

Online conference "Sharing across borders - New ways of care, communication and cooperation for older people along the Danube and in Europe" with speakers and participants from 21 countries

A small team, great enthusiasm and the will to strengthen cooperation across borders despite, or even because of, COVID-19: The association Institute for Virtual and Face-to-Face Learning in Adult Education at Ulm University (ILEU) e.V., as the coordinator of the education network Danube-Networkers, has organized an online conference for civil society actors from the Danube Region and all over Europe, thus demonstrating how in times of physical distance caused by Corona, social contacts, cooperation and civil society commitment can be lived. And also what potential digital technologies have for NGOs.

With the support of the Ministry of State of Baden-Württemberg, ILEU organised a conference in online video conferencing format with the title "Sharing beyond Borders: New ways of care, communication and cooperation of elderly people along the Danube and in Europe in times of COVID-19" on July 10th/11th, 2020, with lectures, numerous working groups and a social evening. Representatives from politics, science and civil society spent two days analysing the current situation, exchanging experiences and developing ideas for the future. Actually, the conference should have taken place during the Danube Festival Ulm/Neu-Ulm 2020 in Ulm, but COVID-19 made a face-to-face meeting impossible and so the networkers from Ulm searched and found new ways of cooperation.

The conference was opened by greetings from the first mayor of Ulm, Martin Bendel, and the head of the education department of the Baden-Württemberg Foundation, Andreas Weber. This was followed by political statements on the conference topic. EU Commissioner responsible for Innovation, Education and Culture, Marija Gabriel, whose speech was given due to technical difficulties by one of her colleagues, spoke about the so-called "digital divide" - a divide that opens up between all those who use their smartphones every day and do everything online, and those who have never learned how to do it or have no access to it. There is an urgent need for action here. According to a survey, 30 million adults in the EU often feel lonely. Digital technologies and social networks could help to prevent this under the condition that a solution-oriented education is provided. 'We must not leave anyone behind in Europe,' said Gabriel, informing of prospects for new EU programmes for adult and especially seniors' education.

In her speech, Theresa Schopper, Baden-Württemberg's Minister of State for Policy Coordination, pointed out, among other things, that the continuing "brain drain" - the emigration of young, qualified people, particularly in Eastern European countries - is exacerbating structural problems and the gap between East and West. There is a lack of personnel in Eastern European countries, especially in areas such as health care and care for the elderly. Solutions must be sought through the qualification and employment of local nursing staff. Mrs. Schopper expressly praised the deepening of cultural and civil society exchange, initiated by actors such as ILEU. 'These are often very small civil society bottom-up initiatives that provide inspiring ideas,' said Schopper.

Karl-Heinz Lambertz, long-standing President of the European Committee of the Regions, pointed out the importance of the 36 regional hubs (centres) in Europe, which work together with more than 250 stakeholders and are intended to communicate and implement European Union policies in the regions. Among other things, it is important to equalize the standard of healthcare systems in Europe and make improvements accessible to people in all countries, said Lambertz.

Prof. Rumiana Stoilova from Sofia and Prof. Heidrun Mollenkopf from Heidelberg focused in their contributions on central issues: the well-being and satisfaction of seniors in Eastern and Western

Europe, digitalisation and age discrimination. In their presentations and in the subsequent discussion, they provided impulses important for all the working groups in the afternoon.

Discussed in a total of eight working groups were topics such as digitalisation and its impacts in the third age, opportunities for lifelong learning through social Internet applications, new models for care and nursing of elderly people, youth participation and intergenerational dialogue, design of age-friendly cities, discrimination against older people, violence against older women and empowerment. 'None of these are new topics,' said Carmen Stadelhofer, the initiator and chairperson of ILEU and the coordinator of the network. 'But through the experiences in the Corona crisis we all developed a sharper view of things, the need for action became even clearer.' The innovative aspect of the conference is that it took place online: the problem-free virtual meeting of participants from so many countries via the Internet platform Zoom, the given possibility e.g. via a parallel online channel, to translate simultaneously from English into German, Bulgarian and Romanian, to form thematic sub-groups at times or to brainstorm together via mind map, to use an evaluation barometer. This opens up concrete perspectives for working more closely and intensively together and exchanging ideas in the future. 'We see enormous potential in digital technologies - for cooperation between organizations, but above all for people in the third age. Video conferences and workshops make real participation possible,' said Stadelhofer.

In the workshops at the conference, participants from 21 countries were also able to exchange their very personal experiences from the Corona crisis. The basic tone was clear: new forms of cooperation, of togetherness, across all generations are needed. 'We want to be together, to be connected, especially in difficult times like these,' as Andrea Laux from the Mothers' Centres Baden-Württemberg expressed it. Video conferencing is a good opportunity for mothers to talk to each other, to open up, to talk about their problems. 'We create a space of emotional security,' continued Laux. Especially because mothers still do a large part of the care work, both globally and in the EU, formats such as video conferences provide a flexible way to talk to each other across national and generational boundaries. Cultural formats, such as the Come-Together-Sessions organised by ILEU, also work surprisingly well via videoconferencing and provide emotional support to many people in the Danube Region and Europe in general in times of Corona. A participant from Ruse, Bulgaria, stated: 'The presentations of all participants were really interesting, and the most emotional thing for me was that we could sing and speak together not only in English, but also get to know the languages of all the other participants! The emotion was great, and now we have memories that we will keep forever!'

Present at the conference were many members of the international association DANET (Danube-Networkers for Europe), which is also a cooperation partner of ILEU. Tihomir Ziljak, board member of DANET from Zagreb, dealt in his workshop with the subject of age-friendly cities. Ageing should not be reduced to medical and social issues alone. Above all it is important to create opportunities for lifelong learning and to enable participation. In Workshop 6, which dealt with the importance of immaterial culture for social bonding, Emiliya Velikova, Vice President of DANET, presented the award-winning project Bread Connects. In addition, the current project of ILEU, 'CODANEC' (Connecting Danube Neighbours by Culture) was presented. The first results of the project, in which more than 130 personal cultural treasures have already been presented, make it clear that European, diverse culture lives also from commonalities. When one speaks of culture, this does not mean that one only has to speak of high culture. Equally important part of lived culture are the simple, everyday things.

In the morning of the second day, representatives of organisations and networks presented their work and invited the participants to contact them and join the networks and to jointly bring up the concerns of older people and for older people in the fields of politics, economy and education. In the

European Erasmus+ Partnership Discovering European Neighbours in the Third Age (DENTA), 9 groups of learners from 7 countries investigate and compare by means of interviews what the third age means concretely for individuals. The clubs of the worldwide women's association Soroptimist International, which are located in the Danube countries, got together two years ago on the initiative of the Club Ulm-Donaustadt to form SI Danube and initiated the international school project Danubius. They presented the creative ways used by the pupils in all participating schools to deal with the topic Danube. The large international networks of senior citizens' work and education EURAG, EFOS and Danube Networkers could identify many common concerns and have agreed to an online conference in September for a deeper exchange and cooperation. Many individual organisations presented their committed work on site.

At the end of the conference, various actors met again, email and website addresses were exchanged and new projects considered. But what would a conference be without a Social Evening? Although on Saturday evening the participants could not have a drink together, everyone was happy about the variety of musical and cultural contributions. And they could even learn something new in a playful way: The German-Bulgarian association MOST from Ulm offered a quiz - How well do I know Bulgaria?

Mrs. Gisela Erler, State Counsellor for Civil Society and Civic Participation in the State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg, who was invited as guest of honour, addressed the participants with emotional and personal words: 'The beautiful thing about these cultural get-togethers is the intimate connection that develops between the participants. We all live in Europe, but there are many little things we do not know about each other. This diversity in unity is a particularly strong element of the connection, which we can establish here. I don't know any other formats that can do it this way.'

The conference demonstrated in an impressive way what ILEU and the network of Danube-Networkers have been doing since the beginning of March in their Sunday sessions Come Together in Times of Corona by Culture and in other virtual groups. In times of Corona it is possible to activate the members of the network to work together over the web - those in charge, teachers as well as learners. As all participants unanimously agreed, the conference has provided important impulses for more active international cooperation across the borders, otherwise seldom possible due to the long distances and high travel costs. Nevertheless, everyone hopes that they will soon be able to meet again face-to-face, gladly at a Danube conference in Ulm!