

## YOUMIG - Local kick-off meeting in Szeged

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**The Municipality of Szeged, a partner in the YOUMIG project, organised its local kick-off meeting on 25-26 May, 2017 at the city's IH Event Centre. On the first day, after a local press conference, a public forum was held on the topic of youth migration, followed by a meeting of local professionals and experts in the field. Between the two events, a local blues and rock band played, whose young members have experienced living abroad themselves, and they joined in a conversation on how those experiences affect their careers and lives. On the second day of the kick-off meeting, a training was held by the staff of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office for the employees of the Mayor's Office. The participants of the training were employees working in the fields of social care, health, education, youth affairs, tourism, commerce, business administration and international relations who are likely to encounter the effects of migration during their work.**



Photo: szegedma.hu

the city of Szeged was struck by an immense natural disaster: the river Tisza flooded the whole city, as a result of which 95 percent of the buildings were destroyed. Szeged was totally reconstructed after the Great Flood, and within the next five years a beautiful downtown, adorned by palaces, was born.

As the cultural capital of the Southern Great Plains, Szeged has a major theatre and hosts the Open Air Festival every summer, which has traditions going back to the 1930s. Another cultural event, the Szeged Youth Days (SZIN), has also become well-known throughout the country.

Szeged is also important for education, with the University of Szeged attracting about 30,000 students, making it the second largest university in Hungary. Its degree programmes in life sciences are especially distinguished, including its courses in genetics, medical and pharmaceutical research as well as plant breeding. The city has a wide variety of secondary schools and vocational schools, some of which are bilingual in English, German, Italian, French and Spanish. The total number of secondary school students exceeds 14,000. There are also 27 primary schools, with more than 12,000 pupils aged 6-14.

Hungary's largest thermal water base is in Szeged, with medicinal springs from as deep as 1,000 meters, attracting leisure and health-related services alike. In 2006 the city was awarded the

Europe Prize, the highest distinction of the Council of Europe, for developing international relations and European awareness.

Szeged is close to the border with Serbia and Romania and sees a lot of illegal immigrants going to Western Europe. Migration issues feature prominently in local news; opinions, views about illegal entrants circulate in the media and in everyday life. Since 2015, when the influx of migrants was most striking here, there has been continuous reporting and information-sharing in the online and printed local media about events happening on the Hungarian-Serbian border. Much attention was paid to the installation of a fence system, to asylum issues, and events in the transit zones of nearby Tompa and Röszke. Civil movements and humanitarian actions (food, clothes and other support) also receive significant media coverage.

Besides these issues, legal migration and its consequences are also present in the news. The city is strongly influenced by young people leaving. While the statistical population of Szeged has remained unchanged over the past years, the number of permanent residents registered in the city has grown by thousands. This also proves that while many people living in Szeged - especially young ones – take their chances abroad in the hope of better living conditions, Szeged also has a strong attraction for the Hungarian-speaking people from the other side of the borders. Many young people come to Szeged to complete their secondary or university studies from Romania and Serbia. This means that in Szeged, outgoing and incoming migration is present simultaneously.

Szeged is a welcoming and growing city, and its natural population decrease is well balanced by an incoming flow. Yet this "most modern migration phenomenon" poses difficult tasks for the local government, for example in planning services, such as the number of nursery places needed, or in dealing with unforeseeable situations. YOUMIG's benefits for Szeged include looking at the motivations behind the statistics and the needs of immigrants or returnees, which are important goals in urban planning.

Given these circumstances, YOUMIG partners were curious as to how the project and its local kick-off event would be presented by the local press. *Do they understand the real purpose of the project, its content? How will they communicate this to the public?*



Examining press reports after the YOUMIG press conference, it is clear that reporting was accurate and the essence of the project was well understood. Some of the local media (e.g. Szeged TV, Szeged.hu) carried a brief report, while others added further information such as graphs and poll results, reflecting the situation in Szeged. The daily *Délmagyarország*, for instance, devoted two full pages to the topic, asked young people originally from Szeged, but now living in the Netherlands and London, about the

motives of their move. The daily also carried out research locally, collecting 742 responses to questions like:

- Does anybody from your family work/study abroad?
- Are you planning to go abroad to work/study within the next few years?
- Why would you go and work abroad?
- Would you move back to Hungary after a couple of years?

The press is mainly concerned with the migration of young people, their motives, trends and related data, statistical indicators, and the content of the project was also interpreted and communicated to the public from this side, assuming that ordinary residents are also primarily interested in such details. The project's deeper aims, the preparation of local governments for migration-related tasks and building capacities for coping, was also mentioned, however.





The **Migration Forum** attracted the attention of representatives of sister projects, government specialists from the region, experts from the police, education, NGOs, local administration (social affairs, health, commerce, business, international relations, tourism, education, youth affairs, administrative and public authority affairs), university lecturers and students, as well as high school students, altogether 63 people. Seeking feedback on questions raised by YOUMIG at the start, following some introductory facts, Gábor Attila Feleky, economist-sociologist and YOUMIG's local thematic expert, opened the floor for discussion, pondering the fundamental motivations for emigration, and return. In the latter case it was agreed that emotional reasons are dominant. In Szeged the presence of the university is vital, as it brings acquaintance with a foreign environment through programmes like Erasmus, and these can be stepping stones to migration. During university years, there is a large presence of foreign students in the city, many of them ethnic Hungarians from Vojvodina, in north Serbia. They often stay in Szeged after finishing their studies. Other students (from Arab and African countries) do not return home, but typically move on to Western Europe, yet there are some who stay in Szeged (eg. Arab doctors).

After the forum, the band called **The Members** provided entertainment, as well as a real-life example on the issues of youth migration, with two of their former players studying abroad and struggling with the questions of staying or returning.



Next, a **roundtable** of experts with 18 participants took a deeper look at the subject, and here a real dialogue emerged. The following essential statements, thoughts and attitudes were expressed:

- the richer the place, the greater the attraction for migrants,
- the “pull effect” of the university in Szeged is significant,
- people without qualifications or those who have a trade or degree which is in demand abroad (construction, catering, health sector) tend to go abroad for work,
- starting a business is easier abroad than in Hungary, where there are administrative barriers,
- it is worth paying attention to experiences shared at high school reunions, for example, and data from registering for kindergarten, which can be meaningful for migration
- while earlier only a single family member (generally the head of the family) went abroad to find work, now, the tendency is that the whole family goes together (because of this, the migration process is more difficult to reverse),
- a wider range of job opportunities and higher wages are the key motivating factors,
- standards of services (transport, cultural services, infrastructure), can also be motivating and this is significant also in terms of domestic mobility,
- the attraction of Szeged as a “liveable city” is important,
- in Szeged the number of Hungarians from Vojvodina, who fled from war, is significant, many of them study in the city and they form a strong community (eg. the local group Democratic Community of Vojvodina),
- Hungarian communities in other countries typically strive to keep their traditions (e.g. Hungarians living in Australia send their children to motherland camps),
- young adults living abroad typically do not send money home, but “consume” where they live, yet there are some who invest in Hungary, buying property (eg. farms near Szeged),

- the internet helps keeping in contact with relatives and friends left behind (older people are “forced” to learn digital skills new to them to keep in touch with grandchildren – this is the upside),
- while the Délmagyarország survey shows that the political situation in Hungary, a lack of freedom and insecurity appear as important factors to emigrate, these reasons were not emphatic at the forum,
- while Szeged loses out on emigration (brain drain, population loss), the growing presence of multinational companies in Hungary (e.g.ELI Laser Centre in Szeged), can present opportunities, too (tapping these requires more attention to the needs of the incoming labour force, including matching standards of local services to their needs, (English spoken in shops, administration, by patrolling police).

The next day, the kick-off concluded with a training held for the staff of the Mayor’s Office where 20 people were present, gathering in a computer room to get hands on experience in finding useful information on migration-related topics. Participants could ask questions on how to access the statistical data and information related to the migration of young people they might need in their work.

