

Challenges and Development Paths of Central and Eastern European Locations in the Globalised World – Report on the first International Smart Communities Academy

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In Autumn 2016, a reputed international project consortium submitted a project proposal in the topic of ‘Smart Communities’ to the Interreg Slovakia-Hungary call for proposals, that received a positive decision (SKHU/1601/4.1/210). The objective of the bilateral cooperation project is to prove that smartness is not the privilege of cities, through the implementation of several social innovation activities in the border region (www.smartcommunities.eu). The project has a sound concept that formed the basis of both the selection of the consortium partners and the range of project activities. This is to generate an attitude change in rural areas towards smartness, mainly in the sectoral field of information communication technologies and sustainability, from early childhood to advanced years. In order to facilitate this process, a focus shift should be generated from the attraction of industry and foreign direct investment to intellectual property and endogenous development factors that could be advanced by a virtual education, research, development and innovation network. For this reason, the disadvantaged cross-border target region should be positioned on the map of the international academic and practitioner community.

Based on the above, as one of the first activities in the framework of the project, on 28-29 September 2017, the first international Smart Communities Academy for practitioners and scientists was organised with the coordination of Szent István University, Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences (Gödöllő), together with the Hungarian Regional Science Association (Pécs) and the University of Szeged, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, as co-organisers. The Chair of the Scientific Committee was Prof. h.c. Dr. József KÁPOSZTA and the Head of the Organising Committee was Dr. habil. Henrietta NAGY. Internationally reputed scholars, Prof. Dr. János RECHNITZER, former President of Hungarian Regional Science Association and Prof. Dr. Imre LENGYEL, Chair of Doctoral

School of Economics at the University of Szeged were the representatives of the co-organiser institutions.

The Academy, including the fifth Central European PhD Workshop on Regional Economics and Business Studies, was a combination of several methodological novelties regarding its concept, location and participants. It formed a platform for the communication and change of ideas of actors from very different geographic and sectoral areas, all interested in global tendencies and local answers in the field of sustainable development and smartness. As such, it constituted a unique opportunity not only to provide a proof of concept that international and inter-sectoral (academy and practice) conferences can be located into disadvantaged rural communities, but also to offer several lessons-to-be-learned and implications for the future that can be summarised as follows:

The guiding principle of the project was strictly followed in the choice of the location, as the organisers decided to locate the Academy into the countryside, in one of the most disadvantaged area of Hungary, in a small village, Legénd, Nógrád county. The conference started with a plenary programme that was a good example of subsidiarity and the connection of local and international (global) scale, starting from the local mayor, through county level representatives to the delegate of the national government (Prime Minister's Office). All administrative levels of Hungary were presented, together with a project presentation and a closing contribution from a local resident of Dutch origin, who provided a first-hand, but yet different perspective and experience about Legénd and Nógrád county. After the plenary programme, three thematic sessions were organised in the afternoon at different venues in the village, ranging from the Village Hall, through the local Castle (that used to be the primary school and now is in private property), to a traditional cob-walled country house. On the second day, the second round of thematic sessions (3) was organised at the same venues, and participants could visit other sessions within walking distance during the coffee breaks. As a closure of the Academy, a plenary session was held where closing remarks and future implications were summarised. Consequently, the Academy could provide to the more than 100 participants from 25 countries a memorable, real-life experience about the Hungarian countryside and the everyday living conditions of the local citizens, most of them belonging to marginalised target groups. Direct interactions between the local residents and the participants of the Academy could be generated this way.

The scope of the participants was not limited to either practitioners or scholars, but the objective was to ensure a balanced participation of both academics from all fields and in all career stage (starting from MSc, through PhD students, candidates, early-careers, associate-

and established tenured full professors) and practitioners, including mayors, civil servants, non-profit and bridge organisations, local economic actors and interested residents. Altogether six thematic sessions were organised in the two days, three of them in English and the others in Hungarian.

The topics of the sessions covered all major research strands and real-life challenges, as Smart Communities and Resiliency; New methods and approaches in local economic development; Enterprises and Locations in the Globalised World; The Geography and Challenges of Peripheries; Contribution of Local Actors, Place-based Policies and Community Development; and Human Resources in the Countryside, Migration, Training and Education. A balanced representation of the academic and practitioner community was ensured at the level of the session chairs and the presenters (6-7 lecturers per session) also. Following the presentations, the chair and the participants addressed specific questions and feedbacks to the presenters, in order to generate debate, provide different insights and facilitate further cooperation. Practitioners welcomed the presentation of the state-of-the-art in theory and academic research, while scholars welcomed practical, actual insights (qualitative data) and future research opportunities in the form of invitations to study visits and joint elaboration of case studies, for example in case of the national Smart Village development concept. A clear and declared request was formulated toward a network (platform) of professionals and continuous information flow in this field.

Regarding the next steps and the sustainability of the Academy's results, the conference proceedings in English language is under preparation by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre for Economic and Regional Studies West Hungarian Research Department. The proceedings will be made publicly available at the project homepage also (www.smartcommunities.eu). The programme of the Smart Academy and the photo gallery are already available at the site. Based on the success of the Academy, the Department of Regional Sciences and Management of the Faculty of Economics at the Technical University in Kosice, as member of the Smart Communities project consortium, will organise the second international Smart Communities Academy in Slovakia in Spring 2018. The main organiser of the event is Assoc. Prof. Natasa Urbancikova (Natasa.Urbancikova@tuke.sk), the planned venue is the Slovak countryside in the border region, the planned date is the last week of May, or early June 2018. In the name of the project consortium we would like to thank all citizens of Legénd to host the Academy and we hope to see you in 2018 in Slovakia, at the second Smart Communities Academy.

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