



VIOLET Communities of Practice (CoP)

How the Interreg Europe VIOLET Project's interdisciplinary stakeholder groups have established a lasting impact

What is VIOLET?

From 2017 to 2021, the Interreg Europe VIOLET project addressed the need for improvement to regional public policy to enhance energy efficiency in traditional buildings, by addressing both low carbon and cultural preservation actions. In 2021, VIOLET submitted a proposal under a special Covid-19 call of the Interreg Europe programme, which was approved. An additional € 1,262,744.40 in ERDF for partners was awarded to continue its applauded work towards improving regional development policies to better face the net-zero transition and recover from the unprecedented situation brought upon by the Covid-19 pandemic.

For the past 12 months, the international consortium has continued to work together toward establishing a building culture that is sympathetic to modern requirements of reinstatement and conservation for improved energy usage and reduced carbon emissions, without endangering the highly appreciated EU architectural heritage. Main activities of the partners in this extended phase of the project include the implementation of the partners' regional action plans, which outline concrete measures and include commitments from relevant public authorities to secure financial resources and policy support.

Communities of Practice (CoP)

Within the VIOLET project, regional Communities of Practice (CoP) were established to bring together various key players in the building heritage and energy sectors (i.e., architects, decision makers, energy managers, etc.) to build interdisciplinary, targeted stakeholder working groups. CoP members have actively engaged with the project locally, regionally, nationally and at EU levels throughout the project lifetime to leverage VIOLET policy recommendations and thus ensure the adoption of the VIOLET approach. The CoP members are also a foremost feature in the communication and dissemination of project outputs to assure VIOLET produces long-term effects. The regional VIOLET CoP members form a trans-European network to provide lasting results that will extend well beyond the project's completion.





Biannual CoP meetings occurred of the VIOLET Interreg Project and dealt extensively with the work related to the development of the Action Plan at the regional level. Each partner had taken advantage of different tools in order to receive adequate feedback for their regional CoP development. Let's take a look at how the VIOLT CoPs have developed and have left a lasting effect in each of the partner regions.



Photo: Interreg Europe project VIOLET faces the challenge to create a building culture that is sympathetic to modern requirements of reinstatement and conservation for improved energy usage and reduced carbon emissions—without endangering architectural heritage.

How is a CoP formed?

In each of the VIOLET partner countries of Romania, Cyprus, Spain, The Netherlands and France, various stakeholders related to the fields of energy efficiency and traditional/heritage buildings were invited to participate in the interdisciplinary stakeholder groups. In Romania, for example, Lead Partner SE RDA's (South-East Regional Development Agency's) mission is to promote the socio-economic sustainable development of the South-East Development Region, through the: development of partnerships (local, regional and international); implementation of regional development programmes; and promotion of economic cooperation. In this framework, the Agency





develops specific activities of elaboration, updating and implementation of regional strategic planning documents based on the structure of inter-institutional partnerships coordinated by SE RDA at regional level. Acting as responsible for the regional development policy programming and implementation, SE RDA organises and manages the implementation of the Regional Operational Programme. In this respect, SE RDA undertakes specific tasks, such as projects' monitoring and control of expenditures, awareness raising and publicity actions and dissemination of information on financing opportunities available that involve direct contact with ROP (Regional Operating Programme) beneficiaries (i.e., local public authorities, private companies, universities, NGOs, etc). Therefore, SE RDA was able to use their already established networks to bring together specialists from relevant fields of VIOLET, with the Agency acting as a catalyst among different organisations in order to achieve its mission and serving as a policy maker at regional level.

In Cyprus, in comparison, relevant stakeholders comprised the Technical Committee, and during the first meeting they were introduced to the VIOLET project's objectives and the obligations they were going to have in the case of their participation to the CoP. In addition, during this first meeting the stakeholders had the opportunity to meet the other participants and discuss their points of view on the subject of improving energy efficiency of cultural heritages buildings in the region.

In Spain, a similar approach was taken by VIOLET partner AVRA, in that at the very start of the VIOLET project, AVRA identified the main fields relating to VIOLET, followed by a detailed selection of those entities – both public and private – whose domains are focused on these areas and have a relevant impact on the building heritage and energy sector. Subsequently, a Collaboration Protocol was signed between the CFIOT and AVRA and five public administrations, to ensure more effective implementation of regional and local policies and programmes concerning the conservation and maintenance of a built heritage of architectural interest when introducing energy improvements within such buildings. This action has been developed through the Community of Practice, an initiative that would not have come into being if not for the Interreg Europe VIOLET project. Five regional administrations and one local administration have signed the collaboration protocol (i.e., Regional Ministries of Culture, Finance and Public Administration, Industry and Energy, and Economy and Knowledge and Sevilla City Council).

Meanwhile in France, Alec (Local Energy and Climate Agency) worked closely with the CAUE, an architectural advisory structure, to set up an Alec-CAUE (energy-architecture) Steering Committee. Each of the two organisations then contacted experts in their field. It should be mentioned that prior to the establishment of the VIOLET CoP in France, there



was no opportunity for the two disciplines to exchange; therefore, the COP had allowed some stakeholders working in the same local authority to meet for the first time.

In addition, VIOLET partners screened exactly where and when the subject of energy efficiency in cultural heritage buildings is being developed and analysed and have subsequently contacted those persons involved in relevant research and activities in order to present the VIOLET project and involve them in their CoPs. Throughout the entire VIOLET project period, all project partners have hosted regular meetings and presentations and have sent invitations to all the members to participate in. The participation of the CoP members has in all cases proven to be continuously active and productive. These meetings have not only provided different visions of the same problem but have also contributed to establishing links between different organisations or entities.

Sustainable innovation through interdisciplinary working groups

An illustration of how interdisciplinary in nature the VIOLET CoP's are comes from the municipality of Middelburg in The Netherlands. Middelburg's CoP consists of senior advisors in municipalities in the field of historic and traditional building, climate adaptation and (innovative) climate interventions, parties in the field of education and science, historic buildings, construction sector, painting companies, installation sector and real estate brokerage. Those employees in charge of the city public relations are involved as well. They are responsible for the quality of life in the city centre and advise businesses located in the traditional buildings in the city centre (i.e., how to respond to consumer behaviour post-Covid-19, how to maintain the attractiveness of the historic city centre so entrepreneurs in historic buildings can keep their business/shops open, etc.). Reducing energy costs is an important issue in Middelburg, so energy consultants play an important role in the CoP. The municipality continuously strives to find a balance between installing energy efficiency interventions to become carbon neutral by 2050 whilst maintaining the cultural heritage of the numerous monumental buildings in the city centre which are often under strict cultural protection restrictions.

Furthermore, the municipality has regular contact with the decision makers' policy instrument (policy officers in the Province of Zeeland). At present, the regional influence of the CoP is limited as it focuses mainly on the project objective, though efforts are being made to have the CoP function as a regional study platform after the project's completion, with a steering role for the region's cultural heritage support centre.

The VIOLET CoP established in South-East Romania also covers a wide range of entities, including representatives of local public authorities and politicians, as well as staff that is directly involved in implementation of investment projects for buildings retrofitting,





architects, site managers, urban planners, energy auditors, and personnel involved in protecting and conservation of national cultural heritage.

In Cyprus, the CoP was developed by addressing all sorts of public and private sector professionals: specifically, the members represent organisations such as: the Cyprus Architectural Heritage Organization, University of Cyprus, Cyprus University of Technology, Frederick University, Town Planning and Housing Department, Department of Antiquities, Cyprus Employers and Industrialists Federation, Department of Environment, Union of Cyprus Municipalities, Mechanical & Electrical Contractors Association of Cyprus, Association of Mechanical & Electrical and Energy Consulting Engineers, International Council on Monuments and Sites, Federation of Associations of Building Contractors Cyprus, Energy Service - Ministry of Energy. It is considered a great achievement and innovation that all these stakeholders worked together in order to discuss the obstacles that occurred during the VIOLET project's actions and exchange collaboration resulted in the influence of the current regulations on Heritage/Listed buildings and Ancient Monuments as well as the creation of the VIOLET Guidebook. Which is now being disseminated amongst building professionals and researchers across Cyprus.

In Middelburg – as in all VIOLET partner regions – each participant of the CoP is very active in his or her field. The developments in their fields are brought into the CoP so that instruments used for the project objective can be adjusted if necessary. Before VIOLET, this sort of integrated approach and way of working with a multidisciplinary team did not exist.

Not only is such a methodology innovative – it is also sustainable. This integrated approach contributes to finding new sustainable solutions, in addition to allowing for the lasting legacy of the work carried out within the VIOLET project. Sustainability is an important and topical issue for each individual member of the CoP; in order for the CoP to function as sustainably as possible, travel movements are limited as much as possible and information exchange takes place mainly digitally.

In Cyprus, what makes the CoP sustainable is the regular meetings of the CoP and the creation of the VIOLET Guidebook, which includes the contact details of all the stakeholders and keeps them involved and active in the current and future actions related to the energy renovations of heritage/listed buildings. Especially nowadays, in reflection of the European Green Deal, the public and private sectors are more focused on renovating and upgrading the energy efficiency of the existing building stock including a significant number of heritage buildings. The stakeholders play a significant role either by consulting the public or by being the responsible service for providing the required permits or approving the applications for funding.





Navigating around hurdles within the VIOLET CoPs

Though the VIOLET CoPs were implemented in all partner regions with great success, partners did encounter some challenges and barriers that could be taken into consideration when developing regional CoPs in other regions. For example, in Romania it was sometimes challenging to convene representatives of the authorities in charge of protection and conservation of cultural heritage with the building owners or companies directly involved in the retrofitting of cultural heritage buildings. This was due to different perspectives on applying the regulations for energy efficiency in patrimony buildings, and the heavy legal framework for such buildings could in some cases lead to differing interpretations of how the building should be retrofitted.

Generally speaking, energy retrofitting on historic buildings is a controversial subject in Spain. In the face of the massive energy transition, two extreme sectors – energy and culture and heritage – have to combine forces and compromise on some aspects. But sometimes, it is very difficult to encourage stakeholders to cooperation as they have their own approach and there is a need of more knowledge, awareness and successful experiences to contribute to make their positions more flexible.

Through working with their CoP, AVRA has also seen more involvement among the technical staff than among the management and political positions. So, when addressing them in order to propose the participation in the Spanish VIOLET CoP, AVRA had to approach stakeholders at highly varied levels in order to ensure participation.

In southern France, the turnover in the structures required VIOLET partner Alec to constantly re-explain the objectives of the project. Subjects that had already been dealt with often came up. Mutual acculturation was also difficult at the beginning, despite the interest and good will of everyone involved. Finally, the definition of heritage buildings was the subject of long, tiresome discussions amongst stakeholders. In fact, some subjects are even still too sensitive to be agreed upon (e.g., PV on old buildings).

In all partners' cases, the VIOLET CoPs offered stakeholders from various industries and fields the opportunity to convene, collaborate and cooperate towards the common goal of improving energy efficiency measures in (regional) heritage buildings.

Lasting legacy of the VIOLET CoPs

Without the VIOLET Communities of Practice, the outstanding work of the regional partners would not have been made possible. To illustrate the impact of the VIOLET CoPs, the CoP in Romania brought together for the Romanian Chamber of Architects – the group for overseeing rural development – established specific architectural guidelines on observing the local specific in Dobrogea rural areas (i.e., Lower Dobrogea, Central





Dobrogea and Macin Mountains, and Danube Delta), which provide a heritage-friendly and sustainable approach on rural rehabilitation and new construction. This particular good practice was identified as a result of VIOLET project activities, and it has been promoted within the Romanian CoP members and during the project's interregional exchange events – which in turn allows the good practice to be adapted and transferred to the territorial context in other regions.

Furthermore, thanks to interregional cooperation and the establishment of the CoPs, a direct result of the local activities within the framework of VIOLET, Cyprus Energy Agency was able to inspire The Amendment of the Law on the Regulation of the Energy Efficiency of Buildings (13th of November 2020) refers now directly to the energy performance of Heritage Buildings. Additionally, the influence of the CoP in Cyprus includes the following exceptional results:

- Initiation of public consultations for the Energy Efficiency Regulation which included the Listed/heritage buildings
- Buildings that have been declared as listed buildings or as ancient monuments cease to be exempted from the obligation to have an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC), when sold or rented
- Issuance of the Guidebook that provides guidelines aimed at upgrading the energy efficiency of heritage buildings, as well as improving their internal comfort conditions
- CoP members participate in trainings for engineers and professionals of the building sector

The VIOLET CoP activities and subsequent analysis and exchange of approaches have been essential for AVRA's success in enabling interregional and regional exchange, as well as raising awareness, in Spain. The VIOLET CoP had made a significant political impacts in the region, in addition to the influence on the regional OP 2014-2020, and in the Plan VIVE (thanks to the VIOLET Action Plan). For one, it is the influence in the Master Plan for the Historical Heritage of Seville developed by the Sevilla City Council.

In Middelburg, the most significant result that has been achieved with the help of the CoP is the creation of the sustainable historic building passport. This “passport” provides owners of historic buildings clear insight into where they can take energy-saving measures in combination with a good indoor climate without damaging the historic qualities of the building. This is increasingly relevant due to the recent Covid-19 pandemic, through which there has been an increased focus on a healthy indoor climate.





At the end of the VIOLET project, the French CoP will become one of the exchange groups led by the Alec, extending VIOLET's legacy well beyond the project lifetime. The CoP in France, in fact, had also a very positive impact on the region, specifically relating to:

- Participation of the Architect of the Buildings of France in the meetings of the COP.
- Taking into consideration of the analysis and the action proposals in the region's PREE and then in the Bordeaux metropole climate plan
- Building a common culture on the issue
- Engaging in good will discussions on more sensitive issues

Due to the VIOLET CoPs across all European partner regions, there are now members of different fields related with buildings energy retrofitting and heritage, as well as policy makers and energy retrofitting programmes/financial planners. The discussions, the real cases and the studies that have been exposed during the CoP meetings, have raised awareness among the groups. In fact, some public initiatives are being launched thanks to VIOLET and its CoP. However, what is clear is that the CoP has detected an enormous need for knowledge to carry out initiatives of this type and for instance this fact is going to be demanded by the different members of the CoP.

