

# My Municipal Adventures: Forty Years in the International Municipal Movement, or the story I have lived...

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My "municipal life", or involvement in local government affairs dates back to the early 1970s. Even earlier, if I am to count my small contributions -such as checking municipal budget figures and editing certain council documents- for my late father, who was an elected councillor and chair of the finance committee in a then a small community within Greater Istanbul's periphery.

Following my graduation from the Faculty of Law of Istanbul University, and having acquired the title of attorney in law and spent some years abroad (mainly in London and Paris) in the late 1960s as a worker and a "student of life", and of different cultures and languages, I returned to my second hometown Istanbul. The first had been a mountainous rural area in the city of Trabzon in the northern Black Sea region.

During the early 1970s, as in many geographies of the world, Turkey was in full socio-political agitation and turmoil: an environment of strong student and workers' movements; anti-establishment resistance and certain military *coup d'etat* attempts.

My political stance then was (and I think more or less, with certain modifications, still is) one that challenged and rejected authority structures, establishment party politics, competitive and egoistic individualism, corporate liberalism and the rampant capitalist order; one that defended the core humanistic values of human dignity, independence and basic rights; and justice; participatory and self-governed, decentralized democracy, authenticity, moral superiority and solidarity; as well as a genuine internationalism, or cosmopolitanism.

*"I am of that city which is the city of all  
who are without city."*

M.J.RUMI

During those "heated" years, I was simultaneously engaged in various fields, such as transformatory politics, social movements, citizen initiatives, human rights protection (serving as a lawyer in military courts), and editorial and translation work on political philosophy and world literature.

Then came the Military Regime of 1971, of which most of us were victims. From 1973 onwards, I started to participate directly in the municipal arena, by helping the newly-elected mayors of cities such as Istanbul, Ankara and Izmit, where the democratic left wing of the Republican People's Party (the founding, modernist party of the Turkish Republic) held the majority.

During this period, with certain "masters" and friends of mine (such as I.Tekeli of METU, Ankara) we developed a new municipal understanding and practice that we called the *New or Democratic Municipal Movement* based on the following main principles:

- strong, participatory democracy;
- productiveness and resource creation;
- consumer protection;
- solidarity and inter-municipal cooperation.

This democratic movement was a sort of breakthrough in a historically centralized culture, where municipal authorities until then were considered only as a service delivery body and they were, to a great extent, dependent on central government and its bureaucracy, both politically and financially.

Perhaps that's why my intellectual friends then used to tease me by calling me "Selah the municipalist", meaning, more or less, "garbage collector"...

In the same period I met with the International Municipal Movement through:

- the internationally designed and run Greater Istanbul Urban Development Project, of which
- I was part-time head of the urban governance section;
- the OECD's urban management team, of which I was a member;
- FMCU's Union of Mediterranean Towns initiative and IULA's activities.

My inter-municipal cooperation experience started with the founding secretary-general role of the Union of Municipalities of the Marmara Region in 1975, and then with the same role at the Union of Municipalities of Turkey in 1978, and Secretary of Economic affairs of the Union of Mediterranean Towns (FMCU initiative) in May 1980.

All these "ambitious" activities came to an end in Turkey on 12 September 1980 when yet another Military Regime took power. The main Turkish actors of the democratic municipal movement were then either imprisoned, exiled or banned from professional and political life for some years.

During the 1980-83 break due to the military "force major", I with some friends of mine from the democratic municipal movement worked hard under clandestine conditions to initiate a Turkey-wide democratic political movement that served as the basis of the future Social Democratic Party of Turkey.



*D.Horgan, H.V.Putten, S.Yildirim*

Towards the mid-1980s I was back in the municipal movement, this time as a founding elected Secretary-General of IULA - EMME, with great contributions from my late friends H.V.Putten, D.Horgan, T.Edison, J.Han, and my dear friend D.Borut among others.



*P.Maragall, S.Yildirim*

I was also involved in the creation of Metropolis in 1984-85, through the Metropolitan Istanbul Municipality and IULA - EMME. Between the years of 1989-1994 I served as vice-president of IULA in the Hague.

During the mid-1990s I found myself as host coordinator - general of 1996 the Istanbul City Summit (Habitat II) responsible for local governments and civil society initiatives.

From 1996 onwards I, of my own volition (there was no official demand), became an honorary mediator, or facilitator for the unification of IULA, FMCU and Metropolis under one umbrella.

Actually, this role had started somewhat earlier, since I was active in all three organizations in one way or other from the mid 1970s onwards. But my concrete contributions started during the preparations for the Istanbul City Summit in 1996 when The World Assembly of Cities and Local Authorities took place in Istanbul.

Of course, so many dedicated people such as mayors, municipal leaders and professionals have immensely contributed to this process. To mention a few: I list P.Maragall, A. Pristina, J.Clos, J.Sampaio, M.Bresso, A. Lloyd C.Anthony, D.Borut, J.Smith, P.Wood, J.Roig, J.P.E. Mbassi, E.Gateau, G. Tapia, C.Tikiz

It was almost ten years of permanent effort, in which we all have lived certain ups and downs.



*S.Yildirim, A.Piristina*

In fact, all parties were united, or agreed on the urgent need for creating a new strong single voice in the domain of international municipal movement. And all parties, more or less, ascribed to the main mission and objectives of the new organisation.

There was a solid and well-intentioned leadership, and efficient technocratic back up. What I saw as the main problem area of difficulty that we faced during this process was of a cultural nature. In other words, the different politico-institutional cultural codes which were (perhaps still are!) dominant in the two main components of the unification initiative, namely, IULA and FMCU.

IULA's general politico-institutional culture, though born in continental Europe (Belgium) was, what I call, Anglo-Nordic; whereas FMCU's was Franco-Latin in the main.

The general traits of Anglo-Nordic culture may be summarized as:

- Empiricist, pragmatist approach to ideas and life in general;
- Individually oriented action;
- Discursive political decision-making;
- Common Law superiority;
- Gradual, or reformist approach towards change; and
- Bottom-up movement development tradition.

The municipal and inter-municipal cooperation culture of this world is:

- Longevity of the liberal local government tradition;
- Council / Councillor domination in municipal government;
- Associative, local government association-based inter-municipal cooperation; and
- A less political, more technical / service-orientated inter-municipal movement understanding.

Franco-Latin culture's main characteristics may be described as:

- Rationalist / Cartesian approach to ideas and life in general;
- Publicly-oriented action;
- Conflictual political decision-making;
- Public law superiority;
- Radical approach towards change;
- Centralized polity and top-down movement development.

The municipal and inter-municipal cooperation culture of this world is:

- Breaks within local government tradition;
- Mayor dominated or presidential municipal government system;
- City based inter-municipal movement development; and
- More politically based inter-municipal cooperation understanding.

I was not totally foreign to either of these cultures, because of my intellectual past, life experiences and professional activities in both. Nonetheless, I have learned much during this entire process...

Ultimately, the unification process has ended with a happy "marriage", though a bit 'loose' at the beginning, and consolidated gradually later on.

My "municipal adventures" were (and still are) of great importance to me. They have brought me closer to people, and to their daily life and problems, both locally and internationally and have taught me much about how to find a common language and engage in a dialogue with others or differences, and how to become a candid citizen of the cosmos or as great poet Nazim Hikmet says how "to live free and single like a tree but in brotherhood like a forest".



*K.Topbas, S.Yildirim, C.Tikiz*