

KoneKtor 2024: What roles can (community) foundations play in fostering democracy, dialogue, and social cohesion?



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KoneKtor 2024, the annual gathering of funders working on or interested in issues in Central and Eastern Europe, took place in Prague on the 23rd-25th of September. Under the title “Dialogue, Democracy and Diversity”, participants explored and investigated the role of philanthropy in promoting social cohesion, bridging divides, and innovating how we develop and strengthen connections. Given the vital role that community foundations and national movements play in fostering cohesion in different Central and Eastern European countries, ECFI could not miss the opportunity to bring the broader field perspective to the discussion, along with on-the-ground colleagues like Trag Foundation, the National Network for the Development of Local Philanthropy in Ukraine and Tuzla Community Foundation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The two days alternated between panels focused on framing the issue of polarisation and its characteristics with more in-depth and specific sessions on the challenges that democracy is facing, the role of civil society organisations, and how we, as a society and philanthropic actors, can rebuild our capacity for dialogue and overcome polarisations.

Throughout the sessions, two words recurred: social cohesion and inclusion, which I reframe as belonging to overcome the intrinsic power dynamic of someone including someone else.

One of the side meetings was indeed titled “Strategies for Restoring Social Cohesion”: Maxim Dedushkov, Founder Holis School and Weronika Czyżewska-Poncyłjusz, Executive Director International Programs at Borderland Foundation, an organisation focused on strengthening communities living on national borders, kicked off a lively conversation. This topic is very relevant to community foundations across Europe that are currently facing the uprising of extremist movements, hate discourses, and fragmented communities on topical issues such as migration. Both speakers agreed this work must start at the community level, an incredible hub for experimentation and solution testing. Maxim raised an interesting point on how silo-based professional approaches were one of the key elements driving polarisation, making the example of Central and Eastern European education systems designed to segregate children from different communities. My thought went immediately to how community foundations are best placed to overcome this issue, given their holistic approach to communities in a defined locality. Another relevant element for community philanthropy for building bridges and fostering social cohesion was being in the community for the long term: the Borderland Foundation has been working for 30 years with small groups of people living close to borders.

Finally, the speakers tackled one of the recurring questions in philanthropy: how do we scale our efforts? The answer was simple: we need to overcome the pressure of finding a solution that can be copied and pasted into other contexts as the communities are complex, and what works in some places does not apply to others. We need to learn how to scale processes that can be adapted to different situations rather than answers. We must aim to scale up our solutions, make them permanent and embedded into policies, change systems, and tackle the root causes profoundly.

Another eye-opening session centered on the layered discrimination faced by particular communities, for example Roma and Sinti, the most discriminated community in Europe according to the Fundamental Rights Agency, as well as LGBTQ+ communities. This session raised an important question for community foundations: how can we create spaces for safe belonging for everyone in our localities? Who does not have a seat at our table today? How can we hold and integrate this complexity in our organisation and strategy and untap the full potential of our resources - financial, social capital, our convening power - to achieve this greater vision?

The two days were very enriching, and I would like to close on a personal final note: this KoneKtor event made me think about how philanthropy support organisations must strive to hold difficult conversations. Philea and the KoneKtor's Steering Committee were bold enough to experiment and create the space for a moving exchange between Vesna Bajanski-Agic, Vice President of Strategic Alliances and Global Development at TechSoup Global, and Kristina Šešljija, Head of Field Office at UN Agencies, titled "Talking with the Enemy". These two extraordinary women opened their hearts to what the Bosniac war in 1992-1995 meant for them, the values they held at the time for one another, being on the opposite side of the war, and the struggles to rebuild peaceful communities in the aftermath of the conflict. And for their testimony, brutal and sweet honesty, and sharing these complex fragilities, I will be forever grateful.

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