IMPACT REPORT

PROTEUS

Protecting EU Values and Fundamental Rights through Public Participation and Civil Society Assistance in Central Europe

January 2023 – September 2026

Co-funded by the European Union

G | M | F Transatlantic Foundation

Co-funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

About PROTEUS

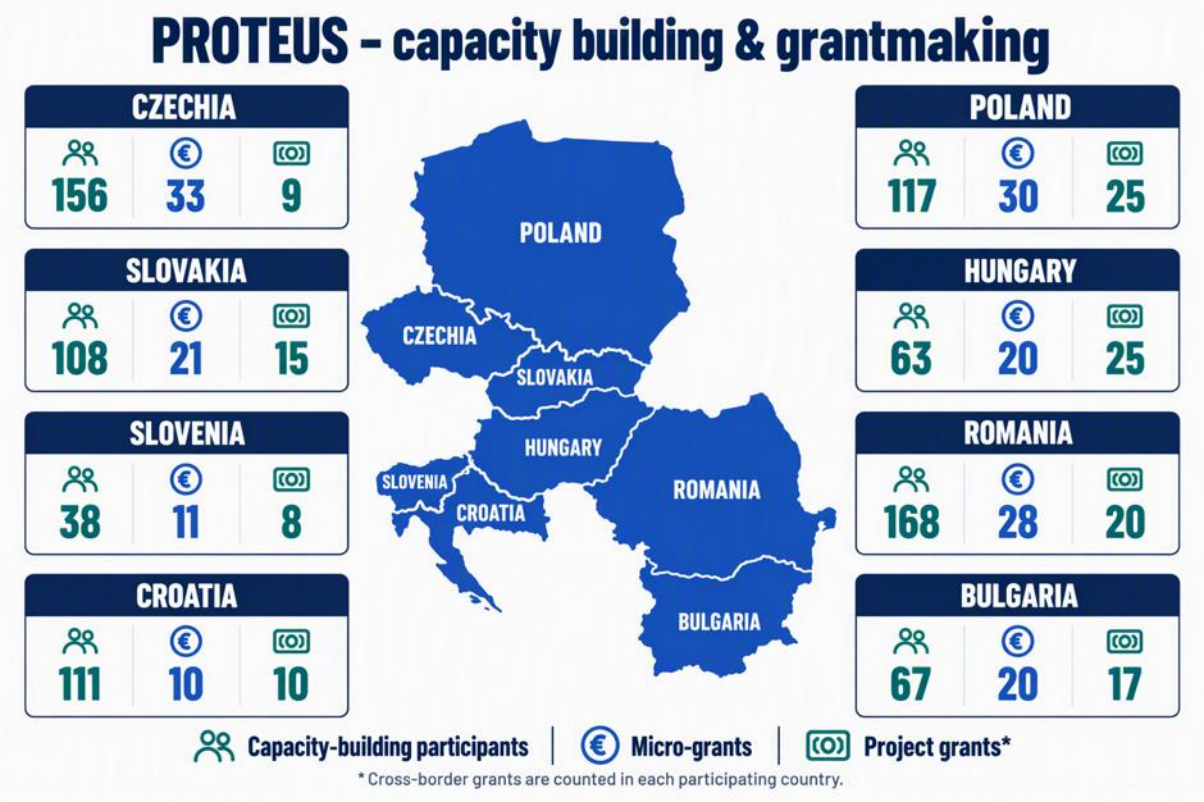
A strong and vibrant civil society is an essential prerequisite for pluralist liberal democracy, yet it increasingly faces pressures that undermine its ability to operate freely and effectively. Accelerating democratic backsliding, growing social polarization, and political autocratization contributes to a sustained "shrinking space" for civil society across the EU. The PROTEUS (Protecting EU Values and Fundamental Rights through Public Participation and Civil Society Assistance in Central Europe) project was led by the Transatlantic Foundation, and supported and strengthened the capacities of civil society actors in eight Central European countries—Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia—in cooperation with eight National Implementation Partners: Sofia Platform Foundation, CERANEO – Centre for Development of Non-Profit Organisations, Via Foundation, Power of Humanity Foundation, Shipyard Foundation, Resource Center for Public Participation CeRe, Partners for Democratic Change Slovakia, and SLOGA – Slovenian Global Action. Co-funded by the European Commission, the project ran from January 2023 to September 2026.

PROTEUS fostered local civic ecosystems across Central Europe by helping civil society organizations become more capable, visible, connected, and confident in defending EU values and fundamental rights. Its support combined grants, capacity-building, mentoring, peer exchange, and public storytelling, allowing organizations to develop their own capacity while also reaching communities more effectively.

The project contributed most directly to stronger organizational capacity, more sustainable civil society organizations, more effective advocacy and watchdog work, greater civic participation, the empowerment of vulnerable groups, and increased awareness of EU rights and values in peripheral and rural areas.



Photo credits: PROTEUS grantees – Model Parliament of Slovakia (MPS), Ocalenie Foundation, NaZemi, BoMiasto Association, SEEDS, Center for Community Organizing, KUD Transformator, Center for Curricular Development and Gender Studies: FILIA, Casimir Pulaski Foundation, Association Startup Factory, Association for International Affairs, Bob Institute, Women's Circles, and Domino Association.

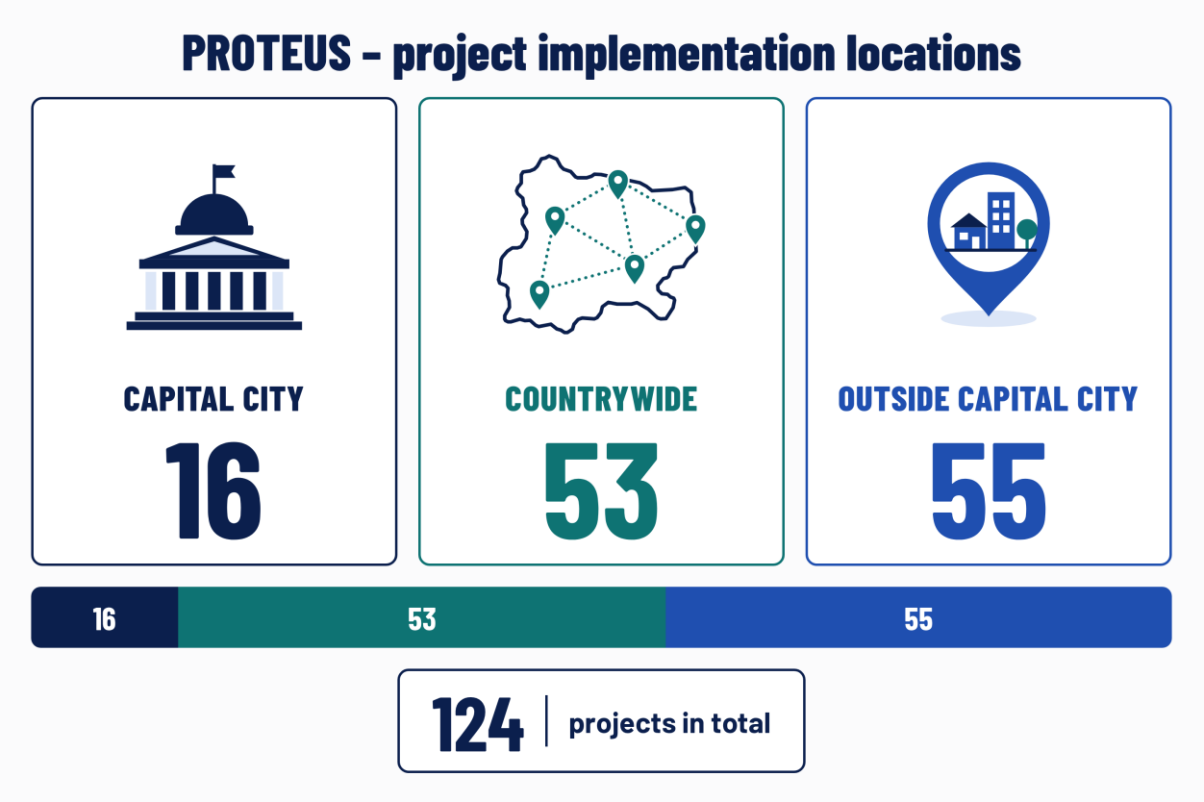


Reach and scale

At regional level, the Transatlantic Foundation supported 120 medium-sized projects (average grant: €23,000) as well as 4 cross-border projects (average grant: €40,000). At national level, 173 micro-grants (average €2,300) were awarded, and a total of 828 people benefited from capacity-building activities delivered by the National Implementation Partners, ranging from training to individual mentoring. This level of demand underlines the project's relevance in a civic environment marked by shrinking space, limited funding, and uneven access to capacity-building opportunities.

Stronger civic infrastructure in peripheral areas

A central contribution of PROTEUS was stronger civic infrastructure in peripheral localities. Many supported groups were small, locally rooted organizations working outside capital cities and major urban centers. Through training, mentoring, micro-grants, and simplified support mechanisms, they developed practical skills in organizational management, fundraising, communication, project planning, public outreach, and advocacy. As a result, they became more deliberate in their internal management, more active in their external communication, and better able to present their work to communities, donors, and local authorities.



This was especially clear in the capacity-building programs delivered by the eight PROTEUS National Implementation Partners. In Hungary, participating rural organizations reported the strongest progress in public relations and communication, financial independence, and advocacy. In Poland, 30 organizations from peripheral regions reported strengthening their management, financial planning, communication, and cooperation with public institutions. In Slovenia, survey respondents reported strong practical relevance: 91% noted a positive change in their own perceptions, 94% expected to respond differently in future situations, and 97% planned to apply what they had learned in their daily work. Taken together, these results point to a shift from one-off training toward practical organizational change.

Community engagement

PROTEUS also strengthened community engagement in peripheral localities. Micro-grants enabled organizations to apply new skills through concrete local projects, moving from learning to action. Supported initiatives created spaces for public discussion, civic education, community organizing, local campaigns, youth engagement, environmental participation, and dialogue with decision-makers. In Czechia, the Community Academy and its micro-grant scheme supported local initiatives in towns and villages, helping to strengthen community cohesion, intergenerational cooperation, and the inclusion of vulnerable groups. In Croatia, young people from rural areas explored EU rights, institutions, democratic values, and active citizenship through practical activities and study visits.

Advocacy and watchdog work

The project strengthened the advocacy and watchdog roles of civil society organizations. PROTEUS grants supported anticorruption monitoring, transparency campaigns, strategic litigation, legal awareness, freedom-of-information work, and advocacy for equality and non-discrimination. Projects helped watchdog organizations monitor public authorities, promote transparency in local governance, support legal aid outside capital cities, and defend communities affected by discrimination or exclusion. The impact stories published by the Transatlantic Foundation show what this looks like in practice: for example, Strengthening the Voice of Single Parents in Slovakia shows how regional consultations, evidence-gathering, and public advocacy helped bring the needs of single-parent families into policy discussions, while Enhancing Climate Protection and Civic Engagement in Lower Silesia illustrates how civic monitoring and local engagement can turn community input into concrete policy proposals.

Explore the stories
Read how PROTEUS-supported organizations turned rights, participation, and accountability into practical local action: Sister Outsider: Reflections of a Croatian Human Rights Activist and Europe on Edge? Building Strategic Communication on the EU in Poland.

Empowering vulnerable groups

PROTEUS also contributed to the empowerment of vulnerable groups. Several interventions focused on women, Roma communities, persons with disabilities, youth, LGBTQI+ communities, migrants, single mothers, and socially excluded residents. In Bulgaria, the Active Women, Prosperous Democracy project trained 64 women and supported their participation in local decision-making. The GrowSPACE and the Transatlantic Foundation Boost Youth Activism in Poland story shows how PROTEUS support helped LGBTQI+ youth to organize, build peer networks, and promote inclusion in schools and smaller communities. Together, these examples show how PROTEUS translated EU values into concrete tools, confidence, and opportunities for people who often face barriers to exercising public voice.

Awareness of EU rights and values

Another important contribution was increased awareness of EU rights and values. PROTEUS did not present these values as abstract principles. Through local workshops, campaigns, civic education, storytelling, and advocacy projects, organizations connected democracy, the rule of law, equality, human rights, and non-discrimination to everyday community concerns. Supported projects helped make these values visible through lived experience rather than institutional language. For example, Fostering Women's Civic Participation in Rural Bulgaria translated democratic participation into local leadership and decision-making opportunities; Strengthening the Rights of Women and Children in Slovakia's Healthcare translated

healthcare rights into practical tools, complaint templates, informed-consent materials, and multilingual resources; Strengthening Youth Participation Through Theatre and Debate in Hungary helped young people engage with participation and responsibility through theatre- and debate-based methods; and Discussing Global Politics in Czechia's Local Communities brought informed debate on international affairs to smaller towns and local communities.

Sustainable and accountable organizations

PROTEUS also helped civil society organizations become more sustainable and accountable. Mentoring, peer learning, organizational diagnosis, simplified reporting, and practical grants helped smaller organizations build confidence and operational discipline. In Romania, supported groups improved project planning, volunteer engagement, advocacy methods, and visibility; some also attracted further resources or formalized their organizational development. This shows that PROTEUS often served as a steppingstone, helping organizations move from informal activism or isolated local work toward more stable civic engagement.

Explore the stories
More examples of PROTEUS in practice are available through the project's published stories, including Cybersecurity for Romanian CSOs: From "Boring" to "We'd Better" and Strengthening Civic Participation and CSO Capacity in Slovenia.

Regional civil society cooperation

Finally, PROTEUS strengthened regional civil society cooperation. Its eight-country structure, use of national languages, and shared intervention framework allowed local organizations to work in their own contexts while contributing to a broader Central European civic infrastructure. The project connected national partners, grantees, trainers, mentors, and advocacy actors around common challenges: shrinking civic space, weak peripheral infrastructure, low trust, limited funding, and the need to defend EU values in practical ways.

Conclusion

Overall, PROTEUS combined organizational strengthening with community-level change. It helped civil society organizations become better managed, more resilient, more visible, and more capable of advocacy. At the same time, it enabled citizens, especially in peripheral and rural areas, to participate, organize, learn about their rights, and engage with public institutions. Together, these results show the contribution of PROTEUS to a stronger, more participatory, and values-based civil society in Central Europe.

The project concluded with a final conference on September 7 and 8, 2026, focused on peer exchange and upholding democratic values in shrinking spaces. The key

findings, discussions, and recommendations emerging from the conference were summarized in the **Ljubljana Messages**.

LEARN MORE

For more information about the PROTEUS project, including success stories and articles highlighting the work of supported civil society organizations, visit the **PROTEUS project website**. The website provides further examples of how PROTEUS has helped strengthen civic participation, organizational resilience, advocacy, and the promotion of EU values across Central Europe.

gmfus.org/proteus-0 →

Project partners

LEAD PARTNER

G | M | F Transatlantic Foundation

BELGIUM

Transatlantic Foundation (TF)
https://www.gmfus.org/transatlantic-foundation

NATIONAL IMPLEMENTATION PARTNERS

Sofia Platform 10 YEARS

BULGARIA

Sofia Platform Foundation
sofiaplatform.org

CERANEO

CROATIA

CERANEO – Centre for Development of Non-Profit Organizations
ceraneo.hr

NADACE VIA

CZECHIA

Via Foundation
nadacevia.cz

EMBERSÉG EREJÉVEL

HUNGARY

Power of Humanity Foundation
emberseg.hu

fundacja stocznia

POLAND

Shipyard Foundation
stocznia.org.pl

cere: Centrul de Resurse pentru participare publică

ROMANIA

Resource Center for Public Participation (CeRe)
cere.ong

PDCS

SLOVAKIA

Partners for Democratic Change Slovakia (PDCS)
pdcs.sk

SLOGA Platforma nevladnih organizacij za razvoj, globalno učenje in humanitarno pomoč

SLOVENIA

SLOGA – Slovenian Global Action
sloga-platform.org

Co-funded by the European Union

Disclaimer: The views expressed herein are those solely of the author(s). TF, GMF, the National Implementation Partners, and EACEA do not take positions.