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(PROTEUS)

FUTURES REPØRT

(executive summary)

**Summary of mapping and the cross-border forum with
recommendations for democratic resilience in
border areas of Croatia and Slovenia**

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Summary

This report presents the results of the project PERIPHERAL FUTURES which explored the spread of misinformation and its impact on democratic participation, environmental justice and a just green transition in the border areas of Slovenia and Croatia. The project aimed to strengthen democratic participation in peripheral border areas and respond to misinformation about climate change, a just green transition and EU democratic values and freedoms, while providing support to civil society actors who stand up for these values in their local communities. The special focus of the project was on young people from local communities who can be agents of change that can significantly contribute to the development of more open, inclusive and resilient communities.

Due to limited media attention, weaker institutional support, and greater distance from national and European debates, border regions are often more exposed to manipulative narratives. These narratives can portray the green transition, climate action, civil society engagement, or democratic values as something alien, imposed, or a threat to the local way of life. Such narratives spread particularly where people lack access to clear information, where trust in institutions is low, and where residents feel that decisions are made without their participation.

The report is based on the initial mapping of civil society organizations, a questionnaire that collected their experiences and insights from the field and discussions held at the cross-border forum IMAGINE. INSPIRE. IGNITE. The forum brought together young people, representatives of civil society, journalists, researchers and other experts from both countries, enabling the exchange of experiences, joint consideration of the challenges faced by the border areas and reflection on possible responses to these challenges.

MAPPING EXERCISE

Before the forum, a mapping of civil society organizations in the border areas of Slovenia and Croatia was carried out. A questionnaire was sent to the identified organizations in order to better understand their experiences with the spread of misinformation, the topics they consider most susceptible to manipulation, and the issues they consider important for joint discussion. The results of the mapping and questionnaire served as the basis for creating the forum program.

Total of 80 organizations from both sides of the border were involved in the mapping process. They were selected based on their operations in peripheral and border areas, their status as independent, non-profit civil society organizations, their focus on youth work, and activities carried out over the past year. Selection criteria also included a "bottom-up" approach, advocacy for democratic values, the promotion of public participation in democratic processes, and addressing the issue of disinformation - particularly regarding climate change and a just green transition.

Representatives from 20 Slovenian and 18 Croatian civil society organizations and initiatives - 38 organizations in total - responded to a questionnaire covering working conditions, relationships with local authorities, and challenges and instances of disinformation in border areas.

The survey results revealed that organizations encounter misinformation in a wide range of areas. Frequently mentioned topics included human rights and democracy, a just green transition, climate change, culture, and the activities of civil society organizations. In addition to specific thematic challenges, respondents highlighted broader social trends that hinder their work: declining public trust, growing social polarization, shrinking democratic space, staff shortages, and reduced financial stability. The participants particularly emphasized the problem of misinformation in relation to issues of environmental protection and development. They identified problematic cases in which investment or development projects were accompanied by one-sided information, pressure on local communities or the presentation of civil society initiatives as obstacles to development. Environmental protection organizations and local initiatives often find themselves in a position where, in addition to their advocacy work, they must simultaneously oppose attempts to discredit them, as well as deal with simplifications and manipulative interpretations of their activities. Furthermore, they are often expected to have in-depth expertise in legal or technical matters and to respond to misinformation, even though this goes beyond their core role.

Most participants identified social media as the primary channel for the spread of disinformation. These platforms are not merely spaces where accurate and inaccurate information intertwine, but also environments where algorithms reward content that triggers strong emotions, fuels conflict and fosters polarization. Local media outlets and politically biased online portals were also highlighted as significant sources of disinformation. Respondents specifically pointed to selective reporting, sensationalism, and the publication of information without proper verification. Disinformation typically does not appear in the form of entirely fabricated stories, but rather as one-sided interpretations of events, the omission of context, or an emphasis on only specific aspects of a topic. At the same time, the responses indicated that disinformation spreads not only through media or political actors; informal channels - such as rumors, social media comments, and everyday conversations within local communities - also play a significant role. Consequently, respondents emphasized that combating disinformation is closely linked to media and digital literacy, trust built within the local community, general trust in institutions, and the quality of public communication.

CROSS BORDER FORUM

On both sides of the border, a significant convergence was identified in the selection of topics that became the core of the Forum's program. Among the most frequently mentioned topics were the role of civil society, misinformation and media literacy, the involvement of young people in decision-making processes, environmental protection issues and cross-border cooperation. A strong lack of cooperation between Croatia and Slovenia in recent years was noticed, as well as a strong desire to exchange experiences, meet new partners and establish long-term cooperation between

organizations from Slovenia and Croatia. The organizations were not only looking for a space for discussion, but a platform for hands-on learning, networking and co-creating solutions. It was these needs and expectations that served as the starting point for conceiving the forum.

Organizing and hosting the IMAGINE. INSPIRE. IGNITE. cross-border forum in Krško was a key way to put the project's goals into practice. Held in May 2026, the forum brought together 35 participants from Slovenia and Croatia, including young civil society representatives, journalists, researchers, and other experts. It was designed as a space for sharing experiences, mutual learning, and collaborative reflection on challenges related to disinformation, environmental justice, and democratic participation. It also facilitated networking among individuals and organizations facing similar issues on both sides of the border.

Forum has identified few key areas of concern:

- Misinformation not as exclusively technological but a broad social problem;
- Environmental topics as key target of manipulation;
- Crucial role of media, science and civil society;
- Environmental justice as a power and trust issue;
- Young people are key co-creators and changemakers;
- Cross boarder cooperation can increase resilience of local community

A key conclusion of the discussion was that environmental problems often do not disappear once media attention fades. Their consequences are felt most acutely by vulnerable population groups, who simultaneously possess fewer opportunities and resources to organize civic initiatives, access decision-makers, or effectively advocate for their own interests. The aftermath of natural disasters and environmental interventions can persist for years, while environmental remediation, infrastructure restoration, and support for affected communities often lag behind actual needs. Participants highlighted that long-term monitoring of environmental impacts is frequently inadequate and that public discourse quickly shifts to other topics once initial interest wanes.

The discussion also raised the issue of the long-term sustainability of civil society initiatives. Participants highlighted that, although many projects yield valuable knowledge, research, and experience, these outcomes are often neither systematically preserved nor made accessible to others once funding ends. Due to a lack of time, staff, and resources, organizations frequently move from one project to the next, resulting in a loss of institutional memory and missed opportunities to build upon results already achieved. Consequently, a need was identified for better documentation, sharing, and preservation of knowledge among organizations and communities.

Another important issue that raised attention was related to question on how young people are involved in decision-making processes and whether existing participatory mechanisms truly enable them to influence their local communities. Participants pointed out that many forms of engagement remain largely symbolic, while young people often face limited opportunities to participate in shaping decisions or developing their own initiatives. They particularly emphasized the distinction between participation driven by the interests and initiatives of young people and participation structured primarily within institutional or project frameworks. It is also noteworthy that young

people do not always display the same level of initiative or awareness regarding the need—in unfavorable circumstances—to fight for their own inclusion, sometimes bypassing or acting outside institutional formats defined by specific interests. This largely depends on the understanding that democratic achievements are not irreversible and that, without maintenance and renewal, they can lead to a regression requiring new social struggles.

Debates also touched upon the issue of social infrastructure in border areas. Participants highlighted that civil society organizations, informal initiatives, and community spaces are often less developed there than in major urban centers. Economic uncertainty, demographic shifts, and limited resources can reduce people's willingness to participate in public debates or advocacy activities. Furthermore, in small communities, entrenched power dynamics change slowly and with difficulty; consequently, social engagement is often constrained by political and economic interests and structures that discourage people from stepping forward and jeopardizing their livelihoods. As a result, many communities face challenges in launching joint initiatives and establishing long-term forms of cooperation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of mapping, expert insights and discussions in the working groups of the forum, we formulated recommendations for strengthening democratic resilience, suppressing misinformation and ensuring a fair green transition in the border areas of Slovenia and Croatia.

Our recommendations are based on three key principles:

1. the need to rebuild trust,
2. the importance of using accessible language close to the local environment
3. the need for people to have a real impact on the decisions that shape their lives.

Ultimately, misinformation spreads not only because of a lack of information, but also where people do not feel heard, where processes lack transparency, and where they cannot participate in shaping joint solutions.

Therefore, the recommendations emphasize the importance of clear communication adapted to the local context, early involvement of residents, quality local journalism, support for young people and civil society actors, and long-term cross-border cooperation. The report thus provides a foundation for strengthening democratic resilience and fostering a common response to misinformation, environmental conflicts and green transition challenges in border regions. It concludes with key messages and recommendations that can serve as a starting point for further work, cross-border cooperation and strengthening of democratic resilience in the border areas of Slovenia and Croatia.

Key horizontal recommendation important for all stakeholders was a character of language use. When addressing misinformation, the green transition and environmental conflicts, special attention must be paid to language. Language is not merely a means of conveying information but also a space where trust, a sense of belonging, and an understanding of shared challenges are shaped. Terms such as "green transition," "climate policies," "European values," or "participation" can sound distant, technical, or even imposed in local contexts if they are not linked to people's everyday experiences.

Recommendations for public institutions have stressed timely and proportional involvement of local community in local planning, access to information and demand for high transparency in decision making processes.

Recommendations for journalists and media have stressed importance of local context and fact checking, but also creation of local and solution-oriented narratives.

Recommendations for civil society organisations and activists has highlighted importance of outreach "beyond the bubble", building of trans-sectoral alliances and need for systemic documentation and exchange of experiences.

Recommendations for local community entailed revitalisation of public spaces for dialogue, building the trust in local community and development of media literacy at local level.

Recommendations for funders and support programs has urged for long-term support to cross-boarder initiatives, particularly in less visible and more vulnerable regions and providing resources for learning.



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