

**36**  
INNOVATION  
LEADERS

**72**  
STRONG  
INNOVATORS

**71**  
MODERATE  
INNOVATORS

**65**  
EMERGING  
INNOVATORS



ASSEMBLY OF EUROPEAN REGIONS



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AER PRESIDENT ALBERT CASTELLANOS

## President's Vision

This past year, 2024, has been exceptional, bringing changes to the European project that will likely redefine the role of the Assembly of European Regions (AER) in the years to come. Our mandate—to incorporate the regional perspective into European policy—has never been more relevant.

Across the ocean, a new administration has reshuffled the dynamics of transatlantic cooperation. Trade discussions feel different, security conversations are sharper, and the commitment to support our Eastern neighbours is being reevaluated. None of this is abstract; events in distant capitals influence investments, energy decisions, and how we define solidarity in our regions.

Closer to home, the ballots cast last summer have reshaped the political landscape in Brussels and Strasbourg. The new parliamentary term opens opportunities for fresh ideas but also requires broader, sometimes unfamiliar alliances to achieve progress on cohesion, the green transition, and social convergence. For Europe's regions, this presents both an opportunity to help shape policy and a responsibility to build consensus in fragile areas.

These developments have reignited scrutiny of fundamental European values—representative democracy, multilateralism, the transatlantic partnership, and even the principle of subsidiarity, which ensures that regions have a voice in shaping the future. At the same time, they underscore the necessity of European sovereignty and open strategic autonomy, which have become indispensable since the pandemic's end.

As we approach the 40th Anniversary of the AER, these developments have renewed our network's focus on our core objectives: safeguarding democratic standards, reinforcing cohesion, advancing strategic autonomy, and enhancing Europe's external engagement with our Eastern neighbours, while promoting cross-border partnerships led by the regions themselves.

However, principles alone cannot propel the Union forward; cooperation is essential. Over the past twelve months, the AER has advocated for a stronger and better-resourced Cohesion Policy. Through our Task Force on Cohesion Policy and active participation in the Cohesion Alliance in the context of the Mons Summit 2024, we have communicated the regional message directly to those responsible for designing the next multi-annual financial framework. Agriculture and rural development have also received considerable attention; our Task Force on Agriculture and Rural Development has consistently argued that a competitive Europe cannot afford disparities in rural areas. Initiatives by the Working Groups on Bioeconomy and Mental Health, along with the Task Force on Decarbonisation, have translated broad ambitions into practical guidance that members can implement locally. Moreover, the Eurodisney exchange programme has allowed over six hundred young Europeans to undertake 3- to 7-month internships in member regions, providing real-world experience and strengthening the fabric of our Union.



A resilient Europe must also be inclusive; citizenship must be more than just a slogan. With the completion of the EU-Belong project, our members now have an intercultural toolkit for welcoming newcomers and transforming diversity into a shared asset. The Climbing the Ladder initiative is creating pathways for underrepresented groups to enter regional public life, and the MEET project (Mobilise Europe = Engage Together), funded by the EU's CERV program, has offered training and safe spaces for young activists and citizens from diverse backgrounds to discuss Europe's future and engage directly with decision-makers ahead of the elections. This commitment to youth reached its peak last August at the Summer Academy in Bodø, where youth representatives from wider Europe initiated a wave of innovation reshaping dialogue with regional assemblies. Our work would be incomplete if we ignored developments beyond the Union's borders. Insights gathered at the 8th Black Sea Summit in Batumi have informed calls for a more coherent Neighbourhood Policy that aligns trade, connectivity, and security with local needs. Simultaneously,

the AER Focus Group on Ukraine has connected Ukrainian regional authorities with European counterparts for peer learning and partnership building, demonstrating the added value a pan-European network can provide to its members. None of this would have been possible without the dedication of our 130-member regions, the countless participants who contributed their expertise and time, and an AER team that has maximized limited resources for maximum impact. I extend my deepest thanks to each of you. Your commitment ensures that the regional voice continues to shape Europe's future—clearly, constructively, and with a level of ambition matching the challenges ahead.

**AER PRESIDENT**  
Albert Castellanos





AER SECRETARY GENERAL VANIA FREITAS

## Secretary General's Foreword

As the new Secretary General, I am pleased to report on a year of new beginnings, exciting developments and a continued commitment to uniting European regions and amplifying their voices.

Over the past year, we have witnessed a progressive deterioration of democratic stability across Europe, with rising political polarisation and growing disaffection with democracy. Russia's illegal and unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine has continued to fuel political and economic instability. At the same time, the worsening impact of the climate crisis has heightened threats to the well-being and livelihoods of Europeans, while demographic shifts have continued to reshape economies and societies, significantly affecting territorial cohesion. These challenges have deepened inequalities within and between regions, posing a major test for Europe's cohesion.

While current trends are troubling, they reinforce the relevance of AER's mission: uniting regions across Europe and supporting them in delivering the best for their communities. This year, we have placed a renewed focus on AER's purpose, visibility and impact. In June 2024, we adopted our Multi-Annual Strategy 2024–2031, pushing us to be more ambitious and ensuring that the association remains as effective as possible in its role as the voice of Europe's regions.

We championed the principles of democracy and good governance, working closely with the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe to shape a continent where regional democracy can thrive. Through our Youth Regional Network and EU-funded initiatives, such as Climbing the Ladder and the MEET projects, we empowered young people to engage in public life and decision-making, bringing Europe closer to local communities. At the Summer Academy 2024, we fostered dialogue between policymakers and young people, highlighting culture as a powerful driver of youth participation.

Driven by our commitment to European unity, we organised the 8th Black Sea Summit to strengthen cooperation among regions across the Black Sea, fostering deeper collaboration and regional solidarity. In parallel, our Ukraine Focus Group provided a platform for regional recovery and reconstruction efforts, forging partnerships and mobilising support for the future of Ukrainian regions.

The EU elections of June 2024 provided an opportunity to disseminate our key messages and build relationships with the new Members of the European Parliament and the European Commission, helping to shape EU policies for the benefit of European regions and their communities.



Discussions continue on the future of the EU's cohesion policy and the reform of the agricultural and rural development policy post-2027, and the AER was actively involved in these debates. Through our Bureau Task Forces and partnerships with the European Committee of the Regions and the Cohesion Alliance, we worked to influence future programs and ensure that regional voices are heard. We also remained committed to accelerating the transition to climate neutrality at the regional level through our Task Force on Decarbonisation and Working Groups on Bioeconomy and Green Hydrogen. At the United Nations Climate Conference (COP-29) in Baku, we showcased how regional governments are driving climate efforts and advocated for multi-level partnerships in the fight against climate change.

Creating opportunities to enhance skills across all regions and ensuring that they can attract and retain the workforce needed to thrive by providing job opportunities, essential services, and a welcoming, inclusive environment has also been a high priority this year. This commitment is reflected in our active involvement in the Harnessing Talent Platform and our flagship Eurodissey program for youth mobility. With growing inequalities and discrimination, we have maintained a strong focus on intercultural inclusion under our EU-Belong project, empowering regions to harness the

benefits of diversity for their economies and societies. At the same time, we have prioritised mental health and well-being, advancing crucial discussions and initiatives within our Working Group on Mental Health.

None of this work would be possible without the commitment of our members and the dedication of our secretariat. My sincere thanks to all of you for everything you have contributed this year. As we look ahead to 2025, let us strengthen our collaboration to realise the ambitions of our new Multi-Annual Strategy, with regions leading the transformation toward a more democratic, sustainable, prosperous, and inclusive Europe for all.

**AER SECRETARY GENERAL**

Vania Freitas



About  
**THE**  
**ASSEMBLY**  
**OF**  
**EUROPEAN**  
**REGIONS**  
**(AER)**



## ASSEMBLY OF EUROPEAN REGIONS

*The Assembly of European Regions*

*(AER) is an independent, pan-European*

*network of regions; gathering members*

*from 24 countries—from Norway to*

*Turkey and from Georgia to Portugal.*

*The AER is present right across the*

*European continent, inside and outside*

*the European Union.*

As a network built on interregional collaboration, we stand strong to promote a Europe that embraces the diversity of its regions to thrive in a global world, making our communities attractive places to live, with greater economic opportunities and well-being for all, and diversity as a source of innovation and growth. Since our establishment in 1985, the AER has played a pivotal role in the recognition of regions as key players in the European project.

A prosperous Europe goes hand in hand with thriving regions that drive innovation, boost productivity, generate wealth and raise living standards, creating positive economic and social impacts across the continent. The AER prides itself on our bottom-up approach and on driving initiatives that make a real difference to communities in member regions all over Europe. It provides a framework that enables regions to learn from one another, influence policymakers at European and international levels through collective advocacy and strengthen their impact through dedicated programmes and projects.

# Which services does the AER offer?



## POLICY AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

The Policy and Knowledge transfer activities enable members to initiate mutual learning activities on any topic relevant to regional policy making. This can be done through thematic events and Working Groups, bilateral peer-to-peer meetings, and knowledge transfer activities in the context of European projects.

Peer learning supports innovation in the public sector via the sharing of regional policies and practices. As one of the bottom up modalities for peer learning, an AER Working Group provides a space for experience and knowledge exchange between regional policymakers, both civil servants and politicians. Chaired by a politician supported by a civil servant and facilitated by the AER Secretariat, Working Groups are set up for a two-year period and meet both in person and online. Activities may include but are not limited to study visits, regional experience exchanges, seminars, information sessions, workshops. The AER Working Groups are designed to be a light structure to support AER members who want to innovate policies and practices in their regions and create impact for citizens.



## ADVOCACY AND INSTITUTIONAL RELATIONS

Working to advance AER's political priorities for 2020-2025, the advocacy and institutions relations actions provide a strong voice for European regions through direct engagement with institutional stakeholders. The AER actively supports and coordinates membership's engagement and joint advocacy with European and international institutions, while also deepening strategic alliances with key partners. This involves participating in a range of meetings and events and convening joint policy propositions on key policy issues for European regions. Upon request of the AER Bureau members, the Task Forces are convened with the objective of driving AER's joint political action in specific issues, in support of the network's political priorities.



## PROGRAMMES

The AER's programmes (Eurodissey, Summer Academy, Youth Regional Network) are an integral part of our identity and services to regions. They generate several opportunities for young people: paid traineeships, participation in international events, advocacy on policy recommendations and capacity-building initiatives.

Through interregional peer learning activities, like the exchange of experiences and practices, they aim to foster interregional cooperation, partnerships and ultimately strengthen young people's sense of belonging to Europe and its regions. The AER, young people, and member regions work together to ensure the added value of the AER programmes to regions.



## EUROPEAN PROJECTS

Aligned with the AER's political priorities and the work of the different structures such as the Bureau, Working Groups and Programmes, European projects enable members to work on a diverse range of topics such as cohesion policy, inclusion, democracy and youth engagement. They further help members to connect with experts in the field and with relevant institutions and organisations.





**Place-Based and  
International:**

**HOW  
REGIONS  
DRIVE  
INNOVATION**



From the Arctic fjords of Nordland to the lush highlands of Ajara, place-based innovation thrives thanks to the diversity and richness of European regions. Throughout 2024, AER regions showcased how their grassroots expertise plays a vital role in sparking and sustaining sustainable innovation across sectors, driving business growth and interregional cooperation. The AER supported this by fostering conditions that enabled member regions to engage in peer learning, build coalitions, and develop strategic partnerships.

The two flagship events of 2024, the Black Sea Summit and the Summer Academy, illustrate how regions can foster innovation in very different ways, from promoting rural development in protected natural areas to sponsoring culture as a means to facilitate youth engagement in regional politics.

This Activity Report is a celebration of the capacity of regions to experiment and deliver place-based innovation. In Chapter 1, it rewards their work in shaping blueprint initiatives for a more inclusive model of democracy, characterised by youth empowerment and intercultural integration. In Chapter 2, it highlights their creativity in adapting their grassroots expertise to initiatives that fast-track sustainable development—from bioeconomy to green hydrogen to the intersection of mental health and societal resilience. In Chapter 3, it showcases their commitment to testing new approaches for territorial cohesion and cross-border cooperation.



## Chapter I.

**INNOVATING**

**REGIONAL**

**DEMOCRACY**

Inclusive decision-making, youth engagement and accessibility of culture were the inspiring principles of our regions' commitment to experiment with political innovations across Europe. From the intergenerational debates at the Summer Academy in Bodø to mainstreaming youth participation in policy-making at regional, national and European levels, AER regions took the lead in shaping more democratic, inclusive and cohesive communities.



The Summer Academy in Bodø, Nordland, Norway

# The Summer Academy 2024 at a glance

## ABOUT THE SUMMER ACADEMY

The Summer Academy is a biennial flagship programme of the Assembly of European Regions. Inspired by intergenerational principles, it brings together youth representatives and policymakers to discuss European issues. In 2022, the Summer Academy was awarded the European Citizen's Prize for Ireland for its contribution to mutual understanding and cross-border cooperation within the EU.

### Summer Academy Organising Committee (as of 2024)

- Brussels Capital (Belgium)
- Catalonia (Spain)
- Donegal (Ireland)
- Flevoland (the Netherlands)
- Jönköping (Sweden)
- Maramures (Romania)
- Nordland (Norway)
- Østfold (Norway)
- Údarás na Gaeltachta (Ireland)
- Vojvodina (Serbia)
- Zürich (Switzerland)





## HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 2024 SUMMER ACADEMY



The Summer Academy 2024 took place in Bodø, the first European Capital of Culture within the Arctic Circle, from August 12 to 16. Driven by the topic “Fostering Youth Participation through Culture,” the event featured ten workshops exploring different issues related to youth participation, empowerment, and representation. For example, Canton Zürich (Switzerland) and the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (Serbia) offered practical examples

of how regional institutions ensure the participation of young people in local democracy through the engagement of local universities and youth parliaments. Other regions, like Donegal (Ireland) and Nordland (Norway), showcased the importance of involving youth in keeping their artistic and cultural heritage alive by offering live concerts and exhibitions to participants.





*Participants explored the cultural heritage and  
natural wonders of Nordland. They experienced the  
power of Saltstraumen, one of the world's strongest  
tidal currents, admired the scenic panoramas of the  
Norwegian fjords at Keiservarden and Kjerringøy,  
engaged with Sámi culture and heritage, and took  
part in the many initiatives organised as part of Bodø  
2025, the European Capital of Culture.*





This edition of the Summer Academy brought together around 120 participants, over 40% of whom were young people under the age of 30. This remarkable proportion was made possible by the youth delegates invited by the regions, the revival of the Youth Regional Network, the involvement of the Nordland Youth Council in the event, and the provision of a Youth Solidarity Fund by Nordland County Council.

The 2024 Summer Academy also served as an opportunity to reward the most youth-friendly European regions through the MYFER Award Ceremony, which celebrated successful youth empowerment initiatives across Europe. Among the many high-quality applications received, the two awarded regions were the Regione Autonoma Trentino-Alto Adige/ S d tiro l (Italy), for their project **"Schools Beyond Regions and Borders"**, and Krapina-Zagorje County (Croatia), for their project **"ReCeZa – Regional Centre Zabok."**

# The Youth Regional Network in 2024



YRN General Assembly in Zalău  
(Sălaj County Council, Romania)

2024 was a crucial year for European democracy. With the European Parliament elections set to take place in June 2024, the Youth Regional Network (YRN) represented the ideal platform to raise awareness of the stakes at play, especially regarding the implementation of the Green Deal in urban areas and the digital transition in rural ones. Co-funded by the EU project MEET, the YRN General Assembly in Zalău (Sălaj County Council, Romania) elected a new Presidium with a one-year mandate, with Norbert Nagy (Sălaj) as President, Sigrun Myrvang (Innlandet, Norway) and Kassandra Petsa (Nordland, Norway) as Vice-Presidents, together with four Committee Chairs: Mathilde Colarte (Wallonia, Belgium), Jack McLaughlin

(Donegal, Ireland), Marsel Haka (Tirana, Albania), and Elona Matoshi (Kosovo).

Throughout the year, the four YRN committees on Youth Participation, Mental Health, Gender Equality, and Green and Sustainable Europe pursued the goal of engaging youth representatives through online meetings and onsite workshops. They organised regular online meetings and in-person workshops, such as the capacity-building event hosted by the Canton of Zürich. This event was supported by the Cantonal Chancellery and included a panel discussion on youth engagement models with the YRN and local cantonal stakeholders, participatory workshops, and study visits, together with the Zürich Youth Parliament.

The YRN also contributed to the AER Summer Academy 2024, with YRN members actively participating in the event and facilitating a workshop on mental health together with the region of Primorje-Gorski Kotar. The latter pursued good cooperation with the YRN and demonstrated a commitment to youth inclusion by inviting Chair McLaughlin to speak at their conference on “Mental Health Challenges in Today’s Youth – A Regional Perspective” in Rijeka, Croatia.

When it comes to advocating and joining external platform events, the YRN participated in the Europa Forum Wachau and the EYCA Rural Youth Camp, contributed to the consultation on the revision of the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life

of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, and was selected to take part in the Youth Test of the European Economic and Social Committee. In the year of EU elections, Chair Colarte was selected to attend the Maastricht Debate of the Spitzenkandidaten, a YRN delegation joined the LevelUP! event at the European Parliament, and the YRN organized a photo competition on social media encouraging young people to go to the polls.



YRN Capacity Building session in Zürich, Switzerland

# About EU-Belong - An Intercultural Approach to Migrants Integration in Europe's Regions

## THE EU-BELONG PROJECT AT A GLANCE



**Topic:** An Intercultural Approach to Migrants Integration in Europe's Regions

**Role of the AER:** Lead partner

**Partner member regions:** Arad (Romania), Catalonia (Spain), Donegal (Ireland), Timiș (Romania), Västra Götaland (Sweden) (until 2023)

**Other Project Partners :** Aufbauwerk Leipzig (Germany), ART-ER (Italy), Emilia-Romagna (Italy) ICEI (Italy), Navarre (Spain), Pomerania (Poland), ROPS Poznań (Poland), Salzburg (Austria)

**Programme:** AMIF - Asylum, Migration and Integration Funds

**Timeline:** 03 January 2022 - 02 May 2025

**Outcome:**

- Capacity building program for public authorities and local stakeholders
- Elaboration of a multi-stakeholder model framework for intercultural integration in the regions.
- Design of a three-year integration strategy in each of the ten partner regions
- Implementation of ten pilot integration projects.
- Knowledge sharing and dissemination activities at regional, national and transnational level

**Budget for AER:**

- Total budget for the AER €580,638.78 (of which 90% covered by the EU Grant)

**Website:** <https://aer.eu/eu-belong/>





## EU-BELONG IN 2024

Building upon two years dedicated to capacity building, 2024 showcased the international and interregional outreach of EU-Belong through newly drafted or revised strategies and pilots by the 10 partner regions. For instance, Timiș organized a celebration event on the occasion of World Refugee Day on June 20, 2024; Donegal published a blueprint strategy for providing support to people from Black and Minority Ethnic Communities to access job opportunities; and Catalonia offered multimedia anti-discrimination courses to civil servants.

At the European level, the AER ensured that the EU-Belong achievements were shared on different occasions with diverse audiences, from Council of Europe events to the AER Black Sea Summit, to meetings with key players in the non-profit sector at high-level meetings at the Council of Europe and during the Black Sea Summit 2024.

Consistent capacity building and effective outreach led to the publication '**Building Inclusive Societies - Regional Strategies for Intercultural Integration**', which showcased the result of three years dedicated to elaborating blueprint approaches for intercultural integration at a regional level.

[Read the publication here](#)



What does EU-Belong look like?  
[Discover the playlist!](#)



## OVERVIEW OF KEY

### EU-BELONG EVENTS IN 2024



**Intercultural Integration: A Shared Journey towards Equality and Belonging**  
19-21 March 2024, Donegal, Ireland.

100 participants from Ireland and 10 European regions gathered in Donegal to discuss interculturalism, exchange knowledge, and explore regional policies for inclusion.

[Read more](#)

**Addressing Racial Injustice, Discrimination and Bias in AI within Public Administration**  
- online webinar, 28 May 2024.

This webinar addressed the growing reliance of public administrations on AI systems, and it centred on building skills and expanding education to prevent discrimination and bias.

[Read more](#)



**Skills: (EU)Belong here – How intercultural strategies can boost talent attraction and retention**  
- Workshop at the EURegions Week 2024 - 9 October 2024

The workshop focused on best practices to attract and retain foreign talent in European labour markets.

[Read more](#)

# About Climbing the Ladder (CL-YE)

## CLIMBING THE LADDER AT A GLANCE



**Topic:** Fostering youth engagement in policymaking among all levels of governance

**Role of the AER:** Full partner

**AER Member regions involved:** Nordland County, Norway

**Project coordinator:** DYPALL Network

**Programme:** Erasmus+ Programme

**Timeline:** 1 December 2023 - 30 November 2025

**Project budget:**

- Total budget €439,347.00 (100% EU grant)
- Total budget for the AER €48,749.20 (100% covered by the EU grant)

**Outcome:**

- Analyse and understand the key features of current models and mechanisms for youth engagement in Europe
- Collect and share successful practices that encourage young people, policymakers, and practitioners to involve the youth perspective in policy-making
- Create an accessible platform for implementing youth engagement mechanisms
- Establish two networks ("young facilitators for democracy" and "young city/regional councillors")
- Promote citizen participation and democratic engagement at the local and regional levels throughout Europe

**Website:** <https://climbingtheladder-project.eu/>



Funded by  
the European Union

# CLIMBING THE LADDER TO REAL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Coordinated by the DYPALL network, the Climbing the Ladder project aims to address the need for effective and meaningful structures, mechanisms, and spaces for the active engagement of young people in policy-making and decision-making processes at the local, regional, national, and European levels. Its goal is to provide, through several actions and outputs, a comprehensive approach to support young people in becoming actively involved in the political arena and to create the basis for developing new policies aligned with the needs and vision of new generations. In the medium term, it aims to provide clarity in the field of youth engagement and generate a real impact on amplifying the voices of young people in policy-making.

Launched in December 2023, Climbing the Ladder created several opportunities throughout 2024 to build the capacities of young people participating in political activities. These opportunities took the form of international study visits and comprehensive publications, enabling different learning processes.



## CLIMBING THE LADDER PUBLICATION

### Models and Mechanisms of Youth Engagement

Published in October 2024, the publication mapped and analysed different youth engagement models and mechanisms in place across Europe, at the local, regional, national and European levels. The extensive analysis provided important resources to foster a culture of youth engagement, and serves as a basis for the upcoming project publications providing practical insights into various youth engagement initiatives' and their impact.

[Read the publication](#)

## INTERNATIONAL STUDY VISITS



### Summer Academy in Bodø, Nordland, Norway (12-17 August 2024)

The AER Summer Academy was part of the study visit hosted by Nordland County Council and generated valuable insights about the competences, functioning and achievements of youth councils at the County and national levels.

### Study visit in Brussels, Belgium (2-6 December 2024)

The final study visit focused on observing and learning how the EU institutions are addressing the youth engagement topic and how many institutionalised structures and mechanisms of youth engagement there are at the EU level and in Belgium at the national level. Key institutions and committees visited were the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) and the Council of Europe Liaison Office.



### Study visit in Bratislava and Vienna (7-11 October 2024)

Hosted by EDYN, the study visit to Bratislava and Vienna explored best practices and mechanisms about youth engagement, such as participatory budgeting, in Slovakia and Austria.

# About the MEET project

*(Mobilise Europe, Engage Together): Regional Debates for the European Democracy*

## THE MEET PROJECT AT A GLANCE

**MEET  
PROJECT**

**Topic:** Intergenerational debates to bring the EU to local/  
regional level

**Role of the AER:** Full partner

**AER Member regions hosting MEET debates:**

Açores (Portugal), Krapina-Zagorje County (Croatia),  
Lower Austria (Austria), Sălaj County (Romania)

**Project coordinator:** European Youth Forum (YFJ)

**Programme:** CERV - Citizens, Equality, Rights, Values  
2021-2027 (programme of the European Union)

**Timeline:** 15 November 2022-14 November 2024

**Outcome:**

- Intergenerational debates in European regions encouraging interaction between EU politicians and other stakeholders

**Project budget:**

- Total budget €955,695 (100% EU grant)
- Total budget for the AER €84,570.00 (100% covered by the EU grant)

**Website:** <https://aer.eu/meet/>



Funded by  
the European Union



## THE MEET PROJECT IN 2024

Taking place at the end of the Conference on the Future of Europe and on the eve of the 2024 EU elections, the MEET project was an opportunity for young and senior EU citizens to gain tools for active democratic participation through a shared space for discussing and sharing experiences, expectations, and priorities ahead of the European elections. It also represented an opportunity to engage EU politicians in direct discussions with young people.

Throughout 2024, until its successful wrap-up in November, the MEET project focused on three main pillars: Debating Europe, Broadening Europe, and Shaping Europe. Through

its direct partnerships with networks, NGOs, youth councils, and MEPs, it strengthened interregional cooperation across Europe, from local and regional to national and European levels. With a total of 13 debates organized across Europe, the AER gathered 579 participants from 20 European countries. The intergenerational component constituted the common thread of all debates, providing young people with the means and space for discussion and preparation for the European elections held in June 2024, with the greatest focus on participatory democracy and an inclusive Europe.





The debates shed light on the vital need to involve every citizen, from the youngest to the eldest, in the EU elections, emphasizing that a sense of participation grows when people feel part of a community and can engage in meaningful discussions. An emerging key priority was

the importance of transforming the green transition into a substantial opportunity rather than a mere imposed measure. In this context, engaging young people is crucial to driving forward the EU democratic process.

MEET Debate at General Assembly of the Youth Regional Network (YRN), March 2024



# Building partnerships for a truly European democratic community

## ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE AER UKRAINE FOCUS GROUP

As AER President, Albert Castellanos has made clear “The cause of supporting Ukraine is one that unites us all. We are committed to building a truly European community; where Ukrainian towns, cities and regions are vital and valued partners in peace and prosperity.” With that commitment very much in mind, in 2024, the AER Ukraine Focus Group stepped up our activities to build partnerships, and bolster political and practical support for Ukraine.

At the political level, in March, Lukas Mandl, AER Vice President for European Integration and Wider Europe, spoke on behalf of AER at the high-level meeting of the Alliance of Regions and Cities for the Reconstruction of Ukraine as part of the Mons Summit. In his remarks, Vice President Mandl strongly underlined that regions, civil society and enterprise “need real clarity” on how to use the Ukraine Facility instrument to support a whole-of-society recovery for Ukraine. Building on our message on decentralised cooperation with Ukraine, speaking during the 47th session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Council of Europe, AER Secretary General, Vania Freitas, underlined “how peer-to-peer partnerships between European regions can drive Ukraine’s reconstruction and economic recovery”.



For the second year in a row, the Focus Group also co-organised a mission to Brussels with 'U-LEAD with Europe', hosting a delegation of representatives from the Association of Invincible Communities of Ukraine. Over two days in May, the delegates met institutional partners from the European Commission, and held meetings with the Ukraine Alliance at the European Committee of the Regions.

They were also warmly welcomed by Representative Ignasi Centelles and Deputy Representative Laura Rius to the Offices of the Government of Catalonia for discussions on Catalonia's support to Ukraine, and on avenues of possible future collaboration.



In 2024, AER President Albert Castellanos led a number of initiatives with the goal of building trade and investment links between Catalan and Ukrainian enterprises. In September, the President convened Ukrainian regions and the Catalan business community in Barcelona to launch "EU-Ukraine Investment and Reconstruction", a platform to promote EU business cooperation with Ukrainian regions. On this occasion, ACCIÓ, Catalonia's Trade and Investment Agency, signed letters of intention with Ukrainian member regions, Odesa and Dnipropetrovsk.

The work of the Ukraine Focus Group culminated with a major, high-level gathering as part of the 2024 Smart City World Expo in Barcelona. Co-organised with ACCIÓ, the AER's Ukraine Focus Group discussed the role of regions and public/private partnerships in Ukraine's reconstruction. Delegations from Poltava, Odesa, Dnipropetrovsk and Sumy gleaned insights on support initiatives for a smart recovery from the European Investment Bank (EIB), the European Commission and the German Marshall Fund of the United States. Following the panel discussion, ACCIÓ Trade and Investment hosted meetings for our delegations with Catalan urban solutions companies in sectors vital to Ukraine's recovery.



Chapter II.

# **REGIONAL INNOVATIONS FOR TOMORROW'S SOCIETY AND ECONOMY**





## About this chapter

Regions are on the front lines of global political, economic, and societal challenges. Driven by a strong commitment to better serve their citizens, regional representatives have been key contributors to conversations and initiatives shaping the innovations that will define tomorrow's society. The political work of the Task Force on Decarbonisation, together with the peer-to-peer learning within the Working Groups on Bioeconomy, Green Hydrogen, and Mental Health, has reinforced the commitment of AER regions to improving quality of life and promoting solutions that are both economically and environmentally sustainable—boosting productivity and enabling clean growth across Europe.

## ABOUT THE AER TASK FORCE ON DECARBONISATION

**Chair:** Johannes Sundelin, Norrbotten (Sweden)

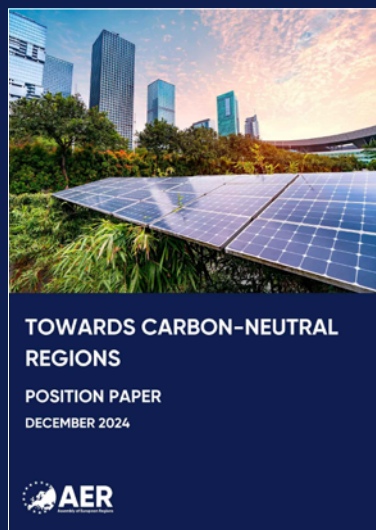
**Regions:**

- Canton Zürich (Switzerland)
- Korçë Region (Albania)
- Jönköpings Region län (Sweden)
- Norrbotten Region (Sweden)
- Odesa Rayon (Ukraine)
- Västerbotten Region (Sweden)

**Areas of interest:**

Low-carbon and climate-smart technologies for tourism, agriculture, transport, heavy industry, public-private partnerships, green transition, carbon neutrality

Decarbonisation is on course to shape the present and future of European regions. To enable regions to fully seize its transformative potential, the Autumn Bureau 2023 meeting decided to set up a Task Force on Decarbonisation, chaired by AER Vice President for Sustainability Johannes Sundelin (Norrbotten, Sweden). The Task Force was driven by the commitment to identifying the regions' stakes while establishing financial incentives for local and regional authorities to implement EU strategies and policies for decarbonisation.



### AER POSITION PAPER

#### 'Towards Carbon-Neutral Regions'

The work of the Task Force resulted in the publication of "Towards Carbon-Neutral Regions", which focuses on policy recommendations on how to facilitate the decarbonisation process by aligning policies to achieve net-zero emissions across all industry sectors, enhance multi-level governance and accelerate phasing out of fossil fuels

[Read the position here](#)

One of the first opportunities to exchange was the 2024 Rhine-Meuse Forum, organised under the auspices of the Belgian Presidency of the Council and with the patronage of the European Parliament. The Forum offered the opportunity to bring together various stakeholders from regional, national, and European levels to discuss the green and digital transition with representatives from politics, research, business, and civil society, and to propose concrete solutions focused on regional cooperation.



The Breakfast Debate on the nexus between the extraction of Critical Raw Materials (CRMs) and recyclability, held in March, marked one of the first key steps in advancing the Task Force's advocacy agenda. The debate brought together stakeholders from local and regional administrations in the Swedish region of Norrbotten, along with private sector representatives, to jointly address the challenges and opportunities of decarbonisation, focusing on the extraction of critical raw materials and enhancing their recyclability. The debate was held in the framework of the MEET: Mobilise Europe = Engage Together project, led by the European Youth Forum in cooperation with AER and funded by the EU.

In 2024, the Task Force on Decarbonisation advanced its advocacy work with the development and adoption of a position paper, shaped through active discussions between AER members and exchanges with European stakeholders. The Chair and AER Vice President for Sustainability, Johannes Sundelin, presented the draft to senior representatives of the European Commission and members of the European Parliament. The final paper was adopted by the AER Bureau during its Autumn meeting in the European Parliament, reinforcing the regions' collective voice on decarbonisation.



# About the AER working groups

The AER Working Groups currently engage 36 different regions in a voluntary collaboration to learn from each other on the **Bioeconomy** (Chair: Nataša Ritonija, East Slovenia), **Mental Health** (Chair: Daniel Schützer, Värmland), and **Green Hydrogen** (Chair Albert Castellanos, Catalonia).

## WORKING GROUP

### ON THE BIOECONOMY

**Chair:** Nataša Ritonija, Eastern Slovenia (Slovenia) - since election at AER General Assembly in June 2024

#### Regions:

- Adana (Türkiye)
- Dolji (Romania)
- Donegal (Ireland)
- East Slovenia (Slovenia)
- Flevoland (The Netherlands)
- Fribourg (Switzerland)
- Gaziantep (Türkiye)
- Gelderland (the Netherlands)
- Grand Est (France)
- Innlandet (Norway)
- Tirana (Albania)
- Udaras na Gaeltachta (Ireland)
- Umbria (Italy)
- Valencia (Spain)
- West Slovenia (Slovenia)

#### Areas of interest:

- innovation in bio-based products
- solutions for climate change mitigation
- biomass utilisation methods for bioenergy
- sustainable practices in agriculture and forestry
- research and development partnerships

Throughout 2024, the AER Working Group on Bioeconomy organised capacity-building activities across Europe. On the occasion of the AER General Assembly in Batumi (Ajara, Georgia), it held the workshop “Changing Perspectives on Resources for a Sustainable Bioeconomy” on 12 June 2024, highlighting regional practices aimed at fostering a more circular and sustainable bioeconomy. The workshop featured a presentation by Flevoland (the Netherlands) and a presentation by East Slovenia/ Podravje (Slovenia). In the same context, it organised a study visit to agro-farms in Machakhela National Park, exploring innovative approaches to sustainable energy generation and consumption in protected areas.

The commitment to exploring innovative and grassroots approaches to the circular economy was reaffirmed by the Breakfast Briefing on Circular Bioeconomy Strategies at the AER office in Brussels on 8 October. This event was organised together with representatives from the Circular Cities and Regions Initiative (CCRI) and the pilot region of Podravje.



OVERVIEW OF ACTIVITIES OF THE  
WORKING GROUP ON THE BIOECONOMY



12 June 2024, Workshop 'Changing Perspectives  
on Resources for a Sustainable Economy',  
Batumi, Ajara, Georgia



14 June 2024, Study Visit to the UNDP-funded  
agro-farms in the Machakhela National Park



8 October 2024: Breakfast Briefing 'Circular  
Economy Strategies'

## WORKING GROUP ON GREEN HYDROGEN

**Chair:** Albert Castellanos, Catalonia (Spain)

- until December 2024

### Regions:

- Abruzzo (Italy)
- Adana (Türkiye)
- Burgenland (Austria)
- Catalonia (Spain)
- Denizli (Türkiye)
- Donegal (Ireland)
- Flevoland (the Netherlands)
- Fribourg (Switzerland)
- Gaziantep (Türkiye)
- Grand Est (France)
- Kosice Self-governing Region (Slovakia)
- Lower Austria (Austria)
- Maramures (Romania)
- Mayo (Ireland)
- Valle d'Aosta (Italy)
- Värmland (Sweden)

### Areas of collaboration:

- The hydrogen value chain: how to involve businesses
- Decarbonisation of transports: transport carriers, trucks and buses
- Decarbonisation of the industry
- Green hydrogen production
- Support to or development of Hydrogen Valleys

Throughout 2024, the working group maintained consistent efforts to facilitate peer-to-peer exchanges on the topics of hydrogen transport, hydrogen ecosystem and regional infrastructure.

## OVERVIEW OF ACTIVITIES

### OF THE WORKING GROUP ON HYDROGEN



On 27 November 2024, an online webinar featured the following speakers:

- **Albert Ballbé** – Programme Manager, General Directorate of Industry, Government of Catalonia
- **Mirela Atanasiu** – Head of Unit Operations and Communications, Clean Hydrogen Partnership
- **Katarína Sasaráková** – Project Manager, Kosice Department of Regional Development
- **Jordi Candela** – Director, Aeroports de la Generalitat, Catalunya

The learning outcomes of the webinar laid the groundwork for an onsite workshop on 4 December, on the occasion of the AER Autumn Bureau and Working Group meetings. The workshop focused on learning complexity. It offered a series of resources for regional policymakers by identifying hands-on good practices, showcasing regional initiatives and projects and opening the way for European dissemination through the AER digital media channels.

## WORKING GROUP ON MENTAL HEALTH

**Chair:** Daniel Schützer, Värmland (Sweden)

### Regions:

- Alba (Romania)
- Brussels Capital (Belgium)
- Dibra (Albania)
- Donegal (Ireland)
- East Slovenia (Slovenia)
- Innlandet (Norway)
- Jönköping (Sweden)
- Norrbotten (Sweden)
- Nordland (Norway)
- Odesa (Ukraine)
- Poltava (Ukraine)
- Primorje Gorski Kotar (Croatia)
- Salaj (Romania)
- Tirana (Albania)
- Värmland (Sweden)
- Västerbotten (Sweden)
- Västra Götaland (Sweden)
- Wallonia (Belgium - with youth representative)
- Zürich (Switzerland)

### Areas for exchange:

- Response to traumatic events, including bullying and hate speech
- Addictions
- Growing resilience
- Prevention & research in mental well-being

Set up in Autumn 2023, the Working Group on Mental Health aims to facilitate the sharing of knowledge, experience and best practices between regions in wider Europe. The group is closely collaborating with the AER Youth Regional Network.

## OVERVIEW OF ACTIVITIES OF THE WORKING GROUP ON MENTAL HEALTH



### Online Study Visit to Mental Healthcare Services of Odesa, Ukraine - 23 April 2024

Mass displacement, damaged infrastructure and war traumas make it challenging to access quality mental healthcare in the region of Odesa. Several initiatives by the Odesa Mental Health Center and the Center for psychological support for veterans and their families, have the goal of supporting families and inhabitants in reintegrating veterans by exercising empathy, managing expectations, and adapting communication modes.

The Odesa team focused the online study visit on the measures targeting children in mental rehabilitation or in education. The region is also implementing specific measures to support women and prevent gender-based violence, which were not presented at the online study visit.

[Read more on the study visit here](#)

**Workshop “Sustaining youth mental health and preventing mental illhealth” in partnership with Youth Regional Network | 13 August 2024, Summer Academy in Bodø, Norway**

The workshop, which was designed together with the AER Youth Regional Network, in particular the Chair of the YRN Thematic Committee on Mental Health Jack Mc Laughlin, was facilitated on the spot by YRN President Norbert Nagy and Mathilde Colarte, Chair of the YRN Thematic Committee on Youth Participation & Governance. The workshop featured a presentation by the YRN on AI & Mental Health as well as practices from Primorje-Gorski Kotar County (HR) and Odesa (UA).

[Read about the Summer Academy here](#)



**Conference “Mental Health Challenges in Today’s Youth’ co-organised by the AER and the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County | 22-23 October 2024**

The conference on mental health on “Mental Health Challenges in Today’s Youth – A Regional Perspective” gathered over 200 participants from all over wider Europe. It explored the root causes of mental health challenges, the implications for society as a whole and showcased a series of innovative practices from the Primorje-Gorski Kotar Teaching Institute for Public Health, a presentation by WHO and good practices from several European regions, including Norrbotten (SE) and Odesa (UA).

The conference featured key figures of the AER political and managerial leadership, including:

- Johannes Sundelin, AER Vice President for Sustainability, Green Transition and Health
- Jack Mc Laughlin, Chair of the YRN Thematic Committee on Mental Health
- Vania Freitas, AER Secretary General
- Marina Medaric, Chair of the AER Election Committee, Deputy Prefect of Primorje-Gorski Kotar County and host of the conference.

**Breakfast Briefing “How to build resilient societies to promote mental health” | Brussels, 4 December 2024**

This event built up on the findings of the conference in Rijeka on building skills for better resilience and extended this reflection to societies. It was chaired by the Working Group Chair, Daniel Schützer, and featured the following speakers:

- **Anastasia Deligkouri**, Policy analyst at the European Commission’s Joint Research Center (JRC), offered insights on the fundamental role of trust in strengthening the credibility and resilience of democratic institutions in the wake of disinformation and malicious fake news. Her presentation “Strengthening democracies with participatory and deliberative approaches” showcased several democratic innovations, which are further explored in the European Commission’s Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy.
- **Jocelyn Deloyer**, Senior Project Manager at the Centre Neuro Psychiatrique Saint-Martin (Brussels Capital Region) shared how the TRUST Erasmus+ project destigmatises mental health problems and fosters connections between mental health centers and artists. Through art therapy, the TRUST project fosters individual and collective healing in the aftermath of traumatic events, with particular attention on war traumas affecting survivors in Ukraine. In addition to experimenting innovative paths to mental wellbeing, the TRUST project has also the goal of promoting EU values of peace, solidarity, and inclusivity.





## Chapter III.

# **REGIONS STRENGTHENING COHESION & INTERREGIONAL COOPERATION**





## About this section

Reducing disparities between regions and fostering interregional cooperation are two sides of the same coin. Achieving territorial, economic and social cohesion is at the centre of our work. Through the Task Forces on Cohesion Policy and on Rural Development & Agriculture, we mapped the needs and priorities for enabling the full capacity of our regions by innovating rural economies, advancing towards the green transition, and addressing skill gaps in the labour market, preparing younger but also older generations for the future of work. Reducing disparities within and between regions, connecting rural and urban realities, and exchanging good practices for a better understanding of the way forward and advancing future challenges. All this in full respect of the subsidiarity principle.

## ABOUT THE TASK FORCE ON COHESION POLICY

**Chair:** Lilijana Madjar, Western Slovenia (Slovenia)  
Albert Castellanos, Catalonia (Spain)

### Regions:

- Alba County (Romania)
- Brussels Capital (Belgium)
- Catalonia (Spain)
- Eastern Slovenia (Slovenia)
- Flevoland (The Netherlands)
- Lower Austria (Austria)
- Norrbotten (Sweden)
- Värmland (Sweden)
- Västra Götaland (Sweden)
- Wallonia (Belgium)
- Western Slovenia (Slovenia)

### Areas of interest:

- Economic development, skills gaps, territorial development, regional responses to climate change, Recovery and Resilience Facility, Cohesion Policy

The persistent territorial disparities within the EU, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges posed by climate change, and the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine have exacerbated existing structural vulnerabilities and given rise to new inequalities. In this context was established the AER Task Force on Cohesion Policy with the overall aim of addressing these economic, social, environmental, and territorial disparities across all EU regions.

Throughout 2024, the Task Force gathered together its members and partners to discuss, identify and agree on the future Cohesion Policy that we want, and that our regions need the most to adapt to the ongoing socioeconomic and environmental challenges.

In March, on the occasion of the Belgian Presidency, AER joined forces with the European Committee of the Regions and its Cohesion Alliance to launch a joint call advocating for a reformed Cohesion Policy that aims to address the evolving inequalities while also being more straightforward and deeply rooted in EU territories. In this regard, the AER active participation in the Mons Summit was key for bringing the regional voice to the Belgian Presidency of the Council, and therefore to the 27 Member States of the EU, calling for an ambitious Cohesion Policy post-2027 with full respect of its golden principles.



The 10th European Summit of Regions and Cities in Mons, Belgium (18-19 March 2024) tackled the impact of global and European challenges at regional and local levels. It was an opportunity for AER and Task Force members to meet, discuss and exchange ideas on the future of Cohesion Policy and territorial cohesion.

During the Summit, the voice of the AER members was amplified thanks to the co-signature of the [Joint Call for a Renewed Cohesion Policy post 2027](#).

Scan the QR code to contribute to the Joint Call for a Renewed Cohesion Policy post 2027.



[Read here the AER Position Paper on Cohesion Policy](#)

The 9th Cohesion Policy report was at the centre of the Task Force's discussions and served as an inspiration for the finalisation of the position paper which was adopted during the Spring Bureau Meeting in Batumi, Ajara, in June 2024.

In October, and on the occasion of the 22nd edition of the European Week of Regions and Cities, the AER Secretary General participated in the Cohesion Alliance High-Level Event, "Cohesion Policy at a Crossroads – How to Strengthen Territorial Cohesion and EU Competitiveness," alongside the European Commissioner Elisa Ferreira and the President of the European Committee of the Regions, Vasco Cordeiro.

In December, the Autumn Bureau meeting provided the space to discuss the key messages of the position paper in the heart of the European Parliament. Thanks to this occasion, the messages advocating for a robust and redesigned Cohesion Policy in the next Multiannual Financial Framework reached high-level officials from the European Commission and the European Parliament, which overall contributed to greater visibility of the work carried out by the Task Force throughout the year.

## ABOUT THE TASK FORCE ON AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

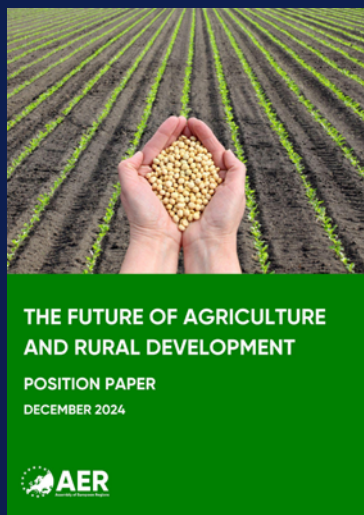
**Chair:** Harold Zoet, Gelderland (the Netherlands)

**Regions:**

- Adana (Türkiye)
- Denizli (Türkiye)
- Donegal (Ireland)
- Fribourg (Switzerland)
- Gelderland (The Netherlands)
- Korçë (Albania)
- Mayo (Ireland)
- Västerbotten (Sweden)

**Areas of interest:**

- Sustainable agricultural practices, decarbonisation, resource management, rural revitalisation



The efforts of the Task Force resulted in the adoption of a position paper on the Future of Agriculture and Rural Development.

The position paper explores the needs for integrated rural strategies which take into account the need for more investments in smart agriculture, efficient public services and efficient governance in rural development and agricultural sector.

[Read the position paper here](#)



As Europe embarks on a transformative journey toward a green and digital future, rooted in environmental sustainability, well-being and prosperity, both rural areas and the agricultural sector face significant opportunities and challenges. To guide the discussions on the future of European agricultural and rural development policies beyond 2027, the AER Political Bureau has established a Task Force on Agriculture and Rural Development, chaired by Harold Zoet, Regional Minister of the Province of Gelderland.

In April, following a debate on the future of farming and rural policy in Europe, organised as part of the EU-funded MEET project, led by the European Youth Forum in partnership with AER, the Task Force began shaping its vision for post-2027 reforms. This work led to the adoption of a position at the Autumn Bureau in December, calling for integrated, place-based rural strategies that enhance urban-rural linkages, improve rural proofing, and acknowledge the diversity of rural economies across Europe. The Task Force also pushed for concrete action to enhance opportunities and quality of life for those living and working in rural areas and the

agricultural sector through innovation, education, digital connectivity, and essential services, while making the case for generational renewal in farming. Stronger governance, better policy coordination and increased funding were flagged as critical to building a more resilient, competitive, and inclusive rural Europe and agricultural sector.

In October, AER advanced its advocacy efforts with a high-level meeting between President Albert Castellanos, Task Force Chair Harold Zoet, and Wolfgang Bartscher, Director-General for Agriculture and Rural Development at the European Commission. The discussion provided a timely opportunity to present AER's messages on the future of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and rural development, reinforcing the need for a policy framework that reflects the realities and ambitions of Europe's regions and rural communities.

# About Eurodissey

*- the only interregional traineeship exchange programme*

In 2024, Eurodissey benefited from the commitment of 13 regions: Azores (PT), Adjara (GE), Brussels-Capital (BE), Catalonia (ES), Madeira (PT), Murcia (ES), Sardinia (IT), Timis (RO), the Union of Cyprus Municipalities (CY), Valencian Community (ES), Valle d'Aosta (IT), Varazdin (HR), and Wallonia (BE).



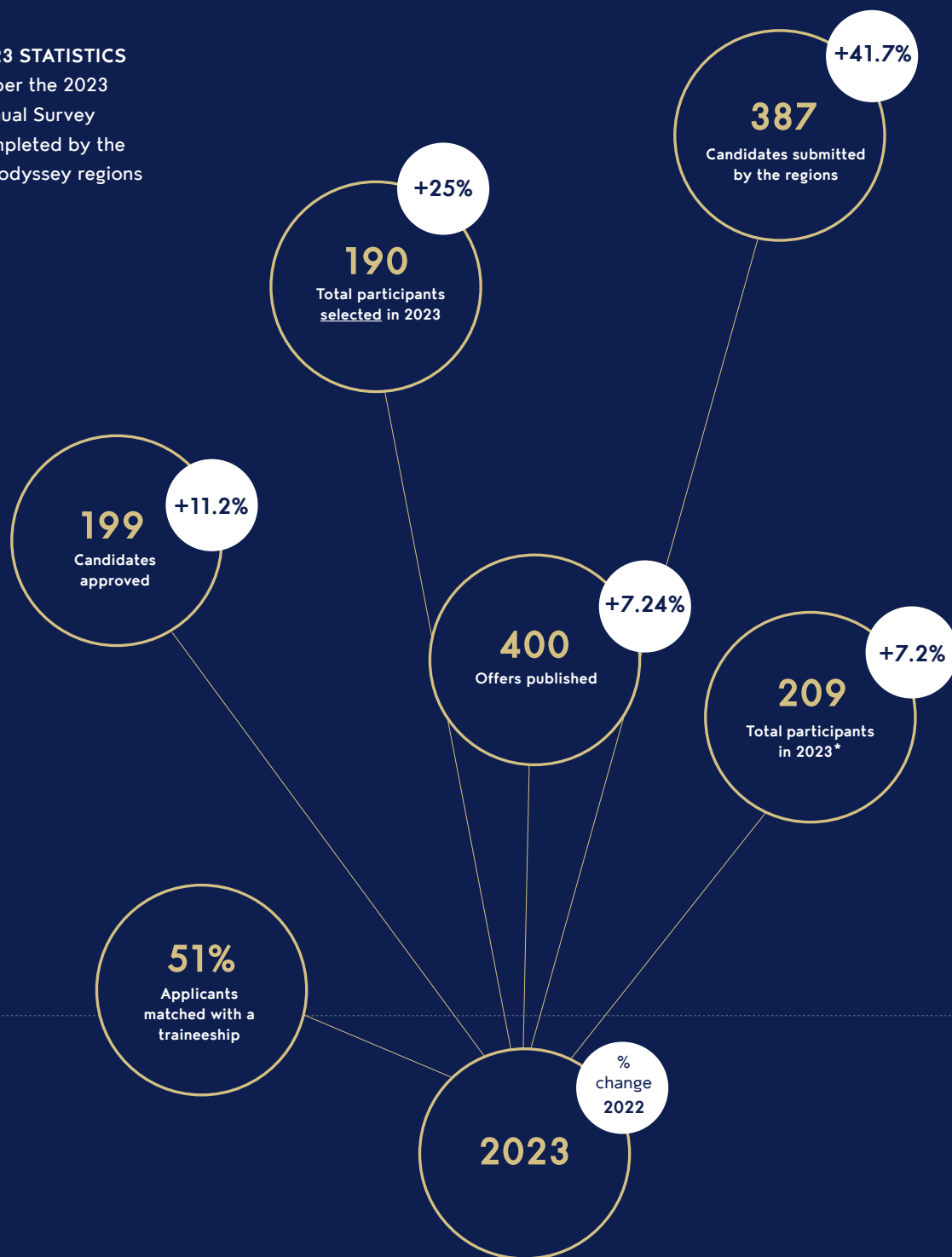
In June 2024, in the context of the AER General Assembly in Batumi (Georgia), the host region of Adjara organised a study visit for Eurodissey members. It included a meeting with the Ministry of Education, highlighting the importance of the programme for the region and reaffirming Adjara's long-standing commitment to Eurodissey and its regional partners across Europe. The visit included presentations on how the programme is managed in the region, along with testimonies from Eurodissey trainees, alumni, and partners in the region, and a networking event among the different regions present. The event was also reported in the regional news.



The yearly Eurodissey Forum, hosted in early November, by the Delegation of Catalonia to the European Union in Brussels, focused on peer learning and capacity building for the Eurodissey correspondents, the civil servants in charge of the practical management of the programme in their respective regions. From offering quality traineeships to finding candidates, communicating effectively about the programme, selecting companies, and working together with a dozen other regions across Europe, the workshops delved into the very concrete work, challenges, good practices, and difficulties of the Eurodissey correspondents, strengthening mutual understanding and building their capacities. As customary, the event also included visits and cultural activities, focused on Brussels and the European Union on one hand, and on the hidden gems of the city of Brussels on the other.



2023 STATISTICS  
as per the 2023  
Annual Survey  
completed by the  
Eurodissey regions



# Our Regions' Work for Interregional Cooperation in wider Europe

## INSIGHTS FROM THE 8TH BLACK SEA SUMMIT IN BATUMI, AJARA, GEORGIA

Held on 13 and 14 June 2024 in Batumi, Ajara, Georgia, the **8th Black Sea Summit** explored the issues of interregional cooperation, innovation, and agriculture and rural development, examining how all these elements can foster partnerships and leverage strategic advantages for mutual benefit. Its panels explored different aspects of interregional cooperation in wider Europe, featuring experts from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and several AER member regions from within and beyond the Black Sea basin.



The conference took place in parallel with the AER General Assembly, Spring Bureau and Working Group meeting, and it was co-organised by the Autonomous Republic of Ajara and the AER.



# Our Members

## • ALBANIA

Berat  
Dibër  
Durrës  
Elbasan  
Fier  
Gjirokaster  
Korçë  
Kukes  
Lezhë  
Shkodër  
Vlorë  
Tiranë

## • ARMENIA

Lori  
Tavush

## • AUSTRIA

Burgenland  
Lower Austria  
Upper Austria  
Tirol  
Vienna

## • BELGIUM

Brussels-Capital Region  
German Speaking  
Community  
Wallonia

## • BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Bosna-Podrinje  
Brcko Distrikt  
Sarajevo  
Zenica-Doboj

## • CROATIA

Brod-Posavina

Istria  
Krapina-Zagorje  
Osijek-Baranja  
Primorje-Gorski Kotar  
Sibenik-Knin  
Split-Dalmatia  
Varaždin  
Zagreb County

## • CYPRUS

Union of Cyprus  
Municipalities

## • FRANCE

Corsica  
Grand Est  
Guadeloupe  
Martinique

## • GEORGIA

Ajara  
Imereti

## • IRELAND

Donegal County Council  
Mayo County Council  
Údarás na Gaeltachta

## • ITALY

Abruzzo  
Molise  
Sardinia  
Trentino-Alto Adige  
Umbria  
Valle d'Aosta

## • MONTENEGRO

Municipality of Budva

## • NETHERLANDS

Flevoland  
Gelderland

## • NORWAY

Nordland  
Innlandet

## • PORTUGAL

Açores  
Madeira

## • ROMANIA

Alba  
Arad  
Arges  
Bihor  
Bistrita-Nasaud  
Brasov  
Buzau  
Calarasi  
Caras-Severin  
Cluj

Covasna  
Dambovita  
Dolj

Galati  
Gorj  
Harghita  
Hunedoara  
Iasi  
Ilfov

Maramures  
Mehedinti  
Mures  
Neamt  
Olt

Prahova  
Salaj  
Satu Mare  
Sibiu

Timis  
Tulcea  
Vaslui  
Vrancea

## • SERBIA

Sumadija and Pomoravlje  
Vojvodina

## • SLOVAKIA

Košice

## • SLOVENIA

East Slovenia  
West Slovenia

## • SPAIN

Catalonia  
Valencia  
Murcia

## • SWEDEN

Jönköping  
Norrbotten  
Värmland  
Västerbotten  
Västra Götaland

## • SWITZERLAND

Basel-Stadt  
Fribourg  
Zürich

## • TURKEY

Adana  
Antalya  
Denizli  
Edirne  
Erzurum  
Gaziantep  
Izmir  
Mus

Sakarya

## • UKRAINE

Association of Self-Governments Euroregion Carpathians-Ukraine  
Chernivtsi  
Dnipropetrovsk  
Kharkiv  
Kirovohrad  
Kryvi Rih  
Lviv  
Odesa Rayon  
Odesa Oblast  
Pavlohrad  
Poltava  
Rivne  
Ternopil  
Transcarpathia  
Zaporizhzhia

# Events 2024

14-17 Feb.	Kick-off meeting of Climbing the Ladder project (CL-YE) Berlin, Germany	18 May	EU-Belong webinar «Addressing Racial Injustice, Discrimination, and Bias in AI within Public Administration» Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain	22-23 Oct.	Conference Mental Health Challenges in Today's Youth - A Regional Perspective Rijeka, Croatia
28 Feb.	YRN workshop «the concept of youth participation» online	5 June	YRN Open online meeting for World Environment Day online	31 Oct. 3 Nov.	YRN Capacity Building weekend Zürich, Switzerland
1 Mar.	YRN workshop «Formal and informal participation structures» online	12 June	Workshop of the Working Group on the Bioeconomy «Changing perspectives on resources for a sustainable bioeconomy» Batumi, Georgia	4-7 Nov.	Eurodissey Forum Brussels, Belgium
4 Mar.	YRN workshop «Participation and project planning» online	12 June	AER Spring Bureau meeting Batumi, Georgia	7 Nov.	Joint Horizons- Partnerships for a Smart Recovery in Ukraine - Ukraine Focus Group at the Smart Cities Expo Barcelona, Spain
6 Mar.	Breakfast debate with MEP Lukas Mandl - MEET debate Brussels	13 June	AER General Assembly Batumi, Georgia	19-22 Nov.	Partners» meeting of the Climbing the Ladder project Athens, Greece
14-17 Mar.	YRN General Assembly & MEET debate Zalău, Romania	13-14 June	VIII Black Sea Summit Batumi, Georgia	26-28 Nov.	Steering Committee meeting of the EU-Belong project Leipzig, Germany
14 Mar.	Info session on Interreg NEXT MED online	12-16 Aug.	Summer Academy 2024- The Summer Academy of Culture & Study visit of Climbing the Ladder project (CL-YE) Bodø, Norway	20 Nov. 6 Dec.	VII Regional Business Forum Novi Sad, Serbia
19-21 Mar.	EU-Belong Intercultural Integration: A Shared Journey towards Equality and Belonging Letterkenny, Ireland	3 Oct.	Final event of the MEET project Brussels, Belgium	27 Nov.	Live webinar on Green H2 Ecosystems online
20 Mar.	MEET debate & launch of the Task Force on Decarbonisation «Green Horizons: navigating decarbonization, critical raw materials and recyclability» Brussels, Belgium	5 Oct.	YRN workshop «Sustainable Pathways: Youth-led Foresight for Territorial development» Tirana, Albania	2-5 Dec.	Study visit within the Climbing the Ladder project Brussels, Belgium
22 Mar.	MEET debate «Writing the story of Europe: 2024 EU Elections and the next chapters» Letterkenny, Ireland	7-11 Oct.	Study visit within the Climbing the Ladder project Bratislava (Slovakia), Vienna (Austria)	3 Dec.	AER Autumn Bureau «Regions shaping Europe's future» at the European Parliament Brussels, Belgium
26 Mar.	YOUTHopia Transnational event - Workshop on Skills, Cohesion Policy and Project Development - part of Summer Symposium Brussels, Belgium	8 Oct.	Breakfast briefing «Circular bioeconomy» by the Working Group on Bioeconomy Brussels, Belgium	4 Dec.	Breakfast briefing on 'How to build resilient societies to promote mental health' by the AER Working Group on Mental health Brussels, Belgium
18 April	MEET debate and launch of the Task Force on Rural Development and Agriculture «Feeding the Future: Regional Perspectives on Agriculture and Rural Development in Europe» Brussels, Belgium	9 Oct.	EU-Belong workshop at the EUREgionsWeek 2024 «Skills: (EU)Belong here - How intercultural strategies can boost talent attraction and retention» Brussels, Belgium	4 Dec.	Workshop on Green Hydrogen by the AER Working Group on Green Hydrogen Brussels, Belgium
23 April	Study visit on Mental Health in Odesa online	14-18 Oct.	Partner Leadership Programme: «Dúiche» - Capitalising on Culture, Competing on Difference—Why and How Place Matters? Leuven, Belgium		



# OUR EXECUTIVE BOARD



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**President**

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**Vice President – Treasurer**

Region: Grand Est (FR)

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**DAVID BATSIKADZE**

**Vice President for Science**

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**NINA BJÖRBY**

**Vice President for Democracy,  
Inclusion and Equality**

Region: Västerbotten (SE)

Seconded Officer:  
Kurt-Åke Hammarstedt



**NICOLA CAMPITELLI**

**Vice President for Innovation,  
Urban and Territorial Planning**

Region: Abruzzo (IT)

Seconded Officer: Leo Grassi



**LINDA HELÉN HAUKLAND**

**Vice-President for Employment,  
Education and Skills  
(from June 2024)**

Region: Nordland (NO)

Seconded Officer: Åshild Opøyen



**SIMON JOHNSEN**

**Vice President for Employment,  
Education and Skills  
(until June 2024)**

Region: Nordland (NO)



**LILIJANA MADJAR**

**Vice President for Cohesion,  
Public Services and  
Digitalisation**

Region: Zahodna Slovenija (SI)

Seconded Officer: Nataša Rojšek



**LUKAS MANDL**

**Vice President for European  
Integration and Wider Europe**

Region: Lower Austria (AT)

Seconded Officer:  
Caroline Parsché



**SERGII MILIUTIN**

**Vice President for the Local  
Dimension and Ukraine Recovery**

Region: Kryvyi Rih (UA)

Seconded Officer:  
Anton Krasovskyi



**GERRY MURRAY**

**Vice President for Social Policy  
and Rural Opportunities**

Region: Mayo (IE)



**MÍCHEÁL Ó HÉANAIGH**

**Vice President for Youth,  
Culture & Tourism**

Region: Donegal (IE)

Seconded Officer: Anne Marie  
Conlon



**JOHANNES SUNDELIN**

**Vice President for Sustainability,  
Green Transition and Health**

Region: Norrbotten (SE)

Seconded Officer: Per Erik  
Andersson



**JEAN-LUC VANRAES**

**Vice President for Interregional  
and Global Cooperation.**

Region: Brussels-Capital (BE)

Seconded Officer: Karima Zahi



**DAMIR ZOENICA**

**Vice President for Economic  
Development and Investment**

Region: Vojvodina (RS)

Seconded Officer: Sanja Šifliš



**ESTHER ESTANY**

**AER Eurodysey President**

Region: Catalonia (ES)

Seconded Officer: Adriana  
Andrés Comas



**KARI ANNE BØKESTAD ANDREASSEN**

**AER Summer Academy President  
(since February 2023)**

Region: Nordland (NO)

Seconded Officer: Åshild Opøyen



**NORBERT NAGY**

**AER Youth Regional Network  
(YRN) President**

**(since March 2024)**

Region: Sălaj County  
Council (RO)



**JIM SIMONSEN JENSEN**

**AER Youth Regional Network  
(YRN) President**

**(until March 2024)**

Region: Nordland (NO)



**DR HANDE ÖZSAN BOZATLI**

**AER Honorary President**

Region: Istanbul (TR)

AER President 2013-2017



**MAGNUS BERTSSON**

**AER Honorary President**

AER President 2017-2023

Region: Västra Götaland  
(Sweden)

# Bodies of the Assembly of European Regions

## GOVERNING BODIES

The **General Assembly** is the highest decision-making body of the Assembly of European Regions. It convenes representatives from whole membership once per year and charges the Executive Board to implement its organisational and statutory decisions

The **Executive Board** manages the coordination of all AER activities and charges the Secretary General to implement its decisions.

## THE POLITICAL BODY

The **AER Bureau** is the primary political voice of the network. Composed of Executive Boards members and two representatives per State, it has the purpose to define the network's political positioning underpinning political discussions as well as lobbyind and advocacy activities.

## THE THEMATIC BODIES

The **AER Working Groups** provide a space for experience and knowledge exchange between regional policymakers, both civil servants and politicians. Chaired by a politician supported by a civil servant and facilitated by the AER Secretariat, Working Groups are set up for a two-year period and meet both in person and online. The current Chairs are:

- **Daniel Schützer**, Värmland, Sweden for the Working Group on Mental Health
- **Nataša Ritonja**, Eastern Slovenia, Slovenia for the Working Group on Bioeconomy
- **Albert Castellanos**, Catalonia, Spain for the Working Group on Green Hydrogen

The **AER Task Forces** are convened by the Bureau with the objective of driving AER's joint political action in specific issues, in support of the network's political priorities. There are currently four Task Forces, each led by a Bureau member with support from representatives from AER member regions. The current Chairs are:

- **Lilijana Madjar**, Western Slovenia (Slovenia) for the Task Force on Cohesion Policy
- **Johannes Sundelin**, Norrbotten (Sweden) for the Task Force on Decarbonisation
- **Harold Zoet**, Gelderland (Netherlands) for the Task Force on Agriculture and Regional Development

## OTHER BODIES

The **AER Monitoring and Evaluation Group (MEG)** monitors the performance of the AER operations according to statutes and provisions. In 2024, the members were:

- **Thomas Hartman**, Västerbotten (Sweden), Chair
- **Erjon Nexhipi**, Korçë (Albania)
- **Vyacheslav Berezhnyy**, Kryvyi Rih (Ukraine)

The **AER Election Committee** takes care of the necessary procedures for smooth elections within the General Assembly. In 2024, its members were:

- **Thomas Hartman**, Västerbotten (Sweden)
- **Marina Medarić**, Primorje-Gorski Kotar County (Croatia)
- **Kenneth Backgård**, Norrbotten (Sweden)

## SECRETARY GENERAL

- **Vania Freitas** (interim from May 2024, full time from September 2024)
- **Christian Spahr** (until May 2024)

## MEMBER RELATIONS

- **Justin Sammon**, Coordinator

## INSTITUTIONAL RELATIONS AND ADVOCACY

- **Vania Freitas**, Coordinator (until May 2024)
- **Gisela Guari Cañada**, Coordinator (from October 2024 )
- **Larisa Stanciu**, Manager (maternity leave from August 2024)

## PROGRAMMES

- **Lorène Weber**, Coordinator
- **Teodora Nicolaescu**, Eurodyssey intern (until March 2024)

## POLICY AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

- **Johanna Pacevicius**, Coordinator
- **Ana Isabel Méndez López**, intern (November 2024-March 2025)
- **Nicola Miceli**, intern (January-June 2024)

## EUROPEAN PROJECTS

- **Agnese Pantaloni**, EU Projects Coordinator
- **Anouk Albinovanus**, Financial and Administrative Manager (until March 2024)
- **Emanuela Pisanò**, EU Project Manager
- **Giulia Moretto**, EU Project Manager
- **Mirjam de Jong**, EU Finance & Communication Manager

## COMMUNICATION AND EVENTS

- **Barbara Polin**, Coordinator
- **Rocio Rivera Torrente**, intern (until December 2024)
- **Maicon Bellavia**, intern (until August 2024)

## GENERAL FINANCES

- **José Viaud** (until September 2024)

AER SOCIAL STATS







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[@europeanregions](https://twitter.com/europeanregions)