SEPTEMBER 30TH, 2026
THIRD EDITION

Interreg Danube Region
Co-funded by the European Union
SMILE Incubator

SMILE INCUBATOR NEWSLETTER

ALL THE BEST HIGHLIGHTS AND MORE



CELEBRATING ONE YEAR OF SMILE INCUBATOR

Dear SMILE community,

It is hard to believe that the SMILE Incubator has already been underway for more than a year. In this time, our partnership has continued to grow into a committed community, working together to strengthen rural young people's leadership and social media skills.

The third project period brought many opportunities to turn this shared commitment into action. We met with stakeholders, exchanged ideas in workshops, completed 12 deliverables and contributed to two project outputs. We also presented SMILE's work to the international academic community at several conferences. Our successful first-year review was another important milestone as we continued to build momentum for the work ahead.

There is plenty to discover in this newsletter, from project meetings and workshops to conference contributions and reflections on youth participation. I invite you to take a look at what the SMILE community has been working on.

Thank you to the amazing SMILE team for dedication and collaboration. I'm proud of what we have achieved together, and I look forward to what comes next.



Prof. dr. Simona Kukovič
Project Manager

SMILE goes on ... smile with us...

Read more on our official Interreg website.

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Events & Activities

GLOBAL SOCIAL NEXUS 2026

On the 15th and 16th of May, SASS (SMILE lead partner) hosted a two day conference in Ljubljana, Slovenia. The conference, named *GLOBAL SOCIAL NEXUS: Connecting Disciplines. Shaping Society*, brought together experts from all corners of the world. With 124 academic papers submitted, the conference hosted 15 international panels, 9 doctorate panels, 4 round tables and a special panel on Interreg project, where SMILE was presented!



Many panels, many more experts

While the conference brought in many expertise in various fields, the main topic of discussion was ***Societies in Flux: Navigating Uncertainty, Change, and Resilience.*** The special occasion also marked the 20th anniversary of the School of Advanced Social Studies, lead partner of the SMILE Incubator project.

GLOBAL SOCIAL NEXUS
Connecting Disciplines. Shaping Society.

Members of SASS team also contributed and participated in a special panel dedicated specifically to represent Interreg projects and their impact on the world. The panel gave them a voice, and power to form new synergies, foster new and old connections, present their ideas. Along with SMILE, other Interreg projects were also presented, some with similar topics and other with completely different fields.

In addition to all the panels and round tables, the conference was proud to host prof. dr. **Christian Welzl**, one of the most prolific names in contemporary politology and sociology of political culture. His presentation on the topic of democratic processes and the dangers that liberal democracies face, were the hallmark of the conference itinerary. **GSN returns in 2027, in Kranjska Gora, Slovenia, on the 13th and 14th of May.**

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Events & Activities

3RD SCOM CONCLUDED



After the conclusion

It is almost hard to believe how quickly time passes. Having celebrated one full year since the launch of SMILE Incubator, and now concluding the 3rd SCOM (Steering Committee Meeting) in the wonderful city of Cluj-Napoca, Romania, our team is stronger and more determined than ever.

Our project also successfully **passed the first year review (FYR)** and is effectively trough the third period, which is also one of the more busier periods of the project, but also the most rewarding. **Now we go into action!** Organizing workshops, building synergies and networks with stakeholders - all to empower rural youth with leaderships skills, and also tackling digital (social) media literacy, which will foster a self-reliant and inclusive environment for **young people to thrive** in.

Our SCOM only solidified our ambitions and wishes of what this project really means, and what positive changes it brings. **With all of the technicalities settled and ideas aligned, we are more than confident to see this trough.**

To the team: Thank you all for your hard and dedicated effort you put into the project, especially sacrificing time you could have spent elsewhere, making sure that rural areas don't remain forgotten and are brought into the light they deserve. It not only a pleasure, but a privilege to be working with such dedicated members of the consortium. This one is for you.



Proud of our work

Time continues to go on, but so does SMILE. Make sure to smile with us. Until next time in Sofia, Bulgaria.

Mulțumesc Romania, mulțumesc team!

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ASSESSING MAIN ISSUES RELATED TO YOUTH: SOCIAL MEDIA SKILLS AND LEADERSHIP

Formulating policies....



On the 28th of May, our team gathered online and in Eisenstadt, Austria, to come together in a workshop environment and evaluate important project details. The workshop was hosted by out project partner FOSTER EUROPE. Many thanks!

The main topic of discussion was assessing main issues related to youth social media skills and leadership, as well as recapping of what's been done so far, and discussed shaping proper policy guidelines to empower rural youth.



Assessing issues of rural youth

Our consortium is a vibrant collective of many fields of study and expertise, that is why we also discussed among ourselves and gave several short inputs on best practices/approaches. While it is important to remain flexible and adapt to the outcomes, it is also important to see the big picture and align the project in such a way so that is makes sense and is most impactful to our target audience - **rural youth**.

We concluded on a positive note - with vigor and enthusiasm - with SMILE heading in the right direction. **More on this in SMILE reading corner!**

KEEPING UP WITH THE TEAM: SMILE MONTHLY MEETINGS



Missing the latest news? Want to be the first to know what the team is up to? Follow our social media channels and be the first to find out the latest news and updated from our partners, including keeping up with our monthly meetings!

Each month, the team gathers to check in on the progress of the project, carve up new ideas, reflect on past achievements and more... Always active, making sure it all goes to plan! Visit us on social media platforms or our official Interreg site.

Read more on our official Interreg website.

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Engaging, Challenging, Improving

ASSESSING MAIN ISSUES RELATED TO YOUTH II : A WORKSHOP IN SLOVAKIA

On the 12th of May, our partner EUBA organized a workshop! The goal of the workshop was to understand how young people today perceive leadership in both the digital and real offline environments, as well as what role digitalization, experience with social networks, and the institutional environment in which we actually shape the competencies of young people as citizens, as voters, and as members of various networks and organizations.



The workshop also covered the SMILE Incubator project framework, which includes project objectives, partnership structure, and future initiatives targeted at improving social media leadership abilities and active citizenship among rural youth in the Danube Region.



Open Call! On the 7th of October, we issued an open call. It's purpose was to identify, engage, and support a diverse group of relevant stakeholders.

The call aims to **strengthen rural youth innovation ecosystems, ensure transparent and inclusive participation processes**, mobilize community and institutional support, and generate project ideas, partnerships, and working groups that will contribute to the long-term goals of the SMILE Incubator project.

Selected stakeholders will gain access to capacity-building programs, visibility through SMILE communication channels, networking opportunities at national and regional levels, and participation in developing and testing innovative rural initiatives.

A NEW FACE OF SMILE: SELECTION OF THE OFFICIAL SMILE BADGE

Great news! The team has come together to select the official SMILE Incubator badge!

The completion of the badge, as a part of Activity 1.1 (and Deliverable 1.4.3), means that it will be used as a digital "stamp" that organizations/stakeholders can earn, when they **cooperate** with the Youth Activation Competition (marked under Specific Objective 3 of the project) and fulfill the organizational criteria set by the project.

It is not only a mark of participation, but also a reminder that the work done is important and impactful - that is: **empowering rural youth!**

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MOVING FORWARD: kick-off meeting for the policy impact committee

to empower

On April 9th, our partner Foster Europe Foundation for strong European Regions **hosted a kick-off meeting of the Policy Impact Committee**, signaling another leap forward in the SMILE project timeline! The committee unites **experts from various sectors** into a transnational advisory group, helping ensure that the project's results are relevant, impactful and effective.



SMILE EXPLAINS:

An Interreg Policy Impact Committee is a group of project partners and relevant stakeholders who assess how a project's results can influence public policies, improve decision-making, and support changes in legislation.

At the online meeting, members had the opportunity to get to know one another, see what the project is all about, and **align their shared role to make sure that the work done will be one of quality**.

Many thanks again to all members for taking part in an active change, as well as taking their time to be on board with us. Thank you to the coordinators for their effort and organization.

Vis-a-Vis: A trip to Montenegro to visit our parters

Making plans



During the period from the 13th to 15th of April, a small **team from LP SASS visited** the beautiful country of Montenegro, soon to be the next member of the EU, and met with **Teodora Đurnić**, leader of our project partner **UZOR**.

We exchanged some pleasant words and debated on the future of the SMILE project, as well as the good work already done! Was a pleasure to visit.

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First Year Review and beyond...

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Happy Birthday SMILE!

April 1st: *one year anniversary*

Dear followers, dear readers, dear all!

Thank you all for your continuous support and making SMILE what it is today!

The project is busier than ever, with many deliverables, workshops and tasks ahead. We will continue on this path to empower rural youth!

In the meantime, follow us on our social media platforms and see how even you can make a difference!



Our great team

...a successful FYR!

For this SCOM also we actively prepared for our big meeting in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, where we presented further activities and development of the project.

In addition to this, this SCOM was also be very significant for the project, as it underwent and successfully completed the first year review - an important milestone in any project's lifetime.

Going strong!

A well oiled machine

Meeting our partners

Want to see a more in-depth look on who we are and what we do?

Search no more! Follow this *link* and meet our partners further on our Facebook page, where we regularly update who we are with introductory videos!



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what we strive for...

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Taking part in TakePart: SMILE research results presented in Romania!

Following our conference for the project, a few of us remained in Romania to present our research results regarding rural youth and their position/activity on the digital platforms. While the panels were very diverse in topics discussed, our findings were surprisingly similar:

While (rural) **youth show a high degree of digital knowledge** and give somewhat high priority to political, social and environmental topics, their overall lack of further engagement is more than apparent, regardless of specific age groups. Combined with the rise of AI and misinformation, the youth(s) also **expressed the lack of programs** and activities from local/regional/national stakeholders, which would in turn bolster participation.





It is now clear, more than ever, that **a gap needs to be bridged**, and stakeholders to initiate. With the build up of these networks, hopefully, the **connection will remain and rural youth will thrive** in their areas. This is now the key and ultimate objective of SMILE.

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Building Synergies and Engaging Gen Z: SMILE Incubator at the PATHS Summer Camp

By our partner STRIA



Empowering the Next Generation of Digital Leaders

Representing STRIA, **Project Manager Inez Fekete** hosted an interactive "social media exhibition" booth at the camp. The goal was to move beyond theory and get young participants actively involved. And they delivered! The youth co-created dynamic Social Media Reels directly aligned with the core pillars of the SMILE Incubator project: responsible digital citizenship, active participation, and media literacy.

How do we ensure that our capacity-building tools and upcoming youth competitions truly resonate with today's youth? By asking them directly. Recently, the SMILE Incubator project took a hands-on approach to grassroots youth engagement through a fantastic cross-project collaboration.

At the South Transdanubian Regional Innovation Agency (STRIA), as the international work package leader (SO3) for the SMILE Incubator project, we strongly believe that the most impactful European initiatives are built on active synergies.

Recently, we had the opportunity to put this into practice at the PATHS project summer camp. We were thrilled to accept the invitation of our Associated Strategic Partner (ASP), the Central Danube Development Agency (CDDA). This event perfectly highlighted how different Interreg projects can mutually strengthen each other, building on a solid foundation of regional cooperation where partners like the University of Pécs (Lead Partner of PATH project) have also been actively contributing since our early stages.

From Grassroots Insights to Concrete Action

The experiences from the camp will directly shape not only our upcoming SMILE capacity-building tools, but also the framework of our highly anticipated international youth competition. By listening directly to our target audience, we are ensuring that all our upcoming initiatives are not designed "behind a desk," but are highly practical and genuinely customized to the actual needs of youth in the Danube Region.

A big thank you to CDDA for facilitating this connection, and to the inspiring young minds for their incredible creativity.

Read more on our official Interreg website.

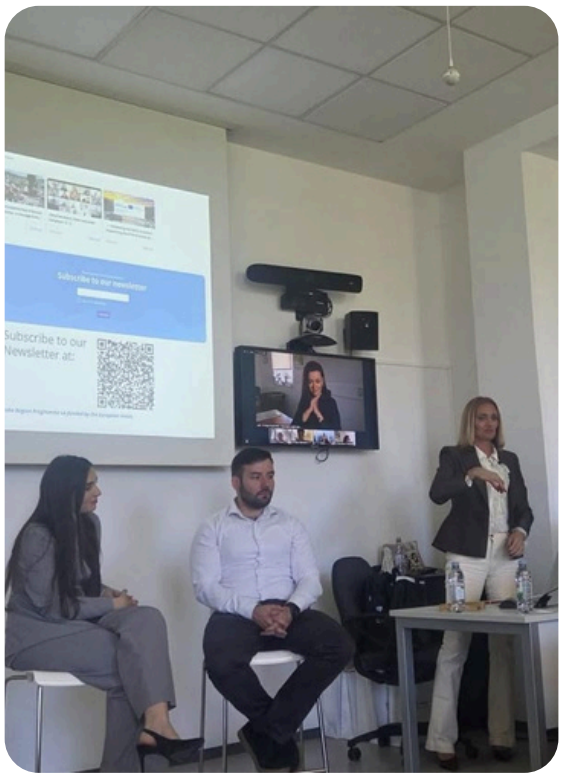
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FROM IDEAS TO REALITY

FROM BARRIERS TO ACTION: A FUTURE IN WORKSHOP EVENTS

A hint of things to come



Synergy and knowledge

On the 4th of May, our partner RIT Croatia, hosted a workshop event in Zagreb.

The aim of the workshop was to **examine the regional conditions**, evaluate challenges and harness opportunities in cooperation with rural youth and local stakeholders. Furthermore, the gathering also served as a validation effort to compare completed country reports, which paint a clearer picture on the actual conditions of rural youth.

With the help of distinguished guests of the academia, the organized round table helped to further convert ideas and research results into practical implementable solutions, which will empower rural youth.

The most pressing of questions being on what creates the gap between interest and active participation among youth and how do we bridge it? **How does SMILE bridge it?**



Workshop in full swing

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30 YEARS, 1 COMMUNITY: SMILE presented at CEPSA

Celebrating the 30th anniversary of CEPSA - Central European Political Science Association - where many of our partners from SMILE Incubator gathered at a prestigious 2 day conference in Plzen, Czech Republic.

It featured many panels and round-tables with various topics presented, from socioeconomic to political academic papers. The event brings together academics and scholars from all around Europe and the world. It is a story of academic cooperation across borders.





Our team was proud to host a round table event, where listeners could tune in into the latest and greatest from the SMILE project. The panel specifically focused on our past findings, valuable research and analyses within SMILE. The round table solidified our spirit as a team, and confirmed that we are on the right path to empower rural youth!

The way to go!

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SMILE READING CORNER

Likes, but No Voice? Why Social Media Skills Are About More Than Follower Counts *(5 min)*

By our partner FOSTER EUROPE

Young people across the Danube Region are online – but are they truly participating? A workshop held in Eisenstadt brought into sharp focus where the real gaps lie.

Growing up today means growing up with social media. Instagram, TikTok, YouTube – these platforms are not just entertainment. They are spaces for communication, identity and, increasingly, political expression. And yet: the fact that young people spend a great deal of time online does not mean they are genuinely heard there. Or that they know how to make themselves heard.

This is precisely where the SMILE Incubator project comes in – the Social Media Leadership Incubator for the Danube Region. Co-funded by the EU through the Interreg Danube Region programme, the project addresses a question that sounds simpler than it is: how can young people use social media not just as consumers, but as active, competent participants in society and public life?

BEING ONLINE IS NOT THE SAME AS TAKING PART

There is a common **misconception that digitalisation has automatically solved the problem of youth participation**. Yes, the barriers to visibility have lowered. Anyone can post, comment or share. But being visible is not the same as having influence. And reach is not the same as impact.

Research and policy mapping consistently show that youth engagement tends to remain low-intensity – a like here, a share there, perhaps the occasional comment. Genuine participation – shaping decisions, making one's concerns visible, engaging in political processes – is far less common. And it is not accidental. It requires competences that have to be learned and practised.

Media literacy does not mean knowing how to take a good photo or edit a video. It means being able to contextualise information, understand algorithms, communicate constructively and use one's voice with purpose.



Read more on our official Interreg website.

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The Blind Spot: Rural and Peripheral Youth

The challenge becomes even more pronounced when we turn our attention to young people in rural and peripheral areas. They are not less online – but they face structurally worse starting conditions. Weaker digital infrastructure, fewer local opportunities, geographical isolation, and limited institutional support. Growing up in a small town in the Danube Region often means having less access to spaces where participation can be practised and experienced.

This is not an individual problem. **It is a structural one** – and it reproduces itself. Those who have never experienced that their opinion matters are less likely to engage. Those without access to mentoring or networks find it harder to develop leadership skills. The gap between urban and rural youth widens – not just in terms of internet access, but in access to participation itself.

Power to the youth!

What the Workshop in Eisenstadt Made Clear

On 28 May 2026, around 20 experts, project partners and stakeholders gathered at the Esterházy Palace in Eisenstadt – in a hybrid format, with participants both on-site and online – to discuss exactly these questions. The workshop was part of Activity A1.2 of the SMILE Incubator project and had a clear purpose: not just to name problems, but to develop concrete policy approaches.

What the discussions revealed was unsurprising in its diagnosis, but striking in its clarity: young people want to participate – but only when they feel it makes a difference. Symbolic participation, being consulted without consequence, leads to frustration and withdrawal. Genuine co-creation requires transparency, feedback and visible outcomes.

Flavia Enengl from the EUSDR Priority Area 9 "People & Skills" team (L&R Social Research) placed the discussion in its broader regional policy context. She pointed to the uneven developments across the Danube Region: while youth employment rates have risen in many countries, PISA results between 2015 and 2022 show a significant decline in basic skills – particularly in EU member states. Digital competence and citizenship skills are increasingly recognised as prerequisites not only for social participation, but for labour market integration as well.

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Leadership Competence Is Not a Workshop Topic – It Takes Time

Another theme that surfaced repeatedly in Eisenstadt: **leadership competence cannot be taught in a single seminar. It develops through continuous mentoring, through taking on responsibility in supported environments, through sustained engagement over time.** What young people across the Danube Region often lack are precisely these structures – mentoring programmes that outlast individual project cycles, cooperation between schools, municipalities and youth organisations that does not depend on project funding.

What tends to dominate instead are one-off offers. A workshop here, a training session there. Valuable impulses – but without follow-up, without continuity, without being embedded in a longer-term support structure. What actually works looks different: young people who are regularly involved in decision-making processes, who know who to turn to, who have role models and sustained guidance.

The Competences That Are Actually Needed

The workshop made clear what a genuinely contemporary approach to media literacy would need to deliver – and it goes well beyond "staying safe online":

- ***Critical thinking and fact-checking*** *– in an era where misinformation is algorithmically amplified, the ability to assess and contextualise information is essential.*
- ***Algorithm awareness*** *– understanding why certain content is shown and other content is not is a basic requirement for informed media use.*
- ***Political and participatory literacy*** *– knowing how political processes work and how to engage with them meaningfully.*
- ***Constructive online communication*** *– in an increasingly polarised digital public sphere, the ability to engage respectfully and substantively is a skill that must be learned.*
- ***Collaborative leadership and project management*** *– because meaningful participation is rarely a solo endeavour.*

*Together, these competences form what might be called "**participation literacy**": the capacity to engage as an active, informed and self-confident citizen – online and offline alike.*

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What Policy Can Achieve – and What It Cannot

How to tackle such a problem?

The Policy Lab sessions of the workshop made one thing clear: solutions need to operate on multiple levels. Locally, there is a need for permanently anchored participation structures – youth advisory bodies, accessible contact points, mentoring programmes. At national level, media literacy and leadership development need to be integrated into educational frameworks – not as optional extras, but as core responsibilities. And at EU and Danube Region level, transnational exchange matters: what works well in one country can be adapted elsewhere.

What policy alone cannot do is replace grassroots structures. Institutions can create spaces, provide resources and set frameworks. But lived participation emerges where young people have real points of contact, where trust has grown over time, where engagement is visibly rewarded – not with certificates, but with impact.

Next Steps in the SMILE Project

The results of the Eisenstadt workshop feed directly into the next phases of the project. They form the substantive foundation for the Policy Suggestions (D1.2.3) and the Strategic Guidelines for Social Media Leadership (D1.2.4), which are being developed and validated in close collaboration with partner organizations from across the Danube Region.

Within SO3, the project is actively developing a capacity-building curriculum designed to strengthen the digital skills, leadership capacities and civic participation of young people living in rural areas across the Danube Region.

The programme covers five key areas: digital identity and leadership, media and information literacy, civic participation, online community management, and advocacy and sustainable action planning. Through practical exercises, teamwork and peer mentoring, participants will learn to use social media to address local challenges, engage with decision-makers and develop initiatives that benefit their communities.

The next step: consultation, feedback, dissemination. Because that too is part of the project – ensuring that insights do not disappear into drawers, but reach the people and institutions where they are needed.

How is SMILE involved

*Thank you for taking your time to read our **third edition of SMILE Incubator Newsletter**! We hope your reading was pleasant and you learned a thing or two about our project. To keep up with the latest and greatest, **follow us on our social media platforms**! Until next time!*

Edited and presented (with love and no AI) by:
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LP SASS Communication Team Assistant



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