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# Ethics and accountability : the role of local leaders

Legitimacy does not come solely from election, but also from the manner in which the mandate is exercised. One cannot pretend to be at the service of these fellow citizens, act for the general interest and not behave impeccably.

Yet scandals regularly spill the political class all over Europe and the world. This is currently the case in my country, Belgium, where a scandal about the excessive remuneration of elected officials in some inter-municipal structures which reached astronomical sums without these officials taking part in any work!

In Italy, “clean hands” operations had to be carried out a few years ago in order to clean up a situation where the mafia weighed heavily on political decisions and in particular on the award of public contracts through its links with certain politicians, including local ones.

In Ukraine, corruption is also a reality and must be fought.

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe is heavily committed to this issue of ethics. At its 32nd session, last March, it approved a list of criteria to prevent the misuse of administrative resources in local and regional elections. In 1999, it adopted a "European Code of Conduct on the Political Integrity of Local and Regional Representatives". This code contains 25 articles dealing with subjects as diverse as conflicts of interest, clientelism, prohibition of corruption, respect for budgetary and financial discipline, limitation of expenses for electoral campaigns, publication and motivation of all decisions taken, the objectification of commitments within the administration, ...

Most of these provisions are translated into law in my country and non-compliance can be sanctioned.

One way to enforce these provisions is transparency. Transparency of the remuneration of elected representatives and their benefits in kind, transparency of public procurement, etc. In my country, this is done through mandatory public declarations.

Ethical behaviour, however, is not limited to the compliance with the above provisions. Ethics is also the seriousness with which we carry out our mandate. This is what led one of the regional associations of cities and municipalities in my country, the Union of Towns and Municipalities of Wallonia, to adopt an 18-point code of ethics which calls in particular on municipal councillors to commit themselves to:

* Exercise their mandate with integrity and loyalty;
* Specify whether they act on their own behalf or on behalf of the local institution they represent, particularly when sending mail to the local population;
* To fully assume (meaning with motivation, availability and rigor) their mandates and the subsequent ones;
* Report regularly on their subsequent mandates;
* Assiduously participate in the meetings of the local institution bodies as well as the meetings to which they are required to participate because of their subsequent mandates, and to do so solely for the purpose of serving the public interest;
* To seek the information necessary for the proper exercise of their mandate and to participate actively in the exchange of experience and training offered to the representatives of local institutions throughout their mandate; …

A fault that is not legally reprehensible but which is, in my opinion, contrary to ethics is to yield to "the spectacle of the State": to privilege discourses over actions, publicity, operations for public relations and making a show to announce concrete achievements. In other words, to practice what ancient Rome already knew: "bread and games".

I believe deeply in politics, in political commitment. That is the only way to make a difference. But as an elected representative, we must never forget that we are representatives of our fellow citizens and that this creates an obligation to act in the public interest and in accordance with ethics.

Thank you for your attention.

Marc Cools