



I O P D 13TH EDITION OF THE "GOOD PRACTICE IN CITIZEN PARTICIPATION" AWARD

CANDIDATE INFORMATION SHEET

PART 1: BASIC DATA

Title of the experience: ADVOCATES ("VALEDORAS") OF CROSS-BORDER CITIZENSHIP		
Name of city/region: Cerveira-Tomiño Eurocity (association of municipalities of Tomiño (Galicia, Spain) and Vila Nova de Cerveira (Portugal))		
Country: Cross-border area between Galicia (Spain) and Portugal.		
Candidate institution: Council of Tomiño (Galicia, Spain)		
Start date of the experience: June 2017		
Type of candidate entry	New experience	X
	Others (indicate which): Ombudsman	X
	Community strengthening	X
	The strengthening of non-organised citizenship	
	Expanding citizen rights related with political participation	X
	Improving the quality of public decisions through participatory democracy mechanisms	XX
Territorial scope	Whole of the territory	X
Thematic scope	Governance	X

Part 2: DESCRIPTION OF THE EXPERIENCE

Goals

Main goal of the innovative experience:

The Advocate ("Valedora" in Gallego; "Provedora", in Portuguese, "Defensora" in Spanish) of the Cross-Border Citizens of Cerveira-Tomiño has as its function "guaranteeing of the defence and securing of the particular interests of the residents of Vila Nova de Cerveira (Portugal) and Tomiño (Galicia, Spain) as European cross-border citizens".

The institution was created in 2017 within the framework of the Strategic Agenda for cooperation between these two town councils - constituted as a Eurocity on 4 October 2018 - situated opposite each other on the banks of the River Miño, which delimits in this area, close to the mouth of the Atlantic Ocean, the frontier between the states of Spain and Portugal.

The cross-border cooperation strategy is born from the will of the governments of both municipalities to establish lines of joint intervention for the integrated development of the territory, pursuing policies of protection of natural resources, of sustainable economic development and of social cohesion, through the collaboration of authorities, social agents and public participation.

This process necessarily involves in-depth analysis and consolidation of institutional relations through joint and shared programming and management of the different public services and through involvement of citizens in the formulation of solutions for the resolution of common problems. Based



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on these aspirations, a project has been set up, co-funded by Interreg VA, European Union (EU) FEDER funds, that aims to encourage equal opportunities among citizens from both countries, as a factor for improving their living conditions, based on actions designed and developed by local actors, possessors of greater knowledge regarding the problem issues that exist in the territory.

The institution of the Advocates is therefore created as an instrument for community strengthening with views to improving the quality of public decisions and expanding the rights of citizens in the cross-border context.

In what way has this goal been reached?

In this context, the Advocates of cross-border citizenship are a pioneering figure in cooperation between Galicia and Portugal, which exercises its activity with autonomy and impartiality in relation to the municipal bodies and without any kind of economic retribution.

According to the Charter that governs its functioning, the Advocates have, among others, the following competencies:

- Receiving complaints, claims and suggestions relating to cross-border relations between the Councils of Vila Nova de Cerveira and Tomiño;
- Issuing opinions, recommendations and suggestions within the scope of their competencies, sending them to the Cerveira-Tomiño Strategic Management Committee;
- Giving information, at the request of the Cerveira-Tomiño Strategic Management Committee, on any matter related with its activity;
- Producing a half-yearly report on its activity.

In the first two years of action, the Advocates have developed an agenda of contacts and meetings with diverse social organisations and a line of dissemination of its functions through the media and the organising of events.

Thus, on 11 September 2017, they visited the municipal swimming pool of Vila Nova de Cerveira talking with those in charge and with users and confirming as a need a "continued transport system from Tomiño", currently non-existent due to problems of "authorisations and regulations". Also resulting from that interview were some positive steps towards electronic payment of swimming pool services for Galician users.

On 8 November 2017, a visit was made to two nurseries attached to Cerveira Town Council, where they confirmed the good relationships that exist with people in Tomiño in the shared use of this service, reflected in a significant rate of use by babies and children who are inhabitants of Tomiño. The "Advocates" had the opportunity to talk with the heads of the institutions, education staff and parents.

On 13 December 2017, the workshop "Experiences in participatory democracy and cross-border cooperation" was held with the attendance, among others of the "Advocate of the People of Galicia".

On 7 June 2018, in Tomiño, the "Advocates" presented their story to an international delegation taking part in the ESPON Seminar held in Vigo, organised by the AECT Galicia-Northern Portugal.

Subsequently, meetings were organised with the heads of the education centres of both municipalities. Both in the meeting held with the head of the "School grouping of Vila Nova de Cerveira" (20 June) and that held with the head of the Secondary School Antón Alonso Ríos in Tomiño (4 July) it was confirmed that one of the most prominent obstacles for a fluid cross-border relationship is that of the regulation of permits for children for the implementation of school exchanges between the two states.



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In December 2018, the *Report on Recommendations for eliminating barriers to cross-border mobility for children and young people* was produced and forwarded to various Galician, Spanish, Portuguese and European institutions and presented publicly, with significant media attention, in the month of February 2019. (Report available in various languages at: https://eurociadecerveiratomino.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/20190207_informe-valedora_recomendaciones_para_la Eliminacion_de_barreras_a_la_mobilidad_transfronteriza_infanto-juvenil_es.pdf).

On the basis of this, the EFE News Agency produced a report that summarises the story of the Advocates ("The 'Advocates' of Cerveira and Tomiño, two pioneers in the Europe without Frontiers"). <https://www.efe.com/efe/espana/portada/las-valedoras-de-cerveira-tomino-dos-pioneras-en-la-europa-sin-fronteras/10010-3962195>

On 13 July 2019, the Advocates presented their experience to delegations from the municipalities of Dalgopol (Bulgaria), Aksakovo (Bulgaria), Osilo (Sardinia, Italy) and Nova Gorica (Slovenia) within the framework of some sessions on the project 'European Future Is Our Future' (Europa for citizens) held at Vila Nova de Cerveira.

Finally, the European Commission programme B-solutions has selected the candidate entry presented by the European Grouping for Cross-Border Cooperation AECT Galicia-North of Portugal and the Eurocity of Cerveira-Tomiño to designate an expert who studies problems of cross-border mobility for children and young people pointed out in the aforementioned report. <https://www.jn.pt/nacional/interior/ue-estuda-eliminacao-de-barreiras-escolares-entre-galiza-e-alto-minho-11001107.html>

In parallel, the new Eurocity website has contained, since 18 October, an information section on the institution, its Foundational Charter and the access procedure <https://eurociadecerveiratomino.eu/valedoras>.



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To what extent has that goal been reached?

The Cross-Border Citizenship Advocates have contributed towards improving the relations between people and institutions of both sides of the border, giving information on rights and duties, registering incidents and problems that hamper them, and demanding solutions from the institutions responsible.

Their success has been rooted, fundamentally, in raising the visibility of obstacles that affect an adequate community relationship in cross-border contexts where, despite the elimination of inter-state borders inside the EU, numerous administrative problems persist that limit the full exercising of educational, social and labour rights and opportunities.

Dimensions of the experience:

Which is the most innovative element of the experience?

The development of the strategy of cross-border cooperation requires the establishment of mechanisms of governance that involve municipal governments and other institutional, economic and sociocultural actors necessary for a multi-level dialogue. In addition, to guarantee the positive social impact of the actions developed, it is essential to have citizen participation and involvement, both in the identification of needs and goals and in the accompaniment of their execution.

The figure of the Advocates is thus constituted as an institutional tool that, from a position of independence of the governments, contributes to maintaining this commitment to participatory democracy within an "unprecedented" context (originated by the formal absence of borders within the EU), reinforcing the power of the community against institutional inertias or administrative-bureaucratic obstacles that persist in states that are still lacking permeability before a new reality in which community and cultural bonds should prevail over anachronical administrative or psychological frontiers.



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To what extent is the procedure transferable?

In our case, the common historical, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and the dynamics of the social, economic, administrative and commercial relationship that currently exists between Galicia and Portugal, within the context of an EU without frontiers, give full meaning to the constitution of Eurocities that, like that grouping together the councils of Cerveira and Tomiño, are advancing with regard to bridging the gap between towns separated by the barely 200 metres of the width of the river Miño, through:

- shared formulas of government and participation, such as the citizens' Advocates;
- promotion of joint facilities;
- shared planning and management of services and facilities;
- joint revitalisation of the local economy;

The existence of these new local cross-border agencies facilitates the quest for citizen empowerment, with the goal of constructing eurocitizenship and of "social free zones" with greater equality and better quality of life, in accordance with the priorities defined in the European framework.

Even so, the application of formulas of community empowerment and broadening of the rights of participation, such as that represented by the figure of the "Ombudsman", are perfectly transferable to other contexts in which the political will exists to make deeper inroads into participatory democracy by devolving real power to citizens, in the form of tools for democratic control and effective intervention over governments.

In this sense, all the cross-border contexts, delimited in many cases by arbitrary lines that do not respond to the sociolinguistic-cultural reality of neighbouring communities, can be fertile ground for the promotion of this type of institutions aimed at asserting citizen rights against the administrations.



Why do you consider that the experience is feasible?

In the case of Cerveira and Tomiño the setting up and the acceptance of the figure of the Advocates was facilitated by the fact that they are two border towns with a long tradition of collaboration within a context of the disappearance of frontiers between the states of Spain and



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Portugal, subsequent to their incorporation into the EU just over 30 years ago. Moreover, the political will of joining forces present in both local governments, their commitment to citizen participation and the historical and cultural proximity between Galicia and Portugal are other actors that have contributed to the success of the experience.

How has the experience been articulated with other actors and processes?

The figure of the Advocates of cross-border citizenship was created within the framework of the project of "Strategic Agenda for Cerveira-Tomiño Cooperation and Friendship", co-funded by the Interreg VA programme. The project contemplates as one of its four lines of action the boosting of this cooperation agenda - defined in 2014-2015 with the participation of 200 representatives from 70 civic organisations from both sides of the frontier - through initiatives such as the Cross-Border Participatory Budget that annually mobilises people and associations from both town councils in the formulation of joint candidates that are ultimately subjected to votes, with the two most voted projects being chosen for their execution and funding. Begun in 2016, to date it has mobilised over three thousand people (some 14% of the census), favouring dozens of meetings between civic and cultural associations and organisations that have collaborated, thanks to this process, in many cases for the first time.

What has the level of co-responsibility been?

In an opinion study conducted in late 2018, data confirmed were very favourable towards cross-border cooperation between the populations belonging to both town councils. This explains the good acceptance that the different initiatives promoted from the Eurocity are having. In the case of the Advocates, there has been active collaboration from both the technical teams of both councils and the educational heads of the respective school centres and different shared services and facilities.

What mechanisms for evaluation and accountability were used?

As already commented, the very activity of the Advocates has been proactive in relationship with the community, especially because this is a newly created institution. A workshop, an information leaflet and a specific space on the eurociudadecerveiratomiño.eu website were used as tools for the presentation and dissemination of the group's activity.

The report on mobility for children and young people was the subject of a specific press conference (February 2019) with great acceptance in the printed and digital media of Galicia and Portugal alike. The report by the EFE Agency was published also in the press of Madrid (eldiario.es) and of Barcelona ([La Vanguardia](http://LaVanguardia.com)) and the video published by EFE had over 3,000 views.

Both the selection of the candidate for the B-solutions programme and the fact that it was a finalist for the IOPD Prizes also had a significant repercussion in the media.

Initially, an activity cycle (Junio 2017 to December 2019) evaluation is planned, which includes rendering accounts, at cross-border conference sessions, coinciding with the close of the POCTEP-INTERREG project, scheduled for the first quarter of 2020.