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# Making the invisible visible: the EU's impact on the lives of Slovenian people

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Since Slovenia joined the EU, the cohesion and structural funds made a considerable difference in many areas; yet, often this contribution is invisible. It needs to be highlighted in a creative and novel way. This is important not only for the sake of the visibility of individual projects, but so that people in Slovenia see the membership as a positive undertaking, with many benefits. Awareness of the projects co-financed by the EU can be a significant contributor to building support for the EU.

## Introduction

Slovenes are very proud of their nature and natural heritage. But keeping the country clean and historical sites well preserved is costly. Ever since Slovenia joined the EU, the ability to draw on cohesion and structural funds made a considerable difference in these two areas, among many others. Yet, often this contribution is not recognised or properly appreciated, in spite of the efforts of the national coordinator for the EU sponsored projects. Consequently, Brussels gets the blame for introducing

unpopular policies, but not the credit for numerous positive contributions on daily lives of Slovenian people that are European citizens.

## From a castle renovation to a recreational park

Slovenia, through three national programmes, will potentially benefit from European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) funding of EUR 3.9 billion<sup>1</sup> during the current financial perspective. This represents an average of EUR 1 907 per person from the EU budget over the period 2014-2020. Not many citizens are aware of this fact, even though numerous developments, co-financed by EU funds are all around us. It seems that only the big projects get media attention, especially if something goes wrong. Yet it is often the small things that make a difference in the quality of our lives. The trouble is they go unnoticed and are often taken for granted. This is a story of so many EU-sponsored projects, which were implemented over the last decade

<sup>1</sup> <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/countries/SI>

or so since resources from the Cohesion and Structural funds were available to the communities across the country. A new bicycle path in a tourist resort, a new pool, a restored local castle, improved sewage system, waste treatment plant, high-speed Internet, community bio-market: all in all, each and every community in Slovenia has at least one project, which was co-financed by EU money and yet, when you ask an average citizen to mention what she or he has benefited from being an EU citizen, these types of projects are seldom, if ever mentioned.

Every spring, we have a project with the students at the Faculty of Social Sciences of Ljubljana's University on EU projects in Slovenia. The students are asked to identify an interesting project in their local community, which was implemented recently with the EU co-financing, describe the process from the application for co-financing to actual implementation and reporting, and also test how well aware the locals – in principle those who use and profit from the project – are of the EU contribution. As a starting point, it is already informative to see how students themselves are surprised of the variety of themes, which the local communities identified as relevant and where they applied for the support from the structural funds.

The students are asked to investigate how the local government had identified the project and explore the preparation of the project application. What they found was that the best in terms of local visibility and impact were the projects which were already in the pipeline

anyway, because the communities had already identified the need. The availability of additional resources enabled the local authorities to speed up their implementation. Their usual justification (“there is no money”) for why a particular improvement was not possible was no longer valid, given the option of applying for project support through national programmes. Projects which received the co-funding from the structural funds were completed faster and were much more sustainable in a long run. People enjoyed the benefits of improved services or new facilities and often accepted the novelty as “normal”. However, if the EU contribution was recognised, it was hardly visible.

On the other hand, there were cases of projects going sour simply because the approach was wrong from the very beginning: the local authorities were looking at what were the priorities in the Operational Programme and came up with the project proposal to fit the national/ EU structural fund's priorities and not necessarily the needs of the local community. Such projects, even if technically well prepared and executed, usually run into the problem of sustainability in a year or two, when their maintenance depended on local financial support.

The next task the students have to carry out is to find out how well aware the locals are that the implementation of the project in their neighbourhood was accomplished with EU structural funds. In spite of the placards and official logo on the project documents, people

seldom linked the projects with the EU contribution. Who got the credit for a successful project was identified as a communication problem. In many cases, the local politics was keen to reap the benefits and kept awareness of the EU contribution at a minimum – putting up the required placard, but only barely mentioning this in public. So, the fact that improved water management was achieved was a deed of the mayor and the 85% EU contribution was only known to the staff of the municipality.

However, things are changing gradually. Students observed that more and more the ability to draw on EU funds is seen as a success of the local administration. Precondition for this is active engagement of local politicians who make sure that the citizens/ villagers know that they and their administrations were successful in obtaining additional resources to speed up the development of their communities. In fact, we can see from the annual programmes of municipalities that, already in the stage of planning the community's projects, there is a list of projects conditionally planned if they will receive EU support and a list of projects which are part of daily business. This adds to better visibility of the EU contribution, but much more needs to be done for a better understanding of the effects this contribution makes to local development.

The Slovenian authorities, be it at local or national level, have a different view of what is problematic in relation to obtaining project

support from the EU structural funds. They see the administrative process as too demanding and the reimbursement process too slow. To those who are unfamiliar with the processes, it may even seem that EU contribution is not the most appealing source of support. Little is revealed of the fact that the success in drawing on EU funds depends significantly on the national framework, which is the country's own doing. EU cohesion policy is complex and the check-lists important, but the final system is designed and set up at the national level. It so happens that when trying to meet the deadlines<sup>2</sup> and implement the required procedures for co-financing of individual projects, no time or energy is left to design a comprehensive and innovative promotional strategy for the project, which would make the invisible more visible. The view of structural funds of too many citizens is that this is money coming too slowly and in a too complicated manner from Brussels and is spent on something that the government decides on without their involvement.

This does not mean that the government's office, responsible for the promotion, is not trying to make the EU contribution more visible. It means that promoting the EU contribution is not only their task but needs to be carried out by all those involved in EU projects – from local to national authorities, with every single project, no matter how small or big that project is. The contributions need to be highlighted, successful cases continuously promoted in media, in a

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<sup>2</sup> For example, for the period 2014-2020, the final documents were submitted for the approval by the Commission only in November 2015.

creative and novel way. This is important not only for the sake of the visibility of individual projects, but primarily so that people in Slovenia see the membership of the EU as a positive undertaking with many benefits to the local community. The EU decision-making process is seldom understood by the average citizen, but the fact that she/he can enjoy a hockey or basketball game in a new sports hall, renovated with the EU support, is appreciated. To successfully fight EU-scepticism it is important to build on small, often invisible events and make them visible and appreciated by the citizens. Slovenia as well as many other receiving countries have much to show, but it is upon their governments to understand that the promotion of the cohesion and structural funds is in their own interest as well. The communication strategy is not just part of something one is obliged to do because it is one of the conditions of the EU cohesion policy, it is an integral part of making sure that people feel the EU is doing something for them.

### **What's next**

The support of Slovenian citizens for membership in the EU remains high at nearly 80% in a poll conducted in 2017<sup>3</sup>. Still, nearly 40% of the same respondents felt that Slovenia is not treated in a fair way by the institutions of the EU. At least in part we can attribute such feeling to the low visibility of the EU contribution through cohesion and structural funds. Awareness of the projects co-financed by the EU

can be a significant contributor to building support for the EU. This can be a much more tangible approach than talking about abstract benefits of membership that people cannot associate with.

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<sup>3</sup> A recent survey (December 2017), carried out by Centre of International Relations, showed that 79% of respondents feel Slovenia should remain member of the EU.



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