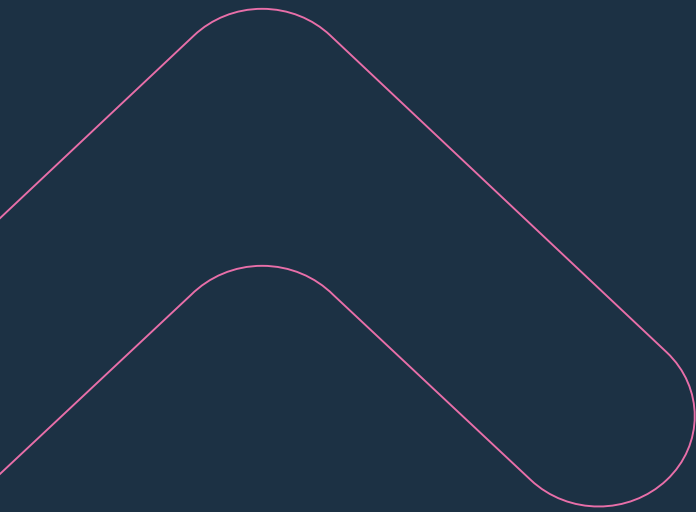
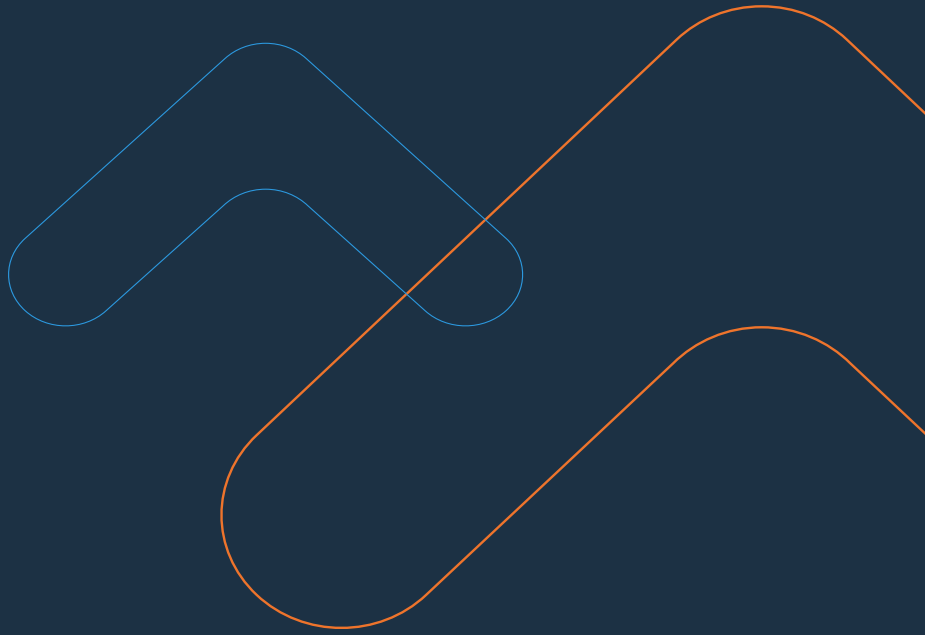




**European Capital
of Democracy**

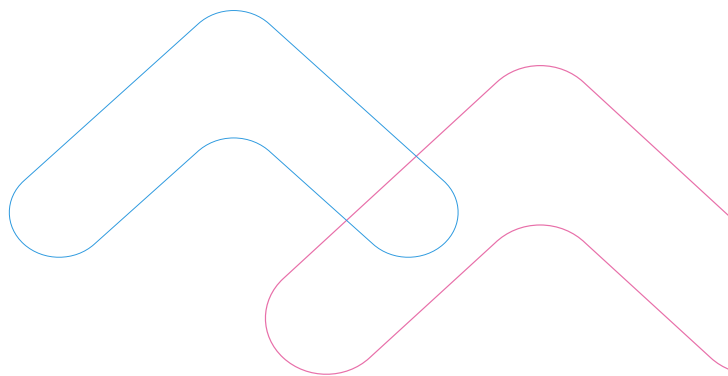


ECOD 2026 APPLICATION

Sofia

February 2025

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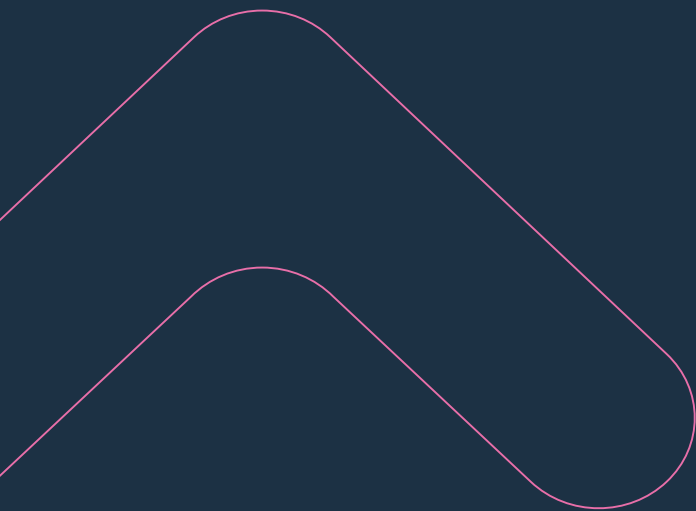
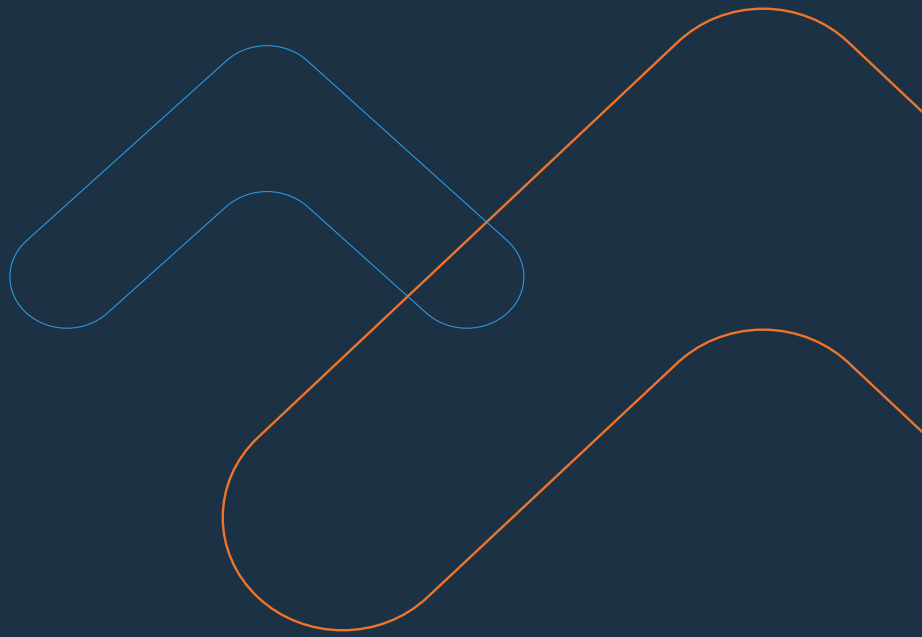
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ECOD 2026 APPLICATION - SOFIA

Mission Statement





Mission Statement



Sofia: Engaging, Empowering, and Evolving – A City Where Every Voice Shapes the Future

Teaser

As a candidate for the European Capital of Democracy, Sofia imagines a vibrant future rooted in democratic innovation and citizen participation. Our vision is to make democracy a part of everyday life where citizens are not just reacting but taking action to shape their own neighborhoods, policies and future. By fostering a culture of transparency and collaboration, Sofia aims to build a resilient, inclusive city that serves as a model for democratic progress and civic engagement across Europe.

Summary

Sofia's ambition to become European Capital of Democracy mirrors our efforts to create a live-and-breathe democracy, the one in which citizens feel empowered to take an active part in shaping their lives. Sofia has a history of democratic reforms and citizen-centric programs, and has undertaken bold initiatives in recent years to strengthen citizen engagement, improve access to sustainable urban spaces, and increase public service innovation. And the Sofia Sandbox for Innovation, Neighborhood Recycling Facilities and Green Ring projects have been developed in this spirit where residents themselves become directly involved in sustainability, technology and urban planning initiatives. With our application to be European Capital of Democracy, we want to amplify these achievements and explore new avenues where citizens can participate in democratic governance.

Democratic Ambitions

The democratic aspirations of Sofia mirror its dedication to adopting progressive governance practices that prioritize transparency and citizen involvement in decision making processes. The urban development strategies of the city are designed to promote diversity and economic prosperity while also supporting sustainability efforts that align with the values upheld by Europe as a whole. Initiatives such as digitalization, participatory budgeting, and enhanced infrastructure projects demonstrate a commitment to empowering residents and ensuring equitable access to public resources. By taking initiatives into account and actively implementing them Sofia aims to reinforce its democratic structure and establish itself as a progressive European capital with a clear vision for the future.

Mission Statement

Achieved Successes

Sofia has made significant progress in democratic governance, with successful policies in several key areas:

1. **Increased Transparency and Open Government Open Data Portals:** The introduction of open data platforms has allowed citizens to freely access municipal data, thus enhancing accountability and public monitoring. **E-Government Services:** Sofia Municipality has streamlined administrative processes by digitizing many of its public services, making them more accessible and reducing bureaucratic practices inherited from the past.
2. **Citizen Engagement Participatory Budgeting:** Citizens are more and more involved in decision-making through participatory budgeting initiatives, where they can propose and vote on local projects. **Public Consultations:** Regular public consultations on urban development, environmental issues, and infrastructure projects have fostered a culture of inclusiveness.
3. **Sustainable Urban Development Green Policies:** Democratic governance has prioritized green spaces, clean energy initiatives, and sustainable public transport, reflecting citizens' demand for a more eco-friendly city. **Metro Expansion:** The transparent management of large-scale projects like metro extensions has improved connectivity while involving public input in the planning process.
4. **Social Innovation Support for Vulnerable Groups:** Programs such as "Generation Program" for youth leaving care institutions reflect a commitment to social equity. **Integration of Minorities:** Initiatives aimed at integrating minority communities have enhanced social cohesion.

Future Challenges

Sofia's democratic governance faces several future challenges as the city continues to grow and modernize. Addressing these issues will be critical to maintaining its democratic values and ensuring equitable development:

1. **Citizen Participation and Engagement Low Participation Rates:** Despite efforts to involve citizens, participation in public consultations and local elections remains relatively low. **Motivating greater civic engagement** will be essential. **Digital Divide:** While e-governance tools are improving accessibility, not all citizens, particularly older generations or marginalized groups, have the digital literacy to benefit fully.
2. **Urbanization and Infrastructure Urban Sprawl:** Rapid urban expansion risks creating socioeconomic divides between the well-developed center and underserved peripheral neighborhoods. **Transportation Challenges:** While metro expansion continues, addressing congestion, pollution, and equitable access to public transport in all areas remains a pressing issue.

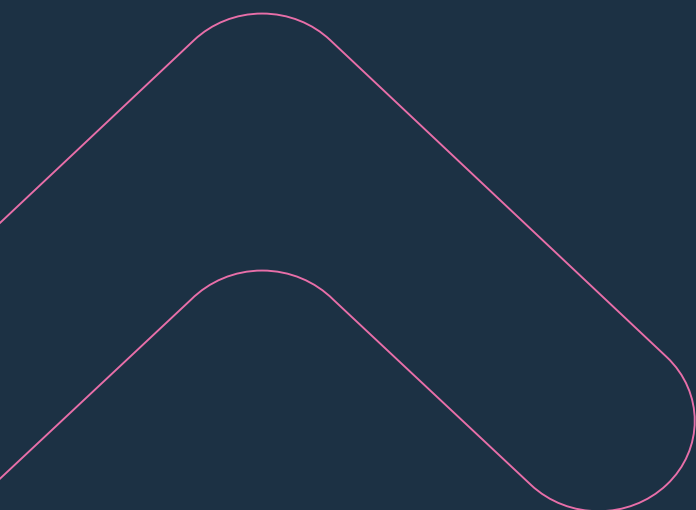
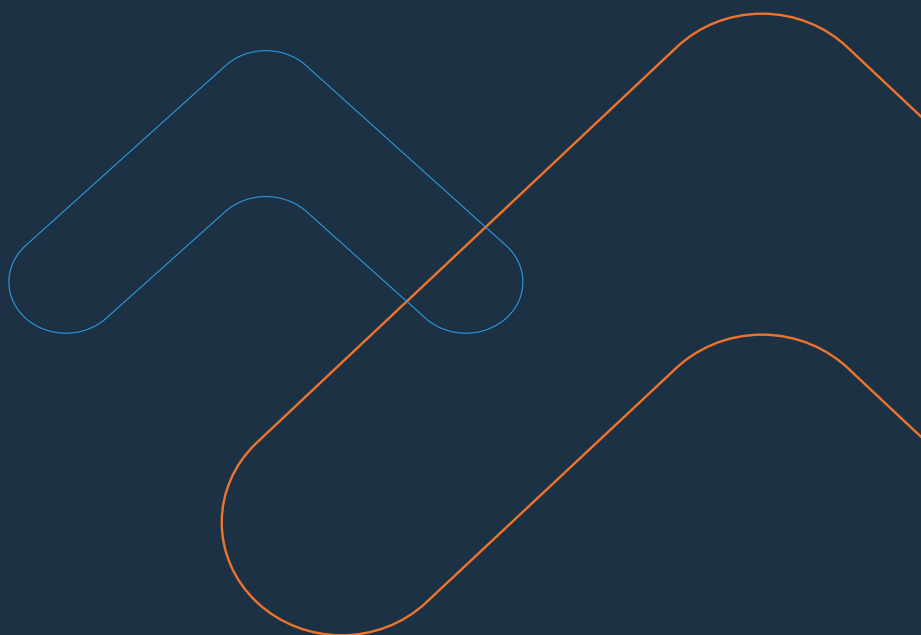
Mission Statement

Future Challenges

3. **Social Inequalities Integration of Vulnerable Groups:** Efforts to integrate minority communities, youth at risk, and low-income groups must intensify to prevent social exclusion and disparities in access to opportunities. **Affordable Housing:** Rising property prices and rents are making housing less affordable for many, threatening social equity.
4. **Governance and Accountability Corruption Risks:** Ensuring transparency and accountability in large-scale infrastructure projects and public procurement processes is a continuing challenge. **Bureaucratic Inefficiency:** Further streamlining of administrative processes is needed to reduce red tape and improve responsiveness to citizens' needs.
5. **Environmental Sustainability Climate Adaptation:** Sofia must address urban heat islands, improve flood management, and integrate more green infrastructure to cope with the effects of climate change. **Air Quality:** Tackling air pollution remains a critical issue, requiring stronger enforcement of environmental regulations and investments in sustainable energy and transport.
6. **Balancing Development and Heritage Preservation of Cultural Heritage:** Managing urban development while protecting Sofia's historical sites and cultural identity is a delicate balancing act. **Public Spaces:** Ensuring public spaces remain accessible and free from over-commercialization is key to maintaining quality of life.
7. **Political Polarization Diverse Stakeholder Interests:** Navigating competing interests between government, business, and civil society requires effective conflict resolution mechanisms. **Trust in Institutions:** Strengthening trust in local institutions is necessary, especially in light of broader national and regional political dynamics. Addressing these challenges will require robust policies, inclusive decision-making, and strong collaboration between municipal authorities, citizens, and other stakeholders.

ECOD 2026 APPLICATION - SOFIA

Projects



Sofia – Project 1

BEST PRACTICE | REGULAR | 01/01/2009-31/12/2024
[HTTPS://WWW.EVROPA-SO.BG/BG/](https://www.evropa-so.bg/bg/)

Sofia Program Europe – Strengthening Civil Society through European Integration

Brief description

The Sofia Program Europe, initiated by Sofia Municipal Council, is a funding program aimed at fostering democratic engagement and the development of civil society organizations within the context of Bulgaria's EU membership. Established in 2008 and revised multiple times, the program focuses on supporting local initiatives that align with EU values, foster collaboration between citizens and local authorities, and promote public awareness on key community issues. Annually, the program allocates 1 million leva, with a maximum funding of 25,000 leva per project, to NGOs and civil society groups for impactful projects within Sofia Municipality. Each project is expected to advance specific goals related to civic engagement, community development, and EU integration.

Detailed description

The Sofia Program Europe, initiated by Sofia Municipal Council, is a funding program aimed at fostering democratic engagement and the development of civil society organizations within the context of Bulgaria's EU membership. Established in 2008 and revised multiple times, the program focuses on supporting local initiatives that align with EU values, foster collaboration between citizens and local authorities, and promote public awareness on key community issues. Annually, the program allocates 1 million leva, with a maximum funding of 25,000 leva per project, to NGOs and civil society groups for impactful projects within Sofia Municipality. Each project is expected to advance specific goals related to civic engagement, community development, and EU integration.

Project Set-up:

1. Annual Planning and Prioritization: The Program Council, comprising 13 members (11 municipal councilors and 2 municipal representatives), establishes annual priorities and approves the budget allocation.
2. Application and Proposal Submission: Eligible organizations submit project proposals electronically. Proposals must include a project outline, budget, and timeline, along with supporting documents that demonstrate alignment with the program's goals.

Sofia – Project 1

Detailed description

3. Evaluation and Selection: An Expert Committee reviews proposals based on established criteria, including relevance, impact, and feasibility. Projects are scored and ranked to ensure funding goes to the most impactful initiatives.
4. Implementation and Monitoring: Approved projects are implemented by the respective CSOs under the guidance and monitoring of the Program Coordinator, ensuring adherence to project goals and efficient use of funds.
5. Annual Reporting and Review: The Program Council prepares an annual report detailing project outcomes, financial expenditures, and lessons learned. This report is submitted to Sofia Municipal Council and published online for public access.

Democratic Impact and Long-term Benefits: The Sofia Program Europe fosters democratic resilience and civil engagement by:

1. Encouraging Public Participation: By supporting a wide array of projects, the program strengthens citizen engagement and promotes a more inclusive decision-making process at the local level.
2. Enhancing Transparency and Accountability: The public application, evaluation, and reporting processes reinforce transparency, enabling citizens to see how public funds are used to benefit the community.
3. Building Community Awareness and Collaboration: Projects funded by the program increase public understanding of local governance issues, encourage debate, and foster collaboration between citizens and municipal authorities.
4. Supporting Innovative and Youth Initiatives: The program places emphasis on youth engagement and innovative approaches in civic projects, cultivating the next generation of community leaders and democratic advocates.
5. Promoting Sustainable Partnerships: Through collaborative projects, the program builds enduring partnerships between the municipality, civil society, and the private sector, fostering a resilient and connected civic network.

Challenges and Future Goals: Despite its successes, the program continually seeks to address challenges related to participation from underserved areas and representation across diverse demographics. Future goals include expanding outreach to marginalized groups, enhancing digital access for the application process, and increasing available funding to support a broader range of community projects. Efforts to simplify application procedures and build greater capacity among CSOs are also underway to encourage more organizations to participate. The Sofia Program Europe strengthens local democracy by empowering civil society organizations (CSOs) to propose and implement projects that address societal needs, encourage public debate, and increase citizen involvement in decision-making. Through transparent project selection and oversight, the program ensures that citizens' voices contribute to shaping municipal policies, thereby reinforcing accountability and trust in local governance.

Sofia – Project 1

Collaboration

The Sofia Program Europe is an initiative designed to strengthen Sofia's role within the broader context of European cooperation, development, and cultural exchange. Through various collaborations, Sofia aims to foster deeper connections with other European cities, share best practices, and contribute to Europe's social, economic, and environmental goals.

Target Group(s)

The program primarily targets local NGOs, civil society organizations, youth groups, and other entities registered within Sofia Municipality. These groups can propose projects that address community needs across Sofia's neighborhoods, fostering democratic participation and civic responsibility.

Communication

- A robust communication strategy ensures transparency and broad awareness:
- **Website and Digital Platforms:** Key information, guidelines, and updates are shared on the Sofia Program Europe website and the official Sofia Municipality portal.
 - **Information Days:** The municipality organizes informational events, both online and in-person, to guide potential applicants through the program's requirements and objectives.
 - **Media Engagement:** Local media outlets are engaged to amplify awareness about funding opportunities, application deadlines, and project impacts.
 - **Direct Outreach to CSOs:** Newsletters, email campaigns, and social media updates are used to reach registered civil society groups and other stakeholders.

Project Setup

The Program Council comprises 13 members (11 municipal councilors and 2 municipal representatives) and is coordinated by the Deputy Mayor for European Policies, International Relations and Tourism.

Involvement of Civil Society

The Sofia Program Europe actively involves CSOs in each stage of the program. By offering funding, resources, and support, the program enables local organizations to address community issues that align with their missions. Regular consultations and collaboration between municipal authorities and CSOs ensure that program priorities reflect citizen concerns and foster sustainable community partnerships.

Budget Project Funding

Project funding Operating costs 500,000.00€

Toral Budget

500,000 €

Sofia – Project 1

Funding

Budget and Funding:

- Annual Budget: 1 million leva, funded by the Sofia Municipality.
- Project Grants: A maximum of 25,000 leva per project, with opportunities for co-financing from beneficiaries if needed.
- Financial Transparency: All grants are managed under strict financial guidelines. Annual audits ensure accountability, and a publicly accessible financial report is published for each funding cycle.

Programme Year Integration

Sofia can host an exhibition dedicated to showcasing the tangible outcomes of the Sofia Europe Program as part of an ECoD exhibit celebrating democratic innovations.

Democracy Dimension

Community

Sofia – Project 2

TOOL | REGULAR | 01/01/2024-31/12/2024

Sofia Citizen Budget Initiative - Empowering Local Democracy through Participatory Budgeting

Brief Description

The Sofia Citizen Budget Initiative is a participatory budgeting program developed by Sofia Municipality to engage residents in local governance by allowing them to propose and vote on community projects. Launched in 2024, this initiative allocates 5.3 million leva for projects that enhance urban spaces, culture, education, mobility, environmental sustainability, and public safety within Sofia. Citizens submit project proposals, which are then evaluated and selected based on public voting, creating a transparent and inclusive decision-making process. The Sofia Citizen Budget Initiative - Empowering Local Democracy through Participatory Budgeting will follow a yearly cycle to align with municipal budgeting processes and ensure sustained citizen involvement.

Detailed Description

The Sofia Citizen Budget Initiative is a groundbreaking project aimed at strengthening local democracy by involving citizens directly in the municipal budgeting process. Through participatory budgeting (PB), residents of Sofia can propose, discuss, and vote on projects to improve their neighborhoods and the city as a whole, ensuring that public funds are allocated to initiatives that reflect community priorities.

Key Objectives:

- **Empower Citizens:** Enable Sofia residents to have a direct say in how a portion of the city budget is spent.
- **Enhance Transparency:** Build trust by fostering openness and accountability in municipal decision-making.
- **Promote Inclusivity:** Ensure participation from diverse communities, including underrepresented groups such as youth, elderly, and marginalized populations.
- **Improve Urban Spaces:** Fund tangible projects that address local needs, such as improved infrastructure, green spaces, or community programs.

Project Set-up:

1. **Planning and Preparation:** Initial stages involve setting up a steering committee comprising municipal staff, community representatives, and local NGOs to oversee the initiative's design and implementation.

Sofia – Project 2

Detailed Description

2. Submission Phase: Residents are encouraged to submit proposals via the on-line platform or at designated municipal offices. Each proposal must meet certain criteria, including relevance to community improvement, feasibility, and budgetary requirements. Assistance is provided for proposal development.
3. Evaluation Phase: A municipal review committee assesses the feasibility, impact, and budget requirements of the proposals. This includes consultations with technical experts to ensure that each project meets legal, environmental, and safety standards.
4. Public Voting Phase: All eligible proposals are presented to the public. Citizens vote on projects through an online platform, which requires authentication to ensure voting integrity. The most popular projects are selected for funding based on the highest vote count.
5. Implementation and Monitoring: Selected projects are implemented by the municipality, with progress updates provided to the public. Transparency is maintained by posting project timelines, budgets, and outcomes on the website, allowing citizens to track the results of their participation.

Examples of Possible Projects

- Creating new playgrounds or community parks in underserved neighborhoods.
- Installing energy-efficient street lighting in residential areas.
- Organizing cultural festivals or art installations in public spaces.
- Launching recycling programs or urban gardening initiatives.

Monitoring and Evaluation Citizen Feedback Surveys:

- Collect feedback on the process and results to improve subsequent cycles.
- Impact Assessments: Evaluate the social, environmental, and economic outcomes of funded projects.
- Annual Report: Publish a comprehensive report detailing the program's successes and lessons learned.
- Potential Benefits Increased civic engagement and a stronger sense of community.
- Tangible improvements to Sofia's urban environment and quality of life.
- Greater public trust in municipal governance through direct involvement and transparency.

Contribution

The Sofia Citizen Budget Initiative represents a bold step towards empowering residents and fostering a more inclusive and democratic city. By directly involving citizens in decision-making, Sofia is setting a precedent for participatory governance in the region. This initiative aligns perfectly with the themes of participatory democracy and citizen empowerment that are central to the European Capital of Democracy (ECoD) Programme Year.

Sofia – Project 2

Contribution

It provides an excellent opportunity to showcase how local democracy can be strengthened through direct involvement in decision-making processes, allowing citizens to actively shape the future of their city. Sofia can host or contribute to a forum on democratic innovation as part of the ECoD Programme Year, focusing on how participatory budgeting is transforming local governance.

Collaboration

The Sofia Citizen Budget Initiative offers a strong foundation for collaboration with a range of stakeholders, including municipal departments, local communities, external partners, and international organizations.

Target Group(s)

The primary target group is the residents of Sofia aged 16 and above, who are eligible to participate in both the proposal and voting stages. The initiative encourages the involvement of young people, community activists, local organizations, and all citizens who wish to contribute to the improvement of their neighborhoods.

Communication

To ensure maximum participation and awareness, Sofia Municipality has implemented a comprehensive communication strategy. Key components include:

- Digital Campaigns: Using social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter), the municipality runs regular updates, Q&A sessions, and testimonials to engage a wide audience.
- Website Portal: A dedicated page on the municipal website provides detailed information, guidelines, deadlines, and resources to support citizens in submitting their proposals.
- Community Events: Local workshops and information sessions are organized in various neighborhoods to educate residents about the participatory budgeting process and provide support in proposal submission.
- Press Releases and Media Coverage: National and local media are engaged to spread information about the initiative, fostering a broader understanding of participatory budgeting's value for democracy.
- Direct Outreach: Leaflets and posters are distributed in public spaces

Project Setup

Sofia Municipality departments and local district authorities Role: Central coordinating body for the initiative. Responsible for overseeing the implementation of the participatory budgeting process according to the city's budgetary plans and governance structures. Finance Department: Works on the allocation of funds, ensuring that the projects are integrated into the official municipal budget. Urban Planning and Development: Assesses the feasibility and impact of proposed projects, particularly those related to infrastructure, public spaces, and urban renewal.

Sofia – Project 2

Project Setup

Social Services: Ensures that underrepresented communities (e.g., minorities, low-income groups) have access to the process and their proposals are considered. Public Relations: Promotes the initiative, runs outreach campaigns, and engages citizens through media channels.

Universities and Schools Role: Engage youth and academic communities in participatory democracy. Local Businesses Role: Contribute resources or other support

Description

NGOs and Civil Society Groups Role: Ensure inclusivity and diversity in participation, particularly for marginalized or vulnerable groups. Activities:

- Outreach and Advocacy: Help raise awareness about the initiative in communities that may not traditionally participate in city planning or budgeting.
- Training and Support: Facilitate workshops and provide assistance for citizens who wish to propose projects or need help navigating the budgeting process.
- Monitoring and Evaluation: Collaborate on assessing the outcomes of the funded projects to ensure they meet the needs of the communities they aim to serve.
- Grassroots Movements and Activist Groups Role: Promote local participation by ensuring the inclusion of diverse perspectives, especially those related to environmental, cultural, or social issues.
- Activities: Help organize local events, discussions, and campaigns that encourage broader engagement in the budgeting process.

Budget Project Funding

Project funding Operating costs 2,650,000€

Total Budget

2,650,000€

Funding

Budget and Funding:

- Allocated Budget: The municipality has dedicated a total of 5.3 million leva to fund projects selected through the Sofia Citizen Budget Initiative.
- Funding Sources: The budget is primarily funded through municipal resources, supplemented by potential grants and partnerships with organizations that support civic engagement and urban development.
- Financial Transparency: All expenses are transparently managed, with regular updates posted online to allow residents to track the allocation and use of funds for each project.

Programme Year integration

Sofia can host or contribute to a forum on democratic innovation as part of the ECoD Programme Year, focusing on how participatory budgeting is transforming local governance. Sofia can also organize a series of workshops and community dialogues („Your Budget, Your City“) during the ECoD Programme Year to involve a broad spectrum of Sofia’s population in the participatory budgeting process.

Democracy Dimension

Empowerment

Sofia – Project 3

BEST PRACTICE | REGULAR | 02/10/2018-02/10/2025

Sofia LIFE Heating Upgrade Program – Improving Air Quality through Sustainable Heating Solutions

Brief Description

The Sofia LIFE Heating Upgrade Program, funded under the European Union's LIFE program, aims to reduce air pollution by replacing outdated, polluting heating systems with modern, eco-friendly air conditioning units across the city. This project focuses on reducing particulate matter emissions from residential heating, which is a significant contributor to poor air quality in Sofia, particularly during the winter months. The initiative is part of Sofia's broader commitment to sustainable urban development and environmental improvement. In 2024, the municipality began the large-scale replacement of wood and coal-fired stoves with energy-efficient air conditioners. This measure directly contributes to improving public health and quality of life for residents, while also supporting Sofia's climate action goals.

Detailed Description

The program encourages public participation and transparency by directly involving citizens in decision-making regarding heating options for their homes. The initiative enhances accountability by providing regular updates on progress and engaging local communities in sustainability practices. By prioritizing public health and environmental responsibility, the Sofia LIFE Heating Upgrade Program strengthens community trust in local government.

Project Set-up:

1. **Planning and Feasibility Studies:** Prior to the rollout, the municipality conducted air quality assessments and feasibility studies to identify high-pollution areas and the most effective heating solutions for each district.
2. **Application and Selection:** Eligible households were invited to apply for a free replacement of their existing heating system. Applications were reviewed based on criteria such as pollution levels, household income, and health vulnerability.
3. **Installation and Monitoring:** Approved households receive modern, energy-efficient air conditioning units installed by certified technicians. The municipality monitors installation quality, efficiency, and subsequent reductions in air pollution.
4. **Ongoing Evaluation and Reporting:** Environmental and health impacts are monitored and evaluated throughout the program's duration. Progress reports are regularly published to ensure transparency and assess long-term benefits.

Sofia – Project 3

Detailed Description

5. Inclusion of Civil Societies: The program actively involves environmental NGOs and health organizations that promote clean air and public health. These groups assist in raising awareness, advocating for sustainable urban policies, and supporting outreach efforts. Collaborating with these organizations enhances program credibility and helps address any public concerns or barriers to participation.

Democratic Impact and Long-term Benefits: The Sofia LIFE Heating Upgrade Program directly contributes to a more democratic and sustainable urban environment by:

1. Promoting Environmental Awareness and Responsibility: Through public engagement and education, the program encourages citizens to adopt sustainable practices, enhancing community awareness about pollution and health.
2. Strengthening Community Trust and Inclusion: By addressing a critical public health issue and prioritizing low-income households, the municipality reinforces trust among residents and demonstrates a commitment to equitable environmental policy.
3. Improving Public Health and Quality of Life: Replacing outdated heating systems reduce indoor and outdoor pollution, leading to lower respiratory and cardiovascular health risks, particularly for vulnerable populations.
4. Building Sustainable Urban Policies: The program serves as a model for future initiatives that aim to reduce urban pollution and support sustainable development, promoting a healthier and more resilient urban environment.

Challenges and Future Goals: While the program has achieved significant success, ongoing challenges include expanding eligibility to additional households and ensuring long-term maintenance and efficiency of installed units. Future goals involve securing additional funding to cover more households, implementing community feedback mechanisms, and expanding the initiative to include other renewable energy sources, such as solar panels or heat pumps.

Contribution

The Sofia LIFE Heating Upgrade Program directly contributes to a more democratic and sustainable urban environment by:

1. Promoting Environmental Awareness and Responsibility: Through public engagement and education, the program encourages citizens to adopt sustainable practices, enhancing community awareness about pollution and health.
2. Strengthening Community Trust and Inclusion: By addressing a critical public health issue and prioritizing low-income households, the municipality reinforces trust among residents and demonstrates a commitment to equitable environmental policy.

Cascais – Project 3

Contribution

3. Improving Public Health and Quality of Life: Replacing outdated heating systems reduces indoor and outdoor pollution, leading to lower respiratory and cardiovascular health risks, particularly for vulnerable populations.
4. Building Sustainable Urban Policies: The program serves as a model for future initiatives that aim to reduce urban pollution and support sustainable development.

Collaboration

The program actively involves environmental NGOs and health organizations that promote clean air and public health. These groups assist in raising awareness, advocating for sustainable urban policies, and supporting outreach efforts. Collaborating with these organizations enhances program credibility and helps address any public concerns or barriers to participation.

Target Group(s)

The project primarily targets residents of Sofia who rely on outdated and polluting heating sources, particularly low-income households. Priority is given to neighborhoods with high pollution levels and vulnerable populations, including children, the elderly, and those with preexisting respiratory conditions.

Communication

Communication Strategy: To ensure widespread participation and awareness, Sofia Municipality has implemented a comprehensive communication plan:

- Digital Campaigns: The program is promoted through social media channels and the official Sofia Municipality website, with regular updates, informative content on environmental benefits, and step-by-step guides on application processes.
- Public Workshops and Community Outreach: In-person workshops are held in various neighborhoods to educate residents about the program's goals, eligibility, and the benefits of transitioning to cleaner heating systems.
- Collaboration with Local Media: National and local media are engaged to provide ongoing coverage of the program, reaching a broad audience across the city.
- Direct Engagement with Residents: Door-to-door visits and distribution of informational leaflets are conducted in targeted neighborhoods, ensuring that eligible households are fully informed about the program and its benefits.

Project Setup

Key Municipal Departments

- Department of Environment: Leads the program's implementation, monitors environmental impact, and ensures compliance with EU LIFE program guidelines.
- Urban Planning and Development: Coordinates integration with ongoing urban infrastructure projects. Housing and Energy
- Efficiency Office: Develops heating solution guidelines, supports building upgrades, and provides assistance for residents.
- Public Relations Office: Manages communication and outreach to engage citizens and encourage participation.

Sofia – Project 3

Project Setup

- Finance and Grants Department: Oversees budget allocation and ensures the proper utilization of EU funds.
- Legal Department: Ensures all contracts and agreements comply with local, national, and EU legislation.
- External partners - European Union (EU LIFE Program) - co-financing the project and policy guidance. - Private Sector Partners - Academic and Research Institutions

Involvement of Civil Society

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) Environmental NGOs: Advocate for sustainable solutions and support public outreach campaigns. Social Assistance Groups: Help identify and support low-income households needing heating system upgrades. Residents of Sofia, particularly those in areas with high air pollution levels, are critical stakeholders in the program. Their participation is encouraged through: Public meetings and consultations. Subsidies and financial incentives for adopting sustainable heating solutions. Assistance in navigating technical and administrative processes.

Budget Project Design

Project Design and Feasibility Studies (Includes environmental impact assessments, socio-economic studies, and technology evaluations). Administrative Preparation (Covers administrative costs like grant applications, procurement planning, and compliance verification). Planning costs 300,000.00€

Budget Cost Operation

Personnel Costs, Heating System Implementation (Subsidies and direct costs for purchasing and installing heating solutions), Monitoring and Evaluation, Public Assistance Programs, Operating costs 3,900,000€. Public Outreach Campaigns, Digital Engagement Communication costs 200,000€. Contingency Fund, Innovation grant Extra budget: 700,000€

Total Budget

5,100,000.00€

Funding

Funding Sources: EU LIFE Program Contribution: Covers 55-60% of the project costs. City of Sofia Contribution: Co-finances 20-30% of costs, including resources, personnel, and city-led initiatives. External Partner Contributions: Technology providers, NGOs, and private sector contributions (10-20%).

Programme Year integration

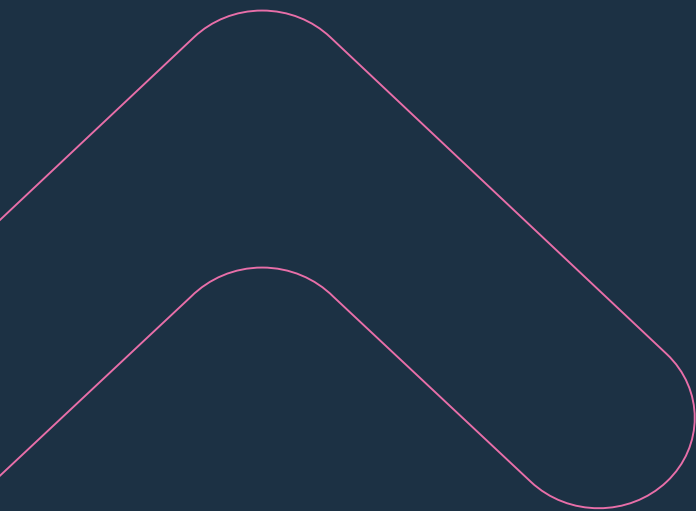
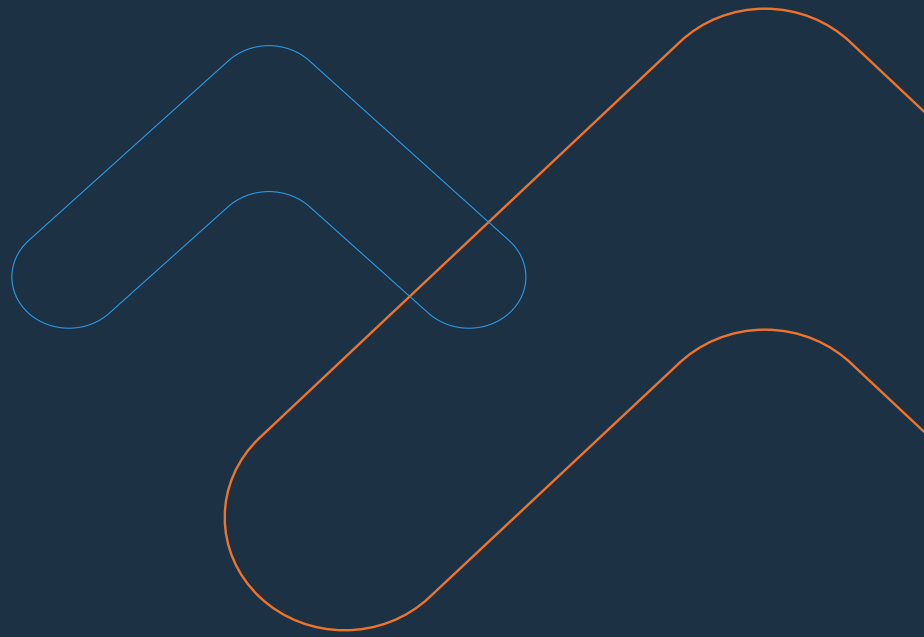
To effectively showcase the Sofia LIFE Heating Upgrade Program during the European Capital of Democracy (ECoD) Programme Year, the project can be featured in events and campaigns that highlight its innovative approach to sustainability, citizen engagement, and environmental improvement.

Democracy Dimension

Sustainability

ECOD 2026 APPLICATION - SOFIA

Project Ideas



Sofia - Project Idea 1

DEMOCRACY DIMENSION: COMMUNITY

Neighborhood Recycling Facilities Program: Empowering Communities for Sustainable Waste Management

Challenge

The Neighborhood Recycling Facilities Program aims to establish small-scale, user-friendly recycling facilities within various neighborhoods across Sofia. These facilities will be placed in areas with high foot traffic and are designed to make recycling accessible and convenient for residents. To drive engagement, the program emphasizes community participation, where facility placements and operations are determined based on residents' activity, commitment, and feedback. By embedding democratic practices, the program empowers citizens to have a direct say in where and how recycling facilities are implemented and maintained.

Pain Points:

1. Limited Access: Centralized recycling centers can be inconvenient for residents, reducing recycling rates.
2. Low Community Awareness: Without adequate knowledge or incentives, many citizens do not prioritize recycling, leading to increased waste generation.
3. Disengagement in Waste Management: Lack of community ownership and input opportunities leads to passive participation in waste management practices.
4. Environmental Impact: The low recycling rate contributes to environmental issues, such as landfill overuse and increased carbon emissions from waste processing.

Solution

Solution - Benefits and Advantages:

1. Increased Accessibility: By establishing local recycling facilities within neighborhoods, the program makes recycling a more convenient option for residents.
2. Community Ownership: The democratic approach encourages citizens to participate actively in waste management decisions, fostering a sense of ownership

Cascais - Project Idea 1

Solution

3. Enhanced Awareness and Education: Informative signage and periodic workshops at each facility will increase awareness of the environmental impact of recycling and empower citizens with practical knowledge on sustainable waste practices.
4. Improved Environmental Impact: By increasing recycling rates and reducing land-fill waste, the program aligns with Sofia's sustainability goals and contributes to a cleaner, greener city

Impact

The project will target all residential neighborhoods in Sofia, with the goal of implementing at least one recycling facility per neighborhood within the first phase. These facilities are expected to directly impact the recycling habits of approximately 300,000 residents, significantly increasing local recycling rates. Additionally, the program will help reduce waste transportation costs and carbon emissions by minimizing the need for residents to travel long distances to dispose of recyclables. Size (Scope) and Justification of Need: The program will cover a diverse range of neighborhoods, from high-density urban areas to suburban districts, ensuring equal access to recycling facilities citywide. Recent surveys indicate a strong demand among residents for convenient recycling options, with 65% expressing support for local facilities. Additionally, waste management studies reveal that a significant portion of Sofia's land-fill waste could be diverted if residents had more accessible recycling options.

Implementation

- Phase 1: Community Consultation and Engagement (Months 1-3)
- Conduct community meetings and online surveys to gauge interest in the program and identify priority neighborhoods based on population density, current recycling rates, and resident feedback.
 - Establish neighborhood committees to work with the municipality and serve as liaison bodies for ongoing community input and facility maintenance.
- Phase 2: Pilot Facility Design and Deployment (Months 4-9)
- Launch pilot facilities in selected neighborhoods with strong initial engagement. Each facility will be equipped with clear signage, sorting bins, and educational materials.
 - Provide residents with periodic workshops and resources on recycling best practices, managed by the neighborhood committees.
- Phase 3: Feedback Collection and Democratic Input (Months 10-12)
- Implement a voting system where residents can provide feedback on facility effectiveness and suggest improvements or additional locations.
 - Evaluate the pilot phase using community input and data on recycling rates, participation levels, and neighborhood committee recommendations.
- Phase 4: Expansion and Scaling (Year 2 onward)
- Based on pilot feedback, expand facilities to additional neighborhoods, ensuring that facility placements align with resident preferences and community needs.
 - Engage local businesses and NGOs to support ongoing operations and education efforts.

Sofia - Project Idea 1

Support

Financing: The program will be funded through a combination of municipal budget allocations and European Union environmental grants. Additionally, partnerships with waste management companies and environmental NGOs will provide resources and in-kind support, such as maintenance, educational materials, and facility enhancements. **Estimated Budget:** Initial phase funding is projected at €2 million, covering facility setup, maintenance, and educational outreach. Additional funds will be sought for long-term scaling and operational sustainability.

Democratic Impact and Future Milestones:

1. **Fostering Citizen Participation:** By allowing residents to vote on facility placements, designs, and operations, the program directly incorporates democratic values into Sofia's waste management strategy. Neighborhood committees will ensure that residents have ongoing input and responsibility for their local recycling facilities, fostering a culture of environmental stewardship.
2. **Milestone 1 (End of Year 1):** Successful launch and evaluation of the pilot facilities, with data on recycling rates, community engagement, and facility usage
3. **Milestone 2 (Year 2):** Scale-up to cover 50% of Sofia's neighborhoods, with tailored modifications based on resident feedback and neighborhood committee recommendations. .
4. **Milestone 3 (Year 3):** Full implementation across all neighborhoods in Sofia, with continuous monitoring, citizen feedback mechanisms, and integration of additional recycling initiatives

Video Link

N/A

Images

N/A

Sofia - Project Idea 2

DEMOCRACY DIMENSION: SUSTAINABILITY

Sofia Sandbox for Innovation and Urban Solutions – Expanding Innovation Capacity for a Smarter City

Challenge

The Sofia Sandbox, now an operational testing ground for urban innovation, provides a unique environment where startups, tech companies, and research institutions can pilot emerging technologies within Sofia's urban landscape. Building on its success, Sofia Municipality aims to expand the Sandbox's capacity, adding new focus areas, increasing the number of projects, and enhancing community participation. The goal is to develop the Sandbox as a cornerstone of Sofia's smart city strategy, scaling it to encompass a wider range of urban issues and solidify partnerships with local and international innovation leaders.

Pain Points:

1. Limited Scope and Scale: Current projects cover only a fraction of Sofia's needs, with limited reach in critical areas like renewable energy, public health, and citizen safety.
2. Scaling Innovations: Successfully piloted projects often require additional resources to transition from a pilot stage to full-scale implementation.
3. Limited Public Awareness: Residents may not be fully aware of the Sandbox's impact and potential, limiting citizen engagement and feedback.
4. Integration with Existing Infrastructure: New solutions need effective integration with Sofia's infrastructure, which requires strategic coordination and additional resources.

Solution

Solution - Benefits and Advantages of Expansion:

1. Broader Innovation Scope: Expanding the Sandbox will allow Sofia to address more complex urban challenges, including renewable energy, public safety, and data-driven health solutions.

Sofia - Project Idea 2

Solution

2. Accelerated Path to Scale: With dedicated funding for scaling successful pilots, promising innovations can be rolled out citywide, benefiting more residents and enhancing overall urban efficiency.
3. Enhanced Community Engagement: A focused campaign to raise awareness and involve citizens in project evaluations and feedback will strengthen community trust and participation.
4. Increased Collaboration: By attracting additional partners from both local and international tech sectors, the Sandbox can leverage diverse expertise and resources, creating a more resilient and sustainable innovation ecosystem.

Impact

Impact (Target):

The expanded Sandbox aims to create measurable impacts across a larger spectrum of urban services, including:

- transportation: Implement smart city solutions to streamline public transit and traffic management, covering additional routes and neighborhoods.
- Waste and Resource Management: Broaden waste management solutions and include new technologies for water conservation and renewable energy integration.
- Public Health and Safety: Introduce health monitoring and air quality data tools across more areas, providing residents with real-time access to health-related information.
- Community Involvement: Ensure that over 50,000 residents actively participate in or provide feedback on Sandbox projects, fostering a more engaged citizenry.
- Size (Scope) and Justification of Need: The expanded Sandbox will scale to cover new urban sectors and double the number of projects under testing in a given year. This scale-up is justified by the growing population and environmental challenges, as well as public feedback indicating a strong demand for enhanced city services. Citizen surveys reflect a consistent demand for faster, more reliable service innovations and solutions to pollution, health, and transit issues.

Implementation

Phase 1: Strategic Expansion and Focus Area Identification (Months 1- 6)

- Assess current pilot success rates and define additional areas for testing, such as renewable energy, public health, and digital connectivity.
- Partner with new organizations and academic institutions specializing in the identified focus areas.

Phase 2: Enhanced Pilot Projects and Community Outreach (Months 6-12)

- Launch a new round of pilot projects addressing additional urban challenges, with an emphasis on solutions that can be scaled citywide.
- Implement a public awareness campaign to increase citizen engagement, encouraging residents to participate in project feedback and evaluations.

Sofia - Project Idea 2

Implementation

Phase 3: Data Collection and Analysis for Scaling (Ongoing)

- Monitor performance metrics for each pilot and assess scalability based on community feedback, impact analysis, and cost-benefit assessments.
- Collaborate with municipal departments to integrate scalable solutions into Sofia's infrastructure and service frameworks.

Phase 4: Full-Scale Deployment of Successful Solutions (Months 12-18)

- Identify successful pilots and allocate resources for citywide rollout in phases, ensuring compatibility with existing infrastructure.
- Continue community involvement through feedback loops to refine and improve implementation as projects are scaled.

Support

Financing: The expansion will be supported by additional funding sources:

- **Increased Municipal Budget:** Sofia Municipality will increase the annual allocation for the Sandbox to cover expanded testing and scaling of successful projects.
- **EU and International Grants:** Applications for new EU funding, such as from the Horizon Europe and Green Deal programs, along with collaboration with global smart city organizations.
- **Private Sector Sponsorships:** Tech companies and startups with successful pilots may co-finance scaling efforts, particularly for high-profile projects in public transit and energy sectors.

The initial funding requirement for expansion is estimated at €7 million, with ongoing support secured through partnerships and grants. Future Milestones for Expanded Sandbox:

1. **Milestone 1 (Year 1):** Complete assessment of initial pilots and launch new focus areas within the Sandbox.
2. **Milestone 2 (Year 2):** Implement citywide scaling of 2-3 high-impact solutions, with expanded community outreach and feedback systems.
3. **Milestone 3 (Year 3):** Establish the Sandbox as a permanent innovation platform within Sofia's smart city strategy, with a streamlined process for testing and scaling.
4. **Milestone 4 (Year 5):** Reach continuous operation of 20+ pilots annually, establishing Sofia as a leading innovator in urban solutions within the region.

Video Link

N/A

Images

N/A

Sofia - Project Idea 3

DEMOCRACY DIMENSION: PARTICIPATION

The Green Ring of Sofia – Building a Connected, Green Urban Pathway

Challenge

Challenges Citizens are Facing: Sofia's residents face multiple urban issues that reduce the quality of life, including:

1. **Air Pollution and Noise:** Sofia is one of the most polluted capitals in Europe, with high levels of particulate matter primarily due to motor vehicle emissions and reliance on fossil fuel-based heating. The lack of green spaces exacerbates urban heat and noise pollution, affecting residents' health and well-being.
2. **Traffic Congestion:** The city's infrastructure is heavily car-dependent, leading to frequent traffic jams, delays, and high greenhouse gas emissions. Alternative transport options are limited and poorly connected, discouraging the use of eco-friendly transit modes like biking and walking.
3. **Fragmented Public Spaces:** Green areas and parks are scattered, and neighborhoods lack connectivity, creating physical and social barriers. Residents struggle to find accessible, safe paths for daily commutes or leisure, limiting options for community interaction and outdoor activities..
4. **Limited Infrastructure for Non-Motorized Transit:** The city's infrastructure primarily supports motorized vehicles, with few safe, dedicated paths for cyclists and pedestrians, leaving those who want to use sustainable transport options vulnerable. Pain Point: High air pollution rates impact respiratory health, and lack of safe outdoor spaces restricts physical activity options, contributing to sedentary lifestyles and health problems.

Sofia - Project Idea 3

Solution

Solution: The Green Ring addresses these challenges by offering an innovative, multifunctional urban solution with diverse benefits:

1. Environmental Benefits:
 - Reduction in Emissions: By promoting non- motorized transport, the project aims to cut down vehicle emissions, improving air quality.
 - Urban Cooling: Increased green cover from the corridor will reduce the urban heat island effect, especially beneficial in summer months.
 - Biodiversity Boost: The green corridor will serve as a habitat for urban flora and fauna, enhancing biodiversity in Sofia's urban landscape.
2. Health and Well-being:
 - Encourages Physical Activity: Safe and accessible paths for walking, jogging, and cycling will promote active lifestyles, benefiting physical and mental health.
 - Improved Air Quality: Reduced pollution levels will directly impact respiratory health, particularly for children and the elderly.
3. Community and Social Interaction:
 - Connecting Neighborhoods: The Green Ring will link diverse neighborhoods, providing a common space that encourages social interaction, cultural activities, and events.
 - New Social and Recreational Spaces: Parks, benches, bike stations, and interactive art installations along the pathway will create attractive gathering spots for residents.
4. Enhanced Safety:
 - Dedicated Paths: Separate lanes for cyclists and pedestrians reduce the risk of accidents, making it a safer transit option for non-motorized travelers.
 - Public Lighting and Surveillance

Impact

Impact (Target): The Green Ring is expected to have a broad impact, directly benefiting over 500,000 residents in Sofia by providing a safe, accessible, and environmentally sustainable transit option. This will also indirectly benefit the wider metropolitan area by reducing traffic congestion, improving air quality, and making Sofia a more livable and attractive city.

Key metrics for impact include:

- Environmental Improvement: Reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and particulate matter by an estimated 10-15% in the areas around the Green Ring.
- Increased Public Use of Green Spaces: Expected 20-25% increase in the use of green spaces due to improved connectivity.
- Community Engagement: More than 100,000 residents anticipated to engage in community events, cultural activities, and recreational use of the new green spaces.

Sofia - Project Idea 3

Impact

- Size (Scope) and Justification of Need: Spanning approximately 30 kilometers, the Green Ring will encircle central Sofia, linking neighborhoods with parks and community spaces in a continuous, eco-friendly loop. Surveys and recent public consultations show strong demand for better air quality, more accessible green spaces, and safer routes for walking and biking. Traffic data and environmental studies also confirm the need for reducing motor vehicle reliance and introducing sustainable transit options.

Implementation

- Phase 1: Planning and Environmental Assessment (Months 1-9)
 - Conduct an environmental impact assessment and feasibility studies to confirm project areas and design considerations.
 - Engage urban planners, environmental scientists, and local communities to ensure alignment with sustainability goals.
- Phase 2: Community Engagement and Pilot (Months 9-18)
 - Start by constructing a pilot section in a high-traffic neighborhood, gathering feedback to refine designs and community preferences.
 - Host public forums, design workshops, and online polls to incorporate resident feedback and ensure transparency.
- Phase 3: Full-Scale Construction and Phased Expansion (Months 18-42)
 - Gradually expand construction along the planned route, with sections prioritized by population density and pollution levels.
 - Implement sustainable materials, landscaping, and waste management practices to minimize environmental impact during construction.
- Phase 4: Final Touches and Infrastructure Completion (Months 42-48)
 - Install urban furniture, signage, safety lighting, and landscaping features.
 - Add facilities such as bike rental stations, benches, public art installations, and educational kiosks about Sofia's biodiversity.
- Phase 5: Awareness Campaign and Official Launch (Month 48 onward)
 - Promote the Green Ring through local media, social media campaigns, and a grand opening event with public figures, environmental NGOs, and community leaders.
 - Launch a website and app for route maps

Support

Financing: The estimated total project cost is approximately €20 million. Funding sources will include:

- Municipal Budget: Sofia Municipality will allocate annual funds dedicated to sustainable infrastructure and green urban development.
- European Union Grants: The project will seek co-financing through EU programs like the LIFE program, the European Regional Development Fund, and the Cohesion Fund.

Sofia - Project Idea 3

Support

Milestone 1 (Year 1): Completion of environmental assessments and pilot section.
Milestone 2 (Year 2): Construction reaches 50% of the total planned route.
Milestone 3 (Year 3): Completion of core infrastructure with urban furniture, lighting, and community facilities.
Milestone 4 (Year 4): Official launch event, followed by ongoing community engagement and maintenance initiatives.
Milestone 5 (Year 5): Post- launch evaluation and expansion of additional green links to nearby parks and neighborhoods based on user feedback.

Video Link

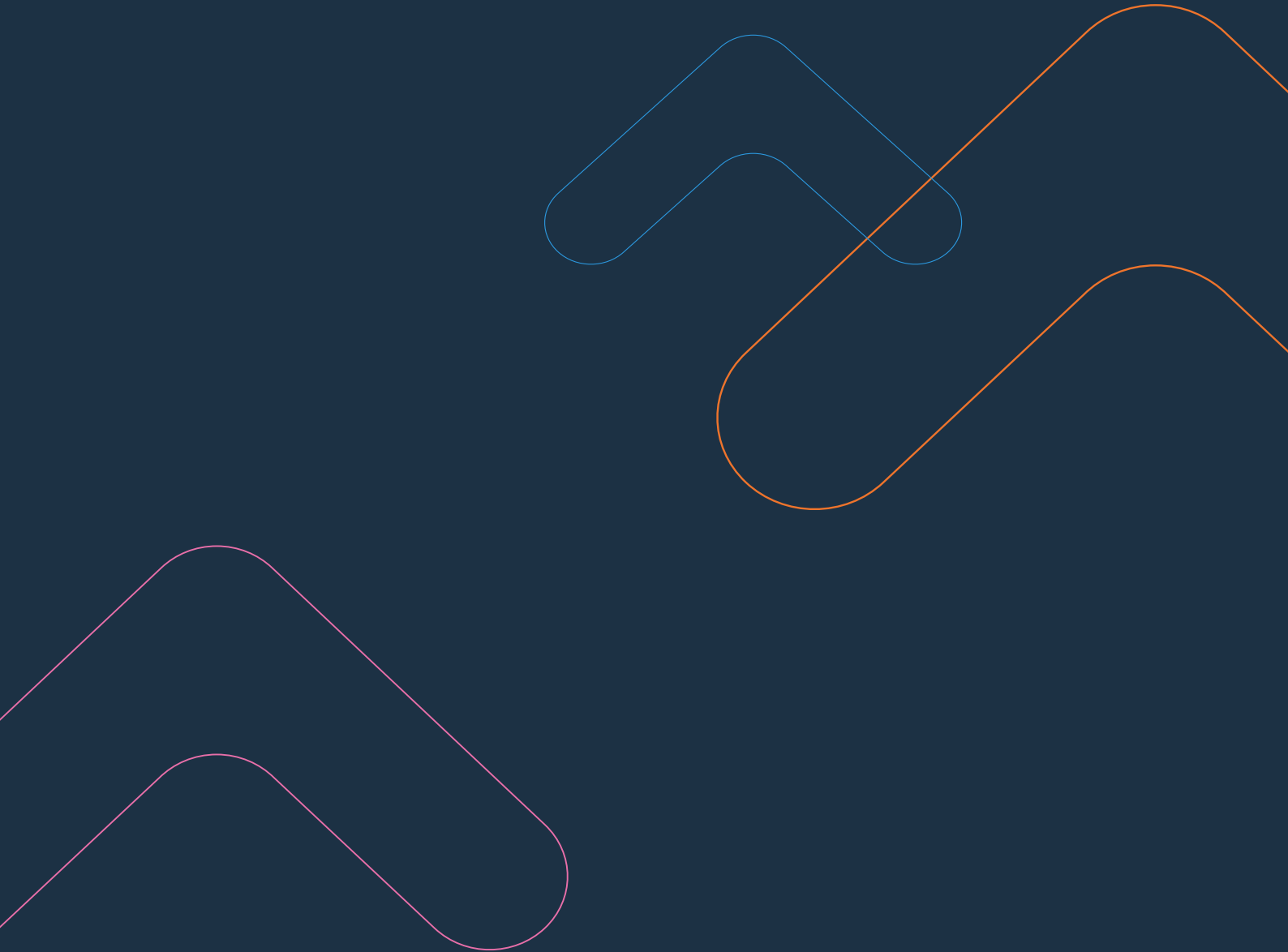
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Democracy Dimension

Sustainability



**European Capital
of Democracy**