

### **Digitalization & the European Volunteering Capital competition:**

#### **How has the pandemic affected competition? How important are the digital tools in this?**

On 7th February 2020 a huge event with several thousand people in attendance took place in Padova. This event was the Opening Ceremony of Padova's year as the European Volunteering Capital 2020. There were many prestigious guests such as the President of Italy and the Mayor of Padova, but also many thousands of ordinary people, volunteers and future volunteers there to share in this important moment of European recognition. At that time we had heard about risks presented by the COVID19 virus and signs alerting to the symptoms were available in the airport but otherwise the event and the ideas for the next steps continued as normal. Only a few days later, as COVID19 cases began to appear in the region it became apparent that amendments and adjustments would need to be made to the carefully laid plans that had been subject to extensive and diligent preparations for more than two years.

The European Volunteering Capital Competition is not awarded, as other similar European competitions, on the basis of a plan for the year. The title is given due to the evidence presented of the existing policies and strategies that are in place to support and promote volunteering and the only requirement from the competition organisers (the Centre for European Volunteering - CEV) is for a suitable Opening and Closing Ceremony. Nevertheless, it is natural that the winning municipalities wish to implement some extraordinary activities during their year as title holders. In the case of Padova different working groups and roundtables to discuss and explore issues related to the development of volunteering Padova as well as a study visit for other candidates and winners of the European Volunteering Capital competition, to enable them to learn more first hand about how volunteering is implemented in practice in Padova, were planned. Representatives from Padova were also looking forward to sharing their experiences with a wider audience in different events across Europe. CEV also planned to hold their Autumn Volunteering Congress in Padova with over 50 guests from all across Europe.

At first, when the lockdown was announced in March 2020 it was thought that only a temporary postponement of some of the planned activities would be needed but as the weeks went by it became clearer that a broader re-think would be required. Not wanting to lose the opportunities for exchange of practice, experience and ideas, activities in relation to those being held locally in Padova and also those that would enable Padova to engage on a European level slowly began to move online. In a sector relatively inexperienced in online

events, this presented some challenges but also opportunities. Operating parts of the competition in the digital sphere was a forced necessity in 2020 but some of the innovations that were imposed could very well be here to stay!

The first international event that had to be cancelled was a conference in Ireland that was looking at volunteering in events. Representatives from Padova were due to take part to present their experiences in this field. Once travel to Ireland became impossible and the event was cancelled it was decided to transfer the format online. This change meant that Padova was able to share their experience to an even wider audience than would have been possible in Ireland due to the fact that participants who would not have travelled to Ireland due to budget constraints etc were able to participate online. The online format also meant that we were not limited to those European Volunteering Capital Candidates Community (EVCCC) members who would have been able to travel to Ireland and many more could participate online, sharing their experiences and learning from those of others.

Prior to this event, which took place in June 2020, a webinar was also organised in April followed by a second one in July, looking at volunteering in the COVID 19 crisis (VISCOVID19 Webinars). In the first one, both Padova (EV Capital 2020) and Berlin (EV Capital 2021) were able to present their experiences to a wide European audience. These webinars were both attended by representatives from the EVCCC and their localities and were additional opportunities necessary because of the COVID19 crisis and the need to share experiences but also made possible by the digital means becoming more widely available and accessible at that time.

The Solidaria festival in Padova is a regular annual event, but for the year of Padova's EV Capital title an even more international approach was planned. Scheduled for September 2020 there was hope during the summer that it could proceed as normal but towards the start of September it became apparent that this was not to be the case and that an online version of the festival would need to be organised. The capacities of Facebook and YouTube live streaming possibilities were harnessed to good effect bringing the Solidaria experience not only to the citizens of Padova but also more widely across Italy and Europe. Meanwhile, the roundtable discussion topics connected to volunteering and solidarity that had been planned in Padova throughout the whole of 2020 as cross-sector spaces for reflection and future planning involving a variety of different stakeholders were also moved online. During the pandemic the Volunteer Centre in Padova was able to quickly implement a system to geolocalise all the volunteers in order to be able to allocate tasks in a timely and efficient manner to the closest available volunteers in a safe way. In addition, thanks to systems such as YouTube and Google Meet, the centre was rapidly able to put in place the necessary training programmes for volunteers at a low cost. This agility and flexibility to respond to changing needs in a dynamic situation as part of a broad and comprehensive municipality-based volunteering strategy founded in cross sector partnerships and long term vision is just one of the reasons why Padova was awarded the EV Capital title for 2020.

CEV had planned to hold the Autumn Volunteering Congress 2020 in Padova in October. The event was to comprise a study visit, General Assembly, EV Capital 2022 Candidate presentations, a seminar and a conference. As the situation improved towards the autumn, plans had gone ahead for an in-person event. However, only a couple of days before the event was due to start things took a turn for the worse and it became clear that this was no longer a possibility. Rather than cancelling, all the experiences from the previous months of digitalisation of activities came into play. Within a few short hours the Congress programme was adapted to the online format. The study visit element had to be cancelled but all the other components planned as part of the Congress went ahead online. Whilst this limited the interaction between people, especially in the non-formal moments, it also, as in previous experiences, opened up the possibility of participation to those who would not have been able, for financial or other reasons, to travel in person to Padova.

As Padova's year as the EV Capital was drawing to a close it was obvious that a Closing Ceremony with in-person participation was not going to be possible. Despite all the successes with online formats it was felt that for the closing ceremony having participants in person would be a significant feature for its success. It was agreed that the ceremony would be postponed to 2021. This meant however, that an online format was required for the announcement of the EV Capital 2022 as this would ordinarily have taken place in the closing ceremony.

In order to frame the announcement in a wider event, as would have been the case for the closing ceremony, it was decided that it would take place in connection with the Gattamelata and FOCSIV award ceremonies for volunteers organised in collaboration with Padova EV Capital 2020. This ceremony was hybrid in the sense that some of the presenters and musical entertainment were physically present in a theatre in Padova but that other contributions would be made by recorded video message or via an online connection. The event was live streamed and also broadcast on regional TV. By having this hybrid format we were able to engage more senior level European policymakers than would have been possible in a solely physical event, for example the President of the European Parliament and Romano Prodi, Italian politician and one of the former presidents of the European Commission as well former Italian Prime Minister. The emotion of announcing the winner was somewhat lost in the online format, but it also meant that more of the local level stakeholders could watch the proceedings and feel part of the process in a more direct way than was ever possible when only physical winner announcement events were held.

The opening ceremony for the EV Capital 2021, Berlin was held in February, again in a hybrid format with a panel of speakers present in Berlin and other interventions shared as video presentations. The event was live streamed and attracted a wider audience than usual for physical events, with 1200 participants it was also larger than it would have been as a physical event. The online format again meant that recorded interventions from high level representatives was possible and fitted better with the overall event format than for physical

events in the past when video interventions, especially from high level speakers gave the impression that they were not so committed to the cause by »only« sending a video rather than being there in person.

The thematic discussion groups taking place with volunteering stakeholders from Berlin were also re-directed online. In this case, they were a continuation of discussions that had already been taking place pre-covid and in many cases involved the same actors so moving online was facilitated by the fact that participants already knew each other. Digital issues and volunteering were already foreseen by the EV Capital Berlin team as an important component to explore even before the pandemic. With the innovation contest, it has been possible to showcase in Berlin new ways and concepts to improve volunteering in the digital world. This has ranged from innovative campaigns or new ways of putting volunteering into practice. There has been a focus on methodologies that rethink and implement volunteering while also strengthening social cohesion. <sup>1</sup>

As with Padova, CEV's Autumn volunteering Congress 2021 was planned to be held in Berlin. In this case the COVID19 situation had improved and physical events were possible in Berlin. Some people however were still not able to attend in person due to COVID19 restrictions or other reasons related to capacity of the organisations etc. Having this in mind different components of the Congress were prepared for hybrid format ensuring as much as possible that participation online and offline was possible and not limited to passive viewing online through a livestream. The hybrid character was most challenging when there were delays in the schedule for the physical participants and the online participants needed to wait without actually being part of the dynamic that caused the delay. Conversely when technical issues caused online delays and the physical participants had to wait for the issues to be solved. Patience and understanding were required on both sides. The study visit was the most challenging to prepare in hybrid format and live-streaming of the visits proved too technically challenging but one organisation was able to provide a video presentation that was shared online.

The Closing Ceremony for Berlin EV Capital 2021 will be held on the 5th of December, International Volunteer Day. It is planned as a small ceremony, keeping within the guidelines for numbers of guests able to be present physically and supported by live-streaming<sup>2</sup>. This will enable the volunteers and local partners of the EV Capital 2023 candidates municipalities to be able to view the moment when the winner is announced and also for those stakeholders in Gdansk, EV Capital 2022, unable to travel to Berlin to also enjoy the moment when the title is handed over.

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<sup>1</sup> Innovation Contest: <https://freiwilligenhauptstadt.berlin/en/innovation-contest>

<sup>2</sup> <https://freiwilligenhauptstadt.berlin/>

The move to virtual and hybrid activities as part of the European Volunteering Capital competition has not been without its challenges but it has also meant that more people could participate in and share some of the significant moments and also that the overall carbon footprint of the competition has been reduced.

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