively participate in shaping public affairs, policy formulation, and community matters that profoundly impact their lives. This approach goes far beyond mere one-way communication from the top to the bottom; it builds trust between people and government, improves outcomes, and ensures transparency. By sharing information and collaborating on problem-solving, a more effective and inclusive governance can be created that truly reflects the community's needs and aspirations.

Civil society plays a crucial role in participatory democracy as it is embedded in communities, represents, and amplifies the interests of various citizen groups. One key difference between the state and civil society is their responsiveness to social challenges. The state, by its rigid bureaucratic hierarchy, responds slowly to issues faced by local communities and struggles to identify the underlying causes of pressing challenges. In contrast, civil societies, which are rooted in their communities, provide solutions – or even take action in place of the state. In participatory democracy, these community-driven solutions can be adapted and integrated into mainstream policy. Therefore, an effective and smart state should create an enabling environment that fosters and harnesses the innovative potential of civil society in citizen engagement.

Civil societies are one of the engines of social innovation, and the case studies in this brochure highlight the key ingredients and prerequisites of this process. First, there is a need for changemakers - motivated individuals who embody and ignite the spirit of their community, and are willing and dare to take the initiative to change the given conditions. A changemaker cannot

be a lonely, isolated individual; s/he should be able to mobilize others in the community and build a supportive network, making the process of change a collective endeavor.

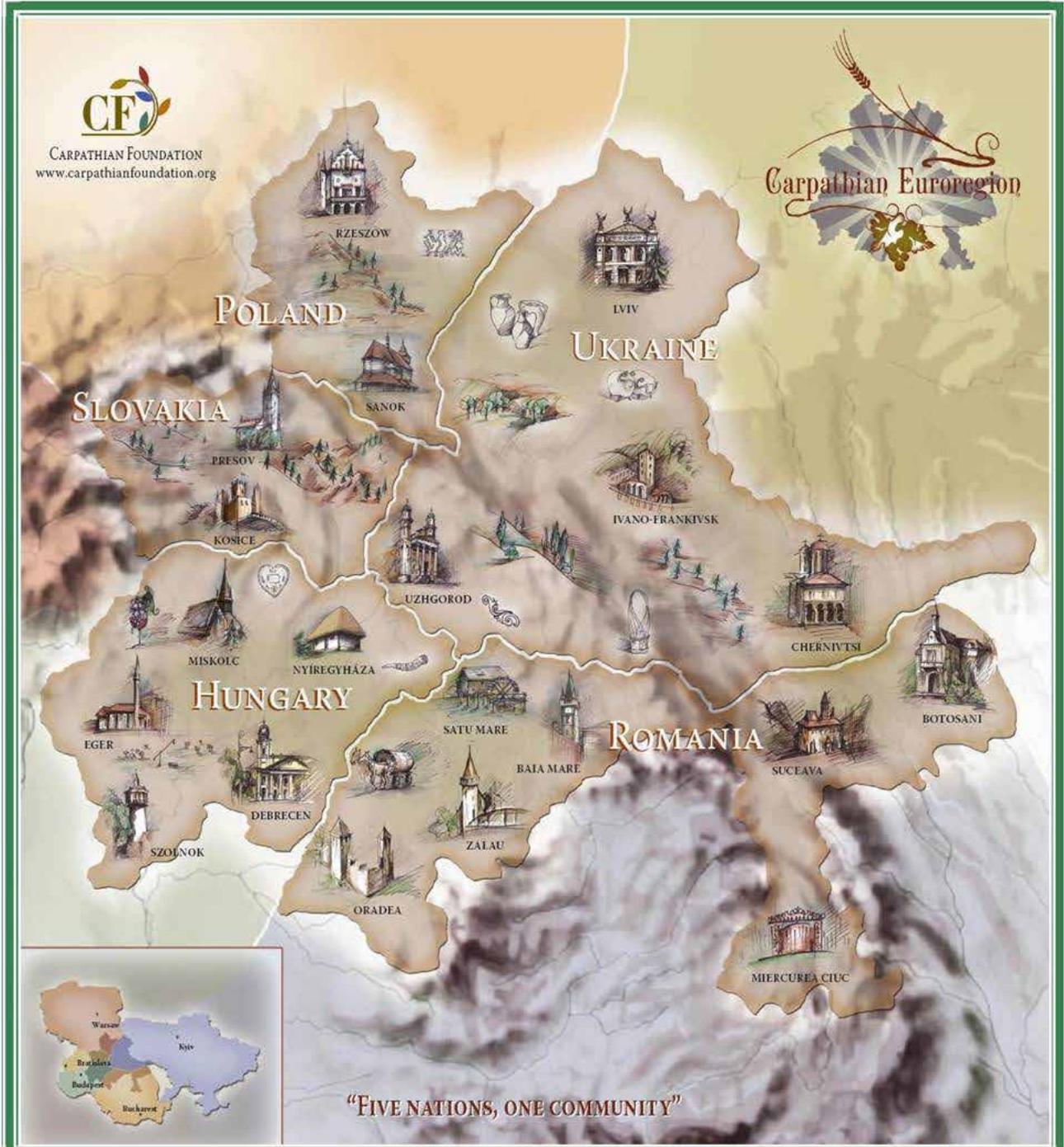
This brochure, the collection of good practices of citizen engagement from the Carpathians, showcases some of the many accomplished initiatives undertaken by Carpathian civil society organizations that shaped the conditions for local citizen actions, for example, encouraging young people's participation in public life, expanding opportunities for community engagement, creating new community institutions, promoting good neighborliness and local culture, mobilizing communities, supporting migrants and internally displaced people, and various other initiatives.

The primary goal of the **Carpathian Civil Society Platform** is to connect and network isolated grassroots civil society organizations across the neighbouring countries of the Carpathian region by creating a mutually supportive and encouraging web of changemakers and a civil space for exchanging experiences and learning from one another.

This brochure serves this goal and may inspire other civil society organizations to adopt the good practices in their communities to bolster citizen participation in the Carpathians.

SÁNDOR KÖLES

Chair of the Board
Carpathian Foundation-Hungary





UKRAINE

Title: Coping with psychological trauma of war
Organization: Charitable Organization «Charitable Foundation «The Tree Of My Life», Zakarpatska Oblast Of Ukraine (Transcarpathia)

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY

The Tree of My Life operates in the picturesque mountainous region of Transcarpathia, namely in Uzhhorod, Mukachevo, and Svaliava, formerly renowned for its natural beauty, tourist attractions, and vibrant multicultural lifestyle. These cities are among the most densely populated parts of the region, which accepted the highest number of internally displaced people, including the families of the military personnel, since the beginning of the full-scale war. Apart from this, they are home to one of the distinguished brigades of the armed forces. Moreover, thousands of wounded warriors receive medical treatment in the local hospitals.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

The Tree of My Life had been registered in April 2022; a little while later, the full-scale invasion started. It pursues its objectives in the fields of psychological and psychosocial services for wounded and retired military personnel, families of active military and those who lost their relatives at the war, IDPs and elderly people, medical personnel and social workers. Highly skilled team of The Tree of My Life consists of twenty-three persons: four administrators, a volunteer, six facilitators, a life coach, a professional on mental health in the workplace, five consultants on military psychology, four psychologists, and two psychotherapists.



88015, 6a Oleksandr Khira-str.,
Uzhhorod, Ukraine





THE PROBLEM

Besides unnecessary casualties and horrid devastation, the war leaves its cruel imprint on the mental health of both military personnel and civilians. It inflicts severe psychological trauma, the consequences of which people may fight for their lives. In these circumstances, the psychoemotional support to those coping with the psychological trauma of war continues to grow in importance. It includes stabilization, restoration of resources, dealing with loss, coping with ambiguous loss, suicide prevention, etc.



THE BEST PRACTICE

The Tree of My Life offered a systematic and sustainable approach to meeting these challenges by introducing a unique set of services which include: comprehensive balneological and psychoemotional recovery for veterans with acquired disabilities; weekly psychoemotional recovery for the groups of spouses of acting military personnel; weekly psychological recovery and coping with the loss for the groups of family members who lost their relatives; weekly psychological recovery, using animal therapy, for the groups of military personnel who returned from captivity; psychoemotional sessions for the groups of veterans; daily outdoor psychoemotional recovery activities for the veterans who are undergoing treatment in the local hospitals; daily psychoemotional recovery activities, including hippotherapy, for the

veterans and their families; daily psychoemotional activities, including Canistherapy, for disabled persons; permanent psychoeducational activities for elderly people; integrational activities for IDPs; psychoeducational activities for the employees of health and social services.





UKRAINE

Title: **Seniors' club**

Organization: **Civic Organization "Movement To Support Transcarpathian Military – Uzhhorod", Zakarpatska Oblast Of Ukraine (Transcarpathia)**

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY

This mass movement evolved in the regional center of Transcarpathia, the city of Uzhhorod. Since the beginning of the foreign invasion in 2014, this provincially neat and snug city of about 120,000 people has gradually transformed itself into one of the core pillars of national resilience. Uzhhorod accepted the biggest waves of IDPs, most of whom are women, children, and the elderly. The city became a home for relocated businesses and cultural institutions. It is a place where a significant



part of the new military units was formed. A dozing provincial city turned into an important economic and humanitarian hub. The people of Uzhhorod play a crucial role in these transformations, providing all possible assistance to the defenders, caring for their families, and helping those who flee from the war. Dozens of formal and informal, truly people's, initiatives appeared in the city to cope with different aspects of the barbaric aggression. The Movement is one of them.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

Apparently, The Movement is the biggest and most recognizable civil society organization in the region. It had been started as an informal volunteer initiative in 2014 and primarily focused on support

to the military units from Transcarpathia and to the families of active personnel. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion in 2022, the initiative has been legally registered as a civic organization and significantly increased the scope of its operations. Although The Movement expanded drastically, its key pillar remains the same. It is almost completely based on volunteerism and direct donations from people. Thousands of community members invest their resources, time, and devotion into The Movement's activities. Besides traditional help to the military, the organization provides diverse services for the families of military personnel, for widows and children who lost their parents, designs integrational programs for internally displaced people, cares for wounded in the local hospitals, hosts charitable auctions and fundraising campaigns, promotes volunteerism and community engagement.



88000, 8 Yurii Hoida -str.,
Uzhhorod, Ukraine





needed and useful for others. The Movement appreciates the valuable input of elderly people into everyday activities of the organization, as they weave camouflage nets, collect donations at the shopping centers, produce hand-made goods for charity fairs, and support operations of the main office. The Senior Club's activities are organized in a way that provides elderly people with opportunities, but not a ready-made solution. Seniors enjoy the utmost freedom in modifying their activities and

THE PROBLEM

Significant diversification and expansion of The Movement's activities since 2022 became a profound challenge for the organization. It is compelled to combine its organizational development and increasing demands for services for several, often dissimilar, target groups. In particular, a significant number of elderly people (65+) arrived to Uzhhorod with the waves of internal displacement. Most of these lonely people lost everything: home, social environment, and were often thrust into life. Obviously, the local community, and The Movement in particular, should have reacted to this challenge too.

developing new initiatives. For example, the groups of Scandinavian Walk and neurodynamic gymnastics became completely independent and self-reliant. The Movement is happy and proud to witness such achievements of seniors and considers these gains as its ultimate success.

THE BEST PRACTICE

The organization came up with the idea, which employs a win-win approach and anticipates services for elderly displaced people in conjunction with the involvement of the latter in volunteering activities of The Movement. The Seniors' Club was established in 2023. It provides psychosocial support, assists in community integration, and helps elderly people to make friends and develop new social relations. These efforts have an undeniably positive impact on the physical and mental health of seniors. Yet their involvement in volunteering work refills their life with new content, provides them with a sense of being



Links showcasing
the best practice





UKRAINE

Title: **Child Center**

Organization: **Volunteers Of Uzhhorod National University, Zakarpatska Oblast Of Ukraine (Transcarpathia)**

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY

Uzhhorod National University is the biggest educational institution of Transcarpathia. Its human capacity of more than 2,000 staff members and 16,000 students significantly exceeds any other company in the region. Literally, there are no institutions or fields of activity in Transcarpathia where the University's presence is absent. This makes its role special for the regional social, economic and political development. Besides other influences, the University sets standards and promotes values, which are then implemented in different fields of life by thousands of its graduates. No wonder that the University was among the first to meet the challenges of the full-scale invasion in 2022.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

Civic organization "Volunteers of Uzhhorod National University" was registered in 2018 as an initiative of about 100 of its students and teachers. In the first place, it was focused on the development of professional and social skills of the students through their involvement in volunteer activities and participation in socially significant events. Since the beginning of the full-scale war, the Volunteers have changed into an important hub, which provides diverse humanitarian aid and social services in the region and beyond its limits. It sent several hundred tons of humanitarian aid to the front-line regions of the country, provided free daily meals for 2000 refugees, who found shelter in the University's premises, created the coworking space for IDPs, started a youth center, permanently supported military units, and the teachers and students of the University who defended the freedom.



THE PROBLEM

Since 2022, the University has turned into the biggest shelter for IDPs in the region. From 2000 to 500 people live at its facilities on a daily basis. A significant number of these people are women and children. The Volunteers paid special attention to the children from the beginning of the refugee crisis, providing them with all possible support. Nevertheless, it became evident that, besides the humanitarian aid, permanent services are needed. They are the only way to, on one hand, provide care for children, and, on the other hand, to enable parents' integration into the local community (to find a job, permanent housing,



88000, 2, Narodna-sq., office 25,
Uzhhorod, Ukraine





search for educational opportunities for children, explore community services, etc.). Despite the critical shortage of free spaces, The Volunteers had taken over abandoned premises, renovated and equipped them, and started the Day Care Center for IDP Children.

THE BEST PRACTICE

Considering the urgent need for permanent services for IDP children who live in the premises of Uzhhorod National University, and being aware of the limited capacities of municipal pre-school institutions, The Volunteers started the Day Care Center. Its program was developed in a way to combine educational services, psychological support for children and their parents, as well as after-class recreational, leisure time, and art activities. The Volunteers involved highly qualified University staff members (teachers, post-graduate and master students) in the everyday operations of the Center. After 3 years of operation, when most of the children had grown up and gone to school, the Center changed its profile and turned into an after-school



child facility. It is a space where children can relax after school, find assistance in making their home tasks, and participate in sports and art activities. The Volunteers demonstrated their flexibility and adaptivity to the changing needs of children who grow up in the shelter and are committed to serving these kids as long as needed.



Links





SLOVAKIA

Title: Inspiring Youth (Mladí inšpirujú)

Organization: Mladý Bardejov – Municipal Youth Parliament, Bardejov, Slovakia

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY

Mladý Bardejov – Municipal Youth Parliament is located in the town of Bardejov. The town, which has 30,000 inhabitants, is situated in northeastern Slovakia, near the border with Poland.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

Mladý Bardejov was established in 2017 as an advisory body to the town and also as a platform for young people to actively participate in local affairs. The Youth Parliament organizes a variety of activities including international programs (Erasmus+) volunteer initiatives, and political discussions. It was the only one in Slovakia to have its members in all committees of the municipal council. Its composition changes regularly, and in the last two years, it has consisted of 22 members.

THE PROBLEM

Youth parliaments bring together the most active young people in a town – those who want to influence their environment, speak up on current issues, and implement activities that meet the needs of their peers. The Bardejov Municipal Youth Parliament is one of the most active in Eastern Slovakia, and even though one of its most exceptional aspects – direct participation in municipal council committees – is now a thing of the past and thus the parliament’s advisory function is weakened, its members continue to show a strong effort to be an active group. Regular activities include pre-election discussions with candidates for elected positions, participating in the wreath-laying ceremony for soldiers fallen in World War II, and various volunteer activities. Their latest challenge is to bring inspiration and positive role models to young people for their future careers.



THE BEST PRACTICE

Mladý Bardejov is a Youth Parliament with support from the Municipality of Bardejov, which allows it to organize events almost without its own budget, or by utilizing smaller grant schemes. Thanks to this support, its activities are sustainable, although its current neutral (non-partisan) position is not guaranteed in the future. In recent years, Mladý Bardejov has created several own events designed to offer local youth leisure-time





activities, inspiration from successful Bardejov locals and strengthen Euro-citizenship.

Bardinspo Conference: The first edition of the conference took place in 2024 in Bardejov’s largest venue – a 300-seat cinema, which was filled with high school students. The conference presented 6 inspiring stories that proved that Bardejov also offers opportunities for one’s own success story. The second edition in 2025 had the subtitle: Opportunities in the Hands of Women. It again featured 6 stories, this time also aiming to highlight lesser-known professions and the non-profit sector.

European Fridays: Before the European Parliament elections, Mladý Bardejov aimed to raise awareness about the EU’s values and benefits for Slovakia to increase voter participation. In May 2024, they organized 5 Friday supporting this theme in different formats and locations: a discussion, a quiz, an EU countries info day, a workshop on disinformation and a film screening. Over 500 people participated in the activities, and thanks to these efforts, voter turnout increased by 12% compared to the previous EU elections.



Summer Cinema under the Stars (Letné kino pod hviezdami): This event was created to address the lack of open-air events in Bardejov. It has now become a two-year tradition. The youth run the cinema every week during summer holidays in cooperation with the Municipality of Bardejov, a local cafe and local media. Admission to the films is free.

Mladý Bardejov is a great example of how young people, even without adult leaders, can create activities that have a significant social impact.



Links





SLOVAKIA

Title: A Strategy for Youth – Participatively!

Organization: Youth Council of Prešov Region (RMPK), Prešov, Slovakia

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY

Children and youth form about one third of the population of Slovakia, and the highest proportion of them living in the Prešov Region. The specificities of the region, which have a direct impact on the quality of life of young people, include the lack of job opportunities and the unfavorable economic conditions. Young people here consider brain drain, insufficient local infrastructure, lack of employment and disregard for their needs to be the most pressing problems.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

RMPK is a platform that creates a unified voice of youth organizations in the Prešov Region. It brings together non-governmental organizations, youth parliaments and informal youth groups that implement activities for children and youth. The organization contributes to the creation and implementation of regional and local youth policy. At the same time, it supports the participation of young people on school, municipal and regional level. It implements a wide range of activities for school parliaments – as a grant program supporting their activities, educational activities, or the Quality Mark – an award for active and inspiring school parliaments. It regularly organizes informal educational activities in the field of developing skills necessary for better employment of young people – trainings focused on the development of soft skills, e.g. critical thinking, presentation, communication skills, teamwork, etc.

THE PROBLEM

In the area of youth policy, there is a prevailing tendency among authorities to consider young people’s needs as irrelevant. Representatives of the authorities assume that they “know” what young people need, but in reality their activities don’t reflect the real needs of young people. The idea that young



people should be involved in public affairs is still not widely accepted. However, participation proves to be the best tool for overcoming frustration caused by unfavorable conditions and also a way to overcome those conditions effectively.

THE BEST PRACTICE

In 2023, the Prešov Self-Governing Region (PSK) adopted the PSK Youth Strategy for 2023–2028. This mid-term youth policy document is an interesting example of cooperation between the local government and youth organizations in the Prešov Region based on the needs of young people. The Prešov Region supported the participatory creation of the document and delegated its preparation to RMPK, as the umbrella organization for youth work in the region. The main source for the Strategy creation was an extensive „Survey of the needs and quality of life of young people”, in which over 4,300 young people



participated. Based on the results of the survey, 28 experts from youth organizations worked on the defining goals and measures. The final document was reviewed and commented on by young people from different parts of the region. The Strategy's goals are evaluated on an annual basis, and the implementation of specific measures is the result of cooperation between a wide range of youth work actors in the Prešov Region. The implementation of the Strategy is facilitated by the Regional Action Group as a platform for dialogue for youth work in the region, where its members meet regularly throughout the year. Another major achievement is that the „youth” program was included in the existing donation schemes of Prešov Self-Governing Region for the first time ever. The creation of the strategic document brought more flexible responses from actors to meet the needs of young people. For the next five years, it serves as the main source document for improving the quality of life of young people in the region.



Links





SLOVAKIA

Title: Young philanthropists give youth a reason to stay
Organization: Community Foundation Bardejov, Bardejov, Slovakia

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY

The Community Foundation Bardejov and the Young Philanthropists operate in the city of Bardejov and its surrounding area. The city, with 30,000 inhabitants, is located in the northeast of Slovakia, near the border with Poland. Bardejov is proud of its UNESCO-listed historic center and is a peaceful place to live. However, despite the work of local non-profits, participatory processes are still weak and young people have few opportunities to influence public life.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

The Bardejov Community Foundation was established in 2002 to develop local philanthropy and active citizenship by supporting initiatives and non-profit organizations. Fourteen years ago, it launched the Young Philanthropists program based on the YouthBank concept, through which it passes

on its know-how to young people. This is the only program of its kind in Slovakia that has run continuously since its inception. Its goal is to develop philanthropy and volunteerism among young people, encourage their involvement in addressing the needs of their community, and support their talent and ideas.

THE PROBLEM

Young people in small towns like Bardejov face a lack of opportunities to get involved in activities with social impact. The limited ability to influence their surroundings leads them to feel that there is no point in being active citizens. Many have limited access to participatory decision-making processes and often do not have the necessary skills or space to develop them.



THE BEST PRACTICE (IMPLEMENTATION, ACHIEVEMENTS, FUTURE SUSTAINABILITY)

The innovative Young Philanthropists grant program is based on the YouthBank concept and has been the only one of its kind in Slovakia for more than 14 years. The program helps young people to reflect on their community, identify needs, and propose concrete solutions. A mentor guides them, broadens their perspectives, involves stakeholders, supports fundraising, and helps evaluate their outcomes. These positive experiences contribute to a more active approach to life and strengthen the community—young people have a greater desire to return or continue to participate in the life of the town.

Dozens of young people have gone through the program, with each team responding to current needs and problems. In 2023, an election year in Slovakia, polls showed that only 52% of young people were interested in voting, with many wanting to leave the country. The Community Foundation Bardejov and the Young Philanthropists therefore joined the nationwide mobilization campaign „I Want to Stay Here”



and organized their own campaign. They created on-line videos where people of different ages expressed their motivations for voting. They also organized the Night of Young Philanthropists, facilitating a discussion about the importance of being active citizens. As part of the nationwide campaign, they organized the Festival of Democracy in the four largest residential areas of Bardejov. Thanks to these events, the young people reached a larger number of their peers and gained visibility. The Young Philanthropists were even featured as a positive example in the Country of Youth podcast. The „I Want to Stay Here” campaign resulted in a 16% increase in interest in voting among young people under 25.

Links





POLAND

Title: **Building the strength of local social organizations**
Organization: **SIEĆ NGO Rzeszów – Aktywni Razem**

LOCATION CHARACTERISTICS

Rzeszów, the capital of Podkarpackie Voivodeship, is a "compact city" with 200,000 inhabitants, a significant economic and academic centre in southeastern Poland. It has a relatively young population, and residents are characterized by a strong attachment to the city and region, with more liberal-left views compared to the traditional conservatism of surrounding rural areas.

THE ORGANIZATION

SIEĆ NGO Rzeszów – Aktywni Razem was formally established in 2024 and currently brings together over 40 NGOs from Rzeszów, Podkarpackie Province, and other parts of Poland. It includes organizations for seniors, sports, people with disabilities, entrepreneurs, artists, children, and youth. Its headquarters are in Rzeszów, with Pub Spółdzielczy as a regular meeting place.

THE PROBLEM

The network was created to coordinate the activities of numerous smaller social organizations in Rzeszów and the surrounding areas, and to empower them in their relations with local government. The goal was to make local authorities recognize and appreciate the potential of local NGOs.

"The main problem we encountered if we acted alone, if we were not associated, was certainly access to

authorities and local governments. Now, if we have elected representation, if we have 40 organizations and are able to issue even a letter that all organizations and their representatives sign at a meeting, we have greater leverage." Katarzyna Maciechowska, coordinator of the Network.

THE BEST PRACTICE

Networking began in 2023 with monthly "business breakfasts for NGOs" held at Pub Spółdzielczy or the International Integration Center FENIKS. Despite low initial attendance, these meetings were consistently continued and promoted on social media. After a year, there was a breakthrough, and more organizations started attending. In 2024, a WhatsApp group was created for participants, leading to spontaneous coordination of joint activities and knowledge/experience transfer.



"This also results from the fact that, for example, I have a stage, sound system, someone lends tents, someone is a sound engineer, someone else is responsible for various other things, and each person is from a different organization. If I host an event, today we are doing a joint one, so everyone helps, but if I host an event, others come to help me. If someone else hosts one, I go with others to help there, and I lend my equipment for free. And that's why organizations that don't have money, don't have the possibility to rent, for example, professional equipment, are able to borrow from other organizations in the network, and this is also an enormous value, because we would be without it." Katarzyna Maciechowska, coordinator of the Network.

The network also provides support for organizations in writing projects, with seven network organizations successfully obtaining small senior grants, and other projects in sports and other areas are also being funded. In 2025, SIEĆ NGO Rzeszów – Aktywni Razem organized two NGO picnics (06.07.2025 and 30.08.2025), gaining material and organizational support from the city government, presenting and promoting the activities of networked NGOs to thousands of Rzeszów residents.



for spontaneous coordination of activities and knowledge transfer.

- It allows for the exchange of equipment and resources between organizations, which is particularly valuable for those without funds to rent professional equipment.
- The network also offers support in writing projects, which has resulted in member organizations successfully obtaining grants.
- Cooperation with the city government has brought material and organizational support for NGO picnics, promoting the organizations' activities among residents.

CONCLUSIONS

- This practice involves coordinating the activities of numerous smaller social organizations and empowering them in their relations with local government.
- It includes organizing monthly "business breakfasts for NGOs" and creating a communication group (WhatsApp)





POLAND

Title: **Folkowisko Borderland Culture Festival**

Organization: **Stowarzyszenie Animacji Kultury Pogranicza Folkowisko**

LOCATION CHARACTERISTICS

Gorajec, the association's headquarters, is a small village in Podkarpackie Voivodeship, located 15 km in a straight line from the Polish-Ukrainian border, with about 40 daily residents. It's an agricultural area, distant from larger urban centers, facing demographic problems (aging population, unemployment). Chutor Gorajec serves as both the association's base and an agritourism facility.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The "Folkowisko" Association was founded in 2012 to formalize the efforts of individuals involved in organizing the "Folkowisko" Borderland Culture Festival. Its aim is to culturally revitalize places burdened by difficult history and transform them into spaces of cooperation, dialogue, and reconciliation.

THE PROBLEM

The living memory of the Ukrainian-Polish conflict and the contemporary socio-economic depreciation of small borderland communities created a need to build a community that transcends borders and stereotypes, providing people with tools for collective action and reclaiming local identity. Currently, this community also extends to supporting refugees from Ukraine and engaging in aid for victims of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

"The best example is probably our flagship product, which is the Festival. The principle of the Festival and also other activities, because that's what the Association does, is that first, come and tell us what superpowers you have and use those superpowers for the common good." Marta Połtowicz-Bobak, a board member of "Folkowisko" Association.



THE BEST PRACTICE

The "Folkowisko" Borderland Culture Festival originated from informal meetings of folk culture enthusiasts (2008-2010), which evolved into a festival in 2011 and then led to the establishment of the Association. Growing interest and increasing attendance led to more professional organizational solutions. Association members hold monthly online meetings, which intensify before the Festival. Just before the event, all volunteers (regardless of tenure and experience) undergo training



that serves not only for technical preparation but also for integration.

"Each of us, regardless of how many years we have been working at the Festival, undergoes training. So even before the Festival, we have such a meeting where we can get to know each other, and we can integrate. (...) We went into the forest in the middle of the night, and there was a tape strung between trees, and we had to walk on this tape without touching the ground. This was, of course, just a game, but suddenly something happens that we all take seriously. That is, a 17-year-old boy is aware that he has to help me, a woman over 50, to cope with this. And this teaches responsibility." Marta Połtowicz-Bobak, a board member of "Folkowisko" Association.

Furthermore, every initiative and idea, as long as it aligns with the Association's general system of values, is carefully listened to, discussed, and implemented with the substantive and technical support of all members.

"Co-responsibility. This, in my opinion, is important. Openness to people, but also using everyone's potential. Knowledge transfer is something incredibly important to me. If someone comes completely from



outside, they see things we don't see. Because we've been in the Association for so long, for example, that something is already obvious to us. Someone can come and say: 'Listen, but we can do it a little differently' and that's also huge value, right?" Marta Połtowicz-Bobak, a board member of "Folkowisko" Association.

CONCLUSIONS

- A special role in building bonds within the Association is played by recognizing and appreciating the efforts of volunteers, as well as celebrating together – that is, devoting part of their time and energy within the Association.
- Youth activation happens naturally, by engaging them in work and treating every community member as important.
- All volunteers, regardless of experience, undergo integration and technical training (e.g., first aid, crisis response), which builds responsibility and the ability to cooperate.
- Every initiative and idea, as long as it aligns with the Association's values, is discussed and implemented with substantive and technical support, making people feel important and responsible.





POLAND

Title: Rzeszów Mobile Paths: Inclusion in the Logistics Industry
Organization: Fundacja CONTEO

LOCATION CHARACTERISTICS

While there are no official, current data on the exact number of people with disabilities in Rzeszów, the Central Statistical Office estimates that about 10% of the population has legally confirmed disability certificates. City authorities allocate public funds through competitions for activities aimed at social and vocational activation and integration of people with disabilities.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Fundacja CONTEO was established in 2022 by individuals with extensive professional experience in the logistics industry and social economy. Its main goals include promoting sustainable transport, supporting local communities in ecology and pro-ecological education, and connecting innovative scientific solutions with business.

THE PROBLEM

Most public initiatives for the activation and integration of people with disabilities focus exclusively on social issues. There are significantly fewer activities in the vocational sphere, and those focused on providing people with disabilities with specific tools to start or develop a particular professional career are truly rare. A particular challenge

also remains the level of knowledge and awareness of employers regarding the potential and capabilities of people with disabilities.

THE BEST PRACTICE

The project "Rzeszów Mobile Paths: Inclusion in the Logistics Industry" invited 20 people with disabilities (motor, hearing, and intellectual) up to 35 years of age. They received a psychological workshop (motivation to seek employment, overcoming fear of entering the labor market), a workshop on effective job search strategies (practicing how to design a job search strategy within a specific time-frame), and a qualification workshop on logistics basics (presenting the fundamentals of the profession and options for obtaining relevant qualifications).



All workshops were conducted in a hybrid format (in-person and online) to ensure accessibility. The 10 most engaged beneficiaries completed a 14-day internship at a logistics company.

"We particularly wanted potential employers to have the opportunity to get to know people with disabilities and look at them as potential employees. And it worked, because at the end of the internship, we were informed that two positions for immediate employment had been prepared - one on the production line and one in the office. Of course, the applicable regulations also work in our favor here - an employer is obliged to pay to PFRON or employ disabled people. However, it turned out that it is better to employ disabled people, because they perform some work. And the logistics industry is even perfect for people with disabilities. Work in route handling, forwarding, all of this is now done remotely, from home." – Katarzyna Hnat, president of Fundacja CONTEO.

The Foundation is currently working on scaling this idea to regional and national levels. The scheme (psychological workshop, effective job search workshop, introductory vocational workshop, and short internships) can also be applied to other professions. Discussions are also underway regarding cooperation with representatives of a Women's Prison within a program to prevent recidivism and facilitate activation, integration, and adaptation in a new place of residence.



CONCLUSIONS:

- The aim of this practice is the vocational activation of people with disabilities, which is a rarity compared to initiatives focusing solely on social aspects.
- The project was aimed at 20 people with various types of disabilities (motor, hearing, intellectual) up to 35 years of age.
- Participants received a series of workshops in a hybrid format (in-person and online) to ensure accessibility: a psychological workshop (motivation, overcoming fear), a workshop on effective job searching, and a qualification workshop on logistics basics.
- The 10 most engaged beneficiaries completed 14-day internships at a logistics company, which allowed employers to learn about the potential of people with disabilities.
- As a result, two people received immediate employment offers.
- Fundacja CONTEO is working on scaling this idea to regional and national levels, and is also considering applying the scheme (workshops + internships) to other professions, including in cooperation with a Women's Prison in a program to prevent recidivism.

Links



ROMANIA

Title: Alzheimer Café Oradea – A community space for support and inclusion of people living with dementia

Organization: Caritas Catolica Oradea, Oradea, Bihor County, Romania

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY

Oradea is a city in northwestern Romania, near the Hungarian border, with around 180,000 residents. Known for its cultural vitality and Art Nouveau architecture, the city has a strong tradition of civic engagement and community-based projects. This active social environment has made Oradea a fertile ground for innovative initiatives addressing mental health and social inclusion.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

Caritas Catolica Oradea is a well-established social and healthcare organization, part of the international Caritas network. It supports vulnerable individuals, elderly people, and families in need through

professional and volunteer-based services. The organization promotes solidarity, human dignity, and community empathy.

THE PROBLEM

The number of people living with dementia is rising steadily, but families often lack specialized support, reliable information, and social networks. Stigma, isolation, and emotional exhaustion affect both patients and caregivers. In Oradea, there was a clear need for a welcoming, non-judgmental space where people affected by dementia could find understanding, support, and a sense of belonging.

THE BEST PRACTICE



Oradea,
Piața Ion Creangă nr. 2



03 59 427 777





In 2021, Caritas Catolica Oradea launched the Alzheimer Café Oradea, inspired by international Alzheimer Café models from the Netherlands, Germany, and France. The initiative provides a community setting where people with dementia, their families, specialists, and volunteers meet biweekly to share experiences, learn, and connect.

Each meeting covers practical topics such as symptom management, communication strategies, patients' rights, cognitive activities, and non-pharmaceutical therapies. The warm and open atmosphere fosters honest dialogue and emotional support.

Over time, the project expanded through partnerships with medical, educational, social, and church institutions. Awareness campaigns, conferences, and caregiver training sessions have strengthened its community impact. Volunteers from diverse fields – medicine, education, art, communication – play a crucial role in sustaining the initiative.

Looking forward, Alzheimer Café Oradea aims to extend to other towns, create accessible educational



materials, and build international partnerships. It stands today as a sustainable and replicable model of community-based support and inclusion for people affected by dementia.



Links





ROMANIA

Title: Recreational and educational activities for children and young people with disabilities at the Băile 1 Mai Rehabilitation Hospital

Name of the organization, location: Cătuñul Verde Association, Băile 1 Mai, Bihor County, Romania

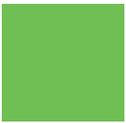
ABOUT THE COMMUNITY

Băile 1 Mai is a spa resort near Oradea, known for its medical and rehabilitation services. The local Rehabilitation Hospital receives children and young people with disabilities from all over the country, who stay for three-week treatment and recovery programs.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

The Cătuñul Verde Association is a non-governmental organization based in Oradea that promotes volunteering, environmental education, and community solidarity. Through its projects, it encourages active citizenship and support for vulnerable groups.





THE PROBLEM

Children and young people hospitalized for long rehabilitation periods often face boredom and isolation due to the lack of structured recreational activities. Volunteers bring emotional support, creativity, and play, helping them regain self-confidence and joy during their recovery.

THE BEST PRACTICE

In response to this need, the Cătunul Verde Association organizes regular recreational and educational sessions for hospitalized children. During each visit, volunteers spend around three hours engaging in games, music, theatre, and creative workshops.

Since 2023, the initiative has included a book donation component, encouraging children to read and dream through stories. Each visit ends with small symbolic gifts that leave long-lasting emotional memories.

The project takes place 7–10 times a year, reaching 50–80 children each time, and stands as a model of community empathy and inclusion.





ROMANIA

Title: Run For It! - Charity sports event supporting local community initiatives

Organization: Community Foundation of Odorheiu Secuiesc, Harghita County, Romania

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY

Odorheiu Secuiesc is a municipality in Harghita County, located in the heart of the Székely Land, with about 34,000 inhabitants. The city is well known for its strong community spirit and the close collaboration between civic organizations, public institutions, and businesses that foster sustainable development and solidarity.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

Community Foundation of Odorheiu Secuiesc promotes civic involvement, solidarity, and outdoor activities through charity sports events. The organization brings together hundreds of participants, sponsors, and volunteers to support meaningful local community projects, focusing on cooperation, health, and social responsibility.

THE PROBLEM

In many communities, local civic initiatives face a lack of financial resources and visibility. Small organizations often have good ideas but insufficient funding to implement them. Moreover, citizens' involvement in community and charitable activities is sometimes low due to the lack of engaging, participatory events.

THE BEST PRACTICE

Run for It! is an annual charity sports event in Odorheiu Secuiesc that combines movement, joy, and solidarity. Participants – individuals, teams, or companies – run or walk to support local projects proposed by NGOs, schools, or civic groups. Each kilometer symbolizes commitment to the common good, and the collected donations directly contribute to the realization of these projects.



Székelyudvarhely,
Str. Kossuth Lajos 20



The event is professionally organized in a friendly, inclusive atmosphere, encouraging people of all ages to participate. Beyond its sports component, Run for IT! builds bridges between citizens, businesses, and NGOs, offering a concrete example of community mobilization. Every year, dozens of projects receive financial and logistical support, contributing to improving local life.

Over time, Run for It! has become a symbol of active solidarity and civic responsibility, showing how a sports event can create real and lasting social impact.



Links





HUNGARY

Title: Youth community center in Szécsény

Organization: Egyesek Youth Association – Szécsény, Hungary

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY

Szécsény, in Nógrád County, is one of Hungary's most disadvantaged regions. Opportunities for work and education are limited, and community ties have weakened. Many young people grow up in families with low levels of education and face early unemployment. With most youth clubs and community spaces gone, local youth lack safe, inspiring places to meet, learn, and socialize.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

Founded in 2000, Egyesek Youth Association supports young people, youth workers, and communities in self-development, active citizenship, and social responsibility. They provide non-formal learning through international and national exchanges,

trainings, volunteer programs (including Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps), and local initiatives. Since 2012, they have focused on skill development and community-building in the Szécsény micro-region, emphasizing social skills, English, and local engagement.

THE PROBLEM

Nógrád County faces deep social and economic challenges: unemployment, limited opportunities, and weak community networks. Young people have little exposure to other cultures or civic engagement. Without local youth spaces, peer networks are limited, self-esteem is low, and imagining a future in the region is hard. Schools often lack resources to provide experiential learning that develops critical thinking, creativity, and social skills.





THE BEST PRACTICE

In 2024, Egyesek purchased an abandoned disco in Szécsény through fundraising, savings, and partner support. Renovation is community-driven: local youth and volunteers participate in cleaning, construction, and gardening, fostering ownership and bonds. Participatory planning ensures the space meets real community needs. The Youth House functions as a hub for non-formal learning, cultural events, and international youth programs. Even during renovation, 1–2 monthly events – game nights, barbecues, hikes – help build trust and a sense of belonging. Partnerships with local cultural actors and the municipality strengthen local integration, while a self-organizing youth community takes responsibility for activities and the space.

The Youth House is designed for long-term operation, with an official opening in 2025. Regular programs, workshops, and clubs will continue focusing on youth empowerment, community engagement, and social responsibility. In 2026, the former pub area will be renovated for wider community use, including rooms for 15–20 participants, supporting local and international programs.



Links





HUNGARY

Title: Students' Budget – Learning Democracy

Organization: Alternative Communities Association – Debrecen, Hungary in cooperation with K-Monitor – Budapest, Hungary

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY

Debrecen, Hungary's second largest city with around 200,000 inhabitants, is a regional center of education and culture. A significant part of its population consists of young people studying in secondary schools and higher education institutions. The city's educational environment provides an ideal context for experimenting with participatory and civic engagement models among youth.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

The Alternative Communities Association is a Debrecen-based civil organization focused on community organizing, youth engagement, and social participation. It works to strengthen local communities through participatory methods and inclusive civic education.

The K-Monitor is a Budapest-based NGO that promotes transparency, civic participation, and democratic innovation in Hungary. Together, they adapt and test participatory democracy tools for different local contexts.

THE PROBLEM

In Hungary's centralized education system, students have very limited opportunities to experience democratic participation or influence decisions affecting their school environment. Although student councils exist, their impact often depends on individual school

leaders' openness. Research shows that Hungarian youth demonstrate low civic engagement and political trust, which weakens democratic culture in the long term.

The organizations aimed to address this democratic deficit by providing students with a real-life opportunity to participate in a transparent, rule-based decision-making process, helping them understand how shared responsibility, dialogue, and collaboration can shape their community.

THE BEST PRACTICE

The Students' Budget is Hungary's first school-level participatory budgeting process, launched as a pilot project in 2021–2022 at the Medgyessy Ferenc Secondary School and Vocational Art School in Debrecen. Supported by the U.S. Embassy in Budapest and mentored by the Center for the Future of Arizona through the People Powered global network, the initiative gave students control over 350,000 HUF to decide how to improve their school environment.





IMPLEMENTATION – STEPS OF THE PROCESS:

1. Preparation and recruitment:

Teachers and students were informed, and an operational group of motivated students was formed to co-design and manage the process.

2. Idea collection:

Students submitted 30 ideas through suggestion boxes and online forms on how to improve their school.

3. Idea development:

Together with mentors and teachers, students refined the proposals into feasible projects and prepared a shortlist of ten for voting.

4. Campaigning:

Idea creators presented their projects with posters, videos, and school-wide communication.

5. Voting:

Over 380 students cast their votes in a three-day election that simulated a real voting experience with ballot boxes and voting booths.

6. Implementation:

The winning projects – the creation of a relaxation room ('Chill Room') and sanitary product boxes for girls' restrooms – were realized by students themselves.

7. Evaluation:

Organizers and participants reflected on lessons learned to improve future editions.

ACHIEVEMENTS

- The project involved nearly the entire school community, fostering cooperation and responsibility.
- Students gained practical experience in project design, campaigning, and budgeting.
- The school leadership reported stronger student engagement and trust.
- The initiative demonstrated that participatory budgeting is a flexible, adaptable method suitable for education.

FUTURE AND SUSTAINABILITY

The partners aim to extend the model to other schools and possibly local youth communities. For long-term sustainability, they advocate for institutionalizing the process by dedicating a recurring public budget line, enabling yearly repetition. The model can complement civic education, project weeks, or youth initiatives and strengthen democratic skills among future generations.

Links





HUNGARY

Title: **Happy Streets – active local citizens**

Organization: **Eger Community Foundation – Eger, Hungary**

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY

Eger is a livable, historical small town with a strong identity, and as a well-developed micro-regional centre, it plays an important economic and cultural role with many institutions and tourism assets. Although it lies in a disadvantaged region, it has diverse endowments for prosperity; at the same time, its networks make the city appear “bigger” than it really is. Civil society in Eger is not very innovative, the majority of NGOs are aging, and the civil funds are small: cooperation between civil, municipal, and for-profit actors is weak. The city’s culture of giving is underdeveloped, the young intelligentsia has left, community spaces have disappeared, society has become individualised, and active citizenship is declining. Yet there is a middle class in the process of civic development that has the potential to rebuild social engagement.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

Eger Community Foundation was established in 2021 by 10 local citizens with the intention to make Eger a more livable place where communities thrive and local citizens engage in local issues. The three main activities of the Foundation are raising local funds, supporting local initiatives through grant programs, and community building. An important goal is to build bridges between the private, public, and civil sectors in Eger, to generate cooperation.



THE PROBLEM

Despite Eger’s rich cultural heritage, strong identity, and economic potential, community and citizen engagement remain weak, and people do not believe that they themselves can take action to improve their community or the city they live in. Another challenge is that political divisions are also reflected among local residents. Therefore, there is a need for initiatives that bring people together around shared values and common causes, enabling them to connect, build community, and take collective action on issues affecting their city.

THE BEST PRACTICE

Happy Street is a neighbourhood support programme launched in 2023 by the Eger Community Foundation. It is based on a simple belief: local communities become stronger when people meet in person, know each other, and address local issues together. The programme starts from a basic insight: residents themselves are the experts of what is missing, what is needed, and what would make their street “happy”.



And if they receive a small amount of support, they organise it, implement it, and create the quality of life they want to see in their own micro-environment.

The programme provides small and easily accessible grants to neighbourhood initiatives that enable meeting, togetherness, shared space, and collective action. This could be a shared cooking day, a courtyard picnic, a street party, urban gardening, or even a small “beautification” action in a house block – the point is that the programme builds on real, in-person human connections. The programme does not “bring” community into the neighbourhood from the outside – instead, local people themselves create it, based on their own needs, and thus shape a more liveable city. In this way, Happy Street has become one of the drivers of local civic culture in Eger: by 2025, we have reached the point where the enthusiastic local activists who organised their very first Happy Streets in the first year now manage the programme themselves, as volunteers of the Foundation, in a working group.

This is the real impact of active participation: local people not only come together – they also take ownership of their community.

THE PROCESS OF THE HAPPY STREET PROGRAM

Call for Applications - At the beginning of the year, the Eger Community Foundation announces the Happy Street grant program. The application process is deliberately simple: interested residents submit a short letter of intent, usually as a small team of 2–3 people, expressing their willingness to organise their street, apartment block, or neighbourhood.

Initial Personal Meeting - Applicants are invited to a joint, in-person meeting where they get to know each other and the Foundation team. They present their ideas, motivations, and – for those returning from previous years – share past experiences. This personal encounter is central to the Foundation’s approach,



creating trust and a sense of community, and applicants value the human-centered nature of the process.

Volunteer Support and Mentoring - Volunteers who emerged from previous Happy Street initiatives support the new organisers within a structured working group. Following a checklist, they guide the planning and implementation of the projects, maintain regular contact with the organisers, attend events, assist with questions, and manage project administration. They also collect short experience reports and photographs from each completed event.

Promotion and Communication - Every neighbourhood gathering is communicated through the Foundation’s social media channels, ensuring visibility and encouraging wider participation in the program.

End-of-Year Reflection - At the end of the year, organisers of all Happy Street events are invited to a personal meeting to share experiences, reflect on challenges, and provide feedback and suggestions regarding the support program. This step also strengthens connections among local active residents and between the Foundation and those committed to improving their immediate and broader community.

This methodology emphasizes personal interaction, hands-on support, and continuous feedback, ensuring that the program not only funds local initiatives but also nurtures active, engaged neighbourhood communities.

Links



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More information about the **Carpathian Civil Society Project**:



<https://www.karpatokalapitvany.hu/en/tartalom/carthian-civil-society-platform>



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