

The project « Europe, a tangible experience for all its citizens » was funded with the support of the European Union under the Programme "Europe for Citizens"

Applicable to the Strand 2 – Measure 2.1 "Town-Twinning"

Participation: The project involved 311 citizens, notably 133 participants from the city of Obec Mad (SK), 60 participants from the city of Comuna Suseni (RO), 59 participants from the city of Kispiac (SR), and 59 participants from the city of Feherto (HU).

Location/ Dates: The event took place in Obec Mad - Slovakia

Short description:

The day of 03.08.2016 was dedicated to the following workshops:

"Civic Participation in the Decision Making Process on European Level"

The opening event – held by Obec Mad , where discussions about the effectiveness of citizen participation were debated. During the sub - activity, the following problems and recommendations were made by the participants:

Problems identified:

- problems with the representativeness of citizens;
- problems with international networking;
- problems with sufficient funding;
- problems with building cross-sector coalitions with public institutions and corporate partners;
- problems with the effectiveness of citizen participation.

Recommendations made by participants:

Representativeness of citizens:

- Citizens should improve their skills to promote to the general public what they do. A common effort to improve NGO communication skills should be undertaken in order to improve the visibility and attractiveness of citizen organizations.
- NGO's should focus on include more first-time young participants in their activities

Problems with international networking:

While citizen activism has gathered a critical mass of experience and members across the EU, funding appropriate partners for joint citizen action's across borders remains a problem. ECAS has taken the lead in developing databases and fostering cross-border cooperation between citizen organizations, an institutional and financial facility what should be used more often by citizens' organizations and NGO's.

Problems with sufficient funding:

With funding is a growing problem for the majority of national and pan-European citizen organizations, participants discussed the "globalization" of citizen activities as a possible solution: following the technique of international corporations joint projects between NGO's across the EU can minimize administrative cost as they can make the best use of the partners' competitive advantages and outsource specific activities to the respective country with best infrastructure, best knowledge base, lower labor costs, NGO-friendly legislation etc. Such effective and cost efficient networks also have better chances of successfully attracting funding across borders

The effectiveness of citizen participation:

The development of effective cross-border coordination and the ability to speak with the national and EU institutions with a joint voice as well as forming cross-border support coalitions on European level have been identified as the major boosters of the effectiveness of citizen participation in the EU.

"Focus on the Positives. The role and relevance for civil society in times of crisis" – held by Comuna Suseni.

It was a discussion about the European economic crisis, and the way it has affected Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) alongside many other sectors of European society. However, despite the difficulties and obstacles created by this crisis, opportunities have simultaneously appeared to increase the value and relevance of civil society to European citizens.

Problems /expansions identified by participants:

One problem facing those that are attempting to increase civil society participation in the European decision-making process, is the uneven pattern of civil society development across Europe. This is largely a function of the frameworks and mechanisms present at the national level. In many cases, effective contributions by CSOs to society are limited by the legislative framework. In response to this, the NGO Initiativea has been working towards involving NGOs in the process of revising and amending the existing legal framework in any EU countries. Despite limited progress in the 2007-2013 period, 2014 -2016 represented something of a turning point with renewed efforts made in terms of advocacy and extensive meetings with political party representatives and government officials.

Recommendations/Solutions

Such efforts are necessary to enhance the effectiveness of, and level of participation in, civil society across Europe. In order to better coordinate these efforts and increase the value of civil society across Europe, the following recommendations were made:

- *Define with greater clarity what constitutes a non-governmental organization (NGO) and a civil society organization* – There is a need for a pan-European definition promoted by the European Parliament.
- *Develop mechanisms for more effective sharing and dissemination of information about CSO activities* - The development of civil society calendars could both improve participation and increase the relevance of actions at the national and EU level.
- *Support the networking possibilities for CSOs both within member states and across the EU* – Coalitions and networks must pool resources when facing these conditions of tight and decreasing budgets
- *Enhance the collaboration between CSOs and local authorities* – These bodies are the closest to European citizens and could often very productively work together, however they often display a lack of awareness concerning the other's work.

"New Media for Increased Impact" - discussion about the challenges linked to social media and citizens' participation in our societies and at EU level, held by Kispiac.

The event explored the challenges linked to social media and citizens' participation in our societies and at EU level. Social media can be used as a driver for change in our hyperconnected societies and they allow the possibility for online participation, which can lead to participation in the real world.

Social media can help to connect citizens, stakeholders and policy-makers. However some limitations have to be outlined, namely regarding the link between the online and offline participation. Civil society should ensure that online participation and engagement through social media is also translated into offline participation and "does not limit itself to just clicking on a like on Facebook". Civil society organisations could play the role of connecting citizens and bridging the gap between online and offline participation.

"Civil Society and the Non-Europe Debate"

Given the problems facing Europe, the participants named four critical issues that Europe must resolve. These are:

- the need to build a common identity
- the need to increase inclusion in Europe
- the need to include all people in the decision-making process
- the need to promote equality between men and women

The day of 04/08.2016 was dedicated to the following workshops:

"Citizen Participation in the Political Life of the EU" – held by Obec Mad.

Conclusions: As the only directly elected EU institution, voting at the European Parliament elections can be considered one of the most important participation mechanisms available to EU citizens. However, attempts to encourage citizens to make use of this mechanism seem to have largely failed, as apparent from declining turnout

at European elections and low public interest in Parliament's daily work. This low level of public interest is matched by several other challenges, including public disillusionment with election results, lack of trust in the EU institutions and a lack of general knowledge about the EU.

The experience of partners have to be instructive regarding ways for civil society organizations to promote their goals at the EU level by showing the followings:

- debates on European issues need to be transnational and multicultural
- face-to-face communication is more effective than online communication
- interactions with decision-makers need to be targeted at legislative change

In addition, it is important to strengthen ties between CSO's and public institutions by sharing good practices, such as those contained in the "European Charter for Active Citizenship", a document compiled by autonomous European civil society organizations.

Finally, communication between MEP's and citizens must be improved from both sides. This could be achieved through the following measures.

From MEPs:

- use of both social and traditional media channels, using simple language to explain complex issues and setting them in the wider context
- initiating discussions on the development of pan-European media

From citizens:

- use of tools such as EUprofiler and Myvote to inform their decisions
- stay informed about the EP's work using tools such as VoteWatch

"Solidarity in Times of Crisis" – held by Comuna Suseni

Conclusions:

The ongoing crisis impacted civil society organizations and stirred them into reshuffling their services. Cases from Italy and Cyprus showed that CSOs were able to adapt to the needs of the citizens and provide support in new areas, while redefining their priorities of action.

The main challenge still remains finding the appropriate financial resources for managing the services for citizens; As a result of the crisis, citizens mobilized at grassroots level and more solidarity was established between civil society organizations and citizens.

New forms of civic engagement were also explored. New media became a viable mechanism for creating a solid base for citizen engagement with its real-time, unlimited information sharing component. Also, civil disobedience has become a new way of showing solidarity within civil society in response to the crisis. Finally, the involvement of civil society organisations in the policy-process is a way in which the livelihoods of citizens can be changed

Recommendations:

- more focus on direct services in the funding programs, especially at EU level
- involvement of citizens at grassroots level
- allowing EU funds to finance local initiatives and grassroots actions

"Development of Social Enterprises in the EU" – held by Kispiac:

Conclusions:

Social enterprises have grown rapidly in Europe over the last decades. There is no single, widely accepted definition; however they are generally understood to be "enterprises that combine social purpose with entrepreneurial spirit".

There are several recent initiatives to foster the development of social enterprises such as the Social Business Movement - addressing key social and environmental problems for the most marginalised groups in society and the Forum of Social Enterprises, supporting the creation of social economy through the promotion of development, mutual aid, community networking.

The following **recommendations** were made to enhance SE development:

- education institutions partnered with SE in order to introduce the culture of business to students and develop social enterprise curricula
- the promotion of networking and international-based SEs in order to better share information and capacities
- the regulatory framework of SEs in partner countries should be developed
- The European Commission regulation and strategies on SEs, should be subject of bilateral agreements among members and applicant countries to assure implementation and results

The day of 05.08.2016 was dedicated to the following workshops:

"Protecting Citizens' Rights: Challenges and Opportunities for EU Passengers" – held by Feherto

Conclusions:

Although recent EU directives have strengthened the legal protection of passengers throughout the EU, many passengers remain unaware of their rights and their remain weak points related to the quality of local transport services, vulnerable groups of the population and lack of cultural support for more sustainable mobility measures. There are, however, some examples of good practice from civil society as exhibited in a case study, debated by the partners. In Italy, a partnership among public institutions, private companies and civic organizations has led to new voluntary agreements granting greater protection to travelers:

- at national level - an agreement was reached between insurance companies and consumer associations for conciliation in case of car accidents.
- at regional level: in Liguria, the local transport company and consumer associations have reached an agreement on the reimbursement of damages due to public transport strikes.
- at local level: an NGO opened a bilingual web service for travelers that is complementary to the regular tourist info point.

Recommendations

- Reduce the discrepancies between countries regarding the implementation of EU law
- Increase the awareness and the knowledge of EU rights.
- Increase the cooperation between consumer associations and information centres
- Better enforcement of citizens' rights at national level
- Creation of an online dispute resolution system to allow citizens to complain in a user-friendly way
- Widespread awareness campaigns on the rights of EU citizens both online and offline

„Keeping Europe Open - Mechanisms available for Serbian citizens so that they could more actively participate or influence the accession negotiations process” – held by Kispiac

Conclusions:

The process of accession negotiations for Serbia to join the EU has begun on January 21, 2014. Obtaining of the official status has opened different opportunities of civic participation in the accession process, or the "keeping the EU doors open". From the prospective of Serbian citizens, the process has a double meaning. On one hand, it means that the EU is open for the accession of the new member states, and on the other hand it means that the EU is open for free movement of workforce and potential for equal access to the employment in all the EU member states. The latter aspect is still far-fetched for Serbia, while the interest in the accession is far more important.

Problem

- Mechanisms available for Serbian citizens so that they could more actively participate or influence the accession negotiations process are, so far, limited to participation through CSOs
- In 2013 and 2014, the restrictive policy and enforced control of media by the ruling structures of the Republic of Serbia resulted in significantly decreased opportunity for citizens to obtain correct and timely information which are of importance for this issue
- Serbian citizens will not be able to use all the privileges and advantages the EU member states citizens have. As the issue of economic asylum seekers is recognised by the EU institutions as one of the major problems when relations with the Republic of Serbia are concerned

Recommendations for improvement at national and European level.

- increase mutual trust between the Government, Parliament and other institutions of state and CSO
- increase political will for broader involvement of citizens in the decision making processes as well as the enlarge the areas where citizens can participate in the decision making process;
- improve CSOs capacities, capacities of ministries and government institutions and professional individuals to increase the citizens' participation in the process that deals with the EU accession negotiations as well as in the process of adoption and implementation of new regulations and procedures.