

WHAT IS SO EXCITING ABOUT

EXCITE?

EXCITE isn't just a project; it's a beacon of transformation, a testament to the collective desire for positive change within our cities. What makes **EXCITE** truly exciting is its pivotal role as the catalyst for meaningful and impactful shifts in our urban landscapes.

Our cities hold a special place in our hearts, and we all share a common dream – to see them evolve into the greenest, most environmentally conscious, and sustainable havens in Europe. Yet, navigating the complexities of differing attitudes, opinions, and interests becomes a formidable challenge when it's time to make tough decisions.

Undoubtedly, it requires a tremendous amount of effort. Local authorities, the custodians of our city's well-being, stand at the forefront of this endeavour. They require not only expertise but also active collaboration from us, the citizens. What they truly need is a comprehensive system that provides support, tools, and, equally important, recognition for their dedicated efforts.

Enter the European Energy Award, the game-changer that checks all the essential boxes. It doesn't just provide municipalities with a set of methods; it equips them with the necessary tools, expertise, and motivation to turn aspirations into reality. The power to instigate change lies at the local level, within the very communities we call home.

EXCITE is the driving force that empowers local authorities to overcome challenges, implement sustainable practices, and create a future where our cities are shining examples of environmental stewardship. It's not merely about envisioning change; it's about making change happen – one municipality at a time. The excitement in EXCITE lies in its promise to transform aspirations into actions, bringing us closer to the cities we've always dreamed of.



EXCITE is where change happens. Because change happens at the local level.

The EXCITE project

- Main objective: To support the implementation of enhanced municipal energy management systems in countries in Central and Eastern Europe.
- Approach: Applying the methodology of the European Energy Award (eea)
- Scope: At least 15 pilot cities in Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine
- Aim: To stimulate the implementation of local energy and climate plans, attracting private investors, promoting public entrepreneurship and successfully leveraging the scarce public resources.

What's in there for me?

Local authorities choose to participate in the European Energy Award to receive:

- An action-oriented management instrument that leads to tangible benefits
- Capacity building through coaching by experienced energy experts
- Access to a comprehensive set of nationally-adapted support tools
- Increased visibility through public events and awarding procedure recognized around EU
- Regular exchange of experience and training promoting public entrepreneurship and successfully leveraging the scarce public resources.

KEY PROJECT OUTPUTS

The eea process

Activities commenced with stakeholder mapping by each partner, followed by national partner training on the eea assessment guidance's content and principles. Recommendations for eea integration with SECAPs were provided in a dedicated report, and the setup of national eea programs was detailed in another. A comprehensive guide for adapting the assessment guidance was created, facilitating national adaptations.

The eea catalogue and assessment guidance were translated into Slovenian, Bulgarian, and Macedonian for the selected pilot municipalities. Up to four experts (eea consultants/advisors) per municipality were trained by the end of 2021. Despite challenges from the COVID pandemic and the war in Ukraine, the expected outcomes, including setting the national institutional framework, toolbox translation, and expert training, were achieved.

In the reporting period, local activities progressed coherently. Regular meetings facilitated workshops for the eea initial energy review, national auditors were trained, audits were conducted, and the national Certification Commission Body was established. Improved versions of the Assessment **Guidance** were developed, gaining approval from the eea office

As a result, most pilot municipalities underwent initial reviews and external assessments, leading to the implementation of tailored energy and climate policy programs. Romania and Ukraine advanced to the eea implementation phase, enhancing the national eea label and tools.

These achievements were strongly supported by the progress on national eea implemen-



tation, overcoming barriers and integrating methodologies with SECAP practices. Training courses in Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, and Ukraine addressed CoM signatories, facilitating the integration of SECAP methodologies into the eea EMT tool. This process supported the cooperation agreement between eea and CoM for mutual acceptance of reporting methodologies. The success of these activities thus presents a replicable model for other countries in Central and Eastern Europe looking to adopt energy management systems and integrate them with existing sustainability frameworks without additionally burdening the local authorities - on the contrary, the identified complementarities are expected to strongly enhance the efficiency of the local climate and energy actions.

CAPACITY BUILDING PLATFORM



In a parallel manner, the peer-to-peer learning activities in EXCITE supported and applied best practices within the implementing countries. The initial phase of the project saw the publication of the first report, 'Training Programs and Materials Available Off- and On-line,' as part of these learning activities. This report detailed the training materials accessible through the specialized Moodle application, forming the basis for engaging and interactive on-site training programs.

These training sessions were hosted by EXCITE pilot cities during peer-to-peer study visits, such as Cluj-Napoca (Romania), Vienna (Austria), Skopje (North Macedonia), Dobrich (Bulgaria), and Velenje (Slovenia). Municipal staff engaged in these sessions benefited from discussions and experience exchanges facilitated by speakers from local authorities and companies who understood the challenges related to procurement procedures, technological solutions, and internal coordination.

The study visits proved highly successful, allowing focused discussions and positive feedback from participating experts. Complementary activities included online workshops facilitated by AEA and online applications like the dedicated Moodle training course in Ukraine, which was particularly valuable given the country's circumstances. In summary, the EXCITE training scheme significantly enhanced the capacity of municipal staff through interactive on-site trainings, online workshops, and study visits across various locations.



Pertinent topics such as the EU Green Deal, the EU mission on 100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030, local energy cooperatives, and renewable energy solutions were presented, resulting in new skills for municipal staff, additional eea consultants and auditors, and increased capacities to meet 2030 and 2050 energy and CO2 reduction goals.

STAKEHOLDERS' FNGAGEMENT

These activities were intricately interconnected with the endeavours carried out in the field of stakeholders engagement, underscoring the significance of promoting business models to both local authorities and citizens, particularly in the context of civil engagement activities on the ground. Following the formulation of civil engagement strategies for the pilot municipalities, available in the dedicated report "Local Civil Engagement Strategies", a strong focus was placed on translating these strategies into action. This phase marked the initiation of stakeholders' engagement in each participating pilot municipality.

Each locality witnessed the successful execution of at least one large-scale pilot activity, aligning with the tailor-made strategies. This comprehensive effort was documented in the "Best Case Studies – Citizen Engagement" report, meticulously preparing best case studies to ensure thorough documentation of methodologies and outcomes.

Crucially, the outcomes of these activities seamlessly fed into the peer-to-peer learning activities described above. The study tours facilitated the exchange of knowledge among pilot municipalities, enabling them to explore and adopt best practices in civil engagement. New best cases identified through these experiences were seamlessly incorporated into the training program, fostering a continuous learning loop for all participating entities. Online awareness-raising workshops played a pivotal role in informing



local authorities about best practices, drawing insights from municipalities with experience in eea and/or Covenant of Mayors. The dissemination of these experiences occurred through national and international communication channels, optimizing the impact of the gained knowledge.





COUNTRY HIGHLIGHTS

BULGARIA

In the initial project phases, EnEffect's team achieved significant milestones, laying the foundation for EXCITE's successful implementation. The establishment of the eea national office, staffed by a dedicated team, and the signing of MoUs with pilot municipalities—Gabrovo, Dobrich, and Sofia—underscored a strong commitment to project goals. The translation and adaptation of key components, including the International eea Catalogue and the eea EMT tool, were complemented by the selection and training of local eea consultants, forming a cohesive team.

Transitioning to the implementation phase, the team coordinated the Initial Energy Review in Bulgaria. Overcoming challenges posed by external factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the team engaged Sofia, Gabrovo, and Dobrich with a tailored approach. Each city's unique circumstances were addressed: Sofia Municipality benefitted from its recent adoption of a Sustainable



Energy and Climate Action Plan, facilitating data provision and clarifying meetings with the auditor. Gabrovo Municipality involved desktop studies and direct communication with municipal experts, combining online and face-to-face interactions. Dobrich Municipality featured on-site visits, weekly coordination talks, and close collaboration between the advisor and municipal representatives.

Collaboration continued with international auditors, refining assessments and identifying potential improvements based on national contexts. Initial scores set the stage for subsequent improvements. The interna-

tional audit in June 2023 provided first-hand insights, fostering collaboration. Post-audit, the final eea scores for pilot municipalities reflected the growing ambition and dedication, but also pointed out to pathways for further improvement:

- GABROVO: 487 potential points; realized points: 172.25//35.4%
- DOBRICH: 475 potential points; realized points: 133//28%
- SOFIA: 500 potential points; realized points: 132.75//26.5%



Meeting with municipal experts in Gabrovo, 2023

Beyond eea implementation, the EXCITE team actively contributed to local civil engagement strategies, supporting initiatives in Gabrovo, such as "The Mayors Talk" and the launch of the first energy cooperative in public-private partnership. The robust communication strategy, including social media, websites, and participation in major events, ensured widespread visibility with over 2000 participants. Positive engagement with authorities and the June 2023 EUSEW conference highlighted sustained progress despite changes in government leadership. The project's impact extended beyond core objectives, emphasizing active community engagement, innovative financing models, and capacity building. This comprehensive approach underscores the multifaceted success and impact of the EXCITE project across diverse initiatives and at both local and national levels



The deputy ministers of Energy and Regional development and public works at the official public consultations on the National Energy and Climate Plan, organized jointly by EnEffect and the Ministry of Energy



NORTH MACEDONIA

At the project's outset, the North Macedonia EXCITE team crafted a detailed Proiect Implementation Plan (PIP) and convened the kick-off meeting, drawing participants from municipalities, governmental and educational institutions, the business sector, professional associations, and NGOs. During the subsequent preoperational phase, the National eea office was established within HFH Macedonia's central offices, and the National eea Certification Committee was formed. Transitioning to the operational phase involved signing cooperation contracts with the three pilot municipalities-Karposh, Kochani, and Kichevo. These contracts solidified initial commitment, and the team focused on translating and adapting key eea tools, including the eea International Catalogue (IC) (Swiss version), the eea International Guidance for the Implementation of the IC, and the eea EMT tool. Training tools and brochures for the Moodle training platform were also translated. Continuous efforts refined assessment tools throughout the project.

Six qualified experts were trained for the Initial Energy Review process, forming a cohesive eea consultants' team. This local expertise played a pivotal role, and preparation



for the assessment process involved collaboration with international experts, resulting in initial scores that laid the foundation for subsequent improvements. On-site visits by the international expert in March 2022 provided first-hand insights into municipal activities.

The assessment process utilized workshops, desk research, and direct communication. Three events, including two-day workshops

and online sessions, were organized for necessary information collection, assessments, and training on Energy Efficiency (EE) and Public Participation. While Karposh and Kochani municipalities actively supported the process, Kichevo's inconsistent efforts led to the invitation of Delchevo municipality as an alternative. Due to Kichevo's inability to provide documents, the International Audit wasn't implemented. Final eea scores post-audit reflected growing ambition:



• KOCHANI: 496 potential points; realized points: 135.7//27.2%





Beyond eea implementation, the EXCITE team actively contributed to three local civic engagement strategies, showcasing stakeholder engagement and utilizing financing models and capacity-building platforms. Representatives from pilot municipalities, including the newly attracted city of Delchevo, actively participated in organized Peer-to-Peer meetings and the study visit in Vienna. Macedonian municipalities contributed during online training events, and the EXCITE team engaged in the final international conference in Sofia.

The communication strategy played a crucial role, effectively promoting project activities and results through social media, websites, media coverage, and participation in public events. In conclusion, the eea methodology shows promise in North Macedonia, and involving more municipalities is essential. The EXCITE Project in North Macedonia demonstrates that a comprehensive approach can yield multifaceted success and impact across diverse initiatives at both local and national levels.

The KSSENA team played a leading role in translating and adapting key project components, including the international eea Catalogue, implementation guidance, and the eea EMT tool. Then, local eea consultants in each pilot municipality were carefully selected and underwent specialized training, forming the eea consultancy team. Together with international consultants, KSSENA organized seminars and workshops to train eea auditors and Label Commission members.

The KSSENA project team coordinated the Initial Energy Review process in Slovenia, tailoring it to the specific characteristics of each pilot municipality—Velenje, Celje, and Slovenj Gradec. Despite challenges posed by external factors like the COVID-19 pandemic, the team navigated them adeptly. The specific approaches to the three pilot cities were tailored to their unique circumstances:



- Municipality of Velenje: Recognized for its green transition, Velenje's Local Energy Concept (LEK) adoption in April 2022 facilitated the initial energy review, benefiting from ample relevant data.
- Municipality of Celje: As the largest participating municipality, fruitful cooperation between the municipality staff and the energy manager eased the process despite incomplete activities in the energy area.
- Municipality of Slovenj Gradec: Adopting the Local Energy Concept 2020, the municipality focused on appropriate spatial planning and energy supply, actively attracting investors and renovating public buildings.

SLOVENIA

In the initial stages of the EXCITE project, significant strides were made, laying the foundation for the subsequent successful implementation by the regional energy agency KSSENA and its partners. A pivotal achievement was the establishment of the eea National Office, staffed by a dedicated team of three actively engaged in project activities. This strategic move was complemented by successful agreements signed with the pilot municipalities of Velenje, Celje, and Slovenj Gradec, signifying a significant commitment to project objectives.

After collecting and analysing information, the team filled in relevant data and comments for assessment in the EMT. Online meetings between national consultants and international assessors followed, presenting the context for each pilot community and clarifying proposed assessment scores. The audit results for the municipalities are as follows:

• VELENJE: 479 potential points; realized points: 270 // 56.4%

• CELJE: 483 potential points; realized points: 265 // 54.8%

• SLOVENJ GRADEC: 479 potential points; realized points: 252 // 52.6%

Apart from evaluating and training municipalities and stakeholders, international exchange of experiences played a vital role. Representatives participated in peer-to-peer excursions, gaining new ideas, and showcased their work at international events. KSSENA organized or participated in national events, presenting the European Energy Award mechanism to local energy agencies. Collaboration with Borzen at the national level laid the foundations for further development of the European Energy Awards in Slovenia.



Training of eea label commission, 2021



Mr Matija Kovač at European Sustainable energy week, 2023



Type text Panel discussion during the EU Green Leaf award ceremony for Velenje



Eea audit in Celje, 2023

ROMANIA

In Romania, the eea journey began in 2016 when RoGBC became the eea license holder. The subsequent establishment of the national trustee, advisors, and auditors laid the foundation for the 'Comunitate Sustenabila' ('Sustainable Community') system, adopting a 5-step design mirroring the Austrian model. The assessment guidance, translated in 2016 and updated biennially, integrates new solutions and legislative changes.

From 2018 to 2021, RoGBC actively participated in the H2020 CoME Easy project, harmonizing Covenant of Mayors with eea. This initiative designated Ambassador Cities, lasi and Vama Buzaului, from Romania. The significance of city energy managers in communities exceeding 5000 inhabitants became evident during the CoME Easy project.

Building on eea experiences through CoME Easy, the EXCITE project took flight with the eea certification of Vama Buzaului in October 2020. This small village highlighted the value of technical staff, aiding in data collection and project management. Vama Buzaului achieved a commendable score of 38.50%, surpassing the two-leaves threshold (37.50%). Subsequently, lasi secured eea certification in April 2021, marking a significant achievement. As the second-largest city in Romania. Iasi's success resulted from collaborative efforts among the city council staff, city energy manager, and Servelect company. Despite challenges, lasi garnered media interest, further spotlighted by the Swiss Ambassador at the certification event.



Alba Iulia eea event. Opening of a road sign in August 2021 with municipal staff involved

The momentum continued with the eea certification of Alba Iulia in August 2021, a city deeply rooted in Romanian history. With photovoltaic panels on most city schools and a focus on smart city initiatives, Alba Iulia achieved a score of 41.5%. The neighbouring Cluj-Napoca, a city that joined eea in 2012, initially faced challenges

highlighted by the lowest initial eea certification score of 28%. However, over the past decade, Cluj-Napoca has made remarkable progress, addressing issues with city council buildings and internal organization. In 2022, Cluj-Napoca achieved an impressive eea assessment result of 45.00%.

Turda, inspired by the success of Cluj-Napoca, joined the eea initiative at the beginning of 2022. Despite challenges, Turda achieved a fully electrified public transport system. The eea certification event for Turda took place in July 2022. Gherla, another city in Romania, joined the eea initiative, obtaining a score of 28.50% in the eea assessment. Despite the initial score, Gherla demonstrated a willingness to improve energy efficiency and decarbonize, setting the stage for further steps in this direction.

Sighetu Marmatiei, a city situated at the Romanian border with Ukraine, dedicated significant efforts to enhance energy efficiency in public buildings. Achieving a commendable score of 31.00% in the eea assessment, Sighetu Marmatiei demonstrated its commitment to sustainable practices. The eea certification event for Sighetu Marmatiei took place in September 2023.

The most recent addition to the list of eea-certified cities is Oradea, located at the border with Hungary and showcasing remarkable infrastructure developments over the past decade. Oradea has tapped into high geothermal capacities, initiating their exploitation. Thus, it achieved the highest score to date, reaching an impressive 46.20%. The certification event was held on January 19, 2024. Expectations are high for major Romanian cities like Brasov and Timisoara to join the eea initiative and achieve certification by the end of 2024, further solidifying the success and impact of eea in Romania.







The national eea partner, EECU, played a crucial role in selecting local experts and advisors for Ukrainian communities, appointing two advisors and four local experts for each. Activities in each community began with introductory meetings and the formation of local energy teams. After the initial assessment, local experts and advisors organized comprehensive meetings to present results, crafting descriptive reports in Ukrainian and English. The next phase involved preparing and gaining approval for a 4-year action plan from each community's city council, based on the initial situation:

NOVOVOLYNSK: Establishing a coordination group of 14 members, Novovolynsk received an initial assessment score of 38.2% in 2021, increasing to 45.1% in 2023. EECU committed to ongoing support, noting the positive impact of the Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan (SECAP) developed with their assistance. Experts, together with representatives of the working group, combined the methodologies of the Covenant of Mayors and the eea as much as possible and reflected joint measures in the local eea implementation plan.

MYRHOROD: Forming a coordination group with 27 members, Myrhorod achieved an initial score of 39% in 2021, rising to 47.2% in 2023. EECU pledged continued support for Myrhorod's eea implementation.

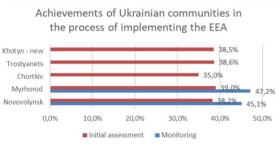
CHORTKIV: With a coordination group of 12 members, Chortkiv scored 35% in 2022, developing a 4-year action plan. EECU committed to supporting Chortkiv in implementing the eea tool and further certification.

TROSTYANETS: Despite facing a temporary halt due to occupation, Trostyanets, with 15 members in its coordination group, scored 38.6% in 2022. Efforts to renew support in 2023 are awaiting council approval.

SIEVIERODONETSK: After the first initiated meetings and forming a 22-member council, the eea consultants began preparations for the initial assessment. However, in February-March 2022, the city was heavily shelled and bombed by Russian aggressors, leading to occupation since April 2022. Consequently, work on eea implementation is on hold.

KHOTYN: Given the impossibility for Sievierodonetsk to implement the EXITE project, it was decided to identify a new city for the planned tasks. Joining the EXCITE project in 2023, the community completed the necessary tasks, forming a coordination and working group of 8 people and delivering the assessment, scoring at 38.5%. EECU will support Khotyn in the eea implementation and further certification.





Due to the war's impact on the ability of Ukrainian municipality representatives to attend training events, EECU developed the education.enefcities.org.ua online platform. With 12 modules, it allows coordination and working group members to learn conveniently. Over 20 representatives completed the first training, receiving certificates. Additionally, Sustainable Energy Days (SEDs) took place in all 5 Ukrainian EXITE pilot cities (Chortkiv, Novovolynsk, Trostyanets, Myrgorod, and Khotyn) between September and November 2023. Towards the end of the project, a final workshop for the 5 Ukrainian EXITE pilot cities occurred online on November 30th, 2023. All eea municipalities and interested stakeholders were invited, shedding light on eea implementation in Ukrainian communities, specifically within the EXITE project.

Three case studies on best practices within SECAPs and eea implementation in Ukrainian communities were developed. They cover the use of the EECU Municipal Revolving Fund for financing EE measures in the residential sector, the Cooperative initiative "Solar Town" in Slavutych, and the ongoing Cell Energy Supply System implementation in Dolyna. Access them at eea.enefcities.org.ua.

KEY RESULTS

From remote villages to regional centres and national capitals, the EXCITE has attracted a total of 26 municipalities with total population of 3,082,609 people to officially engage in implementing eea in the 5 countries – all of them bringing valuable knowledge for the benefits of municipal energy planning and management and developing the local communities. In each of these cities, specific planning documents are directly influenced, and internal capacities are built, as evidenced by the documented engagement of 218 public officials. Other 92 municipalities have been reached through the communication and dissemination campaign of the project, with a total outreach to 2664 municipal experts and policy makers. According to the applied methodology approved by the EC services, this has resulted in annual energy savings of 79,99 GWh, and emissions savings of 14,26 tCO2 – just from the 26 directly involved cities.

However, other important impacts are to be found elsewhere: the project has virtually transformed the media coverage on the topic, with over 130 publications, interviews, and appearances in national and local TV and radio stations reaching hundreds of thousands of users. Thus, municipal energy planning and management, once marginalized, now features prominently in mainstream media discourse in the target countries. Additionally, project social media channels were convincingly reaching the targets with more than 500 posts reaching close to 100,000 users, even though they suffered from the overall shift in professional communication practices towards other communication channels. Another major achievement lies with the influence on the local stakeholders, which have invested significant time resources to participate in project-related events and training, so that they are able to apply the best practices into their daily activities and routines. In this area, the EXCITE project is happy to report more than 7000 participants at topical events, co-organised or attended by project representatives delivering targeted presentations, which involved representatives of all key target groups. And the recognition came: from taking over the attention at the eea annual awards ceremony, through winning the poster completion at the C4E Forum, to presenting the project's outcomes at the closing session at the main stage of EUSEW, the EXCITE has become a trademark of excellence across Europe.

NEXT STEPS

The project team is poised for the next phase, strategically extending the proven project concept and leveraging key results in the Central and Eastern European region. The focus is on intensifying the application of the eea methodology, aiming to expand the roster of signatories in the project countries. Building on the established national frameworks, the team will engage in targeted initiatives to promote the benefits of the eea approach, fostering increased awareness among municipalities, energy consultants, and other stakeholders. Efforts will be directed at sustaining the momentum generated during the pilot phase, emphasizing stakeholder engagement, innovative financing models, and capacity-building programs. The peer learning platform, a cornerstone of the project, will continue facilitating knowledge transfer from experienced municipalities to counterparts in the region, fostering a collaborative approach to energy management. The team is committed to enhancing the visibility of municipalities and reinforcing their position as reliable partners for investors and contributors to sustainable urban development. With a comprehensive understanding of the region's regulatory frameworks and market dynamics, the team aims to replicate and adapt successful strategies, ensuring the continued success and growth of the eea initiative in Central and Eastern Europe.





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Romanian Green Building Council (RoGBC), www.rogbc.org
Institute Energy Agency of Savinjska, Šaleška and Carinthia (KSSENA), www.kssena.si
Association "Energy Efficient Cities of Ukraine" (EECU), www.enefcities.org.ua/en/
Habitat for Humanity Macedonia (HFHM), www.habitat.org.mk
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