

Mayors Learning across Borders: The International Networks of Municipalities in East-Central Europe

HARALD BALDERSHEIM, JAN BUCEK
and PAWEL SWIANIEWICZ

The age of internationalization 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 Ståhlberg, 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 precisely are the activities mayors engage in 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 comes 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 (see Table 8 for 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 conceptualize 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 preparation. Their lot was very much one of learning by trial and error once in office. Many of them rose to the occasion and have managed admirably

(Surazska, 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 organizational learning a series of sophisticated concepts has been developed to characterize various types of learning (such as problem-driven and solution-driven search, single loop and double loop learning, deutro learning, and superstitious learning: see 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 one's own organization. In this study the operationalization 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 the actual change process.

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 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

Harald Baldersheim, University of Oslo; Jan Bucek, Comenius University, Bratislava; Pawel Swianiewicz, University of Warsaw.

characterized by a civic culture that generates social capital or trust in the manner suggested by Robert Putnam (1993) might also be expected to enter into cross-border networks more readily than those functioning in a low-trust culture. Finally, institutional differences may affect learning behaviour. The position of mayor is not the same in the three countries (Baldersheim, Blaas, Horvath, Illner and Swianiewicz, 1996). Slovakia has a directly elected mayor. In the Czech Republic, the mayor is elected by the council among the council members. Polish councils may find their mayors also outside their own ranks, among professional managers. The directly elected Slovak mayor may have the greatest scope for acting on their own and taking initiatives regarding international contacts.

To sum up, following Marks *et al.*, 1994, the forces driving learning networks may be divided into push factors such as local problems and pressures, or pull factors such as opportunities and incentives. To these two sets we will add a third one, facilitating factors such as personal resources, political style and culture, and institutional features (Baldersheim and Ståhlberg, 1999b). Facilitating factors are intervening variables that serve to enhance the impacts of push and pull factors

FEATURES OF CROSS-BORDER LEARNING NETWORKS

Study tours and twinning relations

The first step in the learning process is that of starting a search for information. The search may start in many different ways, and going on a study trip abroad may be a rather special and sophisticated way of initiating a process of improvement. Consequently, it is not something that it is reasonable to expect every mayor to do. But precisely how many or how few engage in this sort of activity? This is brought out in Table 1, which is based on responses to the question 'Have you been abroad on study tours during your term of office?'

More than half of all mayors have been abroad on study trips. Foreign tours are more usual in Poland and Slovakia than in the Czech Republic. Nearly half of all Polish and Slovak mayors have been on such trips more than once whereas only a third of the Czech mayors have done so.

TABLE 1
MAYORS' STUDY TOURS TO FOREIGN DESTINATIONS (%)

	Czech Republic	Poland	Slovakia
None	53	31	27
Once	17	22	28
Several times	30	48	46
N	516	513	311

Establishing twinning links with foreign partners, the second step in the operationalization of the learning sequence, is also quite common. Between a third and a half of the municipalities have established such relations. The proportion with such links is, however, somewhat smaller in Poland than in the other two countries. So the relative reticence of Czech mayors with regard to study tours may be said to be compensated for by their municipalities' greater propensity to take twinning initiatives.

TABLE 2
TWINNING OR OTHER FORMAL CO-OPERATIVE RELATIONS WITH FOREIGN MUNICIPALITIES (%)

	Czech Republic	Poland	Slovakia
None	53	64	57
Yes	47	36	43
N	516	513	311

Destinations

Where do the mayors go when they go on study tours? What are their destinations? Is the geographical pattern the same for study tours and twinning relations? If it is, then it may be concluded that the mayors, when they start a process of search for information, also often find something that is useful and that is followed up in the form of more long-term relationships. Or do the geographical patterns seem haphazard so that the mayors' contacts appear as whims of the moment, tourist adventures rather than strategic, long-term initiatives?

TABLE 3
COUNTRIES OF DESTINATION FOR MAYORS' STUDY TOURS (PERCENTAGE OF MAYORS WHO TRAVELLED TO:)

	Czech Republic	Poland	Slovakia
Russia	0.4	2.3	1.9
Other Central-East	5.2	20.2	24.6
Western Europe:			
Austria	16.2	6.7	45.4
Germany	20.6	44.9	18.8
France	8.9	24.6	12.5
United Kingdom	5.4	3.5	8.0
Benelux	11.0	10.9	19.5
Nordic countries	10.6	20.9	8.0
Other West European	13.9	10.9	20.4
USA	4.2	1.9	5.4
Canada	0.2	0.2	0.3
Other non-European	0.4	1.0	1.9

Table 3 suggests that travels to the closest Western neighbours dominate. For the Czech Republic the most frequent destinations of travels are: Germany (over 20% of interviewed mayors) and Austria (16%); Belgium and the Netherlands and the remaining West European countries are much less frequent destinations. For Poles, travels to Germany are the most frequent (almost half of mayors). France and the Nordic countries are next in rank and are much more important for the Poles than for Czechs and Slovaks. The long tradition of Polish–French ties probably plays an important role in the former and relative geographical proximity in the latter case. For Slovak mayors Austria is definitely the most frequent destination of study tours (almost half of all mayors travelled there).

It is characteristic that travels to East-Central European neighbours are much rarer than to West European countries. This is particularly striking in the case of the Czech Republic, while in Poland and Slovakia such contacts are more frequent.

A map of formal twinning links shows much the same features as one for study tours (table not presented). In Poland over 20% of municipalities have German partners, around 7% have French ones, around 7% have partners in Nordic countries, and 10% in other East-Central European states.

The Polish case suggests a definite regional pattern to the intensity of international contacts with individual countries. Some of the regional differences are simple to explain – they depend on geographical distance from the partner. Sometimes the explanation can be found in deeper historical traditions, while in some cases it may be difficult to find any logical explanation. Polish local governments' contacts with other East-Central European countries are the most frequent in regions located close to Polish borders. Local governments from Southern Poland have the most contacts with the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, while those in Eastern Poland often have links with Lithuania, Belorussia and Ukraine. Municipalities located in close vicinity of the Kaliningrad region have the largest number of contacts with Russia.

Links with Austria are most frequent in south-eastern Poland, which in the nineteenth century belonged to the Habsburg empire. Not surprisingly, contacts with Germany are the most common in western and northern Poland. Travels to Nordic countries are the most frequent from municipalities located near the Baltic seashore. Links with France, Netherlands and Belgium are more evenly distributed, although an above-average frequency is found in the Poznan region (in mid-western Poland).

Foreign experts and assistance

The use of foreign experts mapped here refers to experts coming from a foreign municipality or the visit of a consultant from an international aid

programme or consultancy organization. Such contacts are relatively rare. Overall, less than a fifth report such visits. Use of foreign experts seems to be the most common in Slovakia, where almost a third of the mayors indicated their presence (see Table 4). The proportion of Czech or Polish municipalities which benefited from foreign assistance is considerably smaller.

TABLE 4
MUNICIPALITIES USING FOREIGN EXPERTS/ASSISTANCE (%)

	Czech Republic	Poland	Slovakia
None	86	85	72
Aid from foreign municipality	7	4	17
Aid programme	7	11	11

We do not have information about the tasks performed by the foreign experts or the results of their services, for example the change achieved. However, we did ask the mayors about their experience with the experts, i.e. how useful they thought the expert aid was. To a certain extent, this may be regarded as an 'outcome' measure. The work of foreign consultants is usually perceived as useful, although there are some exceptions to this rule. Over half of the respondents admit the assistance was useful and 30–40% thought it was partially useful. It seems that Polish local governments were the least satisfied – 15% of mayors claimed the foreign experts' advice was not useful, while the percentage of disappointed mayors in the Czech and Slovak Republics was well below 10%.

TABLE 5
MAYORS' OPINIONS ON FOREIGN ASSISTANCE (%)

	Czech Republic	Poland	Slovakia
Useful	62	51	51
So, so (not very useful)	34	34	41
Not useful	5	15	8

Note: Only mayors with experience of foreign assistance/aid programme are counted in this table.

Where did the foreign consultants come from? First of all, their origins are quite different from that of the other forms of international contacts. The origins of consultants are obviously related to the presence of long-term international programmes for local governments, which are financed either

by the European Union (mostly through the PHARE programme) or by individual governments (such as USAID, British Know-How Fund) or by semi-public foundations from Western Europe (for example, the Adenauer or Ebert foundations from Germany). In the Czech Republic slightly over 50% of the experts came from Western Europe and the rest were usually from the USA. Western Europe provided about two-thirds of consultants working in Poland and over three-quarters of those working for Slovak local governments. Unfortunately, more precise information cannot be given here since many mayors did not distinguish clearly between donor agencies (such as PHARE, Know-How Fund, and German foundations).

Intensity of cross-border learning

In this section, we summarize the intensity of international contacts. The index of cross-border learning is based on the summary of answers to the three issues that were analysed separately above: International study tours (no = 0, once = 1, more = 2); twinning arrangements (no = 0, yes = 2); and international experts (no = 0, yes = 2).

The index may vary from 0 (no international contacts detected) to 6 (intensive contacts). The proportion of '0' varies from 18% of municipalities in Slovakia to 26% in Poland and 34% in the Czech Republic. The proportion of '6' (the most intensive contacts) ranges from 7% in Czech Republic to 8% in Poland and 18% in Slovakia. The average scores of the index are 2 in the Czech Republic, 2.19 in Poland and 2.62 in Slovakia.

The index is significantly correlated with the size of municipalities in all

TABLE 6
'INDEX OF INTERNATIONALISM' ACCORDING TO SIZE OF MUNICIPALITIES

	Czech Republic	Poland	Slovakia
< 2,000	0.80	2.00	1.65
2,000 – 10,000	1.79	1.60	2.85
10,000 – 20,000	3.42	2.41	4.17
20,000 – 50,000	3.77	3.76	4.67
> 50,000	5.07	4.64	5.00

three countries (see Table 6). The table confirms that local governments in Slovakia have the most international contacts. However, a comparison of Poland and Slovakia is not so straightforward. Although the average index is higher for Poland, it seems to be very much dependent on the larger size of Polish local governments. When we compare Czech and Polish local governments of similar size, we may observe the reverse relationship – Czech local governments are more internationally active.

WHAT DRIVES CROSS-BORDER LEARNING?

Above, it was suggested that participation in international learning networks might be driven by a variety of forces, divided into pull, push and facilitating factors. The push factors included the performance of the local economy, which is mapped through items such as the rate of unemployment and the establishment of new firms. The expectation is that the worse the performance of the local economy the greater is the pressure on the mayor to act since the municipal finances are influenced by people's ability to pay taxes and by taxes paid by local firms.

Pull factors create opportunities or expose the municipalities to information about opportunities in international networks. Here, such items include membership in regional municipal associations (that often spread information about international network opportunities), the size of the municipalities (mayors of large urban municipalities are more exposed to opportunities), centrality (distance to the information networks of central cities), proximity to international borders, and the affluence of the municipalities (those which can afford to pay for the mayor's trips abroad).

Facilitating factors enhance the impacts of push and pull factors. Here, they include the mayor's education, age, gender and political style. Education is expected to work as a general asset in establishing international contacts (language skills, knowledge of other countries). With regard to gender, the expectation is that female mayors will be more active in international networks than their male counterparts. Female mayors are generally newer to the political game and can be expected to be less firmly integrated into established old-boy networks and traditional role models for mayors; they may therefore be more inclined to look abroad for new ideas about how to run the municipality and therefore more easily drawn into such international networks. Furthermore, younger mayors may be more inclined to try out or establish new relationships across borders. The pursuit of international contacts is also expected to be associated with a modern political style, such as an aptitude for working with the media (newspapers, radio) or a propensity to engage in dialogue with individual citizens rather than organized groups (a populist rather than a corporatist inclination, as suggested by the theory of the New Political Culture, Clarke and Hoffmann-Martinet, 1998).

Regression analyses have been carried out with the individual aspects of international networking as dependent variables rather than the overall index. This is because the facilitating factors are regarded as more appropriate in explaining the mayor's personal behaviour (study tours abroad) and less relevant for aspects of aggregate municipal behaviour such as formal twinning arrangements and visits from foreign experts.

TABLE 7A
FACTORS EXPLAINING INTERNATIONAL CONTACTS – REGRESSION ANALYSIS

	Mayor's travels abroad		
	PL	CR	SK
R	.470	.420	.386
R ²	.221	.176	.149
sign. F	.0000	.0000	.0000
Push factors			
Unemployment ^a	*		
New firms ^b	***	***	**
Pull factors			
Member of associations ^c	**	***	*
Centrality ^d	***		
Size ^e		**	
High budget ^f	***		
Proximity to borders ^g	*		
Personal/facilitating factors			
Sex			
Age			
Education	*	*	*
Contacts with journalists important for mayor ^h		*	
Citizen influence should be through political parties ⁱ	*		

* – significant on .05 level, ** – on .01 level, *** – on .001 level

Notes:

^a Information supplied by surveyed mayors

^b Information supplied by surveyed mayors

^c Membership of municipal associations; information by surveyed mayors

^d In Poland: distance from a city of 300,000 inhabitants or more; in Czech Republic: distance from Prague, Brno or Ostrava; in Slovakia: distance from Bratislava or Kosice

^e Number of inhabitants

^f Budget per capita

^g In kilometers

^h Mayors agreeing to the statement that 'Contacts with journalists are important for doing my job'

ⁱ Mayors agreeing to the statement that 'Citizens who want to influence local decision-making should be members of political parties'

The results of regression analyses are reported in tables 7A and 7B. In sum, the variables introduced into the equations yielded significant r^2 s for all dependent variables in all three countries. International networking is influenced both by push and pull as well as facilitating factors. Overall, pull factors seem the most important ones. Memberships of municipal associations and size seem to be of general importance. Centrality is most important in Poland and least so in Slovakia. Proximity to borders is also

TABLE 7B
FACTORS EXPLAINING INTERNATIONAL CONTACTS – REGRESSION ANALYSIS

	Formal twinning			Visits of foreign experts		
	PL	CR	SK	PL	CR	SK
R	.451	.441	.433	.364	.388	.372
R ²	.204	.192	.166	.133	.151	.115
sign. F	.0000	.0000	.0000	.0000	.0000	.0000
Push factors						
Unemployment						
New firms	***	**	***	**	**	***
Pull factors						
Member of associations	***	***		*	**	**
Centrality	*	**		**		
Size	***	***	*	***	***	*
High budget	***	***				
Proximity to borders	**		*			

* – significant on .05 level, ** – on .01 level, *** – on .001 level

a driving force in Poland but it also has some significance in Slovakia with regard to twinning. Budgets matter most in Poland and the Czech Republic.

Education is the most important of the facilitating factors; better educated mayors go more often on study tours abroad. This is true in all three countries. However, political style also has some significance. Czech mayors who emphasize contacts with journalists (a New Political Culture indicator) as important for their jobs also go abroad more often. Polish mayors who think political parties are the most appropriate channel for citizen influence (a Traditional Culture indicator) rather than more direct contacts also travel more. The latter is rather against what we expected. The age and gender of the mayor are of little consequence.

Of the push factors as introduced into the analyses it is the mayor's view of the local economy that matters most. There are more international contacts in localities with an ability to attract new firms, whereas the opposite was expected. Thus, the local economy seems to work more as a pull factor than a push factor. A growing local economy may create learning opportunities for the mayor and the municipality. The municipality is pulled along on a wave of external contacts. It could, of course, also be that the mayor's contacts abroad help establish new firms in the locality. Undoubtedly, this is what mayors would like to think. Our data do not allow us to say that they are not right.

CONCLUSIONS

We have found that mayors and municipalities in East-Central Europe are extensively involved in cross-border networks with their counterparts in other European countries. The political upheavals of ten years ago have reached down to the local levels and produced fundamental re-orientations in patterns of co-operation. The patterns point strongly towards an emphasis on co-operation with West European counterparts. East-Central European municipalities are thus very much a part of the ongoing process of European integration that also drives much of the cross-border co-operation between municipalities in other parts of Europe. In this process, aspects of geographical location and historical ties matter for the relations that are established. However, the nature of the mayor as a person and a political operator also makes a difference. The extent of involvement in learning networks also depends on personality and political style. Consequently, who the citizens elect as their mayor may make a great deal of difference for their city's involvement in European integration. Mayors matter.

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APPENDIX
DISTRIBUTION OF SAMPLES ACCORDING TO POPULATION SIZE OF
MUNICIPALITIES (%)

	<2,000	2,000 to 10,000	10,000 to 20,000	20,000 to 50,000	>50,000	Total sample - responses (N)
Czech Republic						
Sample distribution	14.5	67.8	10.6	4.2	2.97	711-519
Nation-wide distribution	84	13	2	1	0.6	
Poland						
Sample distribution	0.6	64.1	15.8	15.2	4.3	1500-513
Nation-wide distribution	0.2	66	21	9	4	
Slovakia						
Sample distribution	37.1	49.2	5.8	5.8	2.2	550-313
Nation-wide distribution	86	11	1	1	0.4	

Source: Responses are based on questionnaires mailed to mayors in 1997. The surveys were carried out by national teams based in Bratislava, Prague and Warsaw, financed by a grant from the Norwegian Research Council plus national sources in the respective countries.