



It is extremely difficult to manage development because Croatia has more than 140 national strategic documents

We have prepared and implemented 28 projects in Croatia in the fields of customs, police, tourism, judiciary, economy, agriculture and public administration. Our database contains 8000 experts from different areas in the field of EU funds management.

Although European money is offered to us on a platter, Croatia is, based on the amount of contracted and payments made from the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), at the bottom of the chart of EU member states.

Our problems, inexperience and slowness in drawing money from the European treasury, 10.6 billion EUR from ESI funds that the European Commission has made available to Croatia in the period from 2014 to 2020, has also been noted by the Austrians, more precisely by the Austrian Agency for European Integration and Economic Development (AEI) from Vienna which opens its office in Zagreb on May 4th.

This was the reason for talking with the President of AEI Mr. Gerald Ebinger, and the director of the Croatian Economic Agency (HGA) in Burgenland and the Banking Risk Management Manager, a Burgenland Croat, Mrs. Klaudija Paulitsch.

Higher public administration efficiency

Both of them have recognized the potential for partnership with the Republic of Croatia in developing joint projects in various areas, embedded in Croatia's development strategy, and some of them have already been discussed with the Croatian Minister of Labor and Pension System Mr. Pavić, during his working visit to Vienna in February this year. The European Social Fund that is worth 1.5 billion euros, and which has been put under the auspices of Mr. Ministry until 2020, is not just one of the basic instruments of the EU that provides Member States with support for investing in human capital and strengthening the competitiveness of the European economy, also represents a tempting business

challenge for numerous activities. This is about activities directed at EU citizens, including Croats, that are meant to improve their skills and to integrate more easily into the labor market, targeting the fight against poverty and social exclusion as well as improving the efficiency of public administration.

The opening of the AEI Office in Zagreb aims at transferring our rich and successful experience in preparing projects cofinanced through EU funds, as well as other sources of funding for Croatian partners, and encouraging Croatian institutions and partners to projects of mutual interest and benefit. So, a win-win situation. And as there are no longer any twinning projects, our office in Croatia will, because of its favorable geographic position, serve as the central AEI center for the development and implementation of projects for the countries of South East Europe that are not yet EU members - said Mr. Ebinger, adding:

We decided on Croatia because it is a reliable Austrian and European partner, just like our Agency which was founded in 2003 by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Finance. Members of our administration are from Austrian federal ministries: Finance, Infrastructure, Defense, Sports and Public Affairs, and Health and Social Welfare, so we have access to certain expertise from these ministries.

Mr. Gerald Ebinger said that 200 realized projects, including those in Croatia, and around 180 million euros drawn from EU funds, confirm the efficiency and reliability of AEI.

In Croatia, we have prepared and implemented 28 projects in the fields of customs, police, justice, tourism, economy, agriculture and public administration. What makes us unique in this area is that in our pool of experts there are as many as 8,000 experts from different areas of the EU funds management system, from preparation to project implementation, including the selection of the most appropriate funding sources. We have also developed a partnership with the Croatian Economic Agency in Burgenland - said Mr. Ebinger.

Regarding this collaboration, Director Klaudia Paulitsch says that opening of the Zagreb office represents "a big step forward" for AEI, and for her Agency it represents a new opportunity to pass on positive experiences in successfully withdrawing money from EU funds by the Austrian federal province of Burgenland, where 35,000 Burgenland Croats live.

We intend to offer to Minister Mark Pavić some possible joint projects. The projects concern the strengthening of the position of women in the labor market in rural areas, as is the case in Eastern Slavonia, training them to assist, keep and care for the elderly in their homes, modeled on Burgenland - explains K. Paulitsch and adds that these women would also receive certificates of qualifications for the aforementioned jobs and acquired skills and could then be self-employed or work for one of the specialized agencies of that type.

There are also several other opportunities for joint projects in the field of agrotourism and providing wine, hospitality and tourism services of rural households, grape and wine producers on wine roads that could create numerous new jobs for the female population as well as young families, so that they don't emigrate - said the director of the Croatian Chamber of Economy in Burgenland.

K. Paulitsch invited Croatian partners to cooperate, arguing that Burgenland's provinces could serve as "best practices" for the efficient use of EU funds in agriculture, ecology, exploitation of renewable energy sources, such as biomass and hydroelectric power plants as well as new ones like solar energy, wind energy, geothermal energy, etc.

In Güssing, in southern Burgenland, we have had the European Center for Renewable Energy since 1996. Several city mayors from Eastern Slavonia and city mayors from Varaždin and Međimurje Counties also visited it - said Mrs. Paulitsch.

As for Croatian projects for withdrawing money from EU funds, the biggest number of prepared projects is coming from that local and regional level exactly. However, what makes it extremely difficult to manage the development is that Croatia, at least according to the published data, currently has more than 140 national strategic documents and more than 1700 local and regional strategies.

Mr. Ebinger noted that so far AEI in Croatia has worked mostly on public administration development projects, and now the Croatian Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs is also offering its cooperation on "Technical assistance projects".

Every assistance means investing in human capital and competitiveness and Croatia has made remarkable progress in this area and has grown from a student to a professor - said the President of AEI, giving a lot of praise for the education system in Croatia and the highly educated Croatian labor force.

He added that the Agency's agenda contains cross-border smart projects in the Smart-City development area between Croatia, Hungary and Slovenia, cyber security and other innovative projects, including the idea of Smart marinas.

Mr. Ebinger highlighted some of the potential areas for co-operation: employment of women and youth, pension system, elderly care, health tourism, medical, health and wellness tourism, as well as branding Croatian spa's as attractive destinations for health tourism for clients from all over the EU.

Croatia and Austria are countries linked by centuries-old common history and traditionally good and friendly relationships. If we take a look back, we will see that it is not a phrase but truth. For example, the author of the text of the new Austrian hymn is an Austrian-Croatian poet Paula von Preradović, then our composer Haydn, who used the folk songs of Burgenland Croats in his works, even the Croat Nikola Tesla, who published his thesis right at the Craftsman's Association in Vienna – said Mr. Ebinger.

Embassy Support

He notes that the Agency which he heads is also involved in cultural projects, and the AEI is working on co-operation with Rijeka City Museum Director, for the Rijeka 2020 project - the European Cultural Capital and with the leaders of the Austrian project 'Red Carpet for Youth Art', in which Croats will participate.

Klaudia Paulitsch points out that their wish is that Croats from Croatia cooperate even more closely with Burgenland Croats and thus strengthen Burgenland, so that it becomes the center of social occasions.

For if we look at Varaždin and Čakovec, we see that all of this was once the same economic space - said the director of HGA in Burgenland.

And when talking about cooperation, the Croatian Embassy in Austria headed by the Ambassador, Vesna Cvjetković, PhD, is also a great support to us. We work very closely and successfully with Mrs. Tatjana Mrvoš from the Embassy in Vienna. She has initiated many joint activities which is why we are very grateful to her - said Director Klaudia Paulitsch.