

Participation Day Report

On the 17th of October, the 4th Participation day within the frame of the EU Danube Strategy was held at Festetics Palais inside the building of Andrásy University Budapest. As a networking conference, the panels, workshops, and social partitions of the day were geared towards bringing together scientific, governmental and activist stakeholders in participation, innovation and sustainability in the agenda for participation in EU macro-regional strategies.

To serve this purpose, the 4th Participation day was organised by a heterogenous group of institutions, namely Foster Europe; Local Authorities as Drivers for Development, Education and Raising Awareness (LADDER); European Association for Local Democracy (ALDA); European Local Democracy Week; Baden-Württemberg Foundation; the city of Vienna; Danube Transnational Programme; Danube Region Strategy and Danube Strategy Civil Society Forum; Agapedia; and the host Andrásy University Budapest.

The conference was hence introduced by the rector of Andrásy University Dietmar Meyer, National Coordinator of Hungary in the EU Strategy for the Danube Region István Joó, and Rudolf Schicker of the Danube Strategy. Keynotes were delivered by Baden-Württembergian State Secretary Andre Baumann and Andrásy University's Zoltán Pállinger.

For the hours to follow, the program included a panel discussion, followed by working groups on a number of Danube Strategy relevant topics after lunch. In the late afternoon, next to speeches and reports from civil society agents, the working groups were to present their results. The conference would then come to an end with wine and a creative vegetarian dinner in the evening.

The discussion began with a presentation by Stefan August Lütgenau of Foster Europe's Danube Civil Society Forum and input by Clara Moder of Vienna University of Economics and Business. With the confident moderation of Jörg Mirtl, a panel consisting of delegates from various organising and associated institutions discussed the Agenda for Participation in the EU-Macro Regional Strategies. It quickly became clear that there was a strong consensus on the significance of grass-roots activism in democratic processes and cohesion in the European Union.

After lunch, the five working groups were launched, focussing on research perspectives in participation partnerships; building Macro-regional Strategies on local and multi-level governance in participation partnerships; sustaining developments in participation partnerships; designing 2020+ with local partners; and empowering Roma. The working groups were in session in different rooms all over Andrásy University. The connecting idea was to bring together groups and individuals and share different approaches and perspectives, at best leading to long-term cooperations as a direct outcome of Participation day. As such, for example the working group on empowering Roma brought together stakeholders from grass-root NGOs, research and communal institutions.

All participants gathered again in the hall of mirrors of Festetics Palais, where speakers from all working groups presented their thoughts, findings, the long-term goals they had discussed as well as the challenges they were set face. Before, however, the audience listened to two interesting reports about the situation of civil society and activism in Hungary. Civil society coordinator Miklos Barabas of European House talked about how the divide in the Hungarian society mirrors a divide in its civil society. He also raised the important question of who represents whom, for example in conferences such as this one. Hungarian „activism veteran“ and participatory democracy expert Csaba Madarász stressed the recent hardships for NGOs in Hungary that are being antagonized by a government that is setting up a „puppet theatre“ of uncritical activism, which citizens would lose

interest to engage in serious dialogue with.

In the final stage of the conference, the Passing of the Bell ceremony was carried out between Andrásy rector Mr. Meyer and Iva Taralezhkova of Citizen Participation Forum. Before the participants went over to socialisation with wine and dinner, two final speeches were held: After thanking the Hungarian government and stressing the importance of protecting civil society, Gisela Erder of the Greens party in Baden-Württemberg's government found clear words of criticism of several recent actions by Hungary's government. Former president of PEN international as well as Berlin's Academy of Arts György Konrad enthralled the audience with a speech pledging for an acknowledgement of European realities and European culture in its inclusiveness, bemoaning that „flagwaving would be practised instead of school“.

Ultimately, the 4th Participation Day was a day of finding consensus, yet simultaneously a conference in which gaps and challenges were outspokenly addressed. It thus laid the foundation of further cooperation in many fields by stakeholders as diverse and colourful as the Danube region itself is.

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