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## materiały z badań

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MARIE-CLAUDE MAUREL<sup>1</sup>

### THE ROLE OF LOCAL ELECTED OFFICIALS IN THE MAKING OF LEADER LOCAL ACTION GROUPS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

**Abstract.** Local elected officials in practice exercise political leadership by their involvement in partnerships and their status on the local cooperation scene. The implementation of the LEADER programme, in terms of project selection, reveal that this political leadership has taken over this model of local development, which it sees as an instrument for updating public amenities and services and a source of legitimacy for its action. The configuration of local action groups is examined via the membership of the partnerships and analysis of networks of stakeholders, on the basis of empirical research.

**Key words:** public action, local elected officials, political leadership, local development, Czech Republic

#### INTRODUCTION

In the years following changes in the political systems of Central Europe, particular emphasis has been placed on replacing elites as part of a post-Communist transformation. The consolidation of democratic institutions has been the subject of research that stressed the effect of power strategies among the elites [Highley and Lengyel 2000]. Most of these analyses were national in nature, and the renewal of elites at local level has received less attention. However, the reform restoring the autonomy of local authorities and free elections brought about the creation, as early as 1990, of local government institutions and the arrival of a first generation of municipal elected officials who previously learnt rules of local management in not always promising conditions. As successive terms of office have passed, rotation among these elites has occurred in an

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”ordinary” way, and is evidence of the citizens and representatives’ shared respect for the principles and institutional mechanisms of democracy [Baldersheim et al. 2003]. The role of mayors, who have become key players in democratic life, has gradually grown to include the development of economic, social and cultural activities. The local authority, by designing projects to make the most of local resources, joining in inter-municipal public infrastructure operations and seeking sources of finance, has become a promoter of local development<sup>2</sup>.

When the Czech Republic joined the EU, the LEADER approach became the framework for experimenting with a model of local development which promoted an innovative, decentralised form of public action, within partnerships of local stakeholders<sup>3</sup>. Known as Local Action Groups (LAGs), these decision-making entities, in charge of devising development strategies and launching calls for projects, took on the function of prime contractors for local development. For rural societies that had had to build the institutions of representative electoral democracy and were now assuming the task of local development, this was a new experience [Kovach 2000]. Implementation of the LEADER approach involves learning a new form of public action that calls for the participation and cooperation of local stakeholders. Could this type of collective action under LEADER type act as a factor strengthening the quality of democracy at local level?

In addition to its role as a coordinating structure, could the LAG be a forum for extending democratic life and a place where a new form of territorial governance may emerge [Pasquier et al. 2007]? To answer these questions, I have chosen to focus on the role played by local elected officials in the implementation of this new form of public action<sup>4</sup>.

This analysis is in three parts. Part 1 describes how the LAGs are constructed, identifying who takes the initiative for their creation and who participates in them. Part 2 contains a structural analysis of the relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition and examines the configuration of the local action systems. In Part 3, the central stakeholders are identified and a question addressed concerning the existence of political leadership in the territories of the LAGs, how it operates and what role it has in decision-making for public action.

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<sup>2</sup> The village renewal programme supported training and projects in micro-regions, the SAPARD programme and the operational rural development programme (2004–2006) contributed to the process of economic and social modernisation in rural areas.

<sup>3</sup> The European Union financed LEADER+ (2004–2006) and then the LEADER axis under the Second Pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy (2007–2013).

<sup>4</sup> This research was done as part of a research project funded by the French national research agency ANR, entitled ”Action locale et développement territorial” (ALDETEC) n°ANR-08-BLAN-0270-01 [<http://recherche.univ-montp3.fr/artdev/aldetec>].

## CONSTRUCTION OF PARTNERSHIPS ON THE INITIATIVE OF ELECTED OFFICIALS

### Rationale behind collective action

In addition to the stated principles of European public policy the origin of which will not be covered here [Maurel 2008], a question arises of the nature of the study topic and the level of analysis of practices that is being adopted. An appropriate and short slogan for the Leader Approach could be "Intentional acting-together". To explain a LAG is apparently defined by objectives shared by all its members, which they intend to pursue by devising a development strategy to guide the selection of projects.

Dimensionally, a LAG belongs to a category of small groups where all the members know each other directly. By its membership, with representatives of the public, voluntary and business sectors, as required by EU rules, the LAG brings together individuals belonging to "social circles" that are institutionally diverse (local elected officials, businessmen, association members), who commit to taking part in constructing a local development project that meets the common interests of the stakeholders<sup>5</sup>. This is the main challenge for collective action. Since it does not form a unified social space (because of the diversity of partners), the "associational group" must direct its action on the basis of a "rational agreement by mutual consent" [Weber 1947]. This is a type of social laboratory in which a new approach is invented whose sole legitimate goal is the development of its concerned region [Ray 2000]. The LEADER approach which is based on mobilising local initiatives relies on the ability of local stakeholders to define, design, organise and implement common activities. LAG members must have aptitudes and qualities such as participation, trust and reciprocity between stakeholders<sup>6</sup>. Any absence of, or shortcoming in, these qualities may compromise its capacity for collective action.

### Survey methodology and data

Repeat field surveys were held in order to obtain a continuous observation of the scene of collective action. The data collected during interviews with LAG members has been used to characterise the configuration of the local scene and to monitor its development during various programme implementation phases. In order to describe the socio-occupational profiles, attitudes and practices of the local stakeholders, a questionnaire was given to all members of the LAG's management board. These are in charge of running the partnership and implementing the decisions of the general meeting. The choice of LAGs was guided by field knowledge acquired during previous research into the system change

TABLE 1. Dimensions of Czech LAGs observed

<sup>5</sup> The boundaries of the LAG correspond to the total area of partner local authorities.

<sup>6</sup> Participation, trust and reciprocity may be defined as inter-subjective relationships that underpin cooperation between individuals. These key concepts have been operationalised in the form of closed questions designed to construct measurable indicators.

TABELA 1. Obserwacja wielkości czeskich LGD

Name and location of LAG	Area [km <sup>2</sup> ]	Population	Density [pers./km <sup>2</sup> ]	Number of local authorities	Overlap with micro-regions
Podlipansko (Central Bohemia)	470	37 591	80	54	No (municipalities from several micro-regions)
Hornácko-Ostrožsko (South Moravia)	265	26 068	98	16	Yes (two micro-regions)
Ekoregion Uhlava (South Bohemia)	317	11 706	37	9	Yes (one micro-region)

[Maurel 2005]. The present survey uses three Czech LAGs differing in their size and socio-economic profile (Table 1).

The Podlipansko LAG in Central Bohemia, east of Prague, comprises 54 municipalities<sup>7</sup> from three different micro-regions. The boundaries of the LAG were extended in stages from 2006 to 2008 by bringing in new partners around the nucleus of its founding members<sup>8</sup>. The mayor of Pečky and the manager of the Pečky micro-region originally took the initiative of setting it up. The manager first looked for partners in the neighbouring municipalities and in the small town of Kostelec. Since relations were difficult with this town's officials, it was finally a voluntary association that joined the partnership from this town. This formed the initial alliance, a LAG with a strong voluntary component. Similar peri-urban trends were causing similar problems: promoting the local environment, stimulating employment, developing cultural and leisure activities in order to improve quality of life.

This Hornácko-Ostrožsko LAG is in Southern Moravia near the border with Slovakia and comprises the two micro-regions that give it its name. An initial inter-municipal grouping at micro-regional scale was for local development launched in 2001 on the initiative of the mayor of Uherský Ostroh. The first operations were successful. In 2006, the mayor of Uherský Ostroh undertook an initiative to submit a LAG project to the LEADER CZ<sup>9</sup> and LEADER+ programmes. The idea of combining two micro-regions, Ostrožsko and Hornácko, with a total of 16 municipalities was included in this first project,

<sup>7</sup> The Czech law on municipalities (367/1990) restored the status of local self-government that municipalities had lost during the Communist period. This was a return to the historic tradition of local autonomy inherited from Austrian Empire and continued by the First Republic (1918–1938), a system where by municipalities exercised some of the State's competencies delegated to them. The modern reform involved a process of fragmentation of administrative divisions. More than 2,000 municipalities were restored after 1990 and their number rose from 4,092 in 1989 to 6,258 in 2000. Even the smallest villages wanted to recover their independence. Four-fifths of municipalities have populations under 1,000, more than one-quarter less than 200 and one-third between 200 and 500.

<sup>8</sup> From 41 "founding" municipalities in 2006, the area of the LAG now extends to 54 municipalities.

<sup>9</sup> In parallel with the LEADER+ programme, from 2004 to 2006 the Czech Ministry of Agriculture funded a LEADER CZ programme (or Czech LEADER), proposing a set of measures following LEADER principles and method. The LAGs responded to an annual call for proposals

which was rejected. A new project, prepared for the LEADER (2007–2013) programme, was selected in 2008 and implemented.

Ekoregion Uhlava LAG is in South Bohemia on the border with Bavaria and bears the name of the river that runs through it. The LAG area comprises 9 local self-governments and a population of 11,706. The south of the micro-region is part of the Šumava National Park, a mountain range covered with forest and a protected area. The town of Nýrsko (population 5,100) is the economic heart of the region and the main source of employment. Its mayor supports all forms of inter-municipal cooperation created since 1998. Initial funding was obtained under the LEADER CZ programme (2004–2006). A new LAG project was selected in 2009.

## **MEMBERSHIP OF PARTNERSHIPS**

The initial impetus is in the process of putting together a partnership and formulating a strategy concept for local development. The first objective is to understand how a stakeholder group is created, what the ties there are between them and how a collective interest is defined that differs from the sum of individual interests. Examination of how the LAGs were formed, and who their members are, is key to understanding the actual effect of the LEADER approach<sup>10</sup> in field experiments. The management board, comprising representatives from three sectors, is a formalised expression of the partners' coordinating system and at the same time a framework for their interactions. The principle of partnership based on the participation of the public, voluntary and the business sectors imposes a relatively constricting required framework. This is the rule: some board members belong to two sectors and may sit as representatives of either. Among the representatives of the voluntary and business sectors there are local elected officials, some of whom are mayors, usually part-time, alongside their main jobs<sup>11</sup>. In the group of stakeholders surveyed, there were 28 elected officials sitting on their municipal councils out of a total of 45 (two-thirds). Despite this application of board membership rules, local elected officials are over-represented (Table 2).

by submitting relatively moderate applications (around ·150,000). The Ministry selected few projects, 31 in 2004, 21 in 2005, and 23 in 2006.

<sup>10</sup> The interviews with managers and people sitting on LAG boards revealed who originally took the initiative, how participants were selected, why local authorities were combined and how the bounds for action were set. The bounds of a LAG are not determined in advance, but are the product of relationships formed during the partnership creation phase. The surveys began in 2008 and continued until 2011.

<sup>11</sup> In the Horňácko-Ostrožsko LAG, five mayors sit on behalf of other sectors. Some also hold key positions on the steering committee or project selection commission. So they are apparently well placed to push through their preferences.

TABLE 2. Membership of the boards of administration of study LAGs  
 TABELA 2. Członkostwo w zarządzie badanych LGD

Precipitation	Public sector	Business sector	Voluntary sector	Total
Hornácko-Ostrožsko official affiliation	8	7	3	18
Hornácko-Ostrožsko actual affiliation	13	4	1	18
Podlipansko official affiliation	4	5	3	12
Podlipansko actual affiliation	5	4	3	12
Ekoregion Uhlava official affiliation	9	7	2	18
Ekoregion Uhlava actual affiliation	10	6	2	18

From indicators of their status, it is possible to specify some of members' socio-economic characteristics: an over-representation of 50-year-olds and an under-representation of under-35s, an overwhelming majority of men (three-quarters), good education (secondary and tertiary), a high proportion of people satisfied with their income. More than half (24) hold managerial positions (in municipalities or heading municipal institutions), one-quarter are businessmen, one-tenth farmers (Table 3). From this an initial interpretation of the membership of LAG boards may be made. LAG members belong to a relatively favoured social stratum that is self satisfied, and are people who display a high degree of civic and voluntary-sector commitment. Some combine a job, an elective function and a voluntary activity. A sub-group of 28 elected officials (on muni-

TABLE 3. Socio-demographic profiles of board members of the study LAGs  
 TABELA 3. Charakterystyka społeczno-demograficzna członków zarządu badanych LGD

Indicator	Board members (N = 45)	Of whom municipal elected officials (N = 28)
Age		
Under 35	2	1
35–49	14	8
50–59	19	13
Over 60	10	6
Female	12	6
Male	33	22
Education		
Vocational	3	2
Secondary	21	15
Tertiary	21	11
Occupation		
Farmer	5	3
Businessman	12	3
Subordinate	2	1
Self-employed	2	2
Managerial	23	19
Do you earn a good salary?		
Yes	32	21
No	11	6
In a voluntary association		
Yes	27	18
No	10	10
Have you been an elected official in the past?		
Yes	19	17
No	18	11

cial councils) present similar characteristics. The typical profile of an elected official on the board of a LAG is that of an adult man, well educated, with a managerial job (mayor in almost all cases) and satisfied with his social achievements. This is a traditional profile for elective-representative democracy at local levels. This observation is without prejudice to their degree of involvement in the process of forming the LAG and preparing its strategy.

### Involvement in collective action

There are various levels of participation: taking the initiative (for the LAG), involvement in formulating a common vision and direct involvement in collective action. The level of involvement in terms of actual participation in the project of collective action may be estimated from the answers to questions about the origins of the project, motives for participation and knowledge of the strategy<sup>12</sup>. An indicator was constructed to measure each stakeholder's degree of involvement in the project (Table 4).

TABLE 4. Stakeholders' degree of involvement in LAG project  
TABELA 4. Stopień zaangażowania udziałowców w projekt LGD

Degree of involvement in LAG project – 3 levels	Hornácko-Ostrožsko (/18)	Podlipansko (/12)	Ekoregion Uhlava (/15)	Total (/45)
1. Very high	4	6	2	12
2. Partial	9		5	14
3. Low or none	5	3	8	16
Total responses	18	9	15	42
Total respondents	18	12	15	45

The first group comprises 12 individuals who displayed a high degree of involvement in the formation of the LAG and preparation of its strategy. They entered the process of their own accord and took part in designing the strategy. All but one are Mayors, mostly aged 35–60. More than half are women, although they are a minority on boards.

The second group (one-third of the total) were less involved. They have no clear knowledge of the history of the LAG, but once brought into the process

<sup>12</sup> Open-ended questions in the semi-directive interviews asked for the autobiographical story of the formation of the project, reasons for participation and knowledge of the strategy.

1. Who took the initiative for the project to form the LAG?
2. How were you brought into the LAG project?
3. Who prepared the LAG's local development strategy?
4. Did you personally take part in preparing the strategy, and at what stage?
5. Can you briefly describe the strategy?
6. Which people were most active?
7. In which way were residents consulted?

The answers were converted into indicators as follows:

1. Very good buy-in to the origin of the LAG and its strategy (those who have a full or very good knowledge of the start of the LAG and its strategy were associated with the project from its creation of their own accord and took part in preparing the strategy).
2. Partial involvement (those who have a good or average knowledge of the origin of the LAG and its strategy, and took part in preparing the strategy).



they took part in devising the strategy. These are mainly men and three-quarters are currently Mayors.

The third group (two-fifths of the total) have little knowledge of how the LAG was set up or what its strategy is. Only a half took part in preparing the strategy. They were co-opted by other members, often to make up numbers. They are in the business sector, although some are also Mayors or elected officials.

The three groups are not equally represented in each of the LAGs. In the Hornácko-Ostrožsko LAG, only a handful are highly involved. The LAG was set up on the initiative of the managers of the two micro-regions and is mainly run by a few Mayors. Four of them have a good knowledge of the history of the LAG and took part in the entire process of devising its strategy. Some Mayors are partly involved. Representatives of the other two sectors are only slightly involved, particularly if they are not elected officials too. The LAG is an inter-municipal coalition representing the interests of the participating local authorities. In the Podlipansko LAG, the group of highly involved actors is more numerous. The process of enrolment operated through a network of mutual acquaintances from cultural and sports associations. The working group that prepared the LAG project comprised 14 people who held regular meetings with productive results (in the opinion of the LAG chair). In this LAG, where the voluntary sector is highly developed (44 associations in the LAG area), representatives of that sector were very active. Half of them are women who head associations. The Uhlava LAG was created on the initiative of the Mayor of the small town of Nýrsko. According to the manager (a consultant from outside the micro-region), the project was prepared by a programme committee (two Mayors, two hotel-keepers, a farmer, and the Director of a museum), assisted by the Plzen community work centre and the Plzen regional development agency<sup>13</sup>. In fact, more than half the board members have only a slight knowledge of its history and admit that they were not involved in devising the strategy. It is as if the businessmen co-opted by the most influential mayors sat on the board to justify the existence of a local development strategy designed by a local political elite.

Examination of the degree of involvement indicator reveals differentiated forms of interests and enrolment: initiators often delegated by local authorities, representatives of other components of local society, volunteers from associations and those co-opted from the business sector. In diffusing the new form of public action, local elected officials play a key role. Initiating the process to set up the LAG, which they followed from start to finish, they are at the heart of the relationships between the partners they helped to enrol. This is the case with partners from the voluntary sector (sports and cultural associations) who come under the direct sphere of influence of local self-governments. Businessmen may

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3. Low or no involvement (those who have little knowledge of the origin of the LAG and its strategy, were brought into the project by necessity or chance, and did not take part in preparing the strategy).

<sup>13</sup> Interview with J. M., LAG manager (9 July 2009), from outside the micro-region, a consultant with the Plzen community work centre.

also have been invited in by the local elected official (or manager) to take part in the institutional process. A clear initial conclusion emerges: elected officials took the initiative of creating the LAGs and played a decisive part in setting up steering groups and then management boards. The cooperation required by the new form of public action appears to have been restricted to the narrow social circles making up the partnership.

## **ELECTED OFFICIALS IN THE CONFIGURATION OF LOCAL SYSTEMS OF ACTION**

### **Interdependence within systems of action**

The approach adopted here is to describe the configuration of local systems of action based on an analysis of social networks developed by a movement in sociology using an interactional paradigm<sup>14</sup>. Local systems of action emerge and organise themselves in a complex, unstable and potentially divisive world of social interaction. The methodological choice of structural analysis is appropriate for the study topic, the local action group, and was created and organised to design and implement a local development strategy. The structure of a network of stakeholders is formed by the relationships they maintain, and is a preferred channel for circulating social resources<sup>15</sup>. The hypothesis is that the LAG's capacity for action depends directly on the social resources procured by partnership members and on the coordinating mechanisms needed to mobilise them. It is the pattern formed by interdependence among individuals that defines the configuration of the local system of action.

The configuration of the system of stakeholders is described with variables that express the nature and intensity of their relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (ties of affinity or rejection)<sup>16</sup>. The graphs below, showing relationship matrices, display the position of each stakeholder with respect to all the others and the individual centrality scores are easy to interpret. Centrality of degree, measured by an individual's number of contacts, is used to identify the most important stakeholders in the system, those who control the allocation of resources or possess some authority<sup>17</sup>. An individual's prestige is greater if they

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<sup>14</sup> Network analysis is first a method for contextualising action that describes the system of interdependence between actors and its influence on their behaviour. See the analysis of social networks [Granovetter 1983, Lin 2001].

<sup>15</sup> Following Nan Lin, I distinguish the personal resources possessed by an individual, which may be inherited or acquired, from social resources, which are embedded in their network. "They are not goods that the individual possesses, but resources accessible via their direct and indirect ties. Access to and use of these resources are temporary and conditional, because they are not the property of the actor" [Lin 1995, p. 684].

<sup>16</sup> The survey protocol applied to the stakeholders sought to identify in practical terms their relationships (affinity or rejection) with their partners.

<sup>17</sup> Centrality of degree is the number of connections between an individual and the others. An individual is central if he is strongly connected to others. The more central an actor is, the more active he is in the network. A centrality index was calculated as the sum of contacts taken from responses to three questions: people the respondent would like to work with, who are the most active people, and who is the most respected person.

are mentioned by other individuals (themselves possessing some name recognition). In a situation of exchange or negotiation, they have a dominant position. A stakeholder's centrality, measured as the sum of their positive contacts, is shown on a map locating individuals and their own centrality scores in the municipality where they live. This provides a spatial image (a projection) of relationships between the stakeholder members of the LAG. It presents a territorial dimension of the configuration of the network of social actors. Within a LAG covering more than one administrative entity (municipality), the stakeholders' geographical location is important. It is via these relations of influence of the central stakeholders that the balance of power between places is played out.

### Ties of mutual acquaintance and recognition: the central stakeholders

In the Hornácko-Ostrožsko LAG, mutual acquaintance causes a high degree of integration in the network – people know each other personally. Some of the best-known individuals are three Mayors, two of them chair the micro-regions. The network of Mayors has a high degree of connectivity. Only the businessmen are relatively obscure. The network reflects cohesion expressed around the two main Mayors (chairs of the micro-regional associations). Both are in the position of central stakeholder, with no sign of any rivalry or opposition between them (Figures 1 and 2).

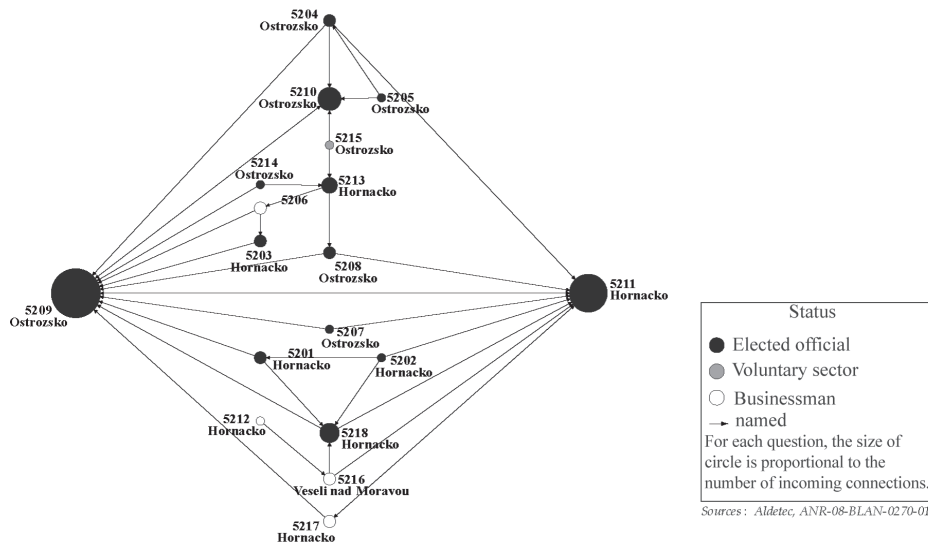


FIGURE 1. Configuration of inter-personal ties in the Hornácko-Ostrožsko LAG cooperation network ("the three people you would most like to work with")

RYSUNEK 1. Kształt powiązań interpersonalnych w sieci współpracy LGD Hornácko-Ostrožsko („trzy osoby, z którymi pracowałbyś najchętniej”)

In the Podlipansko LAG, the network is made up of an elite of well-educated people in managerial positions or self-employed, highly involved in local political life as municipal councillors and in the voluntary sector. The network has a low degree of integration and is defined by a group of voluntary-sector stake-

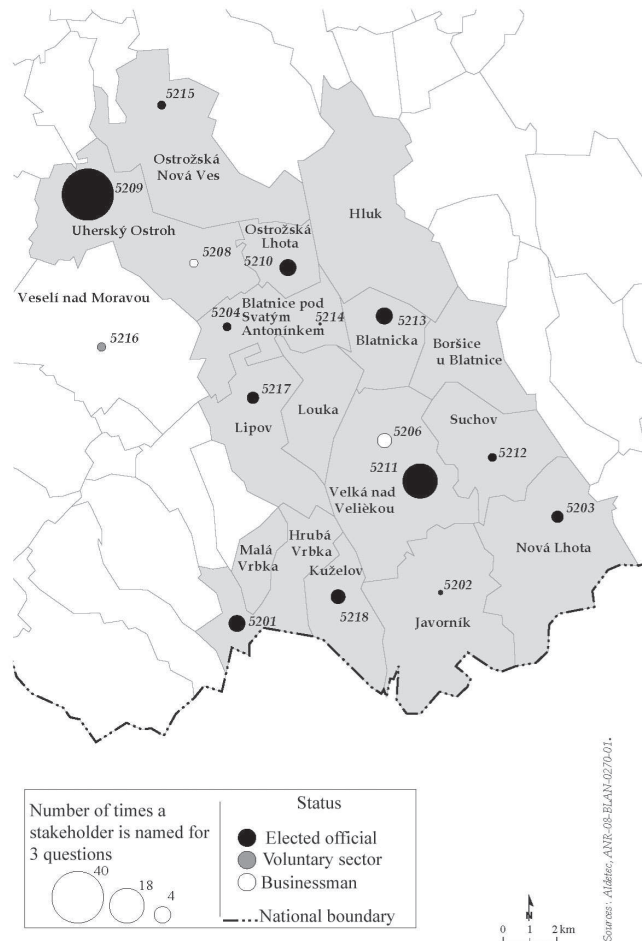


FIGURE 2. Spatial projection of degree of centrality of stakeholders in Hornácko-Ostrožsko LAG  
 RYSUNEK 2. Przestrzenny obraz stopnia centralnego znaczenia udziałowców w LGD Hornácko-Ostrožsko

holders and people living in the small town of Kostelec. The informal leader is the representative of a sports association, but although she is well known to most members, she does not enjoy a high degree of recognition or unanimous respect. The stakeholders are grouped by ties of affinity that do not create a high degree of cohesion (three cliques) and ultimately there is little hierarchy in the network as is seen in the name recognition indices (sum of positive contacts). In this huge LAG spreading over 54 municipalities, territorial proximity is not a decisive factor in the network configuration. The LAG was originally organised on the initiative of the small town of Pečky (Mayor and chair of the micro-region) and is now structured around a group of voluntary association members.

In the Ekoregion Uhlava LAG, a poorly integrated network is structured around the two central stakeholders who initiated the LAG. Only the Mayor of

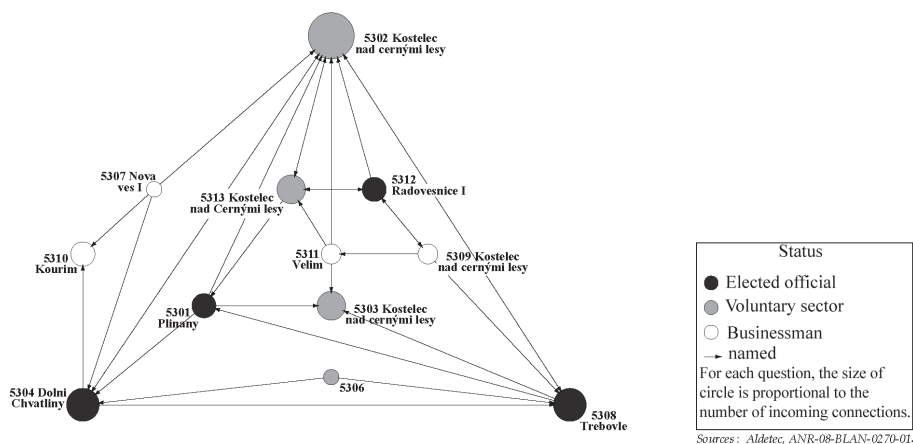


FIGURE 3. Configuration of inter-personal ties in the Podlipansko LAG cooperation network ("the three people you would most like to work with")

RYSUNEK 3. Kształt powiązań interpersonalnych w sieci współpracy LGD Podlipansko („trzy osoby, z którymi pracowałbyś najchętniej")

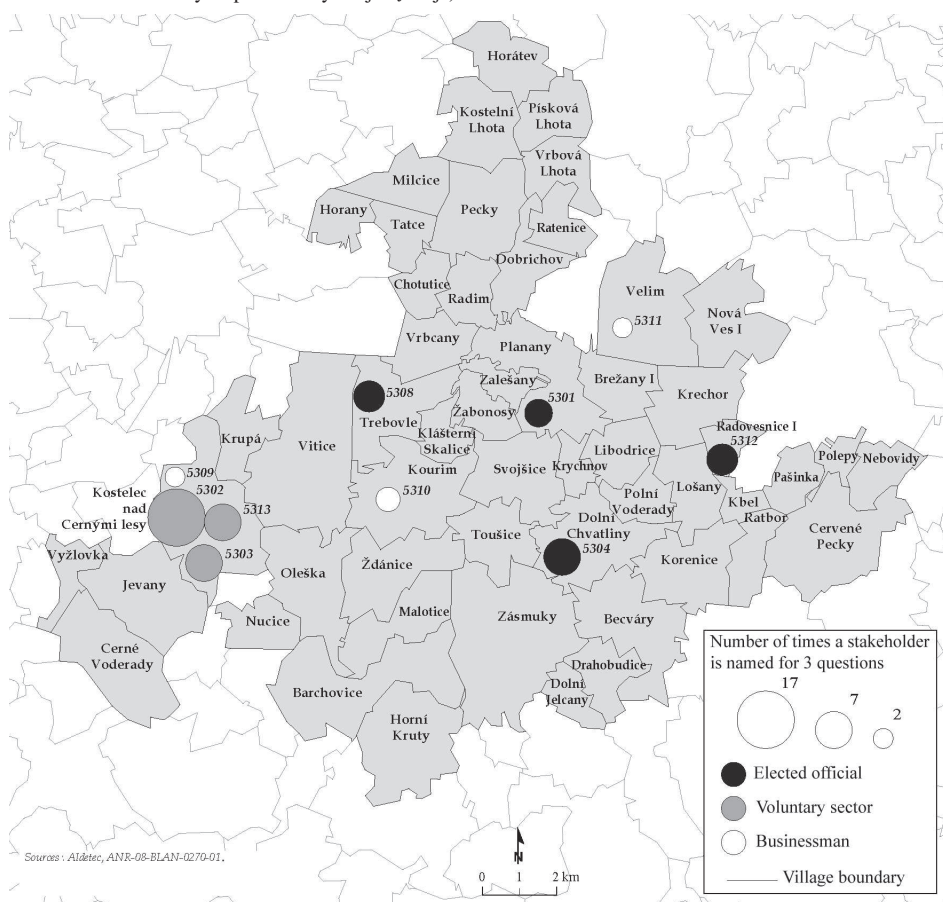


FIGURE 4. Spatial projection of degree of centrality of stakeholders in Podlipansko LAG

RYSUNEK 4. Przestrzenny obraz stopnia centralnego znaczenia udziałowców w LGD Podlipansko

Nýrsko and the Mayor's secretary at Strážov are known to everyone, whereas the other Mayors do not all know each other<sup>18</sup>. Connections are established with people in the same municipality or a neighbouring one. Network density is low and connectivity consists solely of ties of immediate territorial proximity (neighbourhood).

People's responses confirm the high degree of centrality of the Mayor of Nýrsko and the Mayor's secretary at Strážov. Both are more popular to work with (11 and 8 mentions) than they are recognised for their level of activity (7 and 6 mentions). Close examination of rejection ties reveals a latent animosity within the group of local elected representatives who do not wish to work together. However, the prestige of the Mayor of Nýrsko is not contested. He is the most respected person, mentioned by 13 out of 15. A single Mayor, at Dešenice, appears to oppose him (partly explained by political allegiances).

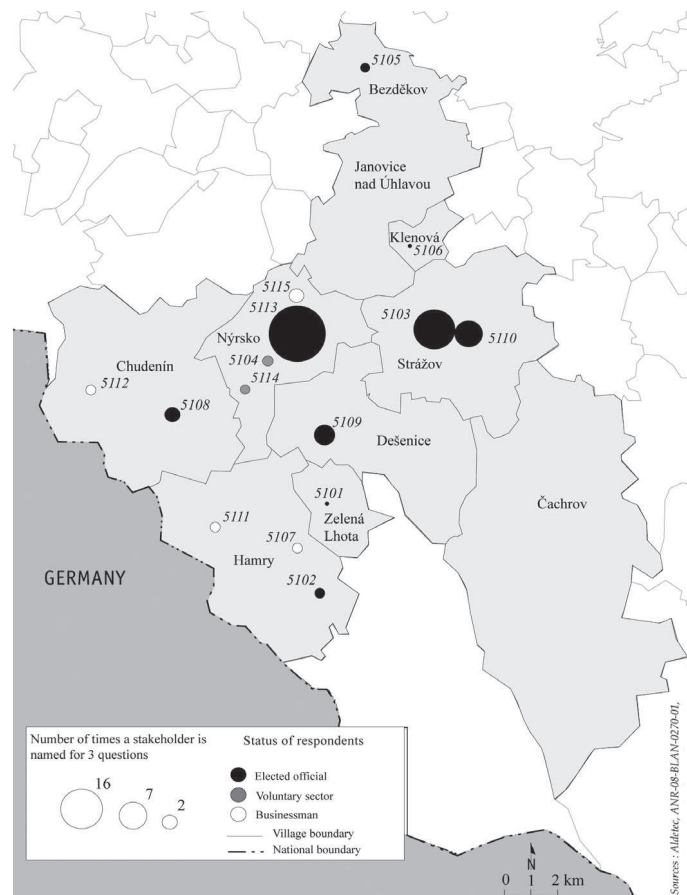


FIGURE 5. Spatial projection of degree of centrality of stakeholders in Ekoregion Uhlava LAG  
 RYSUNEK 5. Przestrzenny obraz stopnia centralnego znaczenia udziałowców w LGD Ekoregion Uhlava

<sup>18</sup> The Mayor of Klenová does not know the Mayors of Chudenín and Dešenice, and the latter is not known to the mayors of Hamry and Bezdíkov. The last is not known to the Mayor of Hamry and does not know the Mayor of Klenová.

Public action is basically advanced by the Mayors but they form a network that is neither coherent nor united. There are two cliques: one around the central stakeholder, the Mayor of Nýrsko, a strong political leader behind the creation of the micro-region and the LAG; the other, less well structured, comprises four Mayors (Dešenice, Hamry, Bezdřikov, Strážov). Their political backgrounds mean that they oppose the Mayor of Nýrsko, who stands for the ODS (Civic Democratic Party). Although the reputation of the Mayor of Nýrsko<sup>19</sup>, who has been pushing micro-regional development projects for more than ten years, is strong, it arouses some reticence among the other Mayors, forced to join a LAG that has been extended to villages in the Šumava foothills<sup>20</sup>. The changing make-up of the inter-municipal structures over the past ten years explains the lack of integration and cohesion in the partnership.

In general terms, the mutual acquaintance relationship reveals the central role played by Mayors in consultation. However, a close examination of a mutual recognition relationship (based on ties of trust and reciprocity) shows that there is an implicit hierarchy based on prestige. Pro-active Mayors, well embedded in local society, known to all, and ready to cooperate with others, enjoy greater name recognition, which makes them central stakeholders. In this respect some Mayors appear to be, in effect, prime contractors for LEADER action. What is the nature of the political leadership they exercise over the LAG project? How do local elected officials intervene in mobilising resources for collective action in order to construct a project territory?

## **POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND TERRITORIALISATION OF PUBLIC ACTION**

### **Political leadership's capacity of intervention**

The principle of three-sector partnership that underpins the LEADER approach would appear to exclude the possibility of seeing a political leadership arise in its action groups<sup>21</sup>. However, the role of local elected officials in attracting partners and their deep involvement in decision-making bodies raise questions about how their power is exercised. It would appear that elected officials have a real ability to formulate strategic guidelines and direct public action in the name of a common interest [Keohane 2010]<sup>22</sup>. Unlike the other LAG members, who are clearly "followers", Mayors have a legitimacy that comes from being elected to lead a municipal council<sup>23</sup>. Their authority is the

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<sup>19</sup> He was born in Nýrsko and elected mayor in 1998. He graduated in engineering from a school in Plzen and was formerly production manager at the Optika factory.

<sup>20</sup> Territorial proximity plays a particular role in this region, where mountainous terrain lengthens journeys and reduces contact between neighbouring villages.

<sup>21</sup> Many definitions of leadership have been formulated in the political sciences. The point here is merely to identify the form of exercise of the political leadership that goes with the introduction of the LEADER programme to a specific context.

<sup>22</sup> See N. O. Keohane's definition of leadership: "Leaders determine or clarify goals for a group of individuals and bring together the energies of members of that group to accomplish those goals" [2010, p. 23].

greater if it has been confirmed by several re-elections. Consolidation of local self-government as an institution has confirmed the authority of Mayors, whose legitimacy is based on their status as elected officials. Their power is exercised over the territory of the municipality in the framework of democratic life. To remedy a fragmentation of self-government units in the Czech Republic, the policy to support inter-municipal undertakings has encouraged the emergence of new regional management areas joining several local self-governments in a flexible, voluntary institutional framework. These groupings have gradually consolidated to produce micro-regions, which have become territories for public action. In order to be eligible for National or European programmes, the Mayors of neighbouring self-governments have set up permanent cooperation structures to prepare funding applications (generally housed in the largest municipality). With the necessary resources for action, these micro-regions have hired managers and have tasked them to develop local development projects. With this experience of inter-municipal management and projects, the mayors who chair the micro-regions have acquired skills and know-how that have made them local public action professionals. Supported by the managers they recruited, they directly exercise their influence over the formulation of local development issues. The managers (assisted by design offices) help to transcribe these into priorities in strategy documents. The most influential Mayors operationalise these strategies by monitoring funding applications and project selection. Their authority is based on their experience and prestige, and the trust other elected officials have placed in them. This may erode if their exercise of power no longer corresponds to the common interests of the participating local authorities. It is therefore important to understand the base of respect the "followers" show them.

### **Mobilisation of resources by a legitimate political leadership**

Examination of the project selection process allows for the identification of characteristics of a new form of governance that accompanies LEADER actions<sup>24</sup>. The analytical framework covers the allocation of funding to strategic priorities, the status of project promoters and beneficiary municipalities. This allows lessons to be drawn from the manner in which funding is allocated.

Since the Hornácko-Ostrožsko LAG was established there have been seven calls for projects launched (2008–2011). In all, 51 projects have received funding under the LEADER axis. The vast majority of the projects were submitted by municipalities, in order to renovate infrastructure (15) or socio-cultural equipment for youth projects (15). A few concerned the protection of a cultural heritage (renovation of religious buildings). Support o projects for tourism and leisure are promoted by stakeholders in the voluntary and business

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<sup>23</sup> In the Czech Republic, the Mayor is elected by the municipal council. The Mayor is remunerated in larger municipalities and Mayors have almost become professionals.

<sup>24</sup> The stakeholders on the LAG's decision-making bodies direct the programming of calls for projects and take part in selecting them.



sectors, and aid projects for small farmers by businessmen or farmers. When asked about the reasons for this distribution which largely favours municipality projects, the LAG leaders (manager and chair of the board) gave a pragmatic explanation: municipalities are more prepared to draft applications and seek co-funding for public infrastructure. Projects from the voluntary sector come from traditional associations: sports clubs, beekeepers' club, parish associations, which receive support from the municipalities. Projects from the business sector likely to directly stimulate local activity are few. Municipalities are the major beneficiaries. The location of the selected projects reveals a concern to allocate funding fairly between the two micro-regions and among municipalities. Project grants vary in a ratio of 1 to 12. Some rebalancing is occurring in recent calls for projects. Ultimately, the spatial distribution of projects shows a desire not to leave any municipality in the partnership.

TABLE 5. Distribution of projects by category of beneficiary in the three LAGs (2009–2011)  
 TABELA 5. Rozkład projektów według kategorii beneficjentów w trzech badanych LGD (2009–2011)

Promoter	Hornácko-Ostrožsko		Podlipansko		Ekoregion Uhlava	
	Number of beneficiary projects	Proportion of budget [%]	Number of projects	Proportion of budget [%]	Number of projects	Proportion of budget [%]
Municipality	28	62	34	50	11	77
Vol. assoc.	10	19	18	36	8	17
Business	13	19	7	14	2	6
Total	51	100	57	100	21	100

The Podlipansko LAG's strategy focuses on raising the standard of living of the resident population, increasing the attractiveness of the LAG area and diversifying its economy. The distribution of funding among the priorities of the strategy shows that in the first five calls for projects, two-fifths of funding went to public amenities. In addition one-quarter of funding was directed towards renovating infrastructure, emphasising that most of the resources were devoted to a municipal amenity policy (37 projects and 63.6% of the grants)<sup>25</sup>. The distribution of projects by category of beneficiary confirms, also, this view of a local policy directed towards infrastructure and public amenities (Table 5). The project promoters are mostly municipalities (59% of projects selected and half the funding). These are followed by voluntary associations, who received 36% of the funding for 31% of projects (sports infrastructure, cultural and social activities). This collective investment also contributes to updating public services. The location of the projects reveals a differential distribution in favour of small towns (Pečky, Kostelec, Kouřim) and the largest villages (Nová Ves, Plaňany). Many municipalities did not benefit from any project. There is a correlation

<sup>25</sup> The projects for road surface renovation, public transport shelters, access paths and playgrounds had priority for funding in 2009. The following year there came projects for supporting micro-enterprises and restoring local heritage monuments, and the call for projects launched in spring 2011 favoured the same type of project (heritage maintenance and renovation, infrastructure and public amenities).

between the domicile of the stakeholders on LAG bodies (board, steering committee and selection committee) and the volume of funding obtained by the municipalities where they live. The places best represented on the decision-making bodies do well for themselves.

The Ekoregion Uhlava LAG has launched seven calls for projects in three years and selected 21 projects. The distribution of projects according to the priorities laid down in the strategic plan provokes some initial remarks. Two measures for the stabilisation and development of housing were the subject of 14 projects (out of 21) and received 90% of the funding. These were projects for renovating villages (renovation of public areas, mains drainage) and sports and recreation facilities. The strategic priorities of promoting natural resources (forests and watercourses) and diversifying the rural economy received no attention from the LAG management. The vast majority of projects meet the needs of infrastructure and social and cultural amenities. Half of the projects are submitted by municipalities and receive 77% of funding. Next are the voluntary associations (8 projects) with 17% of funding. So, the implementation of the priorities reveals a distortion between the initial stated objectives and the operations actually selected. The LEADER approach is being used for operations the elected officials intend to undertake to meet the expectations of their communities. It is as if joining the municipalities together in a LAG is a way of obtaining extra funding resources to improve amenities and public services. In this particular case, even more than in the other two LAGs, the local development approach is only a pretext put forward to apply for financial resources to cover operations to renovate infrastructure and public amenities. Two municipalities received very few projects and little funding (Dešenice 1.5% and Hamry 2.8%), while the small town of Nýrsko commandeered 26.3% of the sums allocated. This distribution clearly reflects the balance of power between local elected officials in the network. The Mayor of Nýrsko occupies a position of traditional political leadership.

### **Ways the political leadership is exerted on**

Local elected officials see the LEADER axis as an instrument for obtaining public amenities, maintaining infrastructure (roads, pavements, public areas), renovating local heritage (churches, castles). Local elected officials speak on LAG bodies to "advance" and select the projects they want to see implemented and are ready to co-fund. Mayors have learnt to cooperate with the enlightened self-interest of the municipalities they run. However, the extension of the action territory has not always been followed by a change of scale in terms of managing public problems. It is as if the main purpose of LEADER funding was to remedy past deficiencies in public amenities. The elected officials' determination to mobilise resources to meet their municipalities' expectations by finding the right payout window is blatant. In some cases, as in Hornácko-Ostrožsko, the procedure for selecting projects responds to the idea of sharing resources equally among local authorities; in others, hierarchy counts, revealing a de facto political leadership, as in the Uhlava LAG. In both cases, we may speak of

traditional political leadership exerted on by the Mayor who enjoys the greatest recognition and relational power (the highest standardised degree of centrality). He is generally the one who took the initiative, with support from a consultant or manager, and monitored the process of putting together the LAG and devising its strategy. To secure its authority over the entire territory, the political leadership allies itself to a "Number 2" who provides an essential supplement of legitimacy. In the LAG in Moravia, this Number 2 emerges clearly from all the elected officials, namely the Mayor who chairs the Hornácko micro-region. In a relationship of mutual respect, the two main Mayors seek to construct a territorial identity on the basis of values and cultural and architectural heritage common to the two micro-regions.

In the Uhlava LAG, the Number 2 is the secretary of the mayor's office in the municipality of Strážov, the largest after Nýrsko. He was given the chair of the LAG to consolidate the alliance. The political leadership reigns unopposed in this micro-regional territory that has coalesced with no great vision of its identity. As "followers" the other elected officials have no choice but to take part in the LAG in order to pick up some crumbs from the feast.

The configuration of the Podlipansko LAG is more complex, since voluntary-sector stakeholders provide a counter-balance to the influence of the Mayors. The best-recognised stakeholders are representatives of voluntary associations, but two of them are also on the Kostelec municipal council. It is hard to speak of political leadership in this LAG with its strong voluntary-sector flavour, where tensions are perceptible between the chair of the management board and four other members on the LAG's decision-making bodies. It would be premature to see in this the embryo of a new more integrative type of leadership based on collaborative governance by the three sectors, public, voluntary and business.

## CONCLUSION

Does the way in which political leadership is exerted on have no consequences for the participation of citizens at local level? It has been pointed out that the degree of involvement of local stakeholders (LAG members) was in many cases limited. LEADER action is presented as a vector for improving local governance but is in fact used to serve the interests of a local elite formed of elected officials and a handful of citizens committed to animating local life. The political leadership takes on the responsibility of securing resources and presides, in the name of the common interest, over their distribution to the "followers". This movement to "municipalise" the LEADER programme, observable in all three LAGs, does not contribute to any advance towards participatory democracy. The way in which this form of political leadership is exerted on may have the effect of hampering the learning of civic involvement at a local level. This is one of the limitations of the transfer of local development models to the new Member States in Central Europe.

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## ROLA OBIERALNYCH URZĘDNIKÓW LOKALNYCH W TWORZENIU LOKALNYCH GRUP DZIAŁANIA LEADER W REPUBLICIE CZESKIEJ

**Abstrakt.** Osoby wybierane do pełnienia funkcji we władzach lokalnych w praktyce sprawują przywództwo polityczne dzięki zaangażowaniu w działania partnerskie oraz swemu statusowi na arenie współpracy lokalnej. Realizacja programu LEADER w kategoriach doboru projektów dowodzi, że to przywództwo polityczne przyjmuje taki model rozwoju lokalnego, który jest postrzegany przez nie jako instrument służący unowocześnieniu urzędzeń i usług socjalnych oraz jako źródło legitymizacji jego działania. Badanie konfiguracji lokalnych grup działania oparte jest na analizie członkostwa w partnerstwach oraz analizie sieci udziałowców, w której wykorzystywane są dane z badań empirycznych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** działanie publiczne, obieralni urzędnicy lokalni, przywództwo polityczne, rozwój lokalny, Republika Czeska