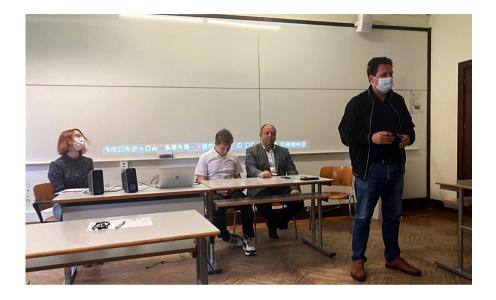## INCOOP'S RESULTS DISCUSSED IN OPORTO

On May 16th, took place at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Porto the seminar Municipal Communication and Participation. The hybrid international scientific event aimed at sharing and discussing some results of the project INCOOP, namely CEPESE's research results. The event gathered not only the project's team, but also other researchers, Communication and Creative Industries students and local government representatives.

WHY STRONG AND CLOSE COMMUNICATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTAL STRUCTURES MATTERS

With a main focus on inter-municipal and inter-sectoral bodies, *INCOOP–Strengthening Civic Participation in the Functioning of Inter-Municipal and Inter-Sectoral actors in Europe* is a project that brings together all levels of society and that aims to reflect and improve the services made available by these institutions to citizens. The project intends to do this by encouraging and stressing the importance of several aspects.

One of the main aspects that the project focus is the importance of developing strong and targeted communication strategies that reach and that generate trust among citizens. In fact, research about the last ten years has been highlighting

that municipalities have been exploring new channels. Particularly, a growth has been felt in terms of social media presence among both private and public sector (Gruzd, Lannigan, & Quigley, 2018). This suggests that local governments have been growing gradually aware of the advantages and potential of communicating through non-traditional channels to be closer to their diverse audiences (Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010).

However, there is no causal relationship between social media presence and citizen engagement (Holzer & Manoharan, 2019). Communicating and promoting citizen participation through digital networks is a demanding task that involves, as Mergel (2013) notes many factors: a) Representation – in order to increase transparency in terms of municipal affairs – ; b) Engagement – increasing interaction with citizens through pools, submission of ideas and feedback and even the co-creation or co-design of both content and services – ; and c) Networking – facilitating an ongoing dialogue with citizens, encouraging them to share and even curate content on their own channels. Though as the researcher notes, institutions usually fail to work on all these dimensions (Mergel, 2013). The absence of a tailored (social) media strategy that considers not only the tools but also the way the various channels are managed (Agostinho, 2013) can therefore distance municipalities from the goal of reaching to and actively engaging citizens.

Communication between municipalities and citizens is also addressed to reflect on the role of entrepreneurship as a driver for local development. Ribeiro-Soriano (2017) refers to entrepreneurship as an important mechanism that contributes to economic growth. The local dimension is crucial, particularly when it comes to rural and peripheral areas, and regions affected by problems such as depopulation and infrastructural insufficiencies (Müller, 2016). From this point of view, to fulfil its constructive and creative purpose, entrepreneurship should be anchored in strong synergies with higher education and research institutions and local governments (Dallago & Tortia, 2019) and widely disseminated through a clear communication strategy to reach its citizens (Gonçalves, 2019; Camilo, 1999).

INCOOP PARTNERS GATHERED IN OPORTO
With these aspects in mind, the event aimed to bring to public discussion the results of the project, namely those arising from the European questionnaire conducted. Professor Paulo Faustino (CEPESE, University of Porto), the representative of CEPESE's team, opened the session, presenting the project's general focus and the research centre's involvement. This brief presentation was followed by Matej Turanský's and Marek Turanský's intervention representing the project coordination and lead partner KRR – Cluster of regional development, from Slovakia.

The researchers detailed the main objectives of the project, which aimed to analyse and provide data to improve municipal services by encouraging civic participation in their management. Besides this, a short movie regarding participatory activities conducted by another Portuguese-associated partner – Coimbra Region Intermunicipal Community – was screened. The movie presented the initiative Academia Europa – an event organised by NAPEEC, together with Europe Direct: Região de Coimbra and Leiria and the National Federation of European Studies. Marek explained the event's contribution to promote, not only the voice of the younger citizens but also to impel them towards active citizenship and with a particular impact on the level of the communities where they live. This was followed by a presentation of the results of the questionnaire conducted by CEPESE's team.

Other partners – Microregion 11 PLUS (Slovakia), NGO FAGDO (Bulgaria), Grad Ludbreg (Croatia), La Cosecha Producciones (Spain), Rzeszowska Agencja Rozwoju Regionalnego Spolka Akcyjna (Poland), Comunidade Intermunicipal da Região de Coimbra (Portugal), Opcina Erdut (Croatia), ANCI Sardegna (Italy) and Tipperary County Council (Ireland) – participated online in the event, through Zoom.

QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS: WHAT DO CITIZENS SAY ABOUT THE ROLE OF MUNICIPALITIES IN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

After the initial introduction, the presentation of the questionnaire results followed. The questionnaire results were presented by Dr Ana Filipa Oliveira (CICANT, Universidade Lusófona/ CECS-University of Minho), guest researcher of the Portuguese team. Her presentation focused on five major areas covered by the questionnaire – local democracy; citizen participation, communication & impact; immigration & integration; services & proximity; urgent matters & challenges for the near future.

During her presentation, the researcher highlighted several aspects evidenced by the survey. Results, as Dr Ana Filipa Oliveira mentioned, showed that around 44% (N=282) of the respondents rated the level of democracy of the region/municipality they inhabit as "Good". As to the political accountability of local politicians, 33.5% (N=339) of respondents assessed it as "Good". She also stressed that citizens that participated in the questionnaire qualified their impact on local decision-making processes and about the opportunities to participate in community affairs (political or not) as "Average" (29.5% | N=298) and as "Good" (55.5% | N=561), respectively.

Other data presented in the seminar highlighted that:

- 35.5% (N=359) of the respondents described the integration of migrant

communities as "Good", and 31.4% (N=317) rated their contribution to the municipalities as "Good";

- Respondents have a positive view of the communication between the municipality and citizens ("Good" (34.5% | N=349)).

The researcher also pointed out that according to the participant's responses, the most pressing issues and challenges for the near future of their municipalities are matters related to "Growth/development/planning and planning"(33.7% | N=341), "Economic development issues/ economic crisis" (30.9% | N=312) and "Environmental issues/climate change" (22.6% | N=24).

Country comparisons as well as recommendations and suggestions for improving services and practices at the municipal level were also presented and discussed with the audience. Dr Ana Filipa Oliveira stated that even though the overall results of this questionnaire show that Europeans tend to have a generally positive view of democracy at the local level, the analysis identifies aspects that underline the urgency of promoting citizens' engagement and active involvement in civic and political participation in the regions.

Furthermore, the researcher stressed that data suggests that there is room to improve the instruments of political participation made available to citizens. Face-to-face and participatory consultation methods (e.g. round tables, open sessions) and online methods (e.g. online questionnaires, online consultation sessions, actions in social networks) can contribute to involving a broader range of citizens (in terms of age and sociodemographic background) and to widen the formats through which citizens can get involved in decision-making at the local level. Besides these aspects, and to involve citizens in the reflection and decision-making process regarding priority matters, initiatives such as citizens' forums and assemblies can work as spaces for auscultation to achieve social consensus and design strategies aligned with citizens' beliefs, expectations and values.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION: THE WAY FORWARD

The final discussion revolved around the comparison of the researches' results and sharing experiences and perspectives regarding civic engagement at local level, municipal communication and entrepreneurship. This final moment of sharing helped reflect on how far municipalities at the European level still must go to provide opportunities for full participation and to promote entrepreneurship.

The audience, in line with results of studies previously mentioned (e.g. Mergel, 2013), stated that some initiatives are unknown for most inhabitants and that occasionally communication is not effective. Information on projects,

opportunities, local political debates or other deliberations do not always reach the intended audiences. The purpose of Public Communication – to contribute to a democratic society, shorten the distances between citizens and political power, promote participatory management and the development of solutions under the collective interest (Brandão, 2015) – is not always achieved.

One member of the audience pointed out that recurrently information doesn't reach young people or individuals that are launching small businesses. Dr Ana Filipa Oliveira called attention to the need of developing and targeting communication and dissemination strategies properly and according to broader civic and political agendas. Support for entrepreneurship, participatory budgeting and other types of financial aid and advice are activities that require a concerted communication plan involving the four major actors in the innovation system: science, policy, industry, and society (Roman et al., 2020).

On the part of the younger public that attended the event, it became clear that they often feel distanced from the political power. The students who shared their insights reported they are not always able to find information about initiatives addressed to them (such as the Youth Participatory Budget, Training opportunities, Extracurricular activities). This leads to a frequent feeling of misalignment with the priorities of the political power, they mention. These aspects, the researchers stated, not only contribute to reinforcing the Recommendations and Suggestions for future action prepared within the scope of the INCOOP project but also to reinforce the importance of looking and considering broader audiences. Meeting the needs of both younger and older audiences and should be considered as part of an integrated communication strategy.

The discussion ended with prof. Paulo Faustino suggesting that due to his particular interest in the topic and the topicality of the matter, he would continue to present the activity and the research's results at the next seminars held at the faculty.

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