

INTEGRATION OF PEOPLE FOR A BETTER SOCIETY

How many of us have participated in the European elections? Has anyone of us signed the European initiative, about which the parliament has to debate if it is backed by a million signatures? Do we notice invitations to »citizen dialogues« with European congress members at all? Surveys show that Europeans are bad at using their citizenship rights. It seems this is so mostly because of the general opinion that the voice of an ordinary citizen doesn't count in Brussels.

We often think that the events regarding the EU in the decision-making centres don't concern us, that they are something remote, that they are concerning only Brussels. But it is not like that. The choices which are taken at the EU level do have an impact on our life in Slovenia and in our home town as well. It is only important that we are aware of our considerable influence on creating a common politic, we just have to be active. Our influence on European politics does not end with our participation in the European elections, but we have to be aware that our voice can also reach the decision-makers through other forms. For easier enforcement of our rights, for easier integration and affection on the creation of politics there are some tools created which enable us citizens an easier influence on the politics concerning our life. Among expressing opinions through debates, participating in questionnaires, participating in elections and the possibility of being elected in to EU's institutions we citizens can also address a petition to the European parliament or sign a citizens' initiative. Association for rural Development LAZ is one among 14 partners from 13 European countries, which cooperate in the implementation of the **DEMOCRATIC RESPONSIBILITY AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN EUROPE** project, it's acronym being DOCPIE, which is part of Europe's program for citizens and is co-financed by the European union.

The **program Europe for citizens** is an important instrument for promoting a bigger role of citizens in the development of the EU. The program promotes a common European history and values and encourages European citizenship and a bigger inclusion of citizens and civil society organisations in the process of European integration. The goal of the program is the integration of people from local communities all over Europe with the intent of swapping experiences, values and opinions. A larger integration of citizens in debates and direct shaping of politics are namely the key means for a successful further development of the EU.

DOCPIE is a civil community project with the main goal of increasing the degree of awareness about European citizenship, European identity, the necessity of cooperation in Europe's voting proceedings and the necessity of the development of networks and working strategies with the intent of increasing the influence of the European Union. It's these civil society projects that reach the most citizens on the general EU level. As such the project DOCPIE has also contributed to a greater awareness and consciousness about the European Union, citizenship and the importance of an active participation in EU-related cases as well as the meaning of volunteering and integration.

There have been over **800** European citizens from more than 13 countries participating on **four events** (they took place in Germany, Greece, Slovenia and Italy) organised in the framework of this project. More than **1,200** citizens attended local events in the countries of the partners of the project. The events focused on different



possibilities of an active **citizens' integration** and on the sole participation throughout different parts of ones' lifetime. We also collected over **1000** opinions of European citizens with the help of an online questionnaire which was translated to the languages of 13 European countries.

The event during the Week of Europe, at the start of May in the **german city Dresden** was intended to **promote and encourage volunteering** as a form of citizen integration, the exchange of good practices, intercultural learning and informing about citizen engagement, especially among the youth.

Activities took place in the framework of the event in the greek Serres, ranging from educating about the possibilities and ways of teaching children about the European union to debates about how to reach all-European solutions for local challenges and how to encourage citizens towards engaging in the local development framework.

The international conference named Citizens' participation in the EU during the time of mistrust took place in Slovenia as part of the **CIVIL SOCIETY OPEN UNIVERSITY** event, followed by a workshop, training on the development of project ideas and applications on tenders of the program Europe for citizens. The conference participants which were greeted by Ljubljana's mayor Zoran Jankovič learned about tools for democratic participation and successful methods for promotion of **citizens' integration in to the decision processes on the EU level**. Parallel to this event there was an ongoing promotion of citizens' rights and interviews for collecting opinions. The intercultural evening also connected the locals and the event's participants from other countries. Along with music, social dances, interesting presentations of European nations language incomprehension became totally unimportant. With events such as this one we are building a feeling of belonging to Europe and an European identity.

The last event in the **italian Brescia** presented good practices and the meaning of urban planning with though of the senior population and the **establishing of an environment for healthy bodily and physical aging**, which is a predisposition for participation eg. active involvement of the elderly.

From the 30. January 2015 there have also been more than 20 smaller, local events happening in the partner countries, with which we were expanding the goal of the project, connected citizens, educated about the importance of an active integration in to EU matter, European citizenship and European identity.

We can summarize a couple of interesting findings from the thought exchange on events and the answers of questionnaire respondents:

1. **Volunteering** as a reflection of active citizenship has a chance for existence, if young people will have jobs, because you have to be employed first in order to be a volunteer.
2. EU's investment for integration of seniors, persons in their third part of life, has to be primarily an investment in to health. **Only a healthy citizen will be an active citizen**. Health also has to be assessed with

participation in mind, which in turn is dependant on surrounding conditions and affects the feeling of affiliation with the local community.

3. It is important to meet with other EU citizens, to get to know different cultures which connect us in to the European unity. We can best feel the EU when we connect and meet in person, not only over television, internet and other media. When we realise that we have the same goals and challenges regardless from which country we are from. Often also the same difficulties. When we see the happening elsewhere, we can also evaluate our contribution to the local community easier.

4. The questionnaire showed that **more than 60%** of the participating EU citizens have the feeling, that their voice does not count in the EU and therefor they don't participate in the elections. There are no known resounding cases of citizen initiatives in most countries and most of them have not signed one yet.

5. EU citizens wish for more connections with EU parliament members, also to better understand about what decisions are made in Brussels.

6. Incentification, connecting and networking is important for integrating in to matters on the local, national and European level. If we are connected in to social activities, civil society organisations, we are more aware and integrated in to the activities which surround us.

With projects such as **DOCPIE** the European Commission wishes to increase interest and integration in to finding a common future for the EU. In recent times there has been a lot of thoughts about this in regard to migrants. Maybe just this topic, which is by now common to all citizens, will increase the feeling of affiliation with the European union and develop a common **European identity**. Consequently, maybe it will also contribute to citizen integration on a local as well as European level. Since if citizens are not interested in the happenings surrounding them, if they are passive and don't express their opinion, then they also can not talk about life in democracy and a democratic Europe.

The **project Democratic Ownership and Civic Participation in Europe – DOCPIE**, which ends with the month of October, has among promoting a huge awareness about active citizenship also contributed towards strengthening of networks, connecting with partners. Old ties were deepened, new ones were made, experiences and good practices were established. The project also contributed towards new ideas, which will be the foundation for upcoming European projects.

You can read more about the project on the website (partner's web page) and www.laz.si/docpie as well as on social networks (facebook, twitter).