

Workshop: public participation

Moderator **Eva Lichtenberger**, a Green MEP from Austria, welcomed the participants. She noted that the Greens are very active in moving from one hot issue to the next, but they do not always take the time to present their positive results and successes. She called for participation in a new project called ‘**Green successes**’, which will use the Google Maps tool to present local Green success stories from across Europe on a single website. Examples of successes – large and small – are now being collected.

Ms. Lichtenberger welcomed that the issue of “participation” in the workshop would be discussed from the perspective of very different contexts, notably Vienna and Sarajevo. She commented: “*Greens can make a huge difference through their political participation in city councils, but real success depends on getting local people involved.*”

Vienna: participation in a Green district stronghold

Lise Smidt, a councillor for the Neubau district of Vienna, presented her local community at the heart of the city. Greens came out on top in the latest local elections in the district, boosting their share of the vote to an impressive 43.3%.

“Bottom-up” grassroots projects have been important. Schools, for example, have taken action to improve the area immediately around their buildings. “Top-down” projects had notable successes too, for example redesigning parks to provide better facilities for dog owners and children, creating a ‘Cult café’ for teenagers and a meeting venue also for senior citizens.

Gerti Brindlmayer, also a Neubau Green councillor, presented a school project called “Take part”. The project incurs only modest costs but has empowered children to get directly involved in district decision-making. “*The key is to make sure that the council really listens and acts on their proposals wherever it is realistic to do so.*” 89% of finalised Take Part proposals were taken up by the council, she said. A further advantage is that Take Part gives ownership of the projects to the children that use them. They also learn how local decisions are made. Typical requests from children are for cleaner public spaces and more leisure facilities, such as for skating. Responding to school pupils’ protests about dog mess, the Council issued a guide to dog owners, including messages from the children.

A new political force in Bosnia Herzegovina

Haris Abaspahić is a Sarajevo councillor for Naša Stranka, a new political party established in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2008. Only six months into its existence, Nasa Stranka made a strong debut in local elections, becoming the third political party in Sarajevo and winning a municipal mayor in northern Bosnia. Mr. Abaspahic noted that the party had little political experience but pointed to former Yugoslavia having traditions from which to draw inspiration, especially strong mechanisms for consulting citizens at municipal level. He said that it is good to have consultative procedures but they must subsequently be

reflected in the implementation phase. ***“It is too easy to criticise lack of participation by the public, but disenchantment is only natural if their ideas are not taken on board”***, he warned.

Mr. Abaspahić pointed out that many active organisations in the country are donor in nature rather than civil society. Of active civil society, war veteran associations have disproportionate influence on policy and funding. On a more optimistic note, Mr. Abaspahić noted that grassroots action is springing up particularly to demand action for greater transparency and accountability.

Experiences across Europe

Further examples of public participation were presented from the floor. **Almut Tharan**, member of a Berlin district parliament, highlighted that the capital’s city-wide and district governments have certain local specificities: under certain circumstances, they can allow referenda, limited ‘citizen budgets’ and direct participation in certain matters such as street planning. Ms Tharan stressed that in encouraging public participation, ***“It is important not to be opportunistic and tell people only what they want to hear.”***

Robert Križanić, a representative of the SMS party in Slovenia, suggested that political action doesn’t always need to have a political label. Cooperation with civil society can help reach a public audience that is sometimes skeptical of overt politics. He countered the stereotype of young people as apathetic. ***“As long as young people have a framework to get involved in projects, they are willing to participate. They are proud to see their work come to fruition and get coverage in the media.”***

Michalis Tremelopoulos, representative of the Greek prefecture of Thessaloniki, said: ***“Ecology can be a political pull factor”***. He also stressed the importance of people getting involved to shape more socially responsible policies, and outlined plans for a new foundation in his region to promote civil solidarity.

Other questions and points made related to the problem of civil participation too often coming as a reaction (rather than being proactive), to the challenges of reaching out to an adult audience and to allocation of municipal funding for participation projects.