

Long report:

Smart cities and communities - a step towards more balanced and sustainable EU regional development?

29 November 2018, Poligon, Ljubljana, Slovenia

An event “*Workshop with a Round Table: Smart cities and communities – a step towards more balanced and sustainable EU regional development?*” was held on 29th of November in Poligon, Ljubljana, Slovenia, jointly organised by European liberal forum (ELF), Zavod 14, Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung für die Freiheit and Institute Novum.

In the brave new digitized world smart solutions, based on new technologies and inter-connectivity, are the next logical stepping stones and platform which will drive the regional development. Although population growth and urbanization in EU are currently not a serious issue, certain regions and cities are becoming more aware of smart solutions and how they can economically, environmentally and socially improve QoL (quality of living) of population and consequently diminish regional disparities on both EU and national level.

In past decade, we’ve witnessed many different approaches under the same name and towards the same goal. Although Smart Cities, as a complete and whole concept are still in the early stages, we already have examples of communities and cities that benefited from implemented smart solutions. Advancement of communities and cities through inter-connectivity of new technologies transcends local, affects regionally and has a great potential to impact EU as a whole.

During workshop participants were presented with an example of smart solutions – bike sharing systems, examples of their implementation in Slovenia, their impact and obstacles cities face with their deployment. During the Round table, the participants, with the help of guest speakers, tried to assess the potential of current implementation of smart solutions in Slovenia and EU within the EU Cohesion policy framework. How are they already shaping the present? How far are we from full integration of smart solutions into Smart Cities? They also addressed the potential obstacles and possible solutions for faster and more widespread implementation of smart solutions, locally and regionally.

After the workshop, attendees were addressed by Zavod 14 Director Aleksander Aristovnik, ELF Member of the Board of Directors Goran Neralić and State Secretary of the Slovenian Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning Simon Zajc. Rok Spruk from the University of Ljubljana presented an upcoming ELF and Zavod 14 publication “European Regional Development: Fate, Fortune or Good Policies?”

After the successful conclusions of the workshop, a panel session “Smart cities and communities – stepping stones towards smart regional development and a future foundation for better quality of living in the EU” took place. Mladen Bijeljac of Smart City Bikes, Nevenka Cukjati of SRIP Smart Cities and Communities, Miha Juvan from Kranj City Municipality, Marko Maver from the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning, Dan Podjed of ZRC SAZU, Klemen Potisek, expert for energy issues and former State Secretary at the Ministry of Infrastructure, and Zina Zlatanova of LIPA discussed their views on the issues regarding smart cities and communities and the way the new approaches shape our lives. The session was moderated by Gregor Plantarič of Zavod 14.

Mladen Bijeljac, Director of Smart City Bikes in Slovenia, presented his view from the perspective of a developer and a provider of smart solutions to the local communities. He pointed out the initial challenge they were facing was understanding their new technology. They had to educate and inform their future customers and the people of the benefits of, in their example, bike sharing system for the community. “For smart cities and smart technology you need smart people,” he emphasized and underlined the importance of changing perception of people. He also mentioned the importance of sensors and big data analysis to understand the implementation and further development of the services. Later on he also pointed out the smart cities are all about interconnectivity.

Miha Juvan from Kranj City Municipality said the local authorities are often facing challenges of getting to know new solutions from many different companies. In his opinion it is very important to gather as much information as possible to be able to plan a possible implementation. As authorities are obliged to prepare public tenders for services, it is sometimes a real challenge to correctly define the end product as it is often hard to follow the pace of technology advancement. “The process itself is satisfying at the end when there are a lot of users of the new service that is well accepted by the people of our municipality,” he said. He also addressed the issue of a lot of small municipalities in Slovenia with not enough manpower to adequately cope with all the new solutions that could benefit the people. In his opinion, the key is cooperation and regional integration.

Nevenka Cukjati from the Jožef Stefan Institute in Ljubljana addressed the importance of partnership between companies, research institutions and universities when developing new technologies and services, especially in the fields of smart health, smart mobility, smart energy, smart safety etc. She presented SRIP Strategic Research and Innovation Partnerships programme and its achievements in building support environment with professional services for industry and research.

Klemen Potisek, former State Secretary at the Slovenian Ministry of Infrastructure, presented his view on the topic of smart cities. “It is a complicated topic with many dimensions, but in brief it can be said it is all about better utilization of assets and resources with the help of data,” he said. The data has to be correctly processed with the aim of better urban living. Smart cities are a natural evolution in his opinion, UN foresees 80 % of the world’s population will live in cities by 2050. “With all the consumption of our resources by our cities, this definitely is an area where we should get smart about,” he emphasized. He pointed out the importance of changes in the society with the goal of better usage of resources. We need data and capability to process that data - we

will have to count on artificial intelligence for that in his opinion. He also pointed out some of the smart solutions are simple: for example, removing cars from the city centers and building bicycle routes. People start walking, using bicycles: it is healthy, it decreases crime, it saves energy and is beneficial for the environment.

Marko Maver from the Slovenian Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning emphasized the importance of public engagement when implementing new solutions. “You cannot just come into a city or a community, introduce a project or a solution and then expect it to work just because on paper and your research in your analysis it has worked,” he pointed out. Collaboration with NGOs, research institutions and really involving all stakeholders in the policy development processes are crucial steps in his opinion.

Zina Zlatanova from the Liberal Institute for Political Analysis from Sofia presented her views from the perspective of financing new projects, especially from the EU funds. “Innovation, digitalization, industrial modernization, circular economy, sharing economy... These are things you find in new programming strategies and their drafts for new financial perspective 2021,” she said and emphasized the importance of EU and its innovation instruments in financing new smart technologies. She described the current public procurement systems and their rigidity. The technology advanced, but the public procurement system lagged behind. In her opinion it is also important to innovate the procurement system in EU member states.

Dan Podjed from the Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts described the issue that technologies are smarter and smarter, from gadgets, cars, buildings and cities, but people are the same as 100,000 years ago. “Our processors are the same, we haven’t significantly changed,” he emphasized and pointed out the challenges of effectively operating with all the new technologies. In his opinion often the new technologies are not adapted enough to the people. Really smart technologies should not be just technology driven, but also people driven. Later on in discussion he also pointed out the importance for smart cities is to have a feeling of community: not everything has to be based only on new technologies. In his opinion there are no one-size-fits-all solutions and compared Copenhagen, Belgrade and Ljubljana. “We are more and more crowded and at the same time more and more alienated,” he emphasized when explaining the importance of developing new types of communities to keep us together. Podjed warned that all the data the new smart communities gather for their services are a big threat for the privacy as the big companies start control more and more of our lives.

A very interesting roundtable was concluded with a quote from Shakespeare’s Coriolanus “What is the city but the People?” The participants agreed the urban planners and architects of today must work together with many other experts, including sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists – to actually understand the people who are not just users and customers. “More sharing, less owning!” was also an important highlight of the discussion.

Dr. Aleksander Aristovnik, Zavod 14