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Europa liegt um die Ecke

Kommunale Europaarbeit in NRW

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Abstract

We believe in the European project and the future of Europe.

The presence of Europe – no matter your location – and the impact of its activities in North Rhine-Westphalian communities are testimony to the extent of European involvement at the sub-regional level.

We aim to honor with this publication those individuals who have demonstrated their commitment to Europe’s communities in diverse ways. Their stories – their personal experiences, motivations and points of view – lie at the heart of the contributions presented here.

The roots of this volume date back to the height of the euro crisis in 2012 when anti-EU sentiments ran high. A cross-national Bertelsmann Stiftung survey of citizens in Germany, France and Poland showed just above half of all Germans saw personal benefit in EU membership, whereas a near one-third felt it to involve disadvantages instead. Two out of three Germans believed that their personal situation had deteriorated since the introduction of the euro. Only a minority of Germans felt the EU involved benefits with respect to their opportunities in the labor market or the broader issue of maintaining peace in society.

As of fall 2014, opinions in Germany show: whereas 38 percent of the German public hold positive views on the European Union, only 35 percent believe EU economies to be overall robust and 57 percent do not believe this to be the case. Yet 64 percent of Germans characterize their personal job situation as good.

These figures underscore the state of affairs at the national level. But this volume focuses on the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW). In practical terms, the border between NRW and its EU neighbors Belgium and the Netherlands have grown increasingly less tangible. What dry statistics describe in numbers is experienced on a day-to-day basis by those living in NRW municipalities and communities:

- Just over one-third of NRW's foreign citizens come from other EU member states, most of them are Italian, Polish or Greek nationals.
- There are more than 800 twin city arrangements in NRW. Most of these involve partnerships with communities in France, Great Britain, Poland, the Netherlands and Belgium.
- To date, 186 schools in NRW have been certified as European Schools.
- More than one-third of all NRW exports go to other EU states, while imports into NRW from the EU are nearly just as high.
- In a 2012 survey of communities in NRW commissioned by the Bertelsmann Stiftung and conducted by the Deutsche Institut für Urbanistik (German Institute of Urban Affairs), 64 percent of those polled felt cultural exchange to be more important than securing EU funds from Brussels.
- 47 percent of the communities polled in the same survey emphasized the importance of creating opportunities for and deepening relationships between individual citizens in Europe.

The communities of North Rhine-Westphalia think and act in a European sense. In line with this are the efforts of Minister for Federal Affairs, Europe and the Media of the German state of NRW Dr. Angelica Schwall-Düren to promote European activities at the community level through a framework in place since 2011.

The Bertelsmann Stiftung has partnered with the state minister through this framework. The goals of this cooperation included developing a process by which communities could be certified as "European communities," creating transparency in European activities carried out in NRW communities, and strengthening NRW communities' capacity to implement EU measures. The "Europaaktive Kommune in Nordrhein-Westfalen" (Pro-European Communities in North Rhine-Westphalia) honors will be awarded in 2015 for the third time. Since 2013, five districts, 19 cities and communities, and eight "kreisfreie" (district-free) cities have been distinguished for their pro-active work in European matters.

The concept framing this volume emerged from the context of this joint project. The volume is designed, however, to do more than introduce the communities honored. As unsurprising as it may be that all of the communities featured here have been recognized for their efforts in deepening the idea of Europe, their distinguished status underscores the fact that such measures will sooner or later receive deserved attention. Indeed, given the difficulties involved with introducing European activities at the community level, it seems all the more important to distinguish those who, by example, demonstrate how to overcome resistance at the local, regional and European levels.

These individuals and the fruits of their labor are the subject of this volume:

There are the “Border Pilots and Facilitators” in Herzogenrath, Aachen and Monschau, who do more than engage in European cooperation by carrying out cross-border operations that improve how people experience borders.

There are the EU representatives who not only bring Europe to its citizens, but who also must promote the EU within their own administrative organizations. Though there are clearly differences in this regard between those, for example, who work with a team of colleagues from Aachen or Cologne, those who’ve trailblazed alone in outreach efforts (e.g., Essen), and those who’ve taken their community’s interests to the heart of the EU (e.g., Steinfurt’s “Man in Brussels”). And the fact that a UK citizen carries out European activities in Duisburg highlights just how far integration in Europe has come.

There are those who help foster economic growth in their communities (e.g., Bad Driburg) by tapping sustainability and other funds in Brussels and elsewhere.

And there also those individuals who, in their work, may not explicitly target a deepening of the EU per se, but who nonetheless contribute to this goal through their work. This includes the integration officers of Versmold and Gütersloh, the head of social affairs in Iserlohn, urban planners in Münster and project directors at Cologne’s Chamber of Industry and Commerce.

There are those who coordinate partnerships in order to reinvigorate old and new sister city partnerships (e.g., Bocholt).

There are the children and youth at NRW schools such as those in Steinfurt and Gütersloh who learn about European history and values not only through school projects and partnerships but also through practical exchanges with schoolchildren throughout Europe. Activities such as these help foster a simple but important mental insight: “They’re no different from us.”

There are also those leaders at the communal level, such as politicians in Dortmund – whose political support and initiative has in many ways precipitated the conditions allowing for European activities to take place.

There are the countless numbers of volunteers, such as those in the district of Rhein-Sieg, who passionately coordinate and initiate events bringing together young Europeans in particular in an effort to spread Europe’s achievements across generations.

There is the European Parliament’s president, Martin Schulz, who seeks to save the European project by reforming the EU. In so doing, he draws on a quote by Wim Wenders (“The idea of Europe is beyond dispute. But the idea has become an administration, and now people think that the administration is the idea.”), which highlights the difference in attitudes toward Europe that exists across generations.

We have these individuals to thank for the fact that in NRW, Europe is experienced not as the crazy scheme of bureaucrats in Brussels who dole out funding for inflated project proposals and whose decision-making is rarely

expedient or transparent. Indeed, it is to their credit that in NRW, Europe provides opportunities for economic well-being, building cultural and individual diversity, and ensuring a peaceful future for us all. As one individual featured here asserts, “The idea of building a common Europe in which everyone can exercise their rights is fascinating.”

It is the efforts and achievements of such individuals that we aim to honor with this volume.