



Arts for Tolerance

Network of towns

In a project implemented with support from the *Europe for Citizens* programme, the Local Government of the town of Nagyecsed focused on improving self-knowledge, cultural heritage and integration of Roma communities. They tackled the issue through artistic activities implemented with their Romanian, Slovakian and Polish partners. We talked to Project Leader Szilvia Erősné Balogh and Coordinator Zsuzsanna Szabóné Ivánku about the project.

Why did you choose this subject?

Szilvia Erősné Balogh: I come from a Roma family. I wanted an international project that relies on our culture and art to bring us closer to the Roma people living abroad

to see how they live in other countries. And why we wanted to make them heard through arts? Because that's what we're good at. It comes from our culture, from us. *Zsuzsanna Szabóné Ivánku:* Nagyecsed has had a long tradition of folk dance and traditionalist groups and activities. Szilvia has lead dance groups and taught Roma dances locally and in the neighbouring villages for about 20 years. That's why we insisted that our project should be based on this topic. Also, we wanted to preserve Roma traditions, enhance identity and improve integration in Nagyecsed.

What do you think made your project better than that of other applicants? Why did you get the grant?

Sz. B.: I think it was complex because it mobilised the people living in the town. Not only organisations, but the entire town. The fact that Roma organisations cooperated also represented great power. The project had a professional and an informal side: at the conference, we could address the professional teams, whereas the cultural events appealed to everybody.

“The common artistic and cultural programmes significantly shaped the self-knowledge and world view of those involved. The artistic activities enabled the members of the local team to get to know each other better and discover each other's new sides beyond the relationships determined by social and workplace hierarchies. At the level of the communities involved, it was interesting to see that the exchange helped to identify achievements to be proud of and good practices. Also, the personal experiences made many participants reassess their own problems.”

Petra Kovács community music therapist, teacher of the Sály method, art therapist, guest lecturer at the closing conference

Did you find any method that can be locally applied in daily work?

Zs. I.: Absolutely. Social life in Nagyecsed can set quite an example. We have truly professional dance groups. Hungarians dance Roma dances, Roma people dance Hungarian dances, and we also have junior groups. This in itself is enough to attract large audiences, which we managed to demonstrate to our partners, too. Also, everybody found the music therapy presented in Nagyecsed very interesting, where Petra Kovács showed the visitors methods of articulation and intonation to be used to develop kindergarten and school children.

Did the participants benefit in any way from the fact that it was an international project?

Zs. I.: Yes, they did, especially from the fact that average citizens, including Roma people, could travel abroad, even to a number of places. Being involved in this programme and in various events in itself made them proud and feel good. It greatly increased their self-respect.

What do you think was the best thing about this project?

Zs. I.: It had a lot of positive sides. Of course, the Nagyecsed event was the 'non plus ultra', but the Polish conference was of very high standards, too. It began by – and it was very moving – an account of the historical relations. There used to be a labour camp nearby, and they gave a detailed presentation on what had happened during World War II. As the closing act of the event, they invited a Roma family and one of the leaders interviewed them on the spot.

Sz. B.: It was the first time a Roma person had stood on the stage of the town since the Holocaust. It's a great breakthrough. Before the project, they hadn't known the Roma there. There was only one family who identified themselves as Roma. Since then, however, Roma people have cooperated and established a dance group. Something has begun. They accept Roma culture and traditions more and more, and those who

identify themselves as Roma are now proud of it.

Zs. I.: The project has brought these families into focus in the town, and the Polish partners also got a lot of inspiration about what can be done for the Roma.

Would you do anything differently if you could start all over again?

Zs. I.: You can always do things better. We've learnt a lot and our enthusiasm is unbroken, but we could change a few things. We would devote much more time to building the partnership, for example. It's difficult, because as long as you don't know if your project has won funding or not, nobody wants to work on it, although with a project requiring so much travelling and a very strict timeline as ours, it would have been useful for us to have more discussions before launching it. But normally, what you don't have the resources for will never happen.

Are you planning to continue?

Zs. I.: There are still workshops where the local specialists involved in the project programmes hold presentations and talks, and share their freshly gained experiences and knowledge. We hope that some of our partners will submit a new EU grant application based on the methods learnt here. That's one of our major goals.

Sz. B.: We have made good friends and we keep thinking together. We hope we can

continue the work we've started. It might not involve all the countries, due to lack of finances, but we have good practices we can share with others.

Zs. I.: We met valuable professionals and very good personal and professional relationships were made. We've also submitted another 'Europe for Citizens' grant application which includes some partners from our current project. •

Interview: NÓRA FRANK

The participants can use the project results in their daily work, too. The music therapy method presented in Nagyecsed, for example, can be used in any kindergarten or school activity to develop children's skills. Dance groups like the one in Nagyecsed, where Roma and non-Roma people dance together can also help to learn about each other and fight prejudice, while attracting wide audiences. The applicants have some further project ideas to be implemented – for example, in the field of early development –, for which they also wish to use some of the experiences and good practices gained during the past few months.