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Valuing Education and Experience of Local councillors Valoriser les Acquis de l'Expérience des Élus locaux

Leonardo da Vinci pilot project – Transfer of Innovation
Initiated by INDL (leader) and iriv (coordinator)
In France, Austria, Greece, Italy, Lithuania and Poland

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Editorial: This was the va2el Project ...

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VA2EL —
Valuing Education
and Experience
for Local Councillors
in Europe

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Local councillors are playing a crucial role in the local democracy process. The responsibilities they are undertaking under the different national law enhancing the decentralisation process are more and more extended. The reality of the »job« of local councillors differ from one country to another, but their motivations remain the same: serving the common purpose and answering the demands of their fellow citizens. The »professionalization« of the mandate of local councillors has been a consequence of the complex environment in which they are working: more and more rules to apply coming both from national and European levels; more and more duties undertaken by local councillors with the decentralisation process.

Summary of the project

In all European countries, new powers and competences have been delegated to local authorities (towns, departments, regions) and their elected managers, the local councillors, in various fields (social, economic, cultural and environmental). The professional environment of such local leaders has become more and more complex.

Local councillors are demanding that their experience should be taken into account to be more efficient for their elective work but also when they have to come back on the labour market.

The va2el project proposes a concrete tool and method: an e-portfolio meant to identify the main activities, skills and competences, training to be proposed and an action plan on the basis of needs expressed by local councillors. This e-portfolio takes into account the different status of local councillors in Europe and the tasks they have to fulfil in the local authorities of the different countries; the administrative context is a main issue for the delegation of competences. A European portfolio for voluntary managers, meant to identify skills and competences to be used on the labour market, has been chosen for the transfer of innovation as their profile is very similar to those of local councillors.

Since specialised skills and competences in technical and administrative matters, in entertainment and management, are required to fulfil their tasks in their daily work, local councillors often discover that they have to improve their skills and competences. The project »Valuing Education and Experience for Local councillors in Europe« (va2el) proposes a portfolio, available through Internet (e-portfolio) for local councillors to help them to identify and to value the specific skills and competences acquired through their political management experience and it also identifies required training to enhance and improve their professional perspective.

In our interviews, the local councillors often answered that they are mainly motivated by the will to be involved, to be active on the grounds, to make a difference and improve local life. They feel useful for their community, they like the idea to serve the common purpose, to transmit values, to apply the law, to support and promote public policy.

The project was initiated and directed by the experts of the French partner organisation IRIV – Institut de Recherche et d'Information sur le Volontariat and it was supported by the European programme Leonardo da Vinci.

Results in Detail

I. Evolution of the role of local councillors in Europe and the need for a status

The development of local and regional democracy was the main innovation of the 20th century. The recognition of local democracy by the Council of Europe member states led to the elaboration of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in the eighties — the first international binding treaty that guarantees the rights of communities and their elected authorities. This text, which affirms the role of communities as the first level for the exercise of democracy, has become the benchmark international treaty in this area.



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II. Being a local councillor in Europe in 2010: a challenging »job«

Whatever their names or status (mayors, deputy mayors ...), local councillors fulfill the same kind of mission in all the partner countries: answering demands expressed by the population according to the legal mandate they have been given by the law. They are working for the common purpose. They are actively participating in the city life. They are expected to respect their electoral commitments and at the same time to defend the general interest in the perspective of a sustainable development and equal rights for all their fellow citizens: those who have elected them and those who haven't.

As far as the autonomous powers of municipalities are concerned, we may find the same kind of services delivered by the local levels of administration (municipalities) in mainly all the six countries:

- civil registration and civil service:
appointment of local officers and public servants
- police: public order and local police
- transport, local traffic management and urban transport,
school transport and public transport
- local planning, local infrastructures
- Economic incentives, economic development
- social welfare: social services and local health regulations,
optional services such as daycare, social assistance
- healthcare: local healthcare centers and hospitals
- environment: water, sewage, roads, household refuse,
water and gas infrastructures, environmental issues
(protection of nature), waste management
- culture
- education: primary schools, school-related services,
pre-school childcare, (also secondary and vocational
schools in Lithuania), school transport
- leisure and recreation
- agriculture, fire protection

III. Profile and motivations expressed by local councillors

Being a local councillor is a personal choice.

Many reasons may explain this choice.

Most of the local councillors express a concern for the public purpose (res publica). They want to serve the common interest and accept to dedicate a lot of time and energy to their city. They are often involved in associations, political parties or trade unions.

Many local councillors feel a social and political legitimacy towards their fellow citizens. They have the feeling of being useful to the Community, to serve the public interest, to transmit values, to apply the law, to enhance and support public policy. They mean to respect their commitments towards their fellow citizens and to keep their support.

They want to serve the general public as they address both the publics with special demands such as the disabled and the disadvantaged population but also the average («normal») population.

They are usually active and sociable and motivated by the possibility to influence decisions being made by the local authorities: to contribute to improve life quality of their town and district.

They are prepared to overcome difficulties, to adapt permanently and to keep on proposing new projects that would answer the population's demands and would follow the ever more and more complex legislation and rules.

They like to work in a team: to enhance relations with other local councillors but also with professionals (paid staff of the city hall/town). They mean to create a relation of solidarity among local councillors: especially among associations for local councillors or any network gathering local councillors (formal or informal).

They usually have the will to transmit their own experience: to support other local councillors and to prepare the future to enhance the renewal of the local team taking into account equality of chances, men/women, juniors/seniors.

In their elective mandate, local councillors have found a source of personal development and challenge: a form of recognition outside both professional and family life.

They sometimes follow a family tradition: their father/mother or grand-father/grand-mother or both were already local councillors. Some of them expect to strengthen a social status; they are motivated by a form of personal and social ambition. Some local councillors have the feeling to belong to an «elite» – this was underlined by Polish local councillors – this might be especially important for people with egalitarian backgrounds. Some local councillors want to gain power, to make connections, to build social networks.

Most of the local councillors have a passion for politics, the desire to have their own values and ideas put into practice. They want to improve people's living condition: they have the feeling to work for the sake of the local community and for their country.

Some involvements are also explained as an act of rebellion as they disagree with the current governors' behaviour, especially the use of public resources. This motivation was underlined by Italian local councillors.

In other cases, they were the only ones for the job, there was no other candidate. Some of them mean to promote the idea of choice, as their profile was different from the other local councillors'. This idea has been highlighted by French local councillors.

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Sitographie:

www.aae.org.gr
www.amf.asso.fr
www.aric.asso.fr
www.indl.fr
www.iriv.net
www.irss.pl
www.kaunas.ldrmt.lt
www.oikodrom.org

More Information on
www.va2el.eu

Voices of Selected Councillors in the Partner Countries

Through va2el, the scientific team discovered a sector of socio-political life that the public opinion is not aware of. In the basic study, we saw the many differences between the European countries based on their historically grown administration.

Our interviews represented a good demographical sample — men/women, old/young, highly different social status and educational and professional background, small villages with mostly rural challenges and small cities with their cultural and service character.

For the future, the results suggest a new project financed by the European Union that would provide training, capacity building and awareness raising beyond the topic of va2el which was the e-portfolio.

The local councillors that we were in contact with all adhered to such an idea of formal/informal learning, including different European countries.

AUSTRIA

Maritta Sturminger, looking back at 20 years of activity in Hietzing:

I have divided emotions regarding my job as local councillor: there is no other political job so near to the voters. But it has not always been rewarding, there were also lots of disappointments. You meet the basic personal needs of the citizens and you realize their strengths in the expression of their rights, yet they are not very efficient in recognizing the needs of their neighbours in the very first meaning of the word. The responsibility of local politics sometimes has to recur on the legal framework in order to find solutions that can be agreed by the various stakeholders of a local conflict. These were certainly the most rewarding moments.

FRANCE

Local Councillors value their experience in France

13 local councillors in the department of Hautes Pyrénées in France, the mayors of micro, small and medium municipalities have identified experiential learning that they have built during their election period. They showed a large diversity of activities and tasks performed by elected officials, a source of skills which until then had never been formalized.

Words of local councillors:

Catherine: »An approach that allows us to reflect on what we have done.«
Jean Louis: »The e-portfolio is a tool to make the point and to realize all that we have learned.«

GREECE

Kostas Kokkoris, Municipal Councillor in the Municipality of Glyfada, a big suburb of Athens with 83.000 inhabitants

I have been always interested and involved in administration activities. The transparency in public financials is the major challenge for me. My mandate offered me the opportunity to cooperate with colleagues from other municipalities in Greece and abroad and acquire a broader view of the field. Although I have felt disappointed many times I never regret for this choice because I think it is my duty to intervene in public affairs.

My mandate helped me to improve my foreign languages which is crucial for a Greek professional who should communicate with colleagues from other countries especially in the EU context which strengthened the cooperation dimension. My mandate motivated me to acquire new competences in ICTs and I want to further improve them since they are of major significance for the promotion of democracy in the local communities as well as in the labor market.

Va2el was the first time I faced the relationship between profession and mandate in a systematic manner. I regard the va2el project as very challenging because all the things we have learned and the tasks we are able to perform, thanks to our mandate, have to be recognized. The portfolio can support our effort towards the modernization of the Municipal services which is necessary due to the transfer of competences from central government by the beginning of next year.

Voices of Selected Councillors in the Partner Countries



AUSTRIA



FRANCE



GREECE



ITALY



LITHUANIA



POLAND

LITHUANIA

Danutė Martinkėnienė, Local Councillor in the Municipality of Biržai

Va2el is interesting to me especially in the way that it creates opportunity to revise my activity from aside, also evaluate my steps, experiences I have and competences I've acquired. It would be a much more useful tool for the young persons, but in my age it helps to systemize my experience and takes possibility and knowledge for younger politicians colleagues to evaluate their competences using the e-portfolio. People from my electorate urge me to participate in the next election again and I think I have to ...

POLAND

In November 2010, local elections took place in Poland. After the election, it appeared that the majority of councillors of the previous term were re-elected. One of the councillors involved in the va2el experiment:

»This situation could also attest the fact that Polish local councillors aren't looking for new career paths and every year, we observe mainly the stabilization of the socio-economic background. Perhaps the va2el e-portfolio could be one of the tools for Polish councillors to better utilize their competence in the labor market. I refer to the councillors who could increase their mobility in the labor market.«

More Information on www.va2el.eu