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## **Community-led Urban Strategies in Historic Towns (COMUS)**

### **COMUS Final Event**

**European Youth Centre,  
Council of Europe, Strasbourg**

**28 June 2017**

### **Main conclusions**



## Introductory statements

The introductory speeches from Ms Claudia Luciani (CoE) and Mr Jose Mendes Bota (EU) both emphasised the importance of capitalising on the work done in COMUS – that culture and creativity have an important position as a driving force for all other reforms (establishing resilient, fair societies). The 2018 Year of Cultural Heritage is seen as a further opportunity to develop cooperation in community-led cultural heritage initiatives.

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## Session 1 Impact of COMUS on Policies and Strategies

### Armenia

- The National coordinator reported on the utility of the COMUS capacity building activities. Cooperation with and through other Pilot Towns, participation in Training Workshops and Site Visits etc. really built capacity and resulted in forming 15 heritage ambassadors.
- COMUS brought a new perspective to the urban development/conservation approach in the Pilot Towns – inspiring for instance the Gyumri Rehabilitation Programme, generating National government interest to attract investment and building infrastructure.
- The Local Stakeholder Group working was highly participative.
- Ongoing use of Reference Plan Actions Template as a useful tool to summarise and present actions identified.
- Important invitation to explore capacity evaluation and needs assessment – and establishing effective channels of communication.

### Republic of Moldova

- COMUS highlighted the importance of discussion and drafting of strategy by locals in creating better transparency and dialogue between the national level and the Pilot Town of Soroca.
- Importance of Reference Plan activity in engaging the community around a process of elaboration and generating spin-offs – Feasibility Study diploma project for students, community events, children’s brochure were unexpected impacts.
- There has been increased perception of an integrated approach with potentials in regional development and the inclusion of minorities.

### Ukraine

- COMUS has become a password in Ukraine – mobilising communities in all three towns to consider heritage structurally i.e. 2030 strategy being developed in Pryluki.
- It has also found resonance with the Deputy Minister of Culture to launch a cultural heritage pilot project (“cultural capital” in analogy with the CIS Cultural Capitals of the Commonwealth initiative starting in 2018, and agreed on 7 April in Tashkent).
- Intention in Ukraine to roll out the COMUS experience to other medium-sized and small historic towns.
- Changed mindsets in COMUS Pilot Towns, but this process needed time to forge links between tangible, intangible, culture, creativity and real people.

### Georgia

- COMUS has reinforced the management model, setting trends at local/national levels where the task of constructing a Reference Plan provided a solid base to discuss and identify priority actions.

- There was emphasis on local cooperation with Project Implementation Units and Local Stakeholder Groups empowering local authorities – converting local development narratives into concrete proposals for action.
- The first project of its kind reaching out to involve the community in a decision-making process - “anyone can contribute” message. The “process” was key to understanding and acceptance.

### **Belarus**

- COMUS has provided valuable tools for the enhancement of historic town development, focusing on culture, environment, economy and social cohesion.
- International experience-sharing inspired mobilisation of the local community.
- COMUS has been a powerful trigger to revisit heritage legislation, while capacity building activities should continuously accompany this process.

### **Discussions on constraints and learning**

- COMUS was sometimes confronted with the problem of over ambitious timing – the setting up of a completely new approach, a common understanding, and the need to find people with the right profile took longer than planned, although in hindsight this has also been a positive demonstration of taking the task seriously.
- Difficulty in mobilising OWHC city experts due to the language barrier and time away from their jobs.
- Language in general proved difficult in terms of respecting production deadlines and capacity for expert review.
- Study visits to Sibiu proved the most effective – close to home, familiar, achievable parallels, closer to own urban reality.

### **EU Creativity Programme**

- COMUS “sister” Programme due to finish this year – online capacity building programme (9 courses) still accessible in all COMUS national languages.
- Question of how to make materials available as resources for other future initiatives – perhaps the possibility of extending the programme.

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## **Session 2 Impact of COMUS on Community Involvement and Projects**

### **How has COMUS changed the way people perceive heritage?**

- Cities with multi-communities confirm that heritage only has real value if you have a personal connection. Therefore it is essential to learn how to have good communication with diverse communities and challenge the position that heritage is defined as a top-down process.
- COMUS helped to develop one direction and cohesion where communities became active, finding agreed objectives (Lutsk).
- COMUS revealed the need to establish permanent community participation; local community understood the point of COMUS and a voluntary group was founded by young people (Dusheti).
- The COMUS communication platform should still be available after the project.
- COMUS has created a space for the cultural life of the community (Dusheti).
- The pre-COMUS belief that caring for heritage should be carried out by the state has found an alternative mindset which understands that heritage belongs to local people (Mstislav).

- A first expectation was about finances. Transfer of knowledge and experience was seen as a secondary product, and it is not clear whether the city council realised the value of a bottom-up approach. Training for local governments remains an important need, as it may multiply the effects of the COMUS project (Gyumri).
- The visit to Alma Vii had a significant impact on the delegates from Mstislav, inspiring possibilities for their own situation – designation as a national cultural reserve could provide a more efficient opening to apply the COMUS methodology – involve students – restore wooden houses – organise culinary festivals.
- In explaining COMUS outside Mstislav, it was a surprise for the community to learn that its heritage attributes were generally not known in other Belarusian cities.
- Before COMUS, the community thought that preservation was the job of the state, and that the community had no role. Through COMUS, the community discovered that they are key actors in heritage and development and attracting investments. The mind-set changed. A strong sense of belonging was stimulated (Belarus).
- The traditional start of heritage initiatives is mostly based on the question “is there any money?”. Transfer of knowledge, soft interventions have been very important in showing the value of bottom-up alternatives. The momentum should continue through ongoing training (fund raising for instance) and also by developing tools to better reach the wider community which are not in the Pilot Town portfolios (Gyumri).
- Inter-generational dialogue took place, with COMUS being used as a bridge for possible future activities (Georgia).

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### **Session 3 Beyond COMUS and the COMUS network**

The COMUS website will be continued, and resources will be available beyond the life of the project.

What is the reality of community mobilisation?

What steps then need to be taken in the future?

What actions should be initiated?

- Armenia will make a presentation to the historic towns of the [Kyiv Initiative](#) in July and organise a meeting to engage international organisations and donors.
- Belarus plans to organise workshops in other historic towns to disseminate COMUS material and process – also exploiting the joint European Heritage Days to inform and promote the methodology.
- As far as we are concerned, the project is not over yet, as there is still a need to keep the population engaged in Dusheti (out-migration trend), and so the need to follow-up is critical, particularly in relation to local capacity development.
- The process should be adopted as routine practice in historic towns of the Republic of Moldova (with an increased role for the Ministry of Culture), coupled with promotional events targeting other Kyiv Initiative towns. There is also interest in maintaining the network at international level.
- Pilot Towns in Ukraine want to continue the project, as their feeling is that the process is just reaching its prime. In this respect, maintaining links with international experts would be valuable. Working on the principle that “Every end is really just a start”.
- Two historic towns in Ukraine want Lutsk to share the experience with them. There is talk of organising an “EU heritage discourse event” where the discourse starts from the local community. Resources should certainly be shared with other Kyiv Initiative towns, organising training around a pool of COMUS ambassadors.
- The structure and design of activities provided by the project was very important in creating ownership.
- Next steps should include identification of training needs, where the CoE can continue to play a strong role in keeping authorities “on board” and informed. The question of who

needs training and what training is required should be firmly linked to economic development and employment.

### **Lead Expert Recommendations for post COMUS actions in partner countries**

- A crucial keystone of the project (community-led), namely the formation of the Local Stakeholder Group must be maintained/developed if the COMUS momentum is to be ensured. This participative forum creates the bridge to the wider community. It may be that continuation requires adjustment of the relationship between LSG and Municipal Authority and the role and connection needs to be carefully considered and agreed – consultative body, co-producer of strategy and policy, executive structure, communication platform, lobby group...
- The position and functioning of Project Officers (appointed by the CoE) will cease to exist post-COMUS. It is therefore essential to review how this coordination and support task can be resourced post-COMUS. With the support of the national authorities, an independent post could be created with a strong profile in line with the COMUS principles.
- In any first initiative, to continue and roll-out the COMUS methodology and practice in individual partner states, it is recommended to concentrate primarily on developing the asset of the pool of Kyiv Initiative historic towns existing in each partner country. This has been clearly identified as an opportunity by all COMUS partners.
- Maintain the international communication platform between key actors operating in COMUS – National and Pilot Town level. Such an ongoing exchange model can be mobilised to identify future cooperation projects in the field of heritage and develop joint proposals which could be explored through the EU 2018 Cultural Heritage Year.
- Examine the possibility of setting up bilateral projects which would allow an extension of the COMUS approach i.e. existing link between Zhovka and Poland, twinning project which starts in autumn 2017 in the Republic of Moldova.
- Look to involve (young) stakeholders, municipal employees in Pilot Towns to follow any relevant courses provided by the EU Eastern Partnership Culture and Creativity Programme online platform.
- The Culture and Creativity Programme will finish this year and follow-up is not certain. Therefore the most available and interesting vehicle to engage with appears to be the Faro Convention. The CoE provides a direct route to fostering understanding of the Faro approach and opportunity to follow and adopt the Faro Convention actions and activities.

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### **Some lasting impressions of the COMUS project from the participating towns**

- Getting to know the COMUS Community.
- The importance of planned joint actions, including European Heritage Days.
- First time ever cross-generational involvement of communities around heritage was set up with common objectives.
- Inspiring Bamberg study visit; discovering one's own home towns through the eyes of others.
- Engagement of young people and community mobilisation.
- Opportunity to self-evaluate local capacities.
- Possibilities for community involvement in decision-making and empowerment.

- Countries began to integrate the COMUS methodology in their strategic plans for 2018 and beyond.