

# LOCAL DEMOCRACY AGENCIES

A proven model for Peace  
and Participation



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# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The Local Democracy Agencies: Empowering Communities since 1999</b>	<b>4</b>
What is a Local Democracy Agency?	4
How LDAs work: Structure, roles, and methods	5
Growing Through the Years: The Evolution of the LDA Network	11
A European Fabric: The Multistakeholder Nature of LDAs	16
<b>The impact of the LDAs: Figures over 15 years of activity</b>	<b>21</b>
A Legacy of Action: 15 Years of Project Impact	21
Strategic Leverage: How LDAs Turn Small Support into Big Results	25
Durability Over Time: Long-Term Commitment to Local Change	28
<b>Challenges and opportunities for the future</b>	<b>29</b>

# Introduction

Born out of the ashes of conflict and the urgent need for reconciliation, the **Local Democracy Agencies (LDAs)** were first established in **1993** under the auspices of the **Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe**. Originally known as *Local Democracy Embassies*, these pioneering initiatives emerged during the wars in the former Yugoslavia, designed to serve as **beacons of dialogue, peacebuilding, and democratic resilience** in regions torn apart by violence and division.

At a time when national institutions were fragile and communities deeply polarised, the LDAs operated at the grassroots level to foster mutual understanding, protect human rights, and promote local self-government. At the time of their inception, **four LDAs** were founded in **Subotica (Serbia), Tuzla (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Osijek (Croatia), and Zavidovići (Bosnia and Herzegovina)**. Their presence represented a concrete response to the need for **bottom-up approaches to peace**, built on trust, cooperation, and citizen participation. Over the years, the network expanded both geographically and thematically, and the initiative adopted the name **Local Democracy Agencies**, reflecting a broader mission to **strengthen participatory democracy, support local governance, and engage civil society** in a growing number of countries across Europe and beyond.

Today, the LDAs form a **unique network coordinated by ALDA – the European Association for Local Democracy**. They act as long-term partners for local development, linking local authorities and civil society in joint efforts to reinforce democracy, advance European values, and respond to emerging societal challenges. They also represent a unique tool for enhancing cooperation between partners with projects and strategic joint approach.

From their origins as instruments of post-conflict reconstruction to their current role as **permanent platforms for democratic innovation at the local level (citizens and local authorities oriented)and territorial cooperation**, the story of the LDAs is one of resilience, commitment, and vision — a story that continues to unfold in the service of communities across the continent.

We aim at confirming the role of local democracy in resilience and support to democracy, as well as the key of local sustainable development. The local Democracy Agencies are a tool for unfolding the international cooperation of local authorities and communities, in areas of the world embarking on decentralisation or of need for a local approach to governance.

# The Local Democracy Agencies: Empowering Communities since 1993



## What is a Local Democracy Agency?

A **Local Democracy Agency (LDA)** is a locally-based, internationally supported platform established to promote human rights, democratic governance, and sustainable local development. Introduced in **1993** by **Causes Communes Belgique** and supported by **Causes Communes Suisse**, the concept was developed through a series of resolutions and recommendations adopted by the **Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (CLRAE)**.

LDAs aim to improve local living conditions and foster peaceful co-existence through **intermunicipal cooperation**, **intercultural dialogue**, and **civic engagement**. Their role encompasses strengthening the democratic process, supporting **minority rights**, **combating racism and xenophobia**, and encouraging micro-economic development and reconstruction aid.

Functioning as both operational and symbolic bridges between local communities and international partners, LDAs also serve as facilitators for **humanitarian initiatives**, promoters of **socio-cultural and economic exchange**, and mediators within diverse local environments.

Their **multistakeholder structure** allows them to engage with local authorities, civil society organisations, youth groups, religious communities, and independent media to build trust, support democratic reforms, and enhance civic participation.

## How LDAs work: Structure, roles, and methods

Each Local Democracy Agency (LDA) operates as a locally registered non-governmental organisation, rooted in the communities it serves. What makes the LDAs unique is their **decentralised partnership model**: every agency is supported by a **Lead Partner**, usually a local or regional authority from a European Union country, and a **consortium of partners** including municipalities, regions, and civil society organisations **from across Europe**. This structure ensures **continuous international cooperation and exchange**, while empowering the LDA to address local needs with tailored, community-driven solutions.

LDAs implement **projects, training, advocacy, and capacity-building activities** in fields such as democratic governance, civic engagement, human rights, environmental sustainability, youth participation, and local development. Their flexible, multi-stakeholder approach allows them to serve as **permanent platforms for cooperation**, fostering dialogue between citizens, institutions, and civil society, and reinforcing democratic practices from the ground up.

Each Local Democracy Agency is founded on a **strong multilateral partnership** that reflects its international and decentralised character.

At its core is a **host municipality or region**, located in a country where the democratic process is being supported or re-established. This host commits to the LDA's objectives and provides essential infrastructure such as office space. The host is joined by at least **three partner municipalities, regions, or groups of municipalities from different Council of Europe member states**, which contribute politically, technically, and financially to the Agency's functioning.

One of the partners, a town, a region or a NGO, shall be appointed by all LDA partners as **project leader**.

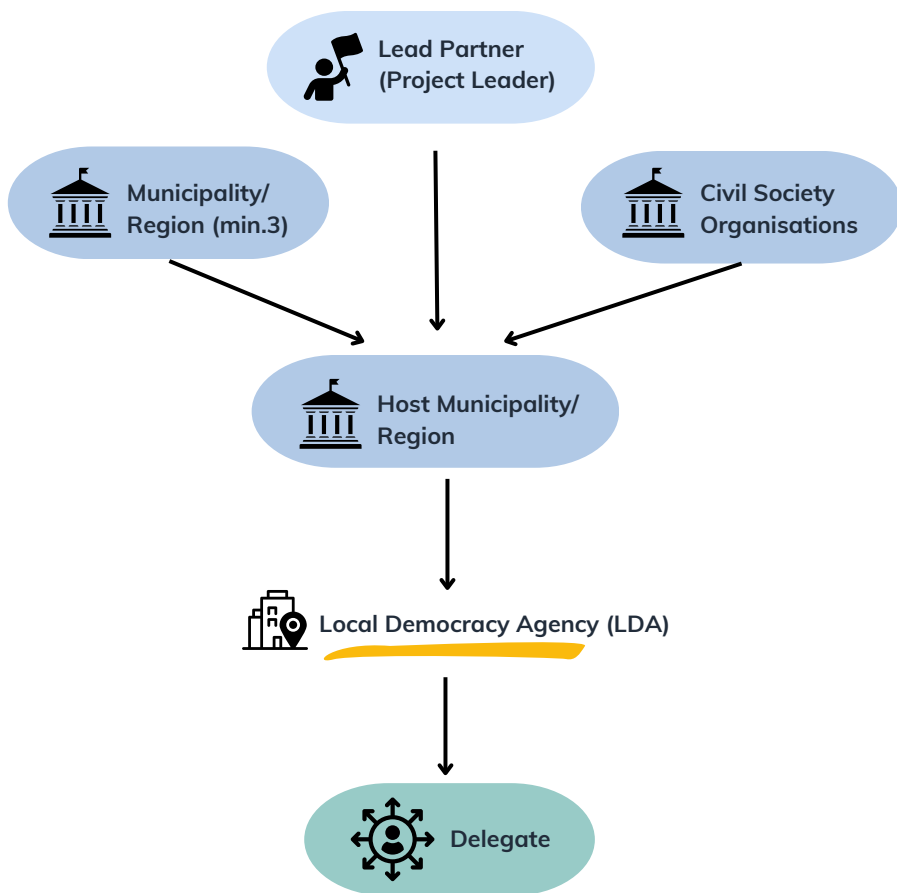
Together, these actors form a cooperative framework that enables LDAs to act as **permanent platforms for democratic exchange, local development, and intercultural dialogue**.



In order to ensure a permanent presence in the town or local community hosting the local democracy Agency, the partners' network, appoints one Delegate assisted by one or more assistants. The name of the **Delegate** is then validated by the Governing Board of ALDA. They ensure that the Local Democracy Agency is present and visible at all times.

The Delegate must be qualified to undertake the coordination of assignments with a «human rights», cultural or even economic development background.





The Delegate is responsible for fostering communication, managing activities, and maintaining strong ties with all partners. Their main duties include:

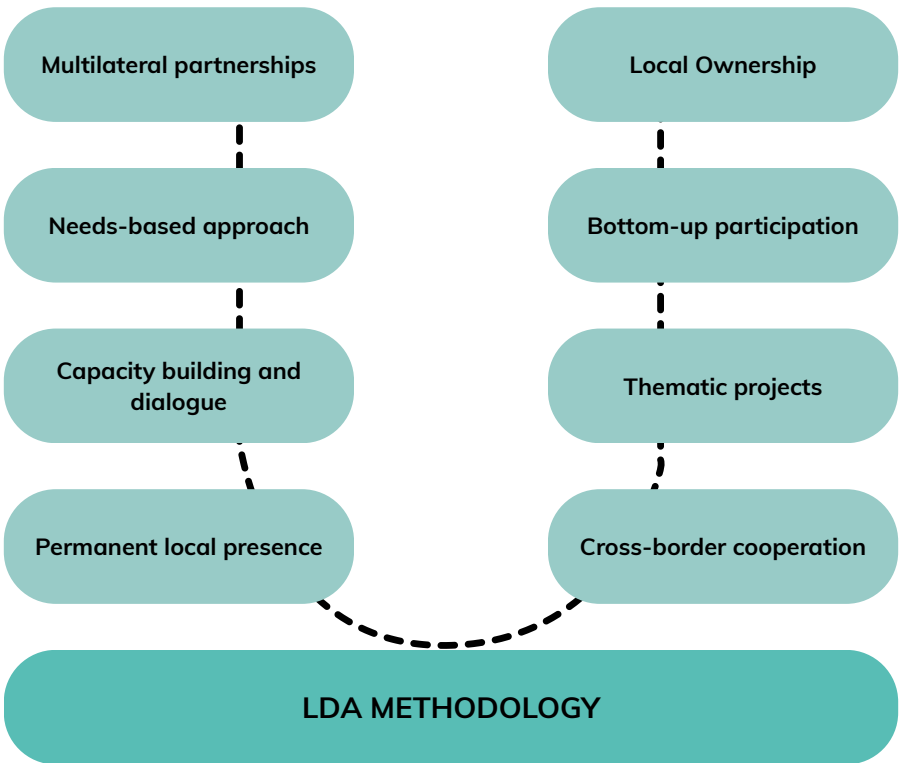
- **Ensuring a permanent and public presence of the LDA in the host municipality**, with daily opening hours accessible to citizens and stakeholders.



- **Facilitating communication and information exchange** between the host town, partner municipalities, regional authorities, and local communities.
- **Organising and coordinating activities** such as training sessions, cultural exchanges, economic cooperation, and intermunicipal visits.
- **Collaborating closely with local NGOs**, youth organisations, independent media, and other civil society actors active in the region.
- **Hosting and managing delegations**, including representatives from partner municipalities, chambers of commerce, and European institutions.
- **Overseeing the financial and administrative management** of the LDA, ensuring transparency and accountability, unless handled directly by the lead partner.
- **Promoting family-to-family links**, community-level initiatives, and exchanges of expertise in local democracy and micro-economic development.
- **Contributing to the legal recognition of the LDA** within the host country to enhance its role in civil society and sustainability over time.
- **Leading the LDA's annual action programme**, ensuring alignment with the overall goals of the agency and its partners.

The Local Democracy Agencies (LDAs) operate through a distinctive and flexible approach rooted in **local ownership and international partnership**. Their working methods are based on **multilateral cooperation**, bringing together local and regional authorities from different countries with civil society organisations to design and implement activities that respond directly to the needs of local communities.

LDAs adopt a **bottom-up methodology**, prioritising participation, dialogue, and inclusiveness in all phases of their work — from planning and project design to execution and evaluation.



Their activities span a wide range of thematic areas, including **democratic governance, civic engagement, youth participation, peacebuilding, and social inclusion.**

By combining **training, community events, policy advocacy, and micro-projects**, LDAs serve as permanent platforms for exchange between citizens, institutions, and international partners. Their ability to adapt to diverse political and social contexts makes them a **unique and resilient tool for supporting democracy at the local level.**

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LDAs are unique and resilient  
tools for supporting democracy  
at the local level.

”

## Growing Through the Years: The Evolution of the LDA Network

The story of the Local Democracy Agencies (LDAs) begins in **1993**, during one of Europe's most turbulent periods in recent history. As violent conflict unfolded in the former Yugoslavia, the **Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe** launched a bold and innovative initiative: the creation of **Local Democracy Embassies**. These early structures were not diplomatic outposts in the traditional sense, but rather **grassroots platforms for peacebuilding and democratic dialogue**.

The first Embassies were established in **Subotica (Serbia)** and **Osijek (Croatia)**, followed by others in **Tuzla** and **Zavidovići (Bosnia and Herzegovina)**, with support from a group of European municipalities and civil society organisations, notably Causes Communes Belgique and Causes Communes Suisse.

From the outset, the mission was clear: to **support local governance, promote human rights, and rebuild trust in war-affected communities**. As these initiatives matured and proved effective, the model was refined and institutionalised through successive Council of Europe resolutions. In **1998**, the name was officially changed from Local Democracy Embassies to **Local Democracy Agencies (LDAs)** to better reflect their permanent and operational nature.

In the **late 1990s and early 2000s**, the network expanded with the openings of **LDA Sisak** and **LDA Verteneglio/Brtonigla (1996)**, **LDA Zavidovići (1997)**, and **LDA Prijedor (2000)**. This marked a move from emergency post-conflict work to long-term support for reconciliation, local development, and participatory democracy.

In **2001**, the establishment of **LDA Montenegro** and **LDA Central and Southern Serbia** further strengthened the network's presence in the Western Balkans.

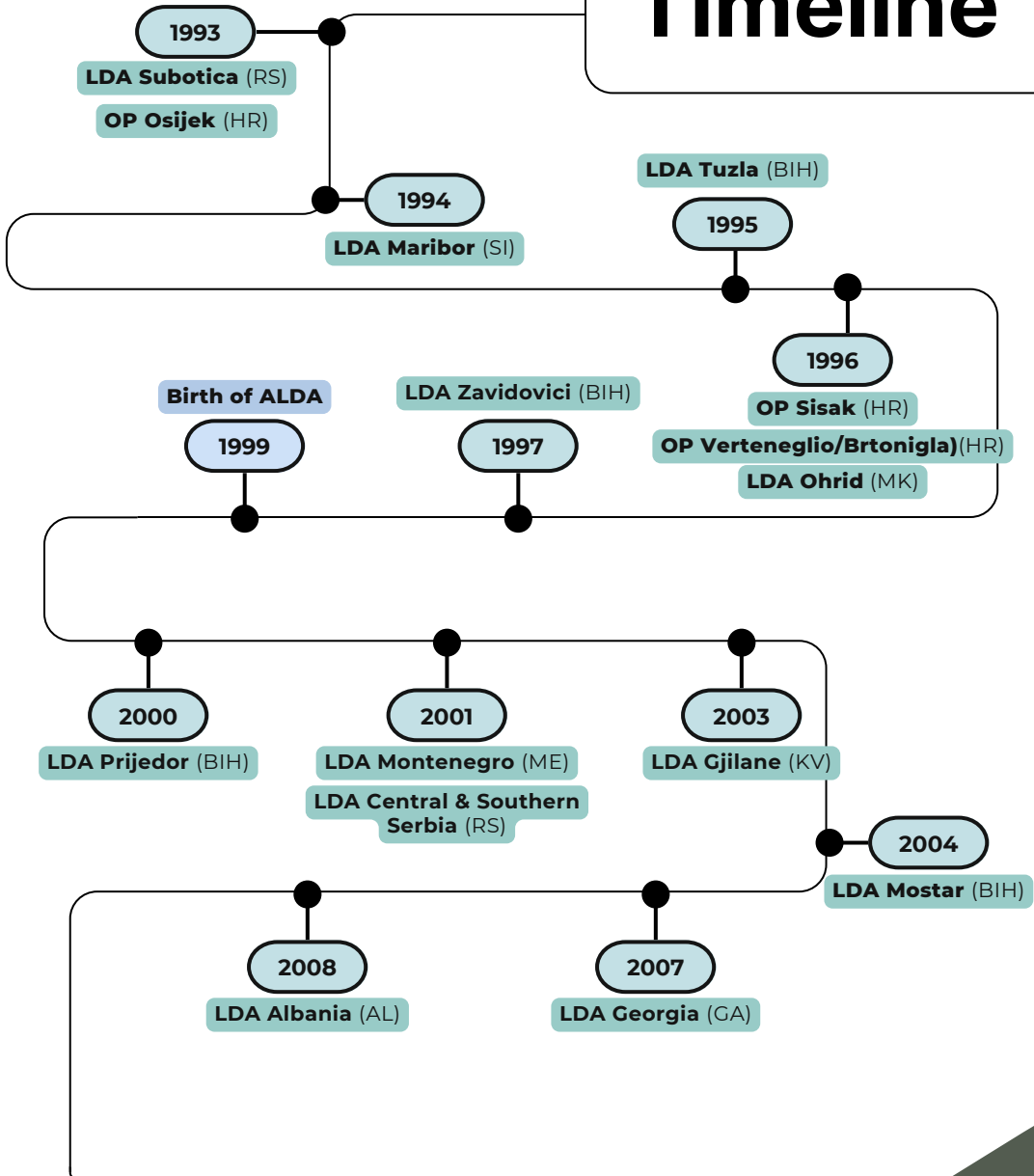
In **1999**, the Congress handed over the programme of the LDAs to ALDA, which was just founded that same year. With the coordination of **ALDA – the European Association for Local Democracy** the network evolved into a **structured and strategic tool** for promoting local democracy across borders. ALDA provided the LDAs with institutional support, project coordination, and capacity-building, enabling the network to become a **European reference point for decentralised cooperation**.

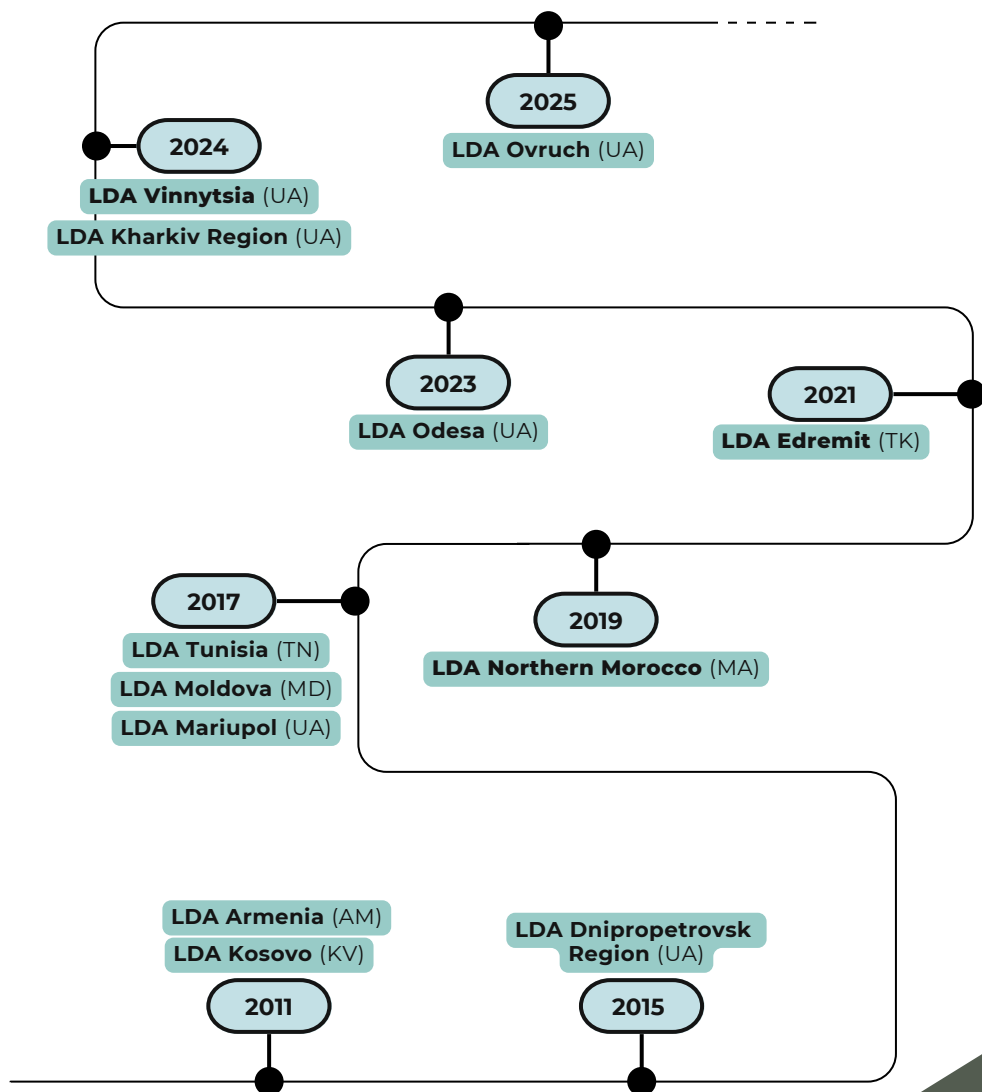
The 2000s and 2010s witnessed both geographical and thematic diversification. In **2004**, **LDA Mostar** was created. In **2007**, the network expanded into the Eastern Partnership with the opening of **LDA Georgia**, followed by **LDA Armenia** (2011), **LDA Dnipropetrovsk Region** (Ukraine, 2015), and **LDA Moldova** (2017). That same year saw the openings of **LDA Mariupol** and **LDA Tunisia**, expanding ALDA's reach to North Africa. Some LDAs — such as **LDA Albania** and **LDA Northern Morocco** — are currently suspended but remain part of the network's broader legacy.

These new agencies addressed issues such as good governance, civic engagement, and European integration, while continuing to build bridges between local authorities and civil society, into a European perspective.

Further growth occurred in recent years with the opening of **LDA Edremit** (Türkiye, 2021), **LDA Odesa** (Ukraine, 2023), **LDA Kharkiv Region** (Ukraine, 2024), **LDA Vinnytsia** (Ukraine, 2024), and most recently **LDA Ovruch** (Ukraine, 2025) — testimonies to the enduring relevance of the LDA model in regions facing conflict and democratic challenges.

# Timeline







Today, the LDA network includes **17 active Agencies** operating in the **Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and North Africa**. Each LDA is founded on a multilateral partnership: a host municipality, typically in a non-EU country, is supported by a Lead Partner—usually an EU local or regional authority—and a consortium of European municipalities, regions, and civil society organisations. Together, they form a **decentralised platform for cooperation**, rooted in the principles of **solidarity, subsidiarity, and participatory democracy**.

Through **three decades of operation**, the LDAs have not only withstood the test of time — they have flourished. From their origins as emergency responses in war zones, they have grown into **stable, trusted mechanisms for local empowerment, democratic resilience, and international cooperation**. Their expansion reflects the enduring value of citizen-centred democracy, and their presence across diverse contexts proves the adaptability and relevance of the LDA model in today's world.



## A European Fabric: The Multistakeholder Nature of LDAs

At the heart of the LDA model lies a unique and powerful principle: **cooperation beyond borders**. Each Local Democracy Agency is not a bilateral initiative between a host and a donor country — it is a **multistakeholder and multilevel partnership**, embodying the very essence of decentralised cooperation.

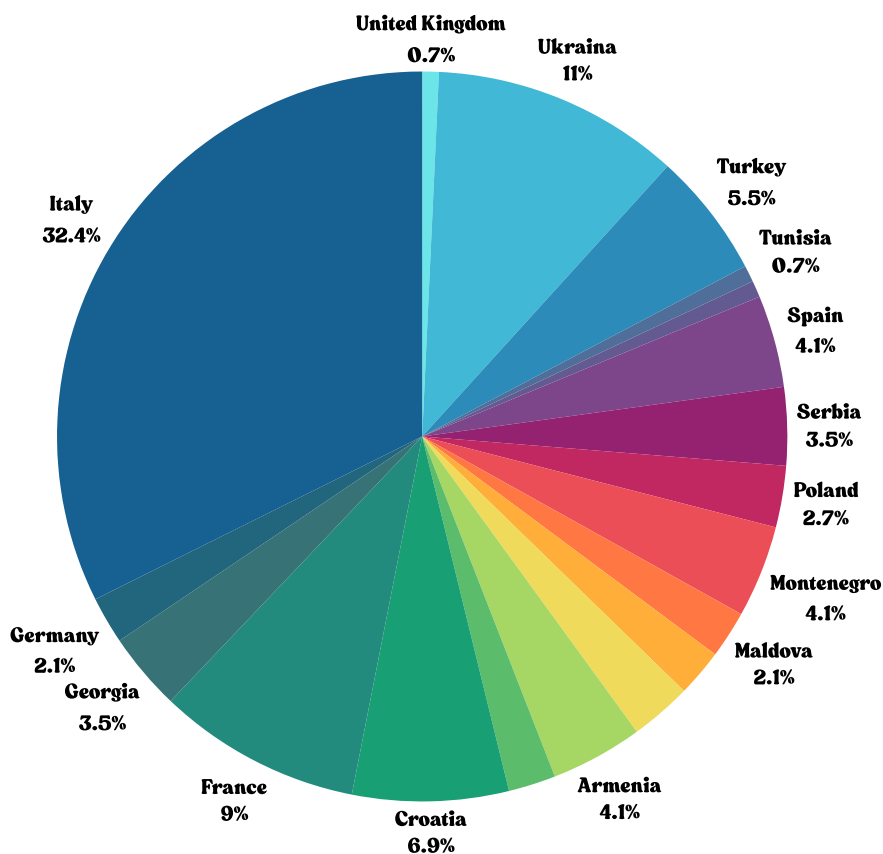
Unlike traditional models of international support, which often follow a one-to-one approach, LDAs are built on a multilateral foundation. Each Agency is hosted by a local authority in a non-EU country and is supported by a Lead Partner and a **consortium of municipalities, regions, civil society organisations, and associations from across the EU**.

A single LDA can count on the support of municipalities from Italy, regions from France, NGOs from Slovenia, or associations from Germany — all working together in synergy with the host community.

This setup ensures that **each LDA reflects a truly European identity**, with stakeholders bringing diverse experiences, resources, and perspectives into the local context.



## LDAs Partners by Country:



This **transnational and collaborative design** is what makes LDAs sustainable and adaptable. It allows for:

- **Cross-country exchange of expertise**, from urban governance in Italy to youth participation in France or environmental practices in Sweden;

- **Pooling of resources and responsibilities**, reducing dependency on a single actor;
- And above all, a **shared sense of ownership** among all parties involved, strengthening both accountability and long-term commitment.

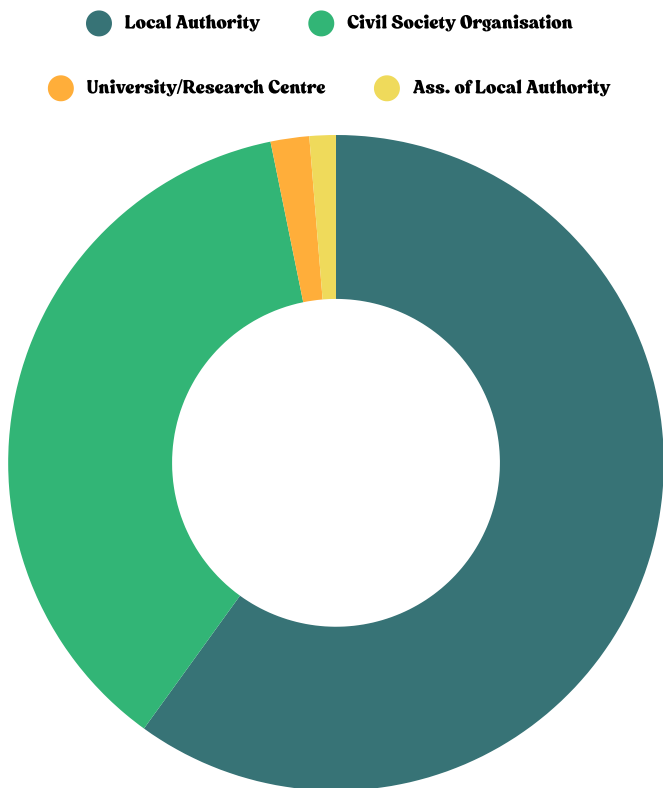
Through this structure, **Europe becomes tangible at the local level** — not just as a political idea, but as a daily practice of partnership.

“  
Multilevel by  
design  
”

The multistakeholder nature of LDAs is complemented by their **multilevel governance model**. Partners include:

- **Municipalities**, at the heart of the local democratic fabric;
- **Regional governments**, providing strategic vision and resources;
- **Civil society organisations and NGOs**, enriching the work with thematic expertise and flexibility;
- **Associations and networks**, bridging sectors and connecting grassroots initiatives with policymaking spaces.
- And **ALDA - the European Association for Local Democracy**, which ensures coordination, quality control, and alignment with broader European goals.

## Type of partner:



“

The result is a decentralised but coherent governance model, where cooperation is not just vertical or horizontal — it is fully interconnected.

”

It is precisely this **inter-institutional collaboration** that enables LDAs to act effectively at the local level while anchoring their work in European values and international cooperation frameworks.

The LDAs' multistakeholder structure is more than a technical arrangement — it is a political statement. It reflects a belief that **democracy is a collective effort**, and that no single actor — whether public or private, local or international — can build it alone.

The success and sustainability of the LDAs are rooted in this **shared ownership**. Each partner brings something essential: funding, capacity, visibility, access, or proximity. Together, they form a durable ecosystem where **partnership is not a support mechanism — it is the operational model itself**.



# The impact of the LDAs:

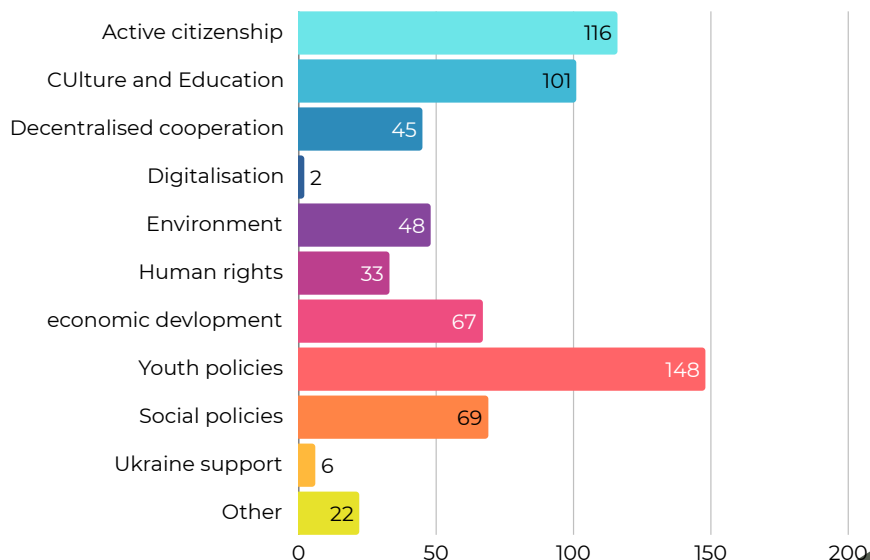
## Figures over 15 years of activity

### A Legacy of Action: 15 Years of Project Impact

Over the past fifteen years, the Local Democracy Agencies (LDAs) have transformed vision into action through a vast and **diverse portfolio of projects**. From 2010 to 2025, **the network has implemented 658 projects**, addressing a wide array of social, civic, economic, and environmental challenges across Europe and its neighbourhood.

These initiatives reflect the **evolving needs of local communities**, the strategic priorities of European and international cooperation, and the LDAs' unique capacity to operate at the intersection of **grassroots engagement and institutional partnership**.

#### Number of projects per topic:

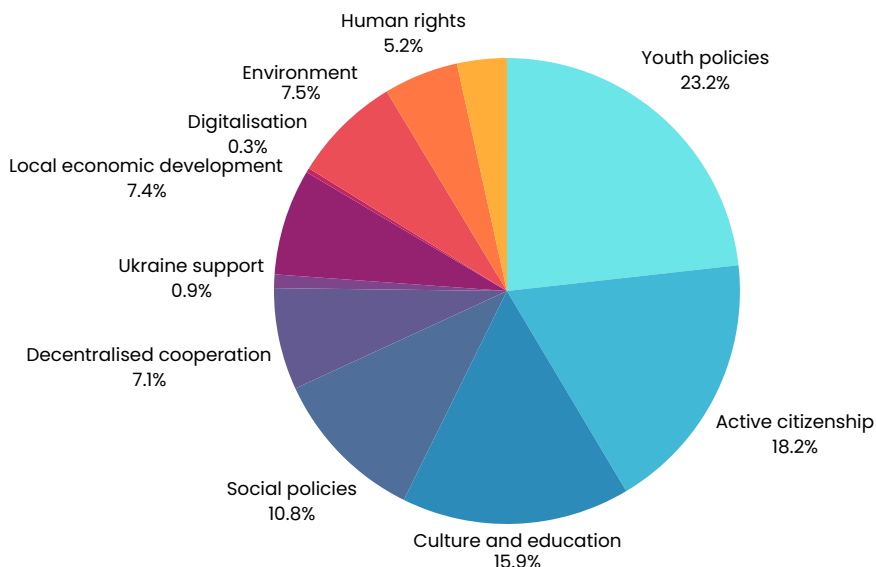




According to aggregated data from the network, the most prominent themes tackled through LDA-led projects during this period include:

- **Youth policies (23.2%)** – A total of 148 projects empowered young people through civic education, participation, mobility, and entrepreneurship programmes.
- **Active citizenship (18.2%)** – With 116 projects, LDAs strengthened democratic culture, citizen engagement, and participatory governance.
- **Culture and education (15.9%)** – LDAs implemented 101 projects fostering intercultural dialogue, local heritage, and educational access.
- **Social policies (10.8%)** – In 69 projects, LDAs worked on inclusion, welfare services, gender equality, and vulnerable group support.
- **Local Economic Development (7.4%)** – Through 67 projects, the network helped communities boost employment, tourism, and social economy models.
- **Environment (7.5%)** – A growing priority, with 48 projects promoting sustainable development, climate resilience, and ecological awareness.
- **Decentralised cooperation (7.1%)** – LDAs carried out 45 projects reinforcing multilevel governance and international partnerships between municipalities.
- **Human rights (5.2%)** – In 33 initiatives, fundamental rights, minority protection, and anti-discrimination were at the core.

- **Digitalisation (0.3%)** – Although still emerging, 2 projects explored digital tools for local governance and inclusion.
- **Ukraine support (0.9%)** – In recent years, 6 targeted projects provided crucial backing to communities affected by war and displacement.



The figures underline the **adaptive strength of the LDA model**: while rooted in long-term goals such as youth empowerment and democratic resilience, LDAs are agile in **addressing urgent priorities**.

The specific interventions in Ukraine since 2022 reflect this responsiveness, with the creation of new LDAs in Odesa (2023), Kharkiv and Vinnytsia (2024), and Ovruch (2025), and the launch of tailored projects supporting displaced populations, local authorities, and post-war recovery.

**“The LDAs are not only carriers of democracy, but catalysts of solutions.”**  
— This has been proven project after project, community after community.

The figures also highlight the **strategic alignment between LDAs and EU frameworks** such as Erasmus+, CERV, Interreg, ENI CBC, and Horizon Europe. By embedding their work in European values and funding mechanisms, LDAs have multiplied their impact and visibility while continuing to serve their local communities first.

In an increasingly complex world, the **ability to act locally while thinking globally** is more vital than ever. The LDA project activity from 2010 to 2025 is a powerful testament to this capacity — and to the enduring relevance of their decentralised, partnership-based approach.



## Strategic Leverage:

### How LDAs Turn Small Support into Big Results

The **Local Democracy Agency model** is not only effective in promoting democratic values and local development — it is also **remarkably sustainable in financial terms**.

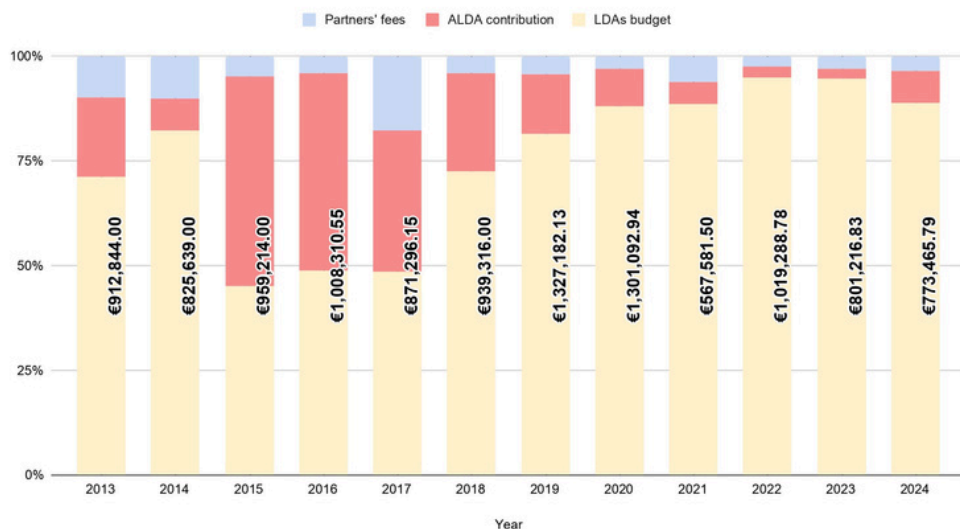
Over the past 15 years, LDAs have steadily grown their capacity to **generate substantial and autonomous budgets**, with total yearly figures rising from modest beginnings in 2010 to well **over €1.3 million** by 2019 and again in 2023–2024.

Equally significant is the **composition of these budgets**. In the early years (2010–2012), the LDAs were already self-financing the vast majority of their activities: over 79% in 2010, rising to 87% by 2012. The contribution of ALDA and the European partners — while crucial in strategic and operational terms — remained financially modest. This structure has not only persisted but has proven resilient and efficient. In the most recent years (2019–2024), partners' fees and ALDA's support have consistently accounted for less than 25% of the total network budget, while LDAs have mobilised the rest through project acquisition, local fundraising, and donor partnerships.

The LDA network operates through a **shared funding structure**:

- A **small annual fee** from the European partners;
- A **coordinating contribution from ALDA**;
- And most significantly, **funds raised directly by the LDAs themselves** through project acquisition and local engagement.

## Budget sources of LDAs:



This **three-pillar system** makes the model highly cost-effective. With relatively limited core support, **each LDA is capable of multiplying the initial investment** — often several times over — by successfully applying to European and national calls for funding. In 2023, for example, the partners' fees and ALDA's contribution made up only a small fraction of the overall LDA budgets, yet **they enabled the generation of nearly €1 million in total activities**.

What emerges is a model that maximises impact with minimal core funding. The small but strategic contributions from ALDA and the partners act as a lever, enabling LDAs to attract and manage significantly larger project-based resources. This cost-effective dynamic allows the network to operate independently, while still benefiting from a cohesive and coordinated structure.

“

A little goes a long way — thanks  
to a model based on cooperation,  
credibility, and strategic vision

”

The financial architecture of the LDAs confirms their role not as aid recipients, but as **resource-generating platforms**. This decentralised, self-reinforcing approach ensures both autonomy and resilience, even in politically or economically fragile environments.



## Durability Over Time:

### Long-Term Commitment to Local Change

Beyond finances, the true sustainability of the LDA model lies in its capacity to last. Unlike many short-lived development initiatives, most LDAs have not only persisted — they have thrived over decades. Several Agencies have now been operating for more than 15, 20, and even 30 years:

- LDA Subotica, the first to be established in 1993, is now over 30 years old.
- Agencies such as LDA Sisak, Verteneglio/Brtonigla, and Zavidovići, all launched in the 1990s, continue to operate actively today.
- Others, including Prijedor, Montenegro, and Central and Southern Serbia, have been continuously active for more than two decades.

This longevity is not incidental — it is the result of **strong local anchoring, trusted partnerships, and continuous relevance** to community needs. Even in contexts affected by conflict or political instability, LDAs have shown an **extraordinary capacity for adaptation and continuity**.

Their ability to survive — and grow — over decades is the strongest proof that **participatory democracy, when rooted locally and supported transnationally, can endure and evolve**.



# Challenges and opportunities for the future

As the Local Democracy Agencies (LDAs) enter a new chapter in their development, they do so in a world marked by profound transitions and mounting uncertainties — from geopolitical instability and democratic backsliding to social inequalities, environmental degradation, and digital transformation. These challenges underscore the continued relevance of the LDA model, while also inviting strategic reflection on how to sustain and strengthen their impact in the years to come.

One of the primary challenges lies in maintaining the delicate balance between local anchoring and international cooperation. As contexts evolve — especially in fragile or post-conflict settings — LDAs must continue to adapt their methodologies without compromising their participatory ethos. This means investing in new forms of civic engagement, embracing digital tools for inclusion, and further reinforcing local ownership. At the same time, the volatile geopolitical landscape, particularly in Eastern Europe and the Southern Neighbourhood, demands renewed efforts to ensure the security, continuity, and resilience of each agency.

Yet, within these challenges lie powerful opportunities. The green and digital transitions promoted at European and global levels offer a compelling arena for LDAs to play a transformative role, especially in supporting just and inclusive transitions at the local level. Likewise, the expansion of the LDA network — with new agencies launched recently in Ukraine and growing interest in other regions — demonstrates both the scalability of the model and its potential to respond to urgent needs for local democratic governance.

In this context, the **ALDA Flagship Initiative in Ukraine** represents a major milestone. The initiative envisions the establishment of a full network of LDAs across the country, consolidating local democratic infrastructure and fostering long-term partnerships for reconstruction, decentralisation, and civic resilience. This strategic effort not only confirms the LDA model's relevance in times of crisis, but also sets a precedent for its application in other regions undergoing transformation. Indeed, the potential for replication and development of the LDA model extends beyond Europe. New openings are being explored in **Asia and Latin America**, where decentralised cooperation, citizen engagement, and local governance are gaining renewed importance. These emerging contexts offer fertile ground for LDAs to bring their proven methodology to new geographies, forging cross-continental alliances for democracy and sustainable development.

Financial sustainability remains another critical area. While the LDAs have proven remarkably capable of generating resources and operating with autonomy, there is a growing need to diversify funding streams, reinforce long-term financial planning, and position LDAs as key actors in multiannual programming frameworks at both national and European levels.

Finally, the LDAs face the task of making their impact more visible and politically recognised. Their daily work, embedded in communities and often far from the spotlight, is indispensable — but it must also be championed at higher institutional levels. Strengthening ties with the European Union, international donors, and regional bodies will be essential to ensuring that LDAs are not only sustained, but strategically positioned within broader democratic support ecosystems.

Three decades after their inception, the Local Democracy Agencies stand as a **mature, agile, and trusted mechanism for local development and democratic resilience.**

The path ahead calls for renewed vision, reinforced partnerships, and bold investments — but the foundation is solid. If nurtured, the LDAs will remain a cornerstone of participatory democracy, international cooperation, and local empowerment for years to come.



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