Learning across borders: The international contacts of municipalities

International networking as a learning process

The age of internationalisation has also reached local government. Leaders of local authorities are increasingly in touch with their opposite numbers in other countries. The cross-border networks between cities, towns and regions seem to grow denser day by day (Goldsmith and Klausen 1997, Baldersheim and Stählberg 1999a). East and Central European mayors are very much a part of this trend. However, not all municipalities and mayors are equally involved in this pattern of cross-border networking. To the extent that important information, economic resources, or strategic advantages flow from membership of such networks, those who cannot or will not take part may be disadvantaged.

In this article, we shall address three issues related to these networks: 1) What are the activities mayors engage in more precisely when taking part in international networks? 2) How far-flung are the networks of the East-Central European mayors? What are the geographical patterns? 3) And what are the forces driving international networking? What are the characteristics of the cosmopolitan mayor and municipality? The material we use come from a survey of mayors in the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia carried out in 1997. Between 300 and 500 mayors were surveyed in each country (cfr. table 8 for further details of the respective samples). The survey was in some respects a repeat of a 1991 study reported in Baldersheim, Illner, Offerdal, and Swianiewicz 1996.

To us, it seems appropriate to conceptualise international networking as a learning process. This choice of perspective seems especially appropriate with regard to the East-Central European mayors under study here. They were only the second cohort of democratically elected mayors since the fall of communism in 1989. They were responsible for running new institutions established in 1990, a task for which most of them had had little chance of preparing. Their lot was very much one of learning by trial and error once in

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office. Many of them rose to the occasion and have managed admirably (Surażska 1997, Baldersheim et al. 1996). Others have felt that the routines of day to day management were not quite what they had imagined in the heyday of the velvet revolutions and have therefore left local politics.

In theories of organisational learning a series of sophisticated concepts has been developed to characterise various types of learning (problem-driven and solution-driven search, single loop and double loop learning, deutro learning, superstitious learning, etc., cfr. e.g. Cyert and March 1963, Argyris and Schön 1978, Levitt and March 1988). These concepts mostly define learning by reference to the outcomes or contents of the processes of learning. For our purposes the focus is limited to the process as such. We divide the process into three steps of deepening learning or commitment to learning. The first step is feeling a need to acquire new or more information about ways of solving problems in the municipality, or starting a search process. The second step is focusing the search on a particular part of the environment where relevant information may be found and entering into a committed search. The third step is actually to commit resources to achieve change in own organisation. In this study the operationalisation of these three steps are 1) the mayor’s study visits abroad, 2) twinning initiatives and other co-operative relations between municipalities, and 3) visits from foreign experts and advisors to the mayor’s municipality as consultants in actual change processes.

However, as mentioned above, not all mayors are equally active in international networking. The motives for establishing international contacts and taking part in learning networks may vary, of course. The motives may have to do with variations in problems, opportunities, locations, politics, or institutional factors. Some mayors may be driven by the force of the problems they face in their municipality; others may be chiefly interested in financial or other forms of support that may be gained from international contacts or international funds, such as e.g. EU or Phare funds; others again may hope that contacts with internationally prestigious institutions may rub off on them and add to their own personal status. There may also be variations in terms of opportunities to establish international contacts. Mayors in large cities or municipalities close to borders may have easier access to such contacts and also more exposure to information about opportunities. Variations may also arise because of factors related to the mayor as a person or political figure an academic education or language skills may help a mayor in international contacts. Political style and political culture may also matter: the extrovert style associated with the New Political Culture (Clark 1983, Clark and Hoffmann-Martinot 1998), for example, may predispose a mayor to establish more international contacts, whereas a traditional political boss may seek solutions to problems in other contacts than those of international partners. Mayors from municipalities characterised by a civic culture that generates social capital or trust in the manner suggested by Robert Putnam (1993)