



# THE POWER OF ORGANIZING

**Stories of Community Organizing  
Campaigns From Across Europe**



# THE POWER OF ORGANIZING

## STORIES OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZING CAMPAIGNS FROM ACROSS EUROPE

Product of the participatory action research of the European Community Organizing Network.

**European Community Organizing Network** (ECON) is a network of progressive movements, organizations, and groups engaged in community organizing in Europe towards social and environmental justice. ECON enables them to build people power, organizing capacity, strengthen international solidarity, and support the sustainability of the community organizing sector.

**Authors:** Alexandru Palas, Bernadett Sebály, Gáspár Bendegúz Tikász, Marija Peric, Maroš Chmelík, Steve Hughes, Wioleta Hutniczak

**Research Coordinator:** Bernadett Sebály

**Editor:** Steve Hughes

**Content Feedback:** Anna Striethorst, Gordon Whitman

**Date of publication:** 2021

Published by the European Community Organizing Network.

Copies of this study are available for download at: [www.organizeeurope.org](http://www.organizeeurope.org)



Publication co-funded within European Union Programme Erasmus+. The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use, which may be made of the information contained therein.

# WHY READ THIS STUDY?

Community organizing is building democratic civil society in Europe. In an era of intersecting and intensifying crises, it is a proven counterweight to the rise of reactionary forces and an essential ingredient for movements seeking to expand their social base and build the power to win.

This study documents the findings of community organizers working in Central and Southeastern Europe, though its lessons are broadly applicable.

The stories of organizing documented in this report cover a diversity of struggles, from climate work in Poland to Roma rights in Slovakia. From LGBT organizing in Romania to mothers building power to pass national legislation in Serbia.

We also look at stories from Hungary of activist movements adopting a community organizing approach in order to win. And there are stories of the ways in which long-time community organizing groups are shifting and evolving their practice from many countries.

So...**read this study if** you are a community organizer in Europe looking to deepen the practice of your craft.

**Read this study if** you are involved in building a democratic civil society and you seek to understand how community organizing can play a role in strengthening movements for social justice and environmental sustainability.

**Read this study if** you learn best from case studies of the practice of community organizing written by the people who were there.

Thanks, and happy reading!  
*The research team*

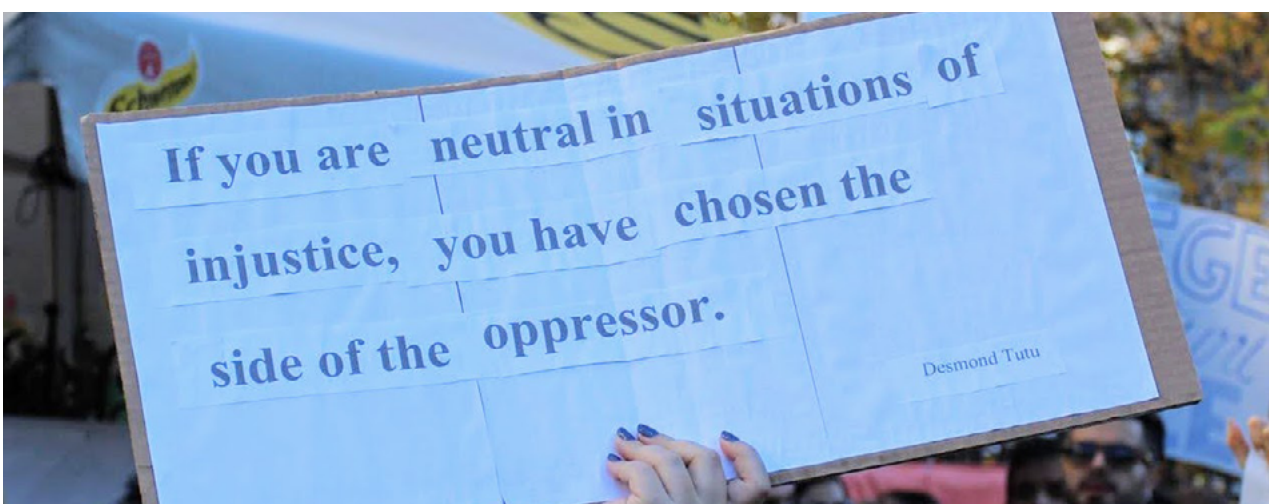


Image Credit: Robert Stewart

# CONTENTS

Introduction: Organizing in transition.....	5
What is participatory action research, and why did we choose it?.....	8
A North Star for organizers .....	12
Lesson learned: The role of the organizer.....	17
Lesson learned: What does disciplined organizing look like? .....	24
Lesson learned: Acting in a political context .....	29
Conclusion: The story of change .....	33
APPENDIX: Case studies from the field.....	35
The research process and team .....	72



**INTRODUCTION:**

**ORGANIZING IN**

**TRANSITION**

Our ambition for this study is to show the transformative power of community organizing and to understand its potential to develop a long-term vision of social change. It is our hope that this research will make visible and reinforce important shifts taking place in the field of community organizing in Europe. Using the methodology of participatory action research, our research team of organizers sought to reflect more deeply on the work we have done, as well as the results - seen and unseen - of this work.

Community organizers know that the work of building power in local communities is seldom about marching from victory

to victory. Even in campaigns where we eventually win, there can be long periods in which progress can seem to be stalled, and victory is anything but certain. And yet, we often end up talking about our work as a sports highlight film. Organizers are often taught to find “small, winnable campaigns.” The habit of emphasizing victory can stem from a desire to emphasize the “winnable” part of this approach so that we motivate new people to join the fight. Or it can be because of outside pressure we feel to demonstrate the impact of our work. Usually, it is a combination of both.

“We want to make changes. We have enough energy and capacities, just give us hope and promise that we can build this effort together.”

**Silvia Kováčova, community leader, Slovakia**

## Organizers talking to organizers

For this study, we will reflect on organizing as a long-term process; one that has a proven track record of results but a process that is imperfect with many challenges along the way. We also want to explore the organic shifts in our practice that have taken place over years of trial and error.

The primary audience for this study is other organizers, and the methodology we chose to conduct this study was built around the idea of “organizers talking to organizers.” We also hope that people who are less directly involved in community organizing will find insights about how organizing is evolving useful to their own efforts to strengthen democracy in Europe.

We are not uncritical of our practice. We believe European organizing needs to shift away from being applied as a “neutral methodology” towards a practice rooted in the values of social justice, equity, and environmental resilience. Organizing needs to be grounded in local communities and center the “have-nots” in our work. At the same time, organizers need to elevate the scale of our ambition beyond the neighborhood or even the national context. In the face of escalating and interconnected crises, we must aim for a strategy capable of influencing the political agenda and public discourse at the European level.

## Studying an organizing field in transition

Many of these shifts are already taking place, which this study documents. For this participatory action research, a group of organizers in Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia examined ten community organizing campaigns (two per country) in a number of different contexts. We interviewed our peers and drew the lessons learned from the work.

As part of the process, we challenged ourselves to envision how the things we were learning would shape our work in the future. In the middle of the research process, the COVID pandemic struck, and the ways in which this disruption affected our work caused even further self-reflection.<sup>1</sup>

This study gives insight into an organizing field in transition. It is our hope that the process and the findings in this report will help European organizers build our work to the next level of scale and impact.

In this report, we will begin by sharing insights into our analytical framework, which serves as a North Star in our assessment, as well as our research methodology.

We then provide a synthesis of the findings of our research process, focusing on the role that organizers play in movement ecosystems and what disciplined organizing looks like. We will lean into some of the dilemmas that organizers face as well as looking at the work of organizing in a broader political context.

Finally, this report contains an appendix that contains summaries of the organizing campaigns we analyzed through this participatory action research process.



Romanian organizers built power for LGBT rights by using community organizing to increase the capacity of the movement outside of the capital. Image credit: Andreea Balaurea

---

<sup>1</sup> Hughes, Steve. "The European Organizing Movement Responds to Crisis: Synthesis of ECON Crisis Strategy Sessions." [organizeeurope.org](https://organizeeurope.org), 2020.

**WHAT IS PARTICIPATORY  
ACTION RESEARCH, AND  
WHY DID WE CHOOSE IT?**

Community organizers have a double transformative effect on the world we live in. We help people join together to collectively influence policy decisions and shape the political culture, and we also help them transform individually into leaders who take a bigger responsibility for social change. This transformation in people's minds and lives makes the endless struggle for social justice rewarding.

However, organizing requires a lot of mental and emotional work. Organizers create the conditions that make it possible for grassroots leaders to build strategy, design campaigns, and map stakeholders and interests. We train and coach grassroots leaders, strengthen team spirit, handle different personalities, help

resolve conflicts, and on top of all this, we participate in meetings showing our best selves. In such an underfunded region as Central and Eastern Europe, we often juggle all these roles without specialized teams of media officers, fundraisers, strategic directors, or campaign directors behind them.

So it is no surprise that organizers are left with very little time to stop and reflect on what we have done right and what we should do differently. Our motive with this participatory action research was to provide organizers with space for this reflection work.

“These interviews [I did during the research] made a huge impact on my understanding of what our organizing program should look like in 2021. [...] This process helped us start several internal discussions about our core values, mission, and vision.”



**Maroš Chmelík, Center for Community Organizing, Slovakia**

## **The principles of participatory action research**

According to the principles of participatory action research, research – the systematic analysis of data to increase our understanding of a topic – is not only the jurisdiction of academics. In participatory action research, those with no research background acquire essential research skills to examine their reality by developing questions and collecting data. But producing

knowledge is not the ultimate goal of this learning process. Researchers must figure out how to turn their lessons learned into action. This makes participatory action research both a liberating experience and a tool for social change.



The seven members of our team, Alexandru Palas, Bernadett Sebály, Gáspár Bendegúz Tikász, Marija Peric, Maroš Chmelík, Steve Hughes, and Wioleta Hutniczak, are trained as community organizers, and our organizations are all affiliated with the **European Community Organizing Network** (ECON). Alexandru, Bendegúz, Marija, Maroš, and Wioleta conducted the research, Bernadett coordinated the research process and supported the editing process,

and Steve was the editor of the publication and coordinated the process of helping integrate the lessons learned from this study into the strategic practice of European organizers.

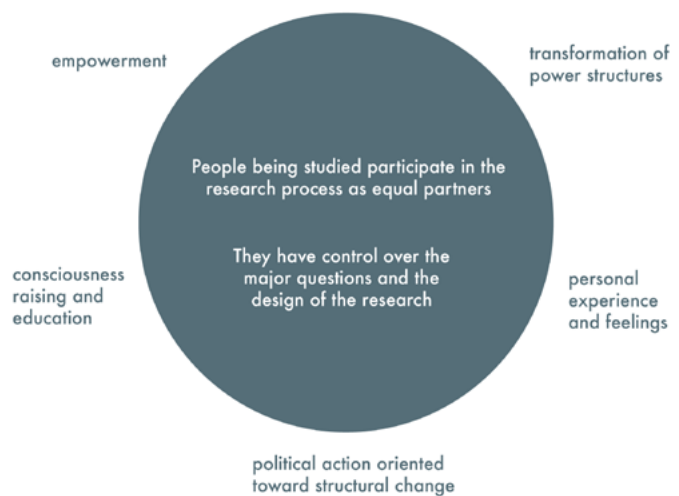
(See full description of the research process at "The research process and team" on **page 72**)

## WHAT IS PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH?

It is **RESEARCH** because...



It is **PARTICIPATORY** and **ACTION** because...



Early in the process, the research team of organizers gathered for training on the process. In this slide, they understand the characteristics of Participatory Action Research.

Original image credit: European Community Organizing Network

## Overview of the campaigns we researched

See full stories in [Appendix - Case studies from the field](#)

### Hungary

Campaign to protect the Római Banks, a natural area on the Danube in Budapest.

Campaign to fix missing streetlights in a suburb of Budapest which ended up exposing corruption at the highest level of government.

### Poland

Campaign to bring community organizing to the climate movement in Polish coal country.

Campaign to organize women in a political context where women are significantly underrepresented in decision-making and civil society.

### Romania

Campaign to protect a Bucharest neighborhood from illegal development.

National campaign to defeat a government-backed anti-LGBT referendum.

### Serbia

National campaign led by mothers targeting parliament to change the method of payment of maternity benefits.

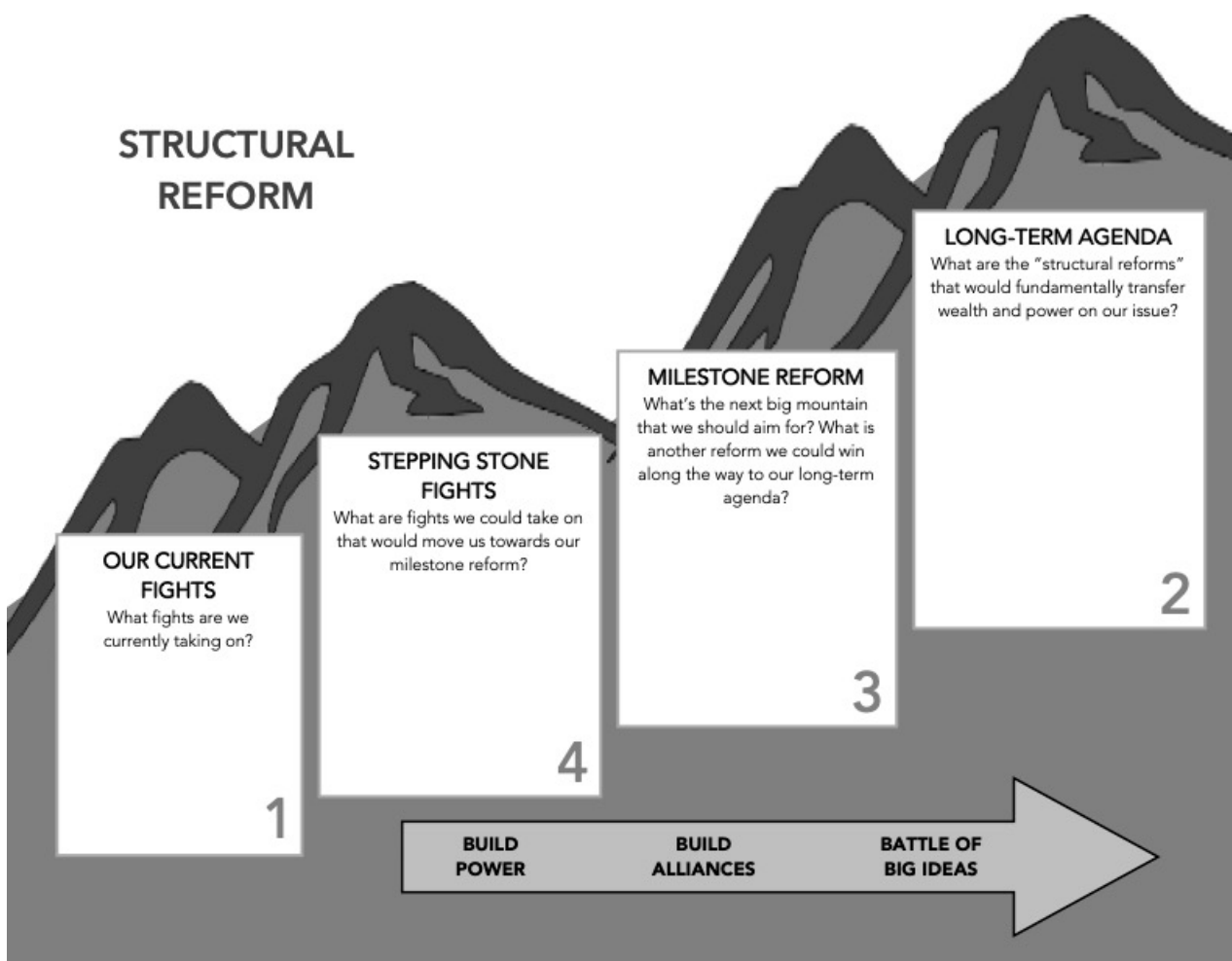
Campaign by youth to win a community center in their town.

### Slovakia

Campaign of mutual aid within Roma communities during the crisis of the pandemic.

Process of shifting from neighborhood-based organizing to organizing in rural and marginalized communities with a clear social justice frame for one of the oldest community organizing groups in Europe.

**A NORTH STAR**  
**FOR ORGANIZERS**



Mapping a Long-Term Agenda. This handout is used by the Grassroots Policy Project to help organizing groups think about their long-term goal and the stepping stone and milestone reforms they need to pursue to get there. Image credit: Grassroots Policy Project

In this section, we will introduce two analytical frameworks which serve as a strategic compass for organizers.<sup>2</sup> We found it both a useful jumping-off point for this research project, as well as a touchstone to refer back to over the course of synthesizing our findings.

One of the key frameworks is the idea of developing a Long-Term Agenda for an organizing process. We think doing so can

serve as a first step in identifying blockages that get in the way of shifting our work from short-term campaigns aimed at narrower tactical targets towards campaigns that seek a more expansive vision and strategy of large-scale social transformation. We believe this will require us to think about the *kind* of power we seek to build, as well as *how* we aim to build it as European organizers.

## Long-Term Agenda

The idea of the Long-Term Agenda is that organizers and local leaders need to understand our work both in terms of

our immediate campaigns, but we must also hold a long-term vision for "structural reform" (i.e., reforms that move power

<sup>2</sup> Both frameworks were developed by Grassroots Policy Project (GPP), an organization founded in the 1990's to help organizers scale up their work and build connections between community organizing and social movements.

and resources from those who have them to those who don't).<sup>3</sup> Along the way, organizers must develop the skill of articulating "strategic pathways" from our specific, targeted campaigns towards our long-term vision. "Small winnable campaigns," if located on the map of a long-term agenda, can then be understood as stepping stone fights that can lead to milestone reforms. Milestone reforms successfully shift power and resources to our communities and prepare the ground for even more ambitious steps.

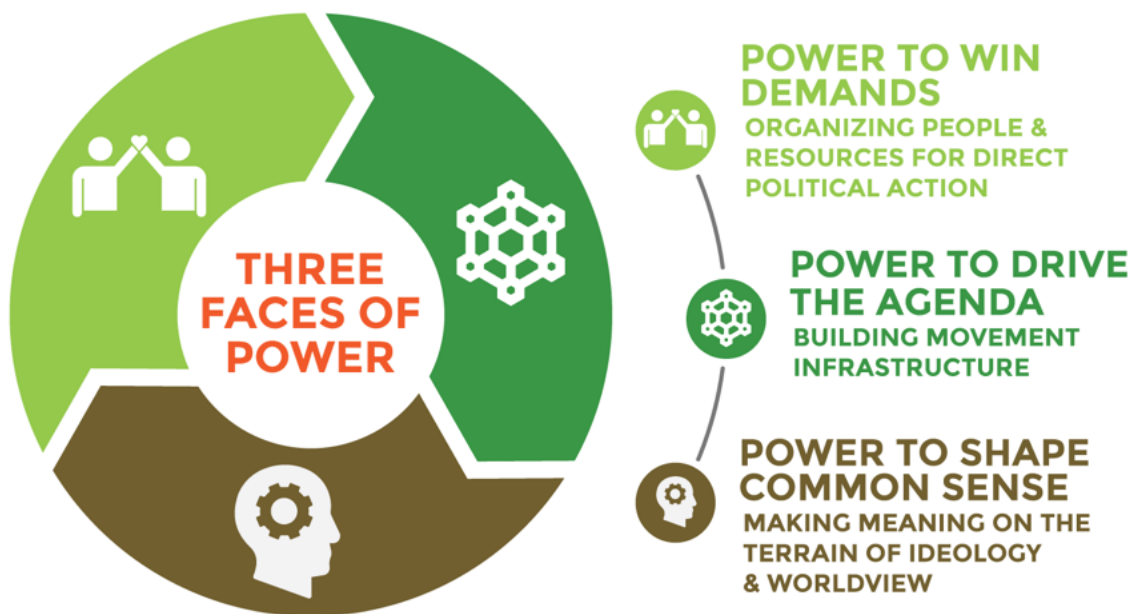
Developing and pursuing a Long-Term Agenda is not a linear process. It is like walking on a rocky trail. Sometimes we are moving up, sometimes down. Sometimes we encounter obstacles in our path and have to find new pathways around. But if we are not using and refining a Long-Term Agenda in which we identify stepping stone fights and milestone reforms along the way, it is like wandering in the woods without a map.

### Three Faces of Power

Central to the task of developing a Long-Term Agenda is deepening our analysis of how power works in society. Community organizing is unique from some other forms of community intervention in Europe in that

it has a clear focus on the idea of "power." The idea of analyzing who has power and how much power we need to win our campaigns, as well as the idea of shifting power relations in a community, animate

## THREE FACES OF POWER



The "Three Faces of Power" as adapted by the Grassroots Policy Project for the work of community organizers. Image credit: Grassroots Policy Project

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the term "structural reform" carries a lot of negative connotations in many of the countries where our research took place as it harkens to the neoliberal economic structural reforms of the 1990's and 2000's in Central and Eastern Europe. However, we believe there is value in using the term for this very reason. The neoliberal reforms of this period were indeed painful and profoundly disruptive, and they are also an example of the scale of social transformation that organizers should aspire to in our Long-Term Agenda for the power building work we are engaged in.





Organizers in Budapest built an impressive campaign to save a natural area on the Danube, and they created an effective narrative that magnified the power of their work.

the tactics organizers use on a daily basis. And yet, organizers often get stuck in the rut of focusing on a narrow definition of power. We are taught “power is something you can count.” Organizers may have been trained to measure power by the number of people who came to their meeting or to count the number of votes needed in a legislative body to move an agenda (or block harm). These are examples of the “power we can see,” and it is often this power that most directly impacts whether an organizer wins or loses a campaign.

In his essay *Power: A Radical View*,<sup>4</sup> British political and social scientist Steven Lukes articulated a theory of power that goes much deeper. The “Three Faces of Power” framework adapts Lukes’ work when laying out the layers of power – visible and invisible – and applies it directly to the work of community organizers.

On its first face, we see power at its most elemental form. This is the face of power defined by “organized people and organized money.” Successful application of this kind of power translates into changes in policies that improve the material conditions of people’s lives, such as winning increases in a social benefit which organizers in Hungary did in 2018 when they won a national increase in the benefit paid to people caring for disabled family members.<sup>5</sup> Influencing who gets what in the political arena is a form of “social power.” Organizers and the leaders we work with often encounter this form of power on their very first campaign.

On the second face, power is about how decisions get made, which is influenced by both the formal rules of governance and also the informal structures of influence that stand behind those decision-making processes. This is the kind of power that

4 Lukes, Steven. *Power: A Radical View*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1974.

5 Beckwith, Dave, et al. “*Making a Way Forward: Community Organising and the Future of Democracy in Europe*.” [organizeeurope.org](http://organizeeurope.org), 2019. Sebály, Bernadett. “*Social Movements and Policy Change: Case Study on Caregiver Benefit Policies in Hungary*.” CEU, [researchgate.net](https://www.researchgate.net), October 2020.

has the ability to put issues on the agenda and – importantly – to keep them *off* the agenda.

Power at this level is the realm of *movement infrastructure*, the network of formal and informal organizations that are aligned with one another behind a particular political project. Concretely, this shows up in the form of an interconnected web of power players which includes entities like elected leaders, civil society organizations, academic and cultural institutions, political parties, unions, media outlets, think tanks, philanthropic organizations, civic clubs, sports leagues, etc. As a strategy planning exercise, organizers often create “power maps,” or “stakeholder maps,” that essentially reveal the second face of power of *our opponents*, but organizers are less accustomed to thinking about how to *build our own long-term alignments*.<sup>6</sup>

On the third face, power becomes even harder to see but no less impactful on an organizer’s work. Third face power is the realm of worldview and ideology. It is on this face of power that what a society considers to be “common sense” is fought over and decided. So, for example, our opponents may leverage their aligned network of power players to advance an ideological position that there is no alternative to a city’s housing crisis other than to subsidize developers to build more market-rate apartments.

If that is the case, then our demands for rent control or more social housing will fall on deaf ears with decision-makers — and *with the public itself*. Our organizing will be faced with a stiff headwind before we even get started. Therefore, organizers must also think of our campaigns in terms of the “narrative strategies” we will employ to tell a new story and chip away at and shift the worldview that our opponents try to force upon us.

---

<sup>6</sup> *Building our own long-term alignments is complicated by the fact that in some organizing traditions organizers are taught an ethos of “no permanent friends and no permanent enemies” in pursuit of immediate campaign goals.*

**LESSON LEARNED:**

**THE ROLE OF THE**

**ORGANIZER**



Organizer, Martina Strmenova (center), played a quiet but central role in holding together the local movement to oust the neo-Nazi governor of the Banská Bystrica region of Slovakia. Image credit: Nie v našom meste

The next sections of this study are organized around broad transversal themes that emerged throughout our interviews, and we illustrate them with references to the case studies, which are developed in more depth in the Appendix.

In a number of community organizing traditions, organizers are taught to make themselves invisible. Organizers are taught to listen for issues and look for organic leaders who have the trust of other members of the community. The organizer is maybe the activator, but leaders from the local community are the actors. Elements of the organizer-as-invisible ethos are present in most training for organizers, as well as discourses about the field of community organizing. In short, organizers do not elevate themselves. Usually, we are not the spokespeople or the front person of the organization. Our job is to empower others and create opportunities for them to step up for themselves and their community.

As much as this attitude has value, it tends to obscure the role that organizers play. And when campaigns become big enough, it can also hide that there is an organizing process going on at all. As our researcher who studied the campaign to save the Római Banks, a riverfront natural area in Budapest, put it, "...a lot of people, especially when the campaign moves so many people [like in Római Banks], do not even know they are in an organizing process, and this is true about the journalists as well. Even if we see that they write next to someone's name the title 'community organizer,' it does not mean that anyone understands the same thing about that as we do."

So what is the role that organizers have played in European organizing campaigns? Below are some themes that emerged from our researchers' interviews.





An organizer looks for roles for people to play as a method of developing their leadership on the campaign. Image credit: Fák a Rómain

## **Give people things to do and develop leaders**

Campaigns to change a public policy take time, but local members of the community can lose patience and become demoralized when the goals of the campaign are not realized quickly. The organizer must be creative to come up with “campaign activity” even when the campaign is in a lull. This is not simply a task of making things up for people to do — it is rather a process of testing the clarity and commitment of leaders and building the muscle of organizations.

The organizer needs to be attuned to the interests and potential contributions of members of the community and be skilled at motivating and channeling those interests and talents into roles that keep people feeling a sense of connection to the campaign. As the researcher of the Római Banks campaign put it: “In quiet periods of the campaign, [the organizers] mobilized groups to organize family events

or leisure activities to keep supporters engaged. In moments of escalation, they assigned people to activities and created a list of well-defined tasks to facilitate participation.”

All the while, the organizer needs to make assessments about developing actual organic leaders through training and practice. Giving things to do to people just because they are the ones who showed up is not the same as identifying the key leaders in a community, understanding their motivations and interests, and then plugging them into campaign roles where they can thrive.





The “snowflake” structure employed by Serbia on the Move to organize mothers in a nationwide campaign to change the law on maternity payments. Image credit: Serbia on the Move

## Provide structure for leaders and members

Disciplined campaigns that win have plans and a structure. In Serbia, a small group of women determined they needed to enlist the active participation of 250 others from across the country to run a national campaign to change policies related to maternity pay. So they created a “snowflake” outreach and activation structure to build the base of support they needed. The most active participants

were given more responsibility. These new leaders were asked to set up their own branch of the structure. Attention to building structure — especially one that enables grassroots leaders to build a base of support — is an important role of the organizer, as is ensuring that the structure acts in service of the campaign plan and strategy.

## Hold groups together even in tough times

Through the challenges of organizing, sometimes the first victory can simply be holding a group together. In Poland, a relatively new initiative aimed at organizing around climate action suffered a setback when their group was forced to move online in response to the COVID pandemic. In this situation, the organizer’s role of checking in on leaders, convening

meetings, and even traveling to people’s homes to teach them the tech skills they needed to continue active participation in the group was essential glue that held a young organizing committee together.



Patient work to build the base enables campaigns to take action in ways that are deeply rooted in the local community. Image credit: Fák a Rómain

## Build the base to act when time is ripe

Sometimes a campaign that has been plodding along for years can escalate quickly. This was the case with the campaign to stop the anti-LGBT referendum in Romania in 2018. Coming under fire for public corruption, the ruling party decided to quickly schedule the referendum after years of delay as an attempt to divert public attention. Organizers with the organization

MozaiQ needed to jump into action right away, activating the networks built in the years leading up to this moment. Years of base-building made it possible for the organization to lead a successful campaign to boycott the vote and defeat the referendum.

## “Nationalize” a local issue

Organizers are taught how to “cut an issue,” meaning to turn a big or global problem into an issue that can be addressed at the local level by moving visible power brokers, such as local elected officials, to take some clearly defined action. Far from just a discursive strategy, this approach makes it possible for people to begin organizing around clear and concrete changes that directly impact their lives and then build on those demands to uncover and change larger systems of injustice and oppression.

Our researcher in Hungary conducted interviews about a campaign over the lack of street lighting in Gyál, a suburb of Budapest, and revealed how the campaign began over the issue of inadequately installed neighborhood street lights. However, as the campaign grew, the community organization was able to uncover a corrupt procurement process by which the lighting contracts were awarded to a contractor who had a direct family connection to the Prime Minister of the country.

By identifying a local issue, involving the local community, and then connecting it to a national issue such as corruption in high places, this local campaign contributed

a potent tool to a mix of factors that managed to put leaders at the highest levels of government on their heels.

## **“Conductor of the activist orchestra”**

Talking about the organizing on the Római Banks in Budapest, one person described the role of the organizer in the campaign as the “conductor of the activist orchestra.” In this organizing effort, the organizer very clearly played a role in coordinating actors to make the campaign more effective.

As this campaign grew, there were multiple — sometimes competing — forces getting involved in saving the natural area. There were local people who lived near the development site. There were national organizations like Greenpeace. And there were opposition political parties coming in and out of the process, looking for ways to engage.

An opinion shared by all who were interviewed was that the community organizer on this campaign played a key role in coordinating all these various actors and keeping them focused on the plan to win. As one interviewee put it, “community organizing was the method that shepherded the different activities, methods, and efforts in one direction and turned them into one conscious activity flow.”



The organizer often works quietly behind the scenes to keep everyone focused on the same goal. Image credit: Fák a Rómain



## **Cultivate broader networks**

Organizers also seed new groups when the practice of organizing spreads through networks of local groups working on similar issues. For example, in Romania, the organizers in the campaign against the anti-LGBT referendum identified a region of the country where there was not much activity taking place, and they cultivated the growth of a new local group. This, in turn, strengthened the national campaign.

In Slovakia, the Center for Community Organizing was able to leverage twenty years of history of working and building relationships of trust in the Banská Bystrica region to effectively provide leadership to a community-wide mobilization against the radical right.

“The key to building a network is that we have strong local groups. If these groups are strong and have many members, there will be enough capacity to join the network and dedicate time to it. If the local groups are short of members, there is no capacity to join a network.”



**Andrea Homoki, Community Organizer, Civil College, Hungary**

## **Make space for reflection to transform and grow**

Our researcher in Slovakia shared insights gained from his interviews about the transformation his organization had gone through from its early years of working on neighborhood campaigns in mostly lower-middle-class areas. The organization is now embracing a more clear social justice frame for its organizing, which has also shifted to more marginalized communities.

He cited how important it had been for organizers to create space for reflection within the work to allow for these kinds of organic transformations to occur.

**LESSON LEARNED:**

**WHAT DOES DISCIPLINED**

**ORGANIZING LOOK LIKE?**



As one can see, community organizing shows up in lots of different kinds of communities and contexts, and it takes on a number of different issues. The role of the organizer in this work cannot be underestimated. Additionally, we need to look at the role of disciplined organizing campaigns to develop a more clear picture of what ingredients can make community organizing an essential piece of a strategy aimed at larger scale social transformation.

This section covers the basic “nuts and bolts” of organizing campaigns. In other words – to refer back to our North Star – this section looks at organizing on the first face. That is, we will look at the process of building visible social power. In the next section, we will layer in organizing on the second and third faces of power as well.

“The big difference between organizing and what we previously did is strategic thinking and structured work. There is room for chit-chat, but we have a long-term plan and follow it through.”



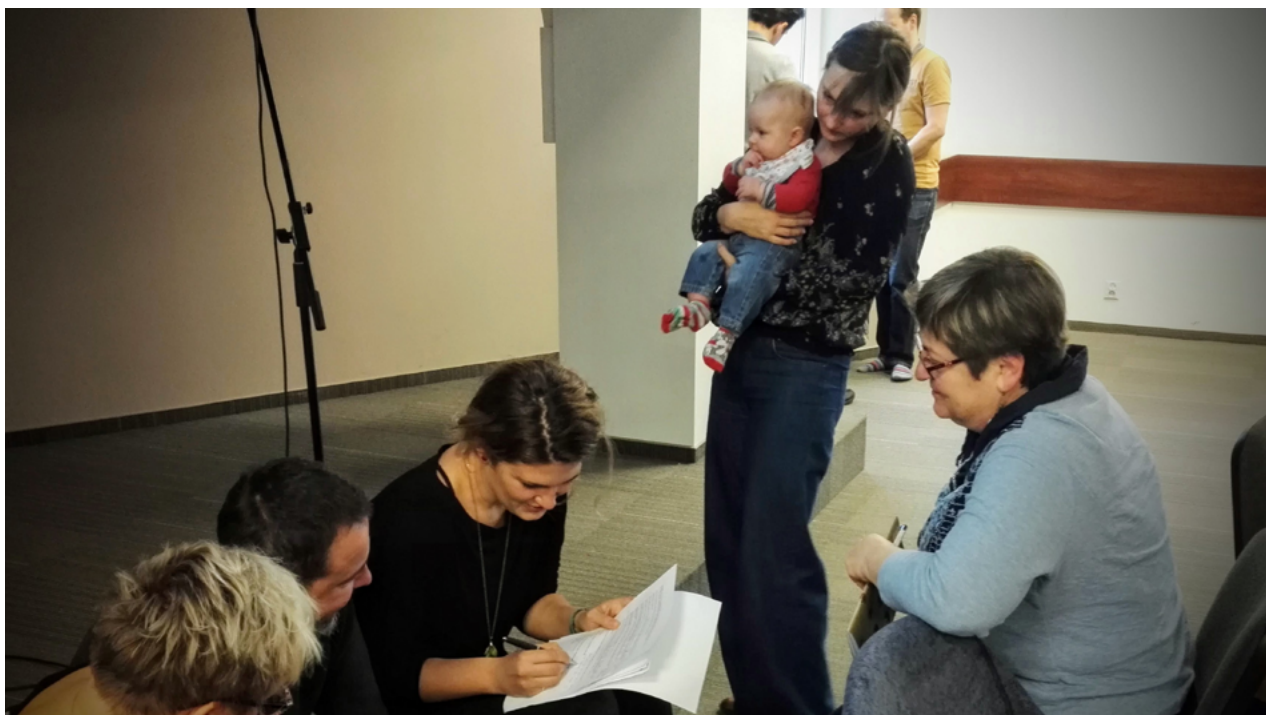
Judit Tóth, Eleven Vecsés, Hungary

## Listen

Most organizers would agree that the very first step in the organizing process is listening to the needs of the community. Organizers often begin their work in a community or on an issue by doing door-to-door outreach in specific communities or by looking to meet specific constituencies in places where they are likely to gather. For example, an organizer trying to work with migrant youth might spend time in a local cafe where they are known to hang out. An organizer trying to move faith leaders into action might meet them or attend a community event at their place of worship. An organizer trying to build a campaign

for improved transit service might ride the bus looking to meet transit users. In other words, organizers seek to meet people on their own turf.

In our research, we documented an example of this in the Polish city of Chorzów, where the organizer was attempting to build a campaign on a “green pasture” where no organizing had happened before. She met with local groups to get a sense of the community, and she strategically targeted door-to-door outreach to particular neighborhoods to listen for local issues.



*The listening process happens at all phases of the organizing process. Image credit: European Community Organizing Network*

## **Build an organization to make change**

Early in their training, organizers are taught the skills involved in conducting an effective one-on-one conversation and organizing efficient meetings. The organizer is taught to listen for concerns or things that might motivate someone to take action. The job of the organizer is to both practice these skills themselves and teach volunteer grassroots leaders to do them as well, so people can organize their communities and constituencies. Once they've identified potential leaders or been invited to help a constituency get better organized, organizers create a context — usually by setting up a meeting — to help people work together across common experiences. They are taught to

get concrete commitments from people to take action, even if it is a very small step at first.

In the Serbian campaigns, this orientation towards building the organization through the campaign was well evidenced. The practice of meeting one-on-one with new volunteers to assess their interest and give them concrete tasks, paired with a systematic approach to giving volunteers increasingly complex tasks, meant that by the end of the campaign they had not just won their issue but built a lasting organization.

## **Evaluate, make a strategic plan, evaluate again**

Organizers are taught strategy. Before they launch a campaign, they are taught to make a detailed analysis of the community using tools like “power maps” or “stakeholder maps,” and they involve their leaders in this process to ensure a full picture of the terrain

as well as deep buy-in for the organizing plan. Regular evaluation of a meeting or a training, an action in a campaign, or a recruitment process, is central to the work.



*Working with the organization Serbia on the Move, mothers from across the country organized to change the national law on how government maternity payments were made. Image credit: Serbia on the Move*

Our research about the campaign over missing street lighting in the city of Gyál, Hungary showed a high degree of strategic thinking and making real-time evaluations. In consultation with the local leaders, the organizers made the decision to tie the local issue together with the broader issue of corruption in the national government. However, the organizers also demonstrated

strategic nimbleness to de-emphasize this connection at certain points in the campaign. Their assessment of conditions on the ground indicated that the local mayor needed room to maneuver if he was going to fix the street light issue. This capacity to evaluate the changing terrain is the heart of an organizer's strategic practice.

## **Take action**

Throughout regular meetings and constant outreach to new members, organizers look for "organic leaders" who have followers in their community. However, leadership often does not come in the form that mainstream society says it does. In the organizing approach, leadership is not a position. It is action: taking responsibility for the community and supporting the rest of the group. In a good community organization, there is not one but many leaders who work together in a coordinated way. This gives a solid foundation to build and run a campaign.

The campaign against the anti-LGBT referendum in Romania was defined by periods of intense action due to the fact

that the government initiated a sped-up voting timeline in an effort to distract public attention away from a brewing corruption scandal in their ranks. Thanks to the work of the organization MozaiQ to build the local leadership of LGBT activists in communities around the country, they were able to quickly spring into motion in a coordinated way when the moment to act was upon them.

## **Meet benchmarks and maintain organizational discipline**

Organizing campaigns that win do so because they set goals, meet them, and act with a level of seriousness and discipline that moving large numbers of people out of apathy and into motion requires.

Again, the campaign work in Serbia provides a good example. Serbia on the Move requires any new project to demonstrate community support before it is launched as an official project. Therefore, before a campaign even starts, the organizers have to collect written support from 1,000 people backing the efforts.

This is an example of having a clear way of measuring if the campaign should progress to the next phase or not. Given that the organizers of the "Rights for Moms" campaign were introducing a novel tactic into Serbian civil society (i.e., direct outreach to members of parliament), and that they wanted to ensure that they had a big enough base to reach all members of the parliament, their adherence to meeting their clearly defined benchmarks was a key to their success..

**LESSON LEARNED:**

**ACTING IN A**

**POLITICAL CONTEXT**



The process of organizers developing campaigns and building people-powered organizations is sometimes summed up in the axiom “organizers organize organizations.” In this next section, we will take the analysis layers deeper by discussing what our research revealed about how organizing exists in a broader political context. We connect the power needed to win campaigns that we have already discussed with the less visible power that European organizers are also building to change the underlying political context in which we are organizing.

In the past, community organizers were taught to avoid direct involvement in politics and focus instead on putting pressure on politicians “from the outside.” Over the years, this created a discourse that “organizing is not political.” However, organizing puts people and ideas in motion, it challenges existing power relationships, and it has the ability to change policy. So while community organizing may not be a partisan activity, it is certainly political.

## Developing “political vision”

Re-centering the political nature of organizing is the antidote to “winning small, but losing big.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, if our organizing leads to small victories at the local level but never adds up to power to make large structural changes in society or to contest dominant ideas and ideologies,

we end up with the kind of organizing that a leading community organizer and thinker Gary Delgado referred to as lacking “political vision.”

“We must not be afraid to use analytical and ideological tools to develop a political vision. By political vision, I mean a vision that takes us past the strategies of a campaign, a power analysis of key players, or the tactics of a good accountability session. In order to be a critical element in future change efforts, we must work with our constituents to develop our vision of a future society.”<sup>8</sup>



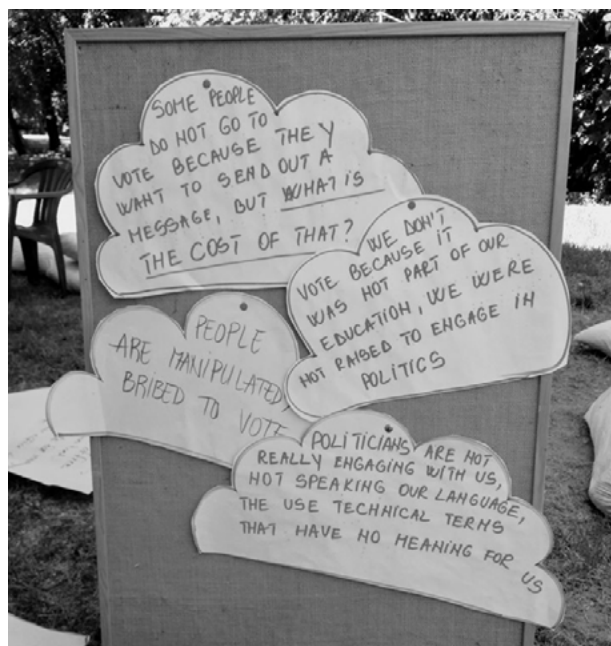
**Gary Delgado**

<sup>7</sup> Sebály, Bernadett. “*The Transformative Impact of Community Organizing.*” Youtube, uploaded by Marcus Rößner, 14 Apr. 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Delgado, Gary. “*The Last Stop Sign.*” shelterforce.org, 1 Nov. 1998.



There is no better proof of organizing's effect on politics than the way in which political actors (i.e., politicians and political parties) are drawn to interact with it once our organizing begins to develop some power. In the Római Banks organizing campaign, a key tension the organizers had to manage was the ways in which opposition parties were positioning themselves vis-à-vis the community group trying to save the natural area. Similarly, in Slovakia, the organizing done to mobilize the community in response to the election of Marian Kotleba, a well-known neo-Nazi leader, immediately put the organizers across the table from numerous opposition parties.<sup>9</sup>



*These attitudes, captured from a training run by the European Community Organizing Network, encapsulate many of the attitudes that people carry towards taking political action. Image credit: European Community Organizing Network*

Wherever one stands personally on the question of politics, organizers must recognize that elections have consequences for our work and for the communities in which we work. Ignoring these factors because “organizing is not political” is to

ignore some of the key conditions that affect the amount of power organizers are — or are not — able to build.

## Setting the terms of politics

At the beginning of this report, we discussed the idea that there are “three faces of power,” the understanding of which is tied to the process of developing a Long-Term Agenda for community organizing in Europe.

Based on the findings of our researchers, we believe there already exist some important lessons learned by organizers about *setting the terms* of politics. Our research uncovered ways in which European organizers are already building on all three faces of power:

**POWER ON THE FIRST FACE: Understanding the value of organizing at scale.** Organizing starts from the bottom, but it cannot ignore who is at the top. Fetishizing a “small is beautiful” vision of neighborhood-based organizing may win some local fights, but the power relations and policies that shape society will likely remain untouched.

Our research in Slovakia showed us that European organizers are looking beyond the horizon. They are asking themselves, “how do we run this campaign for clean water in this community so that we don’t just win here, but we affect this problem across the whole country?” Similarly, we

saw organizers in Gyál, Hungary connecting with a neighboring town to turn a local organization into a regional one. In Romania, we saw the LGBT community organize for survival and recognize that their only chance of beating a national referendum

<sup>9</sup> The campaign in Slovakia never endorsed a candidate, but they did play a key role in brokering cooperation between the opposition parties, as well as providing coherence to the multi-faceted community mobilization that took place under these extraordinary conditions.

targeting them and their loved ones was to invest in supporting the formation of new local groups around the country.

All of these instances demonstrated an ambition towards increasing the amount of social power organizers build through their organizing.

**POWER ON THE SECOND FACE: Aligning a united front of organizations.** It is not sufficient to build a “bigger me” by collecting more people just like us. The task of an organizer is to build a “bigger we.”

In the Keep the Trees on the Római campaign, the “activist orchestra” represented a balancing act in which the organizer built a functional alignment between larger movement organizations, a neighborhood group, issue experts, and even opposition political forces looking for ways to engage with the campaign. Similarly, the “Not in Our Town” campaign that channeled opposition to Marian Kotleba, the neo-Nazi Governor of the Banska Bystrica region of Slovakia, was an exercise in power building that required the organizer to manage competing agendas

and egos and to align a broad united front of organizations and individuals. And in Romania, we saw that part of an organizer’s work involved navigating tensions between allies when differences in tactical approach flared up.

In all of these instances, the organizers worked through these tensions because they recognized that no one actor was strong enough to win on their own; their assessment of power was that they needed a “bigger we” to win.

**POWER ON THE THIRD FACE: Exercising the power of narrative in our organizing.** Narrative is the tool that organizers use to shape worldview and to define what society believes is possible.

The ways organizers make use of narrative strategies is something that we often don’t discuss when analyzing effective organizing campaigns. But we should. Whether it was a messaging technique to focus on the positive of “saving trees” as a way to frame opposition to a dam project at the Római Banks, or it was a strategic decision to pursue a dual campaign in Gyál for neighborhood street lights while also building a case against corruption in the ruling regime – narrative proved powerful in Hungary.

As various Roma communities came together (joined by solidarity actions from the majority community), the campaign came to be known as “TABITA.” It was a biblical reference and an evocative narrative tool that communicated the power of the local leadership emerging from the Roma community to respond to the public health crisis.

In the campaign that grew out of a grassroots response to COVID in Slovakia, narrative served as a “binding agent.” It provided a common frame to a community’s response to the pandemic, but it also spoke to the deep-seated need for respect inside communities forced to the margin.

**CONCLUSION:**

**THE STORY OF CHANGE**

The practice of “community organizing,” as such, evolved out of various traditions, and the practice of organizing has continued to evolve to this day. Good organizing responds to the time, place, and conditions where it is happening. As an organizer becomes more skilled, one of the things they learn to do is make strategic assessments; the organizer

learns to read the various tendencies and opinions among the active leaders and members of the campaign, they learn to read the actions of their opponents, and they develop the capacity to place it all in a political context.

“Through working on this project, I learned to organize my time and talk to people and get feedback in the best way. [...] For me personally, the research process itself was very inspiring, I met new people, learned a lot of new things about both campaigns, and I always wanted more because I wanted to get as much information as possible to make the research successful.”



**Marija Peric, Serbia on the Move, Serbia**

In this report, we documented organizers and communities in motion. It is a story of change; change in the communities touched by organizing processes, change in the local leaders as they gain a sense of their power, and change in the organizers themselves. This change has motivated us to think critically about our work and adapt our practice, to meet emergent needs, and to respond to the moments of crisis that are increasingly defining the political terrain in which we are all working.

For organizers trying to “look around the corner” of our work, the job today is to read the state of organizing in Europe and to reflect on what shifts may be needed in our organizing practice.

What can be learned from the campaigns that have been run that will inform how organizers think about building power in the future? And how might all of this add up to moving together towards a Long-Term Agenda held collectively by the European organizing movement? Through our research, we hope we have provided some answers, but also opened up new questions. We invite other organizers to join us in this process of building an organizing movement that has the confidence to experiment, make mistakes, learn, and grow more powerful.

**APPENDIX:**

**CASE STUDIES**

**FROM THE FIELD**

# HUNGARY

## BUILDING A REGIONAL

## GRASSROOTS CIVIC

## ALLIANCE IN GYÁL

Hungary has sledded down the slope towards authoritarianism in the last ten years. However, to reoccupy politics and rebuild a democracy that draws on the participation of local people instead of corporations, the country needs strong grassroots organizations which do the transformative work. Eleven Gyál became an inspiration for many in this sense. Within four years, the Hungarian community organization solved a crucial anomaly in public services, disclosed the local dimension of a national corruption issue, and grew to be a unique voice in the small town of Gyál. Bendegúz Tikász, a community organizer in Civil College Foundation (CCF) in Hungary, which provided organizing support for Eleven Gyál, shares his lessons learned about how the organization scaled up its work in the region and helped establish a sister organization, Eleven Vecsés.





Residents of the town of Gyál, outside of Budapest, built a local campaign with national significance. Image credit: Eleven Gyál

In 2016, Andrea Homoki decided to build a community organization in Gyál to represent local people's interests. Gyál is a small town in the metro area of the capital, Budapest. Andrea grew up there. She was well aware of the significant political challenges Hungary was facing. She had earlier been a leader in the struggle around the contemporary representation of the Nazi and Communist past. She aimed to build a strong grassroots organization, but she wanted to elevate its scale beyond the neighborhood.

Andrea started a listening process, and it turned out that residents were the angriest about the lack of appropriate street lighting. Even though the town did a significant overhaul of public lights a year before, in 2015, street lighting became worse than it had been in the past. Eventually, this issue set off the organizing process. A new community organization, Eleven Gyál, emerged and started research into facts. They found that the contractor was a company called Elios, belonging to the son-in-law of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Elios, which carried out the overhaul of street lighting in 35 Hungarian settlements, was in the middle of a vast corruption scandal under investigation by the Hungarian police and the EU's anti-corruption agency. So the group decided to work on both dimensions of the issue. Their goal was to make the city council replace the missing public lights and contribute to the unfolding of the corruption scandal.

Eleven Gyál organized people and resources for this cause. Finally, after a series of direct actions, public hearings, candidate forums, protests, and a legal proceeding, in 2019, the city council unanimously voted to replace the 654 missing public lights, and the authorities disclosed documents on the expenses of the corrupt project. Thus, Eleven Gyál successfully connected a local issue, lousy street lighting, to a national issue, a dysfunctional economy. They did not eliminate corruption in the country, but they had an impact on the political culture of their town. In the long run, they may bring Gyál closer to progressive politics.

These achievements inspired a civic group in a neighboring town to follow Eleven Gyál's footsteps. Eleven Vecsés was established on the ruins of an opposition party's local group in 2018 after former members had reached out to Eleven Gyál for assistance. The two groups were a mutual source of inspiration for each other. Eleven Vecsés benefited from the organizing experience of Gyál. The group in Vecsés, working in a very similar social and political context, started their work with more precise goals and a more effective structure as a result of the exchange. On the other hand, Eleven Gyál, being in the middle of the long public lighting struggle, was reinvigorated by the neighboring group. During the joint meetings, Eleven Vecsés learned the basics of community organizing, such as designing an effective meeting, making decisions collectively, and planning a campaign. As

the organizer of Eleven Vecsés said, “the big difference between organizing and what we previously did is strategic thinking

and structured work. There is room for chit-chat, but we have a long-term plan and follow it through.”

“[The residents of Gyál] are in the middle of building civic infrastructure in the region that may have long-term consequences on regional politics.”

Eleven Gyál and Eleven Vecsés went beyond organizing for a cause. They are in the middle of building civic infrastructure in the region that may have long-term consequences on regional politics. They launched a joint campaign on public transport connecting the two towns, and Eleven Vecsés is also organizing around deteriorating water quality.

Both groups share the vision that the region needs more democratic grassroots groups where people learn how to cooperate for social change.



Local residents testify on the issue of missing streetlights in their city. Image credit: Eleven Gyál

# HUNGARY

**CONDUCTORS OF THE**

**ACTIVIST ORCHESTRA**

**ON THE RÓMAI BANK**

Local communities in Budapest had been in a long fight with the previous mayor over a dam on the Danube Bank. The city council wanted to protect apartments built on a floodplain and raise a dam at the expense of destroying the natural habitat. The construction plans, announced in 2013, triggered fierce civic opposition and set off a long campaign to protect the “Római Bank.” In 2020, the idea of the dam was eventually dismissed by the new city council after the voters had elected a new mayor with an environmental agenda. Various civic groups joined the years-long struggle, bringing in different skills and approaches to social change, including community organizing. Bendegúz Tikász, a community organizer in Civil College Foundation (CCF) in Hungary, which provided organizing support for the campaign, shares what role community organizing played in this rich movement infrastructure.





Over several years, an organizer built a movement to protect a riverside green area in Budapest from city-sponsored destruction. Image credit: Fák a Római

In 2013, the City Council of Budapest announced the building of a dam on Római Bank in 2013, a natural riverbank of the Danube. No public deliberation preceded the decision. The then-mayor, István Tarlós, immediately faced the anger of environmental activists, experts, and local communities because the construction would have destroyed the natural habitat. In response, activists of the organization VALYO – Város és Folyó (or “CIVER - City and River”) mobilized on Facebook. The membership of the new group “Keep the TREES on Római” surged to several thousand. VALYO organized a demonstration with the participation of

2,000 people, which prompted the city leadership to back down. However, in 2016, the city announced a new construction plan emphasizing the protection of local interests. VALYO activists were left with no other choice but to reorganize themselves. This time they came up with a new strategy – they hired a community organizer to involve local people in the struggle. This decision turned out to be crucial. The mobilization moved at so many levels that the campaign needed a “conductor” who helped actors align their interests and keep them in the loop – and this was the role the organizer played.

“This time, they came up with a new strategy – they hired a community organizer to involve local people in the struggle. This decision turned out to be crucial.”

In October 2016, the new construction plan prompted a second protest with the participation of 3,000 people. The infrastructure of “Keep the TREES on Római” had grown to include various

actors. For example, several local groups joined the campaign and took on the brunt of the work. Their leaders had an intimate knowledge of the area and had the highest stake in winning. Experts (engineers,

architects, and environmentalists, some of whom were local) helped make sense of the details of the construction plans and explain it in simple words. In addition, Greenpeace and Védegylet, two environmental organizations, assisted with legal procedures, policy-making, and organizing protests. VALYO was responsible for message framing and media communication and provided immense experience in organizing events and protests. Last but not least, Civil College Foundation provided VALYO with significant financial and professional support to hiring organizers and assigned a mentor who helped both in campaign-related questions and with the emotional setbacks inevitable in an organizing process.

The community organizers' role was crucial to maintain and strengthen this infrastructure. The three organizers working throughout the campaign acted as brokers connecting the dots between different actors. They helped organizations align their goals and strategies and kept local people in the struggle when momentum was about to dissipate. First, they built a stakeholder map and created an activist database that kept track of actors' skills and availability. Then, they started to organize bi-weekly meetings. It took some

time for people to get used to this culture, but regular meetings were essential to building a common platform and achieving that the different organizations reinforce, rather than cancel out, one another's work. Organizers knew people very well, so they also played an essential role in resolving tension among groups. In quiet periods of the campaign, they mobilized groups to organize family events or leisure activities to keep supporters engaged. In moments of escalation, they assigned people to activities and created a list of well-defined tasks to facilitate participation. As one of the interviewees said, "We need a cultural change, and organizing can help in that."

Community organizing contributed to keeping the long campaign on track and their followers engaged. Local groups and their allies organized dozens of community events, demonstrations, and policy talks, issued a local newspaper, produced videos, engaged the media, and came up with an alternative policy proposal to protect the area from floods. As a result, the idea of the dam – together with the previous mayor – was dismissed, and the new mayor, Gergely Karácsony, embraced the alternative civic plan which draws on the expertise, local knowledge and is the result of a deliberative process.



*The movement brought in a broad cross-section of the city's residents, and the community organizer played the role of "conducting the activist orchestra." Image credit: Fák a Rómain*



# POLAND

## ORGANIZING IN THE SILESIAIAN CLIMATE MOVEMENT

In 2018, with international leaders descending on the city of Katowice for the meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, or “COP24,” the Silesian region of Poland experienced a burst of climate-centered activism and organizing. Several initiatives sprung up, making use of a variety of approaches, and active debates over tactics revealed a creative tension between practices associated with “activism” and those of “organizing.” Near the center of much of this activity and debate is the Common Thing Foundation. Led by experienced community organizers, the Common Thing Foundation has been seeking ways to adapt the practice of community organizing to meet the needs and realities of emerging social movements in Poland. Our researcher, Wioleta Hutniczak, is a supporter and volunteer with the Common Thing Foundation.



The period following the COP 24 meeting in Katowice, Poland, witnessed a burst of climate-centered organizing and activism in the region. Image credit: Common Thing Foundation

Poland is Europe's coal heartland, and Silesia is a Polish coal country. Poland ranks 1st and 3rd in the European Union for hard coal, and lignite extraction, respectively,<sup>10</sup> and 74% of the country's energy is still produced by burning fossil fuel, the highest rate of any country in Europe. At the same time, the industry has contracted considerably under long-term global market pressures, as well as more recent EU policies aimed at phasing out coal. Despite this, the industry is still celebrated as the force that rebuilt Poland out of the ashes of WWII, and therefore it holds a historically privileged position in society. Nowhere is this more true than in Silesia, which has traditionally been a battleground in Polish politics, and where miners still hold considerable political influence.<sup>11</sup>

The Silesian Climate Movement emerged from a gathering in January of 2019 out of an initial meeting of approximately 70 participants, out of which an active core of approximately 30 volunteers emerged. The Silesia Climate Movement is a regional organization, quite active in the population hub of Katowice, but with leadership and active members living in 18 different Silesian communities. One of the organizations providing much of the infrastructure for this movement to exist is the Common Thing

Foundation, a growing Katowice-based organization bringing together a staff and volunteer team representing many of the tendencies of the emergent movement. They now have two staff organizers working on various projects in the climate space in Silesia.

The Silesian Climate Movement shares a common manifesto, and they are increasingly unified behind the goal of getting the City of Katowice, the regional commercial and industrial center, to achieve net-zero emissions in the heating of city buildings by 2030 and to decarbonize all branches of the commune's activity by 2050. They have also coordinated successful efforts to apply pressure to the Polish government by enlisting the support of friendly members of the local government and even sympathetic Members of Parliament. However, as our researcher described it in her assessment, "The main rule is that the [Silesia Climate Movement] is not unified, which means that each member has their own idea, their own plan, for what they want to do as the Silesian Climate Movement. It's a networking group that gets an idea, and either it grabs, and people follow you, or it blurs."

10 Bednorz, Jarosław. "SPOŁECZNO-EKOLOGICZNE SKUTKI EKSPLOATACJI WĘGLA KAMIENNEGO W POLSCE." *Górnictwo i Geologia*, 2011.

11 Wiech, Jakub. "The Untouchable Profession: How Poland's Miners Carved Out a Special Status for Themselves." *notesfrompoland.com*, 2020.

Indeed, our research uncovered active tactical debates taking place within the Silesia Climate Movement, which we have assessed as representing a dialectical tension between an “activist” approach to building a local climate movement and an “organizer” approach to the same challenge. These tendencies co-exist – often in still unspoken ways. That being the case, our research also revealed the quiet role that Asia Rippel, the organizer from Common Thing Foundation, played during the period in which the Silesian

Climate Movement went into pandemic lockdown. It was, of course, a period of extreme demobilization for the Silesia Climate Movement. However, Asia consciously played the role of ensuring the group continued to meet throughout the pandemic, even going so far as to visit leaders at home to teach them how to use video conference technology. Targeted leadership development interventions such as this very clearly fall into the category of “organizing.”

“...our research uncovered active tactical debates taking place within the Silesia Climate Movement, which we have assessed as representing a dialectical tension between an “activist” approach to building a local climate movement and an “organizer” approach to the same challenge. These tendencies co-exist – often in still unspoken ways.”

The Common Thing Foundation is now launching an early stage organizing campaign in Ruda Śląska, the town in Silesia with the highest level of coal mining employment in the region. It is also well known that the mine in Ruda Śląska is scheduled to close in the next few years. Common Thing Foundation recently hired an organizer who is engaged in a door-knocking outreach campaign, which is aimed at the next step of the process of convening local residents for a series of initial consultative meetings. Beyond this, the staff at Common Thing Foundation are planning to move from this body of work into a phase where they take collective action, and they are already focusing on the city of Ruda Śląska’s slowness to take effective steps to apply for Just Transition Funds from the EU to support mining communities.

A key challenge — which is also a source of internal tactical debates — is to what degree should efforts be made to engage with coal miners themselves and/or the



Early local protest directed in Silesia. Image credit: Common Thing Foundation

unions representing the people who work in the mines. Miners are told by their employers not to talk to outsiders, and the mining unions represent an organized force seeking to preserve jobs, not decarbonize. Even miners who have been willing to talk in private are still afraid to speak out publicly for fear of losing their jobs. Interestingly, even activists in the climate movement who come from coal mining families do not necessarily agree that it is the role of the climate movement to build bridges to those directly affected by the potential decline of mining jobs. Our researcher categorized this set of dynamics as the “Achilles heel”

of the climate movement in Silesia, and it has in the past not only proven a difficult problem to solve but sometimes also a dangerous one. That all being the case, the organizing in Ruda Śląska is emphasizing trying to untangle this strategic knot, so it will be worth follow-up research to assess if progress is made.

# POLAND

## BUILDING THE POWER OF WOMEN IN CHORZÓW

The Polish city of Chorzów used to be one of the most important industrial centers in the Silesian region, which itself has played an outsized role in the economic strength of Poland. However, over the last two decades, the industrial fortunes of the region have reversed as coal and heavy industries have contracted and shut down. The organizing work documented in this study reflected both a place-based and feminist organizing approach, with the key researcher on the project, Wioleta Hutniczak, asking as the central research question, “How does organizing shape the personal development of women in the Chorzów women’s group?”





*The organizing in Chorzów brought together women who represented a broad ideological spectrum in Poland. Image credit: Common Thing Foundation*

The organizing process in Chorzów started out of a recognition of a problem: representation of women in most of the influential organizations in the area was quite low, despite the fact that demographically there are more women in the region than men. Civil society was quite underdeveloped, with the most influential local group being the fan club of the Ruch Chorzów football team. This, combined with the economic decline of the area, opened up a number of organizing opportunities.

This organizing campaign began on a “green pasture” in the sense that the organizer began outreach in the area using various methods to identify an initial group—

no existing infrastructure or relationships existed. The organizer, Asia Rippel, used as her guide to this work an understanding of the basics of an organizing cycle which included, 1) listening, including through door-to-door outreach and meeting with existing local groups, 2) looking for common issues between different groups, 3) seeking to build a campaign around a shared issue, and 4) building lasting organization led by local leaders. While this was the approach taken, there was unevenness in the outcomes, and to some degree, this organizing effort was only partially realized in the form of a women’s conference organized by the leaders of the initiative. This conference was a successful initial tactic in the sense that it activated a group of local women leaders who remain active to this day.

One of the notable aspects of this organizing project was how the organizer successfully built a local leadership group that crossed boundaries that were otherwise polarizing the broader political discourse in Poland. The researcher noted with fascination that several of the members of the local leadership group openly identified with the Polish Women’s Strike movement, while others openly opposed it. Yet through the organizing process, they were able to find common ground. The participants in this organizing process all shared a sense of common identity as women in this region, with one of the group leaders commenting to our researcher, “We show that you can have different views, but still, we can act together.”

**“One of the notable aspects of this organizing project was the way in which the organizer was successful in building a local leadership group that crossed boundaries that were otherwise polarizing the broader political discourse in Poland.”**

Despite some elements of the diversity of the group, there were holes which the organizer attempted to address. Specifically, the organizer conducted door-to-door outreach in the Chorzów II district of the city, an area whose physical infrastructure is defined by dilapidated buildings and general neglect by city authorities. In the end, however, the organizer was not able to integrate these two sets of concerns with the larger group, and the effort to bring in additional leaders from this district was unsuccessful.

Due to a lack of funding, an organizer is not currently working on this project, but as noted, the group of local leaders does continue to meet and take common actions. They are currently looking at advancing an effort to ask the city government to create a women's affairs commission that advises the city council. Some of the local leaders even have their sights on building political power for women in the region, with one leader of the group telling our researcher, "My goal is to inspire women to act and to go into politics."

# ROMANIA

## COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS

## IN THE MOVEMENT

## FOR LGBT RIGHTS

In 2015, a conservative civic group launched a campaign to ban same-sex marriage in Romania. This prompted a broad pro-LGBT alliance of civil society organizations and political parties to protect LGBT rights. Alexandru Palas, now a community organizer at CeRe, the Resource Center for Public Participation in Romania, participated in this movement through the LGBT organization MozaiQ. In his research, he explored how community organizing contributed to the movement's work with massive leadership development efforts and by strengthening the movement outside the capital.



*In their first protest, members of the Romanian LGBT activists confronted the conservative movement's attack on their community. Image credit: MozaiQ*

Romania is one of the few EU countries which does not allow same-sex marriage or civil union for LGBT couples. In 2015 conservative organizations, under the banner of the Coalition For Family, attempted to further deteriorate the rights of the LGBT community by proposing a referendum for a constitutional amendment to explicitly ban same-sex marriage.

This was the political context in which MozaiQ, a membership-based LGBT organization, was founded. The group emerged after a series of community meetings in the summer of 2015 to improve the quality of life and strengthen the representation of LGBT people, particularly vulnerable groups such as sex workers, people living with HIV, the elderly, and those living precariously. Currently, it has 70 members and is run by a board of seven people.

Even though MozaiQ was initially a self-help group, the course of events prompted it to become more political. In response to the conservative petition drive, its members issued an open letter supporting the LGBT community signed by a thousand celebrities and public figures, and they launched a petition in which 12,000 people

urged the Parliament to protect LGBT rights. They also organized the first public march outside of Pride, and for the first time, introduced a clear political message to a public demonstration of the Romanian LGBT community.

MozaiQ worked to build the capacity of the LGBT movement outside of the capital, Bucharest. Where groups did not exist, MozaiQ supported local activists to form one for the first time. With time, local groups started to cooperate, sharing tactics, and coming up with their strategies. In five years, Romania went from having only a couple of LGBT organizations based in Bucharest to having a dozen LGBT groups and organizations spread out across the country and using different strategies to further LGBT rights.

Within a few years, the struggle had grown into a pro-LGBT alliance of various civic organizations. In June 2017, 110 civil society organizations formed the Respect Platform. MozaiQ's primary goal in this alliance was to increase the visibility and the public participation of the LGBT community and to advance the discussion on LGBT rights in whatever way possible. The organization also made it a priority that the LGBT





*The strategy of lifting up LGBT voices was important to leaders of MozaiQ, and as a result of the referendum campaign, public support for the rights of the LGBT community has increased significantly. Image credit: Robert Stewart*

community should primarily shape the campaign strategy. Therefore, MozaiQ regularly organized community forums and debates to keep the community involved.

This outreach was essential because as the movement grew, the voice of LGBT people diminished. The coordinators of the civic alliance framed the referendum as a democracy and a human rights issue rather than an attack against LGBT people. LGBT rights were rarely explicitly mentioned because of fear that it would agitate homophobic sentiments and may lead to a break-up of the alliance, which included a diversity of organizations with various profiles.

In a snap decision, the vote on the referendum was set in October 2018. The ruling Socialist government (PSD) was widely believed to have called the election to distract from a growing corruption scandal in its ranks. They attempted to favor the referendum's passage by extending the voting period. They also decided against normal electronic monitoring of the vote, raising fear of election fraud. The alliance opposing the referendum called for a boycott of the vote with the goal of denying the referendum the mandatory level of participation while at the same time mobilizing thousands of election observers to cover every precinct in the country.

Local LGBT organizations from across the country joined to support the effort. The coalition succeeded in defeating the petition at the ballot box. In the process of doing so, MozaiQ evolved as an organization. It was forced to grow rapidly beyond its initial scope and means. The members who initially wanted to do small-scale community projects had to develop as leaders, learn about the legal aspects of changing the Constitution, learn and apply community organizing strategies, coordinate large groups of volunteers, develop large communication campaigns and transfer know-how to local groups across the country. The growth rate was at times beyond the resources and capacities of the organization, with many leaders burning out in the process. Still, the lessons learned helped the organization develop more sustainably beyond the referendum.

The referendum also proved to be a huge opportunity for the whole LGBT community. Putting the topic of LGBT rights on the public agenda helped grow the degree of acceptance. This is reflected by recent polls, which show that the percentage of Romanians supporting legal recognition of same-sex relationships more than doubled since 2016, now reaching 43 percent.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Gherasim, Cristian. *Support for Gay Marriage Doubles in Romania*, euroobserver.com, 30 Apr. 2021.



**“In the aftermath of the referendum, there was more trust and support between LGBT, Roma, and feminist groups, leading to more intersectional work.”**

Opposing the referendum led to the consolidation of networks of solidarity between different marginalized groups. Roma organizations and political leaders positioned themselves against the referendum from the start and were staunch allies throughout the campaign. Feminist and disability organizations and various other groups also showed solidarity. Their support made it easier for MozaiQ to engage politicians in public forums. In the aftermath of the referendum, there was more trust and support between LGBT, Roma, and feminist groups, leading to more intersectional work. For MozaiQ, this has translated to having Carmen Gheorghe, the director of e-Romnja, on its board of directors since 2019.

For a few small organizations doing community organizing, it is challenging to prevent a discriminative referendum that is supported by powerful political parties, national institutions, and churches. On the other hand, community organizing can give voice to the voiceless and make people who lost hope believe that they can influence politics if they cooperate. In the case of MozaiQ, it also helped new leaders grow and strengthened networks of organizations. Through their efforts, they have demonstrably shifted the discourse on LGBT rights in Romania.

# ROMANIA

## THE CHALLENGES OF VOLUNTEER-LED ORGANIZING AT THE NEIGHBORHOOD LEVEL

In 2014 a volunteer-led campaign in the Floreasca neighborhood in Bucharest began battling a corrupt development regime to combat an assault on the environment of their community. The organization achieved significant growth and success but also suffered the challenges of being a small-scale project. They confronted catch 22 of being a small initiative looking to become a formalized organization: needing money to be able to raise money. Our researcher, Alex Palas, interviewed both a local leader who worked on the campaign and a funder who provided start-up resources to the effort about the advantages and disadvantages faced by hyper-local, volunteer-run organizing processes.



The organizers' early actions grew the group and also caught the attention of district officials and local developers. Image credit: Floreasca Civica

The Floreasca neighborhood was a planned development started after WWI on the edge of Bucharest. Until the 1990's the spatial development of the neighborhood was well regulated, but after the fall of the Communist regime, an era of unregulated development began. In response, a group of neighbors began meeting to discuss what could be done and launched Initiative Group Floreasca (GIF). The Resource Center for Public Participation (CeRe) began collaborating with the Floreasca group in 2014.

2015 marked the public coming out of Initiative Group Floreasca. After months of early organizing, the group held a public event in a park which brought out 250 people and attracted the attention of public authorities. A representative from the Environmental Department of the District Hall attended, and the group got an invitation for further discussions at the District Hall.

This early growth was not matched by growth in the leadership structure. The organization's blog, Facebook page, and email list were controlled by the original founder of the group. But the group was gaining a sense of momentum, it was focused on the issues, and at the time, it

did not occur to anyone to spend much time focusing on internal structures and power dynamics.

By 2016 the group was getting harder to ignore. They grew the base of the organization by engaging neighbors in a story collection about the district. They fought the development of four office towers and for the preservation of a neighborhood park. They organized a protest march that brought approximately 1,000 people onto the streets. The group was invited to join a working group at the District Hall, and they held another public meeting to continue their outreach to the neighborhood.

This growing success of GIF uncovered simmering tensions. Disagreements over tactics opened up between the group's founder – who preferred an approach of letter writing and legal challenges – and newer members of the group who favored engaging members of the neighborhood in direct action. This tension came to a head when a developer invited the group to a private meeting on the condition that GIF kept the meeting a secret. By the end of 2016, the group had splintered. The group's founder took unilateral action to expel three of the eight core leaders and refused

any attempts at mediation to resolve the conflict. The expelled members eventually decided to form a new organization: Floreasca Civică. This understandably created confusion, but over time Floreasca Civică proved to be the more resilient group.

2019 opened up a new chapter in the neighborhood. The district's urban plan had not been updated since 2000, and that document had opened up many of the loopholes that developers had been exploiting over the years. So when the district announced a process to update their plan, Floreasca Civică swung into action. They distributed 1,000 fliers in the neighborhood, held a public forum, and used digital survey tools to collect input from residents. They built a coalition with other local organizations in the district. As a result, some of Floreasca Civică's proposals made their way into the urban plan, but the document still preserved many of the loopholes that were allowing developers to run roughshod over the neighborhood's green spaces.

The leaders of Floreasca Civică realized they needed to do more. They realized they needed to engage with elected officials earlier in the process. So in the run-up to the 2020 elections, Floreasca Civică, together with other neighborhood

## VINO LA PROTEST!

Spune-ți părerea acum! Altfel, traficul și poluarea ne vor sufoca.

Sâmbătă 23 iunie, la ora 11, spunem **NU** aglomerării imobiliare din cartier. Vino în fața **Halelor Ford**, pe Calea Floreasca 159. Mai multe detalii pe: [facebook.com/floreascaconvica](https://facebook.com/floreascaconvica)



*Neighborhood organizers sprung into action when the city announced plans to open up the district's urban plan for review. Image credit: Floreasca Civică*

organizations around the city, organized a candidate forum to speak with the people running to represent the city. This forum was one of the few events in the campaign where candidates from more than one party showed up, and it was the only event where candidates actually interacted with citizens!

“...in the run-up to the 2020 elections, Floreasca Civică, together with other neighborhood organizations around the city, organized a candidate forum to speak with the people running to represent the city. This forum was one of the few events in the campaign where candidates from more than one party showed up, and it was the only event where candidates actually interacted with citizens!”

Floreasca Civică is still an informal organization, but steps have been taken to prevent the conditions which led to the splintering of its predecessor organization, including a formal decision-making process. Coming out of the pandemic, Floreasca Civică wants to go through a process of evaluation, restructuring, and expansion. All of this has raised the debate within the organization about whether or not to become a formal NGO.

Our interviews revealed a local group with deep ties to the neighborhood, a high degree of flexibility and motivation, as well as an ability to operate as an honest broker with local government officials.

On the other hand, the informal nature of the group also created problems in terms of unclear decision-making, which subjected the group to both internal and external pressures. The group is now evaluating if it wants to become more than an informal initiative, but despite some changes to the Romanian laws governing NGOs, everyone agreed that reaching this next level of their organizational development is incredibly challenging for an organization such as Floreasca Civică, especially given the barriers to raising funds faced by small, local initiatives.

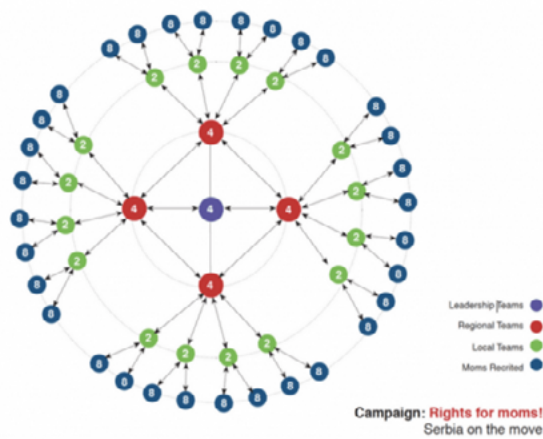


# SERBIA

**RIGHTS FOR MOMS,**

**BRAVO FOR MOMS!**

In Serbia, women on maternity leave received their financial allowance with a 3–6-month delay because the state failed to transfer the funds on time. Serbia On The Move, a center for community organizing in Serbia, launched a campaign in 2014 to remedy this harmful practice. They managed to put enough pressure on the government to guarantee a timely transfer of payments. Marija Peric, a community organizer in Serbia On The Move, explored the organizing strategy that allowed them to recruit more than 200 women with small children into this campaign.



The "snowflake" structure employed by Serbia on the Move to organize mothers in a nationwide campaign to change the law on maternity payments. Image credit: Serbia on the Move

In Serbia, women on maternity leave used to receive their maternity payments from their workplace instead of directly from the state. However, as the state usually started the transfer late, employers paid mothers with small children with a 3–6-month delay. Serbia On The Move decided to put pressure on elected officials to compensate women directly instead of through an intermediary.

Starting in the fall of 2014, they mobilized 250 women (about 200 mothers and 50 allies) to reach out to the 250 MPs in the national assembly. They started with a core team consisting of four members, each responsible for building a group of

four leaders in charge of one of the four regions of Serbia. Each new woman who wanted to get involved in the effort first sat down with someone involved in the campaign for a one-on-one conversation. As participants developed their skills on the campaign, they were asked to take on more responsibility and start coordinating their own small group of women. As the graphic shows, the initial core leaders mobilized 16 regional leaders and engaged 32 local team leaders; altogether, they recruited more than 250 women as activists.

Serbia on the Move kicked off the campaign on March 8, 2014, with an eye-catching action – they hung babies' laundry in public squares and streets in various neighborhoods of Belgrade. They used a mix of "insider" and "outsider" strategies. More than 100 women protested in front of the Parliament or organized a march on the streets of the capital. At the same time, they systematically targeted the 250 elected officials to meet them one-on-one. They sent more than 250 emails, bombarded the office of MPs with mass phone calls, and finally, they managed to schedule personal meetings.

But how could mothers with small children participate in such a demanding campaign? They did so by creating an empowering



Mothers kicked off their campaign with the eye-catching action of hanging baby's clothes throughout Belgrade. Image credit: Serbia on the Move



*The organizers created an empowering environment and a flexible organizing strategy tailored to the needs of women with children. Image credit: Serbia on the Move*

environment and a flexible organizing strategy tailored to the needs of these women. Leaders put a lot of emphasis on building trust. They had built a relationship with potential members through one-on-ones before a new person showed up in a meeting. Meetings took place every week online and were scheduled late at night or early in the morning or sometimes held in play centers. Participation was strongly encouraged to create continuity and accountability. Before each meeting, leaders disseminated the agenda, took minutes, and strictly managed time to keep the one-hour timeframe dedicated to the get-togethers. This disciplined organizing strategy provided a reliable structure that made it easier for busy mothers to participate. Moreover, it enabled the organization to reach a critical mass of 250 members, which proved crucial for the campaign's success.

The fact that women with small children had such a breakthrough shifted their perception of themselves. Mothers are often pushed back to the domestic sphere, in particular, in the first few years after childbirth. This campaign made participating women believe that they have the energy to stand up for themselves and achieve change. When they talked to elected officials, they realized they were working on something big and fighting for all the other mothers in their country. In addition, dozens of women learned new leadership skills, gained confidence, and started their own organizations in their region after the end of the campaign. The "Rights for Moms" not only contributed to drawing women into social struggle but also shaped the perception about the role of women in society.

**“This campaign made participating women believe that they have the energy to stand up for themselves and achieve change. When they talked to elected officials, they realized they were working on something big and fighting for all the other mothers in their country.”**

Overall, this campaign was marked by a high degree of organizational discipline and persistence. Even though MPs first ignored requests for meetings, eventually the balance of power started to tip in the women's favor. As some MPs started to meet with the women, it created pressure on others to do so as well. Before the end of the campaign, MPs were reaching out to leaders of the campaign to meet with them!

And of course, the final measure of the campaign was that the organization won – the women behind “Rights for Moms” achieved that Serbian mothers would receive their maternity subsidies directly from the state budget with no intermediary.

# SERBIA

## PUTTING YOUTH

## IN THE CENTER

One day, a group of young people in the Serbian city of Bor had had enough. They lacked a community space to organize programs and spend their free time creatively. So, in 2017, they launched a campaign to persuade elected officials to turn a city-owned building into a community center. Their actions were crowned with success and changed the perception of local decision-makers about youth. Marija Peric, a community organizer in Serbia On The Move, was a leader in this organizing process. Marija explored their systematic effort at leadership development that allowed them to mobilize a critical number of young people and supporters — and win.





*The organizers built a disciplined campaign and allowed youth to take on leadership roles they were nervous to hold. Image credit: Serbia on the Move*

A group of young people in the city of Bor had many creative ideas about what programs they should organize to spice up local youth life. They had regular meetings in a local organization's office, but they quickly got fed up with being crammed in a small space that could not host the programs they had in mind. Eventually, they

realized they needed a community center. Some pictured the place as a rehearsal room for their bands, some as a library or a training center, while others wanted a space to hang out with friends. So in February 2017, they decided to launch an organizing campaign to get a building from the city council.

**“...youth who were previously glued to their computers became change-makers in their community.”**

In the beginning, they did not have many supporters. Many adults doubted that they could achieve their goals. However, the leaders organized more and more young people into the campaign, which was the key to generating support. The youth elaborated a leadership development system to recruit new activists and keep them engaged. They created teams in which leaders motivated and trained members to become leaders. Those who excelled could found their own teams. This way, they built a creative learning space that eventually inspired about 300 young people to join the campaign. They could try themselves out in various roles, such as organizers, trainers, or negotiators. As the leaders described, many of them were

initially anxious about speaking in public, but they overcame their anxiety in this empowering atmosphere. In other cases, youth who were previously glued to their computers became change-makers in their community.

They followed a disciplined organizing process. Teams had at least one meeting per week, which took place in person and included some time to socialize. The goal was to organize at least one action per week to keep the issue on the agenda. This was usually a public action where youth talked to citizens about the community space or had a personal meeting with an elected official. One of the most spectacular actions happened when 100

young activists marched to the city hall and submitted a petition with 5,000 signatures in favor of the center. Leaders had one-on-ones with potential new members of the campaign before joining the team in order to get to know them and explain how the team operates. An agenda was circulated before each meeting, and minutes were taken. They started and finished on time, and participation was strongly encouraged to create a coherent group culture.

As the leaders themselves described, their growing number and persistent outreach to decision-makers helped them show that they are committed to run their community center. The regular personal meetings with elected officials earned respect for the youth and built trust between them and the officials. As a result, a little after one year of campaigning, in March 2018, they received an old building in the city center, which now serves as a community center for the youth of Bor.

# SLOVAKIA

## THE TABITA CAMPAIGN

## FOR ROMA POWER

## IN SLOVAKIA

The Center for Community Organizing (CKO) in the Banská Bystrica region of Slovakia has existed for over twenty years. The organization originally got its start working in lower-middle-class neighborhoods, but over time has moved more and more into work with marginalized communities. Our researcher, Maroš Chmelik, is the director of CKO. Here he examines how long-term investments made in building relationships within communities on the margin of society paid off in the moment of acute crisis presented by the COVID pandemic. It was at times a messy process, but ultimately this organizing story is one of hope, empowerment, and community resilience in the face of crisis.



*At the beginning of the pandemic crisis, community organizers served as first responders within some Slovak Roma communities. Image credit: Center for Community Organizing*

The Banská Bystrica region is one of the poorest of Slovakia's eight regions. It is also a part of the country with one of the highest concentrations of Roma communities. In fact, according to 2013 statistics<sup>13</sup>, just under a quarter of the Roma communities located in the entire country are found in this one region. The area also carries the recent memory of a political crisis. In 2013, Marian Kotleba, the leader of a neo-Nazi party, won the election as the regional governor in an election result that shocked the country. He did so by explicitly running against the region's Roma communities and the people who live there.

In 2017, CKO played a central role in the broad community mobilization that came together to unseat Kotleba. This victory accelerated a process in which CKO was asking itself questions about its mission and direction. For the first many years of its existence, CKO tended to organize lower-middle-class communities. This was valuable work, and their track record and relationships built over time ensured that CKO was seen as a natural convener of local civil society forces to oppose Kotleba's reelection campaign. They even played the role of local power broker between the

competing opposition parties to ensure a united front against the neo-Nazis on the ballot. However, this campaign left CKO wanting more – and so their journey of building relationships and capacity with more marginalized communities began to deepen.

The ability of CKO to adjust their work and build power in Roma communities can be summed up like this: organizational commitment + the right personnel + time. The role of the organizer in driving community organizing processes is once again observable; in 2014, CKO hired Jolana Nátherová, a Roma woman who was trained as a social worker. She learned the craft of organizing on the job at CKO. Over several years she built trust and led the effort to create a Roma women's leadership group in the community of Cementárska. Together this local leadership group organized around collecting stories and improving local education, housing, and hygiene. They also played a key role in the community's response to the COVID crisis.

In 2020 CKO also tried something new: they hired an organizer to work with religious communities. Ondrej Druga started work just as the pandemic was moving everyone to lockdown, and he quickly began working with his colleague Jolana to support CKO's work in the community of Cementárska. Meanwhile, he was also devoting his energies to building the Banská Bystrica Christian Platform. Over several months he met with sixty different people in various faith communities, and by December of that year, he had organized a core leadership group for the initiative consisting of 15 people, including three clergies – a Catholic and Evangelical priest and a preacher of the Baptist Church.

A synthesis of these two streams of CKO's new approaches to organizing work emerged from the COVID crisis. The

<sup>13</sup> Mušinka, Alexander, et al. "ATLAS Rómskych Komunit Na Slovensku 2013." [ia.gov.sk](http://ia.gov.sk), 2014.



pandemic hit Roma communities hard. Cut off from even basic information – let alone services – communities like Cementárenská were particularly vulnerable to the disease and the disruptions it was creating. Jolana and the other organizers from CKO did

not turn away. They rather took on the character of first responders in the crisis. They felt that their years of relationship building and trust were on the line based on how they showed up at this moment.

“TABITA represents the system that died during the crisis. All of a sudden, the community needed to find their own TABITAs either from the Roma community or from the majority community. And they managed to find many TABITAs. They created a solidarity network that still exists.”

The role that CKO played in supporting local leaders within the Roma community combined with the ways in which they organized solidarity from the majority community – particularly the religious community. This effort came to be known as the TABITA campaign. It was a biblical reference to the story of the servant sewing clothes. When she died, others realized that there was no one who would do the work for them, and they would need to do it themselves. As our researcher put

it, “TABITA represents the system that died during the crisis. All of a sudden, the community needed to find their own TABITAs either from the Roma community or from the majority community. And they managed to find many TABITAs. They created a solidarity network that still exists. And that is because of the strong leadership base and sensitive organizing effort.”



*Jolana Nátherová trained as a social worker, but over the years, she learned community organizing on the job at the Center for Community Organizing in Slovakia. Image credit: Nie v našom meste*



Organizing is always a balancing act, and the organizers in the TABITA campaign learned that they needed to balance a number of different community interventions at the same time. Some of these interventions were of the first responder or mutual aid variety. They were built on the foundation of years of education, advocacy, providing services, solidarity actions, and community development. But for CKO, it all came back to community organizing. The work that was done in the TABITA campaign was ultimately not just about the material results; it was about the ways in which the organizing process gave people hope and a sense of dignity.

Local leaders developed a sense of their power, and this is the beginning of more expansive organizing in the future. CKO is now asking themselves how to move from organizing community by community towards supporting multiple Roma communities to build a sense of collective power in the region. Out of this crisis, they have strengthened the foundation for this work.

# SLOVAKIA

## **FORGING A NEW APPROACH TO ORGANIZING THROUGH STRUGGLE AND CRISIS**

The Center for Community Organizing (CKO) in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia is a pioneer of community organizing in the Central and Eastern European region and one of the oldest organizing initiatives in Europe. Over the 22 years of their existence, they have built a dense network of relationships which have allowed them to build a durable reputation and to effectively respond in moments of crisis. Over the years, CKO has also been engaged in a back-and-forth dialogue with organizers in the United States, which has been characterized by moments of learning, adopting, and evolving practices to meet the particular conditions of their work. Our researcher, Maroš Chmelik, is the director of CKO, and the story of organizational evolution he documents in this case study in many ways mirrors the evolution of many organizing initiatives in Europe.



CKO played a central role in the regional mobilization against the neo-Nazi governor of the Banská Bystrica region of Slovakia. It was not clear at the time, but CKO organizers cite this now as a key turning point in the organization's history. Image credit: Nie v našom meste

The Center for Community Organizing was founded in the late 1990's as part of the wave of new NGOs that took root aimed at fostering a broad notion of "citizen participation" in post-Communist societies. Community organizing at the time was seen as an approach that could be useful in helping activate local communities, and as such, the method used by CKO in its early years was one of the neighborhood-based organizing campaigns aimed at addressing local issues. The social base for this work was generally centered on lower-middle-class communities living in high-rise settlements in and around Banská Bystrica.

Early campaigns from this era of CKO's history included fights over local parks and neighborhood development. Interestingly, the seeds of the idea of more ambitious trans-national campaigning were present even then, especially in the case of a campaign against the development of a new Shell gas station in a local neighborhood. In that campaign, the organizers were able to lean on proto-international networks that were forming (one of which came to be formalized at the European Community Organizing Network) to enlist support for the campaign. Solidarity actions at other Shell locations in Europe were also organized.

These early campaigns established the credibility of CKO in the Banská Bystrica region, and helped them build relationships with local leaders. CKO estimates that in its first decade, it ran 15 local campaigns and identified and developed over 100 leaders tied to these specific campaigns. It also estimates that of this group approximately 10% of those leaders developed a sense of deep loyalty to CKO as an organization – a fact that would prove quite important as the organization launched into the next era of its evolution.

A political crisis jolted CKO into a new way of approaching its work. At the time, it was not completely evident, but through the process of reflection, CKO has come to realize that the turning point for their organization came in 2013 when Marian Kotleba, a leader of an openly neo-Nazi party, won his election to become the regional governor of the Banská Bystrica region. This crisis happened to correspond with a period in which many of the local groups that CKO had helped organize were becoming able to stand on their own. It was at this time that CKO also founded a new initiative called Not In Our Town to create a platform for local residents to resist the radical right extremism represented by their new government.



*The team of the Center for Community Organizing in Slovakia, one of the oldest community organizing groups in Europe. Image credit: Center for Community Organizing*

CKO had built trust with its base during its time of neighborhood campaigning, which positioned the organization to effectively transition into this new stance. By 2017, when Marian Kotleba was up for reelection, CKO found itself playing the lead convening role of a region-wide mobilization of civil society forces to lead a voter education and turnout campaign. Their efforts were as successful as they were impressive: Kotleba lost his election, and voter turnout in the district soared, increasing from 24,6% the year Kotleba was elected to 40,3% in 2017.

From its beginning, CKO has been engaged in a dialogical relationship with organizers in the United States. Its earliest approaches to organizing were learned from the US experience but then adapted to the time, place, and conditions of Slovakia in the 1990's and early 2000's. The idea of creating a platform called Not In Our Town was modeled after a similar initiative against the radical right in the United States, but then the organizers in Slovakia built on this effort to lead ambitious political interventions. And in the current period, they are looking at the ways in which organizers in the US have built anti-racist practice into their work to ground neighborhood-based organizing in a stronger social justice framework. This pattern of learning, adopting, and evolving organizing approaches from the United

States (which is still seen by many as the "home" of community organizing) has been an ongoing one, and it again mirrors some of the ways in which the field of community organizing in Europe has been evolving and changing.

"Slowing down" is not something that community organizers are always very good at doing. In an effort to ensure that their organizing vision remains vivid and tackles the current challenges in society, organizers move with urgency and sometimes get caught in a cycle of looking "for the next big thing." However, our research on this case study revealed the way in which taking time to reflect has strengthened CKO's practice and sharpened its future orientation. Besides engaging in this participatory action research project, CKO also hired an external facilitator to support the organization in reflecting on its past and charting its work in the next period. The tension between the "old" CKO and the "new" can be felt here. Its founding in very local campaigns can feel like a pull against their desire to take a broader "social justice" approach to organizing. These are tensions not unique to CKO, but our research showed the ways in which CKO is actively and openly wrestling with them.



“CKO is moving into the next phase of their work guided by some new strategic orientations including a commitment to remain a grassroots-powered organization and consciously adopting a social justice and human rights frame to the work. What this means in practice is that they are committing to pushing their local leaders – many of whom did not come to the organization out of a broad notion toward ‘social justice,’ but rather out of concerns about their neighborhood.”

CKO is moving into the next phase of their work guided by some new strategic orientations, including a commitment to remain a grassroots-powered organization, and consciously adopting a social justice and human rights frame to the work. What this means in practice is that they are committing to pushing their local leaders – many of whom did not come to the organization out of a broad notion toward “social justice,” but rather out of concerns about their neighborhood.

CKO will inject issues of social justice into the work with their local leaders, and they are planning to include a dismantling racism curriculum in all of their community organizing work. CKO is clear that their mission is stable but not everlasting and that the core of their work is people – which makes the work a never-ending challenge. But by putting in the work with their people, the CKO of the future sees itself as doing the work to prepare for the next time conditions in society demand it of them.



# THE RESEARCH PROCESS

## AND TEAM

### **Outline of the research process**

We formed the research team in March 2020. Organizers were delegated by their organizations based on a set of criteria compiled by the coordinator. The research team received induction training in May, where members learned about participatory action research. We also agreed on goals. We decided to provide a more analytical account of two organizing stories per country and use this research as a learning opportunity to improve our practice. We paid attention to bridge the potential communication gap between the research team and the organizations they were representing from early on. Therefore, we encouraged team members to ask their organizations to suggest a few organizing processes that they want to understand more deeply, out of which we could choose two for the research.

In June 2020, we discussed all the stories, deliberated possible research angles, and collectively decided which two stories per

country team members would explore. We finalized the research agenda after the national organizations had approved our decisions. In the fall of 2020, the team received two training sessions on basic research skills, focusing on interviewing skills and analysis of findings. Researchers then drafted their work plans, and during the research process, they received feedback from and had regular consultations with the coordinator. We left four months (or sometimes more) for data collection and writing up the research reports. Researchers conducted three to six interviews per organizing process, analyzed the interviews, and distilled their findings following a set of guidelines.

Finally, in June 2021, we held a concluding meeting where we evaluated the research process, summarized the lessons learned, and deliberated what each researcher would do to turn the results into action.

### **From learning to action**

We hope to have created a learning space where organizers could improve their analytical thinking and apply it to their organizing practice. In other words, we aimed to contribute to organizer praxis.

On the other hand, we struggled with our main challenge in general: a scarcity of time for analysis and learning. It took a lot of effort from the team members to commit enough time to conduct the research and

write their analysis. Even though the project had a timespan of one-and-a-half years, the participatory action research process was condensed into four meetings, two training sessions, several one-to-one consultations, and a few months of intensive data collection and writing.

During our meetings, we laid the groundwork for an organizing culture where we learn about and critically reflect

on each other's work. With its primary focus on personal development, however, participatory action research has its limitations. Researchers unearthed their stories and built institutional memory, but they did not carry out an extensive analysis of what other factors played a crucial role in the win besides organizing. Our current capacity did not allow us to deeply analyze the narrative climate or to elaborate the role of allies, to mention a few. We only looked at the effect of inputs most closely related to organizing. Our stories should be read with this caveat.

To ensure that the learnings from this participatory action research project are integrated back into the work of European organizers, we will share this document with key actors within the countries where this research took place. We hope the contents of this study could serve as the grounds for future organizer seminars. What's more, the geographic reach of this study is focused on organizing initiatives in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, but the European organizing sector is broader than that. There already exist ties of communication and collaboration between these regions and other parts of Europe. We believe that the material from this research project could be used as fodder for a broader discussion that serves to drive deeper strategic alignment across the entirety of the European organizing movement.

Finally, we should note that we were conducting our research in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, so we had to transfer the project online right from the beginning. Luckily, we all knew each other; therefore, we could deepen trust and have meaningful discussions despite the lack of personal meetings. At the same time, all of us had to face smaller or bigger challenges due to the coronavirus, personally and in our work. Prompted by the global crisis, one of our researchers decided to explore the difficulties of organizing during the pandemic, so the hardships of the present became the subject of his research. We are thankful that this project was a source of support and hope for many of us during these challenging times.

# THE RESEARCH TEAM



**Alexandru Palas** is a community organizer and trainer, passionate about social justice and lifelong learning. He has worked with the Resource Center for

Public Participation (CeRe) in Romania since 2019. There he coordinates international exchanges and training programs, works as a community organizer with homeless people, and documents the campaigns of groups and organizations that have collaborated with CeRe on different projects. Alexandru is an alumnus of the Professional Fellows Program, and before working with CeRe, he served on the board of directors for MozaiQ LGBT Association. He studied Computer Science and in his free time, he enjoys playing tennis.



**Bernadett Sebály** is a community organizer, trainer, and mentor from Hungary. She has a degree in communications, cultural

anthropology, and public policy. She currently studies at Central European University's Doctoral School of Political Science, Public Policy, and International Relations. She is the editor of the book titled *The Society of Power or the Power of Society? The Basics of Community Organizing*, a compilation of studies of American academics, and the author of

many articles. Previously, she worked for seven years in international civil rights organizations as a campaign coordinator and press officer. She gained her experience in community organizing as a member of The City is for All, an organization of homeless people and their allies, where she was an activist between 2009-2017. Based on this experience, she helped design and build a community organizing program in Hungary with the Civil College Foundation, where she worked as a trainer and mentor for five years. Her goal is to link the worlds of activism, civil society organizations, and academia in a way that is fruitful for all.



**Gáspár Bendegúz Tikász** is a community organizer, mentor, and trainer. He did his studies in philosophy at the University of Debrecen in

Hungary. His research field is political philosophy, especially how the market and market logic affect social goods and society as a whole. He has been an active community member since 2015 and a full-time organizer since 2018. He first worked in Debrecen for the Alternative Communities Association and Natív, and today he is a member of System Level, the national organizer group of Civil College Foundation, from Pécs.



**Marija Peric** is a youth organizer with Serbia on the Move, and she has also worked as the Youth Office coordinator of the city of Bor.

Before that, she was the president of the civil society organization called House of Youth Bor, where she coordinated volunteers and youth projects, as well as reported on the work of the organization.



**Steve Hughes** has over 20 years of experience working as a community, union, and political organizer in both the United States and Europe. He

currently lives in Prague and works on several trans-European and transatlantic organizing initiatives. Tracing his roots to the US labor movement, he made the transition to political organizing in 2010 when he went to work for the Working Families Party (WFP). In 2014 he moved to Europe, but he continues to support US-based organizing at the WFP and has also taken a leadership role in developing the European Community Organizing Network, a hub for the community organizing sector in Europe. He has developed a community of practice with the organizers and movement educators of the Grassroots Policy Project, a movement support organization founded with the goal of shifting community organizing practice towards less-siloed, more transformative approaches. In this role, he serves as a link between the US and European organizing sectors.



**Maroš Chmelík** is a graduate of the Political Science of the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen. He has completed internships in

Spain, Syria, and the USA. Nine years ago, he returned from abroad to Slovakia, and since then, he has been working in the non-governmental sector in Banská Bystrica. Currently, he is the head of the Center for Community Organizing (CKO), which focuses primarily on topics such as civic engagement through community organizing and the prevention of violent extremism and radicalization. His expertise consists in setting up comprehensive and strategic interventions for the prevention of violent extremism and radicalization aimed at working with front-line practitioners, such as community workers, teachers, police, etc. Since 2020 he has been working closely with the Slovak Ministry of Interior to develop the national preventing violent extremism (PVE) agenda as part of the Committee on the Prevention and Elimination of Racism. In his spare time, Maroš likes sports, traveling, mountains, taking care of his small bookstore Artforum together with other friends. He tries to spend as much time as possible with his partner and pets – a dog Tino and cat Mia.



**Wioleta Hutniczak** runs proactive interventions aimed at sustainable engagement projects. She is a facilitator and mentor with a

broad history of working in education. She cooperated with Polish Humanitarian Action, Global Education Network Of Young Europeans, Common Thing Foundation and many more. She used to be a community organizer and the project “Story of Change” is a beautiful ending of her story with community organizing.





Published by  
**European Community Organizing Network (ECON)**

*ECON is a network of progressive movements, organizations, and groups engaged in community organizing in Europe towards social and environmental justice. ECON enables them to build people power, organizing capacity, strengthen international solidarity, and support the sustainability of the community organizing sector.*

**[www.organizeeurope.org](http://www.organizeeurope.org)**

2021