

## **Carpathian Civil Society Platform**

### **Inter-regional Meeting in Kosice**

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### **Background**

The state of democracy is still fragile in Central-East Europe which is underlined by those worrisome symptoms and tendencies that occurred recently in those Central- East European countries which went through in the complex process of democratic transition.

The common characteristics of these tendencies are deterioration of rule of law; increasing omnipotence of the state; weakening the balance of the branches of power; ethno-nationalism; isolation, and some cases, label independent media and civil society organizations as “unpatriotic fifth columns”.

The “one step forward and two steps back” is a common symptom of transitional democracies in which, for historical reasons, nor the institutions of democracy, neither democratic ethos (“democracy needs democrats”) are not solidified because there is no or weak tradition and culture of the self-organization in the society.

There are multiple reasons for it. One of them is that although the complex task of the political and economic transition process legally and institutionally was completed by the respective reigning political elites but the process was not coherent because the necessity of the socio-economic and political changes was not embedded in the society, and the final goal and reason of democratic transition, which is the social justice, somewhere lost in the process. The people felt that society has been divided to the majority of losers and minority of winners and this increased the mistrust towards the political elite and, in few years after the political changes, the democratic euphoria was replaced by disappointment in democracy. This disillusionment coincided with the world economic crisis, which led to high unemployment, increased impoverishment and rapidly growing social inequality and territorial disparity. And also coincided with the permanent crises of the global liberal order to which Central-East European countries joined after the political changes in 1989. These circumstances combining with disillusionment has left open the political space for demagogic political forces, which often mix their ideology with elated ethno nationalism and authoritarian nostalgia triggering a scapegoat mechanism (blame others for our failures) and this dramatically reduced social solidarity.

Civil society was one of the driving forces of democratic transition before and right after the political changes, and now, they can give a new impetus to solidify democratic institutions by giving a voice of citizens and marginalized social groups. As these worrisome tendencies span across national borders civil societies in our region are facing very similar challenges, therefore, it is crucial to place our efforts in a cross-border, inter-regional context and reinvigorate civil societies free up their dormant social innovation potential.

### **Why the Carpathians?**

The target area of the project is the Carpathians, which covers the Carpathian Mountain area and embraces the least developed bordering areas of five Central-East European countries, namely Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Poland, Romania and West Ukraine; these countries, which - in different extent- are facing serious backslide of democracy.

There are several reasons why the Carpathians is the target region of the project.

First, the Carpathians geographically, historically, culturally and sociologically a contiguous and compact region thus despite of differences (like five different languages, religions, etc.) share many similarities and regionally mirrors the democracy deficit of each country. The level of social and regional inequality, as well as the poverty is increasing and, proportionally, the highest density of Roma (Gypsy) population can be found here. (most underdeveloped regions within EU)

Second, the Carpathians not only geographically well defined area but politically too since the regional municipalities of this border area, modeled after the more than 50 years experiences of Western European euroregions, has

established in 1993 the Carpathian Euroregion. The Carpathian Euroregion comprises the municipalities of North-East Hungary, Eastern Slovakia, South East Poland, North West Romania and West Ukraine and its territory is 141,000 sq km with a population around 15 million. This size of the target region is large enough to explore and identify the main common issues and to reach out civil society actors as well as local communities to create a powerful supportive network of CSOs. The Carpathians has another institution, the Carpathian Foundation (established in 1995), which works in the territory of the Carpathian Euroregion as a private grantmaking foundation, which main mission is to support the initiatives of CSOs and local municipalities in the field of cross-border and inter-ethnic cooperation as well as to strengthen the capacity of CSOs and has created a loose network of CSOs, which would be the basis of the envisioned Carpathian Civil Platform and Hub. The Carpathian Foundation, having offices in each of the five countries, is committed in the implementation of the Platform and the Hub.

Third, civil society organizations in the Carpathians face double challenges. They are working in peripheral territories where the societal problems are accumulated and regions in the Carpathians lag behind in comparison to the developing centers of their nation state. They are disadvantaged compared to the situation of organizations seated in capitals and central development poles, although the demands for their effective work can be considered higher in the periphery with communities, which are the losers of the political and economic transformation. They are defenseless against the hostile attitude of reign governments, especially in the case of Hungary, where the government introduced alarming measures against Hungarian civil society to intimidate them and created the atmosphere of mistrust and passivity. The combination of accumulated societal problems and lack of democratic practice is manifested at a highly increased rate in peripheral locations, such as the Carpathians.

Common ground for common actions.

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