

EU3doms: Debate on the Future of the Four Freedoms of the European Union

Report on the Day of the Four Freedoms of the European Union in Niš

Conference topic: Perceptions of local self-government units and the general topic of the future of the Four Freedoms, specifically youth, anti-corruption and policy making

On Friday, the 9th of June, delegates from non-governmental institutions and local governments on Slovenia, Hungary, Romania and Serbia met in the recently prospering southern Serbian city of Niš, one of Serbia's three university cities laden with history. The topic of the conference was local self-government, especially regarding the issues of EU accession, youth, anti-corruption and policy making. Hosts of the conference were Belgrade Open School and Deli, a space for creative activities in Niš, providing the rooms for the Conference.

With opening remarks starting at 11 o'clock, the conference would proceed with a one hour discussion panel on local self-government and the before and after of the European Union accession process, a topic of interest for Niš, as Serbia is on the long road for EU membership. In the afternoon, there was time to mingle and enjoy the exhibition "Four Freedoms of the European Union", provided by students from several European cities. The last official part of the conference were the also one hour long workshops on several topics. Last but not least, there was lunch and a guided city tour. All parts of the conference were in English or Serbian, with live translation to the respective other language.

In the opening remarks, Mr. Vanja Dolapčev from Belgrade Open School stressed the importance of local governments for process of European Integration. He talked about the recent issues of Serbia in light of the European integration, such as the importance of Decentralization in the response to a former "Belgradization" of the country. Ms. Marija Marinkovic from European Union Information Point in Niš talked about her centre and the events it organised, altogether more than 500 in and around Niš since its founding, mainly focussed on youth but also on e.g. women entrepreneurship. A delegate from Heviz county in Hungary then stressed the role of youth and advocated city partnerships.

In the discussion panel moderated by Mr. Dolapčev, two speakers from Lendava in Slovenia and Heviz in Hungary would answer questions by Mr. Dolapčev and the audience regarding the problems and opportunities arising with EU accession and how it effected the life in the counties, how the county administrations dealt with and made use of the new situation, the processes of application for funds, etc. The speakers were Ms. Virág Zsár of the Municipality of Heviz and Mr.

Dejan Süč of the Municipality of Lendava. The speaker from Harghita City Council from Mircurea Ciuc, Romania, sadly couldn't participate due to unforeseen illness. Next to the panel speakers, several guests to the conference also used the opportunity to ask questions.

The panel was interesting as both speakers highlighted the challenges their relatively small municipalities faced and how they made use of it. It turned out that there was a number of similarities in the developments surrounding EU accession, but also differences. Both speakers advocated cross-border cooperations with other cities, and both talked about how the meaning of being a border region changed for the cities and eventually turned into a positive trait, even though the nature of those borders was with EU accession much different as before. Another topic that frequently arose was infrastructure and very much connected with that, how better access to the municipalities within their respective countries would affect the utilization of foreign investment.

Next to the benefits that arose from EU membership, such as aforementioned investments in various sectors, the speakers also talked about the challenges new members would face, such as intense soaring of prices. A phenomenon that requires preparation.

Another topic mentioned again and again was youth, especially the youth leaving the rural areas and never returning, a problem that demands initiatives from the side of local governments. Here it was especially sad that the Romanian delegate fell ill, as one of the speakers said that Mircurea Ciuc was an excellent example of how to get the youth to return.

During the following break, there was time to let all the information sink in and chat with other participants about the issues that had been addressed. At the same time, we could enjoy the exhibition „For Freedoms of the European Union“, the exhibits of which could be found all over the conference area at Deli centre. The pieces were created by European students and represented their take on the Four Freedoms, varying for example from a the history of the European idea in a beautiful drawing, via an avantgarde interpretation of the own country's situation in relation to the EU, to a photo journalistic project with refugees at the Serbian-Hungarian border.

The second content session of the conference were the workshops. Here, the participants met in three groups to discuss local self-government units and anti-corruption, policy making and, the by far biggest group, youth. This was especially exciting, as participants from all different perspectives to the issue at hand could raise their voice and debate together. Members of NGOs and politicians from near and abroad as well as locals sat together to hear each other out, address problems and work on solutions. In the end, after an hour or partially heated debate, all participants came together in one room again, and the members of Belgrade Open School wrapped up the

discussions and the outcomes.

After this last panel, there was a lunch provided with a range of local Serbian food and, for those interested, an informative historical city tour, in which the participants from other European countries but also far-away Belgrade were introduced to the long and often tragic history of Niš at the “gates of Europe”, from Niš as the birthplace of many Roman emperors to the sadly still not fully comprehended horrors of the 20th century.

All in all, the conference at Niš can certainly be called a success. A lot of networking occurred, a lot was learned and discussed and the delegates from the municipalities were eager to meet again at the next Four Freedoms conference after the summer break.

Author: Lukas Knopp, YCDN