

Engaging Central Europe

The Cradle of GMF Democracy Support

With the collapse of communism, GMF swiftly expanded its programming to the new democracies of Central Europe. From 1990 until 2010, it systematically supported the region's democratic reforms and Euro-Atlantic integration. Directly and through innovative partnerships with local and international partners, GMF invested over \$30 million to bolster democratic leadership, civil society organizations, and independent media.

Once the poster child of successful democratization, Central Europe has faced steady democratic decline and rising illiberalism over the last decade. In response, GMF recently renewed its support for democratic actors in this key region of Europe.

It does so through a mix of grantmaking and capacity building for civil society and independent media, leadership development, regional exchanges and learning, and analytical and policy work.

Since 2021, the Engaging Central Europe program (ECE) has been dedicated to strengthening

democratic resilience and revival, media pluralism and independence, electoral integrity and the rule of law, citizen participation, civic education, and regional cooperation in the easternmost member states of the EU and NATO.

Based out of the GMF office in Berlin, Germany, operating with a diverse team of regional experts, and supported by partners from both sides of the Atlantic, ECE is built on the understanding that only a democratic Central Europe will be a secure Central Europe.

Civil Society Support in 2023–2025

ECE provides funding and capacity building for civil society organizations, grassroots initiatives, and local community groups in eight countries of Central Europe. Support is aimed at strengthening democratic resilience and renewal, bolstering citizen participation, expanding civic activism in peripheral and rural areas, enhancing the voice of vulnerable social groups, fostering anti-corruption and transparency initiatives, and protecting fundamental rights, the rule of law, and electoral integrity.

\$ 5.2

Million in Grantmaking

206

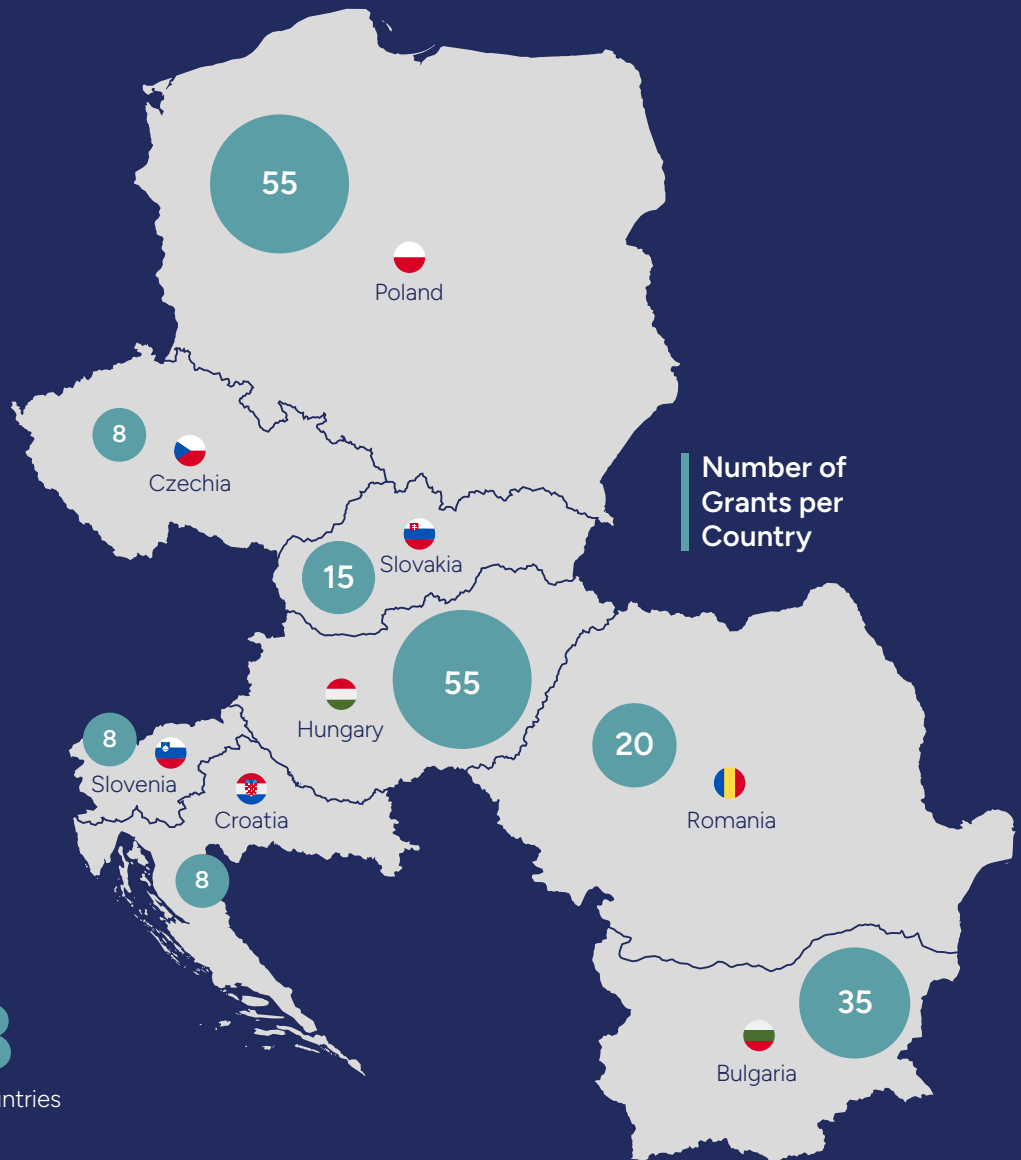
Grants

13

Capacity-
Building
Programs

8

Countries



In-Country Grant Allocation

Poland		\$1,614,091
Hungary		\$1,587,378
Bulgaria		\$959,046
Romania		\$513,136
Slovakia		\$364,157
Slovenia		\$215,034
Croatia		\$193,745
Czechia		\$184,924
Regional		\$33,980



- Expanding Civic Activism in Peripheral and Rural Areas
\$413,070 (17 grants)
- Fostering Anti-Corruption and Transparency Initiatives
\$571,177 (22 grants)
- Protecting Fundamental Rights, Rule of Law, and Electoral Integrity
\$996,185 (42 grants)
- Bolstering Democratic Participation
\$2,268,076 (94 grants)
- Resilience Building and Strengthening Civil Society Through Capacity Building
\$1,423,796 (31 grants)

Policy Work

Substantial analysis and sound policy are essential prerequisites for effective democracy support, in Central Europe as elsewhere. ECE continuously provides timely and comprehensive analysis of democratic and security dynamics in the region. Our analysis of political and societal processes, electoral competition, the state of civil society and human rights, as well as respect for democratic values and principles inform strategies of democratic actors in Central Europe and policies of their partners in the Euro-Atlantic community of democracies.

ECE's analysis and policy work build on the extensive in-house expertise of ECE staff, the team's participation in international research consortia, such as the Neo-authoritarianisms in Europe and the Liberal Democratic Response (AUTHLIB) Horizon project funded by the European Union, as well as the ReThink.CEE Fellowship, a program for next-generation experts from the region launched in 2018. GMF is a partner to major regional policy fora in Central Europe, including the Aspen-GMF Bucharest Forum, the Budapest Forum for Sustainable Democracy, the Forum 2000 Conference, and the Warsaw Security Forum.



65

Policy Articles



19

Policy Papers



43

Panel Discussions



37

ReThink.CEE Fellows



4

Major Regional Forums



Fellows and Alumni by Country

Leadership Development

GMF has long been committed to developing democratic leadership in Central Europe. For over three decades now, it has enabled next-generation leaders from politics, civil society, media, business, and culture to hone their professional skills, learn from peers across the transatlantic space, build new partnerships, and jointly address the challenges facing Central Europe. As of 2025, this regional network comprises over 500 fellows and alumni. ECE actively taps and expands this large and diverse pool of democratic leaders from across the region.

ECE Impact Highlights

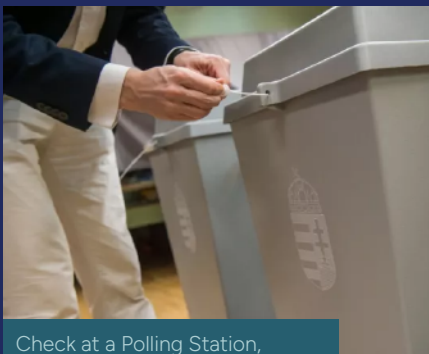
ECE strengthens the integrity of democratic elections through civic election monitoring and non-partisan voter education

The **CENTER FOR CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION** launched, with ECE funding, its Electoral Lighthouse project to engage Polish voters and their political views ahead of the critical 2023 parliamentary elections. This online tool reached more than 5.6 million citizens, or one-in-four Polish voters, from across the political spectrum. Electoral Lighthouse specifically connected with young first-time voters whom it engaged through election debates in nearly 800 schools.

**LATARNIK
WYBORCZY**

Logo of the Electoral Lighthouse Project,
Center for Citizenship Education

In the run-up to Hungary's 2022 parliamentary elections, **LET'S COUNT TOGETHER**, recruited and trained 10,000 independent poll watchers, or one-in-two ballot counters active during the elections. This laid the groundwork for a civic monitoring network in Hungary that will be an important asset in ensuring the integrity of future elections.



Check at a Polling Station,
Let's Count Together Campaign

ECE bolsters human rights through education, watchdogs, and strategic litigation

The **BULGARIAN HELSINKI COMMITTEE** provides free legal aid to victims of human rights abuses, and consultation and representation in strategic cases. In a 2023 case, with ECE support, it prevented the forcible illegal eviction of more than 50 Roma families from the Orlandovtsi district of Sofia whose rights were violated by a planned real-estate development.

The **RES PUBLICA FOUNDATION** in Poland works to renew public debate on the EU and democracy at the local level. Through the Europe on Edge project, it organized meetings with local leaders in four politically polarized cities, produced a podcast, and published a report on communicating European issues in Poland. The project emphasized framing EU issues in local contexts, addressing the risks of social fragmentation and disinformation, and involving trusted local leaders in public discussion. In doing so, it contributed to stronger local exchanges on the EU and democracy in Poland.

ECE supports civic education and participation of young people, women, and vulnerable groups

The **DOMINO ASSOCIATION** addresses the rising rates of femicide and domestic violence in Croatia through educational programs, compelling video campaigns, and artistic performances. It developed a practical toolkit for women to access essential services during crises and staged public protests to challenge restrictive social norms. Its advocacy efforts resulted in the adoption of new policies to combat gender-based violence in Croatia.

The **GROWSPACE FOUNDATION** in Poland strengthened youth activism and LGBTQ+ inclusion through two youth-led initiatives in schools and smaller local communities. By supporting Rainbow Friday and Take Matters Into Your Own Hands, it created safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students, developed a volunteer network, and enabled young people to co-design workshops and support one another. It also delivered weekend workshops and mentoring for youth in less-resourced towns, focusing on design thinking, combating discrimination, mental-health awareness, and developing local projects. In this way, the initiative expanded opportunities for youth participation and community engagement across Poland.

WOMEN'S CIRCLES supports women in Slovakia to assert their reproductive rights. It focuses on marginalized communities—including the Hungarian, Roma, and Ukrainian minorities—in rural and disadvantaged areas with low awareness and access to women's rights. A public tool helps women to navigate legal complexities and empowers them to assert their rights effectively and confidently.



Women's Protest in Zagreb,
Domino Association



REWIRE workshop strengthening positive communication across Central Europe. Credit: Unhack Democracy/BCNL

ECE builds the capacity of civil society in peripheral and rural areas

The **ASPIRA INSTITUTE** in Slovenia worked to strengthen civic participation in the Zasavje region by supporting civil society organizations in their local democratic role. Through the Active Citizens, Strong Region project, it organized four workshops on idea development, financing, advocacy, and communication, helping organizations build practical skills and engage with communities and decision-makers. It also published a document presenting the project's process, results, and recommendations for stronger civic engagement in the region. One participating organization later secured 30% more municipal funding than in the previous year, demonstrating the practical value of the support provided.

TECHSOUP ASSOCIATION

provides dedicated capacity-building with a focus on cybersecurity for civil society organizations in order to foster their resilience to online threats stemming from their increasing digitalization and associated with the shrinking space phenomenon. Offering the first dedicated cybersecurity training for civil society organizations in Romania, Techsoup provided nine thematic online workshops to the representatives of 192 civil society organizations.



Training Announcement, **TechSoup Romania**

The **BULGARIAN CENTER FOR NOT-FOR-PROFIT LAW, UNHACK DEMOCRACY, AND THE POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY FOUNDATION** worked together to strengthen civil society resilience in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Poland in response to negative narratives, isolation, and burnout among civil society actors. Through the REWIRE pilot project, they trained rising civil society leaders in hope-based communication through a two-day workshop in Budapest, a weekly online program, and peer-to-peer trainings in the participating countries. The project promoted positive messages, constructive solutions, and cross-border learning among participating organizations. In doing so, it supported stronger communication practices and regional exchanges among civil society actors in Central Europe.

The ASSOCIATION FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS (AMO)

in Czechia worked to strengthen informed public debate on international affairs beyond the capital by bringing expert discussions to smaller local communities. Through a series of public debates in regional towns, it created opportunities for residents to engage directly with specialists on issues such as the EU's Green Deal, the war in Ukraine, authoritarianism in Belarus, and developments in the Middle East. Working in cooperation with local libraries, the initiative helped local audiences connect with global topics in familiar and accessible settings. In doing so, it contributed to broader public engagement with international affairs and more open discussion of complex global issues in Czechia.

ECE Donor Contributors



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