

Κοινωνική Συνοχή και Ανάπτυξη

Τόμ. 16, Αρ. 1 (2021)

No 31

Social Cohesion and Development

Biannual Scientific Review,
Spring 2021, volume 16, issue 1

Κοινωνική Συνοχή και Ανάπτυξη

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Networks of Solidarity Cities: The Social Dimension of the City Networks within the Europe for Citizens Programme, 2014-2020

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doi: [10.12681/scad.32112](https://doi.org/10.12681/scad.32112)

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Βιβλιογραφική αναφορά:

Karvounis, A. (2022). Networks of Solidarity Cities: The Social Dimension of the City Networks within the Europe for Citizens Programme, 2014-2020. *Κοινωνική Συνοχή και Ανάπτυξη*, 16(1). <https://doi.org/10.12681/scad.32112>

Networks of Solidarity Cities: The Social Dimension of the City Networks within the Europe for Citizens Programme, 2014-2020

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1. Introduction

The European Union is built on solidarity: solidarity between its citizens, solidarity across borders between its Member States, and solidarity through support actions inside and outside the Union. Solidarity is a shared value which creates cohesion and responds to societal challenges such as the recent refugee and migration crisis. But what does solidarity mean within the European Union, especially in times of crisis? What are the legal, political, economic and even ethical limits of European solidarity? The unprecedented arrivals of migrants and refugees in recent years in particular have put Europe's solidarity to the test. Under the Europe for Citizens programme 2014-2020, citizens were given the opportunity to discuss the topic of solidarity as a multiannual priority during that programming period and to assess existing solidarity mechanisms inside the EU. This article underlines the role of the city networks measure of that European programme in which municipalities and their associations working together had the opportunity to develop partnerships of towns to make and develop the solidarity principle more sustainable in a long-term perspective. In this respect, despite their disparity, city networks share common aspirations: exchanging experiences and knowledge, enhancing the skills of their members' executives, exerting influence, securing international representation and defending their interests (Karvounis, 2020, p.82).

2. The solidarity principle within EU legal framework

The principle of solidarity is often used in the context of social protection. For example, it was applied by the European Court of Justice in a case concerning complaints by self-employed workers that compulsory contributions to the mutual funds established to provide social protection violated the principles of free competition in the common market as laid down in Articles 81-82 EC (now Articles 101-102 TFEU). Chapter IV (Articles 27-38) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union is entitled 'Solidarity.' Articles 27 to 34 bear directly on employment and industrial relations: Workers' right to information and consultation (Article 27), Right to collective bargaining and action (Article 28), Right of access to placement services (Article 29), Protection in the event of unjustified dismissal (Article 30), Fair and just working conditions (Article 31), Prohibition of child labour and protection of young people at work (Article 32), Family and professional life (Article 33), and Social security and social assistance (Article 34).

Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union explicitly refers to the principle of solidarity, an affirmation crucial for the concept of Social Europe. The EU principle of solidarity has implications for the various rights concerned with employment, industrial relations and social protection in the EU Charter.

Implementation of the Solidarity Chapter of the EU Charter aims to build a bridge between programmatic solidarity rights (social and economic rights) and justiciable civil and political rights. Justiciable rights equate to effective and enforceable rights. The challenge is to establish clearly justiciable solidarity rights (e.g. trade union freedom of association, information and consultation, collective bargaining and collective action), and, further, to develop and implement programmatic social and economic solidarity rights: e.g. health, education, etc. The EU Charter, which was enacted with the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon on 1 December 2009, opens a new chapter in the legal enforcement of solidarity rights, both at transnational and national levels.

3. Europe for Citizens, 2014-2020

Under the Europe for Citizens programme 2014-2020, the notion of solidarity was intrinsically linked to the concept of generosity, but also to those of reciprocity and responsibility. European citizens reflected on policy areas where such common mechanisms were already existing or could have been useful while considering other possible channels of European solidarity like volunteering, donations, foundations, civil society organisations, charities, crowdfunding, etc. One aspect of the discussion was to highlight the added value of the EU's intervention in times of crisis, as was demonstrated in the case of the refugee and migration crisis, when national responses seemed insufficient, while underlining the limits of such solidarity mechanisms in terms of responsibility and financial cost. Projects developed under this multi-annual priority contributed to overcoming national perceptions by fostering mutual understanding and by creating fora where common solutions could be discussed in a constructive way. Their aim was to raise awareness of the importance of reinforcing the European integration process based on solidarity and common values.

The Europe for Citizens Programme, adopted for the period 2014-2020, was an important instrument aimed at getting the Union's 500 million inhabitants to play a greater part in the development of the Union. By funding schemes and activities in which citizens could participate, the Programme was promoting Europe's shared history and values, and fostering a sense of ownership for how the Union develops. A budget of EUR 187 718 000 for the period 2014-2020 was allocated for the Programme (EACEA, 2020, p.23).

Under the overall aim of bringing the Union closer to citizens, the general objectives of the Europe for Citizens Programme 2014-2020 were as such (EACEA, 2020, p.5):

- to contribute to citizens' understanding of the Union, its history and diversity;
- to foster European citizenship and to improve conditions for civic and democratic participation at Union level.

Specific objectives were pursued on a transnational level or with a European dimension (EACEA, 2020, p.5):

- to raise awareness of remembrance, the common history and values of the Union and the Union's aim, namely to promote peace, the values of the Union and the well-being of its peoples by stimulating debate, reflection and the development of networks;

- to encourage democratic and civic participation of citizens at Union level, by developing citizens' understanding of the Union policy making process and promoting opportunities for societal and intercultural engagement and volunteering at Union level.

The Programme was implemented through two strands and a horizontal action:

- Strand 1: European remembrance: Raise awareness of remembrance, common history and values and the Union's aim.
- Strand 2: Democratic engagement and civic participation: Encourage democratic and civic participation of citizens at Union level. Measures in this strand were:
 - Town Twinning;
 - Networks of Towns;
 - Civil Society Projects.

The two strands were complemented by a horizontal action: Valorisation, analysis, dissemination and use of project results.

4. The City Networks measure

Networking between municipalities on issues of common interest appeared to be an important means for enabling the exchange of good practices. Twinning has been a strong link that binds municipalities; therefore, the potential of the networks created by a series of town twinning links were used for developing thematic and long-lasting cooperation between towns. The European Commission supported the development of such networks, which were important for ensuring structured, intense and multifaceted cooperation, therefore contributing to maximising the impact of the Programme. Networks of Towns were expected to (EACEA, 2020, p.23):

- Integrate a range of activities within at least 4 project events; such Network of Towns' events were expected to have a defined time-frame and include different types of activities around the subject(s) of common interest to be addressed in the context of the Programme's objectives or multiannual priorities.
- Have defined target groups for which the selected themes are particularly relevant and involve community members active in the subject area (i.e. experts, local associations, citizens and citizens' groups directly affected by the theme, etc.);
- Mobilise citizens across the Europe: a project should involve a minimum of 30% of invited participants. "Invited participants" are travelling delegations from eligible partner countries other than the country hosting an event.
- Serve as a basis for future initiatives and actions between the towns involved, on the issues addressed or possibly on further issues of common interest.

Maximum grant for a Network of Towns projects was EUR 150 000. Towns/municipalities or their twinning committees or networks, other levels of local/regional authorities, federations/associations of local authorities, non-profit organisations representing local authorities were po-

tential applicants and partners. The other organisations involved in the project could also be non-profit civil society organisations. A project had to involve municipalities from at least 4 eligible countries of which at least two should have been an EU Member State. The activities had to take place in different eligible programme countries. At least 4 events per project had to be foreseen with maximum project duration set for 24 months (EACEA, 2020, p.23).

5. A review of the networks of solidarity cities, 2014-2020

Following the establishment of the new Commission Juncker, the responsibility for the citizenship portfolio was given to Commissioner Avramopoulos, in charge of Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship. Accordingly, the Europe for Citizens Programme was moved from Directorate-General Communication (COMM) to Directorate-General Migration and Home Affairs (HOME) as of 1 January 2015, while the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency remained responsible for the management of the Europe for Citizens Programme. In this context, reflections started on possible synergies between the Europe for Citizens Programme and DG HOME's activities, in full respect of the programme's legal basis, objectives and budget. On this basis, we reflect on the reports on the activities of the Europe for Citizens Programme 2014-2020 and explore the potential of the networks of cities measure within the solidarity domain.

5.1 *The rise of populism (2014)*

After the European elections of May 2014, which saw a strong rise of eurosceptic parties and populist movements (European Commission, 2014a), as well as a high abstention rate (turnout was only 42.54%, even if it confirmed the level of participation of the 2009 elections), in the two selection rounds that were organized for networks of towns in 2014, out of 224 submitted applications, 35 networking projects had been selected for funding for a total amount of 4.522.000 EUR. The funded projects involved around 19.000 participants. In terms of geographical spread including the partners, all countries participating in the programme were represented within this measure. Italy, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland were the most active countries in organising networks of towns. As all these networks involved at least four towns from different countries, the geographic impact went of course far beyond the host country. Thematically, the future of Europe was targeted by 42% of networking projects while citizens' participation in the democratic life of the EU was chosen by 60% of the projects and the elections to the European Parliament by 13% of the projects (the total of these percentages exceeded 100, as some projects were targeting more than one topic) (European Commission, 2015, p.8).

Example 1: Project “MIGRAIN” (migration and integration) (Poland)

The theme of the project was the mobility of citizens within the EU and the immigration of citizens from third countries towards the EU. The project aimed at investigating issues linked to mobility and immigration in Europe and their social impact, and at giving citizens the opportunity to participate in the formulation of answers to these questions. The towns participating in the network were facing effects of mobility and immigration including difficulties linked to the arrival of irregular immigrants from non-European countries. By exchanging ideas and examining possible solutions to these issues, the project was expected to contribute to the development of local strategies and policies for the social integration of immigrants. Moreover, the project contributed to raising awareness among citizens living in the participating towns on the importance of migration for the society by showing successful models of integration of different groups of migrants and by highlighting the existing potential for changes in local communities. Project partners: Urząd Miasta i Gminy Cieszanów (Poland), Diosd Varos Önkormányzata (Hungary), Freundeskreis Partnerschaften Gemeinde Argenbühl (Germany), Municipality of Lokron (Greece), Comune di Forlì (Italy), Comune di Fusignano (Italy), Kmetstvo Ahe-loy (Bulgaria), Comuna Lupeni (Romania).

5.2 The return of terrorism (2015)

In the difficult political situation after the Paris and Copenhagen attacks of January and February 2015 and in the context of a serious economic, financial and political crisis and the increasing number of third-country nationals arriving in the European Union, the Europe for Citizens programme played an important role as one of the EU programmes helping to foster the civic engagement of citizens, to promote values, such as tolerance, solidarity and non-discrimination and to encourage citizens to play a stronger role in the development of the EU through projects and activities, in which citizens who were already active within organisations or institutions as well as citizens who were not yet involved could participate and make their voice heard. In the two selection rounds that were organised for networks of towns in 2015, out of 339 submitted applications, 32 networking projects were selected for funding for a total amount of 4.067.500 EUR which corresponded to a success rate of 9%. In terms of geographical spread including the partners, all countries participating in the programme were represented within this measure. Italy and Hungary remained the most active countries in organising networks of towns. As all these networks involved at least four towns from different countries, the geographic impact went far beyond the host country (European Commission, 2016, pp.6-7).

Example 2: ACTive Communities for Inclusion (Croatia)

The overall aim of the network was to improve societal engagement in implementing Union policies & measures focusing on the inclusion of persons with disabilities and the elderly in local actions. The specific aims were: 1) to demonstrate to citizens how to effectively implement programs promoting social inclusion of disabled persons and the elderly; 2) to increase citizen awareness about daily challenges faced by persons with disabilities and the elderly and how EU policies positively impact citizens' lives. The inclusion of persons with disabilities and the elderly in civic activities was a priority for the Municipality of Cestica. Local non-profits providing services to disabled persons & the elderly found that current programs and individual services needed to be adjusted in order to improve their inclusion in civic activities. Apart from this, it was found that the majority of residents regionally in Croatia were unaware of the issues facing persons with disabilities & the elderly, making it difficult to foster support for new initiatives. In this project, Cestica & its partners exchanged knowledge/best practices to improve current systems designed to enhance inclusion of persons with disabilities & the elderly in civic activities. This was done by demonstrating innovative methods, presentations, public awareness activities & exchanges at 4 events. Citizens became aware of issues facing the disabled and elderly, the advantages of EU policies for social inclusion and of volunteering opportunities. Professionals in public institutions & associations gained know-how required to establish effective civic initiatives for the inclusion of disabled persons and the elderly at the local level, and new proposals were drafted. The partners built on the results of previous actions. A cooperation agreement finalized at the last event, detailing joint future activities relating to the inclusion of persons with disabilities and elderly. Project partners: Municipality of Cestica (Croatia), Municipality of Ruma (Serbia), ACT Čakovec (Croatia), Varazdin County (Croatia), Municipality of Cirkulane (Slovenia), Municipality of Heiningen (Germany).

Example 3: Stimulating new forms of active civic participation through focus on Social and Solidarity Economy (Greece)

20 years after the introduction of the EU citizenship the project "FOCUS" focused on Social and Solidarity Economy issues which have been ignored or inadequately fulfilled and sought to: a) contribute to citizens' understanding of the European Union, of its history and achievements and of the EU policy making-process; b) create the space for a deeper discussion on the future of Europe; c) give responses to the questions for the kind of Europe citizens want, thus, for a strong, sustainable, prosperous, inclusive, democratic and integrated united Europe; d) raise awareness of forms of active civic engagement, reinforce those already existing and stimulate new ones; e) encourage democratic participation of citizens by promoting opportunities for societal and intercultural engagement and volunteering such as the occupation in cooperatives, non-profit organization, charities and generally speaking, in social economy structures. In particular, the project "FOCUS" through 4 distinct events attempted to situate social economy into a broader political context and investigated its relation with the well-known traditional theories and practices concerning the participation in the democratic life of the EU. Thus, the network of partners from 10 countries desired to disseminate as a best practice for the empowerment of civic participation of those citizens who had not been involved till then, or who rejected the Union outright of put in question its achievements, their engagement in Social economy structures. As the Social Economy moves between the government (public sector's economy) and business (private economy) could be seen equal to the civil society's economy, based on interests and wills of citizens and as part of the Solidarity Economy, the economy of vulnerable and disadvantaged people, usually indifferent in civic participation either at local or EU level, due to their poverty and social exclusion. Project partners: Municipality of Agia (Greece), City of Grada Raba (Croatia), Câmara Municipal do Porto (Portugal), Préfecture de la Haute-Corse, Corse region in the island of Corsica (France), Lazio region/city of Rome, Lombardy region/city of Bergamo and the city of Montone/Province of Perugia in Umbria region (Italy), municipality of Naxxar (Malta), cities of Pegeia and Dromolaxia-Meneou (Cyprus), cities of Teruel/Aragón, Ronda, autonomous community of Andalucía (Spain), cities of Anija, Harijmaa and Keila, other urban cities of surrounding rural municipality - Keila Parish/Keila Linnavalitus, cities of Kernu, Nissi, Padise and Vasalemma (Estonia), cities of Galway and Dublin (Ireland), city of Strumyani (Bulgaria).

5.3 The triumph of Euroscepticism (2016)

In the continuous complex political, social and economic context of the year 2016, the Europe for Citizens programme played an important role as one of the EU programmes helping to foster the civic engagement of citizens, to promote values such as tolerance, solidarity and non-discrimination and to encourage citizens to play a stronger role in the development of the EU through projects and activities, in which citizens participated and made their voice heard. The rise of Euroscepticism – which became highly visible in the result of the UK referendum in June 2016 – highlighted the importance of the Europe for Citizens programme and reinforced the need to foster the development of a shared sense of European identity and to reflect on the causes of the European Union's loss of attractiveness and the disappearance of its credibility as a positive added value to Member States. The Europe for Citizens programme offered a unique forum to ordinary citizens allowing them to express their ideas about the future of Europe through a bottom-up approach. In 2016, out of 328 submitted applications, 30 networking projects were selected for funding for a total amount of 4.120.000 EUR which corresponded to a success rate of 9%. The programme multiannual priorities, particularly the one tackling migration issues, found significant response at local and regional levels of Networks of Towns beneficiaries. Thus, migration and intercultural dialogue was covered by 57%, the debate on the future of Europe by 33%, solidarity in times of crisis by 23% and Euroscepticism by 20% of the selected Networks of Towns projects. The migration theme appeared more as a cross-cutting issue, largely interconnected with other multiannual programme priorities. The greatest number of selected projects came from Italy (23%), France (10%), Hungary (10%) followed by Germany (7%), Spain (7%) and Poland (7%). As all these networks involved at least four towns from different countries, the geographic impact went far beyond the host country. The large partnerships of the selected projects should be underlined: in average around 10 partner organisations were involved per project (European Commission, 2017, p.6).

Example 4: Integrating and solidarity European Models for Sustainability (Austria)

GEMS project established a transnational network between 5 small alpine towns that shared local development strategies (economy based on sustainable tourism), and related challenges, caused by recent EU financial and social turmoil. Over 2 years of activities (2016-2018), under the coordination of the Alpine Pearls Association, GEMS project directly involved a total of 843 citizens in an exercise of civil participation, which aimed to identify solidarity & integration initiatives contributing to boosting local development, while generating too the sense of belonging to a transnational community based on shared EU values (peace, mutual understanding). Citizens, representatives of civil society organisations together with their local authorities worked together in 5 transnational events, each focused on a different thematic, as follows: Sustainable tourism and the future of EU: soft mobility and accessibility; new residents bring new ideas for sustainable tourism; intercultural cooperation and traditional knowledge transfer; new minorities

promoting sustainable tourism in traditional communities; future challenges of EU in the Alpine Region: how to build the sustainable future of tomorrow. Moreover, GEMS project stimulated an intensive awareness raising campaign on EU2020 and EU policy-making mechanisms. Within 7 public conferences (i.e. 5 organised during the thematic events, 2 in occasion of the Opening and Final ceremonies of the project) GEMS informed alpine citizens about relevant EU policies on the projects' main topics and financing opportunities, EU framework and tools for participation. All 7 events (i.e. 5 thematic and 2 dissemination events) promoted the EACEA – Europe for Citizens Programme, and its relevance for the promotion of cooperation between local authorities. It is estimated that GEMS activities and information campaigns reached indirectly more than 30.000 citizens within the involved communities, as well as over 1.000.000 citizens across the overall Alpine Region by means of GEMS online and offline communication channels. Concretely, GEMS project activated (<http://gemsproject.eu/the-project/the-results/>): Debates (workshops) and exchange of best practices (study visits) for the elaboration of a Network Solidarity & Integration Model - a catalogue with local best practices and network recommendations for future initiatives, to be implemented at network level; the signature of a Friendship Agreement between project partners – putting the basis of future cooperation around the identified priorities & strategies of the Network Model; the establishment of a participatory mechanism able to both INFORM a broad number of citizens from involved communities and COLLECT their feedback on the networks' ongoing debates and preliminary results (i.e. the FeedMe Stands – Participation Info-points placed in strategic venues of the project towns); the launching of the Alpine Award for the most innovative Alpine “solidarity & integration initiatives” – during the final Ceremony, to be promoted by the wider Alpine Pearls network (25 Alpine towns, including all project partners). GEMS project contributed to a shift of mind-set on local sustainable development towards a more open, inclusive, EU-oriented one, in which: Citizens are aware of their crucial role in the development of their communities, working side by side with local authorities, as partners, so to realise their common vision for the EU (development) future; citizens perceive themselves as part of a greater European and active community, fostered by institutions (local and EU) in their efforts to achieve common goals; Alpine communities perceive new residents (internal and/or external migrants) as an opportunity to boost their local social and economic contexts through active integration. Project partners: Werfenweng (Austria), Bad Reichenhall (Germany), Bled (Slovenia), Moena (Italy), Forni di Sopra (Italy).

Example 5:

2WILL- 2 Work in Integration of Local Life (PL)

The project 2WILL promoted by 26 Partners from 16 countries, focused on the potential of networks and encouraged new forms of civic and democratic engagement by stimulating debate and reflection on EU related themes, fostering the active involvement of citizens in the policy-making process and avoiding passiveness and misunderstanding of EU actions. The proposal created a path of discussion on three themes: EU solidarity, risks of Euroscepticism and Future of Europe through the linking subject of volunteering. In fact, volunteering is important, especially for young people, and is a vehicle for personal development, social cohesion and active citizenship, fostering the involvement at EU level avoiding oppositions. Youth volunteering is an excellent example of non-formal learning for young people and also strongly contributes to inter-generational solidarity. The target group were citizens from 18 till 40 years old. The project aimed to: foster transnational volunteering and inter-generational solidarity in the Europe of the future;-improve good working conditions for young volunteers, also through the exchange of best practices among them; achieve greater recognition of the value of voluntary activities and the skills it promoted; enhancement of the knowledge of volunteers on the EU policy-making process, through the knowledge of the Programme, EU funds, the Europe 2020 strategy; recognise and promote cross-border voluntary and solidarity activities in the EU, especially in this particular time of crisis; avoid border closure and stereotypes; foster a sense of European citizenship and societal and intercultural engagement, as citizens can be actors not only spectators in the building of the Europe of the future; improve conditions for civic and democratic participation at Union level thanks to citizens' direct involvement in the project activities; gather suggestions and proposals for a better and solidary Future of Europe. Project partners: Municipalities of Wieliszew (Poland), Serock (Poland), Graffignano (Italy), Castiglione in Teverina (Italy), Celleno (Italy), Lubriano (Italy), Civitella d'Agliano (Italy), Herrera del Duque (Spain), Lanškroun (Czech Republic), Dionisos (Greece), Alimos (Greece), Agias (Greece), Siret (Romania), Trittau (Germany), Salaspils (Latvia), Kelme (Lithuania), Strumyani (Bulgaria), Deryneia (Cyprus), Onga (Hungary), Filipstad (Sweden), Habo (Sweden), Santa Lucija (Malta), Swieqi (Malta), and associations of "Aktiivinen Eurooppalainen Kansalainen Suomi Ry" - Vääksy (Finland), "BALKĀNU ZIEDS" - Aizkraukle (Latvia), "Udruga za očuvanje neretvanske baštine" - Opuzen (Croatia).

5.4 The debate on the future of Europe (2017)

Sixty years after the signing of the Treaties of Rome, it seemed more important than ever to address citizens' concerns and reconnect the European project with its founding values. In challenging times for Europe, the European Commission launched an open debate with the White Paper on the Future of Europe presented by President Juncker on 1 March 2017. Having shown remarkable resilience, when tackling a series of global crises in the past, the European Union (EU) was confronted in 2017 with a set of complex and unprecedented challenges including the fight against terrorism, the response to the most serious migration and refugee crisis in Europe after the Second World War and the outcome of the United Kingdom EU membership Referendum. In

2017 the “Europe for Citizens” programme showed its maturity and stability. Supported activities were implemented successfully in all Member States and corresponded to the priorities set out by the Commission. Almost 40% of projects granted combatted stigmatisation of “immigrants” and helped to build counter narratives showing solidarity in time of crises, i.e.:

- Analysing the migration crisis and new policy approaches for refugees.
- Sharing practices and strengthening social inclusion systems for immigrants.
- Promoting the integration of immigrants and the analysis of its impact on local development.
- Working on media literacy and on the importance of a story-telling approach in combatting the stigmatisation of immigrants.
- Volunteering and developing solidarity mechanisms as a form of civic participation.

Whereas in previous years organisations were active in the urgent management of the migrants and refugees crisis, in 2017 they concentrated rather on democratic participation on the Future of Europe. They proposed to combat the general mistrust in democracy, seeing democratic participation as a tool to face intertwined challenges such as populism and xenophobia.

As for all programme actions in 2017, a decrease in the number of applications was also noted for Network of Towns (NT) projects (around 9%). This decrease was mainly due to the lower participation of Hungary and Italy applicants, the countries which used to have the highest participation rate within this action. This trend contributed to a better geographical distribution as well as to a better action success rate (11% in 2017 against 9% in 2016). Applicants from 28 countries participated in the 2017 selections. The greatest number of applications came from Italy (23%) and Greece (8%). Applicants from Greece, Austria, Sweden and Bosnia & Herzegovina demonstrated in 2017 their increased interest in the action concerned. The geographical spread of the selected projects was wide with 19 countries represented as (lead) beneficiary. The geographical spread of those projects including the partners was even higher considering that 33 countries (all participating programme countries) were represented within the selected projects. The average amount requested per NT project (€128.500 in 2017), was higher than the “average value of grants” foreseen in the annual work programme 2017 (i.e. € 94.085). Consequently, the number of grants allocated within this action in 2017 was lower than the number foreseen in the annual work programme: 32 against 45. Under this action 32 projects were selected, providing support to municipalities and associations working together on a common theme in a long-term perspective, and wishing to develop networks of towns to make their cooperation sustainable. The projects under “Networks of Towns” action were characterized by large, diversified and strong partnerships (i.e. in average more than 10 partner organisations per selected project), thus maximising programme impact at national/regional and EU levels. Altogether 32 selected projects involved around 335 partner organisations reflecting an important diversity in terms of the partnership (e.g. municipalities, regions, NGOs, twinning committees, foundation, associations, CSOs etc.). Around 200 transnational events were organised by the NT beneficiaries across Europe (in average more than 6 international events will be organised per selected project), which were coupled with local events in project partner countries. The highest interest of NT beneficiaries went to the issues related to the Debate on the Future of Europe and migration challenges. It is worth noting that the discussion on the Future of Europe went beyond big cities. Issues, such as the debate on the Future of Europe, Euroscepticism, migration changes and solidarity were also tackled in small rural communities (European Commission, 2018, pp.19-21).

Example 6: European Network for the Cohesion and Solidarity in Rural areas (Slovenia)

European Network for the Cohesion and Solidarity in Rural Areas (ENSURE) was a cooperative project of 13 local and regional public bodies and Civil Society Organisations from the European Union, Montenegro and Serbia, that was implemented between July 2017 and July 2019. Establishing the network served to increase the relevance of local and European policy makers as actors developing initiatives that address the needs of rural citizens in the context of EU policies, European citizenship and democracy tools. As it was identified by the ENSURE partners, lacking competences when addressing complex realities of rural citizens - especially when the EU is at stake, can cause frustrating consequences, and it may lead to even greater lack of understanding of the EU, and amplification of Euroscepticism. In a time where citizens' confidence in EU decision making is at an all-time low, and especially the support from rural citizens is rapidly declining, the project aimed to understand Euroscepticism, and then to build European approach by making use of available EU democracy tools, as well as by providing new engaging instruments for citizens. The project addressed day-to-day issues which are prevalent for rural citizens: heritage vs. local development, cross-border mobility of agricultural workers, rules and consequences of Common Agricultural Policy, food security, social exclusion. By bringing up issues that acquire great interest among rural citizens, this project could tackle such questions as: the decline of support of the EU, roots of Euroscepticism, democratic participation, and the EU citizenship on rural areas. ENSURE engaged volunteers, policy makers and experts from 13 organisations, 13 countries (11 - EU, Serbia and Montenegro) - 6 local bodies, 4 Federations and bodies representing local authorities, 1 regional body, and 2 CSOs. Many of project participants either represented Local Action Groups, or supported them directly through their work. Their experience was extremely valuable when reflecting on how diverse EU policies are implemented at local level in rural communities in a public-private partnership. Project aims were met through six transnational events, follow-up local actions held in 13 countries, accompanied by dissemination tools, two publications and activities in social media. In total the project results were delivered to over 1600 participants directly, and to over 50.000 across Europe. The long-term outcome of ENSURE is a lasting partnership, and more initiatives taken up together by project partners - at least six new EU-focused partnerships established thanks to ENSURE. The project managed to mainstream active European citizenship throughout the topics which are rarely linked with it in a direct way, such as the rural development and Common Agricultural Policy. This allowed us to reach citizens who are not primarily interested in exploring EU citizenship. In the course of the project they gained a better understanding of it, as well as the motivation to be more active at Union level. Project partners: Razvojno Informacijski Center Slovenska Bistrica (Slovenia), Municipality Trudovets (Bulgaria), LAG Central Istria (Croatia), Hranicka Rozvojova Agentura (Czech Republic), University of Thessaly (Greece), Kistarcsai Kulturális Egyesület (Hungary), Associazione Alessandro Bartola (Italy), Futuro Digitale (Italy), Ligatne Municipality (Latvia), Municipality of Municipality Kolašin (Montenegro), Municipality of Lask (Poland), Alba County Council (Romania), Fond „Evropskipošlovi“ Autonomne Pokrajine Vojvodine (Serbia), Razvojno Informacijski Center Slovenska Bistrica (Slovenia), Federación of Municipalities of Madrid (Spain).

Example 7:

Local Solidarity - Global Solidarity Network (Bulgaria)

Local Solidarity - Global Solidarity Network (in short: SOLID) was a cooperative project of 13 local and regional bodies from the European Union, Montenegro and Serbia, implemented between January 2018 and November 2019. The project was initiated with the idea that there was a need to retrieve a new meaning of SOLIDARITY between people in Europe, between the Member States, and with the rest of the world. The issues, such as the humanitarian crises related to migration or the process of Brexit have shaken our societies and made clear that many EU citizens have difficulties to understand social and political mechanisms that shape their everyday life. As a result, many societies have seen growing populism that challenges established politics, political culture and the sense of solidarity. The SOLID Network had as the main aim to empower citizens and local authorities to search and provide answers to such questions as: What is solidarity among Europeans and with the rest of the world?, How can we reverse the process and maintain Europe as a world leader when it comes to protection of fundamental values?, How can we use EU instruments to strengthen solidarity in our local realities? Through the project a long-lasting cooperation between 12 countries was established which allowed to create and implement new political tools for policy makers and local communities. These tools support diverse actors of society to have a bigger impact on the global and European solidarity in time of institutional and humanitarian crisis. Through 5 transnational events, educational and political activities, network-building and local actions, the project partners were: Finding common solutions that develop local, Europe-wide and global solidarity; raising awareness on policies and competences of the EU related to fundamental values, and their impact on local and global environment; promoting opportunities (tools) for societal engagement at personal and institutional level that are encouraged by the EU. SOLID engaged representatives, volunteers, policy makers and experts from 13 organisations, 12 countries (10 EU Member States, and Serbia and North Macedonia), eight of them are local public bodies, and five are Civil Society Organisations. This partnership is geographically balanced, and it represents a real European outreach. Partners come from Northern, Eastern, Western and Southern Europe, and also from EU neighboring countries - Serbia and North Macedonia, which makes the partnership colourful and diverse. The project was meant to find common solutions for solidarity at all levels, as well as to design and disseminate tools for solidarity. Not only did it foster the use of existing means available in EU to citizens, but it moreover provided innovative strategies and political tools, such as the Manual for Solidarity 2020 - adaptable by policy makers and activists to other European areas. Project partners: Bulgarian Centre for LLL (Bulgaria), Male Dvorniky (Slovakia), Municipality of Alimos (Greece), Sz dliget (Hungary), Fattoria Pugliese Diffusa (Italy), Daugavpils City Council (Latvia), Moglia Municipality (North Macedonia), Municipality of Kavadarci (North Macedonia), Gmina D browa (Poland), Cleantech Romania (Romania), EKOLOR Indjija (Serbia), Mancomunidad de la Ribera Alta (Spain), and the Center Culturel de Jette (Belgium).

Example 8: Solidarity 4 Heritage (Bulgaria)

The project created a sustainable Network of towns that developed systematic approaches for volunteering involvement in heritage preservation and management. The most important achievement of the project was the initiated policy reform, which was formulated with the participation of decision-makers, international expert groups, civil society organizations and citizens. Furthermore, a strategy and action plan, as well as an ethical code for volunteering were developed in order to promote, improve the conditions and stimulate volunteering in the participating municipalities. During the project 6 thematic events were organized, each one covering a different topic and involving participants with different expertise, in order to cover all major aspects of the project. The Kick-off meeting was held in Strumyani, Bulgaria, in the period 07 - 09.03.2018, where representatives of the 6 European partners gathered to lay the foundation of the network, the rules and principles for management, coordination, communication, evaluation and dissemination. The partners discussed the possible ways for raising awareness of the importance of the preservation of heritage and tools, policies and instruments for facilitating citizens' involvement through solidarity and voluntary action. The workshop "Challenges and best practices for conservation and management cultural sites and local traditions through volunteering" took place in Novo Mesto, Slovenia, from 13 to 15.06.2018. The partners discussed the challenges which local authorities, cultural organizations, CSOs and volunteering organizations are facing in heritage preservation; to present good practices related to the cultural preservation by each partner. Strategies for facilitating citizens and stakeholders' involvement, as well as volunteering in heritage preservation were drafted. The "Tools for Solidarity" round table was held in Agia, Greece, on 24 - 27.08.2018 and allowed for exploring tools and mechanisms to be implemented both at local and international level in order to facilitate volunteering and solidarity. These included organization, coordination, information and integration actions, all necessary to establish a coherent network of local and international stakeholders providing high quality volunteering and solidarity opportunities and placements. The "Working and living as a volunteer" workshop was organized in Naxxar, Malta, from 30.10 to 02.11.2018. During the event standards of working and living conditions were developed for voluntary workers, addressing one of the main challenges voluntary workers face. The regulation introduced a unified set of criteria of living and working conditions to be satisfied in order to provide placements for volunteering and an ethical code for volunteers and solidarity workers, setting standards of personal qualities and behaviours required for engaging in voluntary work. The "Together for Solidarity" conference took place in Caltanissetta, Italy, from 25 to 28.02.2019, where the challenge of poor formal recognition of voluntary service as a valid working/learning/training experience was addressed. It gathered stakeholders to discuss and drafted a joint proposition for policy reform in this respect. The event included expert panels, discussions and gathering of public opinions among citizens and discussion with decision-makers, NGOs, citizens, educational organizations etc. As a result, a "Solidarity of the Future" white paper was developed and presented to decision-makers in order to initiate change. The Closing conference was organized in Strumyani, Bulgaria, on 04 - 07.03.2019, where the authorized representatives of all partners signed a Memorandum of Understanding, thus the Solidarity4Heritage Network was officially established. Project partners: Municipalities of Strumyani (Bulgaria), Agias (Greece), Naxxar (Malta), Novo Mesto (Slovenia), Caltanissetta (Italy) and Association Euni Partners (Bulgaria).

5.5 The European Year of Cultural Heritage (2018)

By actively supporting major EU initiatives such as the newly launched European Solidarity Corps and the designation of 2018 as the European Year of Cultural Heritage, the Europe for Citizens programme emerged as a point of reference for a shared sense of belonging to the European Union. In 2018 the Europe for Citizens programme continued to stimulate EU citizens' democratic engagement to debate and act on the issues that were at the top of the EU political agenda and EU policies: the future of Europe, migration, security and socio-economic solidarity. Issues related to the migration crisis, stigmatisation of migrants and minority groups remained at the centre of beneficiaries' activities (43%). 28 % of projects tackled issues related to migration, which was addressed from different angles:

- migration and its impact on societies by combatting stigmatisation of migrants, stereotypes and growing Euroscepticism; by stimulating the debate on tolerance and solidarity; by understanding the causes and background of migration);
- migration and solidarity mechanisms/integration of immigrants.

The NT beneficiaries also reflected on solidarity mechanisms and volunteering, presenting concrete policies implemented locally and regionally with regards to the integration of immigrants in the labour market and society. The integration of migrants and its positive impact on local development were also demonstrated by the implemented NT projects. 20% of projects focused their activities on solidarity issues, promoting volunteering and exchange of good practices: EU solidarity models for sustainability; exchange of volunteering practices; integration of minorities and other disadvantaged groups. Moreover, besides exchanges of concrete solidarity mechanisms, these projects also managed to involve citizens in the debate around issues such as humanism, common EU values, and approaching solidarity and tolerance as tools to fight against populism and extremism (European Commission, 2019, pp. 19-21).

Example 9: Working for Innovative Volunteering And Solidarity (Cyprus)

The word WIVAS sounds like "cheers" in the Cypriot language. It focuses on the potential of networks and encourages new forms of civic and democratic engagement by stimulating discussion and study on EU related themes, boosting the active involvement of citizens in the policy-making process and staying off from the passiveness and misunderstanding of EU actions. WIVAS wants to be a sounding board on three main themes (EU solidarity, risks of Euroscepticism and Future of Europe) all linked by the leitmotiv of volunteering that is important for the young generations and is a means for social cohesion active citizenship and for fostering the involvement at EU level, avoiding conflicts as well. Youth volunteering is the best way of non-formal learning and strongly contributes to inter-generational solidarity; that's why the target group is 18-45 year old citizens. The aims of WIVAS were as such: Enhance the knowledge of volunteers on the EU policy-making process, through the knowledge of the Europe 2020 strategy, of the Europe for

Citizens Program and other European funds; recognise and encourage cross-border voluntary and solidarity activities in the EU, especially in this particular time of crisis, contrasting Euroscepticism and keeping distance from border closure and stereotypes; further a sense of societal and intercultural commitment and European citizenship, as the members of the European communities can become actors in building up the Europe of the future; boost transnational volunteering and inter-generational solidarity in these hard times of crisis; improve good working and living conditions for young volunteers, also through the exchange of best practices; achieve greater recognition of the value and skills of voluntary activities; improve conditions for civic and democratic participation at EU level thanks to citizens' direct involvement in the WIVAS activities. Project partners: Municipality of Deryneia (Cyprus), Dobsice Obec (Czech Republic), Kunsill Lokali Birgu(Malta), Mestna Obcina Novo Mesto (Slovenia), Laragne-Monteglin (France), Razlog Municipality (Bulgaria), Comune di Canepina (Italy), Municipality of Agias (Greece), Municipio de Vila Nova de Cerveira (Portugal), Par Institute for Developing LLL (Croatia), Opstina Irig (Serbia), Aktiivinen Euroopapalainen Kansalainen Suomi Ry (Finland), Comune di Gallese (Italy), Comune di Vignanello (Italy), Gmina Jablonna (Poland), Kelmės Rajono Savivaldybės Administracija (Latvia), Concello de San Cristovo de Cea (Spain), Onga Varos Onkormanyzata (Hungary), Bashkia Shijak (Albania), Comune di Soriano Nel Cimino (Italy).

5.6 The Year of the European Elections (2019)

2019 was a decisive year for the future of the Union. In May, the European Elections gave the opportunity to EU citizens to assess with their vote the effectiveness of the European Union on issues ranging from security, border management and migration, job creation, economic growth and social policy to climate change, energy policy, the Digital Single Market and the development of the democratic legitimacy at EU level. In this context, the Europe for Citizens Programme for the period 2014-2020 was an important instrument encouraging EU citizens to take part in the debate and play a stronger role in the development of the EU. In 2019 259 Networks of Towns applications were received. Following the trends of previous years, Italy demonstrated the highest interest in this action, representing around 29% of the submitted applications, followed by Spain (8%) and Hungary (8%). It is positive to outline that almost all eligible programme countries (33 out of 34) took part in the NT 2019 selections as applicants. In terms of geographical spread including partners, it is worth underlining that all eligible countries (34) were represented in 2019 Networks of Towns selections. Under this action 36 projects were selected for funding in 2019 involving 21 programme countries as beneficiaries. A total amount awarded in 2019 under Network of Towns action was € 5.022.720. The average grant awarded per NT project was € 139.520. As TT beneficiaries, projects selected under the NT action also managed to combine different programme priorities looking for synergies and concrete outputs. The programme priority “Debating the Future of Europe and challenging Euroscepticism” was addressed by the highest number of beneficiaries. Debates related to the migration crisis, stigmatisation of migrants and minority groups, and solidarity also remained at the centre of the selected projects. The NT beneficiaries presented concrete policies implemented locally and regionally concerning the integration of migrants in the labour market and society. Tackling the priority related to solidarity, NT beneficiaries put an emphasis on solidarity mechanisms and exchange of good practices, such as EU solidarity models for sustainability or volunteering promotion. Besides, the debates involved issues such as humanism, common EU values approaching solidarity, cultural heritage and tolerance as tools to fight against populism and extremism (European Commission, 2020, pp.26-27).

Example 10:

Strengthening a Europe of solidarity in times of migration (Spain)

“Strengthening a solidarity Europe in times of migration” was a project whose main objective was the search for understanding, integration and the creation of new points of view through dialogue and reflection of European citizens, helping to improve understanding of the European Union, as well as its history and diversity of citizens, promoting European citizenship, increasing citizen and democratic participation, as well as understanding the current situation of the EU in relation to migration policies and, in search of alternatives and new challenges to overcome, framed within the crisis of confidence that was lived. The project foresaw the organization of 5 thematic meetings: in Spain October 2019, in Ireland December 2019, in Lithuania February 2020, in France April 2020 and in Croatia June 2020. In order to achieve the objectives of the project, in line with the priorities of Europe for Citizens programme, there was provision to create a strong and long term network, proposing activities based on the reinforcement of active participation in European society, such as round tables, interactive workshops, conferences, case studies, cultural visits. The project aimed to find an answer to the migratory crisis currently experienced in Europe, both internally, between their own countries, and externally. Citizens’ understanding of the Union’s policy process was expected to be strengthened by promoting opportunities for social and intercultural engagement, directly addressing concepts, such as migration, Euroscepticism, solidarity that revolves around their environment or social and cultural integration policies. Therefore, participants were encouraged to exchange opinions and best practices with the aim to formulate new ideas and concrete future proposals. Project partners: Ayuntamiento de Iaracha (Spain), Holloko Kozseg Onkormanyzata (Hungary), Obec Kalonda (Slovakia), Obshtina Mezdra (Bulgaria), Gmina Andrychow Urzad Miejski w Andrychowie (Poland), Opcina Gornja Rijeka (Croatia), Community Enterprise of Thessaloniki Municipality - Thessaloniki European Youth Capital 2014 (Greece), Tornion Kaupunki (Finland), Asociación Cultural Recreativa Deportiva, Xuvenil e Prestadora de Servicios Sociais Muxema (Spain), Municipio de Pinhel (Portugal), Tukuma Novada Izglitibas Parvalde (Latvia), Kaunas Ausros Upper-secondary School (Lithuania).

Example 11:

Action 4 Europe of Solidarity (Italy)

The project had the main purpose to turn the spotlight and spread another point of view towards a great tragedy that was unfolding at the gates of Europe. The purpose of the project was to spread another narration, another idea of Europe, a Europe that did not feel fear, a Europe that was not xenophobic, a Europe that said NO to the merchants of lies that spread fear and uncertainty for their own electoral self-interest. Europe is the bulwark of peace and hope for many desperate people seeking a better life. To reach the goal the project started from the European solidarity attitude that led the European Union to be the beacon of civilization and democracy in the world. The European solidarity’s attitude represents a universal value for us as individuals, communities and societies. It’s the basis of the European Cultural Heritage. In this difficult historical moment where it seems that

the values have been subverted, and some words, such as “race”, “selfishness”, “hostility”, are increasingly popular it is important to preserve and pass on to future generations the sense of proud to be European and show solidarity. Through cherishing our cultural heritage, we can discover our diversity and start an inter-cultural conversation about what we have in common. Europe was born from solidarity and the desire of peace and these elements are the strength and the engine that have meant harmony and prosperity for 70 years. Starting from this context, the project aimed to analyse and turn the spotlight on the European Union Immigration Policies and wanted to do it precisely from those countries that have shown major internal problems in the management of the immigration flows. For this purpose, a series of activities was organised in 7 countries (Italy, Malta, North Macedonia, Serbia, Greece, Kosovo, Belgium). The project aimed to help identify them and developed a positive sentiment on immigration on the citizens, that too often are manipulated and frightened by complacent of Eurosceptics movements. Project partners: COPPEM - Comitato Permanente per il Partenariato Euro-Mediterraneo (Italy), Roma Youth Center (North Macedonia), Urban Municipality of Tuzi (Montenegro), Asociación Pasos Solidarios (Spain), International Platform for Citizen Participation Sdrushenie (Bulgaria), Comune di Mazara del Vallo (Italy), FTZ - Community Foundation Valletta (Malta), Culturepolis (Greece), Centar Lokalne Demokracije Udruzenje Lda (Serbia), Peipsi Koostoo Keskus (Estonia), European University College Association (Belgium), Instytut Rozwoju Sportu i Edukacji - Institute for the development of Sport and Education (Poland), Centrum Stosunków Międzynarodowych - Centre for International Relations (Poland), Qendra e Studimit te Politikave Europiane per Zhvillimin Rajon (Albania), Comune di Osilo (Italy), Unione dei Comuni del Gerrei (Italy).

Example 12: Youth for European Solidarity (Italy)

“YESI - Youth for European Solidarity” was a 2-year network, designed for creating spaces for discussion on the meaning of Solidarity in times of crisis in Europe, on the effectiveness of existing European policies and programmes, supporting solidarity projects and on the Future of Solidarity in Europe, with the identification of innovative tools that could guarantee a strengthening of the European integration process. The 15 partners from 13 different nations (IT,PL,BG,LT,UK,RS,RKS,HE,SP,PT,FR,DE,SE) involved about 500 direct and 55,000 indirect participants, thanks to the organization of international events during the Europe Day, World Environment Day, Digital Learning Day, EU Cooperation Day, World Fair Trade Day. The objective of raising citizens’ awareness of active citizenship for solidarity was achieved through a structured workplan that included: 4 international events, focused on 5 citizenships (European, Economic, Ecological, Digital and Global), when 26 young people (2 per country) were trained for becoming “ESAs: European Solidarity Animators” and ensuring sustainability and a long-term impact at community level; 2 local events, one for the initial promotion and for the selection of future ESAs and the other as a space for discussion on Solidarity and experimentation of the existing tools of participation in European democratic life, organized by the ESAs in their rural and suburban communities (Community Campaigns); the production of two tangible deliverables: 1/“ESAs Toolkit”,

with the methodology of the 5 Citizenships in support of Solidarity initiatives in Europe, distributed to other possible stakeholders, thus ensuring replicability; 2/Final Recommendation Paper “5 Citizenship, 1 Solidarity”, with a collection of all the ideas, suggestions, proposals born during the Community Campaigns and delivered to the relevant decision-makers and policy makers at every level, with the help of Eurodesk offices, existing within the partnership. Project partners: Comune di Miggiano (Italy), Municipality of Suhindol (Bulgaria), Solution (France), Administration of Plunge district municipality (Lithuania), Udruženje srpsko-jevrejsko pevačko društvo (Serbia), municipality of Fyli (Greece), Iars international institute (United Kingdom), municipality of Trzemeszno (Poland), Fattoria Pugliese Diffusa (Italy), Direction general de cooperacio al Desarrello (Spain), Gemeinde Panketal (Germany), Citizens of Europe e.v. (Germany), Ungdomsfronten (Sweden), Junior chamber international prizren (Kosovo), municipio do fundao (Portugal).

5.7 The end of the road (2020)

2020 was the last implementation year of current Europe for Citizens programme. For 2021, the Commission proposed in the context of the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027, to merge Europe for Citizens with the Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme in the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme. At the same time, 2020 was the first year of the new Commission and European Parliament after the European Elections of May 2019. In this context, the Europe for Citizens programme was flexible enough to reply to new needs and to take on board new priorities. In this sense, the multiannual programme priority ‘Promoting solidarity as basic concept’ was taken into consideration by a significant number of eligible city networks project proposals (40% at the first round of selection and 48% at the second round of selection). In the two selection rounds that were organised for networks of towns in 2020, out of 320 submitted applications, 41 networking projects were selected which corresponded to a success rate of 13%.

Example 13: Solidarity - key to solving social problems and supporting the evolution of Europe in future (Germany)

The basic question of the project was what role solidarity played in the EU and why solidarity against the background of a common value base across all generations and all cultures interpreted and lived differently. What was particularly investigated was the question of the understanding and role of the younger generation in this context. Scientific investigations show that the solidarity and humanity are important issues of the competitive societies, which need to be managed properly. The project used appropriate methodology for testing the opinion of people involved, and drew conclusions from the common activities of the project. The participating people were prepared for understand-

ing the subject and questions as concerned the solidarity mechanisms in Europe, and as a result of their project work, specific outputs were created which would help to manage this subject in wider public. A joint summary document and a common promotional brochure summarized the findings and made public the results. 12 partners, representing 9 countries (8 EU-member and 1 non-EU-member countries) form the partnership, and nine partner meetings were organized. The majority of the partner organizations represented local governments, but the lead partner Partnership Association of Alsbach-Haehlein was a very committed civil organization, functioning also as the Twinning Committee of the Municipality of Alsbach-Haehlein. The meetings were attended directly by about 450 participants, and the effects reached a wider population of about 12.000 people. Modern tools of the social media were used for intensifying the cooperation and supporting the effective dissemination. Project partners: Alsbach-Haehlein (Germany), Sulmona (Italy), Lubaczów (Poland), Massamagrell (Spain), Lokroi (Greece), Elbasan (Albania), Kozloduy (Bulgaria), Diósd (Hungary) and Prague District 9 (Czech Republic).

Example 14: Solidarity in PROgress (Bulgaria)

The project wanted to focus on the theme of solidarity, one EU's founding principles, seen from a transnational perspective and settled into a concrete situation of global emergency. Starting from the global experience of the Covid19 epidemiological emergency, the project focused on actions of solidarity and cooperation during this critical period at EU level and at the level of every single Member State participating in the project. For this purpose, the project involved 7 European Towns, three of which were twinned, in 8 international meetings where direct participants were public local administrators and officials and volunteers, who managed emergency situations, and also High School teachers and students, altogether around 330 estimated, and the whole Community as indirect participants around 700 depending on the size of the meeting room. The towns involved work together to: implement a multimedia tool in five languages (English, French, German, Spanish and Italian) which illustrated the EU's solidarity aims and, in particular, the actions carried out during and as a result of the Covid19 emergency in the Towns involved; define a "best practices" document in five languages tool for coping with the emergencies at medium-sized towns level and to be circulated in the EU; lay the basis between the EU towns involved for periodically developing future initiatives on the theme of solidarity. The project activities intended specifically, not only to lead the Communities involved to a greater acknowledgment and awareness of EU emergency interventions, but also to promote the discussion of the experiences of solidarity, cooperation and support to citizens in each partner town with the general aims of a greater knowledge of the UE and its actions; the promotion of European citizenship and of volunteering especially among young people; the creation of networks between partner towns for solidarity actions. Project partners: Obshtina Aksakovo (Bulgaria), Ayuntamiento de quart de Poblet (Spain), Opshtina Stip (North Macedonia), Associazione Nazionale Comuni Italiani Sezione Piemontese (Italy), Stadtverwaltung bad Mergentheim (Germany), Commune de dignes-les-bains (France), Gmina Ziebice (Poland).

6. Conclusions

At a time when European solidarity is lacking and public policies on asylum and immigration are becoming more restrictive in some EU Member States, many cities come forward as support forces, demonstrating the importance of the local level. Alone or in networks, how much room to maneuver do municipalities have to act alongside migrant and refugee population? To what extent can they oppose, or attempt to influence, national governments to welcome and integrate newcomers with dignity? Over the last decade, and more intensely from 2015-2016 onwards, the local – mainly municipal – authorities have asserted themselves as major players in migratory and asylum policies, with some of them even expressing their opposition to national policies. The cities sometimes implement their initiatives individually, but given the deadlock faced by national and European asylum policies, municipalities have often chosen to join forces or mobilise their networks in order to promote the reception and integration of refugees and asylum seekers. Although these networks reflect a complex reality, they now have converging goals and face similar difficulties. Both within the European Union (EU), and at national level, the association of urban areas in the field of asylum and migration has been possible thanks to the integration of the issue into the activities of pre-existing networks, or through the setting up of dedicated new ones. In particular, within the framework of the Europe for Citizens Programme 2014-2020, city networks supported projects committed to solidarity, calling for cooperation among European local authorities to create more cohesive and inclusive societies. Networks of solidarity cities generally had similar goals. First of all they sought to create soft law instruments (information guides, collections of good practices etc.) in order to influence the introduction of local reception and integration policies. Second, by the means of this programme, cities also joined forces to lobby national, European or international authorities and to have a greater influence on the decision-making processes, so that the various tiers of authority fulfil their responsibilities and respect the rights of migrant populations. Associations of towns thus supported activities promoting of societal engagement and solidarity: debate/campaigns/actions on themes of common interest in the framework of the rights and responsibilities of the Union citizens and making the link to the European political agenda and policy making process. So, the emergence of networks of solidarity cities at transnational level inevitably helped to bring about an increasing recognition of cities' legitimate right to express themselves, especially, on asylum and migration issues. After long being in the background, will municipalities through the multilateral cooperation manage to become key players in solidarity domain? In the interests of both policy makers and citizens, the challenge also lies in cooperation between governments, cities and civil society.

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