

Our organization **LAG East-Harju Partnership** participated in the Greek project **“FOCUS - Stimulating new forms of active civic participation through focus on Social and Solidarity Economy”** that organized and implemented by Agia municipality in Larissa Prefecture, in the Thessaly region in Greece.

The project “FOCUS” sought to :

- a) contribute to citizens’ understanding of the European Union, of its history and achievements and of the EU policy making-process,
- b) create the space for a deeper discussion on the future of Europe,
- c) give responses to the questions for the kind of Europe citizens want, thus, for a strong, sustainable, prosperous, inclusive, democratic and integrated united Europe,
- d) raise awareness of forms of active civic engagement, reinforce those already existing and stimulate new ones,
- e) encourage democratic participation of citizens by promoting opportunities for societal and intercultural engagement and volunteering such as the occupation in cooperatives, non-profit organization, charities and generally speaking, in social and solidarity economy structures.

The project attempted to situate social economy into a broader political context and investigate its relation with the empowerment of democratic life inside the EU dealing with those citizens who have not been involved so far in European issues, or who reject the Union outright or put in question its achievements, shortly speaking, with the target groups of social economy as a channel and alternative way of organizing their democratic life, motivating new forms of their civic participation inside EU and forming their role as a full partners in EU policy.

For the project, this modern and innovative Economy, for the reason that it moves between the government (public sector’s economy) and business (private economy), it can be seen equal to the civil society’s economy, based on interests and wills of citizens and as part of the Solidarity Economy, the economy of vulnerable and disadvantaged people, usually indifferent in civic participation either at local or EU level, due to their poverty and social exclusion, In particular in this time of financial and humanitarian crisis where the fundamental rights are restraining and the Euroscepticism gains continuously ground in Member States ranging from the criticism to the Europhobia.

Thus, the core question for all of us as participants was: How societal and intercultural engagement and volunteering of citizens - especially of vulnerable social groups, of those who most affected by economic and humanitarian crisis- in social economy structures and solidarity innovations and mechanisms, could maximize their civic and democratic participation in the United Europe, empower them to play a full part in EU policy and strengthen the democracy inside Europe!!

The project was co-funded by "Europe for Citizens" Programme of the European Union.