

Should the Participation participate?

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The Danube Participation Day, that took place on 17-18th October in Budapest (Hungary), is the unique networking and experience exchanging platform, that already for the fourth time was organized by the civil society actors from Danube Region.

NGOs from diverse social spheres, politician of different levels, educational centers, students and other engaged actors are brought together each year in order to introduce their successful achievement, to discuss current problems and challenges, as well as to set up new mutual expectations of the developments in the civil society world for the next year. The main purpose of the event is actually quite simple - to make the civil society voice present in political, social and economic discourse in Danube Region.

But is the aim indeed so smooth as it seems to be? Is it actually possible for civil society to be really heard? Is it hence in truth enough for civil society just to be heard or should it probably participate in real policy-making process? And the crucial question is, whether the civil society actors themselves would like to participate?

The idea to organise The Participation Day was conceived two years later after another big platform in Danube Region had appeared - the Annual Forum of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. The purpose of the “big” conference, as it is often called among participants of the “small” forum (Participation Day), is to gather the officials from distinct realms and different levels in order to give them opportunity to discuss the current state and to deliberate strategy for the future in all possible spheres of life in Danube Region: economics, business, infrastructure, policy, security, environment, energy, innovations or whatever you want, except the only sphere which was ignored from the very beginning – the civil society. That is how the Participation Day was born.

Usually two events held almost simultaneously in the same cities. The 6th Annual Forum of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, took place on 18-19 October 2017 in Budapest too, was jointly organised by Hungary (current Presidency of the EUSR), the European Commission and the Danube Transnational Programme. This year the main topics of the “big” event were energy security, transportation development, clean connectivity issues and financing opportunities, while the participants of the “small” one were dealing with the issue “Science meets Participation”.

It is often argued, whether two events should be united or whether the Danube Participation Day should be included to the official program of the Annual Forum of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. After the attendance of both forums this year my firm respond would be definitely negative – the Participation Day should not participate in the “big” Forum, but the politicians from the “big” one should certainly pay more attention to the problems discussing on the “small” one.

In my opinion, the format of the Danube Participation Day absolutely corresponds to the character and nature of civil society in this region, as well as to its function to control and

to impact on the policy-making process, but not really participate or take decisions. The most valuable features of civil society are its independence and authenticity, which can be felt and understood only after attending such events like The Participation Day. Fortunately, I had this opportunity this year and I was pleasantly surprised by participants' open-mindedness, devotion, generosity, readiness and real desire to improve their small or big spheres of responsibility.

I would only wish that the Danube Participation Day stays successful and authentic, grows further, attracts more engaged young people, broads its topics and makes the voice of civil society not just present, but powerful and influencing in political, social and economic discourse in Danube Region.

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