

What does an active citizen do and how does become active? Theoretical and empirical findings^[1]

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Abstract

Active citizens are in the heart of this study: those people who do something more besides their everyday life. E.g. they participate in community acting, do something useful for the community or they help for each other. Some questions arise: Who is an active citizen? What should a citizen do to call him/her active? What kind of competences does an active citizen need? Where can they learn these competences from? The study answers these questions based on theoretical and empirical aspects built on a questionnaire and an interview survey in Győr, Hungary, in 2017.

Keywords: active citizenship, civic competences, activities, trust, responsibility

1. INTRODUCTION

A good working democracy needs such people who are active in their community in favour of living in a better society. Active citizens do activities which are more than just being a citizen, they can do voluntary work, they can donate, they can get information from media, etc. Some questions arise: Who is an active citizen? What should a citizen do to call him active? What kind of competences does an active citizen need? Where can they learn these competences from?

In the first part of the study I will write about concept of active citizenship and about the civic competences. I will show the definitions of active citizens and those competences which people need to be active. I provide a list of activities and civic competences based on own experience and literature. I collected also the forms of learning of skills, knowledge and competences of activity. The second part of my study presents some research findings from two surveys: in April 2017 I conducted a questionnaire research in

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Győr, Hungary; in October 2017 I made 15 personal interviews about the active citizenship in Győr.

My goal is to complete the literature with empirical findings and to give some additional information about the topic for citizens, educators and also for policy makers.

2. CONCEPT OF ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

There are a wide range of approaches about the active citizenship, so it has no general definition.

Mainly the word citizenship refers to our role in the state and it is interpreted as a legal status of a citizen (Gáti, 2010). So people have rights and obligations in the society as well. Our rights can be the followings (Marshall-Bottomore, 1992; Lister, 2003 – cited by Children as active... 2008, 3): “Civil rights and individual freedoms (freedom of movement, right to privacy, freedom of speech, thought and religion, right to information, right to justice and treatment); political rights (right to vote and stand for political office); social rights (right to education, security and health); economic rights (right to own property, to conclude valid contracts and to minimum of economic welfare).”

Being active in the society means more than just rights. Active citizenship can be interpreted from economic and from social aspects. Economically people are active if they have a job and work. In a social aspect active citizenship means participation in the community in a very different way. “A core element of active citizenship is now seen as engagement in civil society through membership in or support of organisations, involvement in political debates and public consultation processes, participation in demonstrations or protests, volunteering, and awareness of topical issues.” (Policy Paper on Citizenship Education 2013, 3) Based on Nelson and Kerr (2006, 11) active citizenship means nowadays:

- „engagement and participation in society
- participation in both civil and civic society
- lifelong and life wide learning
- knowledge, skills and behaviours picked up through experience of participation in a range of contexts.”

In my reading citizens are active when they are interested in everyday life beyond their families and friendship, e.g. in other people, communities, social and economic processes, and when they act for a better society whether through lot of kind of activities or just through few of them but regularly.

A report about the active citizenship (Report of the... 2007, 2) provides a definition with a wide range of activities which takes us to the next chapter where I show the feasible activities of the active citizens. “Active Citizenship is about engagement, participation in society and valuing contributions made by individuals, whether they are employed or outside the traditional workforce. In practical

terms, this engagement and participation may mean membership of a resident's association or political party or lobby group, or volunteering to help out in a local sports club, or caring for a family member or neighbour, or simply being active and caring about the local neighbourhood, the environment as well as larger global and national issues."

3. WHAT COULD ACTIVE CITIZENS DO?

As we can read in the previous chapter there is no general definition of the active citizenship, so many authors so many approaches. Therefore there is no general list of activities which active citizens can do. I believe that there are a wide range of activities, but if a researcher would like to analyse activities he/she has to determine those ones which are used for a survey. In my paper I offer a list with 33 activities which cover all of the activity fields (Reisinger 2017).

A) activities related to civil/nonprofit organisations or good cases

- donating to civil or nonprofit organisations
- donating to local/national issues
- being a member in civil or nonprofit organisations
- being a leader in civil or nonprofit organisations
- working at civil or nonprofit organisations
- volunteer activity in civil organisations
- volunteer activity in non-civil organisations
- collecting litters
- 1% donation
- giving blood

B) activity concerned with local governments

- participation on consultation hours of local representatives
- participating in public hearings
- giving own ideas in public hearings
- participating in local forums
- giving own ideas in local forums

C) activities from home

- writing blogs
- joining to internet groups (e.g. Facebook, etc.)
- writing letters to local representatives
- writing comments on on-line contents

D) personal responsibility

- health-conscious eating
- participation on self-development training

E) monitoring and/or intervention in local/national issues

monitoring the local issues
 monitoring the national issues
 monitoring the international issues
 getting information from local media
 getting information from national media
 signing up petition
 protesting
 establishing firms

F) political participation

organising petition
 voting in referendum
 voting in EU election
 voting in local/national election

The question arises how many activities should do an active citizen? How often do they have to do these kind of activities? It is a very complex topic and not easy to answer them. One more question can have an important role. Do only the activities determine the level of activity of citizens or are there any other components? There were many surveys in the past two decades which tried to measure the activity level of active citizens, some of them identified activities, too (Reisinger-Nárai, 2017). But none of them gave clear answer to the above-mentioned questions. I believe that no one can give a factual answer because there are so many aspects of the topic. Can we say that a person who e.g. does volunteer work every month is an active citizen? I think, yes. Can we say that a person is an active citizen, if this person does e.g. volunteer work only once a year but he/she frequents the local forums a couple of times? I think, yes. Or can be a person an active citizen who sits at home and transfers money regularly to civil organisations and follows the local media to become well informed about local issues? I think, yes. Based on these examples it can be seen that there are so many faces of activities and there is no exact answer to the question: How many activities should an active citizen do? It depends on the type of the activity, on the frequency of the activity and also on the personality of the citizens. Activities can be classified in many ways, here are two of them (Reisinger-Kovács, 2018):

- formal or informal activities
- personal or community activities

Table 1 shows an additional grouping with activities taken from home or beyond home. In recent years home activities have widespread because of the quick spreading of information technologies. These kind of activities give the opportunity to citizens to be active also from home. The debates can focus on this phenomena: are they real activities? I believe, yes. But it depends, how people

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use these activities. For example sitting at home and writing offending comments is not the sign of the active citizenship, but discussing regularly current issues with other people by using the Internet can be active action. It is important to emphasize that being active only from home is not good for social life. Sometimes or often it is worth to appear in the real life, too, because personal interactions are the highest level of connection with other people which is very important in our everyday life.

Table 1 Activities taken from and beyond home

| Activities taken also from home | Activities taken beyond home |
|---|--|
| donating to civil or nonprofit organisations | donating to civil or nonprofit organisations |
| donating to local/national issues | donating to local/national issues |
| volunteer activity in non-civil organisations | being a member in civil or nonprofit organisations |
| 1% donation | being a leader in civil or nonprofit organisations |
| writing blogs | working at civil or nonprofit organisations |
| joining to internet groups (e.g. Facebook, etc.) | volunteer activity in civil and non-civil organisations |
| writing letters to local representatives | collecting litters |
| writing comments on on-line contents | giving blood |
| health-conscious eating | participation on consultation hours of local representatives |
| monitoring the local, national and international issues | participating in public hearings or local forums |
| getting information from local and national media | giving own ideas in public hearings or local forums |
| | participation on self-development training |
| | signing up petition |
| | protesting |
| | establishing firms |
| | organising petition |
| | referendum |
| | voting in EU election |
| | voting in local/national election |

Source: own table

I would like to point out that not everybody needs to be an active citizen. There are people who are not able to do and do not want to do such activities, but thinking openly for the society can be important for them, too. It is worth, because there are lot of advantages of the active citizenship. It is proved that those societies which have a high level of participation in this field are better communities.

So why active citizenship is useful? It

- „helps to address more effectively many social and economic problems, as individuals and civic organisations are involved in finding and implementing solutions
- creates real economic and social benefits as high levels of interpersonal trust reduce the costs associated with extensive rules, contracts, litigation and bureaucracy
- generates networks of support and connection, both within social groups and across groups
- benefits the individuals who participate in voluntary activities and community organisations
- strengthens the quality of decision-making through the democratic process and the sense of belonging of individuals and communities lead to a healthy and varied range of voluntary and community organisations which is good for democracy.” (Report of the ... 2007, 3)

In the empirical part I will present some results related to this topic based on interviews.

4. WHAT DO WE NEED TO BE AN ACTIVE CITIZEN?

No one is born with the ability of being active, but I believe we can learn it. But how and what kind of competences, skills and features do people have to have to be able to be an active citizen? Scientific literature labelled these kind of attributes as civic competences. Hoskins et al. (2008, 21) proposed the following elements of civic competences:

- “Knowledge: human rights and responsibilities, political literacy, historical knowledge, current affairs, diversity, cultural heritage, legal matters and how to influence policy and society;
- Skills: conflict resolution, intercultural competence, informed decision-making, creativity, ability to influence society and policy, research capability, advocacy, autonomy/agency, critical reflection, communication, debating skills, active listening, problem solving, coping with ambiguity, working with others, assessing risk;
- Attitudes: political interest, political efficacy, autonomy and independence, resilience, cultural appreciation, respect for other cultures, openness to change/difference of opinion, responsibility and openness to involvement as active citizens, influencing society and policy;
- Values: human rights, democracy, gender equality, sustainability, peace/non-violence, fairness and equity, valuing involvement as active citizens;
- Identity: sense of personal identity, sense of community identity, sense of national identity, sense of global identity.”

There are a wide range of other approaches of civic competences, but neither of them mention an important one, the trust. I believe that *trust* can be a very important factor in all social and economic processes as well, that's why I think it can be an important value in active citizenship, too. I think that also the *personal and social responsibility* is a crucial component.

Based on my experience and literature I collected those civic competences which can be necessary to be active (Table 2). Of course there are no people who possesses all of them, and nobody needs to have all of them, but people who would like to do things for their environment in some kind of way, they sure need to have some competences which make them enable to act in an active way. People with good self-knowledge will know which knowledge, skills and values do they need to be active in theirs way.

Table 2 Civic competences

| civic-related | intercultural |
|--|---|
| information processing personal responsibility | accepting cultural differences |
| social | self-knowledge |
| trust in politics trust in institutions trust in other people knowledge of civil rights ability of thinking at community level political knowledge social responsibility respect | knowledge about on-line sphere economic responsibility creativity self-dependence self-knowledge thinking in shames flexibility sense of personal identity |
| communication | |
| thoughtfulness ability of decision-making cooperation with other people cooperation with institutions ability of interpretation foreign language knowledge ability of making initiatives conflict management problem solving conscious thinking ability of arguing | |

Source: Reisinger, 2017

Above I mentioned two important components of civic competences: *trust and responsibility*. Hereinafter I explain these ones more detailed. The Cambridge Dictionary says that trust is „to believe that someone is good and honest and will not harm you, or that something is safe and reliable.”(<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/trust>) Russel Hardin (2002, 3) stated that trust is relational. It means that it depends on the two parties. As he wrote (Hardin,

2002, 4): “I trust you because I think it is in your interest to attend to my interest in the relevant matter. This is not merely to say that you and I have the same interests. Rather, it is to say have an interest in attending to my interests because, typically, you want our relationship to continue.” Hardin also said that trust is grounded on expectations, but not generalized, rather particular and it is context-sensitive. Trust can exist between people, between people and institutions, between people and systems and we can trust in ourselves, too. I think that a certain level of trust needs to be active, because those people who do not trust in each other will not get together and will not do things together. Putnam (2000) said that in those countries where the level of trust is high the society will be more balanced.

Responsibility is also an important factor. The first level is the individual responsibility, it means that people take responsibility for their own life. The next level is the social responsibility of the citizens. “This means that citizens are involved in the life of the community where they live. It means that people solve problems together, look after the environment (for example they do not litter, etc.) and care about not just their own lives, but also about the community.” (Reisinger 2013, 78) Why does responsibility matter? I believe that only those people can be active who are aware that they are the only one who can take actions for their own life hereby they can be responsible for the happenings in the society, too. They will be able to see other people, communities, public affairs, etc. and they will be able to make steps in a conscious way.

It is a very important question that from where can people learn these kind of competences? There are a wide range of learning methods, based on literature the followings can be the form of learning civic competences (e.g. Breen-Rees, 2009; Delanty, 2007; Gáti, 2010):

- family,
- formal learning (in school system),
- non-formal learning (organised learning but not in the formal system),
- informal learning (during everyday life and in the communities where people live).

Everybody learns the first things about the life from *family*. Our parents show us patterns and models for life, so parents can have an effect with their behaviour to the attitude for active citizenship to their children. If parents believe in social participation, in community life and/or they act accordingly, it can be a good example for the children, too. Also the education system (*formal learning*) can have an important role in teaching civic competences. Opinions are divided according to the usefulness of the formal learning, but a two decades research proved that a community acting and membership in youth organisations can have an effect even decades later in adult community and participatory life (Youniss et al., 1997 – referred Kinyó, 2009). Formal education can have a wide range of methods and technics, but showing these ones would exceed the topic of this study. „*Non-formal* education involves learners voluntarily opting to engage in

self-directed learning from an organised body of knowledge, directed by a designated teacher. *Informal* education or training is more incidental and spontaneous.” (Breen and Rees, 2009, 16-17)

Based on the above-mentioned forms of learning I can highlight that this process is very complex and there are no one good form of learning, mix of them can be an effective way. Besides I agree with Gollob and Weidinger (2010, 9) who suggest that the best way can be the learning by doing method: “Active citizenship is best learned by doing, not through being told about it – individuals need to be given opportunities to explore issues of democratic citizenship and human rights for themselves, not to be told how they must think or behave. Education for active citizenship is not just about the absorption of factual knowledge, but about practical understanding, skills and aptitudes, values and characters.”

5. RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1. METHODOLOGY

Based on questionnaire and interview surveys this study answers the following questions:

- When can we say that a citizen is active?
- From where can people learn civic competences?
- What kind of knowledge, skills, etc. do people need to be active in the society?

An on-line and off-line *questionnaire* survey was conducted in April 2017 among citizens in Győr, Hungary. The topic was the active citizenship. I asked people about the definition of active citizenship, about the type of activities, civic competences and measurement of the activity. A total of 254 people filled out the questionnaire. Women (64,3%) and the university graduates (50%) were overrepresented in the sample, therefore I will not generalize my conclusions.

In October 2017 I made personal *interviews* with active citizens in Győr. Fifteen citizens answered my questions about the concept of active citizenship, the different activity forms and competences. The selection of my interviewees based on the following method: I found people from my acquaintanceship and some of my interviewees suggested further citizens to be worth to ask. My goal was to interview active people, because I was curious about their opinion and motivation. I interviewed eleven women and four men, graduate citizens were overrepresented, twelve of them have university degree^[2], choosing lot of

[2] My research finding based on the questionnaire research (Reisinger-Kovács 2018) and a former national survey about the social participation (Nárai-Reisinger 2016) proved that people with higher education degree are more active in the society.

people with degree was a conscious decision. Interviewees are mainly between the age of 30 and 45 years. Six of them are members in civil organisations and do voluntary work, four of them are members or volunteers, two of them were active in this relation only in the past and three were neither active in the past nor in the present. These interviews complete the questionnaire researches in the following way: based on the questionnaires I could analyse the activity in a quantitative way, during the interviews I could discuss the activities in details. I could also ask interviewees about their opinion what do they think, who is an active citizen?

I will answer the second and third above mentioned questions based on questionnaires and interviews, only interviews will give the answer to the first question.

5.2. WHEN CAN WE SAY THAT A CITIZEN IS ACTIVE?

It is not easy to answer this question, all of my interviewees agreed with it. Five of them mentioned that political election is a base of the activity, one interviewee said that voting is not a real activity, because it is a so called obligatory activity, it is our right as a citizen. I think that voting is an important activity, but it is not enough to call someone being active, if he or she does only this activity. The other interviewees did not mention the political participation. The other approaches were the followings. Those citizens are active

- who do more than the basic rights in the society.
- who act voluntary and not by pressure.
- who act in a conscious way: they act not because they get into the activity accidentally, but they do things with a certain own goals.
- who can have an impact on their environment, on local issues.
- who do whatever they want, the most important thing that these activities have to be regular.
- who do 1% donation.
- who get a line on local and national issues, who have information what is happening around them in their city or in the world (more than half of the interviewees mentioned this aspect).

The last one is important, because we can tell our opinions, ideas in a proper way if we have enough information about the local happenings and issues. Having enough information makes people to be authentic. Some of my interviewees stressed that nowadays lot of people are characterised by giving opinions without having correct information. This can lead to lot of problems, e.g. without being informed people can give wrong information to other people, and they can get up debates. Without information people cannot manage their public life in a proper way, e.g. they do not know how to arrange things in administrative offices, or how to represent themselves in the community.

Almost all of the interviewees stressed that an active citizen does things regularly, this is the base of being active. Also itself the acting is also very important, e.g. we could say that people who are members in organisations are active, but we can say that only if they really do something as a member. Other important aspect is, that active citizens mainly focus on the local happenings, I think if people know their narrow surroundings they will be able to take actions in favour of regional or national issues. One of my interviewees highlighted that she thinks that only those people become active who do not have strong family tights, because they have more time and they are more fearless because they do not have to reckon with their family members. This interviewee mainly referred to community actions like protesting, signing petitions, etc.

Overall I can say that almost all of my interviewees agree that active citizens do some activities regularly which are not obligatory for them and can be useful for their environment.

5.3. FROM WHERE CAN PEOPLE LEARN CIVIC COMPETENCES?

In the questionnaire survey I asked people to prioritize where we can learn^[3] from how to be active. Only 146 from 254 citizen could make a real ranking, more than half of them (82) said that the family is the most important source of learning active citizenship, the less important is the non-formal education (education beyond educational institutions). The formal and informal learning are in the quite same level between the family and non-formal education. There are no differences in the ranking based on degree, so also for non-graduates and graduates the family is the most important source of civic knowledge.

Families are the most important source of civic competence knowledge in interviews, too. Nine of the interviewees said that we can learn the most from our parents and close relatives. One of them said that a child either does the same what he/she sees at home or does the opposite. The formal and informal education were mentioned only by four-four interviewees, the approaches were the followings:

- Activities are infectious: if people see that others do something, they will do, too. One of the interviewees said that she has some friends in France, they are very active and they are good examples for her, and that's why she is very motivated to do something in her environment.
- The compulsory volunteer activity in secondary schools can be useful for the future activity (if the program is well-detailed).
- The formal activity can be an important way of learning, but in Hungary there is no tradition in this relation, the public education is not ready to give enough knowledge related to active citizenship.

[3] The forms of learning are in Chapter "What do we need to be an active citizen?"

- Kindertagesstätten, Schulen können der Ort sein, an dem Kinder lernen können, dass es verschiedene Möglichkeiten gibt, aktiv zu sein (z. B. sie tun dort Dinge, die ihnen zeigen, dass es eine wichtige Sache ist), so dass diese Institutionen ihnen die Möglichkeiten dieser Aktivitätstypen zeigen können.
- Vielleicht ist direkte Bildung nicht notwendig.

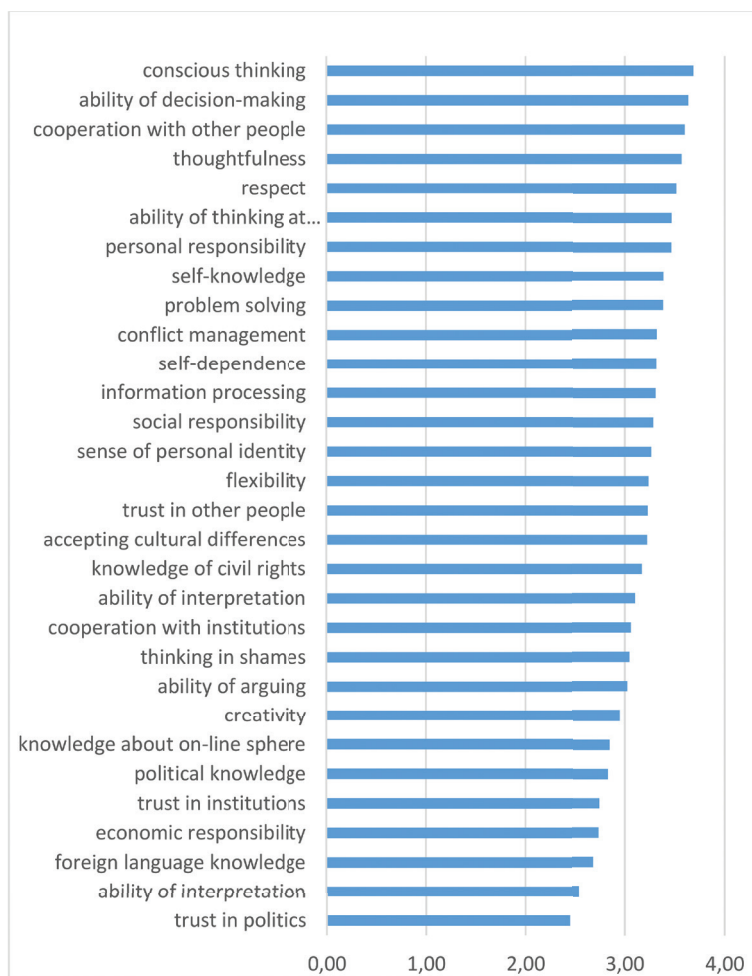
Meine Interviewten erwähnten zusätzliche Möglichkeiten, zivile Kompetenzen zu erlernen, diese sind die folgenden:

- Gute Beispiele: wo immer wir sie sehen können, können sie uns eine Botschaft mitgeben: es lohnt sich, Dinge zu tun.
- *Learning by doing*: einer meiner Interviewten zufolge kann zivile Kompetenz nicht erlernt werden, sondern nur durch die Teilnahme an Aktivitäten im wirklichen Leben.
- *Itself life* kann die Quelle für alle Aktivitäten sein.
- *Media* ist ebenfalls sehr wichtig, da fast alle Menschen besorgt über sie sind, und sie sowohl gute als auch schlechte Beispiele zeigen kann. Deshalb hat die Medien eine große Verantwortung, da sie die Themen und Inhalte, die sie weitergeben, an uns weitergeben. Medien können uns aktive Menschen, Situationen zeigen, die uns lehren können.
- *Civil organisations* können die Wichtigkeit von ziviler Kompetenz hervorheben, sie können Plattformen sein, um zu zeigen, wie man diese Kompetenzen in der Praxis einsetzt. „Eine der wichtigsten Rollen von zivilen Organisationen [...] liegt in ihrer Fähigkeit, sie zu aktivieren, ihre Gemeinschaft zu stärken und sie mit der Gesellschaft zu verbinden, und sie mit der Gesellschaft zu verbinden.“ (Nárai 2004, 627)
- *People themselves* können ebenfalls eine Lernform sein: Menschen werden aktiviert, wenn sie sehen, dass es Ereignisse/Events um sie herum gibt, mit denen sie nicht zufrieden sind.

5.4. WHAT DO WE NEED FOR BEING ACTIVE?

In der Fragebogenstudie wurde den Befragten aufgefordert, für jede der 33 zivilen Kompetenzen (siehe Kapitel 4) einen Wert zwischen 1 und 4 anzugeben. Abbildung 1 zeigt die durchschnittlichen Werte für jede Kompetenz. Die besten Werte (TOP 5) gehen an (in Klammern die durchschnittlichen Werte): bewusstes Denken (3,69); Entscheidungsfähigkeit (3,64); Zusammenarbeit mit anderen (3,6); Achtsamkeit (3,57); Respekt (3,52). Am wenigsten wichtig ist das Vertrauen in die Politik (2,45).

Figure 1 Civic competences based on a questionnaire survey



Source: Own table based on a questionnaire survey

In the interviews I asked people about what kind of competences, skills, knowledge do people need to be (more) active in the society? My interviewees did not get any list of competences, so they had to draw them by own words, so interviews enabled to get explanations about the competences. My respondents told me three-four competences, seven of them mentioned the openness, and they think that only those people can be active who are open to other people and happenings around them. Openness means that people take care about what is around them, they take in and admit the other opinions and are able to have own ones without being influenced by the others.

More than one interviewees mentioned the following competences:

- self-dependence: active citizens are able to make decisions alone, and they realize them indeed.
- interest and curiosity: active citizens are interested in local issues and other people.
- responsibility: active citizens feel and know that with their activity they have an effect on their environment , that's why they act.
- cooperation: "lonely warriors" probably will not have success to arrange things, but with cooperation managing local issues could be more effective.

The following competences and skills were referred: self-knowledge, altruism, endurance, EQ, empathy, spirit and courage, belief, good communication, conflict management, self-confidence, stability, trustworthiness. Courage is important, because active people could feel, that the others (as good as relatives, friends) take a poor view of their activity. Courage can help people in these situations to move on and to act what they believe in. Stability means that only those people can do something for the community who are friends with themselves. One of my interviewees highlighted that personal involvement could be crucial, people will act more likely if they have to do with something and it is important in their life what motivate them to make change.

6. CONCLUSION

The goal of my study was to introduce the concept of active citizenship and to answer the following questions: Who is an active citizen? What should a citizen do to call him active? What kind of competences do an active citizen need? Where can they learn these competences from?

To answer these questions, I reviewed the main literature of the topic and presented some empirical research findings based on questionnaire survey and personal interviews. I made these researches in a Hungarian city, Győr.

I provided a list of potential activities and civic competences and gave examples about what kind of forms could the learning skills, knowledge and civic competences have. As I introduced there are a wide range of competences, skills which could be important, I think every situation needs different skills and knowledge, so there is no general recipe what people need to have. It is important that also during activities citizens can learn new skills or can develop the extant ones. I believe that trust and responsibility are major competences, that's why I presented some aspects of them.

Based on interviews and questionnaires I can say that family is the most important source of knowledge about civic competence, after this come the formal and informal learning methods. My interviewees also mentioned other forms like the media, civil organisations and the learning by doing. I think there is no general

solution, how to learn these kind of competences, everybody needs to find the best for her/him; families could be the base of these processes.

With my paper I would have liked to contribute to the literature of the active citizenship and to give some research findings about Győr which can be useful for citizens, researchers and also for local governments.

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