

Before and after elections - How to successfully communicate with citizens

Conclusions of Roundtable discussion

in Prague, 17 May 2018

Roundtable discussion was held as part of project titled „Practice solidarity and shape Europe” supported with a grant within the „Democratic engagement and civic participation” strand of the „Europe for Citizens”. Main idea of the event was to discuss the aims and tools of civil dialogue and produce the messages to policy-makers. Since the previous conference within the framework of the project were oriented more on European level, Prague’s meeting was dedicated to the local level and local actions supporting civil dialogue linked to the local CSOs and other stakeholders.

Roundtable discussion was held in the seat of the Parliament of the Czech Republic. Members of the parliament (Ms. Helena Langsadlova and Mr. Jan Farský) participated on the event as well as representatives of local authorities, CSOs, journalists and others (teachers, experts on citizen participation etc.). Around 45 Czech participants attended.

Civil dialogue on local level is essential for building culture of dialogue and openness on higher level. No positive outcomes can be reached on national (or higher) level without trust and readiness to mutual cooperation on local level (in daily face to face contacts among all local actors). Civil dialogue is than understand as a broad approach encompasses well-structured and managed consultations and cooperation of all actors.

As a result of intensive discussion and knowledge sharing following conclusions were formulated:

Civil dialogue in general:

- Former top-down government approach has to be fully replaced by horizontal cooperation and bottom up approach. Decision-makers (on all levels) has to be closer to societal stakeholders.
- CSOs are more and more under the negative pressure of some populist movements. They role is crucial for vivid democracy (esp. on local level).
- Civil dialogue is important part of civic education – ordinary people are getting new skills and competencies.
- More innovative methods and their combination is needed to arouse the interest of people. Projects or processes such be focused rather on particular issues (with tangible results) then on general and vague discussions.
- Specific methods and tools of Civic dialogue works only for particular size of the “system”. Approach for local level (small communities) would not be applicable in metropolitan areas etc.
- Direct democracy is a sensitive issue. For instance referendum is useful mechanism when is used as a part of broader process (people needs to be well informed before go for voting in referendum). Otherwise manipulation of voters is a real threat.

Civil dialogue on the local level:

- Local level is specific in many aspects. Such differences have to be considered and respected (also as a part of grant schemes etc.)
- Civil dialogue should be understood as a broad approach encompasses well-structured and managed consultations and cooperation of all actors. All activities on the local level have to be coordinated
- Civil dialogue generates more public activities and engagement people in local public affairs
- Youth and young people are one the most important target group. They can easily adopt the ideas of civil dialogue and promoted it in the future.
- More focus on specific groups (e.g seniors, minorities) . They can be easily excluded from mainstream activities/processes.

Social media as a new challenge:

- We are living the era of information boom. Fake news and hoaxes are available esp. on social media. People needs to more aware of it. Truthful and verified information needs to be offered by all local actors. “Information literacy” is one of the challenges of the future.
- Digital era influence the age of decision makers – more young people is now more involved and they become active in public life.
- Populism and abusing of social media can undermine the principles of democracy. Don't be influence by short and expressive statements or slogans -try to use understandable and clear sentences.