



*The project is funded  
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*The project is implemented by  
a group of partners led by  
the NGO Support Centre*

# **CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT IN THE EU**

## **The Case of Cyprus**

**Prepared by: The NGO Support Centre**



## Background:

The EU is a central institution for the lives of citizens across member states. Decisions taken at Brussels levels have a direct impact on the lives of citizens. However, this relationship between citizens and EU institutions seems distant to the eyes of Cypriot citizens. The question of EU citizenship has been central to Eurobarometers surveys. In the Spring 2016 Eurobarometer<sup>i</sup>, Cypriots had one of the lowest scores regarding the sentence 'You feel you are a citizen of the EU' (46% of respondents said no).

The views of Cypriots regarding their participation in the EU have traditionally been negative as indicated by previous Eurobarometers (Spring 2008 Eurobarometer<sup>ii</sup> indicates that with regards to the sentence 'My voice counts in the EU' 58% of responded that they disagree. Similarly Autumn 2015 Eurobarometer<sup>iii</sup> indicated that the majority of Cypriots (81%) believe their voice does not count in the EU). These statement has been traditionally negative for Cyprus but in the last few years the percentage has increased dramatically. Again in the Autumn 2015 Eurobarometer many Cypriots (77%) share the view that the country's interest are not properly considered within the EU.

The EU has at various levels tried to introduce mechanisms to engage citizens in matters that concern them. The EU has funded a number of projects related to electronic participation, and it set it as a priority in the run up to the Parliamentary elections in 2014. 'EU-funded ICT research projects create a set of tools that make e-Participation a reality. The projects develop and promote effective means for the involvement of stakeholders in the policy processes.'<sup>iv</sup>

Additionally, It is first and foremost one of the most transparent institutions globally, with all decisions and procedures being open and accessible to all. It is also especially open in engaging civil society and society in wider terms to its policies through its competitive programmes<sup>1</sup>. Those programmes have managed to benefit and have an impact in the lives of many people. As the 2016 *Erasmus Impact Study* indicates, 'Employment rates are positively affected by mobility. Astonishingly, students in Eastern Europe reduce their risk of long-term unemployment by 83% by taking part in Erasmus. In Southern Europe, former Erasmus students are half as likely to experience long-term unemployment compared to those that do not go abroad.'<sup>v</sup>

It is with this background in mind that we set to examine the situation in Cyprus and find ways to improve the relationship between Cypriot citizens and the EU.

## About the project & national survey

The NGO Support Centre is implementing, in cooperation with KOPIN (Malta) and ESTyES (Estonia), a Europe for Citizens funded project 'ECoSMS – Empowering Citizens of Small Member States'. The

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the EU competitive programmes and their areas of focus, visit the following link: [http://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders\\_en](http://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders_en)

project seeks to examine whether and to what extent citizens of small EU member states, feel that they have diminished influence as citizens of the European Union. Additionally, ECoSMS aims at exploring the way such views affect citizens' stance towards the EU at a practical level such as their participation at the European Elections.

Through the project, the NGO Support Centre conducted an island-wide research with the aim to identify the views and opinions of citizens about the EU and their level of participation with regards to the European Elections. The research sample included a good percentage of various age groups (ages 16 to 30 - 29.7%, ages 31 to 45 - 34.3%, ages 46 to 60 - 23.9%, ages 61+ - 12.7%) and from various cities, with more emphasis on the capital Nicosia.

The research identified some common trends among citizens in Cyprus with a significant percentage of the sample indicating a relative positive view of the EU by indicating an affiliation and knowledge about its mechanisms.

This has also come up in the research in questions that asked to identify if their views have any influence or are taken into consideration at EU level, which was the area of the survey that had the most negative responses. Overall, Cypriots of a younger, urban and more educated demographic maintain a more positive view of the EU and are interested or have taken advantage of the opportunities that it offers to them, but believe that there are no or little opportunities in terms of influence and participation in a more political setting.

### **Meetings and discussion:**

The NGO Support Centre, organised two discussions to examine and address the popularity of the European Union and how the latter can have a better role in the lives of citizens of a small member state such as Cyprus. The meetings were divided into 2 sections: (1) presentation of the survey by the project coordinator and (2) a discussion with the participants.

The two meetings had a mixture of participants, mainly young people interested and actively involved in civil society. During the presentation of the survey by the project coordinator the participants addressed some concerns around the sample that was mainly well educated and leaning towards a more positive outlook on its perception of the EU. The survey did not indicate geographic location, as a comparison between people who live in urban and rural areas and their view of the EU would have been helpful. This shortcoming of the survey will be taken into consideration for subsequent surveys as it can help give a clearer picture on the variations of opinions.

### **Recommendations & Conclusion:**

The main aim of the meetings was to discuss the participation of citizens in the EU. During the first round of questions, participants were asked to identify how they understand their relationship with the EU, especially as citizens of Cyprus. Common themes that emerged through this question were the plurality of identities as both citizens of Cyprus and the EU, the opportunities for education, travelling and employment they could exploit. They also identified the better implementation of laws generally, making the country more accountable and transparent. Some have also expressed their disappointment with the way the EU handled the financial crisis and that the relative small size

of Cyprus played a major role. The last theme participants have identified was that the EU is still an ongoing process, making it susceptible to mistakes that undeniably have a stronger effect on small member states.

Following the discussion the participants were asked to highlight ways that this relationship could be further strengthened reaching the following recommendations:

- Citizens can benefit from being involved with local CSOs that are member of European CSOs and advocate on social issues as is the case of the European Women's Lobby, ILGA Europe, the European Youth Forum etc.;
- Citizens need to become more actively involved with mechanisms that can help them make demands and share their opinions on matters that affect their daily lives such as Citizen's Initiatives and consultation procedures;
- A sense of common identity needs to be developed especially through educational opportunities offered by the Erasmus+ Programme that bring young people from various countries and cultures together;
- Cypriots need to develop better relations with their MEPs in order to be informed about their work as well be more demanding of them on issues that affect them. Better channels of communication need to be developed that would help maintain a direct and accessible contact between citizens and MEPs;
- Young people (13-30) should be encouraged to participate in Euro simulations, to help them better understand the work of the EU;
- The EU and member states should draft educational material about EU institutions that will be taught in schools(during civic education classes or other relevant subjects), with information about the EU and the opportunities it offers to citizens;

We strongly believe that citizens share a strong interest in improving their relationship with the EU and for various interest groups, steps have been taken in the right direction in order to improve it by demanding better conditions from EU Institutions. Young people, especially, have been involved in a number of opportunities through the Erasmus+ programme and various CSOs have done significant work on policy issues. In this way they have maintained a standard. However, Civil Society and citizens need to be involved more in order to safeguard their interests.

EU institutions need to consider the views of citizens on major issues through consultations and better channels of communications need to be developed between citizens, CSOs and MEPs in order for everyone to be kept informed about decisions and be given the chance to engage and participate. It is crucial, for a Union that prides itself in its transparency and ethos to have the infrastructures to engage its citizens. This is especially the case for small member states such as Cyprus, where the overall feeling of hopelessness is evident.

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- <sup>i</sup> European Commission (2016) *Standard Eurobarometer 85- European Citizenship Report*, Brussels, Directorate General for Communication, p.16, available at:  
<http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2130>
- <sup>ii</sup> European Commission (2009), *Standard Eurobarometer 71- Public Opinion in the European Union*, Brussels: Directorate General for Communication, p.101, available at:  
[http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb71/eb71\\_std\\_part1.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb71/eb71_std_part1.pdf)
- <sup>iii</sup> European Commission (2015) *Standard Eurobarometer 84-Public opinion in the European Union*, Brussels: Directorate General for Communication, p.139, p.141, p. available at:  
<http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2098>
- <sup>iv</sup> CORDIS (2014), *Digest Stories - E-Participation: the Future of Citizen Engagement in the EU*, available at:  
[http://cordis.europa.eu/result/rcn/92448\\_en.html](http://cordis.europa.eu/result/rcn/92448_en.html), European Commission
- <sup>v</sup> European Union (2016), *The Erasmus Impact Study: Regional Analysis*, available at:  
[http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education\\_culture/repository/education/library/study/2016/erasmus-impact\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/library/study/2016/erasmus-impact_en.pdf)  
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