



“SMALL MUNICIPALITIES AGAINST EUROSCEPTICISM”

‘SMUG EU PROJECT’

PRELIMINARY RESULTS AND ACTIVITY REPORT

March 2019

The content of this paper serves as a basic insight into all activities and results gathered through this project. Therefore, it doesn't count as an official publication.

All statements displayed were gathered through discussions and represent the thoughts of people only. We, as project partners, are not responsible for possible mistakes in the facts presented.

The official project brochure with results and guidelines is in progress and will be published soon.



This project is co-funded by the
Europe for Citizens programme
of the European Union

Project summary:

The goal of this project was to examine and debate rural euroscepticism – see why and how it manifests.

During 19 months of cooperation, 6 international events were organized. 4 of them were public debates where citizens actively stated their thoughts about the EU and future of Europe. Lots of people participated, with various backgrounds: students, farmers, public figures, retirees...

On debates, positives and negatives of the EU membership were outlined, then projects and their success, problems which occurred and interaction with civil society and institutions. An active involvement of the young was present throughout the whole project.

Debates opened questions of euroscepticism (reasons, threats, concerns, good practices...) with help of citizens, volunteers and other representatives.

The project opened a debate on Europe, how citizens see it and what they would like to change in the future in relation to increasing the quality of life in the local community.

Project activities:

During the project, 6 events were organized. The first, official project opening, was held in Croatia. Upcoming events were structured as public debates and citizens expressed their opinions on the EU. First debate was in Portugal, second in Romania, third in Macedonia and fourth in Slovenia. The final event, closing conference of the project, was held again in Croatia.

On the following pages, we present you with activities and findings gathered during the events.

Event nr.1

LET'S BEGIN!

On Sunday, the 12th of November 2017, the official opening of the project 'Small municipalities against euroscepticism' was held.

Delegates from partner institutions gathered on the first meeting, which started on Saturday the 11th in hotel La'Gus, Turčin. All partners presented their organizations and got to know each other.

On the next day, the 12th, a press conference was held in the Cultural Center Ivan Rabuzin in the City of Novi Marof. The president of LAG PRIZAG, Zdravko Maltar and mayor of Novi Marof, Siniša Jenkač greeted all guests and wished them a pleasant stay at the conference.

Two important people visited the conference: member of the European Parliament Ivana Maletić and professor from the Faculty of Political Science Nebojša Blanuša. With their presentations about euroscepticism – reasons and research findings – a stable basis for the project has been set.

The conference finished with a group discussion and active role of Ivana Maletić and Nebojša Blanuša in answering people's questions.

Event nr.2

HEAR THE WISDOM

The second event of the project SMUG EU: “**Hear the wisdom**“ was held on the 28 February and 1 March 2018 in Torres Novas, Portugal. Citizens from the local and international level gathered, most of them from Portugal as the oldest EU member of the project consortium.

The conference began with an opening session and greetings from the hosts. The project and its aims were presented, together with interesting figures from the research that was conducted at the beginning of the project.

Then a presentation and debate was held with the special guest of the day: Margarida Marques, Member of the Portuguese Parliament. With her help, a basic insight was brought into the main factors that cause euroscepticism.

As main factors, outlined were:

- Lack of knowledge which leads to mistrust (if people do not know on what the EU is and does)
- Influence of local politics and media (through bad news public perception is being manipulated)
- Migrant crisis and fear of terrorist attacks
- BREXIT and the confusion behind it
- Economic crisis (as the EU did not have instruments for such crisis, institutions have to deal with the crisis by themselves)
- Corruption
- Problems in domestic production
- Lack of solidarity in times of crisis (between institutions, but people also)

The second event was specially focused on the Portuguese and their wisdom, as the oldest member of the EU. Their primary thoughts centered on the idea how Portugal had a bad start at the beginning. Lost opportunities, bad investments of EU money and poor policy implementation. Portuguese confidence in the EU fell sharply as prices were rising in the wake of the crisis, wages were down, and many goods became deficit.

Despite this, the Portuguese are very pro-European. Nowadays, the Portuguese government is working hard with the public informing them on what is being done and why.

After the group discussion, a *'Let your voice be heard'* workshop with 3 groups was organized to let people speak their mind about the EU. In 3 rooms people debated on the following issues:

1. EU funding opportunities are sufficient and adequately distributed – TRUE or FALSE?
2. The EU allows us sufficient political independence – TRUE or FALSE?
3. How can we change the negative perception on the EU?
SOLUTION 1: better informing of citizens on the local level
SOLUTION 2: better informing through the media on the EU level

A very engaging and, in some rooms, heated discussion took place on the stated themes.

ISSUE 1: EU funding opportunities are sufficient and equally distributed. TRUE OR FALSE?

On the EU funding opportunities, the group agreed that the funds were sufficient, but not adequately distributed. They are too centralized. Small rural places get less funding than the big urban ones.

Participants agreed how there should be a minimum of funding for small rural areas, in order to have equal opportunities for everyone.

A remark was also given to the controls that are very strict when it comes to the objective fulfillment of the project. For example, importance is given to the fact that equipment was bought, but no one is questioning the qualitative aspect, so if this equipment is being adequately used.

ISSUE 2: The EU allows us sufficient political independence. TRUE OR FALSE?

On the topic of political independence, two sides collided – the Portuguese on one side, other international participants on the other side. There were both arguments for YES and NO. Statements that competed were as following:

No (the Portuguese team):

'The political independence is supported by economic independence, so money=decision. In recent years Portugal suffered political decision that conducted us to a financial situation. We could not undervalue our money so we couldn't buy supplies. If EU decides something, we have to do it. The EU tends to ignore the will of

people. For example: the UK went for Brexit because they want to close their border, because they have a lot of people coming from anywhere. The bureaucrats in Brussels, that were not elected, take decisions that affect everyone, our sovereignty.'

Yes (others):

'More or less we have political independence because EU has political structures which allow us to make our opinion be heard. EU has mechanisms to elect representatives of different countries and EU commission is formed with ministries of foreign affairs. Direct participation of member states is possible. EU allows the small member states to have a presence in parliament with bigger number of members comparing with other countries that have more population. Also, the presidency of the Council rotates among the EU member states for 6 months. Participants from Croatia point out that EU influence led to less corruption and economic growth. Institutions are better now than before.'

No:

'The EU imposed laws that led to corruption instead of giving guides for their reduction.'

Yes:

'But if the prime minister is corrupted, we need a higher level of decision that helps countries to end this corruption.'

There was much more to argue, but time was short.

ISSUE 3: How can we change the negative perception on the EU?

On this topic, 2 solutions were given to participants and their task was to give ideas.

SOLUTION 1: better informing of citizens at the local level

- Implementing projects that focus on informing people about the EU
- Exchange of experience between institutions and people
- Better involvement of media (newspapers, radio...) that inform people about events
- Establishing centers financed by the municipality to disseminate information about EU projects, programs, events and other. Also, centers would organize public sessions every month – on all things that matter

- Organizing Cultural Europe weeks ('I am a member of an European country')
- Focusing on education from little legs. First years of school teach national identity, then later the EU identity. Furthermore, teach the teachers, so they can teach the children in a right way
- Organizing EU clubs at schools, special activities with children – as knowledge and sharing of it is very important

SOLUTION 2: better informing through the media on the EU level

- The media can be used as a connection between the EU and local people. Citizens should be given concrete information of EU opportunities and what the EU can do for us
- Organizing cultural events to exchange experience and spread positive messages
- Infograms with attractive and simple info can be designed and disseminated with the help of media

On the question of informing and spreading messages, participants gave many ideas. However, they pointed out a problem:

'We do know the means to spread messages, but the challenge is on how to reach out to people?'

After the workshop, a visit was organized to institutions that received EU funding. The building where the conference was held was formerly a hospital and after restoration got transformed in an information center that organizes many conferences, trainings, seminars...

Businesses have also attracted EU funding. Company 'Digidelta' is a manufacturer in the fields of Digital Printing, Display, Labelling and Visual communication means. Equipment was purchased with help of EU funding and the company grew to employing over 140 locals. Local farmers are also successful with EU funds. One of them is 'Esteiros', a strawberry producer that got support for the production facility. Nowadays organic and innovative strawberry products are manufactured there, which are very valued in the society. The last example is Start Up Torres Novas – a municipal project where new businesses and ideas can be incubated. It received also funding from the EU.

On the second day, a visit to the museum was organized and a big round table with participants to give their last contribution to the project. This museum also received support from EU funds.

On the topic of euroscepticism, problems from the first day were confirmed: corruption, lack of solidarity in times of crisis, inadequate use of opportunities, manipulation of people, etc. People also gave ideas on the improvement.

The mostly assessed idea was that there should be a special program towards educating people of their national identity and solidarity within the EU frame. This should be focused on the young, but adults also.

With a press conference, the event was successfully closed. Later on partners had a briefing about next steps, networking and dissemination.

Event nr.3

LET THE YOUNG BE HEARD

The third event of the project SMUG EU: “**Let the young be heard**“ was held on the 6th and 7th of June 2018 in Bistrita, Romania. This debate hosted over 90 participants, majority from countries that joined the EU after the year 2000.

The conference began with an opening session and greetings from the hosts. Then, an interesting presentation was held by Mrs. Monica Muresan – General Secretary of the Chamber of Trade and Industry of Bistrita – Nasaud county. She showed the audience Romania before and after joining the EU and clearly pointed out how the EU brought many benefits to life in Romania. Interesting fact is that Romanians had a high level of trust towards EU before joining.

According to Eurobarometer in 2004, Romanians were having the highest degree of trust in EU (74%), followed by the Lithuanians (68%) and Hungarians (64%). European average was 51% for EU25. Even up today, Romanians still have a high percentage of trust in EU. Mrs. Muresan pointed out many benefits the EU membership has brought:

- Doubling the gross domestic product
- Improving the Romanian economic structure
- Access to Romanian products on the European internal market
- Significant improvements of the labor market situation
- Increase of population
- Improvements of poverty and social exclusion indicators
- Reduction of unemployment
- Protection of the environment and sustainable development
- Agriculture and rural development

- Free circulation for people
- Young people can study abroad
- Erasmus for young entrepreneurs
- Internal Affairs: exchange of good practices, participation in risk analysis to a European level, simplifying working procedures, access to all European data bases

Having stated the positive aspects of EU membership, the time came for participants to let their voice be heard. The most interesting part of the event was the debate moderated by PhD Professor Mr. Mircea Maniu. After an introduction into the theme (general ideas about euroscepticism), the audience split into 2 groups: Pro-Europeans and Eurosceptics. The question which was debated on is:

‘European Union – a people’s community?’

With over half an hour of discussion, the audience spoke about EU’s good and bad sides, things to improve and how they perceive the importance of the Union for the local community.

Eurosceptics:

First the eurosceptic group was to speak. The statement that came from a participant questioned the diversity of living standards and inequality of development in countries/areas of the European Union. The inequality of wages also came to the point. The main statement was: ‘If we live in a Union that has same rules, why don't we all have the same standards and rights? This makes people question the need of the EU as they don't see the benefit directly. We should all be equal as EU citizens.’

Pro-Europeans:

On the other side, the Pro-Europeans gave a positive opinion on this issue. Stating how the EU cannot be responsible for a country's development, it is impossible to dictate every policy. Every country has an own progress, the EU can foster this by setting some general policies, but not impose laws. Also another comment was added in favor of the EU: ‘There is the tendency of ‘complaining’ how the EU is imposing laws and how we are losing our sovereignty as a country. And on the other side, we are complaining how the EU is not decisive enough and not supporting local people. So, it is needed to decide what we actually want – as a community and not give opposite statements.’

Eurosceptics:

The Eurosceptic group countered: 'Why should we strive to be a part of the EU? Looking at the current status, something is going on in the EU, giving a negative perception to the people that there is no benefit from being a member.' With all those negative connotations, people are losing interest in the EU and questioning the need for it. As an example, pointing out how there are many very developed countries that are not EU members. So, is there a purpose for the EU at all?

Pro-Europeans:

The positive group's answer evolved around laws that ensure human rights and justice. Also, there came up the argument about outside enemies. Europe and its' citizens should unite and work together, because there are other enemies around. European countries shouldn't be enemies to themselves.

*The top comment that became a mayor focus of the rest of the debate concerns the **need for both: Euro-optimism and euro-criticism**. In order to have a successful Union, we must be critical towards bad regulations in order to see what's lacking. On the other side, we should be positive that these problems can be solved. That's the right way to ensure that change can happen.*

However, the critic has to be on all levels – the local, national and EU level. Projects like this one are a perfect way for people to be critic and state their mind.

As the debate went over, a round table was held with closing thoughts and conclusions. It was again stated how people should be informed and aware of what the EU is and, therefore, be able to look at it critically. Young people spoke up stating how much they value the opportunities EU has given them – chance to go abroad, study and take part in projects. It was also mentioned how people should be given the opportunity to speak out loud and be critical about problems, which is a great value of projects like these.

In the afternoon, visits were organized to the city's EU funding objectives.

First is the Youth Community Center that organizes various activities for the young. They get to study, paint, dance, play...and it is all provided for free. Second is the National Center for Tourist Information and Promotion which has a special map of the city and projector that focuses light to outline parts of the town. Accompanied by a history presentation of the city on the screen, this tool is a significant asset for Bistrita's tourism. The whole equipment for this special map was co-funded by the European Union.

On the second day, good practices and examples in the field of youth were presented. 4 organizations presented their activities: Bistrita Europe Direct Center, Youth for Community Association, Impact association and Interact association. It is important to point out how the adults were impressed by what the young do. So much positivity was brought by the youngsters who do a lot to engage in the community. This should be an example for everyone.

The Europe Direct Center acts as a network between citizens and the Europe Union, providing numerous activities in the field of informing people about the EU, promoting EU values, giving feedback to EU institutions about citizens' opinions. One of the most interesting information campaigns of the center are:

- European School – Creativity and innovation
- European Week of Mobility
- Information campaign
- "I'm a European citizen so I'm in"
- Information campaign „A safer Europe"

Europe Direct Center organizes many competitions, volunteering activities, debates on EU topics, camps and training sessions.

Youth for Community Association (founded by a group of young people) aims to promote active citizenship of youth through personal development and community projects. Various activities they do are after school workshops, fund raising events, summer programmes, development projects for volunteers and educational programmes, youth exchange (Erasmus +) and other.

Impact association focuses on young people and developing educational projects. The aim of the organization is also to foster active participation of youth, inform young people and inspire them to involve. With the educational projects, Impact association implemented lots of them in the local rural area with disadvantaged young people, also for poor families and children in nursing homes.

Interact association is a volunteering club gathering young people aged from 12-18 years. Sponsored by the Rotary Club, 14 Interact clubs are alone in Romania and even more all over the world. Interact Bistrita-Nosa is the branch in Bistrita. The main aim of these young people is to make a change with projects for the community. They raise funds for charity causes, organize events for socializing and promoting good values and various workshops for the community.

The event finished with short interviews for media release and a special section where the young asked adults questions and filmed them. All videos are available on our social media. The project consortium had a very productive meeting regarding the following events, networking and dissemination.

Event nr.4

THROUGH ANOTHER POINT OF VIEW

The fourth event of the project SMUG EU: “**Through another point of view** “ was held on the 19th and 20th of September 2018 in Krushevo, Macedonia. This debate hosted over 90 participants, majority of them from countries that are still in process of becoming EU members.

After the initial greetings, a speech was held on the theme of Macedonian EU accession process by Marina Tosheska, vice president of LAG AGRO LIDER. Some interesting facts about Macedonia and EU were stated.

Macedonia started the application process in 2004. However, first negotiations started in 2015, with the need for Macedonia to undergo many changes. Since then, the country has been working on parts that have to be fixed. As for EU funds, Macedonia is participating in the Erasmus+ projects. High praise was made to this program for giving opportunities and chances for young people. As a lot of immigration is happening, young people are also leaving Macedonia.

So, one of the aims is to bring the people back, and with EU funding the standard would be much higher. To accomplish this, LAG's are recognized by the ministry and implementing projects that focus on improving life. They are hoping on bringing more reforms and infrastructure for a better life quality.

After the first speeches, the most interesting part came, a *‘Let your voice be heard’* debate on the theme

‘EU membership – yes or no?’

Participants were divided into 3 groups:

1. Group – biggest group with Macedonians and Serbians who were debating on the EU membership – YES or NO.

Both the YES and NO subgroup gave statements on the reasons why their country should or should not join the EU.

The main statements for **YES** included open borders, open big market for goods, higher availability of EU funds, possibilities for people to go work and study abroad, easier way to keep youth inside the country, easier sharing of knowledge and better development of infrastructure with help of funds.

The **NO** group stated how they are not against the EU, but against any kind of policy infliction, following the main statement about Macedonia being forced to change its name. Then, problems are local population leaving the country because of open borders, inappropriate education and youth leaving the country, unfair competition on the EU market, imposing standards that have to be fulfilled in order to join the EU. Also, Serbians mentioned to be forced to change the country's border, which is not okay. They added how high quality staff would leave the country and different standards would lead to a higher inequality rate after joining the EU (wages stay the same, but prices go up).

2. Group (Eurocritics) was given the factors that cause euroscepticism which were gathered on previous debates.

Their task was to sort them by relevance. These are the most relevant ones (from the most relevant to the least):

1. Lack of knowledge about the EU (values, policies and institutions), in both, EU and non-EU countries.
2. Inequality in EU countries (such as difference in living standards, wages, distribution of funds...). All citizens in the EU should have unique standards and rights. But, also to note, this cannot happen overnight, it's a process.
3. Media – distributing too much negative information instead of giving positive examples concerning the EU.
4. Migrant crisis – people were not prepared and informed about migrants, what makes them afraid.
5. Economic crisis – the bad crisis that struck 2008. is still going on in some countries. There are some doubts that the EU should have been prepared with instruments for such crisis. Skepticism emerged towards the EU, because it wasn't prepared and cannot support countries.
6. Lack of solidarity in times of crisis – between the EU institutions, as well as people (for example, lack of solidarity from some countries in the migrant crisis). People are losing the sense of belonging in such situations.

BREXIT wasn't chosen by the participants, but the group leader thought of it as very important. There was lot of skepticism in the rural community of Macedonia when the information of BREXIT appeared.

3. Group (Eurooptimists) were given the task to figure out what makes an EU citizen feel like being part of the EU.

The key factors to EU optimism were outlined as following:

1. The sense of unity in different cultures – solidarity keeps us together, we are a union of people (however, recent happenings in the world are endangering this).
2. The sense of peace and prosperity in EU – we all want safety, prosperity, peace and high quality of life
3. Growing together economically – by using every country's gifts to produce unique goods.
4. Gathering on events where citizens mingle and get to know each other and educate themselves about different cultures, religions...

Until now we focused on the question: ***What can the EU do for us?*** But this group came with another task: ***What can we give for the EU?***

After these debates, a round table was held with personal speeches on the EU theme where people expressed their opinions. A few participants spoke up.

A Romanian spoke about the market and tradition – stating how people are striving more to preserve local tradition when joining the EU. Also, mentioning the interest all people have in different countries.

Another participant from Portugal was giving advice, as the longest EU member, on the problems and concerns. Portugal went through all this before, and at the end it worked out good for the country.

A Macedonian participant stated that people are not informed about the EU. This leads to confusion. Also, the government is not organized well, without institutions that deal with the EU field. Media have the most influence on people's opinions.

At last, a participant from Serbia thinks the rural areas are well informed, but small ones not.

After the discussion, results of the day were summed up. Later in the evening a visit around Krushevo was organized and participants saw potential for EU funding in this area.

On the second day presentations of associations that serve as a positive example were held: Centre of education and development, Youth initiative for regional development, Academic organization Krushevo and Youth council Krushevo. All these organizations aim to foster civic engagement of the local community, development of local areas and making opportunities for young people.

After that a final discussion was held with closing words and a press conference. In the meantime, people participated in a **small 'referendum'** where they had to **vote FOR or AGAINST their country joining the EU (if again they were to choose)**. As expected, the FOR statement won with 44 votes while the AGAINST had only 12 votes.

The event shifted later to Ohrid. Presented were projects of the city that are in close EU relationship. Municipality of Ohrid applied for many funds and programmes: Interreg – IPA CBC programme for cooperation between Greece and Macedonia, Interreg Balkan Mediterranean, South East Europe Transnational Cooperation Fund, Cosme Programme, Erasmus, Australian Embassy, German Embassy and other.

Projects that were implemented led to successful promotion of European values in the community by raising public awareness, economic development and preservation and promotion of cultural heritage.

Special projects to point out are:

- SUSTCULT – study for management of cultural heritage and marketing strategy for promotion, 7 countries cooperated: Macedonia, Greece, Albania, Slovenia, Hungary, Italy and Romania
- IRC-HERMES – improvement of managing cultural monuments and buildings with help of digitalization
- SCBE/TBC (Support Cross Border Entrepreneurship/Transnational Business Consultant) – improving the approach of young people towards entrepreneurship
- WATER.NET – improvement in area of water promotion and near-water infrastructure
- CROSS4AAL – improving health care and social services for children and the elderly
- LACTIVE Tourism – extension of the tourist season

Ohrid is continuously working on project follow-ups and also new ideas that would improve the local community.

The event ended with a visit through Ohrid and evening dinner where all participants socialized and exchanged their cultural aspects. Also, a fruitful project management meeting was held on the second day where ideas were set for the upcoming event in Slovenia.

Event nr.5

WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

The fifth event of the project SMUG EU: **“We’re all in this together “** was held on the 7th and 8th of December 2018 in Novo Mesto, Slovenia. This debate hosted over 100 participants with lots of discussions, exchanges of experience and socializing on the international level.

After the initial greetings and summary of results gathered so far, a presentation about the EU and Slovenia was held by dr. Milan Brglez, Vice president of the committee of the National Assembly for the European Union and former president of the National Assembly.

To the audience 5 scenarios on the future development of EU were presented, also known as the White paper. First scenario centers on the idea how nothing will change. Second one focuses on reducing EU on a single market. Third one aims to do more together while the fourth aims for doing less more efficiently. Fifth scenario talks about doing much more together. In addition, a sixth scenario was proposed by civil society organizations: sustainable development for all.

Looking at all these, the best option that was pointed out is going towards doing less more efficiently. In reality, something between the third and fourth scenario could happen.

As important factors for the EU future outlined were peace, solidarity and prosperity, human rights, freedom, democracy, equality, security, defense and migration. EU will have to face many challenges in the future.

Following the program, a press conference was held and workshop *‘Let your voice be heard’*. The audience was divided into 4 groups:

1. group on the theme ‘What can we do for a better EU’ – how small citizens like us can contribute to the whole idea of the European Union

This group identified 3 mayor fields that we need to work on:

- Heritage and culture – preserve our culture and traditions to be unique, share these traditions to other people from different countries, build a platform for all countries to share, gather and mingle
- Social issues – build better work opportunities, set equal standards so all people have opportunities, build better institutional support, include citizens in political decisions

- Education – build equal opportunities for all children (rich and poor), enrich the school program with knowledge about the EU in order to teach from little legs, build a wiser education system that teaches for life and is more adjusted to the labor market

2. group on the theme ‘What do we need as EU citizens’ – what small citizens need to feel like a part of EU

Outlined proposals were:

- A more equitable distribution of aid, with focus on rural regions + equality of standards
- More tolerance and understanding for each other, cooperation and solidarity
- More campaigns and sharing of knowledge and culture
- Less corruption and having politicians that work for the people
- Freedom in all cases (speech, movement, safety)
- Peace (without peace, there is no wealth and economic growth), looking into the future

3. group on the theme ‘How do we fight euroscepticism’ – establishing a positive attitude towards EU and designing an informative page ‘All we need to know about EU’.

On the positive attitude, the group identified these fields:

- Meetings – organize events on EU positivity, share culture, experience and knowledge on events
- Politics – better support, institutions and care
- Education – improve, listen and learn
- Informing – publish more information about what EU is and does through media
- Personal – be more positive, respect others, keep peace, try harder

This group had similar thoughts like group 1.

On the informative page ‘**All we need to know about EU**’, participants identified what every person should know:

- values of the EU (justice, equality, tradition human rights, democracy)
- basic information (town, currency, rights and obligations, membership, transports, languages, objectives and institutions, laws)
- history (idea behind an Union, founder states, development through history)

- strategy of the EU (economic development, education, multiculturalism, local strategies)
- future mission (goals and interests, international education, work value)

4. group on the theme ‘Euroscepticism from the aspect of new members, old members and non-members – and what we have in common’

On this group, all participants worked as their country's voice. Every sub-group stated their thoughts about euroscepticism. In all these, they found many things in common:

As for the current situation, good things about the EU are not shared to the social media. There are many benefits of EU membership, people are just not informed well. So, positive inputs should be given to public about EU achievements. Also, it should be clearly shared how EU funds are used, with real evidence. Citizens should also be more involved and asked for opinions.

Lots of the elderly population are eurosceptics, because they don't understand the EU. So, we need to inform people better and have ambassadors (local people, not politicians) who can speak up about the positive examples. Despite the negatives, with the young generation more and more eurooptimism is coming and people are getting more positive and understanding towards EU.

As it can be seen, on this debate the findings from previous events were confirmed. All ideas and thoughts of people are repeating themselves, leading to the conclusion that many people think the same when speaking about problems and benefits.

In the afternoon, the group visited Dolenjska museum that was built with help of EU funding.

On the second day, presentations of associations were held: Society of Mach's heritage under Gorjanci, Institute for Slovenian Emigration and Migration and Nefiks. All organizations are actively working with projects and EU funds.

The last **workshop ‘Designing a campaign for eurooptimism’**, was held as a World Cafe. Participants shared thoughts about various media and marketing solutions that can be used to foster eurooptimism, events which can be organized to bring people closer together, and ways to improve the institutional support for a better EU climate.

MEDIA strategy

Every citizen of the EU is in the target group. All sources of media should be used (digital, paper, radio...). Examples were given:

- Rural area magazine about the EU called ‘We are Europe’
- Billboards on more languages informing people about EU

- EU YouTube channel with interviews on topics 'Europe for everyone', 'Our EU', 'Europeans united'
- having a EU channel with TV shows about cultural differences between countries and progress
- EU webpage designed for citizens (with information they can easily access and understand)

EVENTS strategy

- EU should organize tournaments for young people and civic organizations to promote EU spirit and values, for example competitions on the knowledge of EU, also online know-how games ('Triviador', 'Pub Quiz')
- organizing events that focus on culture, exchange of culture and differences
- organizing exchanges and camps, not only for young people and students, but also for workers, adults...

INSTITUTIONS strategy

Participants agreed how institutions should communicate messages to citizens for a better EU image. How to promote the optimism? The main thing is for policies themselves, to set good examples on all levels and have a safe platform for all citizens where they can share thoughts.

After summarizing the results, all delegations gave their own viewpoint on the things they learned during 2 days of the debate.

In the afternoon, a visit to GRM, Center for biotechnology and tourism was held where participants saw various good practices in the field of vinery, agriculture and education. The event finished with socializing, while in the meantime goals were set for the last event in Croatia.

Event nr. 6

SPREAD THE WORD

The last event of the project SMUG EU: **“Spread the word “** was held on the 8th and 9th March 2019 in Novi Marof, Croatia.

Partners from all 9 countries gathered to summarize and present the results gathered through this joint cooperation. Over 100 participants gathered on the last event, while the whole SMUG EU project hosted around 500 people through one year and a half.

On the first day of the event, after the initial greetings, a discussion was held in order to set the final project results.

Through the discussion, participants were able to identify the remaining ideas concerning euroscepticism and completed project results with guidelines for the EU. The whole point concerning euroscepticism centers on the fact how the EU is strong, but as a political concept. There is not enough effort from the politics to bring EU closer to people. On the other side, there is also the lack of involvement from citizens in democratic processes. Both sides should put more effort into cooperating.

Later, a group of high school students joined the adults and got to hear positive sides of EU membership. The youth is the key to ensuring a positive future in our societies.

Later, in the afternoon, the last project management meeting was held and tasks were set for the upcoming dissemination of SMUG EU results.

On the second day results of the project were presented to the community. All guests were greeted by Nevenka Benjak, the president of LAG PRIZAG and Siniša Jenkač, mayor of Novi Marof – wishing them a pleasant stay and congratulation on a successful cooperation to ‘Let our voice be heard’.

In addition, three guests presented examples of good practices in the EU field: Dario Žmegač from the association Youth for Marof, Zoran Hegedić from the municipality of Breznički Hum and Željka Markulin from Croatia’s Europe for citizens contact point. Together with the presentations, a short group discussion was held on the theme. The press visited the conference in order to spread the word to the region.

With this, the project ‘Small municipalities against euroscepticism’ has finished its main activities. For a certain period, dissemination activities will take place in order to spread the word of the results we gathered. On the following pages we present a basic insight into the results and guidelines to be proposed to the EU.

CONCLUSIONS AND GUIDELINES FOR THE EU

Through our project, we set the idea to answer the following questions:

- What is euroscepticism?
- How does it manifest and in what forms?
- Why does it occur (factors)?
- Is there a special group prone to euroscepticism? Is there a difference in non-members, new members and old EU-members?
- How does it influence the local community?
- How do people see the EU?
- How can we tackle this problem? Move closer to citizens and ensure a positive future?
- Can we turn it into something positive? Improve the quality of life in rural areas?

What is euroscepticism and how does it manifest?

One of the most acceptable definition of the term is that euroscepticism is “the opposition and doubt to the process of European integration”. (Taggart, 1998, p.365)¹

There are two kinds of euroscepticism, soft and hard²:

“**Hard Euroscepticism** is where there is a principled opposition to the EU and European integration and therefore can be seen in parties who think that their counties should withdraw from membership, or whose policies towards the EU are tantamount to being opposed to the whole project of European integration as it is currently conceived.” (Kopecky and Mudde, 2002, p.300)

¹ Mehlika Ozlem Ultan, Serdar Ornek (2015). EUROSCEPTICISM IN THE EUROPEAN UNION. International Journal of Social Sciences, Vol. IV(2), pp. 49-57., 10.20472/SS.2015.4.2.006

² Mehlika Ozlem Ultan, Serdar Ornek (2015). EUROSCEPTICISM IN THE EUROPEAN UNION. International Journal of Social Sciences, Vol. IV(2), pp. 49-57., 10.20472/SS.2015.4.2.006

“Soft Euroscepticism is where there is not a principled objection to European integration or EU membership but where concerns on one (or a number) of policy areas lead to the expression of qualified opposition to the EU, or where there is a sense that ‘national interest’ is currently at odds with the EU’s trajectory.” (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2002, p.7)

Why does it occur (factors)?

Due to many factors, euroscepticism emerges. The most relevant ones we were able to define through the project are:

- Lack of knowledge about the EU (values, policies and institutions), in both, EU and non-EU countries.
- Inequality in EU countries (such as difference in living standards, wages, distribution of funds...). All citizens in the EU should have unique standards and rights.
- Media – distributing too much negative information instead of giving positive examples concerning the EU.
- Migrant crisis – people were not prepared and informed about migrants, what makes them afraid.
- Economic crisis – the bad crisis that struck 2008. is still going on in some countries. There are some doubts that the EU should have been prepared with instruments for such crisis.
- Lack of solidarity in times of crisis – between the EU institutions, as well as people (for example, lack of solidarity from some countries in the migrant crisis). People are losing the sense of belonging in such situations.

These factors are even more influenced by the political situation in the community. As there is a big gap between politics and local citizens, a lack of trust and interest from citizens emerges.

Is there a special group prone to euroscepticism? Is there a difference in non-members, new members and old EU-members?

Less developed countries and those who have less experience and knowledge tend to be more sceptic. Thoughts about the EU mostly depend on the state of mind and influences from the media and government.

As far as EU projects, they are present in local areas, but people lack interest. Institutions are far away from people and politics tend to work ignoring the people's will. Due to this, people do not feel close to the EU.

Young people are more positive about the EU than the older ones.

Despite the negatives, with the young generation more and more eurooptimism is coming and people are getting more positive and understanding towards EU.

How does it influence the local community?

Euroscepticism has a bad influence on the community. Sceptics won't access EU funds which leads to lack of development.

Also, if a negative atmosphere is present, the community cannot thrive and develop.

How do people see the EU?

Specific thoughts depend on the individual itself. However, a lot of participants agreed to see the EU as a strong, but political concept. Institutions need to be closer to people and put attention on small areas. EU is necessary for having peace and good life standard, so more focus should be put on developing countries and strategies for a sustainable future.

The national identity is overcoming the EU identity at many times. That's why focus could be put also on teaching EU identity from little legs.

How can we tackle this problem? Move closer to citizens and ensure a positive future?

People have to see the benefit. There are projects that benefit the communities, but they should be clearly visible to the people. Having more balanced roles and funding distribution will help, together with less corruption and having politicians that work for the people.

But, it's not only up to politics. People should show more tolerance and understanding for each other, cooperation and solidarity. People (nations) have to come together and act.

Politics: *make more effort, listen to the people!*

People: *make more effort, engage in politics!*

Through better informing of citizens at the local and EU level, using media the right way to spread positive examples and messages, organizing events and having institutions that work in a right way, a better and more optimistic society would emerge.

With all the ideas given through 4 debates of the SMUG EU project, a high quality campaign can be set up in order to promote such values.

Can we turn it into something positive? Improve the quality of life in rural areas?

Optimists are people who are healthy, successful and lucky.

They can be examples of optimism, keep and share it to others. Through EU programs that give us opportunities for development we can foster our local tradition, diversity and tolerance.

At last, we need both: Euro-optimism and euro-criticism!

In order to have a successful Union, we must be critical towards bad regulations in order to see what's lacking.

On the other side, we should be positive that these problems can be solved. That's the right way to ensure that change can happen.

However, the critic has to be on all levels – the local, national and EU level.

EU is necessary for having peace and good life standard.

Let's cherish it ☺

LESSONS LEARNED

These are the reflections of participants after the last debate in Slovenia. We called up every partner delegation to say what they learned in the 2 days. We won't identify the speakers, just their thoughts.

(Due to mistakes in ordinary speech, some phrases were a bit modified to be more understandable. However, the meaning hasn't changed at all.)

SERBIA, Municipality of Sremski Karlovci:

'I learned that euroscepticism still exists, but it's mostly due to our personal opinions and it is up to us to change that way of thinking.'

'There is so much more than we see in the media and what people tell us. This conference made us learn more things and enriched our knowledge.'

HUNGARY, Municipality of Sopronkovesd:

'Mostly, we have to accept each other. We saw a lot of good examples and what I think is very important, we should go to the local people and inform them about the EU. So, not only politicians should talk about it, but all people should know on what the EU is doing and how things are changing.'

PORTUGAL, Municipality of Torres Novas:

'We are the oldest member here in the project. But, as you could see, Portugal asked the same questions the Serbians and Macedonians have concerning euroscepticism and the future of Europe. To summarize, I think we should make an effort, every one of us, that are optimistic about Europe, to inform all those people that are around us about the meaning of this project and how we can improve it. We have a special role to do it, each one of us, because we must keep this peace and development project going on. As a town counselor yesterday told. Yes, we are all in this together, and we don't want to come back. This is what we learned from these 2 days here in Slovenia.'

LATVIA, Municipality of Dagda:

'Europe gave a lot for Latvia...projects. I am so lucky that we are in Europe. This meeting provides us solutions what we can develop in our country and everyday life in our city.'

'We, as the Latvian team, believe in our future in Europe. As Europeans, we see our culture as a history of democracy with privileges. This is the right time for direct participation of European citizens in shaping the future of a united and democratic Europe. I think this project is not the end, it is the beginning of new projects.'

SERBIA, Danube 1245:

'We learned that we cannot live just by ourselves, we need to cooperate, we need partners. Here we were able also to make some agreements and discussions on how to cooperate and what to do. Not only on this conference. This is an opportunity, everywhere close to the EU, to extend our connections and live in a bigger world.'

BULGARIA, Municipality of Kameno:

'We learned that we got much closer for the 10 years that we are in the EU. This we see from the project. We all feel very welcome and I hope that this is due to the European Union. I would suggest to the Serbians and Macedonians to see what Bulgaria achieved as a self-esteem and to change all our belief that we are poor and so on. We are part of the Union, and those differences don't matter.'

ROMANIA, Municipality of Bistrita:

'We learned that the Europeans need to talk more about unity, identity and trust. Euroscepticism is mostly due to fears that we have and we have to fight against that new phenomenon we have nowadays like inequalities, migrations... I think we are not so naive these days to think that at a national level we can fight these fears, but together we are more united and can fight.'

MACEDONIA, Municipality of Krivogashtani:

'It's our honor to participate in this kind of event, especially when we talk about the EU and euroscepticism. We shared good practices and experiences with countries that are part of the EU, but also those who started the accession process. This will help us a lot when Republic of Macedonia becomes a member of the EU.'

SLOVENIA, Municipality of Novo Mesto, DRPDNM:

'Throughout these two days we were able to show the real values of the European Union, which is unity, solidarity and cooperation. As somebody else already said today, this project is not the end, but the beginning of our further cooperation.'

CROATIA, Municipalities of Gornja Rijeka, Breznica, Breznički Hum; LAG PRIZAG and Youth for Marof:

'The most valuable thing we will bring home is the understanding how it's all up to us. We are all part of the EU and every single one of us should engage. So, if we succeed at the end or not depends on our own attitude and persistence. We might feel hopeless at times, but this is not the case. Everything can be changed if we just work on it and stick together. We have to be the change we want to see. It all begins with us.'

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