

The EmPaci Learning Experience



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One of the key objectives of the ‘Empowering Participatory Budgeting in the Baltic Sea Region’ (EmPaci) project is raising awareness of and knowledge on the Participatory Budgeting (PB) concept and its mechanisms among local governments and citizens of the Baltic Sea Region (BSR). The particular interest of the project partners lays in increasing the knowledge and building capacities of municipality representatives, such as local administrations, councils, communication specialists, and other participants involved in the PB empowerment – locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally. The training approach was selected to test and evaluate the knowledge and confidence regarding practical PB design and implementation.

As a part of PB communication strategy, the training course curriculum and materials were jointly designed by the EmPaci project team in 2020 to facilitate knowledge and experience exchange, as well as other forms of capacity-building activities. These included topics such as Civic Engagement Tools, PB Cycle, Informing and involving Citizens in PB process, Assessment of Effectiveness and Public Value, Effective Public Discussion Offline and Online, as well as Case Studies. The EmPaci partners, that were involved in PB piloting, have tested the materials by applying gathered information according to the local needs. The variety of applications were demonstrated in German, Polish, Finnish, Russian, Latvian, Lithuanian municipalities, as diverse forms, and the modules were individually applied in preparing local training activities.

Learning Internationally. First of all, the levels of advancement of PB practices within the EmPaci project network initially were diverse. In the countries of three municipalities namely Lahti and Riihimäki (Finland), and Bielsko-Biała (Poland) there are already years of experience in PB design and implementation and so that the national partners were able to share their knowledge and experience

with other members of the EmPaci network. LAB University of Applied Sciences, Tampere University (Finland), Klaipeda University (Lithuania), ITMO University (Russia), and Rostock University (Germany) have heavily supported the learning of the EmPaci network partners, as well as local municipalities in all three countries. The experience exchange was done during regular internal EmPaci partnership meetings, international PBbase network events organized by the EmPaci partners, and other distinct initiatives where the EmPaci network partners were invited as expert speakers.

Similarly, partners have upgraded their knowledge on PB design and practical implementation by learning from other PB implementors and stakeholders, such as Cities of Cēsis and Gulbene (Latvia), City of Eberswalde (Germany), City of Helsinki (Finland), Alytys and Kretinga municipalities (Lithuania), City of St. Petersburg, Moskovsky district of St. Petersburg European University, and the North-West Institute of Management RANEPa (Russia). Additionally, partners had opportunities to launch new networks to learn on PB design and communication (e.g. PeoplePowered workshops), to take part in the national and international conferences (e.g. 3rd All-Russian Conference on Participatory Budgeting "Initiative Budgeting as a Social Phenomenon", Digital Transformation & Global Society, St-Petersburg, a series of networking events of the German PB network, Conference „Participatory Budgeting: A useful tool or just a fad?" of the project Innovations in Local Government Government Budgeting in Slovakia) and other smaller events.

Target audiences. Partners have both implemented training events locally (for one municipality representative or involving several municipalities at once, as in the case of Lithuania or Finland represented by two EmPaci pilot municipalities), as well as presented their approaches and knowledge on larger regional, national, and international events to a diverse public.

- **Internal training events.** The majority of the EmPaci project network has delivered training events aimed at building capacities of particular municipality organizations (administrations) and their units responsible for PB implementation. Other EmPaci network members included participants from the non-governmental sector or research institutes interested in the PB topics in their training activities – as listeners or speakers able to transfer the experience of PB projects. Internal training events were usually small in scale and contained 12-25 participants, depending on the size of municipal structures and relevance of the topic. For instance, Bielsko-Biała as an experienced PB implementor has selected a specific topic for the 3-day training - Communication with the citizens – and trained 22 persons from 8 municipal units responsible for PB or general citizen participation.
- **Regional and national training events.** In the BSR countries and regions, where PB is still an innovation, more effort was put to familiarize public municipal organizations, NGOs, and the general public with the basic knowledge on PB, focusing more on PB cycles and variations of PB across the world, as well as positive impacts of PB on citizens' lives.

For instance, by starting the training for diverse citizen groups with the presentation titled 'PB: The Complicated in Simple Words' („Līdzdalības budžets: vienkārši par sarežģīto”), Vidzeme Planning Region from Latvia commenced an engaging PB event consisting of several lectures and thematic workshops. The event included speakers from research settings, as well as local and regional groups, who presented specific cases of PB positively impacting the cultural life of the region. The event was done as a part of Vidzeme Innovation Week, hence attracted diverse groups of citizens from various fields.

Regional and national training events were able to gather more participants with online streaming options. Training events in Russia were organized as online events and managed to gather more than 80 participants (the topic – ‘Organization of interaction with citizens in social

media'). However, at the same time, the methods chosen for streamed events were not fully engaging (e.g. compared to workshops in smaller groups) due to the one-sided communication between facilitator and participants.

Regarding the restrictions of pandemics, some regional training gathered more than 50 participants onsite. For instance, Telšiai municipality engaged 52 residents of Telšiai town, representatives of Telšiai town and regional public organizations, representatives of elderships and NGO, who then become the ambassadors of PB in Telšiai. Part of the event was organized in a form of 'World Cafes', discussing possible models for community creation and the emergence of project ideas.

- **Youth training events.** Additional value in the EmPaci project was brought by delivering training activities and lectures to young people (being a group of particular focus within the EmPaci project) and their facilitators. For instance, representatives of Vidzeme Planning Region (Latvia) have delivered a lecture on civic participation for cultural processes and PB (EmPaci experience) to students of the University of Latvia.

To promote civic participation among younger citizens, representatives of Rietavas municipality (Lithuania) have initiated PB simulation for Rietavas L. Ivinski Gymnasium students (aged 15-18) and teachers. The idea of simulation included students developing ideas and the larger society of Rietavas voting for the best ideas to be implemented for the good of citizens. The training and simulation itself included lectures on PB, learners' researching, developing proposals for their projects, and establishing local partnerships with public institutions - culture centre, library, etc. In result of the cooperation between the municipality administration and the school, 17 real proposals were submitted, 2 430 persons voted and 5 best ideas were selected to take part in the second round of PB voting on the municipal level. Before the simulation, several webinars took place for 8 teachers and several high school students to clarify PB and the procedures of submitting project ideas. Following the training, the local action group called "Ideas for Rietavas" was formed to promote PB across the school community (e.g., parents, other schools, friends etc.).

In the German pilot municipality Bützow, to specifically address children and young people, classes about PB were organized in the local school. Representatives of both partners from the City of Bützow, the local administration and a local citizen initiative, informed pupils about objectives, advantages and methods of citizen participation and PB. Since in the Bützow PB pilot, no age limit was attributed to make proposals for projects in the PB, it was the aim of the German pilot partners to specifically increase the number of proposals but also more generally to disseminate the PB idea and to inform young people of democratic decision-making.

Content. The Empaci network countries are very diverse in terms of PB experience. In some countries, PB is well known in each region (e.g. Poland), for others, the PB concept still might seem unclear, especially when discussed in detail from the organizational point of view (e.g. Latvia, Lithuania). Therefore, the content of the training events on PB was customized to fit the knowledge base of representatives of municipal entities, local NGOs, and citizens.

For instance, Vidzeme Planning Region (Latvia) and Telšiai municipality (Lithuania) have delivered seminars, lectures, and workshops focusing particularly on the community benefits from PB (in culture

area) and showcasing specific examples. The involvement of external experts and community project implementors gave deeper insight into the topic and possibilities PB can provide. In Russia, the emphasis was also put on the cases, but also PB implementation mechanisms and communication (incl. modern forms of interaction, social media) issues were discussed in detail. Particular legal aspects were emphasized to make clear how PB fits the state legislation. In the German pilot municipality Bützow information events for citizens were organized by the local citizen initiative (which is also part of the EmPaci consortium) to give citizens a general idea of what PB is and how it can be designed, since it was the first kind of „citizen budget” ever applied in the German federal state Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. Bielsko-Biała municipality has specifically focused on parties' involvement in cooperation with residents, communication, and problem-solving. LAB University of Applied Sciences has shared own experience with the involvement of PB Guardians and Coaches, as well as developing the Train-the-Trainer (T-t-T) concept (see below).

Approaches. The approaches were first of all adjusted to the needs of primary target audiences content-wise, as well as to the national and local restrictions concerning pandemics. A large part of the training and capacity-building activities were moved online, however offline trainings were also done by the EmPaci network partners. Face-to-face and online one-, two- or three-day trainings included seminars, lectures, creative workshops (incl. work on own community projects), webinars, ‘World Cafe’, Q&A sessions, as well as individual consultations. Consultations were mainly relevant for the citizen groups in the phase where specific projects were developed, submitted and evaluated in the PB cycle. Additional benefits were provided by inviting PB-interest groups to the national and international conferences, facilitated group discussions and open panel discussions

Special attention within the EmPaci project was dedicated to the practices in Lahti and Riihimäki municipalities in Finland, where [the T-t-T approach](#) was used to support PB implementation and communication. Besides that, both Finnish municipalities prepared special PB Project Guardians and PB Coaches, who helped in running PB internally and doing preliminary checks of citizen project ideas (Guardians), and promoting PB externally in own community groups (Coaches). T-t-T approach was overtaken and replicated by other EmPaci network municipalities (e.g. Bielsko-Biała).

Also, a unique type of PB event was carried out in Lahti – PB Lackathon. The idea was to carry the event in a publicly accessible spot – shopping centre – and invite citizens and NGO representatives to collaboratively work on 14 ideas in order to improve them before the citizen voting. Such practice has demonstrated the significance of innovation and creativity in PB design and allowed international partners to reconsider own practices.

The diversity of methods reflect creative and customized approaches to specific target groups within each municipality. The EmPaci partners have delivered educational sessions and practical co-creation workshop activities using the resources jointly developed within the partnership, as well as attracting external experts to facilitate learning activities. All training activities were carried on with the support of external experts representing either adult education centres (or university units), or practicing implementors of PB initiatives in represented countries/ regions, or both. Experts have undertaken the role of either guest speakers or facilitators, depending on the needs of organizers.

In all cases, the information about the EmPaci project supported by the Interreg BSR Programme was presented and relevant project outcomes disseminated.



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