

Citizens' forums driving decarbonisation in central and eastern Europe

Lessons in public participation



Experts from the State Geological Institute present an unused geothermal well to residents of nearby apartment buildings (photo: Martin Guniš).

This briefing is part of the EU's LIFE RePower the Regions project.¹ It focuses on just transition regions in nine countries currently phasing out coal (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine), oil shale (Estonia) and peat (Latvia). These regions have been selected for their unique socio-economic contexts and the initiative they have already shown in driving the energy transformation across central and eastern Europe.

Decarbonisation planning is demanding not only due to its technical complexity, but also because of its social implications. Decisions regarding heating systems,

¹ 'RePower the Regions: Ambitious and inclusive clean energy plans for repowering the just transition regions' is an EU LIFE-funded project designed to accelerate decarbonisation in central and eastern Europe. The project is coordinated by CEE Bankwatch Network and implemented across nine countries through its national member organisations: Za Zemiata (Bulgaria); Centre for Transport and Energy (Czech Republic); Estonian Green Movement (Estonia); National Society of Conservationists (Hungary), Green Liberty (Latvia); Polish Green Network (Poland), Bankwatch Romania Association (Romania), (Centre for Environmental Public Advocacy (Slovakia); and Ecoaction (Ukraine).

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transport, infrastructure, land use, and public investment directly affect everyday life, often raising questions about affordability, fairness and institutional trust.

To address these challenges, citizens' forums offer structured, participatory platforms that bring residents and public officials together to discuss, debate and provide input on local policy decisions. They serve as a two-way communication channel, enabling public monitoring of services while fostering collaboration between citizens, non-governmental organisations and decision makers.

Across nine countries in central and eastern Europe, citizens' forums have been tested as practical tools for involving local voices in decisions regarding decarbonisation, and to ensure that planning processes are guided by lived realities on the ground. This briefing also offers insights for other regions, municipalities and organisations considering similar participatory approaches. It draws on concrete experiences from each country and concludes with an evidence-based evaluation of the lessons learned along with recommendations based on successful and unsuccessful practices.

Bulgaria

A citizens' forum held in Sofia on 27 June 2025 demonstrated the value of creating space for pluralistic debate in a country where public discussion on energy policy is often constrained.² Bringing together scientists, experts, journalists, and members of civil society alongside representatives of the Ministry of Energy and the European Commission, the forums enabled open discussion of alternative perspectives on nuclear energy and large-scale infrastructure projects.

A key outcome of the forum was the presentation of scientific, economic and technical assessments indicating that decarbonisation does not necessarily require costly new nuclear power plants or energy 'mega-projects'. Instead, the sessions provided citizens with different viewpoints on decarbonisation pathways, broadening the public debate on the energy transition.

The forum led to concrete recommendations, including making access to renewable energy easier for citizens and energy cooperatives and halting large-scale energy projects. Additionally, the presence of institutional representatives from the Ministry of Energy and the Representation of the European Commission in Sofia provided citizens with the opportunity to convey these recommendations directly, making their input more than just symbolic.

The legitimacy of the process was further strengthened by the quality of the presentations delivered, the inclusion of expert speakers, online streaming access, and background information materials. Overall, the experience demonstrated the effectiveness of citizens' forums in opening up closed or polarised debates, provided they are well prepared and anchored in formal policy processes.

² Todor Todorov, [Discussion: Playing The Nuclear Card In The Energy Transition – is there a need for new nuclear power in Bulgaria?](#), Za Zemiata, 28 July 2025.

Czech Republic

A citizens' forum held in Prague on 21 October 2025 brought together municipalities, public officials, experts, and members of civil society to discuss energy efficiency and evidence-based policymaking. Discussions primarily focused on local energy management and implementation of the EU's Energy Efficiency Directive.

The results of these discussions highlighted the need for stable policy frameworks, predictable funding, and stronger coordination between national and local authorities. A key takeaway was that energy savings are not only an environmental concern, but also an economic necessity. Every kilowatt-hour saved reduces expenditure from municipal budgets, freeing up resources for other priorities such as schools, transport and housing.

Participants agreed that predictable support schemes, sufficient administrative capacity, and sharing knowledge between municipalities are essential for meeting the Directive's objectives. Among the other key priorities identified were the need to improve communication between central and local government, provide targeted support for regions and regional centres, and adjust subsidy and accounting rules to enable long-term municipal investment in energy savings.

Municipalities that systematically manage their energy consumption can achieve lasting financial savings while contributing to reduced emissions and greater energy security. However, this requires a stable and transparent national policy framework to enable local authorities to invest with confidence.

The experience shows that citizens' forums are highly adaptable and can be effectively used to strengthen governance capacity. However, a key observation was that these formats are easier to implement in capital and larger cities, where established networks already exist. This disparity underlines the importance of strong local partnerships for replication in peripheral areas with less resources.

Estonia

The Estonian experience highlights how strongly participation depends on local context and cultural relevance. An initial forum, due to be held in Jõhvi – a town in Ida-Viru County in north-eastern Estonia – was cancelled due to low turnout, despite well-prepared content.

Building on this experience, a second forum – held on 6 September 2025 in the north-eastern city of Narva – was redesigned to coincide with a cultural festival organised in cooperation with local community groups.³ Its success can be attributed to the merging of technical topics with discussions around local ways

³ Ekaterina Konakova, „Почему не приезжаю чаще?": гости фестиваля Station Narva в восторге от приграничного города, Delfi, 7 September 2025.

of living, community and art, while also introducing participants to a part of the country often isolated from public engagement.

The discussion of energy communities was particularly useful for sharing expert perspectives and knowledge with participants, giving them a more realistic understanding of where and how these communities can best function. Framing energy-related issues in the context of community life, local identity and everyday life made the engagement more relevant and engaging for participants.

The event demonstrates that citizens' forums must adapt to local social dynamics and should not rely solely on formal consultation formats, especially in regions with a weak history of civic participation.

Hungary

On 6 June 2025, a citizens' forum on community energy took place in the north-eastern city of Miskolc. The event led to high-quality discussions, concrete proposals and new connections between participants, particularly on the topic of community energy in apartment buildings. Participants appreciated the opportunity to explore the practicalities and feasibility of shared electricity and heating projects, reflecting on how such initiatives could respond to local needs. The forum also contributed to increasing knowledge on the topic and provided participants with space to exchange ideas on electricity- and heat-sharing models.

Despite strong outreach efforts, however, mobilisation proved challenging. This illustrates a recurring issue: even well-designed forums can still struggle to attract broad participation in contexts where civic engagement is limited or where citizens doubt that their engagement will lead to tangible outcomes. The experience suggests that citizens' forums must be embedded in longer-term, trust-building efforts and visibly supported by public institutions to be effective.

Latvia

The Latvian experience demonstrates how participation outcomes can differ depending on the local context and level of institutional support. Two citizens' forums were held in Latvia: one on 12 June 2024 in the south-eastern city of Daugavpils⁴ and the other on 18 September 2024 in Rēzekne⁵, a municipality located in the eastern Latgale region near the Russian border.

The forum held in Daugavpils, where traditions of civic participation are limited, was largely perceived by residents as an externally driven initiative, hindering mobilisation efforts. Nevertheless, the event proved useful in gathering the perspectives of citizens on the current state of cycling infrastructure in the city. Their

⁴ Green Liberty, [Pasākums: vai Daugavpils var kļūt par velobraucēju galvaspilsētu?](#), 6 June 2024.

⁵ Green Liberty, [Transporta nabadzība un zaļā pāreja: iedzīvotāji Viļānos aktualizē mobilitātes problēmas un dažādus risinājumus](#), 24 September 2024.

input on what they view as the key challenges, and the improvements they would like to see implemented, was subsequently used to develop a cycling infrastructure roadmap for the city.

In Rēzekne, where the forum was organised in close cooperation with a local citizens' advisory board, engagement was significantly stronger and discussions more substantive. The meeting generated valuable insights into mobility planning, and helped raise awareness about future mobility challenges linked to the introduction of the second revision of the EU's Emissions Trading System, along with potential policy solutions. Importantly, the discussion encouraged members of the local community to self-organise in an effort to address these mobility issues as a collective.

The experience shows that citizens' forums are most effective when they are organised in partnership with trusted local institutions rather than being introduced as stand-alone external events. Additionally, collaboration with active local groups not only increases attendance, but also deepens the quality of dialogue and encourages a sense of ownership around the issues discussed.

Poland

A citizens' forum held on 22 September 2025 in Kleczew – a town 90 kilometres north of Poznań – focused on practical questions related to energy transition support schemes for households. The audience expressed particular interest in obtaining information on how to reduce their domestic energy bills and get the most out of these schemes – clearly, a topic of pressing concern for local residents.

The case demonstrates that forums which address real-world, local concerns are more effective at engaging participants than those centred on abstract policy discussions. It also shows the value of active municipal involvement, which helps to foster trust in these events and increase overall visibility.

Romania

A citizens' forum held on 13 December 2025 in Petroșani, a former coal-mining city in Jiu Valley in south-western Hunedoara County, took a more structured, deliberative approach. Using stratified random sampling to ensure a socially diverse group of participants, the forum provided a highly inclusive and legitimate space to discuss pressing challenges related to energy poverty and the heating transition.

Participants were introduced to the concept of energy poverty, including definitions, manifestations, social effects, and illustrative case studies. They also learned about some of the immediate and long-term measures to address it. These include individual solutions (such as energy efficiency schemes and vouchers), public measures (including caps and social tariffs), and broader strategies such as green investments, renovation policies, and energy communities.

Participants also talked about their experiences with public administration and the bottlenecks they face in accessing support. Attendees expressed their appreciation for having the opportunity to share their concerns and explore potential solutions. The results of the forum – expected to include concrete, feasible,

and context-specific recommendations – will be presented in a detailed report scheduled for release in the coming months.

As this case shows, citizens' forums have the potential to adapt just-transition project proposals to the real needs, constraints, and priorities of affected communities, while direct, structured dialogue helps to increase the relevance, legitimacy, and social acceptance of the measures proposed.

Though the approach to this particular citizens' forum required substantial organisational effort and resources, including targeted recruitment and incentives, the experience suggests that deliberative models offer increased democratic value, but only when they are carefully planned and linked to real policy outcomes.

Slovakia

A citizens' forum held on 6 June 2025 in Partizánske, a town in the Trenčín region of western Slovakia, involved a series of thematic events aimed at different audiences, including students and residents directly affected by several proposed changes to the local district heating system.

Local residents play a crucial role in the decarbonisation of district heating systems. As both end users and paying customers of municipal services, they have a vested interest in ensuring that the transition to low-carbon solutions is efficient, transparent, and responsive to their needs.

They also have significant potential to influence heat consumption – both individually through household behaviour and collectively through the responsible management of residential buildings. This is what makes their involvement in the early stages of project planning so essential, particularly when it comes to increasing public understanding and awareness in support of the clean-energy transition.

Findings from a social research study supporting the town's decarbonisation efforts⁶ indicate that residents aspire to see their city become a leader in innovative solutions, with the heating sector presenting an ideal opportunity to fulfil this ambition by becoming a trend-setter in sustainable and modern approaches to energy.

The forum was also particularly valuable for raising awareness and building longer-term partnerships, with a local vocational school now newly involved. It also shows that citizens more readily engage with topics that are tangible and relatable – such as those concerning public spaces or community impacts – than with highly technical discussions, underscoring the importance of translating complex decarbonisation issues into everyday language and experiences.

⁶ Pavel Bors, Marta Kahancová, Matúš Sloboda, [Sociálny výskum – Podpora dekarbonizácie v meste Partizánske](#), Život po uhlí, 28 June 2024.

Ukraine

On 11 December 2025, a citizens' forum focused on the just transition was held in Kyiv, bringing together community representatives from coal and other carbon-intensive regions alongside government authorities and civil society.⁷ The event functioned as a platform for stakeholders from different regions and across governance levels to engage in dialogue, coordination and agenda-setting, helping to clarify shared challenges, identify gaps in the execution of the just transition, and create new connections between communities.

Discussions focused on the importance of continuing to implement just transition measures in coal regions, the potential expansion of these measures to other carbon-intensive regions, and reviewing the available financial resources and existing funding shortfalls. Participants gained a better understanding of the significant challenges communities face in navigating the just transition, how other industrial communities fit into the just transition framework, and the pitfalls and opportunities involved in financing community projects.

The event demonstrated how structured, multi-stakeholder dialogue can strengthen understanding around the just transition, build networks among affected communities, and inform national discussions.

Lessons learned

The nine citizens' forums discussed in this briefing demonstrate that meaningful participation does not occur automatically. In several countries, low turnout reflected deeper structural challenges, including weak civic traditions, low trust in institutions, and general scepticism about the impact of public engagement. While citizens' forums alone cannot resolve these issues, when carefully planned and organised they can contribute to rebuilding trust over time.

Forums proved significantly more effective when embedded in existing local support networks. While forums organised in partnership with trusted local groups led to increased participation and more in-depth discussions, forums perceived as externally imposed resulted in poor attendance. In this context, local partnership should be considered a foundational principle when organising citizens' forums, not an optional extra.

Relevant content also emerged as a decisive factor. The forums in Slovakia and Romania, which focused on concrete, everyday issues – such as household energy costs, mobility challenges, or neighbourhood impacts – generated far more engagement than those centred on abstract strategies. This underlines the importance of grounding decarbonisation discussions in lived experiences.

⁷ Ecoaction, [How to ensure just transition for carbon intensive regions of Ukraine: highlights from the fourth annual forum in Kyiv](#), 12 December 2025.

Institutional presence proved equally important. Where public authorities participated visibly, like in Bulgaria or the Narva forum in Estonia, these forums gained legitimacy by giving participants a greater sense of ownership of the decision-making process. Where authorities were absent, engagement felt more symbolic. Citizens' forums are therefore most effective when they complement, rather than attempt to replace, formal governance structures.

Finally, all experiences point to the limitation of one-off events. Meaningful participation emerges over time through repeated interaction, visible responsiveness and sustained relationship-building. The citizens' forums held in Latvia and Hungary provide good examples of these effects. Citizens' forums should therefore be understood as elements of longer participatory trajectories rather than as isolated activities.

Recommendations for other regions

Regions wishing to implement similar citizens' forums should begin by investing in partnerships before designing formats. Identifying and engaging trusted local groups, such as community organisations, schools, informal groups, cultural institutions and municipal departments – significantly increases legitimacy and participation.

Forums should be clearly linked to real decision-making processes. Participants need transparency about why the forum is being organised, how their input will be used and who holds responsibility for follow-up. Clear communication about the scope of influence helps build credibility and avoids unrealistic expectations.

Design should prioritise locally relevant entry points. Starting from concrete issues such as heating costs, housing renovation, transport access or local environmental concerns makes participation more accessible and meaningful – topics that can naturally lead to broader decarbonisation discussions.

Additionally, formats should be adapted to the local culture rather than imposed as fixed models. In some contexts, informal or creative formats integrated into community events may be more effective than formal workshops. Flexibility and willingness to experiment are key and, in cases where inclusiveness and representation are priorities, dedicated strategies are required. Targeted outreach, cooperation with intermediaries, the provision of accessible venues and schedules, and, in some cases, incentives may be necessary to involve groups who would otherwise be excluded.

Finally, regions should plan for continuity. Citizens' forums are most impactful when they form part of an ongoing process with follow-up events, feedback loops and visible use of outcomes. This gradual approach supports trust-building and strengthens the long-term legitimacy of local decarbonisation strategies.

Conclusion

The combined experiences of all nine countries suggest that citizens' forums are neither symbolic exercises nor guaranteed solutions. They function best as long-term infrastructure for democratic engagement in the just transition. When embedded in local realities, supported by institutions, and designed with sensitivity to context, they can significantly improve the social grounding, legitimacy, and quality of local decarbonisation planning.



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