

# 30 YEARS OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY

Antonella Valmorbida

***IN THE END, IT WAS WORTH IT.***



**alda\***  
**30** years LDAs in the Balkans  
European Association  
for Local Democracy



Co-funded by  
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*September 2024*



*Dedicated to:*

*My mother, who has been everything to me*

*My father, for all what he did for me and my sisters*

*Fabio for his love, patience and company all life long*

*And to our children, Guglielmo, Margherita and Elena,*

*grown up now, whom we look at every day with nothing*

*like less than worthless enchantment ...*

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## **Author's note**

*This book has been written in different moments of my life and very often late at night or on a plane. I decided to put it together for the 30th year celebration of ALDA in the Balkans in 2023 and then, again, I had to wait another year. My activities and career have been also going at the margin of the development of ALDA, like the consultancy, trainers and expertise work (some of them are mentioned though in the text) and my academic experience at the University of Padova. Here, the story is above all about ALDA to make sure that some pieces of this adventure won't get lost forever.*

*Things are changing very quickly around me and all of us and therefore you will likely miss the latest news of 2024, like the results of the EU elections - and the prospects for the new scenarios - and the updates on the war in Ukraine and in the Middle East or the different political trends in Europe. I had to stop updating at some point otherwise I would never have been able to finish the book. But, in general, these first six months of 2024, did not change my conclusions but would rather reinforce them.*

*All photos are from ALDA or personal archive. My positions are only personal. Some names and people have not been mentioned not to put them in danger.*



## In the end, it was worth it.

For those who, like me, lived through the end of the East-West bloc in the 1990s, the reunification of Germany and the last war in former Yugoslavia, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has been a true blow to the heart and raises a big question. In the end, was what we did together to build a different and more peaceful, democratic Europe worth it?

I remember those days, back in the 90s, of a blurred TV broadcasting soldiers of a demobilising Yugoslavia in the streets of Vojvodina and later, of Kosovo, with a sea of people at the border with what was the FRYOM (now North Macedonia) and Albania. A disaster that lasted 4 years. It was the beginning of the end for Yugoslavia, a country which had represented a dream for so many: both for those in the eastern bloc who saw in it a successful, multicultural socialism that functioned well from an economic point of view (the tourism on the beaches of Dalmatia being an example), and also from a western point of view, as it was a mixed and free world with high expectations of brotherhood and peace. With the war well underway in the 1990s, many of those who came to help the victims of the terrible war (which included most families), were nostalgic for a Yugoslavia and a socialism with a human face.

I remember the war was on our doorsteps (I live in Vicenza, in northern Italy), a few kilometres away from Trieste, where every weekend we delivered aid to the refugee camps, close to Croatia and the Adriatic coast of Italy (Ancona, Bari, Ravenna) from where you could easily reach the other side. We would go as far as Mount Igman, before passing ... all the way to the too long besieged city of Sarajevo. Those were terrible years, but somehow, they did not really deeply shake our continent because of Europe's desire for redemption, having experienced victory over the totally scattered Soviet Union and the instant reunification of Germany. Many say that the war in Ukraine is the first European conflict since the Second World War. For me, what I saw in the Balkans looked a lot like a conflict in the middle of Europe and much closer to home. For some in Brussels today, Ukraine is closer than Croatia, from a pure distance point of view, which is, of course, wrong. I say, we all say (those who lived through the war in the Balkans) to them, "what do you mean?". Have they ever looked at the maps of the world or even Europe? The distance between Zagreb and Brussels is half the distance between Brussels and Kyiv. So yes, the war in the Balkans was much, much closer.

The reunification of Germany was a lightning-fast, instantaneous process. Very political. The politicians of the time seized the opportunity to do something that would be totally impossible today in an overly bureaucratic system of accession and enlargement. I spoke once, in a village of Banovina, with a former DDR diplomat, whom I met in Croatia in 1996/1997 (working for UNHCR) and who had worked in Tirana in the highly autarchic Albania. He told me that he had been thrown out of German DDR diplomatic service to be assimilated into the new Germany in rapid time: “The process was supposed to last at least 10 years, but after a few days there was talk of five years, after another few days we were discussing a year... and then it was a month, then we were told, it's next month”. It was a political and economic leap into the void that was, all in all, a huge success. The reunification of Germany is no longer an issue, but it had certainly been one of the fundamental and successful steps of Europe and the European Union project. Some feared this process but, in the end, the political vision overcame these incredible problems associated with this move. With the Dayton Agreements (1993), the war in Sarajevo ended and then, with the NATO intervention in Kosovo that war was also brought to an end, and a long journey began that we, as ALDA, accompanied. You will find it

described in the following pages. Money, energy, thoughts, and passions were invested. ALDA was created just as Europe and its institutions and programmes were being built. I had the privilege to lead and to be part of this collective endeavour. We followed the strengthening of a bottom-up Europe with the empowerment of European policies on regional and territorial basis and then also with a new treaty (the Lisbon Treaty), which, overcoming the impasse of a failed “European constitution”, enshrined the role of civil society with Art 17. In both parts, our “local authorities working with civil society” approach has been fundamental and recognised as a key feature of European integration. Deepening European integration also went ahead with very important and structural changes such as the introduction of Euro and the Schengen Treaty. This integration also made us believe in a different model of society, where market and social policies could coexist and where, with the European project, war was removed from European soil, where disagreements would be resolved through diplomatic or institutional means.

Over many years, together with many others (whom I will refer to in these pages), we have always emphasised the immense risk posed by Putin's Russia.

Yet, for me, the Russians were not enemies. I lived there for short periods and learned their language. Unfortunately, the more I had the chance to know from inside, the more everything became more terrifying. Even before February 2022, for decades, in Russia, there had been little in the way of freedom. Propaganda and the Stalinist style environment have been present for decades with its slogans and hysterical historical references. Putin's power has been scary for a long time. I (we) said it aloud (that is, the associations who knew the risk) but everyone was fine with it and considered Putin's regime as "popular and receiving a lot of votes and therefore politically validated". But what does it mean to vote in a situation where the media is monopolised and everything is monitored and controlled by the police, army and secret service, which ends with total self-censorship including thoughts, and not just speech? The system was dangerous. Yes, very dangerous. And now we have seen the result.

On 24 February 2022 at dawn, many like me wondered: was it worth it?

Taking into account all that has been done and achieved, eventually, it was worth it because, on a few occasions, I saw the results and successes of my work and effort to improve people's lives and maybe change the destiny of history:

among the groups of young people and those who think about the future of their country and get involved, such as in the work of the Local Democracy Agencies but also all the boys and girls who have walked along our paths. ALDA's work benefited almost 25 million people over these 30 years. Even now, I see colleagues, young and old, and beneficiaries of our activities, who show the same determination and who, every day, propose a solution, demand and implement better and more balanced policies, management systems and care for democracy and human rights. I have been a little part of it, and it was worth it. I remember many who told me that I helped and inspired them in their professional and personal choices. Even during the disastrous wars, there have been exemplary mayors, local councillors, and civil society activists, not only in Ukraine but also here in Europe, who put their civic commitment before everything (including themselves and their families). For all of them, I have an immense respect and if my work contributed to their fight, it should have then been done.

Yes, it has been worth it, and I believe that local democracy will save democracy. There is a place where there is very little opportunity to hide from responsibilities, it is where things get really serious about addressing people's needs, sorting out refugees'

accommodation, dealing with homeless people, finding ideas and systems for development of communities, even in rural or remote areas. It was worth it, just to discover how many examples of “good communities” there are around us, of different solutions given to unsolvable problems, different languages or even illiteracy. Work at the local level is the most motivating thing to do and it gives hope to humanity. It enables you to meet people, feel their passion and care for those around them and for their home and their mountains, or sea and beaches, or historic centres. It is worth it because today's generations are aware of the environment and of the need for action. They have learned how to choose the right balance between their family and professional lives better than we, the older generation, managed to do. So many are committed, belong to associations, meet, and think, in collective way. They are and we are many. We are builders. The destroyers are strong but less than us. We change the world one step at a time and my job is to connect the dots and build the net, day after day, one person after another. And sometimes it has worked, and the choice has been peace, cooperation and collaboration.

Yes, it was worth it, and I will try to say a bit more about this long story and those who have been part of it. I am not able to mention all of those who have been part

of this long journey, and I will certainly miss some of them, some of whom were very important. I apologise in advance for this. I hope though to be able to represent the different steps and how, in a collective endeavour, we have been able to make a difference.

## 1. Before ALDA

After so many years, I am still convinced that ALDA and the Local Democracy Agencies are shaping Europe, which is a little part of the world. What we can do by empowering people, creating understanding and commitment to local communities, based on democracy and human rights, with concrete actions at the local level, getting to know each other and communities' challenges and opportunities, is the strongest tool for success and for development. The changes only come from communities working together. I saw the strength generated by visionary mayors and local community leaders. They all remain in my heart, and I try to replicate their example to change the world, one step at a time. In ALDA this is what we do.

Those who have felt the energy and the awareness in the hearts and the eyes of the participants in our activities, understand me. I have been empowered by capacity building activities and meetings with strong leaders. Nothing will diminish the impact that they had on my vision, which is also the vision that I am sharing with all my colleagues and Board members of ALDA.

### Before ALDA – until 1999

Today ALDA is a large and structured organisation, a community<sup>1</sup> with many volunteers, thousands of partners and hundreds of members. It is fair to say that it has not always been so. Many of us still remember it and can measure the distance we have travelled together.

ALDA was established in 1999 but it "existed" even before then. The programme was established by the Council of Europe and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, at that time, it was the Standing Conference. Since 1993, that programme was supporting actions thanks to the commitment of various local communities in Europe to help the citizens of Yugoslavia, in an ongoing war. The programme was named the **Embassies of Local Democracy** and established and supported entirely by the Congress/Standing Conference. A Swiss association started such an initiative, Cause Communes Suisse, which remained a member of ALDA for a long time. The key idea, which is still very much at the heart of ALDA, was that communities in Europe (both local authorities and civil society) can be engaged to help communities in

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<sup>1</sup> The Community of ALDA is composed of ALDA (French association) with ALDA Skopje and ALDA

Chisinau, ALDA Italia, ALDA +, a group of 15 Local Democracy Agencies and 2 Operational Partners.

Summer School on Local Democracy in Ohrid (FRYOM) of ALDA with the delegates of LDA Prijedor, Montenegro, Central and Southern Serbia, North Macedonia and Kosovo, 2002



troubled times to find a peaceful way of cohabitation and development. It was done by providing material and moral support to refugees and affected communities and it paved the way for reconciliation and dialogue, both among citizens and local authorities. The programme was approved and defined in 1993 through resolutions of the Congress while the war was still ongoing, Serbia was under international embargo and Bosnia was still being attacked<sup>2</sup>. Leading this process was a regular group of members of the Congress, who gathered in a Steering Committee/ Comité de Pilotage. At the centre of this process, was the future President of ALDA, **Gianfranco Martini**<sup>3</sup>, who was working for AICCRE<sup>4</sup>, which was involved since the very early moments in the European movement of local authorities, within the network of the CEMR<sup>5</sup>. Gianfranco had been Mayor of

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<sup>2</sup> Resolution 251 of the Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe, March 1993, available at

<https://rm.coe.int/0900001680719abd%20>

<sup>3</sup> Born in Lucca on 23 June 1925, to escape forced enrolment in the army of the Republic of Salò, Gianfranco Martini took refuge in Lendenara, Polesine, where he served as mayor for ten years from 1951. Subsequently a provincial councillor in Rovigo, in 1964 he finally moved to Rome and headed the Council of European Municipalities (CCE - today AICCRE) with Umberto Serafini. He was president of ALDA from its creation in 1999 until 2008. Gianfranco Martini was also author of some books, among which "Little Fathers. A conversation on the birth of the European Union and its future" (2010) and "The way is done by walking" (2014).

Lendenara<sup>6</sup> in Italy and devoted his whole life to municipal twinning as a mean of creating friendship and reconciliation in Europe. He is duly mentioned among the "fathers" of modern Europe. At the Council of Europe, those who believed, at this very early stage, in this programme were Rinaldo Locatelli (Secretary General of the Congress), Ulrich Bohner, his deputy, and staff like Sylvie Affholder and driving politicians like the Swiss members of the Congress Michel Fluckiger<sup>7</sup> and Claude Haegi<sup>8</sup>.

The first Embassy for Local Democracy established within this programme was the LDE in Subotica (Serbia) in 1993, in a country where nobody could enter<sup>9</sup> and where the action was dangerous for colleagues working there. Indeed, in 2023 ALDA celebrated, the 30th anniversary of our work in the Western

<sup>4</sup> Italian section of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (AICCRE), available at <https://www.aiccre.it/>

<sup>5</sup> Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), available at <https://ccre.org/>

<sup>6</sup> The city of Lendenara is undoubtedly one of the most interesting centres in the Province of Rovigo, so much so that it is honoured with the nickname "Athens of the Polesine", as well as a destination for pilgrimages. Like the whole of Polesine, it suffered frequent flooding over the years: <https://shorturl.at/ikulY>

<sup>7</sup> Michel Fluckiger was in the Congress from 02 May 1988 to 30 January 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Claude Haegi was President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe (CLRAE) from 2 July 1996 to 25 May 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Resolution n. 757 Security Council of United Nations, 30 May 1992, available at <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/757>

Gianfranco Martini, former President of ALDA and initiator, at the Congress of the Council of Europe, 2003



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*“The first Embassy for Local Democracy established within this programme was the LDE in Subotica (Serbia) in 1993.”*

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Balkans region<sup>10</sup>. The programme in Serbia could not work officially (in a country where Slobodan Milosevic<sup>11</sup> was still in power, and totally under embargo by the international community), therefore the LDE was established under the umbrella of the Open University of Subotica, acting as an association.

The Delegate, a representative of the LDE, was Nadia Cuk<sup>12</sup>, who continued to work with the Council of Europe office in Belgrade. Her soon-to-be colleague was Stanka Parac, who became Delegate and coordinator of ALDA for South-eastern Europe for many years. Then shortly later, the LDE in Osijek (Croatia) was opened, over the border in what was

still an extremely difficult situation, in which the forces of the UN were still there to protect minority communities and to accompany the outgoing Serbian troops from the Vukovar area<sup>13</sup>. In Osijek, the Delegate (Director) for many years, was François Friederich, then senior officer at the Council of Europe. Historic groups of cities from Europe (like Lausanne) supported these initial LDEs. In Osijek, François' deputy was Miljenko Turniski, who was the Director of the LDA until 2022, when Croatia<sup>14</sup> was already in the EU. Meanwhile, the programme also included Sarajevo LDE led by Barcelona<sup>15</sup>, which offers great support and is still a very good partner and friend of ALDA, while in FRYOM (now North

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<sup>10</sup>The notion of “Western Balkans” was introduced for the first time in 1998, during the Vienna European Council. The concept of Western Balkans is to be distinguished from “Balkans” or “South-Eastern European” countries which include countries like Romania, Bulgaria and Slovenia, namely countries which have made more rapid progress towards EU accession, and Greece, which is an EU member state since 1981. The Western Balkans concept currently covers the following six states: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

<sup>11</sup> Slobodan Milosevic was the President of Serbia from 1989 to 1997 and President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from 1997 until his overthrow in 2000. Charged by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for war crimes, he was a key player in the Balkans instability of the late 1990s.

<sup>12</sup> Nadia Cuk has been working for the Council of Europe (CoE) since 2001. Previously, she was coordinating the CoE support to the EU member states through the Structural Reform Support Programme as well as the strategic programmatic cooperation with the countries in the Western Balkans.

See more here:

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/belgrade/head-of-office>

<sup>13</sup> Vukovar is an important regional centre on Croatia's eastern border, which was occupied by the Yugoslav People's Army and Serbian paramilitaries during the Croatian War in 1991. It was peacefully reintegrated into Croatia in 1998 with the [Erdut Agreement](#).

<sup>14</sup> Croatia joined the EU on 1 July 2013

<sup>15</sup> Only in 1998 the LDAs started being called as we know them today, switching from Local Democracy Embassies (LDE) to Local Democracy Agencies (LDA).

Macedonia<sup>16</sup>) an LDE was opened in Ohrid<sup>17</sup>, with historical partners from Karditsa (Greece).

The pioneers also included the LDE in Verteneglio/Brtonigla (with partners in Friuli Venezia Giulia and other Italian towns) and then shortly later in 1996 the LDE Sisak in Croatia, where I was directly involved at the time. Indeed, I used to work for the Venetian section of ANCI, National Association of Local authorities, led by Eugenio Rossetto<sup>18</sup> and they were involved in supporting aid and humanitarian supplies to the refugees' camps in Croatia. We came across the programme of the Congress and we put together a plan for developing an LDE in Sisak. The programme was led by municipalities from Italy, like Mogliano Veneto, Arese and Lainate. My French native language and my English, along with my interest in international matters, made the

difference and I contributed to draft the plan for the LDE in Sisak.

I met Gianfranco Martini for the first time the same day that I met François Friederich in Schio (Veneto Italy), where Eugenio Rossetto organised a conference for food aid and humanitarian support to refugees<sup>19</sup>. It was 1995 in the summer. I co-organised the conference for ANCI in Schio and I got to know the programme and the immense energy and human and political knowledge and charisma of Gianfranco and the very interesting work of François, and since then Gianfranco Martini and I started working together. The programme at ANCI developed further and, in 1996, we opened the LDE in Sisak and I started working there, driving back and forth from Italy every week.

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<sup>16</sup> The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) was the previous name of North Macedonia; the name was at the core of a decade-long dispute with Greece, which was solved with the agreement of Prespa in 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Ohrid is a city in the southwestern part of North Macedonia, on the northeast coast of Lake Ohrid. It is known for once having 365 churches, one for each day of the year, and has been referred to as the "Jerusalem of the Balkans". It is also known as "the "city of light", a literal translation of its old name, Lychnidos.

<sup>18</sup> Eugenio Rossetto, some elements here: <http://www.sarajevo.it/progetti/progetti-completati/ikre-foundation/>

<sup>19</sup> Among the various programmes to support civil society and local governments in Bosnia and

Herzegovina, the Atlas Programme was formulated by the Italian Cooperation and the United Nations Office Project Service (UNOPS), a United Nations human development cooperation service agency. The Atlas has gathered an extraordinary spontaneous mobilisation of Italian civil society and local authorities in favour of the population of BiH and has succeeded in linking Italian decentralised cooperation in a network of territorial partnerships with numerous cities in BiH. The Atlas was launched in 1996 and concluded in 1998. It constitutes the formalisation of a preparatory phase of a human development programme at the local level. ("The Atlas Programme in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Decentralised cooperation for human development in a post-conflict context", José Luis Rhi-Sausi and Silvia Aprile)

Schools' activities with the LDA Sisak, now an Operational Partner of ALDA, Croatia, 2024.

I worked in Sisak from 1996 till 2000. The director of LDA Sisak has been now many years, Paula Rauzan





I saw, like all the other commuters on those lines in those days, how frontiers are literally created: that being out of nowhere (in the middle of a piece of land or on a hill) with makeshift barracks and uncertain uniforms...and then, more stable buildings (between Croatia and Slovenia) and first names on the police uniforms. My work in Sisak has been very interesting and with a team of colleagues (Vlatka, Tanja, Paula, Julije... thank you all 😊) we implemented dozens of programmes aimed at reconciliation and peace, community work, communication, interethnic dialogue, housing and more, in areas where the war and its aftermaths were very much present<sup>20</sup>. We worked all over the Banovina area, on the frontier with Republika Srbska (now entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina) that lay over the rivers (Kupa and Sava), which was then closed, and the bridges had been destroyed<sup>21</sup>. Landmines were everywhere, refugees were spread all over former Yugoslavia, and wounds were too fresh to speak about reconciliation... the cohabitation with the mayor of Sisak, Ratko Pavlak,

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<sup>20</sup> In March 1991, Croatia started descending into war as the Republic of Serb Krajina (RSK) declared secession from Croatia to join Serbia and Croatia declared it a rebellion. In June 1991, Croatia declared independence from Yugoslavia, leading to full-scale war lasting until 1995.

<sup>21</sup> Operation Stinger was a SAO Krajina offensive against Croatian police positions in Banovina on 26–27 July 1991, during the Croatian War of Independence. It targeted police stations in Glina and Kozibrod, as well as positions in villages between Dvor and Kozibrod.

was difficult but the flag of Europe as a sign of peace, helped us and protected us. The programme was supported by partners and cities and by the Community Building Measures of the Council Europe<sup>22</sup>. We also had, at some point, direct support from the European Commission thanks to direct negotiation between the Congress and the European Commission.

A little anecdote: our projects with the EC were paid in ECU<sup>23</sup>, a virtual currency, in which the exchange rate was to be followed every day for expenses. It was the predecessor of the EURO. Our staff meetings in Sisak lasted for 5/6 hours and the smoke of cigarettes in the room was so dense that we could not see each other. Likely, I might have been one of the very few that stopped smoking forever while working in the Balkans, as a reaction. It was too much!

Then came the LDE Zavidovici in Bosnia and Herzegovina, just over the border from where I was working in Sisak. It was a difficult start driven by amazing and

<sup>22</sup> See more on the Confidence Building Measures of the Council of Europe at the following link <https://www.coe.int/en/web/dpaer/confidence-building-measures>

<sup>23</sup> The European Currency Unit (ECU) was the monetary unit used by the European Monetary System (EMS) before being replaced by the euro. The ECU was introduced in 1979 and replaced by the euro in 1999. It was a composite of 12 European Union member countries.

committed leaders, like Agostino Zanotti (President of the Association for the LDA in Zavidovici<sup>24</sup>) Rosita Viola<sup>25</sup> and Andrea Rossini<sup>26</sup>, who recently became a member of the executive team for the city of Cremona and has always been committed to communities, rights, and democracy. LDA Zavidovici is now a strong association in Italy too, operating in inclusive communities to support the integration of migrants. They will remain friends forever. They were recognised for their work with the 2023 Laureate Paweł Adamowicz prize awarded to the Committee of the Regions<sup>27</sup>. The LDE Tuzla (closed many years ago) was then run by the city of Bologna and its delegate, Igor Pellicciari. The two entities first engaged in dialogue with Bosnia and Herzegovina at the local authority level<sup>28</sup>.

The LDE in Maribor (in Slovenia) was

active for a number of years but personally, I never met them.

The strength of the LDEs has always been their impact and presence at a local level, acting where there was no presence under the flag of Europe. We were local but also international. We were protected in what was still a difficult environment. There are plenty of anecdotes about how we worked in this environment: many of them illustrate how dangerous it was. Weapons were everywhere. Some of us, used name plates for cars, with invented logos to be able to cross borders. Everyone was inventing their own logo and flag, so why not us?

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<sup>24</sup> See more on the LDA Zavidovici here: <https://www.lda-zavidovici.org/>

<sup>25</sup> Rosita Viola, today in the team of the Mayor of Cremona. See: <https://www.comune.cremona.it/nоде/427190>

<sup>26</sup> During the 1990s, Andrea Rossini worked in several projects to assist refugees from the former Yugoslavia in Italy and in EU and decentralised cooperation programmes in the Balkans. He is now a RAI journalist. He worked at Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso and in the Local Democracy Embassies project in Bosnia Herzegovina. As a documentary filmmaker, he has written and directed 'Hamit'; 'The Road Back'; 'The Circle of Remembrance'; 'After Srebrenica'; 'Svetlana Broz: the Righteous in the Time of Evil'; 'Planet Zastava'; 'Srebrenica, Europe'.

<sup>27</sup> Paweł Adamowicz, the long-serving Mayor of the City of Gdańsk, was tragically murdered in January 2019 while performing his public duties. The Award

symbolises hope for elected representatives, officials, and citizens dedicated to advancing democracy at a local level, despite the risks. It is a partnership between the City of Gdańsk, the European Committee of the Regions (of which Mr. Adamowicz was a member), and the International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN), which Gdańsk joined during his tenure as mayor.

<sup>28</sup> The accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the European Union is the stated aim of the present relations between the two entities. Bosnia and Herzegovina has been recognised by the EU as a "potential candidate country" for accession since the decision of the European Council in Thessaloniki in 2003 and is on the current agenda for future enlargement of the EU. Bosnia and Herzegovina takes part in the Stabilisation and Association Process and trade relations are regulated by an Interim Agreement.

## LDAs role and Activities

Extract from:

Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe, 5th Session  
Resolution 73 (1998) on Local Democracy Agencies

[...]

*he role of local democracy Agencies is to promote respect for human rights in general and to help implement and consolidate the democratic process in all sectors of local life. Particular attention will be given to:*

*-promotion of human rights and minority rights -the functioning of local democracy - socio-cultural exchanges*

*-economic exchanges.*

*The duties of local democracy Agencies may be described for the moment as follows:*

*-to serve as a temporary logistic base for humanitarian aid missions conducted by the founder municipalities of the local democracy Agency;*

*-to facilitate mutual communication between the participating towns and their neighbouring regions;*

*-to compile a record of local and regional, cultural and economic resources and transmit this information to the network of European municipalities and regions as a means of forging micro-economic and intercultural links;*

*-to support actively various local and regional activities in line with the objectives of the permanent mission. Active support may consist in:*

- *Helping with practical organisation*
- *Organising participation in an activity of the municipalities and regions*
- *Contribution to additional fundraising activities*

*-to establish constructive contacts – in a spirit consistent with the aim of the local democracy Agency – with local political parties, local NGOs, religious communities, youth organisations and independent media*

*-to draft proposals giving more impetus to the action of the local democracy Agency's partners. [...]*

Decentralised cooperation<sup>29</sup> (local and regional authorities, with civil society, working together at the international level) started being mentioned and conceptualised, not only within the Council of Europe, but also in various countries and, in particular, in Italy, which was at the forefront of the conflict in former Yugoslavia, with humanitarian help going to Slovenia and Croatia every week with boats crossing from Ancona to Split with support and help from friends. What Poland is experiencing with Ukraine today, the border countries of Yugoslavia experienced in those years.

Sarajevo had just been liberated, ending a 500-day siege, in which people and friends left the city through a tunnel<sup>30</sup> and over the Igman mountain. Mostar had also been destroyed. Sarajevo and almost all Bosnia and Herzegovina was a land of destruction. It was on a magnitude that defies description. They will remain forever in

my heart. I remember my first visit to Sarajevo, in 1994; the country and the city had been totally destroyed. We had a coffee, together with my close friend Enisa Rustempasic, Director of IKRE<sup>31</sup>, in the Baščaršija in Sarajevo, soon after I arrived in the town after a very, very long and difficult drive. With us was a former director of a bank.

His words were very clear: “*don’t make war, ever. Everyone is a loser and the losses are forever*”.

We were talking about Russian authors, and he said that he was able to read them in original language and that this is worth doing. Maybe, because of him, I started learning Russian.

The project of the city of Vicenza with IKRE was one of many that supported Bosnia and Herzegovina during and after the war.

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<sup>29</sup> Valmorbida A., “The European Decentralised Cooperation: Acting for Development Engaging Local Authorities and Civil Society”, *P. I. E. Peter Lang*, 2018

<sup>30</sup> The Sarajevo Tunnel or Tunnel of Hope was a tunnel constructed between March and June 1993 during the Siege of Sarajevo by Serbian forces in the midst of the Bosnian War. It was built in order to connect the city occupied part with Bosnian-held territory on the other side of the Sarajevo Airport, an area controlled by the United Nations. It became a symbol of the city's struggle and a way to help civilians.

<sup>31</sup> The "IKRE" fund was established in 1993 by the Sarajevo City Assembly and began operating in

1994. Since 1996, the Sarajevo Canton Assembly has assumed the role of founder. The fund's main focus is on providing education and scholarships for children affected by war, improving their living conditions, and enhancing their schooling success. Families from Vicenza started hosting children from Sarajevo as early as 1995, forging connections with various institutions like the IKRE of Sarajevo, the Municipality, the Canton, the Italian military contingent, Caritas, orphanages, and retirement homes. These efforts aimed to structure solidarity work into organized projects that better express the desire to support and assist the people of Vicenza.



Panel on ALDA strategy of ALDA during the 2023, General Assembly, in Etterbeek/Brussels.

Elbert Krasniqi, Minister for local authorities of Kosovo, Dusica Davidovic, member of the Serbian delegation to the Congress, Katica Janeva, Director of the Skopje Western Balkans office of ALDA, Natasa Vuckovic, Director of the Centre for Democracy Foundation Serbia, now President of ALDA, Emir Coric, representative of Center Skopje, North Macedonia, now vice president of ALDA



Crucial meeting on the future of the LDAs programme in the Balkans, with existing LDAs, in Sisak, Croatia, developing ALDA, at the presence of the LDA Georgia Delegate, Joseph Khakhaleishvili, 2004

I received many photos from Sarajevo (the photographer was Rikard Larma, who also stayed with me in my home for a few days) during the war from a person fleeing<sup>32</sup> the besieged city. With those photos, I approached IPAB in Vicenza and with the support of Carmelo Rigobello, Sante Bressan and Franco Zaccaria (the first was a member of the Board and President and the last one was Secretary General) we managed to produce a book of photos, SARAJEVO, that I managed to sell all over Italy with a campaign in schools and local authorities. All the resources (about 200 million lire, about 100,000 euro) went entirely on scholarships to support orphans in Sarajevo. We also managed to bring many children to Vicenza, in a long-standing partnership, that went on to create the association “Insieme per Sarajevo”, of which Sante was the President until last year (2022).

This experience affected many families in our city<sup>33</sup>, as they hosted children who

were without one or both parents. We supported scholarships for hundreds of children. It was a fantastic project and experience.

It is right to remember that, in the Western Balkans, all those who are above 50 years old were involved in a deep and violent war. They were all involved in operations and suffered in one way or another. When we think about them, it is good to remember that.

### **Back to Sisak (Croatia<sup>34</sup>)**

The LDE in Sisak (where I managed up to 8 working people) organised youth and media activities, worked on reconciliation, supported volunteer camps (together with IOM and UNHCR<sup>35</sup>), cultural activities and visits from delegations from Europe. Meanwhile, on the other side of Europe, in which Germany<sup>36</sup> had just reunified the world was changing in front of our eyes.

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<sup>32</sup> The person was Izet Kalkan, whom I met in Schio in 1993 or 1994.

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.sarajevo.it>

<sup>34</sup> From 1996 to 2000, I was the Delegate of the Local Democracy Embassy (then Local Democracy Agency) of Sisak, Croatia. Sisak was at the border of the area of Banovina during the war, where the war had been raging for years before. Indeed, during the Croatian War of Independence, the entire region of Banovina was part of the unrecognised self-proclaimed Republic of Serbian Krajina, which was known for mass killings of Croats. Croatia regained control of the region in 1995.

<sup>35</sup> Established in 1951, IOM is the leading intergovernmental organisation in migration,

collaborating closely with governmental, intergovernmental, and non-governmental partners. With 175 member states, 8 observer states, and offices in 171 countries, IOM is committed to promoting humane and orderly migration. <https://www.iom.int/>  
UNHCR is the United Nations Refugee Agency and for 70 years they have been working to give asylum and protection to all the people who have been forced to flee their country and leave everything behind. <https://shorturl.at/bAMP4>

<sup>36</sup> The process of re-establishing Germany as a whole took place between November 9th 1989 (fall of the Berlin Wall) and March 15th 1991.

The team of municipalities engaged in the programme of the LDEs (that meanwhile became LDAs, Agencies instead of Embassies.... that name created some problems with *real* Embassies), and the Delegates (the directors of the Agencies) used to meet in Strasbourg at the Council of Europe in Steering Committee meetings. For all of us (for me as a Delegate of the LDA Sisak), they were always important moments since we felt part of something bigger and higher. Certainly, the meeting rooms of the Council of Europe were a bit “vintage”, as they still are (by the way, I love them), but we were at the heart of Europe, and we felt the importance of our work. The inspirational Gianfranco Martini was there and was extremely attentive to what we were saying and doing. He was deeply concerned and upset by what happened in former Yugoslavia. Having lived through the second world war, he could not accept this new war in Europe. Now I can understand his deep distress. Gianfranco would have been devastated by the war in Ukraine. He was also an expert in diversity, languages and religions and he was always curious to know more about what we were doing – as Delegates - in these countries and regions. Even though he was not able to

run a meeting respecting the agenda (he always had very lengthy introductions so that we regularly started with a one-hour delay), our meetings were always meaningful and successful, and we always gained a lot from them. I learned a lot from him, and I think I am still what he taught me to be. In 1997 and 1998, the Delegates and the cities which financially supported this initiative as partners<sup>37</sup> felt an urgency for the network to become more elaborate. Being “conveyed” to the Congress in Strasbourg, that is by being audited and heard, was not enough. Because of this passivity, the city of Barcelona, and maybe also Bologna, stepped back, and we “lost” the LDA Sarajevo and maybe LDA Tuzla. The understanding was that the network was not moving actively forward but just moving by inertia without a clear vision and place within the Council of Europe’s strategy. We were about to end our journey (as LDAs), if not transformed into something else.

There were several key moments in formulating our vision. One was certainly a meeting in Osijek (Croatia) where, for the first time, the Steering Committee of the programme (which usually took place in Strasbourg) met in the famous hotel Osijek, by the Drava River, in 1998. The President of the Congress was

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<sup>37</sup>See the official CoE’s reports: <https://bit.ly/4fRZJud> , <https://bit.ly/3WQ3API>, <https://bit.ly/3AK1qJV>

Claude Haegi; he was present and supported us. My memories of that moment are of a very dark place, with a hall from the sixties and a smoky and smelly lift, which rarely worked. The hotel had been the front line of the fighting, and they were shot at from over the river. Osijek was among the very first places in which the Yugoslav army detached itself from the citizens and where the “civil war” started to materialise<sup>38</sup>. With Miljenko, we passed in front of those barracks, where “us (Yugoslav)” became “they (Serbian)”.

Another absolute key strategic moment happened in Sisak at the Hotel Pannonia, where all the Delegates of the existing LDAs were stationed and where all the city’s activities took place. I had organised hundreds of events there. In fact, I lived in the hotel for a few months during the first year of my position as Delegate in Sisak (which lasted from 1996 to 2000<sup>39</sup>). Now the hotel has been renovated, but in 1996, it was still full of soldiers and the atmosphere was gloomy, smoky, and dark. As the LDA Sisak Delegate, I organised a networking activity in which I invited some delegates (a new generation, since François

Friederich – the previous Delegate of the LDA Osijek had been replaced by Miljenko Turniski) to discuss our aims and identify the next steps. The idea of an association started to develop. For most of the participants, the project was full of difficulties, mainly due to the divisions that separated them; it was difficult for them to think that we could work together again. There was a problem of resources too: if our paying partners for the LDAs had to pay the Association, we would have less resources for the activities of the LDAs. My proposal was basically rejected during this meeting, but I later managed to convince them that money was, in fact, not the real issue. Once I managed to explain clearly that the change would mean the survival of our organisations and their development, the point was soon accepted, and we moved forward. Good ideas need time to be digested, but if followed up carefully, they can lead to good projects. With the Delegates and few municipalities of the network attending, we discussed the different ways of strengthening the network. Up to this point, the only inter-LDA activities that took place, were minor and difficult.

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<sup>38</sup>The Battle of Osijek was an artillery bombardment of the Croatian city by the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) from August 1991 to June 1992 during the Croatian War of Independence. Shelling peaked in late November and December 1991, then diminished after the acceptance of the Vance plan in 1992.

<sup>39</sup>Franjo Tuđman led Croatia from 1990 until 1999 and was among the signatory of the Dayton agreement for the peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, on behalf of the Croatian community. He was the key figure behind the creation of an independent Croatian state.



Group of staff and Delegates from LDAs in the Western Balkans, in Knjazevac, 2004.  
With Marco Boaria, Barbara Elia and Stefania Toriello



General Assembly of ALDA in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2007



Sisak, meeting with the Mayor in 2006, Darko Pavlak, support the LDA Sisak, were I worked from 1996 till 2000

From Sisak, we, along with other LDAs (mainly Osijek and Subotica), organised some activities within the framework of an initiative called the “Democracy Schools”, which were, in a way, the predecessors of the School of Politics of the Council of Europe<sup>40</sup>, which is now a well-established network. An option, supported by the Congress, was a proposal of the Swiss foundation. However, it was not the one considered, since the group wanted something more rooted in its membership. The idea towards which we oriented ourselves was **a new association including the members cities**, that already supported the LDAs.

With those meetings and with the many lessons learned, the idea of an appropriate setting for an association, to be called the Association of the Local Democracy Agencies, started to become accredited, and a draft statute (absolutely messy and full of mistakes) for a future Steering Committee in Strasbourg was produced. Our Statute copied that of another organisation that was already established and gravitated around the Council of Europe institutions (I can't remember the name of this organisation, as they soon disappeared from our radar). Together with some Italian municipalities and

under the guidance of Gianfranco and the careful attention of Sylvie Affholder and Rinaldo Locatelli, we went through this document and adapted it for a future meeting. The clear understanding was that, in order to save the programme of the LDAs, another structure would be needed. We were going for an association of members (local authorities and civil society), under Law 1901, registered in Strasbourg with a first group of signatories of members subject to membership fees.

The membership fees' system that remained in place until 2022 (which was more than 20 years) were discussed at the Restaurant Bleu of the Council of Europe and Gianfranco wrote them down on a napkin (with his microscopic handwriting) dividing local authorities from civil society, with a scale based on the number of inhabitants and fixed a fee for CSOs. Over the lunch, with Rinaldo and Gianfranco along with a few more, we drafted the scheme of fees, which would be the backbone of the organisation. The objectives were: keeping them at a low enough level (otherwise we would have lost members or caused them to suspend payment to the association and the LDAs) but not so low that we would have no funds to work with. My perception was that they were

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<sup>40</sup> See more on Political School of the Council of Europe here:

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/schools-political-studies>

too low. By doing that, that is opting for an organisation with a lot of members (instead of a few paying a lot), we already had an idea of what the organisation should do in order to survive and grow: projects.

We had a statute, we had our first list of signatory members<sup>41</sup>, we had the Congress ready to support the organisation with an initial pot of resources and was ready to be part of the Board, the LDAs (members paying partnership fees and delegates) agreeing to the structure. We fixed the date for the first general assembly and the election of a director. By then, I had left Sisak LDA in the hands of another colleague, Michela Cavallini. I left Croatia at the same moment that President Franjo Tudjman died.

A great importance for me but for many others was the support of the Italian Ambassador in Croatia, Francesco Olivieri, whom I met with his wife, Nina Luzzato Gardner, human right officer at the UN in Zagreb, during those first difficult and epic years in Sisak. They were deeply interested in our work and organised meetings and informal

dinners in their residence where us, Italian citizens working on post war situations and peace building, had the chance to create contact and synergies.

The founding members of ALDA signed the Statute of ALDA in Strasbourg in December 1999. One year later, in November 2000, 30 days after the birth of my twins (Margherita and Guglielmo 😊) I was appointed Director of ALDA.

At the turning point of the millennium, Europe was at a crucial point. It was also a crossroads in my life: ALDA was born. It could have lasted a few years, and I could have gone in a totally different direction, but ALDA developed, it got stronger and bigger, and I am still here. Really, we never know.

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<sup>41</sup> The first signatory members were: Diego Bottacin (Mayor of Mogliano Veneto), Refik Catic (Doctor in Medicine), Ernesto Cornaglia (Pharmacist), Tullio Fernetich (Economist, Mayor of Brtonigla/Verteneglio), Imre Kern (Engineer), Larissa Kireeva (Head of the Department of

International Relations – Congress of Russian Municipalities), François Pasche (City Hall Secretary), Léon Saur (Deputy Mayor of Fléron), Ekrem Sehovic (Computer Scientist). See the document here: <https://search.coe.int/archives?i=09000016808c06>

## 2. ALDA strengthens Local Democracy Agencies in the Western Balkans

The creation of ALDA has substantially empowered the network of the Local Democracy Agencies in the Western Balkans, where they were all located at that time. The LDAs existing before the creation of ALDA were in: Croatia - **Verteneglio/Brtonigla** (supported by Swiss and Italian towns, in particular Bellinzona), Sisak (supported by Italian towns like Mogliano Veneto, Arese and Lainate), **Osijek** (always supported by Lausanne); in Bosnia and Herzegovina - **Zavidovici** (supported by the group of *Associazione per l'ADL di Zavidovici*<sup>42</sup> with Roncadelle, Brescia, Cremona and Crema); in FRYOM (now North Macedonia) - **Ohrid** (supported by the Greek town of Karditsa. The LDA Ohrid stopped its activities soon after); in Serbia - **Subotica** (always supported by Wolverhampton, UK). Two had already ended their work, **Maribor** (in Slovenia) and **Tuzla** (in BiH, supported by

Bologna). Sarajevo continued its work but as a programme run by the city of Barcelona, which invested a lot in this project and made Sarajevo virtually their “11th District”<sup>43</sup>. All the others LDAs still existing in the region are the results of initiatives of ALDA and they are:

- LDA **Prijedor** (since 2000), supported by the Province of Trento and the network “*Associazione Progetto Prijedor*”<sup>44</sup>
- LDA **Central and Southern Serbia** (2001) supported initially by a fund of Irish Aid and the Swiss Development Cooperation, via the Council of Europe and supported by Norwegian, French and Italian partners.
- LDA **Montenegro** (based in Niksic): also initially supported by a fund of Irish Aid and the Swiss Development Cooperation, via the Council of Europe, in particular East Staffordshire Borough council.
- LDA **Mostar**: supported by the region of Puglia and the city of Vejle in Denmark.

<sup>42</sup> LDA Zavidovici was founded in 1996 by initiative of a group of peace activists and, over the years, has implemented humanitarian assistance projects to help the local population, promote and protect human rights. Today, LDA Zavidovici carries out activities in the local community and Zenica-Doboj Canton, working with organisations from across the country and the region. It also works closely with the founders and partners of the organisation from Italy. See more here: <https://www.lda-zavidovici.org/>

<sup>43</sup> During the war in the Balkan area, the city of Barcelona and Sarajevo strengthened their relationship and cooperation in several projects that, over the years, twinned the two capitals. In 1995, Sarajevo became the 11th district of the city of Barcelona, a connection that still survives today. Both cities signed the [twinning protocol](#) in 2000.

<sup>44</sup> See more on Progetto Prijedor Association here: <http://www.progettoprijedor.org/>



Meeting LDAs delegates in Prijedor. Economic recovery and the return of refugees in South-East Europe is the theme of a forum organised by the Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe in Prijedor, Bosnia and Herzegovina on 22 and 23 September.



- LDA **Albania** (first in Shkodra and then in Vlora): supported by the region Puglia and other Italian partners (its activities have now been suspended pending a relaunch).
- LDA **Kosovo** (in Gjilane and then in Peja): supported by French partners and by Italian partners, now in Associazione Trentino con i Balcani<sup>45</sup>

From 2000 to 2004/2005, the network benefitted from the creation of ALDA, which I, alone, coordinated as a consultant of the Congress. The resources available provided by the Council of Europe gave us the possibility to create the spirit and the instruments of the network to apply for donations from the Council of Europe Member States. Those funds from Irish Aid and the Swiss Development Cooperation could not have been channelled to the LDAs without the coordination of ALDA. ALDA also had the capacity to coordinate and provide more partners for the LDAs. Our work was recognised by the Council of Europe as a programme of multilateral decentralised cooperation and city diplomacy, and we

presented our reports during the Congress plenary<sup>46</sup>.

It was a time of strong partnerships and reflection on the structure of the network. Gianfranco signed the cooperation agreement with the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Walter Schwimmer. The partnership was finally enshrined in the official documents of the Council, and we were eventually offered (with some difficulties) premises at the Palais.

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*“It was a time of strong partnerships and reflection on the structure of the network.”*

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During those years, we improved the internal governance and regulations of ALDA, defining *who is who* and *who does what*. **The LDAs were recognised – with a statute change - as statutory members of ALDA** having a pondered vote. The debate was not so easy with the municipalities that supported the LDAs, which were also members of ALDA. Indeed, for many of them, their Delegate should not have voted at the

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<sup>45</sup> Trentino con i Balcani Association (ATB) is an Italian organisation working in the Balkans in the field of decentralised in-community cooperation since 1999. ATB was born to collect and relaunch the 20-year experience of solidarity cooperation and people's diplomacy between Trentino and South-Eastern Europe.

Find out more about the Association here: <https://www.trentinobalcani.eu/>

<sup>46</sup> <https://rm.coe.int/explanatory-memorandum-city-diplomacy-onne-veldhuizen-netherlands-168071947c>



Delegates from the Balkans in 2014 and office of the cooperation Macedonia and Lower Normandie, in Kniazevac (2014) , with the LDA Central and Southern Serbia and our colleague Sasa Marinkov, who passed away in 2021.

General Assembly. They were advocating that those Delegates and the LDAs were de facto already present in the governance of ALDA thanks to the presence of the municipalities that were supporting the Agencies and by the lead partner of the Agency.

Finally, the decision was to offer the Delegates a relatively minor role in the governance (now LDAs have a ponderation 1 in voting, while the Local authorities and civil society have a ponderation 2).

We also established the **recognition of the label of LDA on a yearly basis**. This was an important Governing Board's decision. Every year the LDAs must present a plan of action and the features of LDAs (partners, a delegate, plan of action that coheres with ALDA's values, sustainability) to retain the label and be part of the network. That has not always been easy and straightforward. Two major financial issues (with mismanagement of EU funding) took place in Verteneglio and in Ohrid, before ALDA existed (in the "before ALDA period"). The delegates were recognised as guilty. Those facts left a very long negative impression of the network in Brussels that only ALDA, with its management and governance, made it possible to clear.

The institutional structure of ALDA and of LDAs management was entirely finalised in those years with key points and procedures relating to the responsibilities of the Delegate/Director, the lead partner and the host municipality. The decisions of the General Assembly of ALDA and its Governing Board were now leading the process and not only providing recommendations to the Congress (as was the case before ALDA). Another important step was **the approval from the Governing Board of ALDA to name and decide upon the qualifications of the Delegate** proposed by the partners of the LDA, giving a second and important control over the quality of the person selected.

The opening of the LDAs was also regulated with a process of identification of the partners, once the Governing Board had approved the various steps, and the plan for the local and international partnerships. A series of meetings also identified the needs of the local communities, and an action plan accompanied the signature of the memorandum of understanding between the partners, with a related budget.

Working on local governance in the Western Balkans in those years meant working on the reconciliation of communities and especially on building

Meeting between the LDA Montenegro Delegate Drago Djekovic and the representative of  
the city of Neuchatel, Switzerland



new local communities and rules for decentralisation and local government. In all the new States emerging from the former Yugoslavia, the municipalities and regions had to change the rules in communities heavily affected by the brutal war. We all implemented many programmes where we worked on interethnic exchanges and dialogue, between different religion-based communities. Serbia slowly got out from the embargo which was physical but also mental. Most of Serbian citizens were not aware of what happened outside of their borders, and that included our own colleagues in Serbia, who only had access to the news of the attacks by NATO on Serbia after the facts emerged about Kosovo that produced thousands of refugees. We were at the very beginning of the reconciliation and understanding process, which is still going on. The opening of Serbia changed our programmes, making them more complex and ambitious. The embargo on Serbia<sup>47</sup> had already been bypassed by

city diplomacy, where many cities in Europe (like Modena in Novi Sad, for example) managed to be open up dialogue with their counterparts, despite the governmental blockade. The support of international NGOs was also fundamental in supporting the Serbian movement OTPOR<sup>48</sup> that paved the way for regime change from within. We worked for an Open Society all over the region and also in Central Europe. Open Society<sup>49</sup> meant working with citizens, engaging at the local level, creating new sources of information and networks. We contributed to changing mentalities that became open to new hopes.

The opening of each LDA is a long and amazing story of partnership and a true exercise in democracy and city diplomacy.

The LDA Prijedor, right after the establishment of ALDA, was the first important step towards cooperation of ALDA in Republika Srpska<sup>50</sup> (the Serbian

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<sup>47</sup> The embargo prohibited all trade and financial transactions, scientific and technical cooperation, sport and cultural exchanges, air travel with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, except for specific needs such as food, medicine, and other humanitarian items.

<sup>48</sup> The OTPOR (“Resistance”) movement was a Serbian anti-government student movement against the Milosevic regime founded in October 1998. Following the overthrow of Milosevic’s government on 5 October 2000, the movement operated to hold the new government accountable, pressing for democratic reforms and fighting corruption, as well as insisting on cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal (ICTY). Finally, in

2004 OTPOR merged into the Democratic Party (DS).

<sup>49</sup> The Open Society Foundations (OSF), founded by George Soros in the late 1970s, is one of the world's largest private funders of independent groups working for justice, transparency, democratic governance and human rights. Find out more on the OSF [here:](https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/) <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/>

<sup>50</sup> The Republika Srpska, located in the north and east of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is one of the two entities of the country, recognised by the Dayton Agreement of 1995 that ended the war in that area. The declaration of Republika Srpska in January 1992 triggered a civil war and a campaign of ethnic

entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina), a critical place where memories of the conflict were still very much alive<sup>51</sup>. The decision of the partners from Trento was to work where “*nobody else*” (of the cooperation networks) was ready to go. Their work on reconciliation but also on activities overcoming the conflict were supported by the Osservatorio per I Balcani<sup>52</sup> which contributed to supporting peace making initiatives in this area. The partnership among the communities from Italy and from Bosnia Herzegovina are still active and have supported thousands of “at distance” adoptions of families and helping communities in need over the long-term. The LDA had several brilliant delegates from Italy, and it has been led by Dragan Dosen.

**The LDA Central and Southern Serbia** was opened in Nis in 2001 with the support of partners from Norway, France and Italy. The preparation of the LDA was long and complex as we decided to have activities in a network of four cities: Nis, Kragujevac, Kraljevo and Leskovac, and to have a regional LDA as well. Our activities were soon numerous in a very important part of Serbia, which

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cleansing of Muslims and Croats, in which 100,000 people died. The Republika Srpska is connected to the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the neutral district of Brcko.

<sup>51</sup> After the Srebrenica massacre, Prijedor is the second most affected area of killing civilians

started to open up to the world, after a long embargo. The choice of the delegate was also crucial, and it took a long night of discussion to elect a Serbian-Austrian representative, who supported the agency in its first activities. In all our activities the Congress of the Council of Europe was present, and it backed up our initiatives politically. The opening of the office was something very meaningful. It was located in the main pedestrian street of the city of Nis, we were the first to bring the European flag to the city and to open up a space for thinking and acting, far from the dark days of nationalism. We also had with us Sasa Marinkov as part of the team, who sadly passed away during the pandemic. We also remember Miljana Merdovic' and Maja Uscumlic'. All wonderful people that brought tremendous changes to their community. The funding from Switzerland and Ireland was the seed money for this initiative.

In the same year, the **LDA Montenegro** was opened. It took a long time to prepare with many things to sort out and a lot to understand about the local situation. We decided to open the

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committed by the Army of the Republika Srpska during the Bosnian War.

<sup>52</sup> Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBC Transeuropa or OBCT) is an Italian think tank and online media focusing on South-Eastern Europe, Türkiye, Ukraine, and the Caucasus regions. <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/>

Omladinski  
volonterski centar  
DON

VOLONTERSKI CENTAR

U.G. "DON" PRIJEDOR

European Day in Prijedor, Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the LDA Prijedor in 2010

25/05/2010

LDA in the city of Niksic, in a high mountainous area of Montenegro. Indeed, LDAs are not registered in capital cities as the point is to focus on crucial places where our work can also have more focused impact.

We also identified a very active British partner, East Staffordshire Borough Council, that actively managed and ran the Agency for a long time. The partnership was led by Keith Jones, who also was Bureau member of ALDA for many years. Montenegro was stabilising its internal and international position and working in such circumstances was difficult. The delegate appointed was an American/Montenegrin citizen who worked in the position for a year. The next Delegate was Drago Djekovic, who really shaped the future of the Agency. Drago had been the manager of the city of Podgorica after a period spent in Local Government International Bureau in London. He was then replaced by Kerim Medjedovic, who is still the Agency's Delegate. ALDA was already taking part in the development of the agency as well as in the appointment of the Delegates.

Together with Drago, for the first time we did not abide by the rule of having non-local delegates. Indeed, since the very

beginning, the principle was that the Delegate should be representative of the partners and not local to the area (to avoid local political pressures). For the Delegates' assistants, we could have had local staff. This principle may sound odd nowadays, but it wasn't so at that time. The consequences of the war were very much still present, and any candidate (from any ethnic group) might have been the wrong one. To avoid the fact that the LDAs could have been manipulated in this way, which would create difficulties, we focused on appointing a more neutral (foreign) leadership. As already stated in the case of Drago Djekovic, we opted for a local LDA Delegate, for the first time. Leadership in the partnership was then taken over by the Region Friuli Venezia Giulia, which is still very involved in supporting programmes for local economic development and social cooperatives. The work of the LDA developed its support for youth and economic development. It became a fundamental civil society actor in a difficult environment.

The opening of the **LDA Mostar** in Bosnia Herzegovina was fundamental for a city immersed by the conflict<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup> Two wars (Serbian forces versus Bosniak and Croatian and Croat-Bosniak war) left Mostar physically devastated and ethno-territorially divided between a Croat-majority west bank (with

ca. 55,000 residents) and a Bosniak-majority old City and east bank (with ca. 50,000 residents), with the frontline running parallel to the Neretva River. Most Serbs had fled the city.



Project in Subotica, with the LDA Subotica and the Delegate Stanka Parac, for a long time also the Balkans coordinator of ALDA, 2012

It was made possible thanks to the direct engagement of the Puglia Region and the City of Vejle. The municipality of Mostar has been very supportive despite the gaps they experienced in local governments.

For years, before the new Statute, the city of Mostar had had a rotating Mayor, alternating between a Bosnian/muslim mayor and a Croatian/catholic mayor, which had affected reconciliation in the city for a long time. The initial delegates were Ilenia Destito and Tommaso Vaccarezza. After Tommaso, Dzenana took the lead and now the LDA has developed into a strong and essential NGO in this part of Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>54</sup>.

**LDA Kosovo** also had a complicated history with two organisations involved. The first was the result of a group of French partners led by Steve Duchenes, who was the first delegate in Gjilane/Gjilan. A previous mayor of Gjilane was Lutfi Haziri, who had a

political career at the national and international level<sup>55</sup>. The French partners were from Mulhouse and Strasbourg and worked with Kosovar diaspora. ALDA met the group for the first time at the Congress plenary in Strasbourg. The final part of the war in the Balkans, the operation in Kosovo that had precipitated a flow of refugees into Albania and North Macedonia (then FRYOM) had just happened. The situation was still under a powerful UN protectorate. In Gjilane, we also worked with British partners, who were despatching their personnel to Kosovo, within the UNMIK<sup>56</sup>, which provided governance and support to other states. The mayors elected in Kosovo were “under monitoring” and not totally autonomous until the self-declared autonomy of Kosovo in 2008<sup>57</sup>.

The inauguration of the LDA in Gjilane was a major event organised with the Council of Europe in the presence of all the mayors of Kosovo (Albanians and Serbians).

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<sup>54</sup> LDA Mostar was established in November 2004 to develop the local community and its inclusion in processes at the regional level. The activity of the Organisation is focused on improving the standard of living of all categories of society by influencing concrete changes. See more here: <https://www.lamostar.org/>

<sup>55</sup> Lutfi Haziri is the deputy chairman of the Democratic League of Kosovo and former mayor of Gjilan. He is a former deputy prime minister and minister of Kosovo for Culture, Youth, Sports and Non-residential Affairs.

<sup>56</sup> UNMIK is the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo, established by the Security Council in its resolution 1244 in 1999. The mission helps to safeguard a peaceful and normal life for inhabitants of Kosovo and stability to the Western Balkans, ensuring inter-community trust building, human rights and law respect, gender equality and youth empowerment. To find out more: <https://unmik.unmissions.org/mandate>

<sup>57</sup> According to the constitution approved in 2008, the Republic of Kosovo is an independent, sovereign, democratic and indivisible state. The form of government is parliamentary.



Project with the LDA Montenegro and support with President of ALDA, Gianfranco Martini, meeting among italian partners, 2004

It was a historic and meaningful event with many important characters from its recent history present in the room. It was a fine example of city diplomacy and how we could engage in peace making at the local level.

I knew that it was the first meeting for many of them. The LDA paved the way for a joint programme of work and cooperation and for reconciliation that still continues today<sup>58</sup>. Certainly, all saw the opportunities that local democracy presented for developing a concrete and pragmatic approach to breaking the deadlock of the then current political situation. An active role was also played by the Mayor of Mitrovica, which was a symbol of the separation of Albanian and Serbian communities in Kosovo.

In building the LDA Kosovo, our team met the former president and Kosovan leader of the non-violent resistance

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*“The LDA Kosovo became a true engine of citizen engagement in that part of Kosovo”*

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<sup>58</sup> See the instability raised after local elections in April 2023, with the Kosovo government that tried to cement control in the north of the country or the injured of some peacekeeping soldiers during the local protests.

<sup>59</sup> Ibrahim Rugova led Kosovo's non-violent resistance against Serbian rule in the 1980s and

during its time as part of Yugoslavia, Ibrahim Rugova<sup>59</sup>.

The Mayor of Mitrovica, Fahruk Spahiu, died a few years later. He was a special person and a good friend. Steve spent many years in Kosovo and spoke fluent Albanian. Lutfi also became a member of the Government, negotiated the independence, and worked at a higher national and international level.

When Steve left Kosovo, we restarted in another city, that is Peja/Pec, thanks to the commitment of the “Associazione Trentino con i Balcani”, a crucial organisation for ALDA, which was committed to Serbia. It focused its work on reconciliation but mainly on local, social, health and economic programmes involving the city of Peja. It also worked on a citizens' centre for young people and more, and became a true engine of citizen engagement in that part of Kosovo.

The last and essential Delegate was Elbert Krasniqi, who is now the Minister of Local Government in Kosovo. He took the LDA to a more global level and was

1990s through the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK). Despite escalating tensions and the emergence of armed resistance, Rugova continued advocating for peaceful resolution, leaving a lasting legacy in Kosovo's history.



LDA Mostar and event in Mostar in Bosnia Herzegovina, with the partner of Puglia, Italian region. Dzenana Dedic was the assistant of the Delegate and today she is the Delegate of the LDA Mostar for many years, 2007

among the initiators of the Balkan Network for Local Democracy<sup>60</sup>, which was set up in 2019 incorporating all the LDAs in the Balkans<sup>61</sup>.

The **LDA Albania** was also set up twice and was less fortunate in its activities.

Indeed, currently the LDA Albania in Vlora has been suspended and is no longer operational. The first try was with the Puglia Region and the city of Brindisi, which were partnered with the city of Skodra, in the north of the country. The mayor and the whole community were very active and supportive, despite the difficulties of funding and the possibilities of working.

The LDA never really took off and many changes of Delegates did not facilitate the process. Unfortunately, the LDA in Skodra was then closed, having only implemented a few activities. Another try was made more recently in Vlora, also with the support of the Puglia Region and other Italian partners. It was far more successful and connected to local NGOs. The delegate Madlina Puka was responsible for pushing the process in

the right direction. They were included in many activities of ALDA, in particular in our efforts to implement policies aimed at the young in a region affected by a brain drain. After Madlina left her position, the agency remained dormant. The LDA never really took off and many changes of Delegates did not facilitate the process. Unfortunately, the LDA in Skodra was then closed, having only implemented a few activities. Another try was made more recently in Vlora, also with the support of the Puglia Region and other Italian partners. It was far more successful and connected to local NGOs. The delegate Madlina Puka was responsible for pushing the process in the right direction. They were included in many activities of ALDA, in particular in our efforts to implement policies aimed at the young in a region affected by a brain drain. After Madlina left her position, the agency remained dormant.

Definitively, the period was important in building the foundations for a strong network in the Western Balkans and for the future accompanying enlargement policies of the European Union in the region, marked in the Thessaloniki<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>The Balkan Network for Local Democracy (BNLD) is a regional network that promotes active citizens participation, democratic governance principles, local development and cooperation between civil society organisations and local public authorities in the Western Balkan Region. The network contributes to stabilise Western Balkans and to implement good neighbourhood relations. To find out more: <https://www.bnldwb.org/>

<sup>61</sup> BNLD closed in 2022. its work is taken over by the ALDA branch in Skopje.

<sup>62</sup> The Thessaloniki Summit in 2003 was a pivotal moment for the opening of the Western Balkan countries to the EU, in which it was emphasised the “determination to fully and effectively support the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries, which will become an integral part of the EU, once they meet the established criteria”. See

Summit, where in 2003, the President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, confirmed that the Balkans would be an essential part of the future of Europe, starting the process of enlargement of the region. For all of us that went through the post-war period in the region, the message was clear: we had turned a new leaf and were starting a new period of LDAs and ALDA, oriented towards Europe and the European Commission, with new instruments and reinforced dialogue.

Meanwhile, ALDA also became bigger in numbers and structure. At the EU level, local governance was underlined as important as its enlargement to East and many partners we met in the Balkans were also engaged in the Eastern European transition to the post-soviet area. Central Europe and the Baltic countries were preparing to enter the Union, with a quantum leap in 2004. Both members of ALDA and LDA partners saw an opportunity to expand the horizons of their work.

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more here:  
[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PRES\\_03\\_163](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PRES_03_163)

Opening of the LDA Kosovo in Gjilane, 2003 with local authorities from Serbian and Albania communities, organised with the support of the Congress of the Council of Europe. A new opening of the LDA Kosovo took place in Pec/Peja in 2011



### **3. ALDA moves beyond the Western Balkans and becomes a European organisation**

While the network in the Western Balkans was developing fast, it became clear to me and to our members that the experience of the Local Democracy Agencies, in its projects directed towards good local governance, was engaging a great number of communities and local authorities across Europe, with a potential outreach much greater than our original scope. These local authorities had in common not only the intention and commitment to support peace and democracy in South-eastern Europe but were also similar in the way they perceived their approach to development and community building. This group of members and partners of the LDAs brought new stakeholders that were interested in building initiatives that had at their core cooperation between local authorities and civil society, oriented to local democracy, citizens engagement and city diplomacy. This new basis of interest, not always framed in the Balkans' approach, quickly brought ideas for new projects and new narratives in ALDA.

This resilience and capacity to adapt was one of the features that made ALDA a great and successful experience. Both the team and the Governing Board often accepted the need to try new and different ways of reaching our core objects and values by taking advantage of changing opportunities.

In the early 2000, the European Union was preparing for its big enlargement to the East. The work of ALDA in the Western Balkans gave us the possibility of meeting new partners and stakeholders from Eastern Europe and we were naturally attracted to networks supporting the accession of Central European countries to the EU, like FPLD<sup>63</sup> in Romania and key organisations in Poland. With these important partners, ALDA became part of the programme “Working Together”, which focused on local democracy, local government management and capacity

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*“Resilience and capacity to adapt was one of the features that made ALDA a great and successful experience”*

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<sup>63</sup> The Partners Foundation for Local Development (FPLD) is a Romanian Non-governmental Organisation founded in 1994 to enhance the democratic processes of governance and support

the local development, to strengthen civil society and to promote a new culture of change and conflict management. To find out more: <https://fpdl.alaturidevoi.ro/>



First colleagues in ALDA, Mrs. Sterzynska and Mrs. Dorothee Fisher, then historical communication officer of ALDA, in 2003, for the project EU Mayors at the general kick off conference at the council of Europe in Strasbourg

Sterzynska

empowerment on conflict management and participatory processes in specific training in Romania. The material and methodology were supported by UN Habitat (thank you Ana Vasilache and Fred Fisher<sup>64</sup> and by the network of the Open Society Institute and Local Government Initiative in Budapest - thank you Adrian Ionescu<sup>65</sup>). Most of the training activities for civil society and local democracy that ALDA is still developing have deep roots in those years of capacity building<sup>66</sup>. During those activities, I met new colleagues from Eastern Europe (in particular, Armenia and Georgia), with whom our friendship and cooperation have continued to this day. My first interest in Georgia arose because of my friendship with Sofiko Shubladze, who sadly passed away from COVID. She was a great leader of Partners for Democratic Change in Georgia. This widening of viewpoints brought with it the possibility of new projects for ALDA.

The first really big project of ALDA (outside the Council of Europe's aura) was with partners from Lithuania and Poland to provide information for

citizens about enlargement and the Euro, using participative methods at the local level. I drafted the entire project and packed it (physically... with paper and string) and took it to the post office (everything was sent on paper those days). I had the clear understanding that this was the project for a new launch. And so it was. ALDA (at that time only me and a registration in Strasbourg) received the first European Commission funded project of about 120,000 euro in 2001: an immense sum at that time. I had to recruit people and I had money for a small office (with the idea of having a working place that was not my own kitchen). The decision about the office brought me to a shared space in the centre of Vicenza (under the old tower).

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*“ALDA received the first European Commission funded project of about 120,000 euro in 2001”*

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It was nice and cosy but totally dysfunctional (hardly any light and difficult stairs) but since I had to recruit a

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<sup>64</sup> Ana Vasilache was the Executive Director of FPDL until 2013 and President of its executive council until 2016, promoting good governance and democratic administration in Romania, Central and Eastern Europe. She is Board President of the Association and an expert in public administration, architect and urban planner.

<sup>65</sup> Adrian Ionescu is a Senior Adviser, Local Development and Decentralisation expert and

consultant. He was previously Chief Technical Adviser for UNDP in Moldova, and Senior Adviser on Local Governance and Decentralisation for UNDP Ukraine, having worked as Director of the Local Governance Initiative (LGI) for the Open Society Institute.

<sup>66</sup> For example:

<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/502356?ln=en>

person, they could not work in my flat. I had contacted friends of friends and ended up there. I made an advertisement to recruit staff (I don't remember how and where). All of them were part-time and acting in a consultative capacity: an assistant and a communication officer. I selected Stefania Toriello, who worked with me in this small dysfunctional office. Stefania became a pillar of ALDA for many years. She was simply perfect, being and knowing exactly what one should be, and with the necessary knowledge and experience at the Council of Europe, in the area of human rights. She was living in Padova, only 20 km from Vicenza. I recruited Dorothee Fischer, who was in Strasbourg, as the communication officer. The three of us were ALDA and we started to work not only on the Balkans but on citizens' engagement with our members. They were heroic times.

With more people and a different agenda, the activities increased and proved to be a fundamental step in consolidating our role at the European level with the General Assembly in Barcelona, the city at the centre of the movement for the international engagement of municipalities in those

years, and which was close to human rights activities (as well as a former part of the network for the activities of the Local Democracy Agency in Sarajevo). The 2004 General Assembly in Barcelona brought us into contact with institutions from Europe, like the representative of the Stability Pact for South-eastern Europe<sup>67</sup> and the European Commission. The former Mayor of Bogota, Ronald MacLean Abaroa (a contact of Ana Vasilache) was our key guest, who presented his policy in citizen engagement and fighting local corruption. The Local Democracy Agencies and their partners attended. Among the Governing Board members was also Per Vinther, former Ambassador of the EU to Croatia, when I was working there. Per became the President of ALDA following Gianfranco Martini's departure.

The General Assembly in Barcelona was important not only because it strengthened and valued the network, but also because, having already implemented one project with members and partners, we presented our first paper and report on the importance of citizen participation at the local level as an essential feature of European governance. The research was

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<sup>67</sup> The Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe was established in 1999 by the EU to implement and reinforce peace and security in South-Eastern

Europe, involving countries, partners and international organisations. It was replaced by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) in 2008. To find out more: <https://www.rcc.int/>

impressive and well drafted, and it left a strong impression on the capacity of ALDA to implement and capitalise upon its experience. We were for the first time seen as a key organisation on matters of local governance and citizen engagement.

As one project followed another, the team grew. With Martial Paris, my former intern, who also had been working for us for many years, and the recruitment of Marco Boaria, responsible for reporting projects to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and also for fundraising, the core team of the ALDA was ready: Martial (working from Switzerland), Dorothee (working from Strasbourg), Marco, Stefania and me, working from Vicenza. That was the team which formed and made ALDA possible. With my colleagues, we embarked on ambitious projects on local development and microcredit in the Balkans (with the support of Norway) and with more political and institutional initiatives with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Two projects with ANCI in the Balkans (with the funding through Law 84 for the Balkans) brought immense support to ALDA and the LDAs for many years and developed the capacity for local authorities and civil society groups across region to engage

in actions and regranting activities<sup>68</sup>. With the importance of reporting and of the sums being managed, an external consultant on finances (whom I saw once a week) was no longer possible, and this is when Barbara Elia joined us.

With a consolidated network of members, partners and LDAs in the Balkans and other projects in Europe, new challenges lay ahead. Our staff meetings were clearly very ambitious (six people now); we were visionaries, without fear and with clear ideas and an immense energy. ALDA is today what those meetings were establishing; we were discussing where we would be in 10 years' time. It took us more time than we thought, but ALDA is now what we had envisioned back in those days. Our network managed to reestablish trust and a strong partnership with the European Commission, thanks to our projects and constant relationship. Those were the years in which we developed the programme **Europe for Citizens**. We met Pierre Mairesse in Brussels several times. He was in charge of citizens' initiatives, and he mentioned that they were developing a global programme with Operating Grants for civil society engaged to support the citizens' approach. ALDA became a natural partner for this initiative with

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<sup>68</sup> ANCI/ALDA Programme "Actions for Capacity-Building of Local Authorities and Civil Society in Southern and Eastern Europe"

Europe for Citizens<sup>69</sup>. Unfortunately, they were also the years when our president Gianfranco Martini became seriously ill and passed away<sup>70</sup>. A few years before, Per Vinther had already assumed the role of President of ALDA until 2012<sup>71</sup> Per was an experienced European Commission civil servant and deeply committed to the future of the Balkans. We met when I was working for the LDA Sisak in Croatia, and he was there as the EU Ambassador. He was also the President for “enlargement” of ALDA to the Caucasus with first LDA opening in Kutaisi in 2006. Other key projects paved the way for the development of ALDA, thanks to which we really made a difference.

**“Cities for Peace”** was the first memorable project resulting from networking and engaging with our members and partners. It led to the development of dozens of projects in which local authorities and civil society in Europe were able to cooperate and engage in a variety of topics. It created the shape of ALDA and its features. We contributed with a series of small grants that enhanced the work of communities.

“**Youth in Action**” was a large project focused on young people in the Balkans and was the predecessor of all the projects engaging the LDAs in the region on the topics, from which the LDAs gained experience for all its policies on youth and local governments.

The programmes on **local economic development** supported by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the civil society and the programme for microcredit with the support of Norway and Banca Intesa San Paolo were also important for launching the local economic projects of ALDA, especially in the Balkans, but not only.

The numerous projects for **Europe for Citizens** that we managed to implement with our members on various topics, such as culture, sport, youth, civil society and local engagement were fundamental to linking them to our members and placing them in a broader European perspective. Europe for Citizens helped us to be what we are, and we can say that we also contributed to the shape of the programme thanks to our continuous engagement.

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<sup>69</sup> The Europe for Citizens programme supports activities to increase awareness and citizens' understanding of the EU and of its values and history. The programme also helps people become more engaged in civic and democratic activities through debates and discussions on EU-related issues. See ALDA's publication “Analyses of the impact of Europe for Citizens at the local level” at

this link: <https://www.alda-europe.eu/resources/analyses-of-the-impact-of-europe-for-citizens-at-the-local-level/>

<sup>70</sup> Passed away on 10 October 2012

<sup>71</sup> Per Vinther was elected as President at the General Assembly of ALDA in Vienna on May 16, 2008.



Break during the conference, for ALDA staff, at the General Assembly 2004 in Barcelona

## 4. Moving to the East, accompanying the transition and the new shape of Europe

The true sustainability of ALDA has always been the capacity to anticipate changes. The association has always been able to understand where its mission would be most useful and how it could adapt in order to support local communities, members and partners. At the end of the war in the Balkans and the fall of the Berlin wall, all eastern Europe was in “transition”. We experienced an unprecedented demand for support in governance, especially at the local level. The 2004 enlargement to the East, promoted by the Romano Prodi Commission<sup>72</sup>, was prepared and implemented with good governance, transformation of political settings and public administration reforms at its core. It would be useful to study the process while we are in the process of planning further enlargement towards the East<sup>73</sup>, in particular, the transition from a centralised one-party system. The

countries which were to be included in the European Union (such as the Baltic States) had to adapt their internal organisation. The support of local governance and civil society was necessary to prepare the ground for the Enlargement. This is how ALDA’s members and projects were able to contribute. We worked a lot with Baltic partners and with Poland, and then with Romania. Our experience in community development was particularly important as we had the experience of supporting societal transformation in the Balkans. ALDA worked alongside civil society organisations in all those countries and, in particular, closely with the immense work being done by the Open Society Institute<sup>74</sup>, which brought fresh and free minds together from a vast network of countries in the region. In Serbia and in the Balkans, our Local Democracy Agencies were working with the Open Houses or Clubs, which were a place of dialogue, debate, and reflection about the future of those countries.

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<sup>72</sup> The 2004 enlargement to the East, promoted by the Romano Prodi Commission, saw ten new member states join the European Union. This expansion marked a significant milestone in European integration, bringing increased diversity and economic opportunities to the EU.

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[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ac\\_23\\_6711](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ac_23_6711)

<sup>74</sup> The Open Society Institute (OSI) is a private operating and grant-making foundation that

promotes democratic principles, human rights, and justice worldwide. OSI accords a high priority to protecting and enhancing the lives of people in marginalised communities, supporting a wide range of independent voices and organisations that provide a dynamic and creative connection between government and civil society.

To find out more: <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/>



Fact finding mission to Georgia for the opening of the LDA Georgia in Kutaisi, 2003

We were working together with the Council of Europe and with the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities that, knowing our experience in the Balkans, brought the experience of the LDAs into Southern Caucasus. There, the first local elections were taking place, and we were supporting programmes for the newly established local governments<sup>75</sup>. Indeed, in order to become part of the Council of Europe, after independence, the countries of Eastern Europe and Southern Caucasus had to transform their governance and adopt laws on decentralisation and local government. ALDA participated in the first training and capacity building activities for local governments in Georgia, by far, the most promising country of the region.

ALDA was fully engaged in the network of Working Together, promoted by FPDL in Romania and we were part of a broad programme of training local authorities in various crucial skills like management, conflict management, negotiation and participatory processes, supported by UNHabitat and LGI (Local Government Initiative from Budapest). By meeting with our colleagues from the Southern Caucasus on regular basis and working together with the Congress of the Council of Europe, the ALDA

Governing Board embarked on opening the first LDA in Southern Caucasus, and the first outside of the Balkans. The preparatory processes brought us to Kutaisi (Georgia), which, in line with our own rules, was a municipality and not a capital city, but had a crucial importance in the country. Kutaisi could count on a well-established partnership with Newport in the UK and therefore, around this core group, we built a supporting network for the LDA. The city of Nantes was among the partners of the LDA, even though it was twinned with Tbilisi. The creation of the LDA in Georgia brought a tremendous boost to the work of ALDA.

In 2004, I went to Tbilisi for the first time. It was February and I had bought very warm boots. Approaching our airport of destination, the pilot informed that it was 16 degrees and warm despite the season. I realised that Georgia was further south than I had thought; it was warm and welcoming. Georgia was going through very difficult times. More so than anywhere else I had seen in my life, I felt the Soviet Union had ended. It had its marks everywhere: industry had stopped overnight, and a few doors of the factories we passed as we drove from Tbilisi to Kutaisi, were still open, ... it was like someone had forgotten to close

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<sup>75</sup> The enlargement of the Council of Europe to the East involved extending membership to former Soviet bloc countries and other states in Eastern

Europe. This expansion aimed to promote democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in the region, fostering European integration beyond its traditional western boundaries.



Opening of the LDA Georgia in Kutaisi with partners from Newport in UK and from Italy, Monfalcone at the presence of the President of ALDA, Per Vinther and the president of the Congress Mr. Alain Chenard, mayor of Nantes. The LDA is still operational and supported by partners.



them, because they were in so much of a rush. The roads were just terrible. The situation was difficult. But the wish of the people to sort this out was even bigger. The LDA was inaugurated by President Per Vinther and the representative of the Congress of the Council of Europe, Alain Chénard, who was also the Mayor of Nantes in France. From the very beginning, working in Eastern Europe was working in transitional countries, which were leaving the soviet period, and trying to create their own independence. The transition and the empowering of local governance and the role of citizens was in ALDA's DNA, and we were able to use our experience for sharing programmes and support.

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*“We were becoming truly international and truly European. The challenge was enormous because the resources were still limited, and we wanted to be what we could still hardly be”*

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The post-USSR context had created a stimulating and bigger scenario; it was a broad transformative region. We were requested to define more clearly our rules for the establishment of the LDAs, to redefine our geographic scope and mission, our vision for opening up new

horizons and our methods, which are still valid today. We were not only working for the end of the war in South-eastern Europe (former Yugoslavia), but we were promoting local good governance wherever it was needed, within the Council of Europe's scope of action. With the work in Georgia, ALDA started to work in “another league”. We had embarked in a new geographic zone with different cultures and languages. It was a fundamental step in consolidating our mission and marking the path for our future activities.

Because of our work in Europe and then in Southern Caucasus, ALDA also had to transform itself and its governance.

It was a time when our former president Gianfranco Martini passed over his responsibilities to Per Vinther to lead the organisation through challenging times. We also had a new Governing Board which represented our new stakeholders. It was less Italian and less centred on the Balkan area. We were becoming truly international and truly European. The challenge was enormous because the resources (human and financial) were still limited, and we wanted to be what we could still hardly be. The problems of multiple languages (an expensive and difficult exercise at the time, although less so now thanks to new technology) was a constant burden that we tried to solve in many ways

(mainly with in-house solutions). Nevertheless, the enthusiasm which emerged from this new area of work gave the whole team and the Governing Board new energy.

In terms of organisational matters and governance, the ALDA team was still very limited. We adopted crucial decisions, like attributing the label to the LDAs on a yearly basis. ALDA, through this step, became the coordinator of the LDAs. The label was a Governing Board decision, and it gave it possibility to govern the network, accept the new LDAs, evaluate their work and recommend improvements. Through the Governing Board decisions, ALDA became more what it is today. The Board also decided to ratify the names of the Delegates<sup>76</sup> and their CVs after the partners had approved it. That was also a crucial decision as ALDA was working with the Delegate daily and could be difficult when some of them were not up to the task. We also had to protect ourselves and our name and credibility from possible misuse.

Relevance and good governance became key features of ALDA and remain some of the reasons for its long-term sustainability.

Moving East was, and still represents, a great journey for ALDA. After Georgia, which was definitively a milestone, we opened an LDA in Gyumri in Armenia with the support of the Rhône Alpes Region and the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region.

The work in Armenia was different and to some extent more difficult. Armenia was, and is, a difficult country because of the burdens it carries from its past and its permanent conflict with Azerbaijan, as well as its tight relations with Türkiye. The Armenian partners also had tight relationships with its European partners (mainly the French), and we also worked with many of them. Local government institutions were fragile, and the country was in difficult economic situation. Both the LDAs and our work in Armenia and Georgia benefited immensely from the consistent dedication and work of our Delegates in Georgia. Firstly, there was Joseph Kakhaishvili, who is now Mayor of Kutaisi (many of our colleagues had excellent career in their communities!) and then Nino Tvalvadze (who was an incredibly good Eastern Partnership coordinator for ALDA). Then, we had Nino Khukhua. In Armenia, after some early turbulence, the LDA found its main Delegate, Lusine Alexandryan, who now leads it very successfully.

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<sup>76</sup> The Delegates are the Directors of the Local Democracy Agencies



Opening of the LDA Armenia in Gyumri with the support of the Region Rhones Alpes and the association of local authorities of Armenia (CAA) and the Friuli Venezia Giulia. The LDA is still operational and supported by partners. The Congress was represented by Fabio Pellegrini, 2011



Round table in Gyumri



Supported by the Rhône Alpes Region, which twinned with the association of municipalities of Armenia, we developed the LDA in Gyumi in the northern part of the country. This process was much more cumbersome and from the beginning we understood that the usual problems associated with emerging from Soviet Union were further complicated by specific issues of the country itself, namely a difficult past with Türkiye and the permanent state of war with Azerbaijan. Armenia had no neighbouring friends, except for Georgia to the north and Iran on its southern frontiers. The dynamics in the society were such that Armenia was more closed and less European oriented and have remained so. Indeed, they signed a trade union treaty with Russia as well as an Association Agreement, putting them in a different and opposing coalition<sup>77</sup>. On the other hand, of course, the survival challenges for them are concrete and they need to rely on the strong support of friendly neighbours, such as Russia, where thousands of Armenians live and work. The cooperation with Gyumri municipality has never been easy. The country remains in a special place owing to its history and because of the diaspora,

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<sup>77</sup> The Eurasian Economic Union is an economic union of five post-Soviet states located in Eurasia. The EAEU has an integrated single market. As of 2023, it consists of 183 million people and a gross domestic product of over \$2.4 trillion

which means that Armenians can now be found in every corner of the planet. However, the day-to-day reality is less romantic than one would think. Our little LDA has been run for many years by the great LDA Delegate, Lusine Aleksandryan. Thanks to our cooperation with the Community Finance Officers Association of Armenia and the association of Municipalities, we have implemented a programme of support for local development programmes, with key projects engaging local communities.

Our cooperation with Azerbaijan has always been extremely limited and connected to some activities proposed by the Eastern Partnership process and the European Commission. There was at one point a proposal for an LDA in Ganja, but it failed to materialise.

Another milestone in the region was the opening of the LDA in Dnipro<sup>78</sup>. We need to thank Lower Silesia and Bartek Ostrowski (former ALDA colleague), who used to be the head of international relations in the Lower Silesia region. The Governing Board of ALDA approved the idea that we should move into Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus with civil society

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<sup>78</sup> As a result of decommunisation, the city was renamed Dnipro in 2016. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Dnipro rapidly developed as a logistical hub for humanitarian aid and a reception point for people fleeing the various battle fronts.



Visit of the president of Region Lower Normandie, Laurent Beauvais, in Skopje for a long term decentralised cooperation programme, with North Macedonia. With the participation of Sabine guichet Lebailly, head of the international cooperation of the Lower Normandie office. We opened with them, the office in Skopje, which became our regional office. With us as well our colleagues Ivana Dimistrovska and Srdjan Cvijic. 2015

activities to support decentralisation, good governance and civil society empowerment. After some projects, the proposal for an LDA came, as said, from a Polish contact. Lower Silesia had an established contact with the Region of Dnipropetrovsk, and they wanted to find a framework for cooperation which was more than just a twinning.

The links between Poland and Ukraine are well known (by the way, Ukrainian language does NOT sound like Russian but more like Polish). They were also twinned with the Alsace Region. Bartek proposed to establish an LDA in Dnipropetrovsk (now Dnipro) and we moved towards this. It was a great journey, and we opened the LDA with a strong partnership in Eastern Ukraine, in one of the big cities of the country with more than a million inhabitants, on the river Dnieper. Our colleagues used to say that with Dnipro we entered another league. Our Delegate, who still is, was Angelika Pilipenko. She is an expert on Ukrainian Law and decentralisation and is part of a national network of associations working towards local democracy, based in Odessa. The choice of the Delegate was difficult. The situation got worse with the occupation of Crimea and the war in the Donbass.

Dnipro (it used to be Dnipropetrovsk but, following de-russification, it became Dnipro) was the centre for people moving out of the Donbass and being internally displaced persons (IDPs) in this city. First thing that we soon realised was how big a country it was: Ukraine is very big and diverse and also very rich in minerals. It is also a very productive land. We opened up new possibilities for the city to become a member of ALDA and to become engaged in a programme to support local governance promoted by ALDA and KAS<sup>79</sup>. Angelika also worked for the the development of the programme of neighbourhood and condominiums programme supporting communities, which unfortunately has been discontinued recently. The LDA supported the creation of gramadas and engaged with civil society in the city. It also supported many humanitarian missions during the war. ALDA has always offered, through the LDAs and programmes, a good way to develop further twinning, by adding more content, projects and maybe more triangular partnerships. Therefore, it is able to form the basis for multilateral decentralised cooperation.

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<sup>79</sup> Nationally and internationally, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation is committed to achieving and maintaining peace, freedom and justice

through political education. We promote and preserve free democracy, the social market economy, and the development and consolidation of the value consensus. <https://www.kas.de>



Civil society action in Vicenza supporting Ukraine in 2022

The LDA Dnipro survived the war and with the support of the Region (Oblast) of Dnipropetrovsk, is still very active. It has brought support to refugees and worked on many social initiatives in its surrounding neighbourhoods.

The LDA Dnipro also brought another dimension into ALDA, namely the Polish partners, who have given it a European dimension. The participation of our Polish partners was fundamental in approaching Eastern Europe, and in particular Ukraine. With Lower Silesia, we had the possibility to strengthen our cooperation with the north (Bydgoszcz was member of ALDA for many years) and Gdansk.

The LDAs established in the Balkans and Eastern Europe became engine for development, both social and economic, and a reference point for citizen engagement. ALDA has been developing its own programmes and activities mainly involving the present LDAs but also through its engagement with more partners and

members. Like the programme CHOICE, which supported the economic development of local cultural heritage in Eastern Partnership countries like Belarus, but not Azerbaijan.

When we came across the representatives of the city of Gdansk, the Mayor was the very well-known Paweł Adamowicz<sup>80</sup>, a charismatic person who led Gdansk through the transformation process from the 90s onwards. Gdansk is the city of the strike at the shipyards and the movement of Solidarity<sup>81</sup>. Unfortunately, Paweł was dramatically stabbed to death during a charity event in 2018, leaving us all a bit lonelier. He was a person that one cannot forget. He transformed his community from a critical industrial harbour city into a place dedicated to solidarity, innovation, and tourism. He used to say that Europe gave them a lot and now it was their turn to support those who needed it more. I met Paweł in Yerevan, Armenia, during a Council of Europe/Committee of the Regions event, which was promoted by the CORLEAP<sup>82</sup>.

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<sup>80</sup> Paweł Adamowicz was the long-serving Mayor of the city of Gdańsk. He worked a lot in the field of democracy and local development, promoting solidarity, dialogue between civil societies, protection of human rights, integration of migrants and minorities. He served the city and politics until his assassination on 13 January 2019 whilst carrying out his public duties.

As an homage and recognition of everyone who operates with courage and integrity against oppression, intolerance, radicalisation, hate-speech and xenophobia, in 2022 the General

Assembly of the International Cities of Refuge Network launched the Adamowicz Award.

<sup>81</sup> Solidarność (Solidarity) is the independent Polish Trade Union movement founded on 22 September 1980 that played an important role against the communist regime in Poland and its overthrow.

<sup>82</sup> The Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (Corleap) is the political forum of local and regional authorities from the European Union and the Eastern Partnership countries that offers an opportunity to discuss the

Our meeting was immediately followed by a proposal to engage in the LDA process. The connection and friendship were natural and immediate. He was surprised by my personal interest in Eastern Europe and by the fact that I took my time to learn Russian (“some may think that you are a spy!”, he told me once 😊). Gdansk had a long-standing

partnership with Odessa on the Black Sea, as both are crucial port cities. We approached Odessa and met them several times and explained the concept of the LDA. The approach was difficult, to say the least. After a year of preparation, they refused to meet the delegation of partners, while we were basically on the outskirt of the municipality. Our local partner, Andrej Krupnik, who was a leader of a local NGO, hoped for the opening of the LDA Dnipro and was really upset by this. But what could we do? We “took note” that it was a “no” as we walked along a wonderful alley through an elegant garden and along the promenade in Odessa (in front of the opera) and had a warm tea and cake. Odessa was a challenging place at that time. It remains so today. When we were

there, we assisted in the colourful resignation of Mikaail Shakasvili<sup>83</sup>, who was the Governor of the region, who had accused colleagues and the government of President Poroshenko as a nest of corrupted people. And we also heard, while in Odessa, of the terrorist attacks at Brussels’ airport.

Now, Odessa district is member of ALDA and we have signed an MoU for an LDA there. We don’t give up to easily!

Pawel Adamovicz learned about this failed attempt in Odessa, and he called me on the phone. He said that we should not give up and that Ukraine needed our support. (It was 2017). I agreed entirely with him. He mentioned that the city of Mariupol had a brilliant Mayor and that they were working with him successfully. “Mariupol... do you mean Mariupol in the Donbass?”, I replied. “Yes, that one.” I thought and concluded that ALDA worked in much more difficult places in the Balkans and that it was worth going there to check out.

Mariupol was the city at the very end of “free” Ukraine, by the Azov Sea, near to Crimea. It was located 20 km from the

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contribution by cities and regions in the development of the Eastern Partnership. It consists of 33 regional and local politicians: 18 members of the CoR and 15 representatives from the five Eastern partner countries.

To find out more: <https://cor.europa.eu/en/our-work/International-cooperation/Pages/CORLEAP.aspx>

<sup>83</sup> Mihail Shakashvili stepped down from his post as governor of the Ukrainian region of Odessa in November 2016, blaming the former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko of enabling corruption and ineffectiveness in his government by creating an opposition party.

demarcation zone, with independent troops in the Donbass supported by Russia. Its airport was closed for civilian flights, and it was 5 hours away from the nearest airport (Dnipro). Last time I went, in 2021, they had rebuilt the road, and it took 3.5 hours from Zaporizhzhia to Mariupol. Nevertheless, it was still very far...

Mariupol is a town of martyrs, where out of 500,000 people who lived there, only one third remain, while others left or died following the long assault and siege of 2022<sup>84</sup>. It was summer. After landing in Dnipro, where we already had an LDA, we travelled through the wonderful and never-ending countryside of corn and cereal fields. The blue sky and yellow fields made it look like the Ukrainian flag.

To a certain extent, I felt like I knew this place. This part of Ukraine, and even further into Russia, were places where many Italians (in particular the *Alpini*, the corps from northern Italy where my family is from) fought during the war, and they used to talk of these never-ending cultivated lands. Those who read the books of Mario Rigoni Stern on the Italian fascist campaign in Russia and how they had to return on foot after the Italian army's disaster can easily visualise the

Eastern Ukraine<sup>85</sup>. They told my parents and other people they met that Ukraine was the “granary of Europe” and that it was a marvellous place, which resonated with my relatives as they were farmers. We discovered that Ukraine is not only the granary of Europe but also for a large part of the world.

Our visit to Mariupol was just amazing. We found a European city with the EU flag waiting for us at the municipality. I was moved by this reception.

Somehow, I found Mariupol fascinating in the way they were fighting against their destiny: the war, that cut them off from Donetsk, the centre to which they gravitated, as well as from the Sea of Azov, which meant they were blocked off from the rest of the world. They also had to reinvent their future since the industries which sustained their existence, like the coal mines and the big steel industries, lay on either side of the border, and cut them off from their markets. Their airport was now a military airport and they had to travel a long way to reach another airport (now the road has been partially repaired, and things go faster). Kiev is very very far away. The community is proud, and the city used to be a big port.

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<sup>84</sup> The siege of Mariupol by Russian forces began on 24 February 2022 with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The battle, which lasted for months, is one of the most horrific moments where thousands of

civilians have been victims of the violence of Russian forces.

<sup>85</sup> “Il sergente nella neve. Ricordi della ritirata di Russia”, Mario Rigoni Stern, Torino, Einaudi, 1953.



Visit to Brussels at the Committee of the Regions of the Mayor Vadym Boichenko, 2021. ALDA signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the CoR in 2024

They have public institutions, theatres, parks, and a romantic history dating back to the 19th century. They also had to reinvent their identity and sense of affiliation. Russian was their native language, which is no longer possible in Ukraine. Theirs is a difficult story. They are brave and heroic. I admire them.

The Mayor, Vadym Boichenko (who is still the mayor, but now of an occupied city), and his team were ready to start the journey and invest their energy in establishing an LDA, with the support of the presence of the Fund for Development of Mariupol and future Delegate, Tatiana Lomakina. Of course, we wanted to open an LDA there! We started organising meetings with NGOs and civil society groups, as we usually do, drafted a programme of activities, and built a partnership. Paweł attended the opening, and it is something that remains in everyone's memories. All his friends, including the partners of the LDA, attended his funeral in Gdańsk on a very cold day of December in 2018. The LDA Mariupol still exists, but in exile, working as an NGO from different cities

in Ukraine, although mainly from Kyiv. Tatiana Lomakina is working as a President Zelensky adviser on disabilities and the Mayor of Mariupol is also trying to help his community with a project called Mariupol Reborn with a social support programme called "I am Mariupol"<sup>86</sup>, which has opened in several cities in the country.

The LDA was responsible for activating projects for both civil society and local government.

The LDA in Moldova was also part of the effort to establish a presence in the European part of the Eastern Partnership programme. The decision to open in Cimișlia, a city to the South of Chisinau, halfway way to the Autonomous Republic of Gagauzia<sup>87</sup>, was made possible by the enthusiasm and proactive attitude of the former Mayor, Gheorghe Răileau. The partners were the French association Solidarité Eau Europe as well as CALM, the Association of Local authorities of Moldova. The LDA is smaller than others but still develops relevant programmes to support local

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<sup>86</sup> The project "I am Mariupol" supports centres for displaced Mariupol residents across Ukraine to rehabilitate them and meet their basic needs such as food, job search, psychological and medical support. See more here: <https://mariupolrada.gov.ua/en>

"Mariupol Reborn" is an initiative that foresaw the reconstruction of the city after its liberation. Find out more on the initiative here: <https://remariupol.com/>

<sup>87</sup> The Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia is a region in Moldova inhabited primarily by the Gagauz people, who sought autonomy to protect their culture within Moldova. Established in 1994, Gagauzia has its own legislative, executive, and judicial branches, but its autonomy is limited as it remains part of Moldova, subject to Moldovan law and central government authority.



Joint initiative with the Association of the Moldovan Municipalities (CALM) Chisinau, Moldova, where we opened an LDA in Cimislia in 2017

democracy and civil society in that region and it also became a partner in several projects implemented in the country. For me, the relationship with ALDA is a very long path. Its pillar activities and partnership with a local NGO, called Lev Sapieha Foundation, had more than 15 years of experience, but was “liquidated”<sup>88</sup> by the Lukashenko’s regime. The team of LSF had, for many years, been invited to the Congress of the Council of Europe sessions in Strasbourg as the organisation represented one of the very few groups of expertise in local government in Belarus (a country with notoriously limited degree of decentralisation). Thanks to this affiliation to the Congress, we got to know each other, and we developed many projects and activities to support local community work and local governance. This was over a period of more than 15 years. A report on our cooperation on activities was published some years ago<sup>89</sup>. The partnership was intense and fruitful, although complicated owing to the difficult situation relating to civil society, democracy and human rights in Belarus. For many years, request for a visa for Europeans was a long process and could

not be taken for granted, at all. Some of our participants and representatives were denied a visa, without much explanation, and this caused a serious precedent for future requests, meaning there was even less of a possibility for obtaining visas for future visits. My first flight to Minsk was without a visa. It was around 2005/2006. I started my journey by explaining to the checking-in personnel (likely impossible to do now) that a visa was waiting for me on arrival, which was partly true. This is why they let me travel, no doubt thinking that it was “my problem if the visa was not there”. Someone was there waiting for me, behind the window in the arrival hall and he had indeed organised a visa at the airport. I said to myself: “What could happen? The only bad thing being that they might send me back”. I wasn’t sent back. Today, I would certainly be much more cautious.

ALDA never really managed to develop a dialogue on local democracy in Belarus. We organised activities with civil society groups all over the country. I found incredibly interested, motivated and serious people there. They were truly Europeans but, because of the structure of their government and the conditions

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<sup>88</sup> The situation in Belarus involves ongoing political unrest and a crackdown on civil society groups by the government following the disputed 2020 presidential election. The government has arrested opposition leaders, activists, and journalists,

leading to condemnation from the international community and persistent resistance efforts within the country.

<sup>89</sup> <https://issuu.com/alda51/docs/174>

Visit of the group of projects CHOICE in Vicenza. ALDA has an office in Vicenza since 2002.  
Partners were from Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and belarus. Choice was a project on participation  
approach in protection of cultural heritage and local initiatives, 2017



of the infrastructure, they were somehow living in the last European piece of the former Soviet Union. The subway in Minsk could be taken as an example, as it has the same smell, the same token, the same type of platforms, the same colours as those in Moscow, in Novosibirsk, and other Russian cities. The model was incredibly similar.

I consider Belarusians, in general, very reliable people and I enjoyed working and being with them (I still do). I liked visiting them. I am a bit nostalgic for the past (whatever that means) and I believe the whole country is “very nostalgic” too. Unfortunately, the war in Ukraine has changed our relationship with Belarus and its inhabitants even further. The country is now inaccessible for people like me, but I can still get along with Belarusians, even if outside the country’s borders. KGB<sup>90</sup> (this abbreviation is still used in Belarus, even though it has become the FSB in Russia) was ever present, even for our events.

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<sup>90</sup> The KGB (Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti - Committee for State Security) was the primary security and intelligence agency for the Soviet Union established in 1954 under Nikita Khrushchev presidency. It carried out internal security, foreign intelligence, counter-intelligence and secret police functions.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the KGB was officially dissolved and replaced by a new domestic security service, the FSB.

<sup>91</sup> On April 26, 1986, during a test at low-power, a reactor at the nuclear power plant in Chernobyl, Ukraine, went out of control, causing an explosion and fire that demolished the reactor building and released large amounts of radiation into the

We had interesting programmes around the country and in Gomel. I could clearly see the aftermath of the catastrophe in Chernobyl, which is in Ukraine, but on the border with Belarus (indeed, Gomel is the closest city), as the wind was blowing northeast that day in April 1986<sup>91</sup>. Some of our partners in Europe (like the Sardinia Region) had a long-lasting partnership in Belarus and hosted children in an attempt to keep them away from the contaminated area. Our colleagues, like all the civil society leaders in Belarus, always had a very hard time. Some of them, used to be a Minsk municipal councillor as well, in what was a short but bright time for democracy after the end of the Soviet Union<sup>92</sup>. They also had some problems in their way back from Vilnius. There is a train and several buses going from Vilnius to Minsk.

atmosphere. Some people died because of the accident and many more were affected by the radiation consequences. It is considered the worst nuclear disaster in history.

<sup>92</sup> Occupied by the Russian empire since the end of the 18th century, Belarus declared a short-lived National Republic on March 25, 1918 only to be forcibly absorbed by the Bolsheviks into what became the Soviet Union. Occupied by Nazi Germany, Belarus was retaken by Stalin’s Russia in 1944 and remained under Soviet control until declaring its sovereignty on July 27, 1990 and independence from the Soviet Union on August 25, 1991. It has been run by authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko since 1994.



Visit in Belarus for joint initiative with local groups. ALDA has been working more than 10 years supporting local communities in Belarus, ACSOBE, funded by the European Commission, 2005



The two cities are closely connected<sup>93</sup> and now there is a very big group of exiled Belarusians in Lithuania, including the one of Svetlana Tichanovskaya<sup>94</sup>. I worked with some civil society leaders and co-chaired with them the Civil Society Forum.

it was difficult to meet and to talk since we thought to be constantly under the control of the internal secret service. I had no doubt that it was a strong possibility.

The moment we took part in the Civil Society Forum for the Eastern Partnership<sup>95</sup> was a turning point for ALDA's partnership with the Eastern countries. The "programme" itself was launched soon after the creation of the Eastern Partnership in Prague in 2009<sup>96</sup>. The European Commission started to

advocate for civil society, while, at a governmental level, the programme was already ongoing, or rather struggling. The EaP brought together Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. The creation of this partnership and the various agreements with those countries have been used as one of the excuses for Russia's attack on Ukraine with its fully-fledged invasion of 2022, believing that Europe was stepping on its feet in its area of interest<sup>97</sup>. Indeed, the Euromaidan movement in Ukraine was a response to the sudden decision

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*"Joining the Civil Society Forum for the Eastern Partnership was a turning point for ALDA's partnership with the Eastern countries"*

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<sup>93</sup> Vilnius is now a sort of second capital of Belarus, hosting a lot of dissidents. After the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the group of Ukrainians has been also increasing. The connections between the two countries are controlled but it is still possible to cross the border by bus or train.

<sup>94</sup> Sviatlana Hieorhiyeuna Tsikhanouskaya (née Pilipchuk; born 11 September 1982) is a Belarusian political activist. After standing as a candidate in the 2020 presidential election against the president Alexander Lukashenko, she has led the political opposition to his authoritarian rule through an oppositional government operating from Lithuania and Poland.

<sup>95</sup> The Civil Society Forum for Eastern Partnership is the largest network of NGOs from the Eastern Partnership region and the EU, which aim to ensure effective participation of civil societies in the process of planning, monitoring and

implementation of the Eastern Partnership policy in constructive dialogue with the EU and EaP decision-makers. To find out more: <https://eap-csf.eu/civil-society-forum/>

<sup>96</sup> The Eastern Partnership (EaP) was established as a specific Eastern dimension of the European Neighborhood Policy, which contains both a bilateral and multilateral track. ([www.consilium.europa.eu](http://www.consilium.europa.eu)) The Eastern Partnership was inaugurated by the EU in Prague, Czech Republic on 7 May 2009. The first meeting of foreign ministers in the framework of the Eastern Partnership was held on 8 December 2009 in Brussels.

<sup>97</sup> Russia has many times blamed Western countries and NATO for violating pledges on "not expanding the alliance in the former Soviet area of influence", thereby humiliating its own position. Moreover, Russian propaganda on the war includes excuses such as 'the need to de-Nazify and demilitarise' Ukraine.

of the former President of Ukraine Yanukovych for not signing the Association Agreement with the EU, the night before he should have flown to Vilnius to do it<sup>98</sup>. On that critical day<sup>99</sup> I was in Vilnius organising a side event with the Civil Society Forum members. The concerns and tensions were high. My colleagues in the Civil Society Forum were aware of the challenges that Ukraine was going through. I did not know much about it at that time, but I remember becoming more and more concerned as I learned about these issues. The preparation for this historic signature had already been made, and I was convinced that it would have become a reality despite the increasing doubts I started to experience. I thought that the sherpas<sup>100</sup> organising the conference would have prevented a no-show scenario. On the contrary, it just happened. In the morning, we heard that President Yanukovych had not taken off from Kyiv and that Ukraine would not sign the agreement. A feeling of unrest started to grow among us. A two-meter-tall man came up the stairs and held a press conference right there, on the staircase: it was Vitaly Klichko, now the

Mayor of Kyiv. That day, Ukraine started a new chapter in its long struggle with Russia.

The Civil Society Forum's creation was one the most successful exercise of a civil society engagement I have ever experienced. The European Commission invited hundreds of civil society leaders from the region and from Europe. We met for several days, and we discussed, "*en direct*", the basic document of the Forum by scrolling a word document on a screen. It was incredibly interesting. We discussed the format of the Forum, and we introduced some new elements like the national platforms and the composition of the steering committee. This moment we shared all together, facilitated by a brilliant coordinator and an English/Russian translation service, was extremely powerful. For someone like me, who is interested in governance and politics, it was an incredible galvanising moment, and it was successful. For a few years, the Steering Committee of the CSF EaP worked entirely on a voluntary basis. We looked for funding and managed to achieve a lot.

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<sup>98</sup> The Association Agreement between the EU and Eastern Partnership countries aimed to deepen ties, including free trade and reforms. Viktor Yanukovych's rejection of the agreement sparked massive protests in Ukraine known as the EuroMaidan movement, leading to his ousting in February 2014. EuroMaidan was a series of protests against corruption and abuse

of power, culminating in Yanukovych fleeing Ukraine and subsequent geopolitical tensions.

<sup>99</sup> The day when Janukovic did not sign the agreement in Vilnius

<sup>100</sup> A sherpa is a diplomat who is the personal representative of a head of state or head of government who prepares an international summit and negotiates the leaders' final declaration.



Steering committee of the Civil Society Forum for Eastern Partnership, I was co-chair of the CSF EaP Steering committee for several years. Here in Brussels with partners from EaP regions and civil society and Europe, 2011/2012

I was in the Steering committee as an ALDA representative (meaning also an EU representative) for several years and was the co-chair for 2 years.

The Forum had to deal with difficult matters, addressing the civil societies of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the position of host countries like Russia and Türkiye, as well as the balance between the EU and the EaP representatives. It contributed greatly to the whole EaP consolidation at the EU level. Fortunately, after many years, a dedicated budget and a Secretariat<sup>101</sup> was assigned to the Forum. I reckon that for several years almost 50% of my time was dedicated to the Forum for free, while the team of ALDA was still relatively small. For ALDA, the contribution to the Forum was essential in building a relationship with the Eastern Partnership countries, as we had the opportunity of meeting and working with a network of committed leaders. At the Forum, I led a subgroup on Local Government and Public Administration reform for many years, elaborating good proposals and then

engaging with the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP) and the Congress of the Council of Europe, raising awareness about local governance.

ALDA has not just been working with LDAs and the Civil Society Forum in Eastern Partnership. As a matter of fact, we have built a strong network of partners and members, with whom we work every day. We have developed strong and wonderful projects like CHOICE, which helps local communities preserve their cultural heritage and supports local democracy and citizen engagement in Georgia and Armenia, thanks, in particular, to some strong partners like NALAG<sup>102</sup>, the National Association of Georgian Local Authorities under the guidance of the Executive Director, David Melua. Of course, our interests and position in Eastern Europe have brought us closer to Russia and Central Asia. Russia is situated in that part of the world but constitutes a separate case (mostly for not good reasons).

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<sup>101</sup> The Secretariat is the executive body that reports to the Steering Committee and, together with this last one, develops advocacy and communication campaigns on issues of importance to the Forum and takes stock of political developments, ensuring their further communication to members of the Steering Committee, Forum participants and the general public. To find out more: <https://eap-csf.eu/secretariat/>

<sup>102</sup> NALAG (National Association of Local Authorities of Georgia) is a non-governmental organisation which unites all entities of local self-governance and cooperates with many international organisations and European unions of local authorities to promote development of local democracy in Georgia. To find out more: <https://nala.ge>



Unfortunately, ALDA had very few work opportunities in that country. Our attempts to get in touch with the local authorities were in vain. We had more chance of working with the Russian civil society. Our focus on local issues helped us get into contact with CSOs outside Moscow and Saint Petersburg and assess the potential of local authorities in modern Russia<sup>103</sup>. Unfortunately, most of our former partners and friends are now either in prison or have left the country. In 2015 and 2016, I visited many cities and communities in Russia and had the chance to see the system from the inside. The pressure was unbelievable and any activities for creating alternative proposals were very dangerous.

I met the team of Open Russia and their mentor, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, with my colleagues in London. Their approach to citizens' empowerment for a hard place like Russia has always been very interesting and inspiring to me.

My collection of memories (from where I am taking my inspiration) includes many Russian colleagues and friends. During my visit to Tyumen, in Siberia, to observe the local elections preparation, I met a brilliant 50-year-old woman. All

considered, it was like fighting an impossible battle. Every day, several hours a day, she was standing as a candidate in the city park, giving out her leaflets and speaking to people, trying to convince them, one by one. She was alone and in a dangerous situation, but still she was appreciated by the people she was talking to. One cannot imagine what fighting for democracy and freedom means in Russia back then and today. It consists in getting out from your comfort zone and being exposed to violence and constant aggression. In Tyumen, again, I had to stay away from some of the local municipal candidates while they were campaigning because of my European appearance. I could have jeopardised their fragile campaign and even put them in danger.

ALDA has just started its journey in Central Asia with a wonderful project in Kirghizstan which supports local media. The results are incredible. We need and we want to do more.

Currently, we have a project in Kirghizstan on a very important topic, which is freedom of information. It is a fascinating journey, and I am looking forward to further developments.

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<sup>103</sup> Aleksei Navalny was a prominent Russian opposition politician and anti-corruption activist. He has participated in several elections, including mayoral elections in Moscow in 2013.

Navalny has also been involved in organising protests and advocating for political reforms in Russia. He died in March 2024 in the last prison he was in prison at the extreme north of Russia.

Certainly, my work in Eastern Europe is part of my personal and professional life. My generation was marked by the end of the cold war and by the fall of the Berlin Wall. For several years, the programme in Eastern Europe has been supported by our colleague Alexandru Coica. The beginning of our political interest was

stimulated by the rise of a new era and a democratic transformation, that now is also being challenged. In Europe, the transformation of USSR and the transition of the East was a crucial moment, and it affected both my life and ALDA's. Many organisations were born in that period of transition.



Pawel Adamowicz, Mayor of Gdańsk, and Vadym Boichenko, Mayor of Mariupol, inaugurate the LDA Mariupol, 2017

## 5. Structuring ALDA

Visions, programmes, and good partnerships need operations, people and structure. The development of ALDA also needed to be accompanied by a structure. I worked alone for a few years, then almost four years with four or five people plus an external accountant.

While we were making progress out of the Western Balkans, engaging with more projects in Europe and enlarging towards the East (with the first LDA in Georgia established in 2004), ALDA was becoming more clearly structured and empowered as an organisation. That meant recruiting more people and moving into a bigger office in Vicenza (Northern Italy). ALDA has always been an organisation based on the potential and the commitment of the people who work for it. The organisation is developed around people. ALDA was built by its “founding team”, mainly me, Marco, Martial, Stefania, Barbara and Dorothee. As most of us are from Vicenza, we established our first office in the city. We believed that every person working for ALDA had the power to bring change and contribute to the organisation; and we still have this approach, even if now there are more than 70 people working for ALDA on a permanent basis along with approximately 50 consultants.

The relationship between ALDA and Vicenza is a long one, even though it has not always been successful. Our presence in Vicenza is due to the growth of our organisation which happened gradually over time and was not a pre-determined choice. I built ALDA at the same time as I built my family and, while the kitchen was getting full of children (my twins were born in November 2000 and I gave birth to my third child in 2004), ALDA received its first funding from the European Commission: it became clear that I could not continue working from home. The first “real office” was the one just behind Piazza dei Signori, in Contrà San Antonio. It was an incredibly little room in an old tower in the historical centre. I remember calling the owner of the space while I was in Montenegro carrying out a training programme for ALDA, (it was a wonderful, sunny day). We agreed on a limited, affordable sum. From that moment, ALDA had an office.

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“ALDA was built by its  
founding team, mainly me,  
Marco, Martial, Stefania,  
Barbara and Dorothee”

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This little space (which was dark and not at all functional) also happened to have a very cosy “meeting room”, where I could receive guests and partners. I brought my computer, then I bought another computer with the first tranche



Office of ALDA in Corso Mazzini, Vicenza, already a big team, 2009



Opening of the office, at the presence of the President of ALDA, Gianfranco Martini and other colleagues, like Martial Paris, in charge of the Balkans' programme

of funding from the European Commission. I had the money to hire one person, so I started a recruitment process. I interviewed my first ever colleague at ALDA, Stefania Toriello, who then became my professional alter ego for many years. Without this magical encounter, ALDA would have been totally different. In 15 days, we set up the office and found new contracts for new projects. In that amount of time, I gave her a part-time contract, which immediately became full-time. For the same project, we hired another fundamental member of our team, Dorothee Fischer, our communication officer in Strasbourg. With Dorothee, we managed to have our first “something-like-an-office” at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. Dorothee was a highly motivated German colleague. The three of us were ALDA for about a year.

With the new colleagues, a new administrative life of ALDA had begun. There were new contracts, new flows of money, projects and reporting. The whole machine had started. I am convinced that we were crazy enough not to have been afraid and we were totally motivated. If we had thought of the problems ahead (which really existed), we would not have done anything. A start up is always something “dangerous” that cannot be thought of in an entirely rational way. On the other hand, the three of us clearly knew the

potential of our work, the LDAs and the importance of our mission.

Of course, we eventually had to move to a bigger office. Our financial obligations led us to another organisation, Microfinanza, which had a three-room office (including their own) at Via della Racchetta, a short distance outside the city centre but still in Vicenza. The move brought about a great change. The office had a fantastic meeting room; it was big and bright. Our private rooms were less functional. At that time, Stefania and I had an external accountant (Gianpaolo Giacon) whom I met every two weeks to give him some papers so that he could keep the records. Our official accountant in Strasbourg was Cabinet Boos, who is still in this position (thank goodness!). ALDA received more money and projects including two very big projects (for that time) in partnership with the Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI) on Law 84/2001 for the Balkans (the reconstruction of the Balkans after the war). These two projects were the first multimillion projects for ALDA, and we had to deal with a very difficult sponsor (the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs). These big projects took ALDA to a different league, and we needed a new structure for that. We also had very successful projects in the Balkans (like the microfinancing projects in the region, supported by Norway, which was a fantastic



Office of ALDA in Vicenza, Viale Milano, next step and bigger, 2013

partnership) and a project on local economic development with the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

To follow the Balkans and the LDAs in the region, I hired an intern, who then became my first “assistant”, Martial Paris. Martial lived in Lausanne (Switzerland<sup>104</sup>). He came to work with ALDA as an “intern” or rather as a staff member within a support programme paid for by the Swiss Government. When my third child was born, Martial took over the management of ALDA for a few months. His support was fundamental for ALDA as he travelled in its cause for years. He knew the Balkans and all the people there like the back of his hand; our network appreciated him a lot. He was strong and resilient. I remember that, when I hired him, I saw a perfect CV and then, at the bottom of the page, I saw that he was a football coach for children. I thought: “If he can manage a team of little boys and get something out of it, he has the resilience and determination to work with me”. He exceeded my expectations (tip: always look at the extracurricular activities when you select people 😊).

ALDA had its dream team then: Martial, Dorothee, Stefania and me.

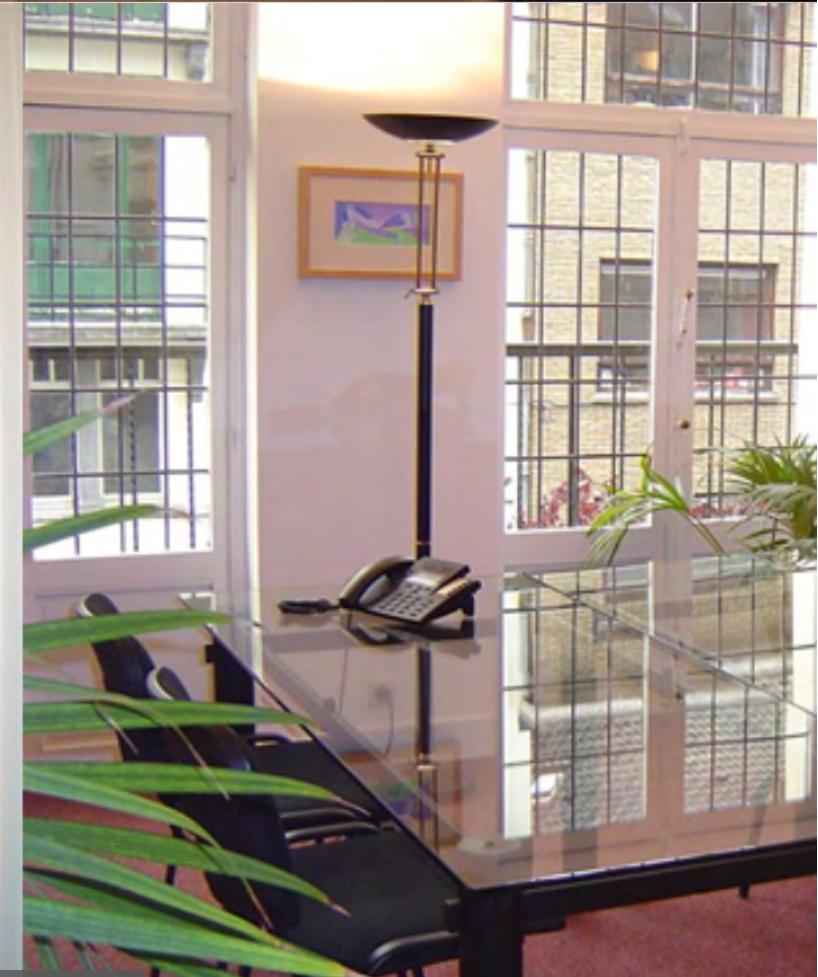
In Contrà della Racchetta, we had to decide what to do together: we desperately needed an administrative office because one external person was not enough (especially in view of what we had ahead of us, with the projects of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Nowadays it seems an obvious decision to make but, at that time, the money was barely sufficient, and I felt uncomfortable passing my responsibilities to someone else: will he/she be trustworthy? Or capable enough? I decided that I had to do it and, eventually, have someone manage the money of ALDA, rather than me en direct. I had come to terms with the fact that growth and development only come through true delegation. I approached a placement company and saw several candidates. That is how I met Barbara Elia for the first time. Barbara was back from maternity leave, and she was extremely motivated. She came on board like a highspeed train, and without a single stop over. She stepped down from that train only one year ago, in April 2021, after more than 15 years with us, as her life took a different direction. Barbara has been the backbone of ALDA, thinking strategically with me and tracing a path for growth. She was a responsible, immensely resilient, calm, thorough and

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<sup>104</sup> Switzerland is a country which I know well, since I was born and lived in La Chaux de Fonds (Neuchatel Canton) for 20 years.



Office of ALDA in Vicenza, Via della Racchetta, with the meeting of the Governing Board, 2004



Office ALDA in Brussels, Rue des Conférés - our first office in town, 2009

focused worker. Nothing, absolutely nothing, would have been possible without her.

The office in Strasbourg was becoming better organised too, as it had a permanent staff. We found a place on the floor of the Congress, despite some logistic difficulties (it was not easy for official institutions to have an “association” like us). In Vicenza, the employees had their first contracts under the French law but, after a short while, in order to be more compliant with the legislation, we opened a *de facto* association in Italy and moved their contracts to Vicenza. Everything was done step by step, taking into account what was best for ALDA and its staff. ALDA is an organisation that takes one step at a time. 😊

The end of the projects for the MFA Italy was traumatic. The reporting phase was very difficult, and we all remember that moment as a survival stress test. In the end, after several years, we finalised the reporting and were able to turn over a new leaf. Based on that, we had to think how to secure the future of ALDA without big projects. We had to start fundraising activities (as we had always done) on a bigger scale: therefore, we needed a fundraiser. We shared the office of Contrà della Racchetta with another cooperative, called la Linea dell’Arco. Marco Boaria was the CEO of the

cooperative. We got to know each other, and he helped us, first, by compiling the reports the MFA projects. Then he applied for the fundraiser position at ALDA. Our President, Per Vinther, and I interviewed him. Since then, our friendship and cooperation have never ceased, and Marco became an absolute pillar for the existence of ALDA. Marco is an outstanding professional and person, being able to juggle many issues at the same time, more than one can even imagine. His resilience and his capacity to focus are extraordinary. We have never had an unpleasant discussion in 20 years of cooperation. We are just not able to do it. We talk and collaborate together. We understand each other so well that we do not need to discuss much. Everything is cleared in one word, one glance, one thought. Our brains think alike. We see ALDA, and probably, our place in this society and world, in the same way. ALDA owes an awful lot to Marco.

The dream team then became composed of Martial, Dorothee, Stefania, Barbara, Marco and me. It remained so for a very long time, and maybe it is still like this in my heart when I think of ALDA.

We had staff meetings everywhere. I remember staff meetings in Vicenza but also in other places. We set out a path for ALDA as it still appears today (as it

existed in our minds 15 years ago). It was a real “vision”. Dorothee and Martial left ALDA for other brilliant careers and new people arrived. We were 5 or 6 people and now we are more than 80, with many more connected to us.

From Contrà della Racchetta, which soon became too small, we moved to Viale Mazzini, where we stayed for many years. Then we moved to our first office in Viale Milano, and then to our second office in Viale Milano (at number 36), which had a very big space. Again, it soon became too small.

Despite all our time in Vicenza, the relationship with the local community was not very strong, as we were always travelling. ALDA in Vicenza was a hub for reporting and planning but only recently did we start a more structured relationship with the local community. Now we are getting more attention, and our aim is to make Vicenza a European stakeholder, as is the case for all our local offices. Eventually, in December 2023, the Municipality of Vicenza became a member of ALDA. Never say never. Thanks to our work supporting local authorities, there are now many municipalities involved from Italy and the Veneto region.

The structure of the offices and our plans changed with the office in Brussels. It became clear that ALDA should have a

pied à terre in order to have contact with European institutions and programmes. The opening of our office in Rue des Confédérés was a milestone.

We had the possibility to hire brilliant colleagues and develop strategic partnerships. Brussels became our/my second home.

We changed offices in Brussels on many occasions. We invested a lot in our presence there because of its importance in developing cooperation with the European institutions and those who are working with/around them. The investment was important for us (in terms of costs of offices and staff) but fundamental to our growth. Now we are safely settled at Rue de la Loi 20, in the Merkator building, together with other organisations dealing with citizen engagement and participation. We are also part of a co-working space with the city of Etterbeek. We feel that we are in the right place. I love this office. It represents what we are and will be.

Being in Brussels has given us the possibility to establish strong partnerships, including one with the Committee of the Regions and the European and Economic Social Committee. With the CoR, we have the chance to cooperate with inputs and programmes of the CIVEX committee. We have worked, and will continue to do

Staff meeting in Vicenza, full team, February 2024



SCUOLA DI  
GIANGIORGIO



so, on participatory democracy with regional assemblies like CORLEAP and ARLEM.

As of today, we are planning to expand our office in Strasbourg together with the European Movement France, Alsace and other European organisations. We will remain at the Council of Europe but with an improved connection to the locality, in order to have more activities in the town and the region, in order to get closer to its citizens.

The description of our offices and how they developed, slowly but safely, shows the progression of our missions, thoughts, and actions. Some may ask where the resilience of ALDA comes from. It comes from our step-by-step approach, evidenced by the fact that we built what we are together and that we know when to upscale and downscale to fit any conditions. We know why we are here and what we have done over 30 years and how much effort it took. Many of us, in particular me, Marco, Barbara, Elisabetta Pinamonti (our extremely brilliant head of administration and finances) and Anna Ditta (our fantastic senior development officer) have spent (a great) part of their lives creating ALDA.

Becoming more structured also meant adapting and surviving the consequences of growth: administration, contracts, software, risk assessment, multiannual planning and reporting, cofinancing, ethic approach, career plans etc.

While the partnership with the Council of Europe has remained, it has become less important in terms of financial contribution; new relationships have become stronger and stronger: particularly, the one with the European Commission and with the newly formed programme, Europe for Citizens. This partnership paved the way for a long-term relationship with the EU institutions and for medium- and long-term planning. Our institutional relationship with **Europe for Citizens** aimed at building EU projects offered us the possibility to become what we are today, and it is continuing to develop with the CERV<sup>105</sup> programme.

ALDA is succeeding because we have good local governance within our own structure, and we are the only one to have local and regional authorities governing the association together with civil society groups.

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<sup>105</sup> The CERV (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values) programme aims to protect and promote Union rights and values as enshrined in the EU Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights by supporting and developing open, rights-

based, democratic, equal and inclusive societies based on the rule of law.  
To find out more: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/fundingtenders/opportunities/portal/screen/programmes/cerv>

## 6. Cities for Peace

“**Cities for Peace**” has been a crucial project for ALDA. It was funded by the European Commission in 2007. It paved the way for strengthening the network of ALDA, since it offered the possibility for many of our members to engage in a single project aimed at peace building initiatives, engaging local authorities and civil society in other geographical areas, which were not necessarily situated in the Balkans. It created the first ever opportunity for ALDA to further develop its mission with a specific methodology, which then became a brand: that is, local authorities working with civil society and associations. It was a great means for formulating proposals but was extremely difficult, since it only received 50% of its funds from the European Commission. Therefore “**Cities for Peace**” also became an example of what ALDA has been able to do in recent years, with its strong input from members and partners. Very few organisations can generate the level of partnership that ALDA does. Learning from the positive experience of “**Cities for Peace**”, which was very well funded, we also went on to develop other initiatives of this kind, like the future Youth programmes, which also required good cofunding and networking.

**Cities for Peace** was clearly a way of engaging local authorities in what ALDA

is aiming to achieve and anticipated the way that local authorities and communities are engaged with Sustainable Development Goals. We funded and co funded hundreds of events, created the mechanisms of regranting schemes and conventions. We promoted other organisations’ plans and activities. This project has been crucial for the methods that ALDA has since been promoting. It allowed ALDA to gain the attention of future donors and it placed ALDA at the centre of a network of towns and civil society actors.

The project, from my point of view, has really been a watershed in management terms. It made us stronger in terms of managing a large number of partners, which included the transferring of resources and compiling reports. We spoke a lot with our accountant, and we structured our administrative team around this experience. We learned a lot. We still work in this way.

While we were implementing Cities for Peace, the topics of local authority engagement in democracy and local governance in Europe and in the wider world, were becoming more urgent and more visible. We were also implementing new projects under the umbrella of Europe for Citizens, a framework programme for which we contributed to its development and dissemination.



Oriano Otocan, President of ALDA, in Istria for a public event, 2015

In particular, our General Assembly in Barcelona (Spain) in 2004 was a milestone for us and for the topics of what is now called, participative democracy. Barcelona was the centre of municipal engagement at an international level and had been engaged in ALDA since the first years of the Local Democracy Embassies. They led the development of the LDE/A in Sarajevo and considered it to be their “11th district”. They were fully engaged in supporting the role in municipalities for peace and in what we then called “city diplomacy<sup>106</sup>”. They also became the host organisation of UCLG and other key stakeholders like Metropolis. In a way, cities engaged in peace and democracy looked at Barcelona as a hub, a place to meet and exchanges practices, ideas and strategies. Therefore, we were pleased that the city acted as host to our General Assembly, in 2004. The event ended up being of particular importance because we presented the results of our first analysis about the participation of citizens in policy making at the local level as a key feature of the European identity. Although we were working within the scope of the programme Europe for

Citizens, we raised this point, which we supported with our findings.

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<sup>106</sup> City diplomacy, which is also known as municipal diplomacy or urban diplomacy, refers to the diplomatic activities conducted by cities or municipalities on the international stage. While traditional diplomacy primarily involves

interactions between nation-states, city diplomacy focuses on the engagement of cities with other cities, international organisations, and foreign governments.

## 7. Becoming larger and more relevant: staff, constituency and Governing Board

Our Association grew constantly throughout the years but here are some moments that proved to be key. For many years, at the beginning of this journey, the relationship with the European Commission was cumbersome. Indeed, at the very early stages of the existence of ALDA, the relationship was disturbed by the wrongdoings of some of the Delegates of the LDAs in Croatia and in FRYOM (around 1994-1995), at a time when ALDA did not yet exist. Nevertheless, we had their “name” in ours and we had to live with that, and we had to work hard to overcome their mistakes. We experienced the long period of time it takes to regain trust, even when our organisation, ALDA, was not involved. Thanks to our transparent approach and good management, we were able to open doors to new projects and for many years the average size of the projects for ALDA was around 100,000 to 250,000 Euro (the biggest ones). After a while, the size of the grants grew substantially. The challenge was either to get ready for this

new phase, with more complex projects and to evolve relevant structures and capacity, or to end up with a lower profile. Our new size, which had big implications, came with the approval of a key project, **Working Together for Development**. WTD was funded under the programme DEAR<sup>107</sup>.

WTD has been a key project for ALDA with a budget of several million euros and it emphasised our role as an organisation promoting local authorities working with civil society in Europe and beyond. The programme focused on education and awareness of citizens and local authorities (as multipliers) to global issues like environment, gender, poverty, migration, and sustainability. We developed training and awareness raising programmes in which our participants formed the core of sustainable processes. WTD and DEAR shared our goals of good local governance to sustainable development. It gave us the opportunity

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*“Our new size, which had big implications, came with the approval of a key project: Working Together for Development”*

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<sup>107</sup> The DEAR (Development Education and Awareness Raising) programme aims to support civil society organisations and local authorities to promote global justice, human rights,

sustainable development and democratic participation by encouraging people, especially young citizens, to take action. To find out more: <https://dearprogramme.eu/>

ALDA General Assembly in Montenegro, Podgorica, 2015



to work at the nexus between good local governance and a better and sustainable world.

The project proposal for WTD was unsuccessful on several occasions (years) but eventually went through! We celebrated this fantastic opportunity with a long party as it was in line with other important projects on different issues fundamental to our organisation and members. On that day, we knew that a new era had started, one with more strength and new possibilities for achieving our vision and our mission.

Getting bigger did not happen over the night and our success in having more resources and more projects for helping us to achieve our common goals was the result of a long and resilient effort.

Some moments were also more crucial and visible to the external world.

The team proposed to the Governing Board that the work of ALDA be split into two parts: ALDA Europe and ALDA cooperation. That was completed with the work of ALDA+. ALDA Europe included all our members from the EU and ALDA cooperation included the rest. It is not necessarily a strict division

because much of our work, by definition, includes both EU and non-EU members and partners. Nevertheless, it facilitated our interaction with some key stakeholders and the European Commission, which is also organised in this way. The EU projects correspond to some policies and to some programmes/envelopes, while the extra EU are divided into NEAR (now), which deal with South and East Neighbourhoods and also the Western Balkans and accession countries, including Türkiye. Non-EU and non-Neighborhood is the rest of the world, followed in several ways and today by DG Intpa<sup>108</sup>. By subdividing the entry point, our staff became specialised in specific areas at all levels, allowing them to improve their results, both in getting grants and managing them correctly. The intensity of our work can be seen everywhere: speed, focus, quantity and quality. We decided (and we never turned back) to divide the organisation so that the Development team was separated from the management team. This is a model which is not entirely satisfactory because, once the project is funded, it goes into someone else's hands. But this is the only way to secure the results we need.

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<sup>108</sup> The Department for International Partnerships (DG INTPA) is responsible for formulating the EU's international partnership and development policy, with the ultimate goal to reduce poverty, ensure sustainable development, and promote

democracy, human rights, and the rule of law across the world.

The mission of the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) is responsible for the EU's Neighbourhood and Enlargement policies.



Inaugurazione e attività dell'ufficio di ALDA, Viale Milano 66, a Vicenza, 2013



The sustainability of ALDA relies, firstly, on the quantity of projects, partners and members in order to overcome short-term falls in the number of projects or the ending of large ones.

Of course, to make ALDA sustainable on this scale over the long-term, project applications are not enough. The organisation has to grow in several ways, including relevance. Therefore, we ensured our membership grew through the application of an assertive methodology, which offered services, connection to projects, working groups and regular activities.

The growth of our membership was a key element in securing some big projects that needed (and need) representation and outreach.

The consolidation of the growth happened also thanks to the solid contribution of our Governing Board and Presidents. The big leap happened with Oriano Otocan, who came after Per Vinther, accompanying the steady development of the organisation, believing in the reputation and capacity to growth and being empowered. We also opened and stabilised the office in Skopje by adding a strong contribution to the strategy in the Balkans. That was

possible thanks to a long-standing support from the Region Basse Normandie. This project has been an amazing journey that lasted about 10 years, engaging local authorities from North Macedonia and Basse Normandie. We worked on rural development, cultural support and youth policies engagement but also institutional reforms. It was a true project of decentralised cooperation that left a strong legacy in ALDA. My special thanks go to the team in Caen and in particular to Sabine Guichet Lebailly, who has also been Board Member of ALDA<sup>109</sup>, and to Ivana Dimitrovska, who has been our Skopje office coordinator for more than 10 years.

Growth has always been the plan. Even when we were only 4 people, I had in mind the very same picture that we are experiencing today.

The plan was to grow so as to give us more possibilities to have an impact and to deliver on our mission. I guess that this is still the case because we are constantly re-evaluating the possibilities that exist around us along with the needs of our partners and members. ALDA is sustainable because it is relevant, and we know how to manage actions and people.

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<sup>109</sup> The project is part of the Project for Decentralised Cooperation between Lower Normandy and North Macedonia, in the

component 3 – Inventory of Cultural Heritage and is coordinated by ALDA.

Growth also gave rise to some difficult moments, in which we were forced to downscale and make our organisation thinner, but ready to restart.

The constant dialogue with the staff, together with the Governing Board, is essential so that we all on the same page. The thing of which I am proudest is that ALDA is democratically healthy: we work hand in hand with a fully functional and relevant Governing Board, elected every four years, with a Bureau and thematic hubs.

The decision-making process is shared (more so now than ever) and there is a constant double checking of responsibilities and tasks. This limits the possibility of mistakes and misunderstandings, which are possible with the kind of structure that we have. We are healthy and credible. It makes life easier and more secure.

The development of the Local Democracy Agencies both in terms of empowerment and numbers has been a fundamental step for ALDA. The Agencies were created before ALDA and the statute of the new ALDA brought them together under a new governance. With time, the link between them became even tighter since the Governing Board proposed that the LDAs became our statutory members (the delegates of the Agencies). They had a voting

representative in our Governing board (appointed on a rolling basis according to the number of years the Delegate was appointed). Each LDA needs to present a label request with details for receiving recognition and being part of the network. That gave to ALDA the responsibility to assess the work and the existence of the LDAs and to secure a degree of quality and representation in their work. Later the Label requests were also completed (in another crucial step towards good governance) by the fact that that each Delegate, expressed and approved of by the partners of the LDAs, needed to be “validated” by the Governing Board of ALDA. Indeed, it recognised the fact that a weak or an unprepared Delegate can seriously jeopardise the work of the Agency and ALDA. In this way, a proper balanced governance has been put into place with the possibility for ALDA to interact constructively with the Agencies, allowing it to support them with funding and assistance in case of need, and to

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*“Growth also gave rise to some difficult moments, in which we were forced to downscale and make our organisation thinner, but ready to restart”*

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General Assembly of ALDA in Torun support by the Region Kujawsko Pomorskie, 2017





develop a common strategy for a global cause.

The initial structure proposed by the Congress was completed with a careful institutional development plan proposed by the Governing Board itself.



General Assembly in Caen, France, 2019



Governing Board of ALDA in Mallorca, Fons Maillorqui is member of ALDA and was governing board member, 2020



Governing Board of ALDA in Villa Fabris in Thiene, Italy. ALDA is now co-managing the Villa in the project "Villa Fabris Bene Comune", 2019

## 8. Our partnership with the European institutions: the office in Brussels

The setting up of our office at Rue des Confédérés in Brussels marked the beginning of a long partnership of cooperation with various European Union programmes, as well as with the whole community in Brussels that actively supports local democracy and good local governance. Being an atypical organisation, it was remarkable for us to have the opportunity of being on the spot and having direct contact with different stakeholders, which allowed us to be more active and visible. The office was rather small, but I loved it.

We had a bathroom with a shower (on the mezzanine floor) and so, in order to save some money, I would sleep in the office when I was in Brussels (I even put up a small camping bed in the middle of the room). I did not need anything else because it was somehow cosy, and close to the other main places we had to visit. The office in Brussels, together with

its activities, had to be managed by a person. The people that made it grow were mainly Peter Sondergaard, who is now the Director of Programmes of the European Endowment for Democracy<sup>110</sup>, and Alfonso Aliberti, who first moved to the European Youth Forum and now works at the European Commission. The office and its role had to be invented from scratch, and we needed to consolidate our presence as a stakeholder in the Brussels community. This is something that I always liked about ALDA: it had the capacity for networking and creating something during every meeting and with every person. In addition to our presence in town, we were more and more engaged in wider networks that were close to our objectives, like the European Movement International<sup>111</sup>, of which we are still members.

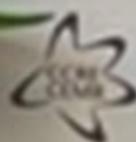
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<sup>110</sup> European Endowment for Democracy (EED) is an independent organisation founded in 2013 by the EU as an autonomous International Trust Fund to foster democracy and human rights promotion in the European Neighbourhood (Eastern Partnership – EaP – and Middle East and North Africa – MENA), the Western Balkans, Türkiye and beyond. To find out more: <https://www.democracyendowment.eu/about.html>

<sup>111</sup> The European Movement International (EMI) is a network of European civil society, employers, trade unions, NGOs, political parties, local government and academia, which provides a platform to encourage and facilitate the active participation of citizens and stakeholders from a cross-section of sectors in the development of European solutions to our common problems. To find out more: <https://europeanmovement.eu/>

# THE GLOBAL NETWORK

of cities, metropolitan, regional and local governments,  
and their associations



Meeting with the secretary general of UCLG, Emilia Saiz, in Barcelona, 2024

We also became associate members of CONCORD<sup>112</sup>, but in different ways and for different purposes. In particular, we were engaged in the EPAN (Eastern Partnership and Neighbourhood) group, which supported the advocacy of the civil society groups in the Neighbourhood of the EU. It all went hand in hand with our strong engagement in the Civil Society Forum for Eastern Partnership from EuroBelarus.

Our experience and presence in the East and South Neighbourhood were also important in establishing a constant relationship with the Committee of the Regions. We supported the development and the content of the work of the CORLEAP and developed some important milestones together, like the work for citizens engagement and local governance (the project on fiscal decentralisation being an example). We are still actively engaged in this network, and we recently took the floor in the EU/Ukraine working group, which helped move us towards a stronger relationship with them. **ALDA has now built a more structured relationship with the**

**Committee of the Regions and with the CIVEX Commission, with the signature of a very important Memorandum of Understanding and the definition of a joint action plan.**

Thanks to our experience and networks, we took part in the establishment of ARLEM. We supported the opening of the programme of the **Initiative of Nicosia**<sup>113</sup> in Libya; a challenging initiative that we tried to follow up with partners from Europe. I got to know Libya better because of a research project that I accepted to undertake on behalf of the European Union Delegation for Libya, which was based in Tunis. The programme was about a study of the different stakeholders (an Integrated Territorial Development Diagnosis) in order to propose a plan for a Territorial approach to local Development. In 2020, I worked on it with my colleague from the Algerian capacity building training programme, Mohamed Sakri. It was among one of the most difficult things that I had ever done (because it was very far from the context I was familiar with), and I dived into the Libyan context by interviewing many stakeholders, both

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<sup>112</sup> CONCORD is the European Confederation of NGOs working on sustainable development and international cooperation, which aims to influence and challenge EU decision-makers, promoting a vibrant civil society and creating synergies and alliances around the world, so as to transform systems and power structures, building equitable and inclusive societies in a sustainable world.

To find out more: <https://concordeurope.org/>

<sup>113</sup> The Nicosia Initiative is a bottom-up process that responds to the needs of one of the EU's closest and most fragile neighbours. The CoR's involvement reflects the belief that city diplomacy and peer-to-peer diplomacy can make a key contribution to addressing long-term international challenges in a sustainable way. See more here: <https://bit.ly/3AAQe2n>



Activities with the staff in the office in Strasbourg, Council of Europe, 2023

local authority and civil society representatives. I also met a lot of representatives and found a few institutional programmes that were active in Libya, mostly coming from Tunisia or other places. I mapped the possibilities of activities for development with local stakeholders and did an accurate analysis of the pragmatic approaches to it. The final document was adopted as a basis for the TALD approach for the development of Libya, but not only. Once again, a local and pragmatic approach showed that it is possible to face difficult governance while answering to local needs. The programme aimed to work with local authorities, empower local leaders, and also tribes and other structures, so that they were included in a participatory manner. The implementation was then put forward by other organisations.

This case is often mentioned as a critical one, since Libya lacks national institutions (the country is still divided into two or three areas) and the only elected governance is at the local level<sup>114</sup>.

Later, I remained engaged with the Libyan local authority and civil society

representatives in a project of decentralised cooperation with ALDA, together with the Province of Trento and Friuli Venezia Giulia Region. I had the chance to meet and work with several representatives, many of them were interesting and proactive, despite the extreme conditions they were living through. It is important to underline that I never went to Libya (as many others working for this country do) due to the unsafe situation in travelling and staying there<sup>115</sup>.

As for the local economic development and territorial approach, I am convinced that these are crucial elements for sustainability and inclusivity. Development must be multilevel and multisectoral. Citizens, enterprises but also educational sectors and local authorities must be involved. They can define strategies, increase commitment and resources and they are less likely to waste resources if they work together. In ALDA, we see a great potential for our role and for the Local Democracy Agencies. Although we see development as a goal, it also forms the basis for democracy. These two aspects are two sides of the same coin. We should take it into consideration. As a matter of fact,

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<sup>114</sup> Despite the outbreak of civil war after the fall of the Gaddafi regime and the high instability in the country, in some municipalities it is still possible to elect representatives and ensure local government due to foreign programmes and aid, supporting citizens' interest and

participation (i.e. the LEP project <https://www.undp.org/libya/projects/local-elections-project>)

<sup>115</sup> Find out more here: [https://www.alda-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ESLD\\_Jan2020-1.pdf](https://www.alda-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ESLD_Jan2020-1.pdf)

we have been working on it with the ART Gold programme of UNDP for many years<sup>116</sup>, and now it is being translated into the TALD approach, which has been adopted by the European commission as a means of connecting democracy and development. A crucial turning point in cooperating with networks at the EU level was the engagement of ALDA in the network of the European Partnership for Democracy. I have had the privilege of being the Chair of the Board for the past 6 years. The engagement of ALDA has been important since it put our organisation in touch with very important global stakeholders. Together, we built a community of practitioners, who are all led by values and experiences relating to democracy. The group keeps growing and it has also created a Democracy Hub of knowledge and the sharing of expertise with Carnegie Europe. We are active in shaping the EU's Human Rights and Democracy Action plan for the next few years and for raising the EU's Democracy profile for external action. Thanks to our intense work on the different aspects of democratic

engagement, we are also calling for a consistent commitment within the EU to work with all of those outside the EU. In its network, ALDA represents local democracy perspectives, and it is engaged in capacity building, research and advocacy. We are currently leading the citizens engagement pillar of the project WYDE, which is mainly carried out in Africa with the support of local and youth NGOs.

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*“A turning point in cooperating with networks at the EU level was the engagement of ALDA in the network of the European Partnership for Democracy”*

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I have been working with Democracy Works Foundation from South Africa and many other organisations from that network. Since 2023, I have been actively involved in the establishment of Team Europe Democracy<sup>117</sup>, in particular,

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<sup>116</sup> ART is an international cooperation initiative that combines programmes and activities of several UN Organisations: UNDP, UNESCO, UNIFEM, WHO, UNOPS and others. ART promotes and supports National Cooperation Framework Programmes for Governance and Local Development, referred to as ART GOLD. Giovanni Camilleri was the ART initiative coordinator at UNDP.

<sup>117</sup> The Team Europe Democracy (TED) is an initiative launched by the EU Commission and

Member States in 2021 to promote and protect democracy and human rights worldwide with actions based on academic evidence, shared experiences on democracy support models, and building alliances to inform international and national policies, programmes and actions. To find out more: [https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/projects/team-europe-democracy-ted\\_en](https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/projects/team-europe-democracy-ted_en)

focusing on its “citizens and participation” component.

Today ALDA is focusing on taking its activities to a more global level. The engagement of ALDA started in 2013 when it was part of the European Commission consultation process, which adopted the crucial Recommendation on the role of local authorities for Development<sup>118</sup> in 2013. We actively contributed to the recommendations of various stakeholders, together with other networks (like UCLG and Platforma/CEMR). Since then, members of ALDA have been active with a network of local authorities to promote their role as crucial actors for peace and development. The international networking of ALDA is broad and diverse. We contributed to the recommendations and development of the Sustainable Development Goals, and we are part of the European coalition monitoring their implementation (SDG Watch). We are also members of CIVICUS, the global alliance for civil society.

My involvement in CIVICUS, the global alliance for civil society, has contributed to the development of new initiatives but it also increased my interest in global

issues. I became a member of the CIVICUS board (2012-2013) a bit by chance. The network was established in the US, then moved to South Africa with its headquarters in Johannesburg. It is an important organisation, as it supports civil society movements and activities around the world. I became a Board Member during their General Assembly in Montreal in 2012. I managed to interact with global CSO stakeholders, and I also got to know the issues of Africa and South America in more depth. CIVICUS have become a global partner of the European Commission, and they regularly publish their Civil Society Report, which was also presented in New York at the UN Headquarters<sup>119</sup>. I worked there throughout the first period of **Danny (Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah)** term as Secretary General.

At a more EU internal level, we are working in a more stable way with some networks to empower our members and our mission. Thanks to our cross membership, we consolidate our networks and implement joint action plans. Together with many other NGOs, we took part in the creation of Civil Society Europe<sup>120</sup>, after our cooperation

<sup>118</sup> See the recommendation:

<https://shorturl.at/lCEF8>

<sup>119</sup> <https://www.civicus.org>

<sup>120</sup> Civil Society Europe is the coordination of civil society organisations at EU level created as a

follow-up to the European Year of Citizens and established as an international not-for-profit actor. The aim of CSE is to ensure the participation of civil society in the Conference on the future of Europe, build a common agenda

and contribution to the European Year of Citizens in 2013.

ALDA established the role of local communities as actors of peace and development and has also managed to **insert participative democracy into the core of the European project.**



Signature of the Memorandum of Understanding between ALDA and the CoR, with Oriano Otocan, former President of ALDA, and Patrick Molinoz, President of the Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs (CIVEX) of the European Committee of the Regions, 13 May 2024

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and raise EU Institutions awareness. To find out more: <https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/>

## 9. Europe for Citizens, Europe with Citizens

Europe for Citizens was established by the European Commission in 2014 and it has now been transformed and enhanced into the CERV programme<sup>121</sup>.

Since the very beginning, ALDA has been a partner of the programme and contributed to it with several actions and suggestions. We have been there throughout each phase of the programme: remembrance, civil society support, twinning cities and networking between twinned towns. Twinning has been one of the most successful initiatives that reunited Europe after WW2 (like the Erasmus project did in the field of youth, students and education). Europe for Citizens contributed to the support of this long-lasting instrument of unification and “people to people” activities.

One can easily say that we helped build the European identity – together with other beneficiaries and partners of the Europe for Citizens programme - and we contributed to the dissemination of the European project to every corner of Europe. We worked with millions of

Europeans, as well as with local authorities and civil society groups.

ALDA has been an essential part of the programme since its beginning and has contributed actively to all its different components:

**Twinning<sup>122</sup> and networking of towns:** these programmes are in line with our mission, since we are mainly an association of local authorities. We fostered partnerships and activities for our members and partners. All the projects have been incredible journeys in building the Europe of cities and regions, which are so important for peace, democracy and development.

**Civil Society projects:** with our members and partners, we developed a number of projects to engage civil society in European and cross border projects. A strong and responsive civil society is key for healthy democracy. ALDA engaged thousands and thousands of Europeans; we had the opportunity of listening to them and bringing their ideas and suggestions into a series of recommendations. Through civil society projects funded by *Europe for Citizens*, we made sure that our future common destiny is discussed,

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<sup>121</sup> See note n. 108

<sup>122</sup> Town twinning, or sister city relationships, is when two municipalities in different countries agree to establish a cooperative relationship. They engage in cultural exchanges, educational

programs, and mutual support initiatives to promote understanding and friendship between their communities. Town Twinning: A vehicle for European integration - <https://www.alda-europe.eu/town-twinning/>

Activities at the European Committee of the Regions, in Brussels, with our colleagues in ALDA, Adrien Licha, Marco Boaria, Bartek Ostrowski who used to be our Ukraine coordinator and Dafne Sgarra, 2023, ALDA signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the CoR in 2024



known, debated all over Europe. We fine-tuned our methodologies for being more inclusive. We learned how to use the best and most efficient words and examples to give value to everyone's differences.

We prepared the ground so that Europe can be perceived as a collective ideal in every single project and in all our groups: an incredible mission made of people and organisations, whom we are still keeping with us as members or partners of our projects. Thanks to this group, we also promoted the European Year of Citizens in 2013<sup>123</sup> and contributed to the creation Civil Society Europe, among other networks that are influential both inside and outside of Brussels.

**Projects on remembrance:** before becoming CERV, and also thanks to our recommendations, the programme focused on Remembrance, to make sure that there is awareness about the roots of our European identity and our joint initiatives. First, we worked on the victims of the Shoah and Stalinism and then, owing to our presence in the

Balkans, we also focused on the aftermath of the wars in South-eastern Europe during the '90s. We developed projects with civil society groups, schools, memorials, and organisations. ALDA and its members are part of the community of Europeans. We cherish the essential roots of the Union's project under one single slogan: "never again".

**Operating grants:** Since ALDA has been an operating partner of the Europe for Citizens programme, we have supported the development of structural actions that are in accord with the values and mission of the programme. Now we are also partners of the CERV programme. We are evaluated every year according to the quality and the quantity of our outreach and how our members and partners contribute to the mission of the programme. We have been part of the Structure dialogue and the Civic dialogue. Now the CERV programme is giving us the possibility to fund civil society groups through specific resources and our re-granting scheme<sup>124</sup>.

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<sup>123</sup> Among the achievements of the 2013 European Year of Citizens, the Commission presented twelve new initiatives in six key areas to help citizens' dialogue and action, including the revision of the Social Security Coordination Regulation, the facilitation of mobility and the comprehension of free movement rights, the implementation of the European public space and the promotion of best tax practices in cross-border situations. To find out more: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/b36abf10-09bd-4155-af71-c7f71cbdc4c2>

<sup>124</sup> For several years now, ALDA has been one of the beneficiaries of the operating grant of the "Europe for Citizens" programme of the EACEA – Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency of the European Union. The CERV aims to protect and promote rights and values as laid down in the EU Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights in particular by supporting civil society organisations active at local,

We also contributed to the formulation and recommendation for the implementation of Art. 11 of the Lisbon Treaty, which provides the legal basis for an empowered civil society within EU policies.

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#### *Art 11 – Lisbon Treaty*

***The institutions shall, by appropriate means, give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action.***

*2. The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society.*

*3. The European Commission shall carry out broad consultations with parties concerned in order to ensure that the Union's actions are coherent and transparent.*

regional, national and transnational level.  
<https://www.alda-europe.eu/hr/donor/european-commission-cerv-programme/>

<sup>125</sup> Citizens initiative is a way for European citizens to take an active part in EU policy-making and ask the European Commission to propose legislation or other measures in areas within its remit.

To find out more: <https://bit.ly/4cAQyov>

<sup>126</sup> Some examples of European Citizens Initiative includes:

*4. Not less than one million citizens who are nationals of a significant number of Member States may take the initiative of inviting the European Commission, within the framework of its powers, to submit any appropriate proposal on matters where citizens consider that a legal act of the Union is required for the purpose of implementing the Treaties. (this will become the Citizens' initiative)<sup>125</sup>*

*The procedures and conditions required for such a citizens' initiative shall be determined in accordance with the first paragraph of Article 24 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.*

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More specifically, we contributed to the formulation and recommendations of the conditions set for the European Citizens Initiative, in point 4 of art 11<sup>126</sup>.

The structured dialogue also allowed us to enhance the programme for the Balkans, which finally had access to the funding. ALDA was an active part of it

Right2Water, the first ECI that collected more than 1 million signatures and led to the revision of the European Drinking Water Directive; Banning glyphosate and protecting people, an initiative that reformed the pesticide approval procedure and set mandatory EU-wide reduction targets for pesticide use; End the Cage Age, an ECI proposing legislation to phase out, and eventually ban, the use of cage systems for certain categories of animals.

and implemented several projects there. For us, approaching membership of the EU mainly consists of ensuring potential new members reach a set of standards in human rights, freedom, right and duties. We contributed to this aim. A crucial (and difficult) point was the discussion about the programme and its budget for its legal basis. The budget was decided by the Council and the member states had to discuss the existence of the project and its format. Of course, some countries questioned it. The United Kingdom was particularly critical, and it almost blocked the process. ALDA was actively lobbying for the added value and excellent results of the project with an intensive campaign. It paid off and we continued to work together.

In 2013, we were among the organisations that created the Alliance for the European Year of Citizens. I have been part of the Steering Committee of the Alliance for the Year dealing with the formulation of recommendations that provided for the empowerment of the Lisbon Treaty and the implementation of Art 11. Together with the organisations that were involved in the EYC, we promoted and created Civil Society Europe, which is now a strong and well-established organisation embracing dozens of networks of Civil Society groups, acting for the promotion of civic dialogue with the EU institutions in the policy-making processes and for

protecting the civil space at EU level and beyond. Together with them, I worked for the implementation for the Conference of the Future of Europe (with a reserved seat for us at the Plenary Sessions). We have published our own recommendations alongside the official 49 recommendations of the Conference and developed a follow up that we presented during the Civil Society State of the Union 2023. In the framework of CSE for the Conference, I coordinated the working group and chapter on Democracy and EU in the World, together with other NGO leaders. The focus of our work was mainly on the importance of Europe delivering its expectations to all EU citizens and fighting against social and economic discrimination.

As for the Conference, ALDA and I have been particularly involved. Together with the European Federalist movements of France and Italy, we contributed to the dissemination of information about the multilanguage platform, which we also presented to the working groups and commissions. The whole initiative was heavily affected by the COVID pandemic, and some of the consultations had to take place in complex online meetings. Now, the follow up to the Conference has been relatively mitigated and it is likely to be represented by regular Citizens' panels on various issues. The more structural

demands of citizens (transnational lists for the European Parliament elections and changes to the treaty for a more integrated Europe, and changes at the Council level) have not been taken into consideration yet. We were expecting a much more ambitious programme considering the future challenges. Unfortunately, the Conference on the Future of Europe took place at the same time as the Russian aggression towards Ukraine. That would have been a brilliant opportunity of gathering our efforts to respond collectively to this challenge and to many others, by changing the structure of the decision-making process. The outcome turned out to be a little step forward instead of a quantum leap, which was something we were all hoping for.

The work linking Europe and its construction to its citizens has been at the centre of my and ALDA's actions at the Council of Europe and in particular at the Conference of the INGOs, where I led the Democracy commission for several years. Together, we developed the very

important Code of Good Practices for civic participation<sup>127</sup>. The Code remains one of the methodologic bases of ALDA, which I present during conferences and training. It has been revised to provide better implementation at the local government level. The Code was approved at the Forum for the Future of Democracy in Kyiv in 2009. Another milestone that helped me develop a better understanding of participatory democracy was ELOGE's<sup>128</sup> benchmarks, based on the 12 principles of the Valencia Declaration<sup>129</sup> (2007) relating to good local governance. ALDA has been accredited for delivering the standards and assisting local governments to improve their rating by implementing the 12 principles.

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*“The “Code of Good Practices for civic participation” remains one of the methodologic bases of ALDA”*

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<sup>127</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/ingo/civil-participation#:~:text=The%20principal%20objection%20of%20the,Council%20of%20Europe%20member%20States>

<sup>128</sup> The European Label of Governance Excellence (ELOGE) is a programme of the Council of Europe aims to reward local governments characterised by a high level of democratic governance through the 12 European Principles of Good Governance, identified as benchmarks to define and assess the level of local democratisation. To find out

more: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/good-governance/eloge>

<sup>129</sup> The 12 principles include: fair conduction of Elections, Representation and Participation; Responsiveness; Efficiency and Effectiveness; Openness and Transparency; Rule of Law; Ethical Conduct; Competence and Capacity; Innovation and Openness to Change; Sustainability and Long-term Orientation; Sound Financial Management; Human rights, Cultural Diversity and Social Cohesion; Accountability. See more here: <https://rm.coe.int/1680701699>

## 10. No Europe Without the Balkans

ALDA was born in the Balkans, and there is still a lot to do in this area. Since the programme of the Council of Europe started here in 1993, we have never stopped being active by cooperating with our members and partners in the region. We assisted in the post war period and the embargo on Serbia. Then, we participated in all the actions for reconstruction and interethnic dialogue. Since the Thessaloniki summit of the EU in 2003, a new process of integration of the countries into the EU has begun. Because of these past events, ALDA and its partners pay special attention to the recent development in the Balkans, and we are, of course, concerned and often disappointed. We constantly question others, but also ourselves, and we wonder how, after so much effort, we still have the feeling that there is so much to do. Certainly, we are aware of the fact that many important choices have not been made, and this has affected political developments further. We believe that local efforts should have been accompanied by a consistent vision and programmes of the European Union, which was not possible due to internal disagreement and difficulties. We had to take fast decisions, but the more we waited for a clear signal for

accession to the EU, the more people became disillusioned and nationalist movements came back stronger.

Many milestones could be mentioned, however, the development of the LDAs in the region and our programmes are evidence of our projects and achievements.

Surely, there are many things that should have been different. We all see the story from our own perspective, and some images for me are still very vivid. I remember how, at the end of the war (that somehow ended the recent wars in the Balkans), Kosovo embarked in an interesting institutional experiment where local authorities from Europe tried to foster local democracy in the country. Our visits there were promising, and we opened the LDA in Gjilane with high expectations. Then the country remained frozen with an undefined destiny, which is still very much the case now. I also remember that we promoted projects everywhere for engaging local governments and we presented our achievements. Drafting maps in the Balkans has always been a hard job. We learned how to deal with borders in our reports, and we also had to use strange acronyms (like FRYOM<sup>130</sup>) for a long time.

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<sup>130</sup> See note n.17, story of the name FRYOM



Certainly, the great boost that we were all expecting happened when Serbia finally came out of the darkness, under the leadership of President Djindjic<sup>131</sup>. He represented a great opportunity and the whole international community bet on Serbian's future, with Slobodan Milosevic eventually sent to the Hague for an international trial<sup>132</sup>. My travel to Nis (where we were opening the Local Democracy Agency of Central and Southern Serbia) was full of hope, for me and for us all. The day of the assassination of the President, I arrived at the Belgrade airport and the city was blocked, fearing awful escalations, which eventually happened. This fact, in a way, held back the future of Serbia and the situation was put on hold, making the

political dynamics, which would have made it possible to get out of war scenario, inactive. I also remember the thrilling experience of Croatia joining the EU, even though we all had the clear perception that it was their last chance: either now or never. And indeed, the process stopped after Croatia joined the EU in 2013.

ALDA accompanied the process of regional integration in the area, since we firmly believed that it was a possibility. We contributed to the Stability Pact<sup>133</sup>, the RCC<sup>134</sup>, and regional programmes like RYCO, which is promoting integration of policies for youth in the region<sup>135</sup>. We consider regional integration to be paramount for

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<sup>131</sup> Zoran Djindjic, former mayor of Belgrade and leader of the opposition to the Milosevic regime, was the first democratically elected Serbian prime minister since World War II in 2001. As prime minister, he supported pro-democratic reforms and the integration of Serbia into European structures. On March 12, 2003, he was assassinated by a sniper just outside the Serbian government headquarters in Belgrade.

<sup>132</sup> The former President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia Slobodan Milosevic was charged by criminal tribunals of crimes against humanity, genocide and war crimes. The trial began at The Hague on 12 February 2002 and ended with no verdict on the charges because of Milosevic's death on 11 March 2006.

<sup>133</sup> The Stability and Growth Pact is an agreement among all the EU States Members to facilitate and maintain the stability of the Economic and Monetary Union. The purpose is to strengthen the monitoring and coordination of national fiscal and economic policies to enforce the deficit and debt limits established by the Maastricht Treaty. The Pact was outlined by a resolution and two council regulations in July 1997 and has been the target of widespread criticism and reform.

See more here: [https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/economic-and-fiscal-governance/stability-and-growth-pact\\_en](https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/economic-and-fiscal-governance/stability-and-growth-pact_en)

<sup>134</sup> The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) is a regional cooperation framework which engages RCC participants from the South-East Europe (SEE), members of the international community and donors, with the aim to promote and advance the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the region. The RCC is also committed to assisting the process of EU integration and the prosperity of the region, through a unique innovation hub, women empowerment, clean environment and competitive youth base.

To find out more: <https://www.rcc.int/home>

<sup>135</sup> The Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) is an independent institutional mechanism founded by some countries of the Western Balkans to promote the reconciliation, cooperation and dialogue between the youth in the region, supporting and funding exchange projects.

To find out more: <https://www.rycowb.org/>

developing standards and possibilities of joining the EU family.

We cannot give up. ALDA is very active in a region which is so important for Europe; it is so close to all of us. We have invested in and renewed our energy, so that we now have an empowered strategy. We want to create a network of motivated people, who can spend their full energy and determination on looking beyond today's struggles and invest in local communities. We are close to our partners, colleagues and networks. We are claiming loud and clear that for all of us it would be better, much better, to have the Western Balkans in the EU. Some of the risks still existing in these countries would be mitigated by EU policies, in a federal way and with mechanisms for consultation and debate. We must find a new way to overcome nationalist movements, otherwise time will bring us back to a period of 30 years ago, which would be a dangerous outcome for all of us. Enlargement has never been a technical issue for the EU, but rather an instrument for the consolidation of democracy and peace and a vision for the future<sup>136</sup>. Since the establishment of the Junker Commission, however, the enlargement process has been far too

technical and without the pathos that is needed for courageous decisions. It shows us that we need to find a consensus and adapt our instruments.

We need to talk to young professionals, fresh intellectuals, and entrepreneurs with bright, out-of-the-box solutions. Now we have a great chance to build a crucial programme for supporting youth engagement and fighting against the brain drain affecting the Balkans through the Local Democracy Agencies and the Centre for Democracy in Belgrade and its brilliant Director, Natasa Vuckovic, who is now a Board member and the Vice President of ALDA.

The war in Ukraine has revitalised the process of enlargement, also in the Balkans. ALDA is now working promisingly on civil society and local democracy, linking them to the representation of the whole region, with the support of Agence Française de Développement and our members and LDAs.

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<sup>136</sup> Spain and Portugal joined the European Economic Community (EEC), the precursor to the European Union (EU), in 1986. Greece became a member in 1981. These enlargements

expanded the EU's reach into Southern Europe, promoting political stability and economic growth in the region.

## 11. Working Together for Development and global outreach

**Working Together for Development**<sup>137</sup> is the name of a crucial project of ALDA's, but also a watershed<sup>138</sup> in our activities. It is, therefore, worthy of a dedicated chapter in our book. With this project, we started a new programme of activities where we deepened our capacities to work as an engine of cooperation between local authorities and civil society. The topics were varied, since we were addressing approaches towards global responsibility, education, and awareness. Our role was to share the crucial, important idea of thinking globally while acting locally. WTD gave all partners responsibility for their communities. The focus on awareness and education was also

essential in raising fundamental topics about the planet: environment and climate change, migration and demography, fair development, sustainability and more.

We met new partners within a more global context, and we brought ALDA into the dimension of the SDGs<sup>139</sup>, by strengthening our role in Concord and in SDG watch. It was one of our first big projects with DEVCO, now DG Intpa<sup>140</sup>. WTD was a milestone for its topics and size. We had the possibility to engage with our partners from Europe, the MED, the Balkans and Eastern Europe. They all worked together! We shaped ALDA's dimension into WTD and then it was followed by LADDER, another DEAR project.

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<sup>137</sup> <https://www.lda-europe.eu/wtd/>

<sup>138</sup> The WTD (Working Together for Development) project led by ALDA, aimed to promote cooperation between local authorities (LAs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) in development initiatives. It sought to implement local-level actions and influence policy-making while breaking traditional divisions between LAs and CSOs. The project emphasised action for change and aimed to maximise the impact of joint cooperation efforts.

The LADDER (Local Authorities as Drivers for Development Education and Raising Awareness) was a project implemented to 2017. The project aimed to enhance the role of local authorities (LAs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) in promoting development education and awareness. Specific objectives included strengthening the capacity of LAs and CSOs, engaging citizens in global issues, fostering

cooperation between LAs and CSOs, and improving development education methods. Activities included capacity-building seminars, trainings, exchange meetings, conferences, events, and a re-granting scheme across EU member states. LADDER built upon the achievements of its predecessor project, "Working Together for Development" (WTD), focusing on information, training, and networking for LAs and CSOs in development cooperation.

<sup>139</sup> SDG localisation is the process of transforming the SDGs into reality at the local level, in coherence with the national frameworks and in line with communities' priorities. Localisation means collaboration among all stakeholders and coordination across sectors and spheres of governance.

<sup>140</sup> See note n. 111



Activity of the programme LADDER in the office of ALDA In Brussels, 2012

LADDER was the follow up of WTD and it further consolidated our approach and our structure. Both were fantastic journeys that remain part of our legacy.

ALDA had supported many initiatives to promote the concept of global responsibility way before the pandemic! Because of their focus and size, WTD and LADDER galvanised ALDA, its members and partners into action, and brought us to a higher level of responsibility and visibility.

As far as I am concerned, two milestones remain in my mind. The first one is certainly the amazing General Assembly of ALDA in Torun, Poland. It was the last massive event of ALDA before a period when we had less resources. Then, the pandemic of COVID 19 came. Torun and Poland hosted us in the best possible way, and we all remember their fantastic hospitality in the hometown of Copernicus!

The second point is more methodological and content oriented. In WTD and LADDER, global responsibility affected everyone, not only the EU. Our members from outside the EU also have practices to share and proposals to make. We understood how the countries of the Western Balkans were moving from recipient countries to donor countries and had a role to play in global development. We worked on that with

our Slovenian partners and our Croatian colleagues. On the other hand, some issues, such as migration and inclusion in Georgia, were very interesting. We also visited municipalities which had an interesting programme for making communities more inclusive, which was a source of inspiration for other partners. It is always nice to see that not only the “developed” countries have practices, but we all have a lot to learn from each other, even those who may be struggling.

Together with our member from Modena, ProgettArte, the project delivered a fantastic theatre play, which remained a milestone of the initiative.

It is difficult, very difficult, to measure the medium- and long-term impact of a project on education and awareness raising. Indeed, this is one of the major issues for us and for all of those who are involved in projects of this kind. We are good at calculating numbers of participants and the quality of the material we deliver. But without any doubts, WTD and LADDER have changed people's lives in the long run and for the better.

The pandemic confirmed the importance of global responsibility. We all depend on each other. Our globalised world has positive aspects, but it also implies more duties.



## 12. A network of members

ALDA is a membership-based organisation that gives a lot of importance to its constituency. I have always thought that the real strength of our work relies in being a group of motivated and like-minded people. A broad alliance: this is the essence of what we are. Throughout the past 30 years, we have been actively looking for new members among civil society organisations, as well as local and regional authorities in Europe and, more recently, beyond. The search has not been easy and there have been some surprising events along the way. After all, we can say that it is the value of an individual that is essential, together with our tailor-made approach. We put the relationship between people and institutions at the core of our actions.

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*“At least a million people have been directly affected by our projects and more than 25 million people have benefited from our initiatives indirectly”*

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Our figures are relevant, and we can say that we can reach anyone, anywhere in just a few days. Our diversified network, involving many countries, allows us to

have this reach. We can find people, expertise, examples, and practices. We have partners and people involved in many projects and activities.

A recent report indicated that at least a million people have been directly affected by our projects (basically, we shook hands 😊) and more than 25 million people have benefited from our initiatives indirectly. I would say that, together, we have contributed to changing the world, hopefully for the better. ALDA has a database with about 15,000 contacts. All of them come from exchanges of business cards, discussions and meetings. The health of this network is very important for us.

ALDA was first established to transform the initial project of the Council of Europe into a membership-based organisation. At the end of 1999, the programme of the Local Democracy Embassies was led by the Council of Europe with a top-down approach, meaning that there was too little involvement of municipalities and stakeholders. Therefore, a first group of members established ALDA in 1999 and we drafted a Statute with the help of the Secretariat. Membership fees were cheap, so that we could have as many members as possible. The French statute of ALDA gives a big role to the General Assembly and to the Governing Board. That was the idea from the very

beginning. The increase in the number of our members has been constant from the start of our activities. Our first members were those involved in the Local Democracy Agencies as partners, and they were engaged in the Balkans. This remained so for a long period of time.

Nevertheless, with the increase of ALDA's scope and activities, our members and their geographical coverage changed and became "larger". We started to have more members from the EU, Eastern and more recently Southern Europe, Africa and Türkiye. Today, thanks to our global strategy, we are aiming to attract members from other parts of the world. When will it end? I can't say. It is an open process, and the aim is to be a "broad alliance of local authorities and civil society groups working for local democracy and good local governance". So, there will be no limits to our expansion until it is necessary.

A limit does exist, and it is the capacity for being able to animate a big network and making membership valuable for our members. Despite the low fees, every year our members re-consider whether or not to remain members of ALDA. We constantly have discussions about it at ALDA. I was very happy to change our membership fee system a few years ago, moving from a principle of

"number of inhabitants" to a "level of budget". That makes the concept much fairer. Having now about 300 members, we need to find different answers as to why each group "is a member of ALDA". There is a turnover; some leave while others join us. Membership of ALDA is approved by the Governing Board on a rolling basis after a presentation in which they explain their motivation, provide a letter of application and take part in an interview. Leaving ALDA is also a decision that must be approved by the Board after a member expresses its intention to leave or does not pay the fees for a few years. We represent a European and broad network, with (many) different languages from many countries. This has certainly added value but also presents an immense obstacle. Everyone has their own idea about "Europe" and our network. Not surprisingly, keeping our members can be a constant and never-ending struggle. But we must do it. We managed to have our newsletter translated into 10 languages every month (!) and I often think that this is a good way of sustaining the long-term position for our organisation. The website has been translated by using Google (even though we have now fixed the EN, FR and IT versions) but the news is translated by us!

The added value of being a member of ALDA is expressed in our **Membership package**<sup>141</sup>.

Now we have a membership officer, which is a turning point. This person deals with administrative matters and works hand in hand with the communication department of ALDA, providing members with many options like training, information sessions and campaigns. The struggle with collecting membership fees (fundamental to an organisation like ours!) is an everyday task. Then, as I said, we have developed services for members, information and debates, free courses, the possibilities for them to receive ad hoc support in management and in project development. As I see it, the ALDA membership fee is absolutely good value for money!

It goes without saying that members join ALDA because of our capacity to put together good projects and to monitor funding opportunities. ALDA gives priority to members from joint consortiums and projects, and it has a real return on investments. The majority of the “active” members of ALDA receive, in many ways, much more than they pay. It is not always about cash in the bank, but about knowledge, support, motivation, information and the many

possibilities for exchanges at a European level and being able to advocate for their causes. Sometimes I feel that day in Strasbourg 25 years ago, when we set our membership fees, caused many of our limitations at ALDA. If we had decided that the fees would have been – let’s say – five times higher, people and organisations would have considered that our worth was 5 times bigger. Low prices are not always a good marketing strategy, but we had to accommodate ourselves with the decision. Anyway, changing the membership scale is an impossible task. My colleagues often say that this “return on investment” (members expect to have value for their membership fees) is the other side of the coin. They usually pay an average of 700 to 2,500 euro per year. They may be engaged in a several thousand Euro project for three or four years, after which they are not engaged for two or three years .... And some do not renew their membership because they don’t see their money back. It is a bit frustrating for us, since we are looking for likeminded members who share our vision and mission.

Anyway, we changed the membership ladder a few years ago and I am very happy and proud of it.

<sup>141</sup> [https://www.lda-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/ENG\\_infopack.pdf](https://www.lda-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/ENG_infopack.pdf)



Oriano Otocan, ALDA President, visiting Vicenza office in Viale Milano 36, in front of our Donors' wall, 2022

We failed a few times (the proposals were not accepted by the General Assembly) but eventually we made it! The change was not about having MORE membership fees, but about being fair! Our membership fees used to be based on a single quota for NGOs and according to the number of inhabitants in the case of local authorities. That was unfair. The number of inhabitants does not indicate whether the city is rich, how decentralisation is implemented, etc. Now we have managed to change this: fees are based on municipal/regional budgets and that also applies to NGOs (some of them are really big, they have a LOT of capacity, and they benefit a LOT from ALDA). Small local authorities or local authorities from poorer countries can join ALDA by paying less, while the richer will pay a bit more. Altogether, total fees remain about the same.

We have regional strategies for helping members contact each other in the same area (the MED, the Balkans, Eastern Europe, or other geographic area). Certainly, if the membership of ALDA increases further, we will need to fine tune this approach. Furthermore, our members are engaged in project activities through our thematic and geographic hubs.

The thematic hubs are an important added value to ALDA. They articulate our work (crossing the borders within which

our organisation operates) and they bring together expertise, projects, people and knowledge. They are led by staff members of ALDA but also by Governing Board members. They are showing (through their concrete actions) what local democracy and good local governance mean for us. All projects and efforts are connected to a thematic hub. Certainly, we would need more people and more energy to develop networks and connect all the dots. Anyway, this is a good and promising start.

We organise our work under the following headings:

- Migration
- Gender, inclusion and human rights
- Youth empowerment and education
- Digital and innovation
- Territorial and local development
- Civic engagement
- Environment and climate

Members' animation needs engagement and a dynamic participation by the Governing Board. At the Secretariat, we try to support the role of the Governing Board in the decision-making process as much as possible: strategic development, opening of LDAs, facing crises or problems, approval of long-term staff, approval of members, etc. Certainly, the level of involvement depends on the time available and the attention that each of them gives to

ALDA. The relationship between the Secretariat (which is involved with the issues of the organisation 24/7) and the political board is a crucial question for all organisations like ours.

ALDA has grown and developed successfully due to of our wise and strategic political guidance. Our members are not always active, or as much as the team would like them to be, but they are supportive and often share their expertise. Oftentimes, they have accompanied innovations like the opening of ALDA+ and other initiatives, showing that they are “present” when it is really needed.

Another step we took many years ago was the introduction of a monthly newsletter in translated form into (now) 10 languages: French, Italian, English, Serbian, Russian, Ukrainian, Romanian, Armenian, Georgian and Arabic. Soon we will also translate it into Turkish to cover our broad network in that part of the world. It is a tremendously difficult job for all of us, in particular for our communication team, but it brings the right results. Our thousands of contacts (including our members) receive our newsletter every month and, after several years (sometimes many years), sometimes I meet people whom I had not seen for such a long time, but are registered in our database, who still receive news from us and from me. They

would still say: Hello Antonella, what a great job you do in ALDA 😊 ... even if I had personally lost touch with them many years before. For many of them, ALDA is still present.

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*“In our governance, we embrace the concept of local democracy with a multistakeholder approach”*

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The Statute of ALDA is the result of our history; therefore, among our institutional members there are representatives of the Council of Europe. This is important for us. The political and institutional connection with the main organisations dealing with democracy and human rights is a fundamental feature of ALDA. The Secretary General of the Council of Europe appoints her/his representative to the Board, and we have the President of the Congress as a permanent member. Our Statute also includes Local Democracy Agencies (following a Statute change), which are represented by their Delegates. That is also what makes our association different and a unique place to work with and for. The uniqueness of our organisation and the reason why it so precious lies also in the fact that our members include civil society and local/regional authorities. In our governance, we embrace the

concept of local democracy with a multistakeholder approach. Few organisations include their stakeholders in such an organic and holistic way. Many locally elected representatives prefer to appoint delegates to sit on the board on their behalf. On the one hand, we don't often have big names on our governing board (the municipality can appoint any of its delegate and so can the NGO) but on the other hand, delegates can be present more often. The quality of our representatives and the format adopted, namely local authorities sitting and voting at the same level as civil society representatives, make an immense difference. We are proud and happy of our governing board. Some members are still individuals, as is the case for former presidents, members of the Board or those who had a particular role in ALDA's activities.

For a few years, we implemented – even though not entirely successfully – another networking model: the Ambassadors of ALDA. These were selected people who were able to liaise with ALDA in their countries (where we did not have the necessary outreach). They tried to animate the existing network of members and to bring new ones to ALDA while keeping a connection with the rest of the partners. That also helped with languages which are less common. The programme ended some years ago, waiting for a new

format and a model of cooperation. The programme “Friends of ALDA” is now available and allows ordinary citizens to receive news from us and be involved in our activities and support our mission.

## 13. Africa is calling us

ALDA was born in the Balkans and then expanded towards the East. We were part of the organisations created at the end of the cold war, with the emergence of a new world order and a demand for a new form of governance. Our outreach to the Mediterranean and Africa came much later following a clear request by our members in the South of Europe, in particular Italy, France and then Spain. For them, decentralised cooperation was mainly about acting in the countries in the Maghreb and/or Sub-Saharan Africa. The Sicily Region, a member of ALDA, was the first one to initiate a discussion about where to go and what to do, and whether our programmes were adding value in this context. We had a small programme with IOM<sup>142</sup> and the European Commission dealing with migration policies, where we interacted with Algerian partners. The programme was about how to prepare migrants for a migratory process that could be successful and helpful for all. That project was then presented, with its results, in Palermo (Sicily), and then in Lecce, another active member of our network together with Apulia Region. That meeting in Lecce was a crucial one

as, for the first time, it marked our wish to contribute by starting our work in Africa, which represented (and still does) a challenge for the world's future and, indeed, for Europe. Our activities in Apulia were greatly supported by the active involvement of the former Head of Cabinet of the President of the Region. His name was Mario De Donatis. Unfortunately, he passed away some months ago. Mario led the Cabinet of President Raffaele Fitto and he managed to create a successful synergy between ALDA and the institutions of this crucial area of Italy. Together, we created many projects and opened a successful LDA in Mostar (in Bosnia and Herzegovina) and the LDA in Skodra, in Albania.

The decision to start working in Africa was not straightforward. Some members of the Board were doubtful about this additional step. We were told that the experiences of democracy in Africa were limited and cumbersome and that in the aftermath of decolonisation things were more complicated. In addition, most of the countries were not tackling programmes of decentralisation.

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<sup>142</sup> IOM is the leading intergovernmental organisation in the field of migration which works closely with governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental partners in order to help to ensure the orderly and humane management of migration, promoting international

cooperation on migration issues and assistance in the search of practical solutions to migration problems and needs, including refugees and internally displaced people. To find out more: <https://www.iom.int/>



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Aménagement Urbain du Territoire  
pour REinventer les Mobilités  
et ENgager les Tunisiens

نهضة العمرانية من أجل إعادة  
تبار التنقل وتحفيز المواطنين  
تونسيين على المشاركة



Projet cofinancé  
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Codatu

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alda  
European Mobility



Activities of the programme Autrement, supporting cycling and more light mobility with partners from France and Tunisia. Here in Sousse for an event supported by the European Commission, in 2022



Projet AUTREMENT

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Since then, though, *Africa has been calling us*.

Our first, more structured step was the opening of the LDA in Kairouan, in Tunisia. We had worked in this country for several years thanks to a number of projects funded by the European Commission, in particular **VOX in Box**, which contributed inputs to the constitutional reform and the decentralisation processes. We took part in important civil society debates, and we made our recommendations for new laws and for the revision of the Constitution.

The LDA in Kairouan was developed around a partnership for local democracy that the city of Strasbourg had had with this city for many years. Since the beginning, during the finalisation of the process and the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding, the difficulties to work in Tunisia became clear. It seems to be a small and “easy” country, relatively simple to access and with no visa requirements. On the contrary, it presented many difficulties when it came to consistency of actions, complexity, and sometimes inefficiency in the sphere of public administration. Despite many obstacles and the opposition of some local politicians,

who also had connections with the city of Strasbourg (we discovered what it means to be under social media attacks in the Maghreb and in Arabic), we managed to open the LDA<sup>143</sup>.

The LDA was run by Mrs. Afaf Zadem, who was also an active coordinator in the region for the European Partnership for Democracy within the framework of a global programme for the empowerment of civil society.

We started working at the LDA implementing the PARFAIT programme, supported by the European Commission.

PARFAIT aimed at empowering women so that they could engage in local authorities during the first local elections after the implementation of a new law for municipalities. We managed to reach the end of the project despite many difficulties. The main obstacle was that the calendar for the elections changed constantly, while the EC project had a tight schedule.

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<sup>143</sup> More info on the LDA opening here:  
<https://www.alsa-europe.eu/alsa-expands-its->

[network-new-local-democracy-agency-opens-in-edremit-turkiye/](https://network-new-local-democracy-agency-opens-in-edremit-turkiye/)



In the end, we fostered empowerment and supported regranting schemes<sup>144</sup>.

We are still working in Tunisia with a programme for decentralised cooperation. In Kairouan and Mahdia, we launched a project on soft mobility called AUTREMENT<sup>145</sup>, with the city of Strasbourg as the lead partner. It has been an incredible journey in which we discovered that many Tunisians love cycling and are ready to try other types of mobility. However, in the past few years, Tunisia has undergone<sup>146</sup> radical change, and local democracy is now at stake. The future of decentralisation is very uncertain. I feel really worried about this situation. During my career, I have also worked with the international community to support decentralisation in many ways: as an expert for strengthening governance, capacity building and funding for local authorities.

Thanks to a former Board Member, Mohamed Salhi, we also became

interested in Morocco, where we opened an LDA in the beautiful city of Tétouan. We had already dealt with Morocco while working with the region and city of Oujda, together with the city of Aix en Provence.

Our members and partners were supportive. The Fons Maillorqui and Fons Minorqui, which are funds for decentralised cooperation in the Balearic Island, stood out, in particular, for their level of engagement. We also had other successful projects for the empowerment of women.

An LDA involving different cities (Tétouan, Tanger, Chefchaouen and Larache) was also established. Now the LDA in Morocco has been suspended and is waiting for its second chance, maybe with new partners.

Women are the main target of most of our activities in the Maghreb; we are aware of the importance of their need for education, involvement, and inclusion in

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<sup>144</sup> The first local elections in Tunisia took place in May 2018, marking a significant milestone in the country's democratic transition after the 2011 revolution. These elections aimed to decentralise power and establish a more inclusive governance system. Tunisians voted for mayors and municipal councils in over 350 municipalities, demonstrating widespread civic engagement and enthusiasm for the democratic process.

<sup>145</sup> The AUTREMENT project aims to promote a sustainable urban development in the area of Kairouan and Mahdia, improving life quality of its inhabitants and enhancing its economic and

touristic attractiveness. Developing active mobility, primarily biking, via setting specific infrastructure, and reinforcing citizen participation in local governance, are the cornerstones around which this project revolves. See more here: <https://autrement.tn/en/>

<sup>146</sup> Tunisia's first democratically elected president, Beji Caid Essebsi, died in July 2019. After him, Kais Saied became Tunisia's president after a landslide victory in the 2019 Tunisian presidential elections in October 2019. On 25 July 2021 he suspended the Parliament, fired the prime minister and consolidated power in what opponents called a "coup."



Opening of the LDA Morocco in Tetouan, 2019



Algeria, dunes of Taghit, for the activities implemented with the ministry of  
interiors and the European Commission, from 2017 till 2021

politics. There is no doubt that the development of Africa will be the result of women's empowerment.

Our work in Libya has been more specific. Libya is a very complicated country, and we were interested in bringing our expertise through the activities of some of our members (the Friuli Venezia Giulia region, represented by our vice president, was involved in activities with some municipalities in relation to decentralised cooperation with a specific focus on fishery<sup>147</sup>). I did a consultancy report studying the territorial approach to local development (TALD<sup>148</sup>) by the European Union Delegation. This triggered me into studying Arabic since I would love, at some point, to speak "en direct" with local people. Libya is also part of our work thanks to an initiative by Nicosia<sup>149</sup>,

which is bringing local authorities from Europe closer to Libyan local authorities.

Certainly, Algeria remains a cornerstone in my professional career. Almost by chance, I was contacted by a French company to deliver a set of Training for Trainers of local authorities and civil society in Algeria. The final goal was to implement the new constitution including a "participatory democracy at the local level" in its provisions. It was a fantastic journey started in 2017, and it is still on-going. Together with my colleagues Mohamed Sakri and Mustafa Malki, we delivered hundreds of days of training for mayors, secretary generals and heads of departments.

We drafted the **Algerian Code on participatory democracy** for all municipalities in Algeria<sup>150</sup>. We had a long and in-depth training programme for public officials in five centres. I had the chance to discover more about

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<sup>147</sup> The project "Path-Dev" was a pilot action in the fisheries sector for the economic development of Libya under the Nicosia Initiative. This project promoted the economic revitalisation and strengthening of Libyan cities in the fisheries sector, strengthening their relations with the regional territory.

<sup>148</sup> TALD is a national policy that promotes endogenous, integrated, multi-scalar and incremental local development in order to translate decentralisation reforms into development outcomes.

See more here:

[https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/articles/what-territorial-approach-local-development\\_en](https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/articles/what-territorial-approach-local-development_en)

<sup>149</sup> At the request of Libyan municipalities, the European Committee of the Regions has been

mobilising partnerships for Libya's local authorities since January 2016. The Nicosia Initiative is a bottom-up process that responds to the needs of one of the EU's closest and most fragile neighbours. The CoR's involvement reflects the belief that city diplomacy and peer-to-peer diplomacy can make a key contribution to addressing long-term international challenges in a sustainable way. It is also in line with the EU's global strategy and the conviction that the EU should think globally and act locally. ([www.cor.europa.eu](http://www.cor.europa.eu))

<sup>150</sup> The 2019–2021 Algerian protests, also known as the Revolution of Smiles or the Hirak Movement, began on 16 February



Preparatory meeting of the LDA Tetouan in Morocco, 2018



Training for participatory planning in Oujda, Morocco, with the support of French Decentralised Cooperation, 2005

Algeria, its history, and its people. I also learned a lot about the potential of participation and how the people are ready to be engaged if the instruments are good. We all loved our mission, not only because of the format but also because of our team. We saw people struggling to do at their best, in very difficult conditions. This long mission also opened my European eyes to the contradictions about how we deal with Islamic countries. The situation is full of shades (way more than just black and white). I learned a lot and I came back with a lot of images of places and stories.

In a conversation, some participants from the desert told me that if they hadn't implemented "participatory democracy", they would just ... die. They were right, participatory democracy can be seen as a solution in terms of survival. I am nostalgic and romantic, I still cherish some places in Algiers where, looking at the bay, you can see the long history of this city. I had it in front of me, exactly as it was in my reading books, and as it had been described to me during my school years. Oran and the mostly unknown Constantine are

just incredible. Everyone should visit them.

One thing I realised was also how unequal the redistribution of wealth was. When the movement of Hirak started in 2021, it, therefore, did not come as a surprise to me<sup>151</sup>.

Africa is calling ALDA and Africa is in our European agenda. We have developed a plan where the experience of ALDA can be useful and valuable. Our programme is mainly embedded in the flagship initiative "The European Support to Local Democracy"<sup>152</sup>, where I have described all the possible means and examples to support local governance and with the reasons why. We have also developed a strategy for becoming a global organisation, with specific countries in which decentralisation is on-going and where our pragmatic approach could be of particular use and interest.

Thanks to our (ALDA's) activities, we are present in Africa, and recently have started cooperating in many projects with the Charter for Africa<sup>153</sup>, EPD and

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<sup>151</sup> 2019, sparked by Abdelaziz Bouteflika's announcement of his candidacy for a fifth presidential term. These peaceful protests led to Bouteflika's resignation on 2 April 2019. By early May, several key figures from the previous administration, including Bouteflika's brother Saïd, had been arrested. The protests highlighted

long-standing tensions within the Algerian regime and attracted international attention.

<sup>152</sup> <https://www.alda-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/publication-esld.pdf>

<sup>153</sup> <https://www.alda-europe.eu/ar/the-charter-project-africa/>

WYDE<sup>154</sup>, in supporting youth and women's engagement.

Thanks to the assertive work of our colleagues from the MEA team, in particular Giulia Sostero and Apolline Bonfils, we have developed contacts with the Middle East, in particular Lebanon, where a proposal for an LDA is ongoing. The programme is currently on hold due to the very complex and tragic developments happening in the Middle East.

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<sup>154</sup> The WYDE (Women and Youth in Democracy) Civic Engagement programme aims to improve the enfranchisement, empowerment, and inclusion of youth in all levels of democratic participation at the national, regional and global scales.

To find out more: <https://epd.eu/what-we-do/programmes/women-and-youth-in-democracy-wyde-civic-engagement-supporting-women-and-youth-participation-in-democratic-processes/>



Training and activities in Algeria on participatory democracy at the local level, training centre of Constantine, 2017

## 14. Türkiye

As I am writing this document, it is pleasing to reflect on how substantially the level of ALDA's engagement in Türkiye has grown. I remember in the past, when Türkiye was preparing to become a member of the European Union<sup>155</sup>, how important the plan was for both us and them. Unfortunately, the process was not successful. Despite this, ALDA remained connected to Turkish civil society members and local authorities, counting on its strong network of local actors, especially the Marmara Union of Municipalities, which also engaged with us in the Balkans. Together, we have developed many projects and always remained together despite many difficulties.

We are currently implementing two important projects to support civil society empowerment in Türkiye. The PLACE<sup>156</sup> project focuses on exchanges between youth organisations from the EU and Türkiye. The second project is WE

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<sup>155</sup> The process started in 1999 with different steps towards accession. On 13 March 2019, the European Parliament unanimously voted for a halt to the full membership negotiations between the EU and Türkiye. In July 2023, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan brought up Türkiye's EU membership application during a NATO summit in Vilnius, linking it to Sweden's accession to NATO

<sup>156</sup> The PLACE programme aims to favour the empowerment of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and Local Authorities (LAs) as actors of local development, through specific capacity

ACT, which aims at fostering gender inclusion in local politics and gender policies through capacity building and networking activities. We are highly motivated to continue our efforts in this country, which represents an immense opportunity to establish a junction between East and West, North and South.

Thanks to the support of European partners, we opened a Local Democracy Agency in Edremit<sup>157</sup>.

building, peer learning and joint cooperation on co-designed common projects.

To find out more here: <https://www.alda-europe.eu/theplace/>

The WE ACT project aims to strengthen the representation and participation of women in the political sphere at the local level in Türkiye, improving the political exercise and civic rights for women and LGBTIQ+ persons and encouraging the debate on gender issues.

To find out more: <https://www.alda-europe.eu/we-act-women-empowerment-and-action-in-politics-and-media/>

<sup>157</sup> See note n. 146

Opening of the LDA Edremit, Turkyie, 2023, with the presence of the representative of Grand Est, Christian Debèze



Kick off meeting the programme WE Act on gender empowerment at the local level, in Istanbul, 2023

POSTANE



Ka<sup>der</sup>  
Kadın Adayları  
Desenvolvimento Sustentável

dakt



## 15. Ukraine, changing the future

The full-fledged attack on Ukraine by Russia has shaped both the European agenda and ALDA's. The night of 24th February 2022 represented a watershed for all of us. We all wanted it to finish soon. But no, it would not be sorted out so easily. The work of destabilisation by the Putin's regime has been going for decades now, and Russia had been attacking Ukraine and Europe way before 2022.

For all of us, Ukraine is part of our future and, unfortunately, we have realised it far too late. We need to support the European aspirations of Ukrainians who are fighting and dying with European flags in their hands, in order to preserve their values and to be free from a past that is now entangling them.

For ALDA, support to Ukraine became a mission and, since 2022, we have supported Ukraine politically with events and statements by our Governing Boards. Since 2023, we have provided humanitarian help, with the essential support of the Fons from Spain. We have also strengthened the cooperation between European and Ukrainian cities, regions and NGOs, especially through

our flagship initiative. We are convinced that we can help through the instrument of the Local Democracy Agencies, and develop a long, honest and deep friendship for the future. That is what they need.

The Flagship is ongoing, and we are creating opportunities for partnerships. We signed the MoU for the LDA Odesa on 17th November and empowered LDA Mariupol and LDA Dnipro. We are looking forward to being able to offer more support to Vinnitsa, Bucha, Kharkiv, Lviv and Mykolayiv and other places.

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### *“For ALDA, support to Ukraine became a mission”*

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I am convinced that this process is shaping Europe. I am looking forward to making the future steps that will create an enlarged Europe of values and democracies, with a revised structure that could embrace the challenges of the future<sup>158</sup>.

The European Commission has identified a set of structured aids to Ukraine through the so-called Ukraine Facility<sup>159</sup>, where ALDA aims to play a role in promoting local democracy.

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<sup>158</sup> Proposal for the change of treaties for the accession

<sup>159</sup> The Commission proposed to create a new instrument, the Ukraine Facility (the ‘Facility’), to

The recent Council's decision to grant Candidate Status to Ukraine and Moldova is a crucial step forward<sup>160</sup>.



ALDA General Assembly in Barcelona, 2024

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provide predictable financial support for Ukraine over the 2024-2027 period. The Facility should cater both for short-term State and recovery needs and medium-term reconstruction and modernisation of Ukraine.

[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/da\\_qanda\\_23\\_3353](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/da_qanda_23_3353)

<sup>160</sup> On 14-15 December 2023, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations

with Ukraine and with the Republic of Moldova, inviting them to adopt the respective negotiating frameworks once the relevant steps set out in the respective Commission recommendations of 8 November 2023 are taken.

To find out more: <https://www.alda-europe.eu/ukraine-moldova-georgia-eu/>



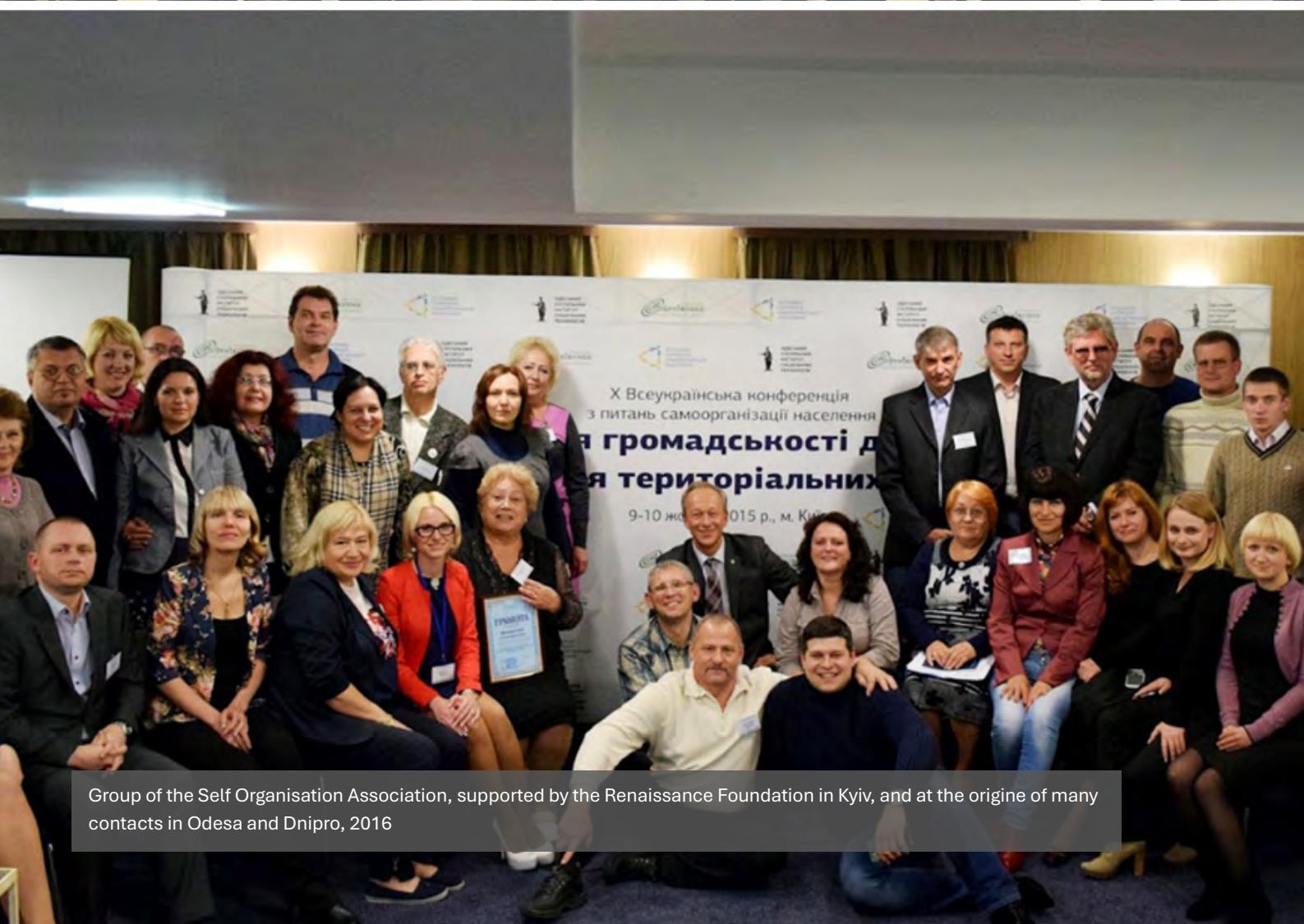
Event in Eastern Ukraine, with UNDP project on capacity building for local authorities, with the former East Coordinator od ALDA, Alexandru Coica, 2021



Preparatory meeting for the opening of the LDA Odesa. Odesa, spring 2023



Vicenza, November 2023, international conference on decentralised cooperation Europe and Italy, in cooperation with U Lead and the European Commission



Group of the Self Organisation Association, supported by the Renaissance Foundation in Kyiv, and at the origine of many contacts in Odesa and Dnipro, 2016

## **16. Local Democracy, more than a job**

People working at ALDA and the Local Democracy Agencies are doing more than just a job.

For many of us, it is about personal and professional growth. We invested our lives (often, entirely) in this adventure, and we feel ALDA is a part of our raison d'être. Many of us, members of the staff and the Governing Board, developed a sense of "care" to ALDA which goes far beyond the professional aspect. It is like looking after a child, watching it grow and protecting it from adversity. ALDA is like our family and indeed, we spent so much time and energy helping it grow, that it could not be otherwise. We do have turnover in ALDA, especially among young team members, but still, people who leave often remain connected to our "family".

In some cases, young colleagues working with us have felt this intense sense of belonging a bit suffocating, especially after the pandemic, which led us to reconsider our work-life balance. No one can think of ALDA as a 9-5 job. It is much more in terms of working hours and being part of a collective can be overwhelming. Therefore, those who have responsibility in ALDA, like the senior team, but also those who have joined us more recently, feel a deep

affiliation: we constantly think about ALDA, explore new opportunities, celebrate our success, rejoice at good news, and struggle with difficulties. It is never just a job.

Our work has been marked by so many key people and moments that it would be impossible to mention them all in this report. It has been a long journey. We also navigated in and out our personal lives, with good and bad moments. We remember the birth of our children, the difficult choices made by some colleagues to move on and leave us, when the kids went to school or... university. We would casually walk through the corridors and into the kitchen of our new offices (a kitchen should be a must-have for every office, for the great camaraderie that it brings to the team). During our long and complicated mission in Europe and beyond (yes, local democracy is reaching places that NOBODY would have ever thought of visiting), we spend time with our colleagues, who share the same curiosity about life, society and cultures. Maybe what unites us all is this genuine curiosity and sense of respect for diversity. ALDA is not learning about societies and cultures through books but through actions with local communities. What better way to learn about each other than meeting and building a project together? Europe was built thanks to exchanges, visits and joint



Celebration of Marco Boaria's birthday in the Vicenza office, 2022

projects. We should not forget the essential role of face-to-face meetings, eating together, exchanges over a coffee or a tea. It can change people's lives.

ALDA is also characterised by a long and never-ending sequence of anecdotes, which will live long in my memory.

For example, I remember one day at the Restaurant Bleu in the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, when Gianfranco Martini and Rinaldo Locatelli, the former Secretary General of the Congress, wrote about a possible membership fee for ALDA on a paper napkin. I wish I had been more assertive and set higher fees at that moment! It took us 20 years to increase the membership fees of ALDA.

Once we held a meeting of the Governing Board of ALDA in the amazing city of Kotor, in Montenegro. How could we possibly forget it? That was the day of the G8 in Genoa (the one in which a massive violation of human rights by the Italian police against demonstrators took place)<sup>161</sup>. While we were having our meeting, we were contacted from Italy and received the appalling news about this event. Meetings of the Governing Board were marked by many other moments. The hotel where we stayed had a blackout (which was quite usual in

Montenegro at that time), so one night (how many nights and awful early mornings...) when I was leaving the hotel, there was no light, no electricity, and I forgot my passport at the reception.... With all the consequences that one can imagine.

I remember our first meetings at the Congress in Strasbourg, where Gianfranco regularly started them with at least an hour delay, as he first wanted to chat with everyone. Gianfranco cared so much about the content of our work; he was entirely focused on it. He was deeply shocked by the war in the Balkans; I can't imagine how he would feel about the war in Ukraine today. For him, war was totally unacceptable. Since the end of the Second World War, he had dedicated his life to twinning and

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*“ALDA is not learning about societies and cultures through books but through actions with local communities.*

*What better way to learn about each other than meeting and building a project together?”*

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<sup>161</sup> On 20-22 July 2001, the 27th G8 Summit was held in Genoa. During the summit, a high number of protests by the global anti-globalisation movement marked the event,

which was followed by violent repression by local police forces against the protesters. More than 300 people were arrested, including one victim.



Crucial staff meeting with ALDA staff members in Subotica and Novi Sad, Serbia, 2013



Meeting in the USA, Dayton, Ohio, Kettering Foundation, with Belarussian and other partners, and German Marshal fund partners as well as partners from LDA Georgia and Armenia, 2019

building peace activities<sup>162</sup>. Thinking of all those dynamics: the war, the attacks, the victims... we said, "never again". Still, it keeps happening, repeatedly. For most of us, there is a sense of hopelessness.

Once I met Paweł Adamowicz, the former mayor of Gdansk, in Yerevan for a programme on the Congress and the Committee of the Regions. It was the end of August, almost the beginning of September. It was a beautiful day. We sat together on the same panel, and that is when we became friends. He wanted to open the LDA in Odessa together with us, but it did not work out. He called me and proposed Mariupol instead.... It was 2016. I said "Mariupol.... That city in the Far East, near the border...". It was precisely that one. He told me that we could help the city and that they deserved our support. So, we went there and decided to create a programme for it, until we opened the LDA in 2017. Now I do not know when I will visit Mariupol again and what is left of the city and our work. Sadly, Paweł was stabbed on stage during a solidarity event in Gdansk in 2019. I attended his funeral on a very cold day in January.

A fantastic journey, supported by the French Ministry for Foreign Affairs, started with our French partners and

members of this network. We launched a very important initiative with a network of French local authorities and their partners in the Balkans for decentralised cooperation in Sofia in Bulgaria. It was a long-lasting and structured programme of support, which included important partners like Jean Claude Mairal. The idea started (as many other initiatives) around a table in Sofia.

The opening of Local Democracy Agencies has left its mark on all of us. Certainly, I won't forget the opening of the LDA of Central and Southern Serbia in Nis, with a lot of partners and members. Four cities had applied for the office, and there were two very competitive candidates for the position of Delegate. My flight was very late (eventually cancelled because of snow) and Gianfranco substituted for me for half a day of discussions. I took over the session in Nis late in the afternoon and evening. We made our decision at 2 a.m., then we all went for dinner. Serbia has never been an easy place. Anyway, I will always remember the opening of our wonderful and colourful office in the centre of Nis, with a big European flag, in the main pedestrian area.

Around 2000, when we opened LDAs in Serbia, Kosovo and Montenegro, we also cooperated intensely with partners from

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<sup>162</sup> See Di Giovan Paolo R., Martini G. "I Piccoli padri. Una conversazione sulla nascita

dell'Unione Europea e il suo futuro", Iacobelli Editore, 2010

the UK and Ireland. We had received a grant from the Congress, so we added Burton on Trent (UK) and Donegal (Ireland) to our programmes. We had very dedicated Board members, like Keith Jones, and many events. These days are long gone but remain vividly in my memory.

There are only few corners of Europe and neighbouring countries which I haven't visited. Travelling by train, car, ferry, airplane ... all year long: that is what many of us do.

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*"It is great for me to know that many of the people I have worked with now have good careers and deeper knowledge.*

*I like to think that they can still be referred to as ALDA's friends"*

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Many of our activities are reported in our fantastic Activity reports and LDAs reports.

In my heart I cherish all the colleagues I worked with and who shaped the world of ALDA together with me. I have never spoken a lot with Marco Boaria (we both have a lot of energy to manage) but our communication has always been deep. I remember how we arranged every step,

mainly through calling each other while we were going to airports, since there are only a few minutes when we have time to speak. I don't know why, but a specific call remains in my memory. I was either in Kyiv or Munich; I am not sure. Anyway, we talked about splitting ALDA between ALDA Europe and ALDA cooperation and Services, which was indeed the proposal made to our Governing Board and it is now the format that is used by ALDA. Marco is courageous and careful enough to be able to play the role of my alter ego. Barbara Elia, who left ALDA in 2021, has been a fundamental supporter to the growth of ALDA. Together, we accomplished an absolutely impossible mission (more than what Tom Cruise would be able to do), dealing with very complicated reports, demands and audits in difficult and heroic times. We also met incredible team members, and some of them belong to a distant past, such as Stefania Toriello, Dorothee Fischer and Martial Paris. Others have worked with us more recently, like Aldo Xhani, Nikos Gamouras, Peter Sondergaard, Annelaure Joedicke, Francesco Pala and Sofia Caiolo. We also have our own "pillars" and "backbones", both in the present and for the future like Anna Ditta, Elisabetta Pinamonti, Giulia Sostero, and many more. The team now is solid, and we are pleased to have welcomed new colleagues that bring a great deal of

added value with their knowledge and personality, such as Rita Biconne, Adrien Licha, Nadia Di Iulio and many more.

It is great for me to know that many of the people I have worked with now have good careers and deeper knowledge. I like to think that working with ALDA gave them a boost and they can still be referred to as ALDA's friends.

For this incredible journey and for what we have been able to shape and change in the world, I am grateful to all of them, and I am looking forward to the future.

## 17. What's next

We are now going through uncertain times, and it is difficult not to be oppressed by the news about environmental crises, the decline of democracy, a surge in the numbers of wars and conflicts, economic tensions and disruption. Nevertheless, something which has never disappointed me is the commitment of citizens and local authorities, who can trigger energy, change and new visions. I am not sure if we will be able to stop bad trends. Certainly, we can resist and limit them. I guess that now everything is about not giving up. We should address the future with a good dose of patience and humility. Europe has many things to give and learn at the same time. Democracy can be lived and experienced at the local level, priding us with many opportunities:

- **Local democracy can secure a direct impact on policies and people's action.** It has this concrete aspect that has an immense value for rebuilding trust and links between citizens and public affairs/institutions.
- **Local democracy facilitates participation because it is local and close to people.** It empowers young people and women, giving them accessible tools so that they are able

to engage. It also offers ways of participation even to foreign citizens and migrants.

- **Local democracy triggers innovation.** It increases the possibility to experiment with forms of participation. Each context has its own model and answers, focusing on the specificities of one's culture and traditions.
- **Local Democracy generates new resources.** In a time when resources are lacking (financially and also environmentally), local democracy gives us the possibility to share responsibilities and include all actors for a sustainable approach to life and development.
- **Local Democracy reduces the political fight and polarisation.** Because of its concrete approach to things, political choices are more oriented to real options against ideologies. It also offers alternatives to political polarisation, which often prevents us from finding solutions. It engages civic actors and directs them towards the common good.

This is why Local Democracy will save Democracy.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all my team in ALDA, who have been with me all these years, unfolding ideas and reaching new possibilities. I have personally thanked some of them but of course I have probably missed others.

A big thanks goes to the Governing Board of ALDA and of course to Oriano Otocan, who has been the President of ALDA for 12 years.

For the publication, a big thank you also to the communication team of ALDA, Elisabetta Uroni and Beatrice Frascatani, who read and re-read a lot of pieces of the book that probably have been a lot messy. All mistakes are mine.

Nothing would have been possible without the strong cooperation with the European Commission, which is not a big bureaucracy but for me it represented a group of reliable and capable partners and people, with whom to build ALDA as it is today.

## On the author

Antonella Valmorbida has been the Secretary General of ALDA since 1999. She has a



senior experience in promoting local democracy, empowerment and participation of civil society, and good governance in Europe, in the Balkans, in Eastern Europe, and in the Mediterranean area. She is a European senior consultant on local development with a focus on the implementation of participatory processes for urban regeneration. She manages a network of 300 members mainly composed of local authorities and civil society groups, in over 40 countries in Europe and beyond.

Antonella Valmorbida was Chair of the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD) and Member of the Advisory Board of Urban Foundation for Sustainable Development, Armenia. After 6 years as President of EPD, she is now part of the Board. She has been Chair of the EPAN working group of CONCORD until 2016, Chair of the Committee on Democracy and Civil Society of the Conference of the INGO of the Council of Europe from 2008 to 2011, and she was the coordinator of the subgroup on local government and public administration reform of the Civil Society Forum for Eastern Partnership. In 2012-13, she was board Member of CIVICUS – the World Alliance for Citizens Participation.

Antonella Valmorbida has an academic career at the university of Padova, Italy, and published three books on the involvement of citizens at the local level to promote democracy as well as various articles. Antonella Valmorbida is a French and Italian native speaker, and she is fluent in English and Russian. She works also in Spanish and German.

## Other publications & advocacy contributions by the author:

- Civil Society State of the Union (Democracy part): September 2023, with Civil Society Europe
- Carnegie Democracy Hub: on the future of the Summit for Democracy, 2023
- Comparative assessments on: a) municipal councils and local electoral system in Turkey b) Use of protocols and honours and international relations of Turkish local authorities, LARSIII, Local Administration Reform Phase III, UNDP Turkey (2011)
- Legal opinion and Comparative Analysis on the general Law on Public Consultation, for the Parliament of Ukraine, Council of Europe senior expertise.
- Contribution to “Association International des Maires de France”, 41 congress, in Rwanda, civil society and local authorities’ cooperation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DuOUB0qSCWQ>
- Participative democracy and citizens engagement, solving local problems at the local level, in Moldova and Ukraine, Antonella Valmorbida, published in English and Russian by SUSIL Edizioni, October 2020, ISDN, 978-88-5550-155-5
- The European Decentralised Cooperation: local authorities and civil society working together for development, Antonella Valmorbida, Peter Lang, 2018, ISBN 978-2-8076-0609
- Co-drafting of the Guide for Local Participative Democracy in Algeria (in French and translated into Arabic), programme of the Ministry of Interior and Local Authorities of Algeria, contract AETS France, 2018
- Comparative Review on the role of the Municipal Councillors, UNDP Macedonia, within the programme Support to Local Democracy in North Macedonia (comparison with Slovenia, Denmark, Albania, Serbia and Lithuania), drafting in English and translated into Macedonian, experience in town twinning opportunities, 2018
- Supporting Local Democracy and citizens participation in Armenia, Project of the Council of Europe, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (Expert and drafting the programme), 2015 in English and Russian
- Supporting local democracy and decentralisation in Togo – events and keynote speeches at the Assembly of the Local Authorities from Togo and national workshop on Decentralisation, October and December 2016, invited by the Ministry of Decentralisation
- Minority rights and Local authorities in Eastern Partnership, Minority Rights Group, 2015, Online course, in Russian and English, author of the course.

- Citizens' participation at the Local Level in Europe and Neighbourhood Countries – Contribution of the Association of the Local Democracy Agencies, ANTONELLA VALMORBIDA (Ed), P.I.E. Peter Lang, June 2014.

[http://www.alda-europe.eu/newSite/public/doc/574181\\_Valmorbida.pdf](http://www.alda-europe.eu/newSite/public/doc/574181_Valmorbida.pdf)

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- Decentralisation in Southeastern Europe: conference report of the UCLG – <http://www.cities-localgovernments.org/>, Committee on Decentralisation / Conference in Skodra (Albania, Nov 2009)
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- Foedus, Culture Economie e Territori, Numero 33 – II° Quadrimestre 2012, p. 41-52, International Decentralised cooperation. A comparative Approach and a focus on Citizens' participation. The French case
- Numero 34 – Decentralised cooperation and decentralisation in Southern Caucasus
- Intercultural Dialogue and Multi-level Governance in Europe, contribution to the collection, a human rights-based approached, 2012, Peter Lang Edition
- L'Unità Europea, Rivista del Movimento Federalista Europeo n.6 2013, p. 6 “Le Mancanze dell'Unione Europea in politica estera. La sfida del Summit di Vilnius”
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<http://www.neweasterneurope.eu/node/1093>

## Annexes:

### Annexe 1: Key Projects of ALDA

#### CERV OPERATING GRANT

For several years now, ALDA has been one of the beneficiaries of the operating grant of the “Europe for Citizens” programme of the EACEA – Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency of the European Union. With the new Multiannual Financial Framework 2024-2028, ALDA has been confirmed beneficiary of the operating grant of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV) of the European Union. Such Operating Grant is specifically designated for networks, organisations, or think tanks that

contribute to achieving programme objectives. This includes activities such as training, capacity building, conferences, mutual learning, cooperation, awareness-raising, communication, and dissemination efforts.

Thus, once again be among the select recipients confirms the effectiveness of ALDA’s endeavours in advancing democracy and citizen participation throughout Europe.

#### ALDA FLAGSHIP INITIATIVE - THE LOCAL DEMOCRACY AGENCIES IN UKRAINE: AN INSTRUMENT OF COOPERATION, COMMUNITY COHESION AND DEVELOPMENT [[www.bit.ly/ALDA-flagship-ukraine](http://www.bit.ly/ALDA-flagship-ukraine)]

Since 2014, ALDA has been actively involved in Ukraine, relying on its two operational partners - LDA Dnipro and LDA Mariupol. ALDA actions in Ukraine are implemented by the Ukraine Task Force comprising teams based in Kyiv, Brussels, Wroclaw, Chisinau, and Vicenza. Most of its activities focused on Ukraine's involvement in ALDA's

transnational cooperation projects on good governance, civic participation, training, and capacity building for local authorities.

After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, ALDA consolidated its efforts on international advocacy, support to LDAs in Ukraine,

and fundraising for humanitarian projects.

This flagship initiative gathers all actions ALDA has been implementing in support of Ukraine, above all the Local Democracy Agencies (LDAs), a network of locally-based organisations, funded and supported by both local partners and international associates with a long-term joint program providing financial and political support to fulfil their mandate and to accompany local democracy and civil society empowerment. The first LDA established

in Ukraine has been the LDA of the Dnipropetrovsk Region, back in 2015, followed by the LDA Mariupol in 2017 and the LDA Odesa in 2023.

Being the Local Democracy Agencies in Ukraine are an instrument of stabilisation and cohesion in a community that is torn by the conflict, the development of further LDAs is the backbone of this initiative, which foresees the opening of about 6 more LDAs in Ukraine in the coming years.

## **EPIC-UP PROJECT – MIGRATION HUB**

EPIC-UP is an initiative funded by the AMIF programme of the European Union (EU) and coordinated by ALDA. It brings together 12 partner organisations and 13 associated partners from 8 different EU countries. The project will capitalise on the existing knowledge and know-how of the consortium working on migrant integration and inclusion to design an

enhanced model of multi-actor collaboration to develop, test and implement local integration strategies.

EPIC-UP is a project with the aim of developing and testing integration strategies for the inclusion of migrants at local level.

## **REAL DEAL PROJECT – CIVIC ENGAGEMENT HUB**

REAL DEAL sets out to stimulate a pan-European debate involving different stakeholder groups, with the aims of reshaping citizens' and stakeholders'

active participation and deliberation in the green and just transition. It brings together excellent research with experienced practitioners of deliberative

democracy from a wide range of disciplines including environmental rights and the law of public participation, ethics and responsible innovation, gender studies and ecofeminism, psychology, geography, urban planning

and applied sustainability studies. In a massive co-creating exercise, it will research, test and validate innovative tools, formats and processes for deliberative democracy.

## **WYDE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT- WOMEN AND YOUTH IN DEMOCRACY INITIATIVE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT – YOUTH HUB**

The Youth Participation in Public Affairs program of the EU, Women and Youth in Democracy initiativE Civic Engagement (WYDE Civic Engagement), is funded by the European Union. It aims to improve the enfranchisement, empowerment, and inclusion of youth in all levels of democratic participation at the national, regional, and global scales. WYDE Youth's three-pronged approach is informed by the need for youth engagement and inclusion not only at national level, but beyond and above it.

With half of the world's population being

under 30, the continued survival of democracy is highly dependent on buy-in and support among its youth.

The project will also implement 5 different projects called "Clusters", coordinated by the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD)'s members, and aimed at engaging young people active in public affairs, from civil society activists to politicians in an effort to empower them to advocate for more youth inclusion in society.

## **POLITIK-HER – GENDER HUB**

It aims to empower young women in developing cohesive, inclusive, and sustainable communities, through: multi-stakeholder roundtables, mentorship, and action plans to develop skills, knowledge, and confidence.

The project aims at empowering young women to drive change in their communities, by providing them with a supportive intercultural, inclusive, and sustainable learning environment. Doing so will increase leadership and

community project development, network building, communication skills,

personal branding, fundraising, and cross-cultural exchange.

## **GREENSCAPE CE – TERRITORIAL & LOCAL DEVELOPMENT**

Cities are growing in central Europe, often turning green areas into grey concrete places. This urban sprawl accelerates negative effects of climate change such as urban heat islands. The GreenScape-CE project works on reversing the trend by making urban areas greener again. The primary mission of the GreenScape CE project is to integrate nature-based solutions (NBS) and green infrastructure (GI) into grey urban environments, by using a multifaceted approach, involving peer-to-peer learning, transnational capacity building, and participatory decision-

making. What sets GreenScape CE apart is its innovative blend of nature-based solutions with traditional grey infrastructure, which promises to enhance urban resilience significantly.

The results of this endeavour will benefit local governments and citizens alike. Knowledge exchange, multi-level governance reinforcement, tailored capacity building events, and the implementation of NBS pilot actions are all geared toward improving well-being and fostering social inclusion.

## **Media4EU – DIGITAL HUB**

This project is dedicated to the improvement of media and journalism standards in the Republic of North Macedonia. The objectives of this project include helping to improve the quality of journalism in North Macedonia in a volatile time in which Euroscepticism is rising and journalistic standards are declining, which in turn can help to strengthen civil society and

bring about a more aware and responsible constituency. The ways in which more quality journalistic standards can be achieved with the project include directly working with journalists, helping to enhance the skills of young journalists, facilitating exchanges of expertise between more and less experienced journalists, including those from EU countries, and

considering modern European media quality standards. A problem to consider is the fact that youth are less represented in the journalism profession today due to a lack of trust, and as such, this project seeks to engage in activities that can help to encourage greater participation, such as training courses, workshops on tools such as Eurostat, teaching about analytical and scientific skills, and other practical activities. Another major goal is to improve the

general information environment in the country. Not only will that lead to better information being disseminated by the media, but also contribute to healthier public debate and thus a better policy-making environment. It is important to consider that fighting Euroscepticism and helping to increase the standards of journalism have a double effect in that national institutions are closer to the public and the European integration process is improved.

## SHARED GREEN DEAL – ENVIRONMENT HUB

SHARED GREEN DEAL brings together 22 leading organisations from across the EU that cover core elements of the European Green Deal cross cutting priorities such as civil society, democracy, gender, energy, environment, circular economy, and innovation. SHARED GREEN DEAL will span all EU Green Deal policy areas by (1) undertaking 6 streams of social experiments (each in 4 different EU or H2020-Associated countries; (2) conducting socio-cultural comparisons of collective practices and individual behaviours (and influences), across different European contexts; (3) developing an ambitious multi-stakeholder Shared Green Deal Network

and (4) providing both reactive policy insights for the short-term and proactive policy insights for the longer-term. The project's core goal is to stimulate shared actions on Green Deal initiatives across Europe, by providing Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) tools to support the implementation of 8 EU Green Deal policy areas, at the local and regional level.

Through the Project's broad membership-based network partners, social experiments in 24 European locations will be aligned with current strategic priorities of on-the-ground policy, NGO, business and citizen groups.

## Annexe 2: Key projects of LDAs

### **BOOST PROJECT - BALKANS FOR OPTIMISING OPPORTUNITIES, SUSTAINABILITY AND TRANSFORMATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY**

*LDA Kosovo, LDA Mostar, LDA Montenegro, LDA Zavidovići, LDA Prijedor, LDA Subotica, LDA Central and Southern Serbia*

Project aims to strengthen democratic, economic and social development of the WB region. This will be achieved through long-term program support for empowering civil society capacities in different thematic pillars: youth & entrepreneurship, rural development & environment, preservation of cultural heritage & community development. The cross-cutting priority is to promote active citizenship through participatory approaches and tools, and to encourage a gender perspective in all the programme's activities. The programme aims to strengthen the capacities of civil society organisations through: a) capacity building, b) financial supporting activities to CSOs in the three key thematic pillars; c) promoting networking within civil society and with

other key actors such as local authorities.

The project focuses on young people and especially young women and is aimed at strengthening their capacity for active participation in all the pillars described above. Project also aims to encourage greater engagement and effective cooperation among citizens and direct dialogue with decision-makers, at the local and national level. These actions help to strengthen transparent and responsive local governance structures, generating a positive impact on a regional scale. ALDA's network also reaches EU and in particular French partners and members, which have been involved with ALDA in the WB region, in several programmes for good local governance for more than two decades.

### **ACTIVITY REPORT OF THE LOCAL DEMOCRACY AGENCIES - 2023**

[www.bit.ly/LDA-report2023](http://www.bit.ly/LDA-report2023)

## Annexe 3: 20 years of Local Democracy

[www.bit.ly/ALDA20years](http://www.bit.ly/ALDA20years)



**TODAY, here is what we are running on a daily basis:**

**11** lines of action  
**54** countries where we are present & operating  
**5** offices (soon to be 7!)

**thousands** of activities  
**millions** of beneficiaries

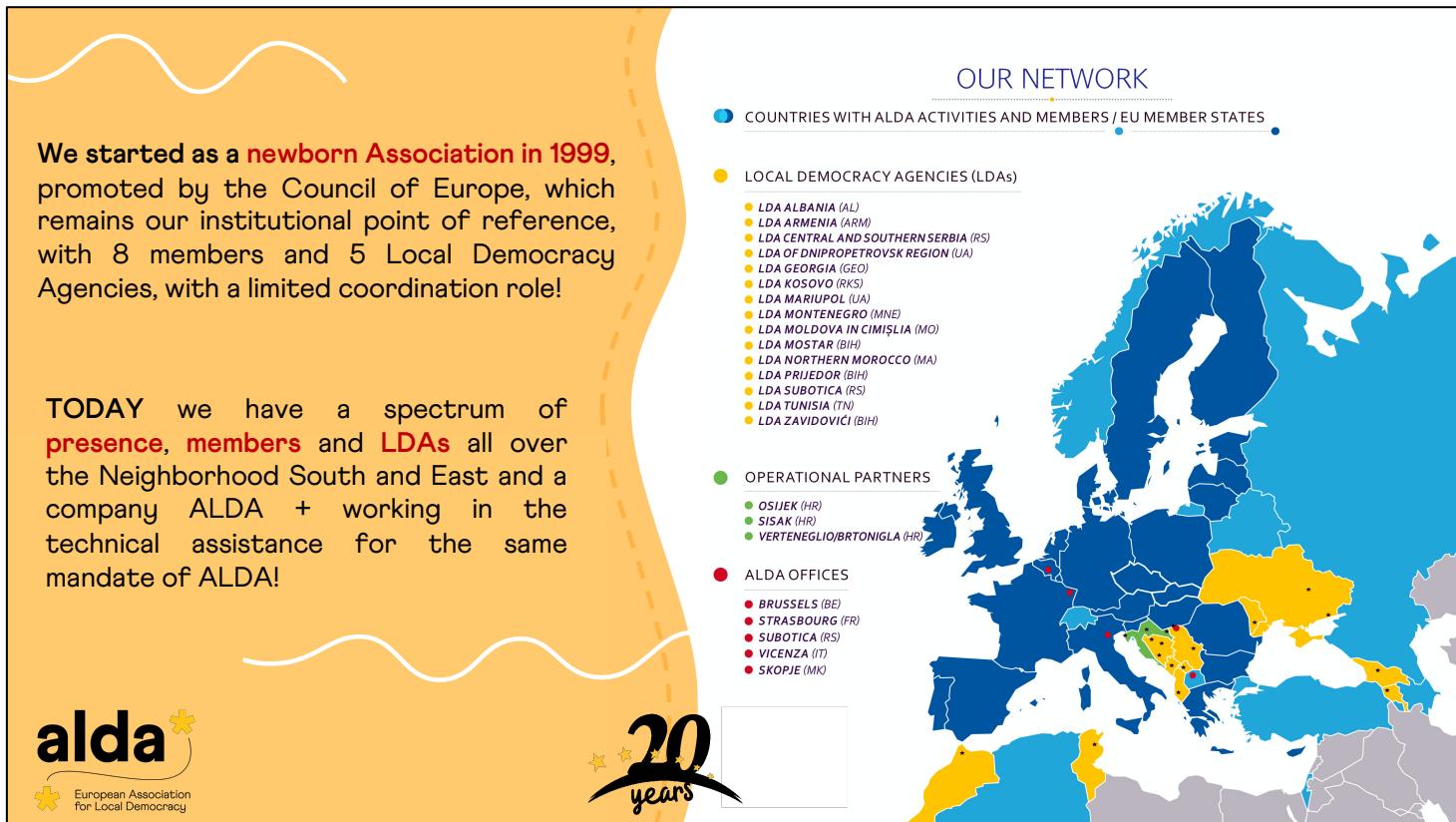
**15** LDAs, in 3 areas  
**300+** members  
**429** projects implemented

...since the establishment of ALDA



A well-recognised **worldwide organisation**, rooted in European experience of local democracy.  
*It did not happen overnight!*



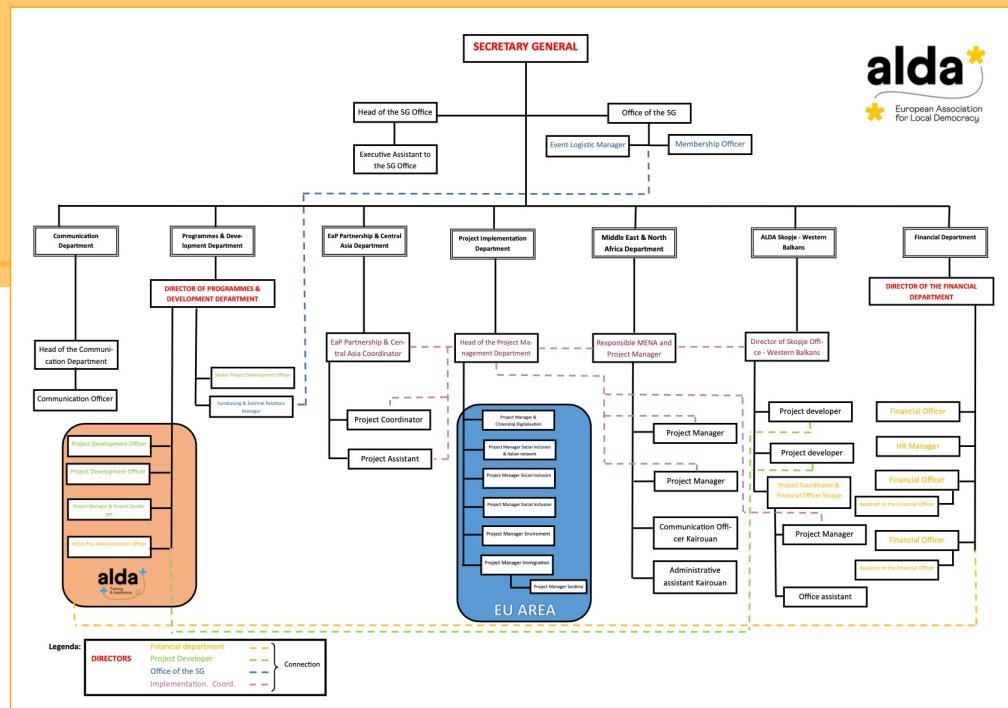


## ALDA's progress in figures

	1999	2009	2019
LDAs & OPs	5	11	18
Countries involved	5	30	54
Members	5	100	350+
Projects	0	102	429
Budget	0	10M	43M
Direct beneficiaries	0	61,000+	2M+



# ALDA's progress in people: the STAFF



## ALDA's progress in people: the GOVERNING BOARD

Governing Board elections were held in the years 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012 and 2016, and are soon to be renewed in 2020.

### Presidents of ALDA, so far:

- Gianfranco Martini
- Per Vinther
- Oriano Otocan, current president



## ALDA's progress in people: the **MEMBERS**

	1999	2009	2019
<b>Nr of ALDA members</b>	5	176	353
<b>Countries where members are based</b>	3	30	47

Empowerment of the **Ambassador programme**, where today we have **20 committed people**, with a dedicated staff member as well as dedicated programmes and support to members, focusing on regional and country approach. And then there are the **friends of ALDA**!



Having worked and collaborated successfully with ALDA over the past years we feel honoured to be able to continue to engage with ALDA on the various levels of operations"  
- Claudia Taylor East, SOS Malta (Malta)

## ALDA's **NETWORKS**



## ALDA's METHODOLOGY



## ALDA's METHODOLOGY



**Localized** action and participatory democracy

**Supporting** local authorities and civil society

Practical and long-term assistance and approach

Local Democracy Agencies LDAs

Research and policy-making

# ALDA's METHODOLOGY

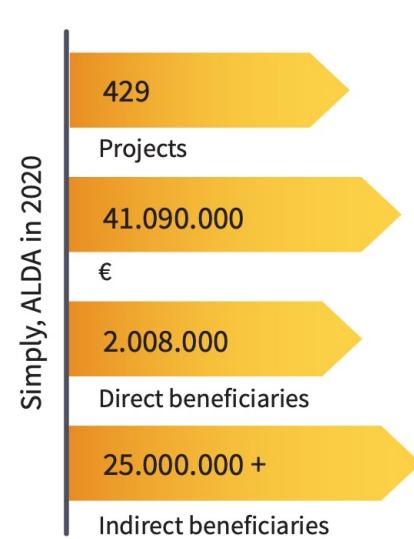
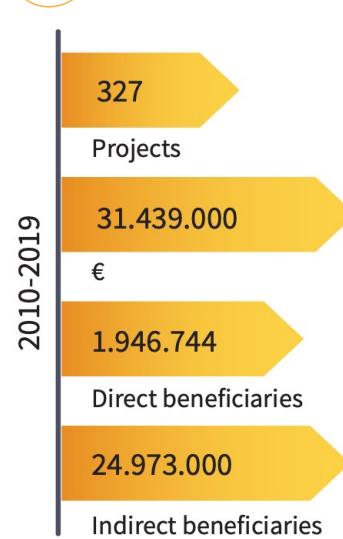
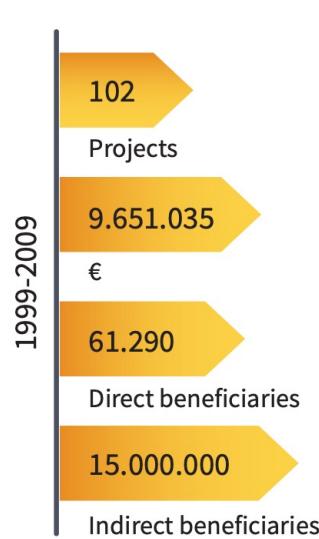


Local authorities	Civil Society
Methods of engaging with citizens and participatory democracy	Methods of engaging with local authorities
Develop plan of local development	Empowerment and sustainability plans
Participative urban regeneration	Advocacy
Environmental plans	Fundraising
Civil society engagement and animation	Engaging vulnerable groups
Functioning of local authorities and plans of support for staff and for local elected leaders	Being part of the local development processes and urban regeneration
Human rights approach and gender balance policies	Awareness and action for sustainability social, economic and environmental

## More on our developed Capacity Of Acting...

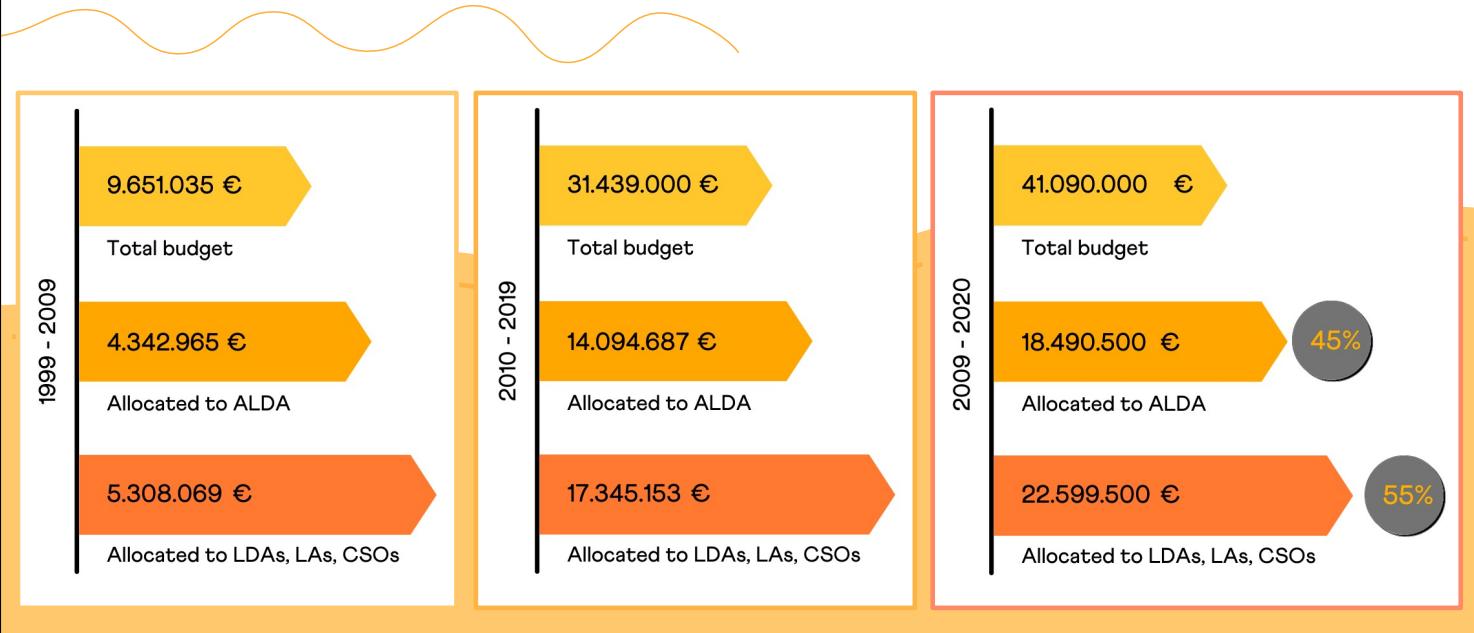


### PROJECTS' FRAMEWORK

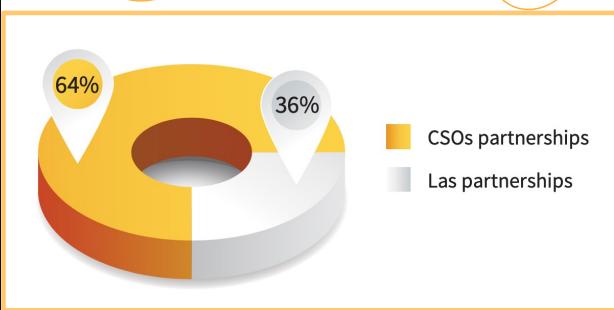


## More on our developed Capacity Of Acting...

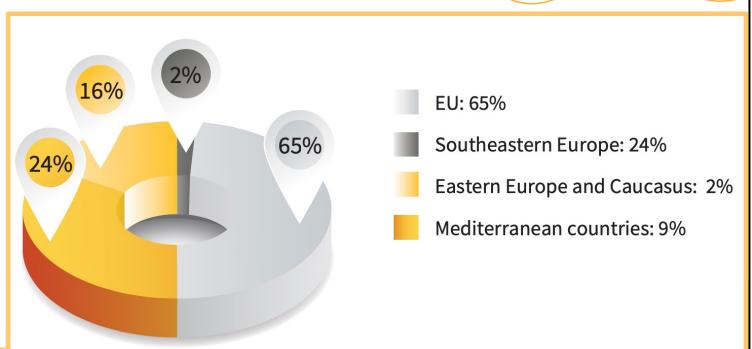
### BUDGET ALLOCATION



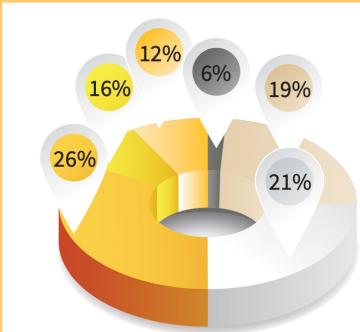
### PROJECT PARTNERS' COMPOSITION



### AREAS OF ACTIVITY



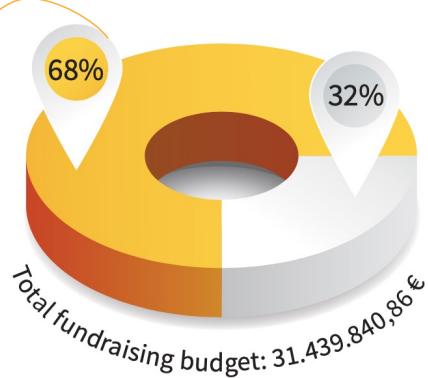
### MAIN THEMATIC LINES



■ Active citizenship: 26%  
 ■ Good local governance 21%  
 ■ Education 16%  
 ■ Youth 12%  
 ■ EU values and integration 6%  
 ■ Others 19%



## FUNDRAISING CAPACITY: A HUMAN APPROACH



Apart from European organs and emanations, ALDA has been working for several years with a **pool of donors**, among which:

Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS)	Normandy Region	Mercator Stiftung
French Development Agency (AFD)	Fons Menorqui	
United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF)	National Endowment for Democracy (NED)	
German Marshall Fund (GMF)	Gescod	Fonjep
		Swiss International Cooperation



## WHERE WE ARE HEADING TO?



Annexe 4: A Wealth of Expertise - Toolkit for Local Authorities to successfully engage citizens

[www.bit.ly/Wealth-of-Expertise](http://www.bit.ly/Wealth-of-Expertise)

Annexe 5: Local Democracy will save democracy

[www.bit.ly/ALDA-local-democracy](http://www.bit.ly/ALDA-local-democracy)

# alda\*



European Association  
for Local Democracy

## LOCAL DEMOCRACY WILL SAVE DEMOCRACY

JUNE 2023

Written by  
Daniela Ciaffi [1]



Citizens, Equality, Rights  
and Values programme





[1] Daniela Ciaffi drafted the theoretical framework and coordinated the whole document that was compiled by the staff of ALDA.

Daniela Ciaffi is Associate Professor in Urban Sociology at the Polytechnic of Turin and Vice-president of the Laboratory for horizontal subsidiarity Labsus".

The first part of the document draws from chapter 9 "City and politics: voting, participating, deciding, contributing" written by Daniela Ciaffi in the book "Contemporary cities: sociological perspectives" (D. Ciaffi, S. Crivello, A. Mela, 2020, Carocci, Rome).



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# Introduction

The present theoretical framework was presented during the General Assembly of ALDA - the European Association for Local Democracy - on the 8th of June 2023. It capitalises on the experience of ALDA and its members and partners and it is an attempt to contribute to the challenges posed to Democracy in Europe and in the world. It identifies instruments responding to the multiple crises and offers options to support European institutions, in their efforts to strengthen Democracy as a pillar for peace and development. The paper also highlights warnings that should be taken into consideration.

The document is structured in a first part of a theoretical framework and a second part that recounts the work of ALDA which makes concrete many theories on democracies, in the plural. Over the last few decades, ALDA – the European Association for Local Democracy - has accepted challenges of representative, participatory, deliberative and contributory democracy. The bigger open question is how to regenerate the electoral participation, that is in a very strong crisis from the point of view of the quantitative decline of voters but also because of the quality of participatory policies, starting from the crisis of internal participation in political parties.

The hypothesis that is presented in the paper, is that local democracy will save democracy, in the sense that at the local level, the democracy of “decisions” is implemented in a new way (deliberative democracy) and the democracy of “cooperation” (contributive democracy) are practiced, being complementary to the democracy of the vote (representative democracy).

# Framing the topic, a theoretical dimension of local democracy

We usually think that democracy was born in the Greek city-states around the sixth century BC, but this belief is both spatially and temporally inaccurate. Some studies reveal embryonic forms of democracy since the 3rd millennium BC. in ancient Mesopotamia. Further studies illustrate how forms of assembly to discuss topics of common interest were already in use in the northern European area around 2000 BC. In all probability, there are two reasons why classical Greece is commonly considered the cradle of democracy, and both are socio-spatial if we look carefully.

First: the term *polis* indicated both the built city and the way in which it was governed by the male and free citizens. Second: the urbanistic invention of the *agora* coincided with the place where one participated in local government, the square in the heart of the lower city where one met in assembly and was equal before the law, and where one could exercise the right to speak as if to keep silent.

What democracies do we experience, in different phases of history and in different contexts, as inhabitants of cities and territories? Throughout history, the term "democracy" has been accompanied by different adjectives. On the one hand, there are consolidated definitions, such as Athenian democracy, and representative. On the other hand, we find less known and more recent characterizations, such as participatory, deliberative, contributory democracy. The purpose of this contribution is to argue the thesis according to which local democracy will save democracy.

In this introduction we can't forget to mention Harriet Martineau (1837). She lived in the 19th century being one of the first sociologists in history, with severe deafness problems and simultaneously active listening to the voices of blacks and women.

Her paradigmatic warning was about a coeval enormous paradox, namely that the declaration of independence of the United States of America, the incipit of which had proclaimed the equality of all men in 1776, was not valid for women, i.e. for half of the human race.

As if to remind us that, when we speak about democracy, we always refer to theoretical ideals which do not in themselves provide a measure of the level of civilization of a society.

The warning that is always valid in the same way is that every time we talk about community, we must always think about the community in and the community out. When we talk about communities of beneficiaries of local public services we usually think of the most fragile and traditionally excluded subjects. But even when we talk about communities in action for the care of common goods, we must be vigilant in tackling mechanisms of exclusion.

The lack of access to rights adds to the emerging problem of the practice of the rights by those who already obtained them. When we talk about representative democracy, there are two questions. Who has the right to vote, and who doesn't? Who could vote but don't vote (anymore), and why? The fact that more and more people in the world are moving to live and work in urbanized contexts means that we are increasingly asking questions about specific issues of urban democracy.

If the heart of representative democracy is the right to vote, the rights on which attention is focused in the study of the local democratic experience of citizens, according to the different urban contexts in which they live, are also others: for example, the one to participate in decisions on urban transformations or to take care of some common spaces. The assignment of one's preference to whoever is running for mayor and to the various local political roles, however, has more and more to do with experiences other than voting, but which have an impact on it.

A famous article by Sherry Arnstein dates back to 1969, in which a "ladder of citizens' participation" is developed in order to help citizens become aware of manipulative and misleading political rhetoric. She focused on the management of power from the bottom-up questioning the top-down logic of electoral objectives. The incipit of this article referred to the heated controversy over contemporary policies for the inclusion of low-income individuals. Provocatively the author states that :

*"The idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: no one is against it in principle because it is good for you. Participation of the governed in their government is, in theory, the cornerstone of democracy-a revered idea that is vigorously applauded by virtually everyone.*

*The applause is reduced to polite handclaps, however, when this principle is advocated by the have-not blacks, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Indians, Eskimos, and whites. And when the have-nots define participation as redistribution of power, the American consensus on the fundamental principle explodes into many shades of outright racial, ethnic, ideological, and political opposition. [...] In short: What is citizen participation and what is its relationship to the social"*

This same attitude of advocacy of the rights of the inhabitants is also well represented by Jane Jacobs, author of the well-known book "The Death and Life of Great American Cities", an essay on metropolis published in the United States in 1961. The object of her reflection is the vitality of cities in relation to a human centered design, starting from the quality of the (im)possible proximity relationships between the inhabitants, urban public spaces and the size of the blocks. Particular attention was paid to the social role of streets (safe or dangerous) and neighborhoods (regenerated or poor).

Where are we in Europe, more than half a century after these reflections, on the other side of the ocean? In our reconstruction of the recent history of participatory processes (Ciaffi and Mela, 2011), both the 1980s represented a phase of individualistic involution and the 1990s, on the contrary, a participatory culture of urban and territorial transformations was taken and relaunched.

A particular push in this direction has been given by the European urban regeneration policies. Thanks to European policies and programmes, many deprived areas have been redeveloped physically and accompanied the social work. These pilot experiences have also been encouraged towards a reciprocal comparison of approaches, exchange of methodologies for action-research (Lewin, 1946), circulation of best practices, transfer of so-called "good policies".

Where do the families of social actions on which participatory processes focus in terms of communication, events, consultation and empowerment "land", so to speak?

According to the theory of the ecology of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), each of us moves in concentric ecological niches that extend from the spaces of our most intimate and private life towards semi-public places, through public places that we know more or less well, gradually up to known supra-local spaces and those we do not know. The virtual sphere, as we know, runs through them all.

When a participatory process of social and spatial transformation is locally launched, it is interesting to ask oneself about these different places as training grounds for democracy. It is clear that it is on a local scale that these democratic experiences are practiced or are not.

The measure of the success or failure of a project is given first of all by the inhabitants, because "people vote with their feet": it is precisely with their presence, as well as with their absence, that they express an opinion on the places, and on the choices of transformation of spaces, as well as services, and their social innovation.

From the roof of the Lyon opera house in France to the traceable waste cycle in Boston-USA, the transition takes place from the interactivity of the technological architectural object to technology as a widespread tool for society. The goal then became not only the behavioral changes but also the social monitor of local urban policies, both cultural and environmental. The input of the designers, in both cases, remains the starting point.

It is different for those experiences born spontaneously around **digital platforms to support social aggregation**, as in the case of the self-organization of the inhabitants in social streets. But cities are increasingly intelligent and less equitable. Urban areas are in most cases at the same time more and more populated by homogeneous groups that do not communicate with each other. The inhabitants are individuals increasingly encapsulated in isolated private spaces, often with pathological consequences for their health.

In the new millennium, the digital revolution and the economic crisis together open the doors to the economic and social concept of sharing, understood as an alternative to possession and consumption. One of the most extraordinary experiences of global reach takes place virtually. The sharing of knowledge through a single web platform. In parallel, the symbolic metropolis of the Western avant-garde began to populate with shared transport services where the priority is no longer to own a car or a bicycle, but to be able to use them.

Beyond the services offered by subjects such as Wikipedia and the number of bike and car sharing operators, it is extremely interesting to note how, in the daily life of millions of citizens, some goods and services are once again conceived as commonly used, even before than as public and private goods and services.

The sharing city, in a similar way to the smart city, is among the most powerful contemporary rhetoric, in the sense that public discourse uses it to prefigure a possible future of cities and territories, or its opposite. In any case substantially empty keywords often arrive to citizens, and scholars can recognize some obscure sides (Mela, 2013).

There are, on the contrary, experiences that fill these keywords with meaning, enriching themselves with intellectual commitment and regaining civil and moral sense. The reference is to ways of acting and behaving that break out routines and make the city and the territories leaders of change. In terms of sharing, it is important to note that more and more citizens share actions to take care of the city and the territory, so as to arrive at theorizing that, in response to the crisis, a caring society has in fact formed (Nakano, 2000). The challenge is that private problems confined to the children, the women, the migrants, the sick and the elderly, become collective issues that concern everyone.

Rather than representing an alternative to the society of mass consumption, it is likely that the caring society coexists in hybrid forms. The bottom-up responses that cross the traditional local welfare system are constantly increasing the number of "hybrid and shared services" (Ciaffi, 2020) whereby classic health services become cultural and health services or public and private educational places are open to anyone and used as neighborhood houses or gardens after the end of school hours (Labsus, 2023). This is the case in the transition towns movement, where the stated objective on the web is the creation of a network between people who have experienced the benefits of joining forces to take care of themselves, their community and their planet.

Frequently these communities begin to experiment with forms of circular economy in order to do this, for example by beating alternative currency in their neighborhood, as in the case of the Brixton pound in the suburbs of London, while living in a reality that is still mostly organized according to the logic of the free market.

This passage from ideas to actions is the link among these effervescent experiences oriented towards a caring society: in the case of cities in transition, for example, daily behaviors change towards a sustainable lifestyle and a no-oil world.

At the same time, the third sector moves to a leading position from a traditionally marginal one compared to the public and private sector, starting from the unfortunate denomination: residual indeed, compared to the first two. Contributing to take care and jointly defining the general interest are increasingly becoming activities not only reserved for public officials. Still rarely, however, the instruments of administrative law are included among the factors accelerating change in the government of the city and the territory, while these can be central. The municipality of Bologna in Italy, followed by hundreds of other local administrations, adopted in 2014 a regulation for the **shared administration of the commons**.

This regulation puts into practice, through the device of the **collaboration agreement**, the principle of **Horizontal Subsidiarity** introduced in the Italian Constitution in 2001 through the article 118, last paragraph: «The State, Regions, Metropolitan Cities, Provinces and Municipalities favor the autonomous initiative of citizens, single or associated, for carrying out activities of general interest, on the basis of the principle of subsidiarity».

The seven thousand collaboration agreements stipulated in Italy (Labsus, 2022) are an important sign of what has been called "**contributory democracy**" (Barbot et al., 2016), in which marginal groups and subjects acquire a leading role, often excluded from representation (such as undocumented foreigners or children) but also from **participatory processes top-down governed** (such as street dwellers or football supporters).

A very important difference is that, unlike a concession that is concluded in an authoritative form between the public responsible and the citizens' association, the collaboration pact is always open to new contractors, thus favoring the social mix increasingly rare in our society. In the majority of cases, the collaboration pact is an agreement that is stipulated with the technical staff of the local public administration, and not with the political one, thus overcoming the party label of some projects which too often end with the closing of the political cycle that signed them.

Administrative innovation, which is making possible a season of extraordinary collaboration in Italy between public, private and third sector entities, can be inscribed in a more general trend that we can recognize in the western panorama.

**Community activism** increasingly works as a forerunner for more equal and less authoritative local public policies (Gallent, Ciaffi, 2014).

Since the 2000s, the hypotheses about the void left by party politics has been filled by other subjects became increasingly frequent, including millions of people involved in associations, committees, campaigns, movements, to carry out what is defined as "spread politics" (Marcon, 2005). Can the modern liquid society, i.e. individualized, privatized, uncertain, flexible, insatiable and vulnerable (Bauman, 2000), still have some hope of reconsolidating from the local bottom-up energies?

One issue that we think is central to the city as a **democratic laboratory** is the definition of general interest. To pick up where we started from, in fact, if the birth of democracy is commonly associated with Pericles' Athens, Robespierre's Paris is the place to which the idea of modern democracy is associated.

Decades before the French Revolution, it was Rousseau (1762) who developed the concept of general interest, which replaced that of the common good during the second half of the eighteenth century. Before, it was the so-called "community rights" that guaranteed all inhabitants access to water, pastures and other resources. The commons therefore have their origins in very ancient forms of rights.

And yet, although the commons have recently returned to the public debate (Coriat, 2015 and 2020), they are not contemplated in our categories of law, where instead every right is defined under the two categories of public and private goods. Similarly, public and private interests are very well defined, while the general interest is a concept that appears only in some national constitutions, including the Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and American ones. In any case, the fundamental question for those who observe and interpret the (power) dynamics between urban actors is: who, in our democracies, defines the general interest?

To return with an anecdotal parenthesis to the history of the French Revolution, the concept of general interest showed all its degenerative risks for the first time when it was embodied by Robespierre alone, convinced that he knew what was the general will and the good of all. The historical result was the time of Terror!

We could interpret the 2008 financial crisis in a similar way, when all the limits of an idea of general and global interest based on growth were manifested, according to a definition given by an alliance between the public sphere and private finance. Cities and their inhabitants were the first victims of the crisis, which primarily involved the urban real estate market.

But the first reactions came from the cities, because urban ecosystems are the place of choice for experimenting with local models as alternatives to government models. Networks of cities (in transition, which have adopted the regulation for the shared administration of common goods, virtuous municipalities, etc.) are examples of places where the concept of general interest is reworked in an original and creative way, while ministries of the Economy substantially continue to make it coincide with growth in terms of GDP (Haëntjens, 2012) :

*“While states are exhausted chasing after growth that is spurring them, some cities are posting insolent progress, and attracting residents, businesses and talent alike. At a time when States are postponing their environmental policies, they are investing massively in ecology and energy independence. When national leaders are systematically disavowed, the mayors of these cities are regularly re-elected. These cities have a secret: they are interested in satisfactions and resources before being interested in wealth. They have perfected a method which, sooner or later, will be imposed on States.”*

*(Jean Haëntjens, 2012)*

Is asking who defines the general interest very different from asking who is responsible for public policy? Yes, and the European Union knows this well when it defines services of general interest as those services that can be provided by the State or the private sector. Examples of services of general interest include: public transport, postal services and healthcare.

These services of general interest are divided into three categories – economic, non-economic and social – and may variously be subject to laws rather than market rules. In particular, social services of general interest are those that respond to the needs of vulnerable citizens. They are based on the principles of solidarity and equal access; they can be both economic and non-economic in nature, for example social security and employment services or social housing.

The theme that seems to emerge with increasing clarity is that the definition of the general interest must emerge from the sole responsibility of political decision makers and, more generally, from the bipolar scheme on the basis of which the social body is governed by a political head: from on one side the voters who are passively governed, on the other side the elected ones who actively govern.

This paradigm is questioned by the most recent practices of contributory democracy, locally based on the reversal of the bipolar paradigm into one based instead on the sharing of administrative responsibilities, on an equal footing, between those who govern and those who are governed (Arena, 2020).

The local level is the ecosystem in which the inhabitants have direct experience – sometimes violent and traumatizing – of feeling different and therefore marginalized and excluded from any type of political decision. In urban contexts, economic inequalities and social, but also environmental, injustices take physical form in ghetto neighborhoods, degraded areas, areas with inadequate or absent services, such as schools, hospitals, public transport, green areas.

On the one hand, these suburbs (which are sometimes found in central urban areas) are easy targets for electoral promises, if not a direct source of illegal mechanisms to encourage vote buying and selling. On the other hand, in some virtuous cases, these same areas of degradation have become emblematic of urban regeneration processes based on pluralistic and inclusive participatory processes, founded on the right to participate (participatory democracy); deliberative paths, based on the right to decide (deliberative democracy); tangible and intangible care actions, based on the right to contribute (contributory democracy).

# Local Democracy

ALDA implements various forms of citizen engagement locally on various themes and topics. To respond to some of the questions, we have selected key cases or samples of our activities, to make the concept and the lessons learned and messages clearer.

## Why?



### BECAUSE WE NEED PARTICIPATION!

*“Let us not question why some people want to dominate. Instead, let us ask ourselves how things work at the level of the processes that subjugate our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviors”.*

*Michel Foucault*

Participation and citizen engagement is an absolute need to respond to complex and integrated societies.

The need for participation is clear for several reasons.

The first one is that the public sector needs more resources. The evidence shows that no municipal, regional or sub regional level have enough resources for the tasks assigned, even in the legislative context of high decentralization with a consequent level of transfer of resources and responsibilities. No mayor, no president of a province or region, would ever say that they have enough resources. And this is clear to everyone since the city and the local community is the place where all the problems and issues “land” and needs to be addressed, going from housing, post industrialization, urban transformation of some areas of immigration as well as areas which are entirely losing population.

The task of cities and local communities are always bigger than what the public sector could perform. Therefore, we need a constant multiplication of resources that are to be found in a **profound and substantial** partnership with citizens and civil society, which can contribute with trust, time, connections, resources and engagement, in their turn.

The second reason is the need for public affairs and sectors to adapt to a complex and quick global transformation. Both at the societal level and in economic terms, the mandate assigned to local political bodies (usually 4 or 5 years) is too long to again engage in a dialogue only through elections. Therefore, the dialogue must take place constantly for changing situations and for new deliberations and scenarios. Politics that *per se* decide without interacting in policy making with citizens and society is deemed to fail.

Complex society needs complex governance. It is globally clear and not only in the West World or in Europe. Each community interacts with different cultural elements, including internet and modernity but also archaic tradition or strong religious influence. In this context, simple governance models strive to work but non-cooperation with civil society will bring (is bringing) to an authoritarian model of governance that runs after the “control of the uncontrollable”. Democracy in a complex society is to be a participative democracy, to take into consideration all possible elements composing society and communities.



Citizens are asking for more participation and have ambitious goals. Participation is needed because... it is also requested. Citizens in most countries are asking for being heard and for having a role to play in decision-making processes affecting their lives. They are less and less inclined to accept that a decision is made against their own interest without being engaged. The sense of awareness of civil society and citizens, makes participation in democracy an absolute need.

In a world that is rediscussing its model of governance, including economic and social relationship, local democracy can give a strong contribution to save democracy as a model of deliberation and respect for everyone's views with capacity for conflict mediation and solution.

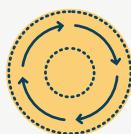
ALDA has contributed to strengthening citizens' participation at the local level since its establishment in 1999. Based on its practice and analysis it contributed to, among others:



Development of the Code of Good Practice Civil participation of the Council of Europe and its implementation;



Elaboration and implementation the European Support for Local Democracy;



Definition of the priorities of the programme Europe for Citizens (civil society and twinning of towns) for 14 years engaging more than 25 million people, implementing actions in different fields of local democracy and citizens engagement, like migration, environment and sustainability, human rights and fight against discrimination, digitalization, local economic development and youth;



Promotion of the participative models in the Balkans, Eastern Europe, Mediterranean area, Turkey and beyond);



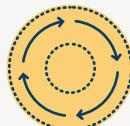
Promotion and coordination of the European Year of Citizens in 2013;



Democracy recommendations for the Civil Society Convention in the Conference on the Future of Europe 2021-2022;



Dissemination of the Charter of Direct Democracy;



Chairing of the Jury of the European Capital of Democracy;



Representation of the local democracy component in the community of the European Partnership for Democracy.

ALDA has implemented more than 500 projects on local democracy and citizens engagement in Europe and beyond. The organization is an accredited agency for the assessment of **Eloge of the Council of Europe**, including benchmarks on good local and inclusive governance.

The experience of ALDA shows that the concept of democracy at the local level and its added value overcome the geographic barriers and topics and methodologies could be appropriate to many political and social contexts, with an approach which could be very similar .



## WARNINGS

- 1** The need to participate is not always explicitly perceived because it may have been neutered, it may not be part of the education received or it may never have been first-hand experience.
- 2** Participants are not always all adults, male, white, educated, employed, digitally connected, of the prevailing religions in the Western world, etc.
- 3** It is necessary to recognize the contexts in which even basic information is lacking from the more advanced ones, in which even rather complex consultation actions can be perceived as trivial.
- 4** Animation actions almost always encourage participation, for example by sharing music, food, play-role and collective rituals it is possible to speak a language not only verbal but also of the body and emotions.
- 5** There are big differences between policies for local development and Not In My Back Yard localist measures.
- 6** For every “community-in” there is always a “community-out”. It is therefore always necessary to keep a close watch on the conditions of access and openness of participatory processes, even the most pluralistic and inclusive ones.

# Who?



## CIVIC POWER, GIRL POWER, YOUNG POWER!

*"No one frees anyone,  
no one frees themselves:  
we free ourselves together"*

*Paulo Freire*

Local democracy is a key factor for democratic transition, stabilization and development. It is fully implemented thanks to the empowerment of civil society groups and citizens working together with LAs to solve local problems and shape the future through engagement and participation. Catching up to challenges like the COVID 19 pandemic and other global challenges (environment, democracy, migrations and demography), civic initiatives at the local level are fundamental from a social and economic point of view, to build and rebuild resilient and successful communities. Indeed, with CSOs and citizens playing an active role, collective processes allow to: bring solutions effectively responding to community's needs and challenges; generate community's welfare difficult to be reached with strategies mainly based on the public services provision; positively strengthen the relationship between local authorities and citizens, and thus re-building trust towards public bodies. In this view, with 40 EU funded projects and 750 implemented activities in 27 European countries, ALDA based its mission and success on decentralisation and horizontal subsidiarity, empowering local communities in all aspects of the public life, to make their voice heard through engagement and participation.

Among other target groups, ALDA is committed to promoting gender equity and avoiding all forms of discrimination, which are key values of several projects ALDA implemented throughout the years. For instance, "Empowering Women in Local Authorities", WEMIN and PARFAIT, were all projects involved in the thematic of women empowerment and participation, while GET UP and WOM-COM had a focus on Gender Equality.

In line with the international and European policy priorities on youth, among its prior thematic, ALDA invests in young citizens' empowerment to shape a better future, with a particular attention on vulnerable groups.

Here below the most relevant focuses:

**Young people and social inclusion:** supporting young people through youth work, with particular attention to disadvantaged groups (NEETs, returnees, young women, young migrants, etc. ) and young people living in rural areas not to be left behind, to provide them with relevant skills and knowledge, to make them aware and active citizens, to raise their awareness on social and economic issues, and to benefit from existing mobility, job, and formal and non-formal education opportunities;

**Young people and digital transition:** enhancing education opportunities to strengthen youngsters' hard and soft skills; promoting interactive, digital and dynamic tools (gaming, social media) to proactively engage young citizens, to prevent social exclusion and to ensure digital accessibility and inclusiveness (digital transition for all); also, promoting virtual reality as a tool to prevent social exclusion and to enhance social interaction;

**Young people and green transition:** raising awareness, improving education and knowledge level on the main climate, energy and environment priorities, and exchanging good practices.

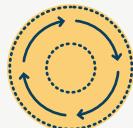


A specific focus is given to the active engagement of young people in the decision-making process, as the definition of the main youth policy agendas and priorities is key at international, national and local level. Indeed, in the upcoming 2024 EU elections, ALDA is running several EU funded initiatives to act not merely on enthusiastic young citizens, but especially on skeptical and ambivalent citizens who are less supportive and not particularly engaged. The ultimate goal is thus to involve the hard-to-reach groups in order to confirm the positive trend of the last EU Parliament elections; this will positively affect the democratic setting in the national contexts too, with a positive impact on future scenarios at national and international level.

ALDA includes a panoply of instruments supporting local democracy through a civil society viewpoint, such as projects, initiatives, expertise, and contributing to:



Creating rooms for dialogue, as spaces and infrastructure for discussions and decisions by citizens, taking different forms, consultative committee, citizens' assembly, agora etc. An example is the **Scintilla project**, a 2-year consultative process aimed at promoting the re-qualification of a neighbourhood of Vicenza (IT) by involving its inhabitants in the decision-making process regarding its future; at increasing the sense of community and local dialogue between citizens and the local stakeholders involved, to come up with a plan for the requalification of the neighbourhood. It resulted in a document encompassing structural urban regeneration proposals and social inclusion initiatives;



Supporting LAs in building strategic partnerships with civil society organizations and umbrella organizations at European level, to rely on expertise for training policy makers, planning and leading participatory processes, connecting with citizens etc.

ALDA coordinated a successful project called EPIC, funded by the EU, in which multilevel governance and multi stakeholder approach has been promoted and applied to foster LAs and CSO cooperation when it comes to deal with migration issues and challenges. As results: 5 MoU have been signed between 5 European cities and their local CSOs to work together on integration policy-making and migrants' involvement; 1 international network made of EU CSOS and LAs to develop common initiatives and advocacy; 4 narrative campaigns to counteract negative migrants' perception; 8 local participatory paths in 8 EU countries;



Building the capacity of policy makers, CSOs about planning, implementing, evaluating and capitalizing participatory processes to engage citizens in the governance process.

ALDA has consequently adapted its strategies pushing forward for raising the awareness and training of the European citizens on all the above-mentioned topics and much more and also engaging itself for being a valuable bridge between citizens, local communities, local authorities and the organised civil society towards the European Institutions and the international community;



Running collective and participatory processes through art, gaming, sport etc. to engage citizens in the debate of the most relevant international challenges. STAR - STreet ARt is a 2-year European funded project co-coordinated by ALDA, and aimed at tackling intolerance and isolation of groups of people, in marginalised areas of European cities, by using the power of street art in order to raise awareness about the importance of solidarity and coexistence of plural attitudes and cultures. Through a bottom-up approach promoting local citizens' participation, 14 murals have been realized in 14 European cities expressing EU values;



Boosting political participation by developing solutions for and with citizens. A concrete example the “TALE - TAKE the Lead in the EU Elections” coordinated by ALDA, and aimed to reach and engage a greater number of voters, reduce the gap of voters turnout among the various EU member states, and, through participatory processes, activate and empower them to play an active role and thus vote in the next European parliamentary elections in 2024;



Boosting women empowerment in politics. A successful example to mention is the PARFAIT’s goal was to improve female participation in local governance in Tunisia, which was notably low when the project was launched back in 2017. The realization of the objective was achieved thanks to several innovative actions that engaged different actors, from Local Authorities to media all down to local CSOs, female activists and women elected locally.





## WARNINGS

1

The most common mistake of youth policies is that they are not designed by young people. On the other hand, unique, original and surprising inputs emerge from interaction experiences with children and young people who are truly at the center of policy planning.

2

Gender homogeneity is certainly appropriate in some phases of particular participatory processes, but separate clubs of women only or men only contrast with the idea of a mixed society that is the cornerstone of participatory democracy.

3

Compared to public and private subjects, civil society is a much less defined collective subject, which is sometimes indicated as a third party with respect to the other two, with a nuance of minor importance. On the contrary, in participatory processes, the civic energies that emanate from below are often the real drivers of change.

4

The more time passes, the more social innovators criticize the fact that it is not only projects for young people, women, civil society groups to be supported. They emphasize above all that policy makers have to work with them in a peer-to-peer process, funding the organizations set up by them and not just the projects that advance.

# What?



## INFORMATION, COMMUNICATION, EDUCATION, DIGITAL CONSULTATION AND PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACTS

*“E-topia: urban life, Jim,  
but not as we know it”*

*William Mitchell*

ALDA implements numerous types of projects in order to support local communities and implement local democracy. An aspect of it is here tackled. Since the turn of **globalisation**, these have been intense years for the spread and use of digital technologies that have shortened 'physical' distances and substantially changed the perception of the sense of belonging, historically much more rooted to places. The exponential use of digital technology for everyday exchange in the professional sphere, but in personal situations as well, has led to the creation of real digital communities based on the sharing of values and methodologies, even without there ever being an actual face-to-face meeting.

Digital transition is nowadays one of the main pillars in the shaping process of our society, not only at the European level but also worldwide, especially following the limits and needs shown off by the global pandemic of COVID-19.

Amplified by the **COVID wave**, recent studies are delving into the socio-cultural and psychological implications of this new digital paradigm, especially its impact on the younger generations, in paving the way to an inclusive development of new forms of participation and means of information able to guarantee a democratic, inclusive and informed participation.

Undoubtedly, in terms of values and human rights, it has enormous potential to give space and voice to demands that otherwise would have remained less expressed and heard. It is highly recognised as digitalisation is an opportunity for involving communities closer to the local governments and how new technologies can make democracy more representative and participative.



ALDA's methodology could be synthesised in key pillars:



Localised action for consultation, education and awareness raising, or empowerment of citizens and vulnerable groups by empowering EU citizens to make informed decisions, by fighting disinformation in the democratic debate, engaging citizens mainly young people in innovative way, in order to raise awareness on EU Values using new communication and visibility tools;



Supporting local authorities and civil society for improving their collaboration and space of dialogue, empowering them and engaging them for assuming an active role in the local development processes;



Practical and long-term assistance and capacity building approach, in order to spread competences and methods in a **participatory and democratic environment**. In this sense, digital transformation is a challenge and, at the same time, an opportunity. Therefore, using digital tools in a meaningful way to help citizens, with a democratic and inclusive approach, is paramount.





## WARNINGS

1

In terms of consultation, the opportunities offered by e-participation and e-voting systems are certainly many, but the issue of those who do not have access to the web has always to be stressed, along with the fact that the online participants stop exercising the face to face dialogue with people different from them and tending to isolate themselves in a bubble of those that agree with them.

2

E-participation has ways and times that are very different from the participation in the presence. For example, virtual advocacy groups - not carrying out face-to-face meetings in parallel - often catch fire on social platforms as quickly as they go out of it.

3

It is quite easy to create digital participatory platforms (especially when there is no ambitions of independence from the big global players and rely on them) but often these initiatives overlap with existing similar ones, with the risk of stressing people who are asked to participate in projects that can be integrated but who do not communicate with each other.

# Where?



## LOCAL DEMOCRACY AGENCIES

*“Rules should fit local circumstances. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to common resource management.*

*Rules should be dictated by local people and local ecological needs [...] Commons need the right to organise. Your commons rules won’t count for anything if a higher local authority doesn’t recognise them as legitimate”*

*Elinor Ostrom*

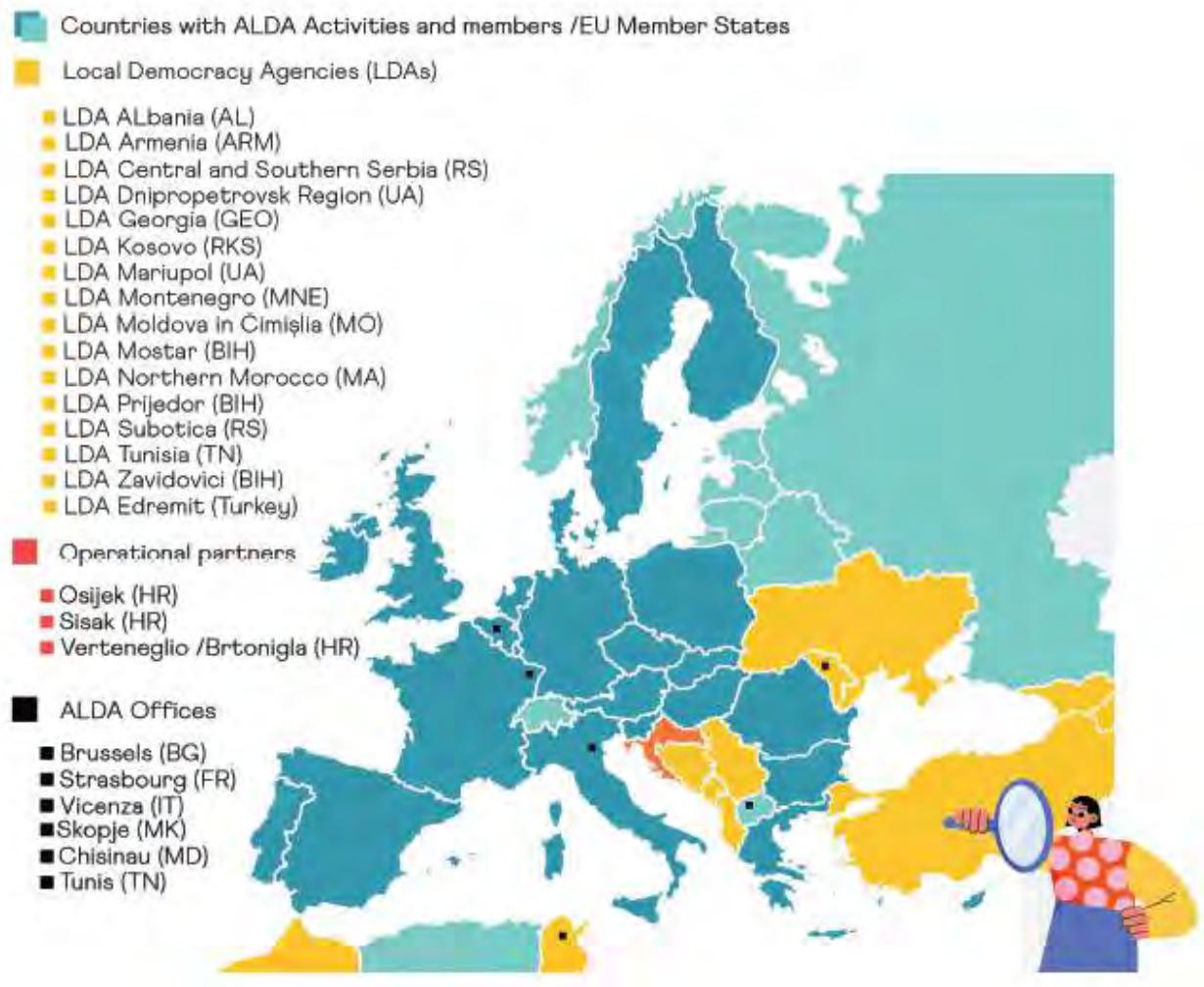
ALDA works in local communities all over Europe and beyond. It focuses on small and medium- size communities, also with a territorial approach (see the territorial approach to local development, i.e. TALD). A specific action localized is the programme outside the EU and mainly (so far) in the neighborhood, the Local Democracy Agencies programme.

ALDA coordinates and supports the network of 15 Local Democracy Agencies (LDAs) in their activities. Initiated by the Council of Europe in the early '90s, the LDAs represent a unique and successful experiment of democratic support, with full engagement of local governments and civil society organizations from Europe and the neighboring countries. Today we celebrate 30 years of activities of the LDAs in the Balkans. The LDAs are locally based organizations, funded and supported by both local partners and international associates with a long-term joint program providing financial and political support to fulfill their mandate and to accompany local democracy and civil society empowerment.

Indeed, **partnership-building** is a crucial aspect for each LDA, as their work is based on the innovative method of multilateral decentralized cooperation. The LDAs are also operational in the field of city diplomacy. Each LDA is locally registered and works with local staff coordinated by ALDA.

Local Democracy Agencies are recognised by the Congress as an instrument for promoting city diplomacy and long-term support, also in view of peacebuilding and future accession to the EU (Resolution 257/251 – 2008 - recognizing LDAs as an instrument of City Diplomacy).

On a yearly basis, the LDAs receive from ALDA's Governing Board, the label of the LDA after assessment of their report of activities, actions plans, partnership support, and sustainability. They are built on local partnership (the local city or region supports logically the local office also with activities) with local authorities and civil society engagement. They also engage European partners that contribute with a partnership for supporting local staff and then engage in activities that are funded by ALDA and its partners.





The partnership of the Local Democracy Agencies is the backbone of the activities of ALDA in Ukraine, especially after the full fledged invasion. After a year of difficult management, due to the ongoing war, is bringing back activities into tracks aiming, on one hand, at further strengthening and consolidating (given the circumstances) the existing LDAs in Dnipro and Mariupol and, on the other hand, at opening new LDAs in other regions of Ukraine.



The Local Democracy Agencies in Ukraine are an instrument of stabilization and cohesion in a community that is torn by the conflict. The communities need help, support and medium long term support, accompanied towards unity. ALDA has been active in Ukraine since the beginning of the invasion also thanks to its clear political stand and for supporting humanitarian support within the country and in Europe.





## WARNINGS

1

Keeping on quoting the Nobel Prize Elinor Ostrom: “Commons work best when nested within larger networks. Some things can be managed locally, but some might need wider regional cooperation – for example an irrigation network might depend on a river that others also draw on upstream”.

2

Local development accompaniment must think about what happens after the accompaniment itself, in terms of empowerment of local actors. Otherwise, there will be an unhealthy dependency on professional facilitators, who will try to maintain their niche participation market.

# When?



## MILESTONES OF ALDA AND BUILDING TODAY'S EUROPE

*"For the first time in its history, this Parliament is debating the state of our Union as war rages on European soil.*

*This is a war against our energy security, against our economy, against our values and against our future. A war of autocracy against democracy."*

*Ursula Von Der Leyen*

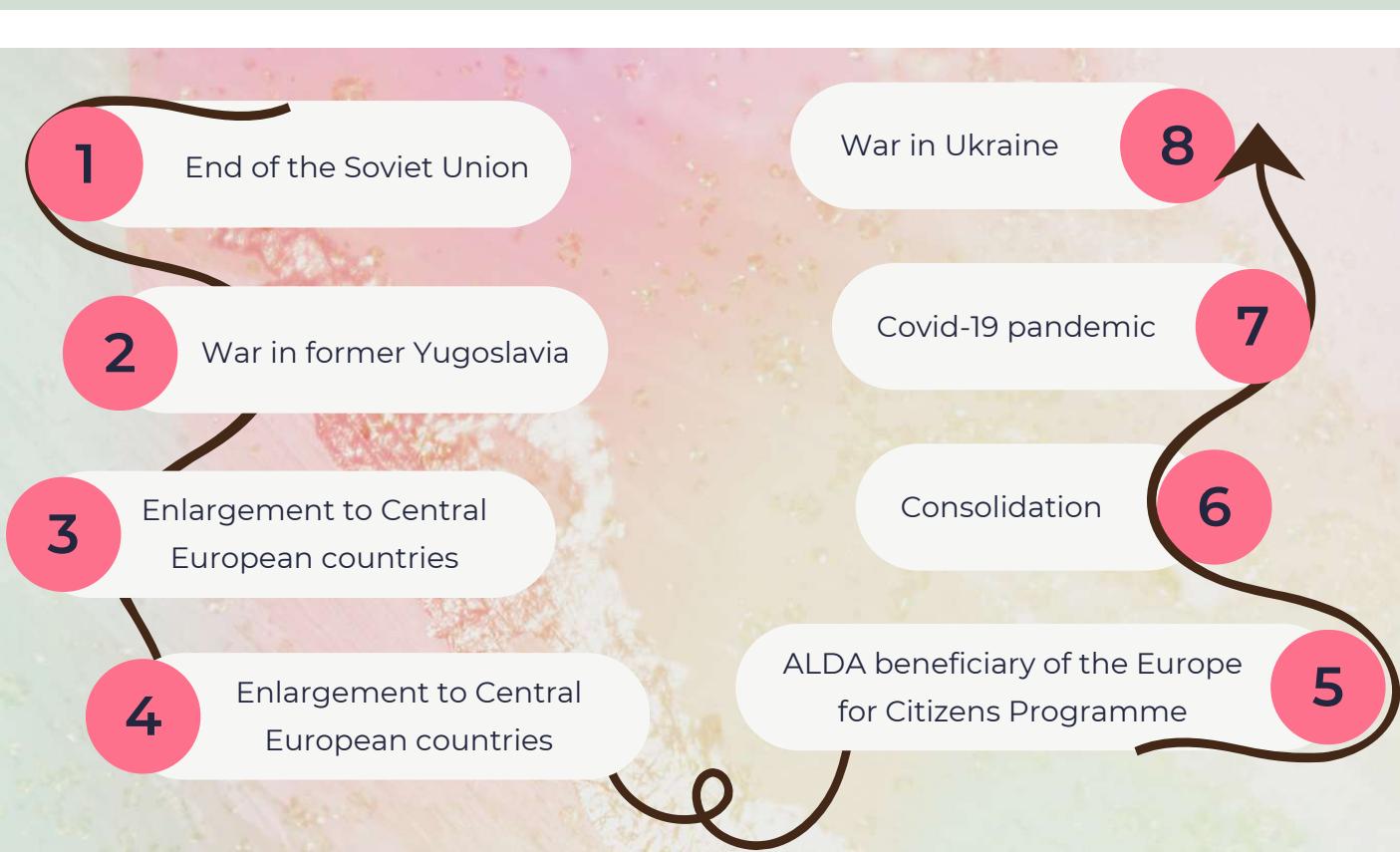
The Local Democracy Agencies were born in 1993 with the first opening of the LDA in Subotica, Serbia. The programme started with the structural transformation of Europe after the end of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Balkans war is historically placed in this difficult period of redefinition of borders and balances in Europe. Many organizations, including ALDA, supporting this transition but also peace building in countries in Former Yugoslavia, were established in those days. The period of stabilisation in the region entirely involved ALDA and the LDAs, especially after the Thessaloniki Summit where the European Commission President, Romano Prodi, started the process of accession of this region into the EU.

The process of building and strengthening Europe from below with a **strong engagement of local communities**, including policies of decentralization and new local governance, continued also with the process of enlargement towards East and in particular with the big leap in 2004. Local governance was at the core of the enlargement requiring new forms of relationship in powers and with citizens. The focus on local democracy and its role in engaging citizens was also marked in the empowerment and enlargement of the Council of Europe and the signature of the European Charter of local governance of the Congress.

An example of this period is the strong emphasis given to decentralization and local governance reform in Poland, that paved the way not only for democratic development of the country but economic.



Key phases in the history - and for the history - of ALDA:





## WARNINGS

1

Time is not linear and we don't learn from the past. Evolution and societal changes are sometimes circular and we don't focus enough carefully to transition which are not ended or repeat themselves, as it is happening those days in some countries where we started working 30 years ago.

2

On the other hand, development and democratic transition are not "finalized" in Europe while they are back in other countries, which are catching up. This line of time and process could be inverted. Indeed, in some municipalities and countries where ALDA works (in Senegal or Algeria, for example) cases of citizens participants, which have a traditional background, are really good examples of carrying about common goods.

# How much?



## NUMBERS OF ALDA

*"In modern capitalism, value-extraction is rewarded more highly than value-creation: the productive process that drives a healthy economy and society"*

*Mariana Mazzucato*

The growth of ALDA could be read as a metaphor. A seedling that blossoms its first leaves in the western Balkan region and then spreads over time involving other territories and other communities.

Established in 1999 at the initiative of the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, ALDA takes root thanks to the first seed planted with the LDA in Subotica, Serbia and then the following Local Democracy Agencies created in the early 1990s.

The lifeblood is evident. Continuous contacts between the citizens across borders are indispensable for a citizens' Europe. By establishing a network between local authorities and civil-society organizations all over Europe and by offering a forum for the exchange of best practices, ALDA contributed greatly and was increasingly recognised as a key actor to facilitate citizens' involvement and good governance.

In order to trigger a significant change, which may impact the surrounding environment, it is crucial that there is a community, a growing group of people who recognise themselves in those values, who take responsibility for carrying out that challenge and who in turn can contaminate and involve others. A sounding board, this is how we could represent ALDA, a living organism in continuous evolution and growth, ready to welcome anyone who is ready to work together with a participative approach for resilient, inclusive and sustainable communities.



In its journey, ALDA has evolved significantly in terms of members, partners and actors involved, projects and activities implemented, as well as resources mobilised.



It has created a community involving and reaching around 2 million people through its activities at local level, and 30,000 followers across social media, websites and digital channels to narrate its initiatives and spread key messages of our networks.

	1999	2009	2019 20 years of ALDA	TODAY
LDAs	5	11	18	18
COUNTRIES INVOLVED	5	30	54	60+
MEMBERS	5	100	300+	350+
PROJECTS	0	102	429	500+
BUDGET	0	10M	43M	59+M



## WARNINGS

1

The project-based activity of ALDA brings us to count figures and projects and people, while focusing less on societal impact assessment. This is a lacking figure to overcome

2

The costs of the projects do not always reflect the impact. Often small scale projects have a bigger impact on communities than big scale ones. That's why the regranting schemes present some good aspects.

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Citizens, Equality, Rights  
and Values programme



*This deliverable has been developed within the  
Project ALDA WP 2023 - Number: 101104615,  
funded by CERV Programme.*



Co-funded by the  
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30 years LDAs in the Balkans

European Association  
for Local Democracy

