

# DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION: THE GAP BETWEEN URBAN AND RURAL

a collection of best practices  
from the EUDIGIT partner cities





# E-book about the fifth EUDIGIT seminar, hosted by the Intercommunity Development Association of Cluj-Napoca Metropolitan Area on 6-7 December 2022



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# EUDIGIT

## European Digital Citizens

The facts are alarming: 169 million Europeans do not have even basic computer skills. This presents itself as a real brake, not only in the professional sphere but also in the fight against social exclusion. This gap also creates differences in development among citizens, and between cities and villages, it endangers the principle of regional cohesion and may damage the feeling of belonging to the EU and having a broader European identity.

This fact has been noted by all EUDIGIT partner cities, which have expressed their concerns about the link between digital exclusion and European Union citizenship, especially among disadvantaged groups of people.

The digital divide, as a contemporary phenomenon, actually acts as an accelerator of social exclusion for those who are not connected enough, not skilled enough and not informed enough – in other words, those who missed boarding “the boat of progress”. Even when they are digitally connected, many citizens show poor interest in European matters. These are pertinent issues since communication stemming from the EU institutions and Member States flows mainly through online channels.

The stakes are therefore high since it involves a battle for the hearts and minds of all EU citizens. On the ground level, EUDIGIT explores how cities, as the government level closest and most accessible to people, can become actively involved in reducing the digital divide through the adoption of policies and an evolution of public services tailored with a “with and for all citizens” approach, coupled with better communication strategies.

### OBJECTIVES:

- Strengthening EU citizenship and citizens' awareness
- Contributing to reduce the digital gap in cities
- Co-building digital policies with citizens

### ACTIVITIES:

- 7 events
- 30 workshops with civic society
- Co-build policies with citizens and stakeholders in all partner cities

### OUTCOMES:

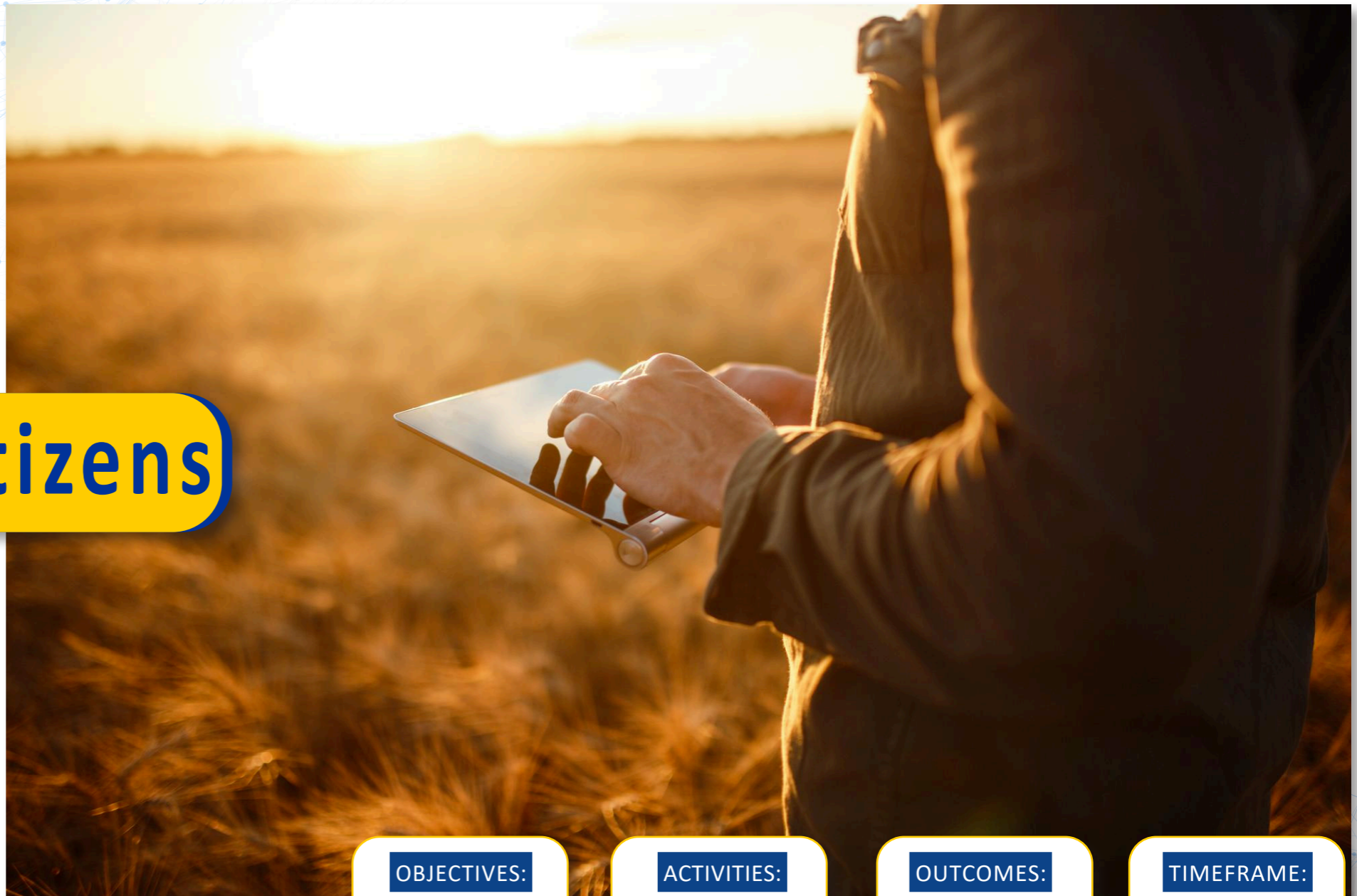
- 5 e-books
- A declaration for cooperation between partner cities
- Digital participation surveys
- Involvement of 520 people directly and 30 000 indirectly

### TIMEFRAME:

May 2020 to March 2023

### BUDGET:

126,000 EUR



# PARTNERS

- CITY OF MARSEILLE
- EVRO ADVANS ASSOCIATION /  
THEMAYOR.EU
- CLUJ METROPOLITAN AREA
- MUNICIPALITY OF GENOA
- MUNICIPALITY OF ROTTERDAM
- FREE AND HANSEATIC CITY OF HAMBURG
- MUNICIPALITY OF VARNA







# THE DIGITAL DIVIDE:

## Urban vs. Rural

On 6 and 7 December 2022 partners and supporters of the EUDIGIT project met in Cluj-Napoca (Romania) to discuss digital transformation from the perspective of the urban-rural divide. The objective of the event, titled “The Digital Divide Between Urban and Rural Areas”, was to provide insight into the issues and potential solutions to enabling efficient digital connection for all communities in Europe. The host partner – the Cluj-Napoca Metropolitan Association was honoured to welcome participants on-site and online and to demonstrate its own advances in tackling the digital divide

and bringing connectivity to all communities of the metropolitan area – be it physically or culturally remote.

But the challenge of Cluj was not only related to the topic. In fact, although it was the fifth event of this kind for the project, it was also the first occasion for the EUDIGIT partners to meet in person, since all previous events took place online due to the

coronavirus pandemic. No need to say that Cluj rose to the challenge perfectly.

The hosts, assisted by the project leader, City of Marseille, and the communication partner, [www.TheMayor.EU](http://www.TheMayor.EU), ensured a varied programme featuring city innovations and strategies to bridging the digital gap between urban and rural areas.



The hybrid event included a busy first day of presentations, including the now-traditional overview of solutions from the EUDIGIT partner cities – Marseille, Cluj-Napoca, Genoa, Rotterdam, Hamburg (a selection can be seen in the pages below).

On the second day, a panel demonstrated what connectivity can really do to bring us closer together as all participants joined remotely to speak about the European Commission’s efforts to bring free WIFI to all populations and to deploy 5G networks. Likewise, they discussed how

the experience of the EU can and has been successfully transferred beyond the continent – as far as Africa and South America.

The event was also an occasion for Cluj-Napoca to put the spotlight on its digital transformation – with a strategic approach and concrete examples. Not only in theory, but also in practice. Event participants enjoyed a fieldvisit on their second day to the village of Plaiuri, where a national pilot project is testing how fast and reliable Internet can be brought to remote areas.

THE RECORDINGS OF THE EVENT ARE AVAILABLE ON THE PROJECT WEBSITE AT: [EUDIGIT.MARSEILLE.FR/EN](http://EUDIGIT.MARSEILLE.FR/EN)



# CONNECTING EUROPE FACILITY – CEF DIGITAL

The seminar, as per tradition, featured an expert intervention from the European Union's institutions-. Franco Accordino, Head of Unit, Investment in High-Capacity Networks, DG Connect, at the European Commission, talked about the deployment and take-up of gigabit and 5G networks and in particular of the Connecting Europe Facility.

Making Europe more digital is one of the key challenges for our generation. The increase of online interactions and the emergence of new ways of living, working and doing business have shown the central role that digital technologies play in our economy and society. In turn, technologies require appropriate digital connectivity infrastructures in order to function.

Despite this growing need for connectivity, there's still a significant gap in private and public funding. The Connecting Europe Facility – Digital comes as a response to this. Together with other funding instruments, including the [Recovery and Resilience Facility](#) and the [InvestEU](#), CEF Digital will help support an unprecedented amount of investments devoted to safe, secure, and sustainable high-performance infrastructure. In particular, Gigabit and 5G networks across the EU. This action will be important in supporting Europe's digital transformation, as outlined in the [Path to the Digital Decade](#) proposal.

Furthermore, CEF Digital will contribute to the increased capacity and resilience of digital backbone infrastructures in all EU territories, and in particular the Outermost Regions. This is crucial for Europe's



ambition to continue being digitally sovereign and independent in the years to come.

The **main actions** foreseen under CEF Digital include:

- Deploying very high-capacity networks, including 5G systems, in areas where socioeconomic drivers are located (see [5G connectivity for smart communities](#));
- Guaranteeing uninterrupted coverage with 5G systems of all major transport

- paths, including the trans-European transport networks (see [5G coverage along cross-border corridors](#));
- Deploying new or a significant upgrade of existing backbone networks, including submarine cables, within and between Member States and between the Union and third countries (see the [European Quantum Communication Infrastructure Initiative](#), [Backbone networks for pan-European cloud federations](#), [Backbone connectivity for Digital Global Gateways](#));

- Implementing and supporting digital connectivity infrastructure related to cross-border projects in the areas of transport or energy (see Coordination and Support Action).

DISCOVER CURRENTLY OPEN CALLS:  
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TENDER OPPORTUNITIES / CEF – DIGITAL







# BRIGHT FUTURE for Marseille's youth thanks to digital technologies

Unlike other city partners of the EUDIGIT project, Marseille does not have any rural territory attached per se. On the other hand, it has remote communities in the sense that serious efforts are still needed to integrate parts of the population into the mainstream society and offer them better perspectives for professional realisation. Such a group are young people and especially those living in districts far from the city centre.

That is why the local authorities partnered up with a local association for the digital training of these youngsters. "Avec nous" has opened two digital FabLabs in the heart

of the northern districts of Marseille as well as two digital mediations in its 13th and 14th districts. These places are dedicated to popular education, to digital technology and to the professional training of young people, who have uncertain prospects for the future.

The association organizes 3-month training sessions for about 15 young people on the use of various technical and software tools for professional projects. The equipment includes laser cutting machines, thermoforming machines, laser printers, hot presses, etc. The young people can also learn 2D, 3D, flocking and coding.

The objective is that at the end of the training each participant signs an apprenticeship contract to continue training or to find a permanent job afterwards, ideally in professions that strongly rely on digital skills. Often, the trainings are meant to help the youngsters requalify for a new professional path or simply to learn new skills in an environment that does not feel like being back in school.

What is special about the work of the association is that they look for participants directly on the street – with posters, flyers, or by talking to them near the premises.

At the end of the three months, the paths

of the learners and the association do not separate immediately. The "Avec nous" team continues with follow-through accompaniment for one year.

The positive exit rate - a pathway that leads to a job or training - varies from one session to the next. It can be between 20% and 90%, as estimated by the Association.

This initiative is the only digital factory in the area of the south of France run by a group of residents. What is more, the courses have been awarded the « Grande École du Numérique » label, a certification from the national government that adds credibility to participants' CVs.





Team EUDIGIT documenting the project of Plaiuri



# THE SMART VILLAGE of Petrestii de Jos

In an increasingly connected world, access to digital services has ceased to be a convenience and has become a necessity. Romania should be a EU spearhead from this point of view, because it boasts one of the fastest cable internet connections in the bloc. But, in reality, it is the member state ranked worst in the Digital Economy and Society Index. For example, more than 2 000 rural localities do not have access to broadband Internet. It is a typical paradox for

the current Romanian society, which faces major internal discrepancies.

To bridge this gap in digital development, the Cluj Metropolitan Area (CMA) association teamed up with the Prysmian private group and the mayor's office of Petreștii de Jos commune, located near Cluj-Napoca - the country's second-largest city and a regional IT hub. The purpose of the partnership was to bring fast and reliable

internet, through broadband cable, to two of the commune's villages, Plaiuri and Livada.

*"This public-private partnership was needed because private investment in such villages, geographically isolated and with an ageing population, is not attractive in terms of return on investment. Thus, although Romania has a very competitive telecom market, companies are not interested in investing in such areas. Therefore, it remains the responsibility of the public structures to undertake these investments,"* explained the general manager of the CMA, Zoltan Coraian.

So, a Corporate Social Responsibility initiative by a private partner proved to be the optimal solution.

The project in Petreștii de Jos involved the installation of an optical fibre network, which now connects the two villages to the Internet, through a switch installed at the town hall in Petrești. The works started in 2021 and ended in 2022 being supported by the private partner.

The challenges with this project were more

about bureaucracy than technical execution. For example, the unclear situation of the high-voltage poles, installed during the Communist regime, on land plots that are now private. Hence, there was a need to obtain the consent of each landowner to host the cable, explained the mayor of Petreștii de Jos, Ioan Pîrv.

By the time of writing this, the investment is in the final authorization phase, and the public tender for its operation will be organized in the first part of 2023.

Through these networks, the inhabitants of the two villages will have fast and reliable access to digitized administrative services, but also to e-health services, e-learning, solutions for agriculture and so on. Mayor Ioan Pîrv even hopes to attract young IT sector people from Cluj-Napoca, who could work remotely from their homes in the two villages.

All the approval and implementation documentation of the Petreștii de Jos project will be made available to the local authorities in Romania so that it can be scaled up and replicated.



Where the paved road ends, there the broadband starts. For now, the village of Plaiuri has no asphalted road, but the broadband cable just arrived – the box on the right of the image is the local switch.





# GENOA:

## preparing citizens for digitalization



In previous e-books we told you about the Citizen's digital folder (Fascicolo del Cittadino) – a personalised online space where each citizen of Genoa can access information about themselves and their families and perform different services online, in a secured and certified way. All of this can happen without leaving their homes to visit the Municipality in person – an essential service to those who live in more remote areas or have trouble reaching the municipal premises. Or simply – anyone who does not want to spend time waiting in lines.

However, it turns out that increased digitalisation of the public administration does not immediately improve citizen's lives. Simply offering digital services is not enough for their usability – unless they are made accessible and known to the general audience that is meant to make use of them.

Well aware of this need, the Municipality of Genoa decided to organise trainings on how to use the Digital Folder, and to make the best use of all its features. Said trainings were available with preliminary booking and financed under the EUDIGIT project.

A total of 9 trainings were planned – one for each sub-division of Comune di Genova, to reach the maximum possible number of citizens. The first ones already took place in the winter of 2022 and 2023 and enjoyed high attendance rates and public interest.







## ROTTERDAM: helping citizens to go offline while staying connected

As shared in the previous e-book editions, digitalization has taken deep roots in Rotterdam. The administration has been offering digital services from over a decade; the online space has permeated every aspect of the professional and personal life. So widespread is the public digital sphere in this city that citizens are beginning to wonder – is it perhaps too much?

This is one of the main types of feedback that city representatives received from the citizen committees, organised last autumn. They took place in September and involved young people. It turned out that youngsters were well aware of how much time they

spend online and the negative effects this has on their lives – such as feeling pressure to react fast, losing the grip of their surroundings, disconnecting from reality, etc. In brief: young people were willing to get more moments of peace and quiet.

Several local initiatives took the call to respond to this need. Among these are the so-called “silence meetings” (Even stil) in Het Steiger - a church in the middle of the city centre where anyone can join a moment of silence for 30 minutes around lunch time.

Janneke van Zelst, the author of the initiative, was inspired by the silence of monastic life.

Her vision: to create more spaces for silence, especially in big cities. Hardly can one think of a more tranquil place than a church.

Hence, the quiet meditation initiatives have started in 2021 and take place once every week to this day, on Wednesdays. As the initiative’s website suggests, churches can be exceptionally good places for quiet activities. In church buildings you almost automatically become silent and church communities already have a lot of practices related to silence. So, even without a preliminary scheduled meditation, one can simply enter the church and enjoy the natural silence present there.

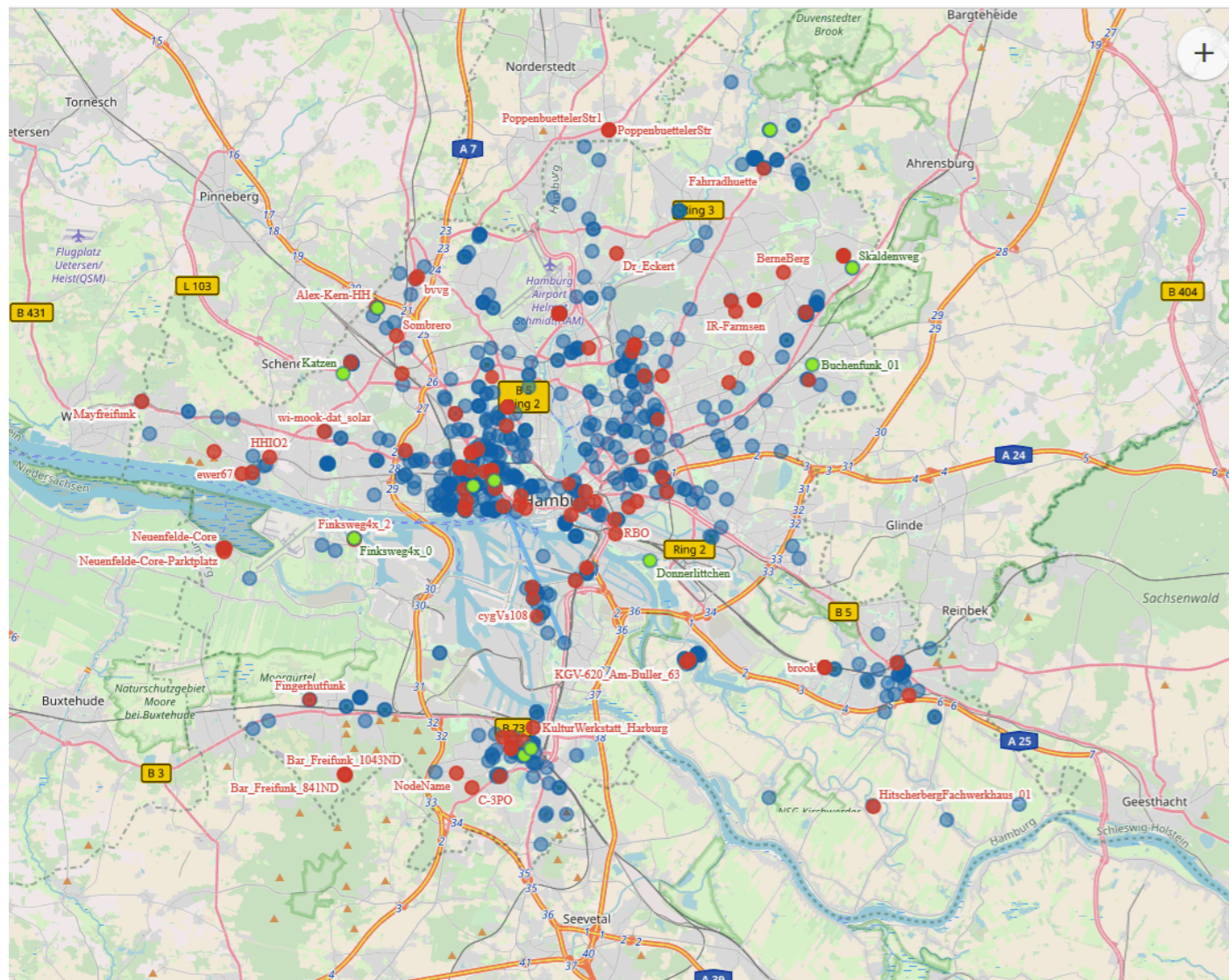




# HAMBURG: WIFI for all

With increasing digitization, digital media has become more and more important as it represents an essential component of social participation. Unfortunately, those who cannot afford to participate in digital media are increasingly left behind in the process.

The digital gap causes severe disadvantages, especially for people with lower incomes, particularly elderly people. In areas of daily life such as work, mobility and public services, they are excluded and as a result - they feel discriminated.



Luckily, in Hamburg there's Freifunk - a citizen-owned radio network, in which everyone can participate. Private individuals voluntarily provide open WLAN access points that anyone can use free of charge. These access points are connected to each other (in technical terms: they "mesh" with each other) and thus form a decentralized (mesh) network. One can imagine Freifunk as a city-wide "intranet", i.e. a "small-scale Internet". The Freifunk network is operated by volunteers who provide the necessary equipment and Internet connections at their own expense.

The vision of the initiative, which translates as free Wi-Fi, is the dissemination of free networks, the democratization of communication media and the promotion of local social structures. By working all over entire districts, the initiative wants to counteract the digital divide and build free, independent networking. The mechanism allows free data flow "through the

air" throughout the city. Thus, "Freifunk" is an open, non-commercial, non-hierarchical initiative for free Wi-Fi networks.

Node operators can make part of their Internet connection available to the Freifunk network or simply expand the existing network with mesh connections. Your own home or company network remains unaffected. The node operators have no problem with liability for interference.

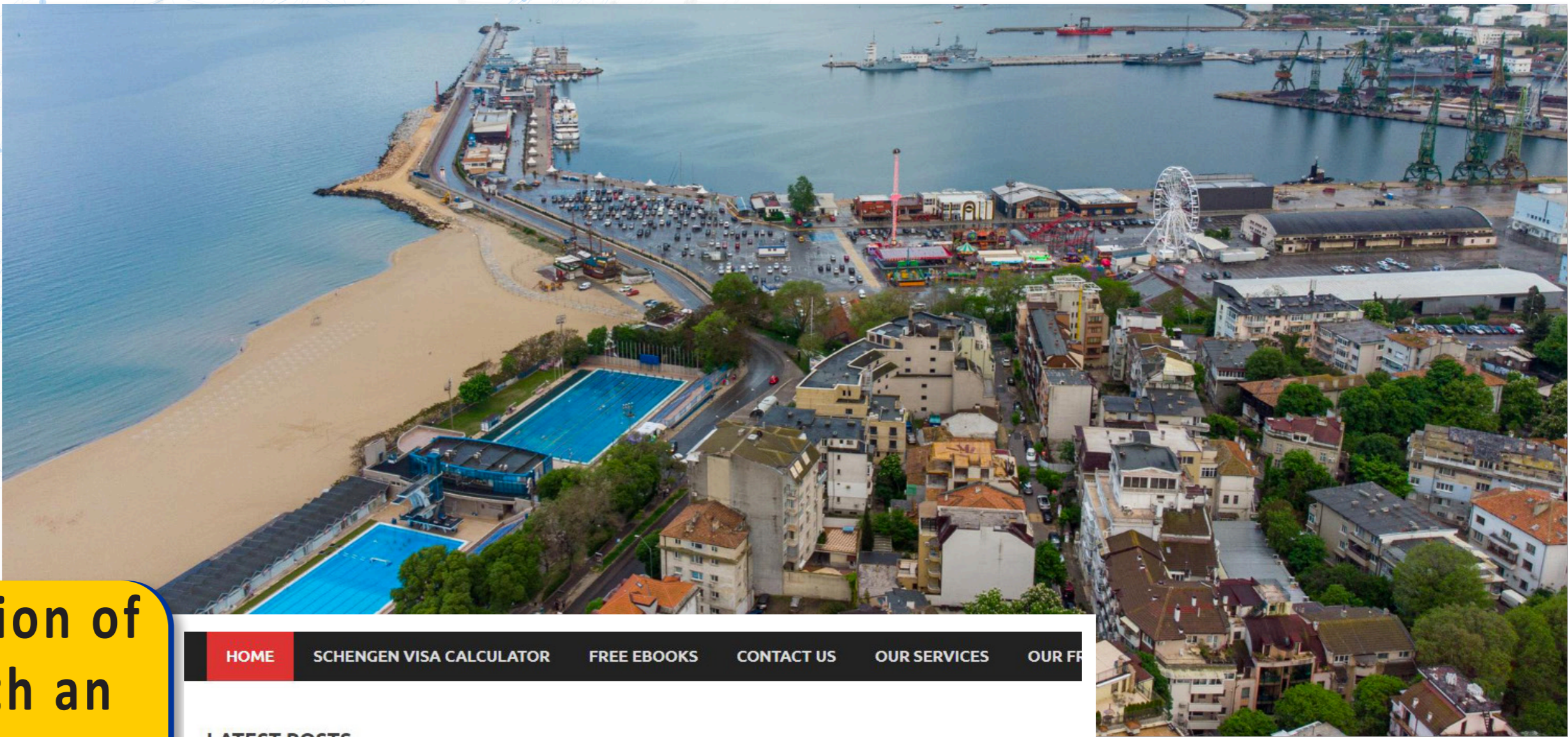
Support is provided by special additional devices in private households or companies. Cyber security of the participants is guaranteed. The Freifunk network is part of the Internet.



Source: Pixabay







# VARNA:

## swift integration of foreigners with an online portal

With the growing tendency for remote work developed under the coronavirus pandemic, prospective destinations have begun doing their utmost to attract the so-called “digital nomads” – people who work online, generally in the tech sector, and whose employment is not fixed to a particular location or office building. The liberty to choose their workplace and the guaranteed high income gives these people the freedom to move around the world.

But would they move to a new city if they knew hardly anything about it and if the mechanisms to settle and work there were not clear? It is easy to imagine how “remote” a newcomer could feel, if they had just moved to a new location.

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To cater to the needs of prospective “digital nomads”, the Municipality of Varna invited the community to the citizen committee preceding the international seminar in Cluj. One of the most interesting experiences was shared by Daniel Montiglio, a Chilean immigrant that has been living during the last 15 years in Bulgaria.

To talk about his experience with connectivity, Internet access and social integration, he presented his portal - Foreigner.bg. As its name suggests, this is a place where expats in Bulgaria can find an expert, practical advice on how to start a new life in the Balkan country. All online, in English. The portal has been online since 2018, tackling topics such as studying, travel, history, traditions, expat stories, as well as tips and tricks – in pictures and video.







# INSIGHTS

## from citizen committees

Traditionally, in each city, the international seminars under EUDIGIT are preceded by local committees of stakeholders – experts or citizens, who tackle the main topic of the seminar at the local level.

These local seminars are a very good opportunity for participants to share their honest feedback and suggest

good practices or improvements to the way each city is working. Here is an overview of some of the most curious findings or recommendations from the committees dedicated to the urban-rural divide:

➤ Be pro-active: Administrations shall not wait for a citizen to break a deadline or an obligation. Instead, they need

to proactively remind them of their duties and the deadlines to complete them;

➤ Raise awareness and educate: It is not enough to digitize public services; if you do not educate citizens on how to use digital tools or if they are not aware of them, then the work might be in vain;

➤ Research first: provide new services, but only if and when they are needed;

➤ Online, but not at all costs: people desperately need silence and calm in a busy city and being online all the time can be an obstacle to this. Cities can and need to guarantee peace and quiet.



## Tackling the digital divide in cities:

# CONCLUDING REMARKS

With the event in Cluj-Napoca last December, the topical seminars under the EUDIGIT project and the electronic books with best practices have come to an end. This also marks an important step towards project completion and the achievement of its objectives – **to contribute to the reduction of the digital gap in cities, co-build digital policies with citizens, strengthen the sense of EU citizenship and awareness.**

Throughout the past two years, the Project Coordinator – City of Marseille and the partners Municipalities of Genoa, Rotterdam, Altona (Hamburg), Varna and Euro Advance Association ([www.themayor.eu](http://www.themayor.eu)) have invested serious efforts into raising awareness of the digital divide and its effects on society.

Through committees involving hundreds of experts and local citizens, they have enlightened the various aspects of the topic (remote and central areas, public administration) and how societal groups

experience the phenomenon differently (young people, the elderly, persons with disabilities, among others).

The participating cities have shown dozens of examples of innovative projects and initiatives implemented on their territories through which they effectively managed to reduce the digital gap, but they also shared the challenges lying ahead of local politicians.

We understood that a lot can be done if local administrations are mobilised to tackle the issue, and likewise that there is a lot that lies outside of their realms of possibilities and financial capabilities. That is why, we also showed you some of the strategic approaches that the European Union's institutions have at hand to help cities progress.

All of the above, you can find in our previous e-books. Do not hesitate to check the official project webpage where all e-books can be downloaded for free – in English, Bulgarian, French, German, Dutch, Romanian and



Italian, to make them even more accessible.

Although the coronavirus pandemic forced us to make a big leap forward in our digital transformation, the digital divide remains a serious issue in European societies, as testified by the latest edition of the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI). It is certainly not only up to cities to resolve the challenges, but it is a good place to start. And exchange platforms such as EUDIGIT are probably the best stage to test out fresh ideas.

To hear more on the topic and how the EUDIGIT network plans to continue its cooperation, stay tuned by visiting the . This is also the place where you will find all project-related news and materials from our past events (recordings, slides), and info on the project chronology, including the concluding event in Marseille, France.

Thank you for being with us through this digitally transformative journey!



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