

JOINT THINKING IN EIGHT COUNTRIES

The town of Békés is implementing its project under the *Europe for Citizens* programme in cooperation with its twinned towns and partner towns. They seek to present the opportunities and processes of the European Citizens' Initiative to the citizens of the countries involved. The project, implemented with the involvement of ten partners, seeks to call the attention to the importance of active participation in European affairs.

THE WINNING PROGRAMME

The partners involved will hold meetings at five venues, discussing five topics from March 2016 for a year at a series of conferences, of which the town of Békés undertook to organise two meetings, the opening and the closing event. The opening event of the programme series was held in Békés, as an accompanying event of 'Madzagfalva Days', where the participants discussed the opportunities of the European Citizens' Initiative as the main topic. The conference was meant to provide a platform for citizens to have a direct say in EU policies.

One of the organisers' goals was to call people's attention to the fact that – both in Hungary and the partner towns – citizens can be more than mere passive participants of the European Union; they can be active citizens, actively contributing to politics, and thus have a say in shaping their own environment and town. The programme addressed maintaining the existing twinning relationships and developing a new twin town network. The regular meetings of the participating partners allow closer relationships, and therefore the local governments and civil organisations will be able to cooperate in a number of areas in the future, while the meetings also provide an opportunity to make new acquaintances and friends.

MEETINGS ALL AROUND EASTERN EUROPE

In the autumn, following the opening event in Békés, Mohol (Serbia) and Myszków (Poland) and then in the winter, Gyergyó-szentmiklós (Transylvania) (these latter two as the twinned towns of Békés) will host the meeting of the professionals, and the programme series will be closed in the town of Békés again.

The thematic conference series began with horizontal issues, and then it went on to present the process of registration at the European Commission. The next topics will be online data collection, attestation by the Member States and the process of collecting statements of support. Finally, the participants will also learn how to submit a European Citizens' Initiative successfully, how a question reaches the European Parliament for hearing, and how the organisers receive a reply from the European Commission.

The 10 participating partners indicated in the programme application represent 8 countries, which means that, besides the Municipality of Békés, the project involves civil organisations from Hungary, Romania, Poland, Slovakia, Serbia, Finland, Croatia, as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina.



WHAT IS THE EUROPEAN CITIZENS' INITIATIVE?

- The European Citizens' Initiative calls upon the European Commission to propose a legal act in matters in which the EU has law-making competence.
- The European Citizens' Initiative must be supported by at least 1 million EU citizens from at least 7 of the 28 EU Member States.
- In each of the 7 Member States, the minimum number of signatures required must be collected.
- European Citizens' Initiatives can be launched in any area which falls within the competences of the European Commission to propose legislation. Such areas include, for example, agriculture, transportation or public health.

CONNECTED BY THE PAST AND PRESENT

"The European Citizens' Initiative, introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, allows one million citizens representing at least one quarter of the EU member states to call on the European Commission to propose legislation in areas falling within its competences", said Gábor Izsó, Mayor of Békés, explaining the background of the initiative. "Since the foreign twinned towns of Békés are not only connected by their past, but also by their present, they can take steps in this area by

joining forces. The mutual visits, learning about each other's cultures and social situation, as well as discussing daily issues encourage participants to think together, since the issues which are relevant to the ex-CMEA countries are highly similar, and therefore their current strategies can define the same direction, too", the Mayor said.

AN EXPANDING NETWORK OF RELATIONS

According to the plans, the organisation and process of launching a successful European Citizens' Initiative will be presented at five conferences. The project events implemented so far included professional contents of high standards, and the participants gained extensive new knowledge. Besides the existing active twinning relations, the network of relationships of Békés has expanded with new partners. Discussions have been launched about economy, culture and sports, and the Mayor hopes they will be followed by actual, successful programmes in the future.

OUTCOMES IN THE LONG TERM

Gábor Izsó thinks the most important achievement of the project was the knowledge gained about the European Citizens' Initiative at the conferences and workshops which reached hundreds of

people. "The participants can learn about the other partners' experiences in the matter, as well as the potential solutions to the problems which arise", he added. Those involved in the cooperation can build stronger relations with the project partners, which also gives them a chance to seek new funding opportunities together. The European Citizens' Initiative also allows citizens to call on the European Commission to initiate legislative proposals. "We can say that the project helps citizens to gain extensive knowledge and new information which they can benefit from by enforcing their interests", the Mayor of Békés emphasised. Due to the relations built and reinforced during the project, the town can expect further partnerships in the future with its international partners. •

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