



Creativity and Innovation in Town-Twinning Activities in Europe and Southeastern Europe Project Results



ALDA
Association of Local
Democracy Agencies



Europe for Citizens
Programme





Introduction

Nowadays, most European municipalities have some sort of twinning relations with other European or international cities – you yourself might have personally benefited from such a partnership, be it at school or university for an exchange with another country or by visiting a cultural event in honour of the twin city.

Although the first twinning agreements were recorded after World War I, the real intensification of international contacts of local authorities began after the Second World War. Citizens and politicians from all over Europe understood the need to develop closer ties between European countries in order to establish the vision of a peaceful and united Europe. Twinning allowed them to face common problems jointly and, eventually, create ties of friendship between their inhabitants and decision makers. Twinning contributed considerably to the reconciliation of the former “hereditary” enemies France and Germany and enabled a first generation to truly feel European. The primary values represented by town twinning are friendship, cooperation and mutual comprehension between the people and peoples of Europe.

Thus, town twinning is the expression of European unity and identity built from the grass roots; it is a visible form of cooperation between citizens from different regions and with different backgrounds and cultures.

Traditionally, education and culture are the focus of twinning relations. But the potential of twinning goes way beyond these subjects. In particular, local authorities have built economic ties through twinning relations. Other partnerships are based on the mutual improvement of local governance or environmental issues – the possibilities of twinning relations are as manifold as municipalities themselves.

That is why twinning is a very flexible instrument. It can take place between small villages, towns or regions; it can focus on a whole range of issues (art, culture, youth, local economic development, social inclusions, environmental protection, etc) and involve a wide range of actors from the twin communities.

Moreover, twinning can bring many benefits to the involved communities: the opportunity to share problems, exchange best practices, understand different viewpoints and better understand European integration. Of course, twinning can also positively affect the economic development of the partner municipalities.

For all these reasons, the European Union fosters twinning agreements as a highly modern and accessible way of creating international ties and fostering Europeanization in old, new and future member states of the Union. An important instrument in this context is the programme “Europe for Citizens”, in the framework of which the present project was co-financed.

The project partners have joined forces to further develop the potential of town twinning. In this publication, you will find the results of their discussions: various approaches to town twinning, methods and experiences. They hope to inspire other local authorities to create new twinning agreements and activities.

The project: CITIES – Creativity and Innovation in Town-Twinning Initiatives in Europe and Southeastern Europe

The European project “CITIES” aimed at promoting innovation and creativity in the framework of town twinning as a way to revitalize and develop town-twinning relationships. The project involved partners – associations of municipalities and civil society organisations - from old, new and forthcoming European Union Member States and thus strengthened links between them. A special focus was set on Southeastern Europe.

OBJECTIVES

The project aimed at:

- Promoting the concept of town twinning;
- Starting, revitalising, and developing town twinning relationships;
- Improving the quality of activities within existing twinning relationships, especially by means of developing thematic cooperation;
- Developing new skills amongst those who are responsible for twinning activities at a local level;
- Promoting exchange of good practices in the field of town twinning.

ACTIVITIES OF THE PROJECT

CITIES was implemented through a set of activities that encouraged the exchange of good practices among partners and other twinning stakeholders. More precisely, the activities included seven national twinning workshops/conferences and one international closing conference.

These workshops took place in different partner countries of the project, treating related themes. The objective of the workshops was to contribute to the development of thematic co-operation and twinning potentials of national communities in all the partner countries.

The first of the **national workshops**, which also constituted the kick-off event of the project,

took place in **Shkodra (Albania)**.

The others were organised in the following locations: **Bitola (Macedonia), Bratislava (Slovakia), Gabrovo (Bulgaria), Varna (Bulgaria), Vilnius (Lithuania), Permet, Sarandra and Kamza (Albania)**.

The project closed with an **international conference** on twinning in **Dordrecht (The Netherlands)** in January 2011.

PARTNERS

The CITIES project was implemented by the Association of Local Democracy Agencies (ALDA) in cooperation with (see presentation of partners, pages 19-22):

- the Association of Municipalities from Albania;
- the Regional Association of Municipalities “Central Stara Planina” and the Union of Bulgarian Black Sea Local Authorities from Bulgaria;
- the Association of Local Authorities in Lithuania;
- ECOVAST – National section for the Republic of Macedonia;
- the International Co-operation Agency of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities;
- the Union of Towns and Cities of Slovakia.

DURATION

The project was launched on 1st February 2010 and ended on 31st January 2011.

The main results of the project CITIES

The project led to interesting and fruitful results issued from the joint reflection made by Local Authorities and Civil Society Organisations (CSO) involved during all the phases of the project.

Generally, it is crucial to provide **capacity-building activities** for local stakeholders in order to prepare them for international cooperation relations, e.g. by improving municipalities' knowledge about EU policies to improve awareness of opportunities and challenges, as well as the understanding of European legislation (often perceived as too complex). Lobbying and networking make it easier to apply for funds and influence decisions; local authorities' networking should thus be facilitated by higher levels of government.

When thinking to establish a twinning agreement, it is important to **involve a large number of local stakeholders** in twinning activities in order to make them "all for all" (e.g. cultural institutions, sports clubs, businesses, social clubs, scientific associations).

In this regard, **public-private partnerships** play a crucial role. Cooperation between local authorities and CSOs can be beneficial for both sides. In twinning, this kind of partnerships can help to develop creative solutions, to get local people involved, and implement long-term solutions.

The project partners consider numerous fields of cooperation meaningful, be it science, agriculture, economy or trade. A special focus was set on the following fields:

Twinning relations can be used as a **means of improving local governance**, thus having positive effects on the quality of services provided by local authorities and on their democratic legitimacy. In this regard, twin cities can share information, assist each other in the analysis of each municipality's needs, give peer reviews on the situation of local governance and thus help each other to improve local governance (e.g. by fighting corruption). This has a social and economic benefit for all partners involved.

Twinning can be a means of **cultural and economic development**, especially touristic development. This is particularly the case for the establishment of cultural heritage relations.

Promoting cultural diversity can thus have an impact on the current economic situation and also has a social dimension.

The promotion of **cooperation between universities** was pointed out as a good tool for innovative town-twinning relationships. Together with the involvement of other actors, this kind of relations can benefit both partners of the twinning relations.

The project identified some weaknesses and strengths of twinning relations.

Weaknesses mainly concern limited funds, language barriers, insufficient human resources

and activity coordination with partner towns, search for partners for EU projects, complexity of application documents, reserves in marketing communication (printed materials) and the absence of marketing strategies in individual towns.

partners from non-EU member states. They underline the need to extend the Europe for Citizens programme, at least into the close neighbourhood of the EU and to former Soviet states.

The **strengths** of twinning cooperation and partnerships are: making mutual acquaintance with cultures, exchange stays within high schools and universities, gaining inspiration for improvement of life quality in partner cities and the establishing of personal friendships among citizens of partner towns.

Furthermore, the project established a new vision for twinning initiatives, with the cities as an interface. Municipalities as an interface should be transformational (change the existing structures, have new functions, redefine the public space), open (allow involvement, integrate different social groups, create communities), provide for dialogue (communication, networking, Schengen) and be environmental (sustainable solutions, water management, public space).

The key conclusion of the discussions was that the Europe for Citizens programme presents an excellent opportunity for small-scale and start-up initiatives for cooperation between local authorities, involving at the same time CSOs and private stakeholders in general. The project partners have multiple cooperation links with



Advice to develop twinning activities

WHAT MAKES TWINNING ACTIVITIES EFFECTIVE?

- Professional staff and facilitators
- Supportive city hall, staff of the honorary consulate, NGO leaders, specialized agencies
- Size of the city + similar organisations willing to co-operate
- Associations and foundations with international activities
- Cooperation with local Civil Society Organisations
- Festivals
- National programmes
- Bilateral programmes (foundations, programmes of co-operation)
- International programmes (UN)
- EU programmes (Youth in Action, Europe for Citizens)

WHAT CAN MAKE TOWN TWINNING INEFFECTIVE?

- Shortage of qualified staff
- Employment of staff working without passion
- Lack of planning
- Limited resources
- Lack of knowledge on funds and programmes
- Distance
- Cultural differences
- Visa regime
- Lack of facilitators
- Negative approach of local authorities to town twinning
- Limited scope of activities

PLANNING

- Long-term planning (particularly with Western EU countries)
- Quick reaction on short-term proposals
- Consider study visits to prepare plans
- Invitation of managers of respective organisations and institutions

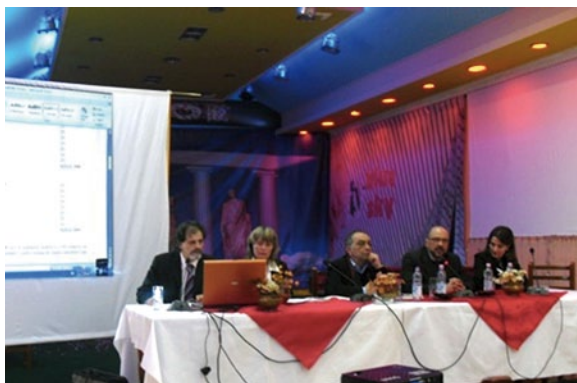
REPORTS AND DISSEMINATION

- Reports of international co-operation including town twinning, twice a year for the councillors
- Internet reporting with calendar
- BA and MA papers and student essays
- DVD
- CD with pictures
- Newsletters, brochures, publication

Reports from the national workshops and conferences

Launching workshop

Shkodra (Albania), 24th March 2010



This first meeting marked the beginning of the project "CITIES" and was organised with the support of the Local Democracy Agency (LDA) Albania. It united local representatives, teachers, lecturers and students from the University of Shkodra. Key speakers were professors from the University of Salento (Italy), who are partners of the LDA Albania.

The workshop started with a presentation of the project and of the opportunities that the programme Europe for Citizens offers for Balkan countries (with a special focus on Albania).

A **first round-table** was held on the topic of European integration through town twinning. The municipality of Shkodra presented its international cooperation with municipalities from Italy, Turkey and Greece. A concrete result of this cooperation is a social research centre in Shkodra that will be opened within the university with the support of Italian municipalities.

The **second round-table** dealt with the cooperation project between the university of Salento and the municipality of Shkodra. They would like to create a Master in Public Administration, to train future Albanian civil servants. The subjects focused on will be sociology, economy and project management. The reaction of the participants to this proposal was quite positive, but some were

doubtful concerning the job opportunities of this study curriculum.

The round-table was moderated by the Union of Towns and Cities of Slovakia, partner of CITIES.

A conclusion of the day was that **cooperation between universities is a good tool for innovative town-twinning relationships.**

It is particularly promising in Albania, although in this particular case, it demands high involvement by the university representatives.



National Conference Bitola (Macedonia), 1st October 2010



- Establishing public-private partnerships between local NGOs, municipalities and the business sector.

This conference was organised by ECOVAST Macedonia. The Association of Local Authorities in Lithuania, partner of CITIES, contributed to this conference.

The conference in Bitola united representatives from various sectors and municipalities. It included presentations of the CITIES project, and of the "Europe for Citizens" programme. Representatives of a number of municipalities (Bitola, Kavadarci, Kratovo, Tetovo, Veles and Kriva Palanka) presented their town twinning experiences.

The participants were then divided into four group workshops that came up with new ideas for town twinning. The results were presented (see below).

At the end of the Conference lunch was served. Participants from other towns, had the opportunity to visit the old town.

The **proposals** made during this conference include:

- Involvement of a large number of local stakeholders in twinning activities to make them "all for all" (e.g. cultural institutions, sports clubs, businesses, social clubs, scientific associations)
- Capacity-building for local stakeholders for international cooperation
- Fields of cooperation suggested include: science, agriculture, economy and trade (e.g. encouraging local economic development by sharing scientific knowledge about agriculture)



National Conference Bratislava (Slovakia), 12th November 2010



The Conference focused on the promotion of EU Active Citizenship Programme, history and the concept of Europe wide town-twinning initiatives, with a focus on revitalisation and developing of town-twinning relationships and strengthening cooperation with the Universities in the Regions.

All participants took part in the Conference's workshops. They represented the municipalities - cities and towns of Bratislava region, universities and research centres, and non-government organisations.

The conference included presentations by the municipalities of Bratislava and Košice about the development of thematic cooperation and twinning potential of European and Slovak municipalities.

The towns of Pezinok, Kremnica and Trnava presented good local practices in twinning on the subjects of cultural and wine route tourism and the development of citizen participation.

A workshop on an innovative tool for Europe wide twinning initiatives included contributions by the Foundation for Development of Bielsko-Biała and of the universities of Bratislava and Banská Bystrica.

Good practices from the workshops include:

- diversified cooperation, including fields like science, territorial development, marketing and tourism, culture and transport infrastructure;

- common work on tourism (multilingual common cultural calendar, common festivals and sports events);
- join forces to increase influence in international structures and institutions.

The participants of the conference also defined **strengths and weaknesses of trans-national cooperation.**

Weaknesses concern limited funds, language barriers, insufficient human resources and activity coordination with partner towns, search for partners for EU projects, complexity of application documents, reserves in marketing communication (printed materials) and the absence of marketing strategies in individual towns.

The **strengths** of cooperation and partnerships are: making mutual acquaintance with cultures, exchange stays within high schools and universities, gaining inspiration for improvement of life quality in partner cities and the establishing of personal friendships among citizens of partner towns.

Furthermore, the participants established a new vision for twinning initiatives, with the **city as an interface.**

The municipality as an interface should be:

- **transformational** (changes the existing structures, has new functions, redefines the public space),
- open (allows involvement, integrates different social groups, creates communities),
- provide for dialogue (communication, networking, Schengen) and be environmental (sustainable solutions, water management, public space).

This conference was organised by the Union of Towns and Cities of Slovakia.

National Conference

“Creativity and innovations in twinned cities initiatives”

Gabrovo (Bulgaria), 25th November 2010

This conference united representatives of municipalities, NGOs and students of Public Administration.

During the conference, the Municipality of Gabrovo presented its experience with its partnership with the Italian municipality of Nichelino, which is mostly concentrated on urban regeneration, planning and management. The mutually beneficial cooperation was based on preliminary analysis of both towns' needs and potential. So the twinning started with a technical assistance and exchange of knowledge in the fields of common interest. Just after that the Bulgarian and the Italian mayor have signed a twinning paper. This partnership benefited greatly from the Operational Programme “Regional Development”.

The conference also included presentations of the programme “Europe for Citizens”, the Lisbon Treaty (with a focus on the Citizens' Initiative).

RAM “Stara Planina” presented its experience in supporting the creative cooperation between Bulgarian and other European municipalities, including cooperation with towns in Germany, Russia, France, and Albania.

Following **proposals** to improve twinning initiatives were made during the discussion:

- Twinning relations can be initiated by the implementation of a common development programme;
- A thorough needs analysis in both partner towns should precede the twinning agreements to make sure that the activities benefit both partners.

This conference was organised by the Regional Association of Municipalities “Central Stara Planina”, partner of CITIES, and attended by ALDA (represented by its vice-president Dobrica Milovanovic).

National Conference “Twinning Programmes through Good Local Practices Exchange” Varna (Bulgaria), 16th December 2010

The second Bulgarian conference in the framework of the programme united representatives of municipalities located on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast as well as from NGOs that are active in the region.

This conference was organised by the Union of Bulgarian Black Sea Local Authorities.

The Union of Bulgarian Black Sea Local Authorities presented its activities in the field of fostering town twinning among its members. The municipalities of Varna, Bourgas, Balchik and Byala shared their experience with town twinning. According to them, the main benefits of their twinning activities were the involvement in successful project consortia applying for financial support by various European programmes.

Following recommendations can be taken from good practices presented during the conference:

- partner with twin city in applications for projects funded by the European Union and other donors in order to enlarge and enhance the twinning activities;
- exchange municipal experts to find solutions to similar problems in the twinned cities;
- organise annual business events to create strong links between economic actors from the twinned cities.

Participants found the event useful because it gave them the opportunity to discuss new perspectives of town-twinning relationships between cities and discover ways of finding a partner.

National Conference Vilnius (Lithuania), 20th January 2011



The conference was organized with the purpose to present the Europe for Citizens programme as well as other available, although less frequently used, cooperation and support programmes and instruments, available for the development of the inter-municipal cooperation links. Invitations were sent to all Lithuanian municipalities, and representatives of nearly half of them took part in the event.

Presentations included the mobility programmes of the Nordic Council of Ministers, and subjects such as development cooperation and local authorities: possibilities and challenges, Lithuanian platform of Development Cooperation Non-Governmental Organisations

Working groups discussed the subjects of:

- "Town-twinning component of the Europe for Citizens: practical example" and
- "Combination of support and cooperation programmes as innovative tool for local authorities international projects".

The key conclusion of the discussions was that the Europe for Citizens programme presents an excellent opportunity for small-scale and start-up initiatives for cooperation between local authorities.

The implementation of such projects helps to set up cooperation links between local authorities

from different European states. At the same time, such cooperation also involves other, usually less formal structures – local non-governmental organisations, communities, other sub-municipal units (like *seniūnija* in Lithuania), etc.

The participants of the event also stressed that the promotion of municipal cooperation, although very important, should not be regarded as a goal in itself. Currently, the Europe for Citizens programme covers mainly intra-EU cooperation, with several exceptions.

Lithuanian local authorities, having multiple cooperation links with partners from non-EU member states, always underline the need to extend the programme, at least into the "near abroad" of the EU and to include the former Soviet states. While expecting a policy shift, a significant role in this field can be played by small-scale development cooperation activities. This field of activity, although rather new for Lithuanian local authorities, shows high potential.

The discussions which followed the presentation of the development cooperation initiative revealed the multitude of ideas on how this tool can be used as some sort of twinning measure with the partners from non-EU member states.

This conference was organised by the Association of Local Authorities in Lithuania.

National Conferences Permet, Sarandra and Kamza (Albania), 21/22/23 December 2010



well as face-to-face meetings with local representatives as there are many questions.

- Trainings should be organised to increase the local authorities' capacities to apply for EU and other funding

The three meetings in Albania were organised by the Albanian Association of Municipalities.

In Albania, three events – two on small, one on large scale – aimed at making municipalities familiar with the opportunities offered by the Europe for Citizens programme, especially its twinning component. In workshops and discussions, participants developed possible topics and potentials for international cooperation.

The 80 participants were composed of representatives of municipalities and non-governmental organisations (local and international). At the large-scale meeting in Kamza, representatives of the OECD and the Council of Europe joined the discussion.

Representatives of the Albanian Association of Municipalities presented the funding opportunities of the Europe for Citizens programme and instructions on how to present a good project proposal. To give input to the discussions about good practices, several Albanian municipalities presented their twinning experiences with municipalities in (among others) Italy, Germany and Turkey.

Recommendations from these three meetings include:

- Albanian municipalities need better information about funding opportunities. Thus, the Albanian Association of Municipalities proposes to organise further information workshops as



Final Conference

“International Twinning Conference for Innovation” Dordrecht (The Netherlands), 13th January 2011



The final conference of the project took place in the City Hall of Dordrecht.

It united numerous representatives of municipalities, associations of municipalities and non-governmental organisations from the partner countries of the project CITIES (Albania, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Macedonia, Slovakia).

Mr **Arno Brok**, Mayor of Dordrecht, opened the conference. He stressed his municipality's rich international and twinning history – Dordrecht started its first twinning relations in the 1960s and has been enlarging its twinning network ever since.

Mr **Per Vinther**, President of ALDA, then welcomed the participants. In his contribution, he explained ALDA's perception of and role in twinning projects. Mr Vinther also presented the programme “Europe for Citizens” as a means of bridging the gap between the European Union and its citizens.

Mr **Leo Platvoet**, Senior Advisor at BMC (Bestuurs Management Consultancy), introduced his organisation's work in bringing its expertise on good local governance to local authorities in the Netherlands, but also South-eastern Europe.

In the first presentation, Mr Marco Boaria, Coordinator of ALDA's resource and development

unit, explained the project CITIES to the audience. He then focused on the opportunities that the programme “Europe for Citizens” offers to municipalities from all over Europe to intensify existing twinning relations and create new ones. Mr Boaria then presented ALDA's work and the principle of the Local Democracy Agencies. ALDA aims at strengthening cooperation between cities as a vehicle of EU integration, and wishes to increase the implication of citizens in the twinning process, which is still too often unsatisfactory.

The participants then divided into five workshops that discussed different approaches to enhancing twinning relations:

WORKSHOP **“Twinning through cultural heritage exchanges”**

Twinning through cultural heritage is a means of cultural and economic development, especially tourism development. Promoting cultural diversity can thus have an impact on the current economic situation and also has a social dimension.

Suggestions made by the participants of the workshop included initiating partnerships between old and new European countries (towns); including citizens and NGOs to promote reflections and actions in twinning with innovative aspects;





involving professionals and citizens in the process of heritage preservation through awareness raising, communication tours or professional exchanges (between institutions, e.g. museums); multilateral twinning.

The workshop was moderated by Victoria Momeva-Altiparmakovska of Ecovast Macedonia and Natalia Shovkopliias, representing The Union of Towns and Cities of Slovakia.

WORKSHOP **“Cooperation between Local Authorities and Civil Society Organisations in Town Twinning”**

In an open methodology, the participants of the workshop were invited to contribute their own ideas about how to develop twinning ties and activities through the cooperation of different stakeholders on local level.

At local level, in most countries, there is a huge range of Civil Society Organisations (CSO) who also help to develop local facilities or services, act as advocates for local people or groups, or help people to organise and participate in their local public affairs and decision-making. Local authorities often have much to learn from the rich experience and commitment of these local stakeholders.

At the same time, CSOs cannot succeed in the long term unless there are capable, effective and adequately-resourced local authorities who can maintain and improve public services for their locality, and who are able to engage positively with their local population.

Cooperation between local authorities and CSOs is thus beneficial for both sides. In twinning, it can help to develop creative solutions, to get local people involved, and implement long-term solutions.

The workshop was moderated by Gea Davids, International Department of the Municipality of Dordrecht, and Marco Boaria, ALDA project development officer.

WORKSHOP **“Twinning through business/private sector exchanges”**

The twinning relation between Dordrecht and Varna, established in 2001, covers various subjects such as innovative education, the quality of life for handicapped people, international internships for young people and business exchange. This last topic was in the centre of attention during this workshop. The municipalities of Dordrecht and Varna cooperate with their local Chambers



of Commerce, employers' and entrepreneurs' associations. Annual business trips are organised to the partner city, and important ties have been created between the municipalities thanks to this.

The workshop was moderated by Cees Visser, chairman of the Dordrecht-Varna Twinning Committee.

WORKSHOP **"Good Local Governance as a Tool for Town-Twinning"**

Improving local governance has positive effects on the quality of services provided by local authorities and on their democratic legitimacy.

The workshop included presentations about how to improve local governance through policy planning (following an analysis of the needs, challenges and potential of the municipality concerned). The Council of Europe's "Strategy on Innovation and Good Governance at Local Level" promotes twelve principles of good local governance that guide local authorities on their path towards improving governance.

In twinning, these same tools can be used in different conditions to the greater benefit of both partners. Twin cities can share information, assist each other in the needs analysis, give peer



reviews on the situation of local governance and thus help each other to improve local governance (e.g. by fighting corruption). This has a social and economic benefit for all partners involved.

The workshop was moderated by Leo Platvoet of BMC and Susanne Caarls, representative of the Council of Europe Center of Expertise.

WORKSHOP **"Europa Proof"**

The workshop moderators presented the results of the study "Europe Proof". This study analysed the compatibility of 22 Dutch municipalities with European legislation and to what extent they use the European opportunities to their advantage.

All analysed municipalities acknowledged that EU policies have an effect on their own organisation. However, there is a difference in the sense of urgency which translates directly to the level of being "Europe Proof". Getting 'aware' of the EU and its policies is partially a choice of priority.

Recommendations were: to better organise municipalities' knowledge about EU policies to improve awareness of opportunities and challenges, as well as the understanding of European legislation (often perceived as too



Roel Wever, Director of BMC, and Mr Dobrica Milovanović, Vice-president of ALDA.

This conference was organised jointly by ALDA, the Municipality of Dordrecht and BMC (Bestuurs Management Consultancy).

complex). Municipalities could often use support in obtaining and justifying European funds. Lobbying and networking makes it easier to apply for funds and influence decisions; local authorities' networking should thus be facilitated by higher levels of government.

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This workshop was moderated by Emma Pauw and Christel Bottema of BMC.

After presentations of the results of the workshops, the conference was closed by Mr



The partners



ALDA

ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY AGENCIES (ALDA; LEAD PARTNER)

Founded in 1999, the Association of Local Democracy Agencies (ALDA) is today one of the most important NGOs working actively to foster good governance, local democracy and citizen participation at local level.

The main mission of ALDA consists of coordinating and developing the network of 12 Local Democracy Agencies (LDAs), currently operating in the Balkans and the Southern Caucasus, based on the concept of multilateral decentralised co-operation between local authorities and NGOs. Moreover, ALDA works on:

- a) strengthening of European integration in different geographical areas, including Caucasus;
- b) fostering of **active citizenship**;
- c) promotion of human rights;
- d) fostering of **equal opportunities** and **young policies**;
- e) **sustainable economic development**.

ALDA focuses on activities that facilitate cooperation between local authorities and civil society. It has already implemented several projects with regard to active European citizenship and the citizen participation in the decision-making process at local level. Furthermore, ALDA gained a considerable experience in the topics which specifically fall within the framework of Action 4 of the Europe for Citizens' Programme, through the year-long Europe-wide campaign on "Cities for Peace and Democracy in Europe" (2006) aimed at bringing local authorities and young people together to evaluate and debate their role in the construction of a peaceful, transparent and democratic Europe. Considering the various events organized, the *Peace School for Young People*, organized in Berlin, is certainly among the most significant within the issues of this Action, as well as the workshop "Peace in Europe" organized by the Municipality Centre of Culture in Gietrzwałd, Poland.

Find out more on www.alda-europe.eu



ALBANIA ASSOCIATION OF MUNICIPALITIES (AAM)

Following the request of 10 mayors, the Association of Albanian Municipalities (AAM) was established in 1993. It enjoys the status of an NGO and it covers the entire territory of the country.

The main mission of AAM is the protection of the common interests of Albanian municipalities with the purpose of achieving and developing real democratization and decentralization in compliance with the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

AAM's role and contribution are highly recognized and appreciated not only by its members, but also by central government institutions, donors, international organizations, etc.

All Albanian municipalities are voluntary members of AAM. They are represented in the leading bodies of AAM and have the following tasks:

- a) to participate regularly in the association meetings and express freely their opinion;
- b) to implement the statute, the mission and the purpose of the association, being directly involved in the fulfillment of its objectives;
- c) to pay regularly once a year the annual membership fee from the independent budget of their municipality.

AAM organize several trainings, seminars, conferences and several events to accelerate the decentralization process. In 2008, AAM organized approximately 100 trainings and seminars on topics like local economic development, social affairs, education, urban legislation, duties and responsibilities of public services, etc. Moreover, there are several town-twinning actions between members of AAM. AAM is also member of international organizations such as NALAS, CLRAE, CEMR, ENTO.

Find out more on www.aam-al.com



ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN LITHUANIA (ALAL)

Established in 1995 by a special law, the Association of Local Authorities in Lithuania is a NGO with the primary objective of representing the common interests of its members - local authorities in all national institutions, as well as in international organizations of local authorities.

Its main mission consists of implementing the essential rights of local self-government and fostering its development, by influencing decisions taken by national authorities and international institutions.

ALAL seeks to implement the provisions of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in Lithuania, to organize and coordinate activities of its members in the areas of investment attraction, development of municipal economies, improvement of legislature, business support, public security, culture, education, science, health care, social care and protection, improvement of local services, as well as relations with international organizations and municipalities abroad.

The Association participates as a social and economic partner with a special status in the legislative, budgetary and planning processes of the Republic of Lithuania.

In addition, it is a secretariat of the national delegation to the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe and to the European Union Committee of the Regions (CoR).

Moreover, the association acts as a town-twinning coordinator as well as one of the coordinators of Active citizenship Programme in Lithuania.

Find out more on www.lsa.lt



ECOVAST – NATIONAL SECTION FOR R.MACEDONIA (ECOVAST MACEDONIA)

ECOVAST (European Council of Villages and Small Towns) is a campaigning organization, for the well-being of the people and the heritage of rural Europe as well as a networking organization, which seeks to support and encourage cooperation between its members as they pursue their activities in rural areas.

The formal aims of NGO ECOVAST are to foster the economic, social and cultural vitality as well as the administrative identity of rural communities throughout Europe and to safeguard and promote the sensitive and imaginative renewal of the built and natural environment of such communities.

ECOVAST Macedonia was founded in Bitola, in July 1998, as a national branch of ECOVAST, aiming at protecting and developing the cultural and natural heritage (such as the protection of nature, landscapes, traditional buildings and traditional customs), by involving local inhabitants in all aspects of sustainable development.

To find out more, contact
Ms Victoria Momeva-Altiparmatovska
makvast@yahoo.com



REGIONAL ASSOCIATION OF MUNICIPALITIES "CENTRAL STARA PLANINA" (RAM "CENTRAL STARA PLANINA")

Established in 1997, RAM "Central Stara Planina" actively supports the local authorities, advocates their interest and contributes to the strengthening of local governance in Bulgaria. In addition, RAM "Central Stara Planina":

- a) promotes and encourages mutual cooperation and experience exchange among its members;
- b) gathers and disseminates information on all issues affecting local governance;
- c) provides professional training both for elected and appointed representatives of local authorities to improve their skills and capacities;
- d) organizes conferences and discussion forums on municipal policies and management issues;
- e) promotes the Central Stara Planina region in front of the European Union and the Council of Europe;
- f) develops and implements projects of local and regional importance;
- g) supports municipalities by using EU funding opportunities;
- h) establishes relations with national and international associations of local authorities.

The priority goals of the association are:

- a) to enhance the capacity of the local authorities in order to fulfill their duties in a democratic, legal, professional, ethical and efficient manner;
- b) to present solutions that could contribute to good governance;
- c) to contribute to the sustainable development of Central Stara Planina region;
- d) to function as a platform for exchange and dialogue;
- e) to be trusted and recognized by all its members and partners.

Find out more on www.rso-csp.org



THE UNION OF TOWNS AND CITIES OF SLOVAKIA (UTCS/UMS)

The Union of Towns and Cities of Slovakia (UTCS) is a voluntary association of cities and towns in the Slovak Republic.

Its mission consists of:

- a) the promotion of the role of cities as centres of regions in the process of decentralization and public administration modernization;
- b) the active participation in completing the public administration funding model in term of ensuring permanent financial and economic stability and independence of cities' self-administrations;
- c) the coordination of mutual cooperation of cities in common problems;
- d) the protection of cultural heritage;
- e) strengthening of local and regional governments;
- f) the cooperation with cities and local communities in the regional development programme;
- g) the development of Pan-European cooperation between towns, municipalities and regions, with emphasis on Middle-European and Carpathian region;
- h) supporting the development of social capital, the integration of minorities, socially reliant and handicapped citizens and civic participation in public matters.

UTCS has expertise in cross-border and international cooperation between towns and regions in the framework of the European Union as well as in the implementation of ICT technologies in different programmes for self-governments.

Find out more on www.unia-miest.eu



UNION OF BULGARIAN BLACK SEA LOCAL AUTHORITIES (UBBSLA)

The UBBSLA is an organization uniting the interests of all of its members-municipalities and encouraging strong and effective local self-government as well as active citizen participation.

UBBSLA coordinates the activities of its members-municipalities in the sphere of economics, science, ecology, energy management and sustainable development. It organizes their efforts in the process of solving common problems of the Black Sea region.

The objectives of the UBBSLA are:

- a)** to improve the competencies and knowledge of local officials and municipal staff;
- b)** to facilitate the exchange of experience and practices on Local Self-Government among Government officials, academicians and Local Self-Governments in other countries;
- c)** to provide opportunities for municipal officials and staff and exchange experience and information on municipal policies, programmes and projects;
- d)** to develop commentaries and/or proposals on laws and regulations affecting Local Self-Government;
- e)** to conduct studies, collect data, prepare research related to the responsibilities and functions of Local Self-Government;
- f)** to organize common projects or programmes for the mutual benefit of its members.

Find out more on www.ubbsla.org



INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION AGENCY OF THE ASSOCIATION OF NETHERLANDS MUNICIPALITIES (VNG INTERNATIONAL)

VNG International is the International Cooperation Agency of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG).

It is a medium-sized, dynamic company with 50 people staff, annually managing more than 60 international projects and programmes with a focus on strengthening local democratic government worldwide.

VNG International support decentralisation processes and facilitate decentralised cooperation; it strengthens local governments, their associations, training institutes and decentralisation task forces both in developing countries and in countries in transition.

VNG International deploys its expertise in three manners:

- a)** international project management (identification, formulation, implementation, evaluation);
- b)** grant scheme management in order to support local governments of Netherlands to implement projects with their partner municipality in Europe or abroad (town-twinning projects);
- c)** advisory services, training and courses, study tours, internships in order to support local governments of Netherlands to implement well-considered international policies.

VNG has been active in the field of town-twinning since 1988; since 1988 it has also organised and developed projects, meetings and seminars. VNG is an active member of the CEMR town-twinning working group.

Find out more on www.vng-international.nl

Contacts

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Union of Bulgarian Black Sea Local Authorities	Bulgaria	Mariana Kancheva Ivanova	office@ubbsla.org
Association of Local Authorities in Lithuania	Lithuania	Arunas Gražulis	arunas.grazulis@lsa.lt
ECOVAST - National section for R. Macedonia	Republic of Macedonia	Victoria Momeva Altiparmakovska	makvast@yahoo.com
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