



Co-funded by
the European Union

ELEVATE: Empowering Communities for European Integration - A European Town Twinning Event for Strengthening Local Governance and Citizen Participation was held in Bansko, Bulgaria, from 7 to 9 June 2026

From 7 to 9 June 2026, the Association for Innovative Mentality (AIM) successfully organised the European Town Twinning event of the project “ELEVATE: Empowering Communities for European Integration” in Bansko, Bulgaria, under the framework of the CERV Programme. The event focused on strengthening the role of local and regional authorities in the European integration process, while promoting democratic participation, inclusive governance and stronger dialogue between citizens and policymakers. Bringing together local authorities, civil society organisations, community representatives and citizens, the event created a platform for discussion on how European policies and values can be translated into meaningful action at local level. Through dialogue, practical exchange and mutual learning, participants explored ways to make local governance more transparent, participatory and responsive to the needs of the communities it serves.

The partner consortium included six participating countries: Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia and Romania. The participating organisations were the Association for Innovative Mentality from Bulgaria, the Municipality of Voio from Greece, Associazione Culturale Lighthouse Languages from Italy, Lokalna Akcijska Grupa Prigorje-Zagorje from Croatia, Društvo za Razvijanje Prostovoljnega Dela Novo Mesto from Slovenia and Asociatia ASEL RO from Romania. Through this cooperation, the project brought together local authorities, civil society organisations and citizens from different European communities to exchange experiences, strengthen cross-border cooperation and explore how local governance can contribute more effectively to European integration.

Kicking off on Day 1, participants arrived in Bansko and were welcomed through introductory greetings and remarks. The welcome dinner provided an informal and friendly setting for the participating delegations to meet, exchange first impressions and begin building connections ahead of the main programme. This first evening helped create an open and collaborative atmosphere for the discussions, workshops and exchanges that followed.

Day 2 formed the core of the ELEVATE event, beginning with registrations and the official Opening Session & Event Introduction. Participants were welcomed into the Open Citizens’ Debate and introduced to its main objectives, setting the scene for a broader discussion on the role of local authorities in the European integration process.

The opening highlighted the importance of strong local governance in bringing European priorities closer to citizens and ensuring that local communities can actively contribute to the way these priorities are translated into practice.

From this broader perspective, attention turned to the challenge of aligning EU policies with local needs. Discussions explored how municipalities can apply fundamental European values, including democracy and the rule of law, within their own communities, while remaining responsive to different local realities. Participants reflected on the role of local governments as an important link between European policy frameworks and the everyday needs and expectations of citizens.

This connection between governance and citizens was further developed through the session on Inclusive Participation & Citizen Voice. Particular emphasis was placed on the involvement of women, young people and marginalised groups, highlighting the importance of creating decision-making processes in which different voices can be represented and heard. The exchange reinforced the idea that effective local governance depends not only on institutions and policies, but also on meaningful opportunities for citizens to participate in shaping their communities.

The discussion then moved from participation in principle to participation in practice. During the interactive workshop on Practical Tools for Implementing e-Participation Strategies in Local Governance, participants explored the potential of e-platforms, online consultations and participatory applications to strengthen communication between citizens and local authorities. These tools were examined as practical ways of encouraging engagement, increasing transparency and making local decision-making more accessible.

The morning concluded with the inspirational talk “From Local Actions to European Shared Endeavours”, which widened the discussion from the local to the European level. The session highlighted how municipalities can contribute to broader European objectives through local initiatives, cross-border cooperation and the exchange of experiences, demonstrating how actions rooted in individual communities can become part of a wider shared European effort.

In the afternoon, participants had the opportunity to connect these discussions with the local context through the Study Visit “Bansko Cultural Heritage & Local Governance Roots.” Visits to local landmarks offered a closer look at Bansko’s cultural and historical identity and encouraged reflection on the relationship between heritage, community life and contemporary governance. The visit added a practical dimension to the day, showing how the history and identity of a place can continue to shape the way local communities develop and engage with public life.

Day 3 brought the ELEVATE event to a close by drawing together the main ideas, experiences and reflections developed throughout the event. During the Closing Session “Key Takeaways & Policy Messages”, participants revisited the key themes that had emerged from the discussions and workshops, including stronger local

governance, meaningful citizen participation and the importance of keeping European integration closely connected to local realities and community needs. The exchange provided an opportunity to identify common priorities and consider how the ideas developed during the event could inform future action at local and regional level.

The closing reflections were followed by the Evaluation and Closing Ceremony, giving participants the opportunity to share feedback, reflect on their learning experience and consider how the knowledge and approaches explored through ELEVATE could be applied within their own organisations, municipalities and communities. The day also included a study visit to the Town Hall of Strumyani, where participants gained a closer perspective on local governance in practice and connected the themes discussed throughout the event with the everyday work of a local authority.

Across all sessions, the ELEVATE agenda fostered an inclusive environment where European priorities met local realities, and where discussions on governance were closely connected with citizen participation and practical exchange. The event strengthened dialogue among local authorities, civil society organisations and citizens, while encouraging participants to consider how municipalities can act as important links between European policies and the communities they serve.

In conclusion, the ELEVATE event demonstrated the value of Town Twinning in connecting European communities and strengthening cooperation around shared governance challenges. Through open dialogue, thematic discussions, practical workshops and study visits, participants deepened their understanding of local governance, democratic participation and the role of local authorities in bringing European values and priorities closer to citizens. The Association for Innovative Mentality, together with the European partners, created a collaborative space for dialogue, learning and exchange, strengthening connections between participating communities and encouraging the sharing of experiences across borders. By placing transparency, inclusion and citizen participation at the centre of the discussion, the

event highlighted how local authorities and communities can play an active role in shaping a more democratic, cohesive and connected Europe.



