

Broken pillar of participation – the ship has already departed from Hungary?

Make civil society fall asleep, or helping them to wake up?

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I am here today, to give some background about the activities of the civil society in 2017, connected to the one of the most important collaborative strategy formulation, the Danube strategy.

As an activist, a researcher, a strategist in participatory and direct democracy design, an expert in open government I am a civil society actor too, but traditionally a journalist. My NGO is dealing with participatory process design which helps to safeguard and strengthen democratic principles in various contexts. I have a few findings to bring to the table when it comes to civil society participation in the Danube Strategy Participation Forum.

First of all, let me begin with the state of Hungarian civil society, as an important context to set up. It is very obvious, that we have a shrinking space here for CSO in all levels of participation.

Many pro-government NGOs popped up in a systematic way to take over leadership in civil society-government collaboration. Most of these NGOs are playing from the government's powerful accord, and in this sense weakening the civil society and putting serious barriers to achieve CSOs core mission inside the society in many areas. The participatory mechanisms has become a play in a puppet theater – citizens and CSOs has lost their interest to participate in meaningless dialogues.

There is a constant attack happening towards NGOs, who raise their voices against corruption, the governmental system, that refuses and neglects real meaningful citizen participation.

The new NGO law is one of these instruments, which is in front of the Venice Commission, putting an obligatory stigma on foreign funded NGOs. It is just one example, I could tell you several others – how the current government is continually attacking the vitality of civil society's power.

You really have to search a lot to find a place, a process where citizens feel, that they are treated respectfully and they are partners in participation.

Former presenter, Mr. Pállinger said, that we need well designed institutions to make participation work. The current system of the Danube Strategy's Participation Forum seems rather exclusive, than inclusive. It was extremely true for the Hungarian activities regarding this year.

A little research.

Are basic values, like transparency, information accessibility met? Do interested citizens have access to the necessary information about participation and the agenda? Do the former meetings minutes, abstracts and findings, questions accessible in writing on web in time? These are a few, very basic indicators of a democratic procedure, which is open for involvement and engaging newcomers in a inclusive way.

But beside these indicators, there a few, that I would like to outline from my research that I have done regarding the Hungarian events, happening in the past year.

1. The official website of Hungarian leadership contained no information about civic participation. No invitations, no event, no links, where to join, how to get into the process of the strategy formulation and realization. No emphasis on partnerships. No documents, even after the direct request of civil actors. Is this normal?
2. 2 newsletters has been published from the responsible governmental agency, non of them deals with the civil society and the possibilities of participation. Probably there was no communication strategy connected.
3. No other website for the involvements of NGO-s participation. Beside a few events, that have not been promoted only through small impact and reach channels, the lack of information about the possibilities to get

involved lowered participation interest and rate. No meeting minutes, no questions and answers, no guidelines for participation.

4. The structure of the organized events showed very limited methodological approach to enhance and encourage meaningful participation. This could suit well for many people, mostly those, who do not know, that real and meaningful participation methods and standards exist. This was serving rather the government's agenda, than meaningful and real dialogue.
5. One of the most important answers of one event in 2017 was, that participants demanded a more independent form, structure for participation, than the current, government initiated centralized one!! There was a strong agreement on this.

How should a participatory system (Danube Civil Society Forum) both theoretically and practically serve integrity and be an effective tool to provide input and agenda setting points at a Danube regional level?

Websites, like mirrors for the society of different organizations. A few things that need to be corrected to preserve integrity with the mission.

1. Danube local actors platform – Hungarian Members – many of them disappeared, do not know about if they are members! Actors: Hungary – no contact at all! Where and how will I connect?
2. Networks – no contact at all from Hungary!

What should be done next? How to learn from our examples, to provide greater integrity with the mission of the Danube Civil Society Forum and its functional working?

I might have a few things to this conversation. There are many other collaboration based strategic networks, between governments and civil society actors, and sometimes businesses. They have developed very interesting processes to safeguard the basic principles of good governance, using internet tools and offline methods.

One of the most interesting model is what the Open Government Partnership is using. Whether this or other model will be used, citizens living alongside the Danube are shouting (you might not hear their voices) for a more inclusive and institutionally designed processes, that is involving and really open towards them. There are several other countries in the Danube region, where these failures for engaging citizens can be used as learning rockets to design real and meaningful participation.