Maria Vassilakou

Maria Vassilakou has been the Deputy Mayor of Vienna, and Executive City Councillor for Urban Planning, Traffic and Transport, Climate Protection, Energy and Citizen Participation since 2010. She is also the deputy national spokesperson of the Green Party in Austria.

1. From Student Politics to City Leader

Maria Vassilakou was born in Athens, Greece in February 1969. From being a young girl, she dreamed of becoming involved in city government – inspired by both her family, who had a strong interest in politics, and by the ancient political heritage of her home city.

Vassilakou moved to Austria in 1986 and went on to study psychology and linguistics at the University of Vienna. Her political career began at the University, where in 1993 she became the Austrian Student Union’s Federal Secretary for Foreign Students. By 1995, she had risen up the ranks to become Secretary General of the Student Union.

Moving directly from student to mainstream politics, Maria Vassilakou was elected as a Green Party member of the Vienna Provincial Parliament in 1996. She remained in this role until 2001 when she was elected to the City Council. Three years later, Vassilakou became leader of the Greens in Vienna.

Vienna has traditionally been a Social Democrat stronghold – the ‘Reds’ having lost majority power in the city only once between World War II and 2010. However, the Social Democrats did fail to achieve an absolute majority in the 2010 municipal elections, and thus entered into coalition with the Green Party (who received 12.6% of the vote). Having received the backing of 98.7% of her party to be the Green’s top electoral candidate, Vassilakou was appointed Deputy Mayor. Her appointment represents the most influential position that a Green Party member has ever held in Viennese politics. Vassilakou is also in a pioneering position as the first Viennese City Councillor to have a migration background.

2. A Three Step Guide for City Leaders of the Future

From the experience of her 13 years in city government, Maria Vassilakou offers three key pieces of advice for prospective city leaders:

- Be open to new ideas.

Vassilakou advocates seeking inspiration from others, learning from their past experiences, and also from the mistakes they have made. “If you have the possibility to do a lot of travelling, visit other cities and other places, meet a lot of people” she says, “Come back home with virtual suitcases full of best practices and ideas”.
• Develop a clear idea of what kind of city you are working towards.

City leaders should have a clear vision of the city they want to create, and must ensure that their wider team supports their vision. Once the vision is clear and agreed, leaders should work with experts to develop strategies which detail precisely how that vision will be achieved.

Vassilakou’s transition from long-term opposition member to Deputy Mayor impressed upon her the need for realism in creating a city vision. Opposition politicians have the luxury of coming up with ideas without needing to consider whether they can be financed, or are feasible or practical in everyday life. Once in power however, only workable and financially viable ideas will be a success.

• Be a Strong Leader with a Strong Will.

It is only with determination that city leaders will achieve their visions. Vassilakou advises prospective city leaders to stick to, and believe in, their ideas: “Never let anybody convince you that having visions means you need to see a doctor”.

The following sections of this paper explore how Maria Vassilakou has put her three step mantra into action in her own career, particularly in her role as Deputy Mayor of Vienna.

3. “Be Open to New Ideas” – Seeking Inspiration

Maria Vassilakou has been inspired by the words and activities of many iconic city leaders and thinkers. The words of Pericles, the great leader of her home city of Athens in the 5th century BCviii, have particularly resonated with Maria who has remembered them ever since being a young girl, and continues to be inspired by them:

“The City is great because its philosophy is not war and conquest.
The City is great because it lets the whole world flow in it; and
The City is great because it offers opportunities to challenge and make more of oneself"ix

Jaime Lerner has also been an inspiration to Maria Vassilakou. Lerner was a visionary leader who was Mayor of Curitiba, Colombia three times between 1971 and 1992 and is credited with transforming the city into a model of sustainability.ii Lerner’s famous assertion that “The City is the not a problem, it is a solution”ixi directly correlates with Vassilakou’s own ethos and city vision (see section 4.4. below). Lerner has inspired and motivated the Deputy Mayor to fight for and implement her own sustainability improvements in Vienna. Maria Vassilakou has also adopted and adapted the ideas of Jane Jacobs into her own city vision, in particular the idea that “outside of the houses is the inside of the city”,xii Vassilakou, like Jacobs, believes that it is the public realm of the city which is key to developing social cohesion and a strong quality of life (see section 4.2. below).

4. Vassilakou’s Vision of A “Good City”

Maria Vassilakou has formulated her own vision of what makes ‘a good city’, and is trying to bring Vienna as close as possible to emulating that vision. Her image of a ‘good city’ consists of five separate ideals:
4.1. “A good city is a city where people live not because they have to, but because they want to”

In her role as City Councilor for Urban Planning, whether working in the spheres of housing, transport or public space, Vassilakou aims to create the type of place in which people would be happy to raise their children. She believes that the qualities that parents look for when choosing where to start a family – green, open spaces; usable and accessible public realm; fresh air; minimal road traffic; safety and security – are in fact the factors that contribute to quality of life for everyone. By creating spaces with these characteristics in the heart of the city, city councils may be able to retain young families and create popular and pleasant living environments. ‘Liveable’ city centres are a dominant characteristic of Vassilakou’s city development plans – for example, houses have gardens or balconies wherever possible, and the city is filled with attractive and accessible green spaces.

4.2. “A good city is a place where people can meet in order to exchange thoughts, goods and inspirations”

Vassilakou believes that the public realm is the most important area of the city – it is here that the city “materializes”: that people communicate, exchange and develop ideas. In contrast, inside buildings, in their houses and offices, people are secluded. Therefore, Vassilakou believes that a good city is a lively one with a welcoming and attractive public realm: not just meaning green spaces and parks, but also streets, roads and public transport facilities.

In order to create a good city, city leaders must try to create usable and high quality public spaces which citizens will enjoy and want to linger in. They must redesign ‘transitory’ spaces that people hurry through, and create areas which are attractive to pedestrians. City leaders should look to create new public spaces and reimagine old ones – streets for example, should become places which do not only exist for the benefit of cars. Ideally, Vassilakou believes that pedestrians should be able to walk right across the city without ever having to leave green and attractive spaces. Above all, public space should not be an after-thought but an integral part of city planning. If public realm is made more usable and attractive she says, “maybe [people will] begin to look at other people, and maybe start talking to each other”.

4.3. “If you want to get people to meet, then get them out of their cars and let them use their feet”.

Maria Vassilakou also believes that a good city is one which promotes and encourages ‘ecological’ means of mobility – that is walking, cycling or public transport use. In order to make cities walkable and cycle-able, city leaders must look into the qualities that walkers and cyclists value, and adapt their city accordingly. This will not only involve making improvements to the attractiveness of public space, but also (for example) to cycling infrastructure, or to the length of time that pedestrians have to wait before they can cross a street. Inter-modality is also important – Vassilakou believes that cities should make it as appealing and easy as possible for citizens to use any combination of forms of transport on a given day or journey.
4.4. “A good city saves energy all by itself”

Energy efficiency is at the heart of Vassilakou’s conception of what makes a good city. Furthermore, she believes that due to their scale, and the size and height of their buildings, cities offer society one of its best opportunities to save energy. In order to achieve an energy efficient city, Vassilakou advocates that city leaders should invest in energy saving architecture, insulation and efficient refurbishments of buildings. The many roofs of the city should be used for solar power. City leaders should also be motivated to invest in public transport – not only to improve mobility and the public realm, but also to mitigate climate change.

4.5. “A good city is a place of dialogue and controversy”

Vassilakou believes that a good city is one whose politicians engage in dialogue. In many instances, she believes, citizens are the people who understand a city’s immediate needs best of all. Engaging citizens in the early stage of a project, can not only help to improve it, but can also create ready-made advocates for the project if it is rolled out to the wider public.

However, Vassilakou also feels that direct democracy (i.e. decision making via citizen engagement) is not always the best tool for driving forward progress in a city in every circumstance. The scale of the task facing city leaders and the speed with which they must act means that in some cases elected officials are better placed to make representative decisions. She explains “We know we have hard tasks to achieve in a short period of time. So you have to do lots of homework when it comes to tools and means of participation and citizen engagement….We need to take a close look at which issues are the right ones for participation, which allow for tools and instruments of direct democracy, and which issues can be decided upon by representatives in elections and in government”.

For Vassilakou, politicians have to know that change always means controversy, and accept that they may need to use their representative mandate to make controversial and even unpopular decisions if they are to transform their city into a ‘good city’.

5. Transforming Vienna - Being A Strong Leader with a Strong Will

Maria Vassilakou has shown a strong commitment to Vienna, and a determined will to make a difference in her adoptive city. This was perhaps best exemplified when, in October 2009, the newly elected Greek Prime Minister Giorgos Papandreou offered Vassilakou the position of Greek Deputy Environment Minister. She declined and chose to remain in Vienna.xiii

The Green Party’s position as a minority partner in a coalition government has meant that Maria has had to fight hard to bring about her city vision. As a member of the Green Party, her own city vision has not always corresponded with that of her Co-Councilors.
Nonetheless, Vassilakou’s strong will and political determination mean that she has been able to bring about an impressive degree of ‘greening’ of the city’s urban policies. She successfully negotiated green initiatives into the 2010 Coalition Agreement, including the introduction of more green spaces in the city, and a planned tenfold increase in the number of solar panels. She has also continued to determinedly fight for measures which bring Vienna closed to her vision of a “Good City”.

Upon becoming Deputy Mayor, she was delighted to put ideas formulated in opposition into practice, and moreover “to find out that some of our best ideas really do work”.

Achievements of which Vassilakou is particularly proud include:

- Reduction of the price of an annual public transport pass to €365 (i.e. €1 per day). This is the cheapest annual card that exists in a capital city of an equivalent size to Vienna in Europe. More than half of the population of Vienna already owns an annual card (or a concessionary version of it).

- Improvements to the walkability of the city. Today in Vienna 28% of everyday trips are done on foot, and the City Council wants to increase this number. Vienna’s City Council is re-imagining and re-working public spaces all over the city. It is working on a network of ‘linear parks’, interlinking existing green spaces with tree lined boulevards. It is making new public spaces by creating terraces over metro lines – a scheme inspired by the High Line in New York.

- The introduction of a scheme in which citizens have the opportunity to invest in solar power plants, and obtain a guaranteed 3.1% rate of return. Within two years, eight new citizen-owned solar power plants have been created in Vienna in this way – the latest one being on the roof of the city’s new railway station.

- The high proportion of green space in the city. More than 50% of Vienna is green space, and in the summer months the city is completely sustainable in its production of certain vegetables. The city’s development strategy plans to maintain this level of green and agricultural space - future
development will increase density, rather than encourage sprawl or infilling. The city will grow upwards, and along existing public transport axes.

- Vienna has maintained its position as a global leader in Quality of Life surveys and benchmarks. This is likely to be partly owing to the fact that it is an affordable city in which to live – 65% of Viennese live in public or subsidized housing. Although affordability is an achievement which has taken time to accomplish, the improvements which Vassilakou has overseen and fought for during her time as Deputy Mayor have undoubtedly added to the city’s Quality of Life offerings.

Vassilakou has also made major inroads in cycling in Vienna, overseeing the closing of gaps in the city’s cycle network, expanding the existing bike sharing scheme and increasing public engagement via improved PR. 2013 was named Vienna’s “Year of Cycling”, and the city played host to the international Velo-city cycling conference.xvi

6. Shaping the Future City

Vassilakou’s present term as Deputy Mayor will continue until 2015. She perceives challenges in Vienna’s near future, in particular in relation to migration. Vienna is the fastest growing city in the German speaking world, and welcomed 30,000 new residents in 2013. By 2030 the city is expected to be home to more than 2 million people.xvii Vassilakou admits that this will make it a real challenge to keep housing affordable, keep up with new infrastructure and new schools, and save green areas. However it is a challenge which she hopes to be able to continue to play a part in.

In fact, whether or not Vassilakou remains in city government for another term after 2015, she is already shaping the future of Vienna. By influencing citizen behavior and lifestyle choices around transportation, energy use and even living arrangements and locations, Maria Vassilakou hopes to make a generational change to how the city is used and molded by citizen’s needs. In addition, Maria is involved in the development of long term projects in the city, which will shape the future of Vienna. Perhaps most notably, she has been a figurehead for SmartCity Wien – Vienna’s long-term initiative to improve the city’s design, development and perception using “intelligent and innovative solutions [and] responsible and sustainable use of resources”.xviii She is also leading the development of STEP 2025, a new city development plan which promotes a new vision of Vienna in 2025.xix
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