



*The project is funded
by the European Union*



*The project is implemented by
a group of partners led by
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CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT IN THE EU

Joint Policy Paper for Cyprus, Malta & Estonia

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Introduction

This policy paper lays-out and analyses the findings and proposals of the 'ECoSMS – Empowering Citizens of Small Member States' project; an 18 months programme funded by the European Commission through the programme 'Europe for Citizens'.

The project undertook research and events in Cyprus, Estonia and Malta examining their citizens' stance towards the European Union and how do they evaluate their participation and influence in the decision making process of the Union.

Background

The European Union is a constantly evolving 'project'. The European Coal and Steel Community formed by six countries in 1951 has transformed into a political and economic union of 28 member states; a transnational body united in the diversity of the states it comprises and whose workings affect the everyday lives of their citizens.

Evidently then, it is of extreme importance for the Union to establish a harmonious relationship with its citizens; one that promotes a sense of belonging, encourages a democratic engagement and develops a European identity. However, to do so, the EU, needs to take into account each state's particularities and differences in perspective between the citizens of its member states. While each state is an equal member of the Union, its relationship with it varies for a multitude of reasons, among which being its size.

Evidently small member states of the likes of Cyprus, Estonia and Malta have, a distinctively different relationship with the Union than for instance to France or Germany. Due to their size, they only have 6 MEPs in the European Parliament and have limited voting power in the votes of Council of the European Union (Estonia and Cyprus have 4 votes while Malta has 3). Furthermore, they are thought to have a diminished influence in the EU's decisions and policy formulations.

Thus, any effort to promote democratic engagement and encourage civic participation of citizens of small member states will first start by exploring and understanding the way their citizens conceive their relationship with the Union. This will allow the formulation of actions and policies to address potential fears, reservations or causes of disillusionment.

Methodology

The three partners – NGO Support Centre in Cyprus, ESTYES in Estonia and Kopin in Malta - conducted a country research based on a common questionnaire that sought to document their citizen's stance towards the European Union.

Each country's research findings were then presented and discussed in country-specific round-table discussions. These events were conducted using the *Active-Dialogue-Networks (ADN)* methodology, which foresees the active participation of people from various backgrounds in a discussion moderated by a skilled facilitator. During the discussion, participants were encouraged to make suggestions on solutions and answers. At a later stage, they were invited to vote the observations listed, thus prioritizing the most relevant ones. This mechanism led to the compilation of a set of priorities that were then resumed and tackled in a Country Policy Paper.

Findings

Exploring the findings in the three states, through their debates and research, there is not a direct lineage of the three states in regards to the way their citizens perceive the EU and their relationship as citizens of small member states with it.

While Cypriots and the Maltese appear to have a positive opinion on the EU, 'ECoSMS' workings in Estonia have showed a more reserved stance, with the majority of people having a neutral opinion of the Union. The distinction between the three cases becomes even more apparent when the way their citizens perceive their role in the EU, the influence they attribute to themselves and their influence in the EU's decision-making process are examined.

Malta clearly poses as the most positive case of the three. The research and workings in the island country show that its citizens do not feel that they have a diminished role in the EU and its workings. Moreover, the general feeling among our research's respondents is that citizens' voice counts in the EU and its policies generally reflect the citizens' opinions. It can be argued that these perceptions are in a way reflected in Malta's voter turnout as in the 2014 European Parliament elections 74.8% of its voters casted their vote to elect their country's Members of the European Parliament.

However, Cypriots and Estonians do not share these affirmative perceptions.

The majority of the respondents in Cyprus stated that they do not believe that their vote counts in the EU or that they can affect its decision. Moreover, the research in Cyprus shows that the majority of people do not believe that the EU's policies reflect the citizens' opinions. Similar and even greater, negative perceptions are observed in Estonia. The overwhelming majority of the research respondents stated that they do not think that their vote counts in the EU that they can influence its decisions or that EU's policies reflect citizens' opinions.

Consequently, taking into consideration these variations of approach, citizens' perception of the EU and their role as its citizens is not directly affected by the size of their state; nor that this is a dominant variable leading to either positive or negative view.

However, when the findings of the research concerning people's views about possible advantages or disadvantages of being citizens of a small EU member state come into the equation, it becomes clear that its effect should not be wholly dismissed.

The work in all three countries has shown that the citizens of small member states, though they might question the extent of their influence in EU affairs, consider as an advantage the fact that it is easier for them to have access to their MEPs. This is a relationship that needs to be emphasized in a bid to enhance attachment to the EU and interest for the workings of the Union.

In addition to this, it was very interesting to document participant's responses when asked whether they believe that as citizens of small member states feel that they have a diminished role in the EU. Once again, a difference of approached was observed between the three countries. This belief is shared by the overwhelming majority of Estonians and a considerable number of Cypriots, with 40% of respondents in Cyprus stating that they either agree or strongly agree with the said statement. Even in Malta, where a strong pro-EU sentiment is identified, this view, though not shared by a considerable number of participants, was also perceived as a point of concern. Thus, this surely presents a sentiment that needs to be taken into consideration and be addressed.

Consequently, the findings and conclusions signify the need for the EU to take direct measures to strengthen its links with the citizens of the small member states, investing in ways that will allow citizens to engage and

influence its bodies directly. This will help alleviate any concerns and disaffection caused by their sense of diminished role in the EU, its decision-making process and policies.

To do, so it is of extreme importance that citizens are more informed about EU affairs and decisions that have a direct effect on their daily lives. They should also be given the opportunity to participate in programmes and actions on offer by the Union taking also an advantage of opportunities available.

Suggestions

While 'ECoSMS' has shown a difference in stance between the citizens of small member states in regards to their perceptions of the EU and their role as citizens of the Union, the three partners have arrived at similar conclusions and suggestions on future actions. The participants of the debates in all three countries emphasized the need for citizens to acquire greater knowledge about the workings and policies of the Union and become more informed about European Affairs. Additionally, they emphasize the need for the EU to establish a way for citizens to have a direct or at least more effective access to its decision-making structures. Finally, they noted that the investment in projects that help build a common identity and sense of belonging, such as Erasmus+, continue and expand.

Hence the following suggestions are put forward:

- The EU should invest in enhancing citizens' knowledge and understanding of EU affairs in small EU member states;
- The EU should establish participatory structures that will allow citizens to have a more direct access and influence to the decision-making process. At the same time, citizens should acquaint themselves with the existing mechanisms and opportunities of participation in the EU such is the European Citizens' Initiative;
- The EU should continue and expand its investments in common identity projects;
- The media should provide citizens with more information about European affairs and the workings of the Union;
- The MEPs should emphasise their role as constituency representatives in the European Parliament and engage citizens more;
- Local and European CSOs should become more active in projects that will enhance citizens' awareness of EU affairs and policy issues as well as capacity building actions that will equip and encourage citizen participation;

Conclusion

European integration is an ongoing process through which the Union continuously evolves and re-examines itself to address existing shortcomings and challenges. In doing so, it needs to maintain a direct link with all citizens, including those of small EU member states, so that it can reflect their concerns, views and aspirations through its policies and workings. For the latter to materialise, it needs to take into consideration that each state represent a unique case.

The work of the 'ECoSMS' project has signified that the size of an EU member state does not predispose a specific stance or perceptions from its citizens' part in regards to the EU having a direct and dominant effect on their views. However, it still does have an effect which needs to be taken into consideration by the EU, in order to effectively engage the citizens of all member states.