BuildingBridges

CREATING BRIDGES BEYOND BORDERS

POLITICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

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In a moment when public discourse across **Europe** is increasingly marked by the rise of extreme-right ideologies and the alarming spread of undemocratic forces throughout society, the need for inclusive, critical, and creative spaces for dialogue has never been more urgent. In response to this growing polarization, **Building Bridges** has launched a bold and timely initiative: **five public encounter**s held in different cities across the continent. These events brought together a diverse spectrum of participants, artists, city representatives, activists, thinkers, researchers, workers, migrants, and engaged citizens, united by a shared commitment to reflecting on and reimagining the meaning and function of walls and borders in both the recent past and our contemporary world.

These encounters served not only as forums for discussion and exchange but also as laboratories for democratic experimentation, fostering grassroots engagement and cross-sector collaboration. The focus on borders, physical, symbolic, political, and social, allowed participants to explore the ways in which divisions are constructed, maintained, and contested within and between societies.

This document presents a synthesis of the **key outcomes** that emerged from the five **Building Bridges citizens' assemblies**. It highlights shared themes, differences in local contexts, and points of convergence across the various gatherings. By capturing the insights and propositions generated during these encounters, the report aims to contribute to broader political and social debates concerning the future of democracy, the inclusion of youth voices, and innovative approaches to migration and integration policy, both at the **local** and **transnational** levels. At its core, this work invites policymakers, civil society, and communities to rethink borders not just as lines of separation, but as potential spaces for dialogue, solidarity, and transformation.

CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES: Lecce, Berlin, Thessaloniki-Avdera-Thermakios, Palermo, Warsaw-Bialowieza Forest.

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Themes:
Migration, integration, municipal empowerment, and transnational civic cooperation.

Key challenges identified:
- Insufficient municipal authority and resources despite cities being at the forefront of migrant integration.
- Structural issues in housing, employment, language access, and youth inclusion.
- Overemphasis on cultural difference, neglecting racism and inequalities among migrants from different backgrounds.

Best practices highlighted:
- Civil society involvement in migrant integration through education, employment support, and volunteer networks.
- Cultural and artistic events as tools for highlighting shared values across the Mediterranean.
- Rural areas as key players in easing the pressure of urban migrant reception.

Policy recommendations:
1. Strengthen municipal law and autonomy: Institutionalize and resource the local role in integration—legally, financially, and logistically.
2. Civil society as a driver: Empower NGOs and local actors to manage integration when national governments fall short, especially in housing, jobs, language education, and youth outreach.
3. Transmunicipal cooperation: Foster direct city-to-city and NGO collaboration across the Mediterranean to act locally while building shared values.
4. Unified migrant support: Avoid dividing refugees by country of origin—focus on their shared experience and encourage collective initiatives like migrant-led organizations.
5. Institutionalize the Assembly model: Promote the Mediterranean Citizens' Assembly as a standing democratic innovation supported by European and regional institutions to sustain civic dialogue and cross-border solutions.

Themes:
Strengthening and participatory democracy, youth.

Key challenges identified (Borders):
- Ageism.
- Language barriers.
- Prejudice.
- Lack of access.
- Digital exclusion.
- Social expectations.

Policy recommendations:
1. Civic education and dialogue: promote critical thinking, democratic rights education, and prejudice reduction.
2. Inclusive community engagement: support safe discussion spaces, grassroots activism, and intergenerational dialogue.
3. Democratic innovation: institutionalize informal participation (e.g., protests, citizen assemblies), enhance stakeholder dialogue.
4. Access and equity: increase funding for civic involvement and remove digital and geographic barriers.
5. Rebuilding trust: foster solidarity, reduce polarization, and rebuild trust in institutions.
6. Youth councils, workshops, cross-cultural initiatives, interpersonal skill-building, legal reforms, and citizen assemblies.

Themes:
Youth participation in governance, community building, rural-urban areas challenges.

Best practices highlighted:
- Youth Council models from Thessaloniki (urban), Thermi (semi-urban), and Thermaikos (rural).
- Avdera's youth committed to launching their own council.
- Shared rural-urban youth issues identified (e.g., unemployment, migration, space access).

Policy recommendations:
1. Legal mandate for youth councils: establish youth councils in all municipalities.
2. Creation of youth centres: fund youth-focused community hubs, especially in rural areas.
3. TransMunicipal collaboration: enable cross-border cooperation through shared projects and platforms.
4. Youth in urban policy: integrate youth voices into municipal planning and public service delivery.

Themes:
Environment, climate, energy, food, water.

Water
- Inequality of distribution: water access varies widely, even within cities.
- Privatization and overtourism: prioritization of tourists over residents strains local water resources.
- Climate crisis exacerbation: industrial developments (e.g., e-mobility industries) increasingly stress water supplies.
- Pollution and scarcity: eco-mafia activities and industrial dumping heavily pollute rural water resources.
- Territorial conflicts: urban-rural tensions over water rights and access.

Energy
- Resource competition: though not deeply detailed under "energy," competition for water from energy sectors (e.g., Elon Musk's factory in Germany) reveals a major cross-sectoral tension.
- Climate and capitalism nexus: energy projects prioritize economic growth over environmental sustainability, contributing to water depletion and climate risk.

Food
- Disparities in access: Urban vs. rural and North-South Europe divides in food systems.
- Capitalist food production: fragmented systems that prioritize profits over communities.

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Best practices highlighted:

Water
- Local water assemblies: community-led participatory governance in rural Sicily.
- Educational initiatives: early education on water protection in Finland.
- Sustainable infrastructure: Algerian model combining solar panels and shaded agricultural areas.
- Morocco's water strategy: focus on dams, rainwater collection, and desalination.
- European Cooperation: INTERREG NEXT MED funding collaborative water projects in the Mediterranean.

Energy
- Sustainable infrastructure integration: though indirectly mentioned, Algeria's use of renewable energy in agriculture is a model for water-energy synergies.
- Grassroots resistance: public mobilization against water-intensive energy industries (e.g., protests against illegal industries damaging water resources).

Food
- Community-supported agriculture (CSA): Sicily's solidarity models connecting farmers and communities.
- Early food education: hands-on learning through school gardens and local food initiatives.
- Cooperative food systems: linking farmers directly with consumers to bypass exploitative market mechanisms.

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Policy recommendations:

Water
- Participatory mapping: enable communities to document local water issues and develop local solutions.
- Euro-Mediterranean water alliance: form a regulatory coalition to manage access and pollution.
- Water education: integrate water stewardship into school curricula and community programs.
- Fund public research: prioritize public innovation in water technologies like desalination and atmospheric harvesting.
- Pollution control: implement stricter local regulations on industrial/agricultural waste.
- Alternative tourism models: promote low-impact tourism respecting local water needs.
- Anthropologists in municipalities: employ anthropologists to map and mediate local water conflicts.

Energy
- Regulate industrial water usage: ensure major industries do not monopolize local water resources.
- Public oversight of energy projects: empower communities to have a say in large energy developments.
- Sustainability standards: require industries to use water and energy sustainably, possibly through licensing conditions.

Food
- Food education programs: integrate comprehensive food education at all education levels.
- University support structures: create spaces and time allowances for students to cook healthy meals.
- Sustainable public procurement: prioritize local, ethical food producers in public catering and events.
- Vegetarian days: encourage plant-based eating habits in public institutions.
- Support food cooperatives: public funding and incentives for cooperative food systems and local food sharing.

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Themes:
Natural borders, comparison North/South natural borders, environmental challenges, human-non human dimension.

Summarize:
The objective of this meeting was to review, discuss and present the policy recommendations created in the previous assemblies of the project. The event also offered a space to envision the next steps forward, drawing from the collective learnings of the journey so far.

The Building Bridges event initially planned for the University of Warsaw was relocated due to a tragic incident on campus. The Jan Karski Foundation generously hosted the gathering, where speakers, activists, and project partners engaged in discussions about an inclusive Europe and shared best practices on migration and integration.

The event featured contributions from several NGOs, researchers, and civil society leaders, touching on EU migration policies, grassroots initiatives, and legislative proposals like the "Xenia" popular initiative law. Despite the absence of some originally scheduled guests and screenings, the event culminated in an agreement to send the Building Bridges recommendations to EU institutions ahead of the Polish presidency's conclusion.

The final part of the assembly took place in the Bialowieza Forest, a symbolic and politically sensitive area on the Poland-Belarus border. Hosted by local cultural and ecological organizations, participants were immersed in the region's complex ecological and geopolitical dynamics. Through nature walks, somatic workshops, artistic performances, and in-depth presentations from activists and researchers, the group explored the impact of border militarization, migration crises, and community resistance. The experience concluded with film screenings and reflective dialogues that highlighted the human and non-human consequences of border policies while fostering solidarity and a deeper understanding of collective resilience.

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