



ERSTE Foundation offers every second year the Award for Social Integration. What determined ERSTE Foundation to launch this competition and what are the selection criteria for NGOs and NPOs?

With the Award for Social Integration, ERSTE Foundation wants to make a significant contribution to the social development in civil societies from Central and South Eastern European countries.

The idea of the Award was born from both the desire and the necessity to give due recognition to the role of individuals and groups in this region in creating societies that provide equal opportunities for everyone, and inclusion opportunities for disadvantaged, vulnerable groups and people with special needs. Consequently, the Award is given to innovative and creative social integration projects that have made a valuable impact and difference in the intended beneficiaries.

The main criteria for the 2011 Award remain the same as in previous award cycles: integrative impact of the project, effectiveness and quality, innovative aspect, sustainability, number and involvement of beneficiaries.

The Award for Social Integration was launched in 2007. How has the quality of the application projects evolved since then?

The Award expanded from one year to another, so I would say that with every new cycle we face more and more interesting projects. It's not so much about the quality of the projects, but about the diversity of approached issues and about the creativity of solutions found by these organizations. Each time we are impressed with their perseverance and dedication, their immense wish to make a change, with either small or more generous resources.

We also learn from people and organizations in countries we are involved and are trying to accommodate their needs so they can better develop their projects and ideas. Based on the comments and needs to further their cross-boarder cooperation with similar projects, we are at the moment developing a network that will serve for better communication and idea exchange between the NGOs and NPOs.

Another aspect that has been looked into is the possibility of alternative funding. As the situation changes and most of the traditional foreign donors are slowly leaving, there is a great need for shifting the focus toward the local corporate sector. Through the initiative developed together with Austrian Embassies we are trying to bring together our short listed NGOs and the selected companies and established cooperation that can be fruitful for the years to come.

I know that for the 2011 edition, the number of the Central and Eastern European countries that are allowed to participate has expanded. How do you select the countries that are allowed to participate at the competition?

We are committed to stable and sustainable social development in Central and Eastern Europe. ERSTE Foundation is the main shareholder of Erste Group, an international retail banking group active in this region. In the selection process we are trying to include all the young democracies from this region, with rapidly changing societies, in order to support the social integration process – when needed, which is utterly important for the political and economic stability.

We started with a pilot phase, but the goal is to include more or less the entire region.

The number of countries registered a significant evolution from one edition of the Award to another, from 4 countries in 2007 - Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia and Serbia, to 8 countries in 2009 – when Kosovo, Macedonia Montenegro and Romania joined. In 2011, the Award will expand to four more countries: Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovak Republic and Moldova, and their successful inclusion will be one of the main priorities.

Who are the jury members and how is the selection process taking place?

The application period for 2011 Award will start on 1 September 2010 and the deadline for submitting applications is 30 November 2010. Firstly all projects undergo a general eligibility review. Then six screening committees comprised of 24 independent experts from all award countries will individually evaluate and give a score to each nominated project. Approximately 100 top-rated projects will be nominated for the final selection, which ERSTE Foundation's experts will then visit in order to assess them further. All projects that pass this assessment will enter the final selection stage and will be passed on to the jury.

The jury is comprised of 20 prominent individuals from the region, leading and developing social integration areas, civic society, politics, media representatives etc.

Do you provide further support for the organizations that won the Award for Social Integration?

As a matter of fact, all shortlisted projects will become part of the pool of best practice projects and have their details posted on our Social Integration Network website (www.socialintegration.org/network). They will also become part of the ACCESS initiative, which aims to connect shortlisted projects with local businesses. In addition, all shortlisted projects will receive regional recognition for their efforts thanks to media coverage provided by professional PR consultants for a period of two years after the award ceremony in 2011.

From your experience, how do you think the external communication of NGOs and NPOs could be improved, in order to enhance their capacity of attracting funds?

External communication activities are very important, because a wide exposure of the profile, activities and achievements of NGOs, with the support of professionals, will surely increase their chances of receiving support at both regional and EU level.

What project impressed you the most of all the projects that won the Award for Social Integration?

Each project is unique in its way and it's really hard to point out just to one of them. We choose the projects for their originality and innovative approach to the problems that exist in our societies for years. What makes the difference between the NGOs are the people and their never ending strength that continues to surprise me. This makes us more determined to develop this Award even further and develop the capacities of the NGOs that are selflessly working in their societies for more cohesive communities.

Dejan Petrovic joined the ERSTE Foundation in early 2007 and is primarily responsible for projects dealing with Social Integration, with the special focus on the ERSTE Foundation Award

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for Social Integration and initiatives related to Roma issues and social activism. He finished Veterinary medicine at the University of Belgrade, but his interests turned fast into the area of human and social rights. From 1994 until 1998 he worked in the Belgrade Jewish Community where he was in charge of the development and implementation of cultural and social projects and activities. In 1999 he moved to Vienna where until 2005 he worked for the US based NGO Centropa dealing with the life of Jewish population in Central and South Eastern Europe throughout 19th and 20th century. In 2005 he established his own NGO that focuses on integration of ethnic groups.

*Interview by Rebeca Pop, Forum for International Communications
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