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The city, the (Member) state, and the European Union

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ABSTRACT

This contribution to a Debate on “The Nation-State and the city” foregrounds the recently adopted Urban Agenda for the European Union. It discusses the new role of cities in the European policy making process and its relevance for relations between State and City in the light of EU membership.

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On 24 June 2016 the Council of the European Union met in Luxembourg and dealt with the unexpected outcome of the British referendum in which a majority of British voters supported a Brexit. In the shadow of this event, the Council for General Affairs also adopted a Urban Agenda for the European Union (EU), which failed to get any media coverage, due to the extraordinary circumstances of the dawn of a post-Brexit EU, the prospect of grueling negotiations for the exit of a Member State and the subsequent redrawing of the political map of Europe. This lack of attention should not conceal that the Urban Agenda potentially has some important implications for urban political geographies in Europe. First the twelve partnerships it entails – bringing together Member states, cities, Directorates-General of the European Commission and stakeholders – arguably introduce a new working method in EU politics. Moreover they potentially impact the relations between cities and (Member) states and contribute to the general trend toward a more influential role for cities in global politics. Nevertheless it remains to be seen which sides have most to gain from this alliance between the cities and the EU.

A new working method for the European Union

It took twenty years to get Member States to agree on this urban agenda and the role of cities should play in the EU, as they widely diverge in terms of their urban networks, their urban policies (if any), the competencies of their local authorities, and the relations between municipalities and other state levels (central state and one or more regional tiers). Over the years the core preoccupation of those arguing that the EU needed an urban agenda shifted – incrementally but dramatically. In the later 1990s

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urban problems needed to be tackled in a more effective way through the harnessing of EU structural and cohesion funds. Now the cities are part of the solution to the many contemporary social, political, economic and environmental problems the states and the EU seem unable to tackle (climate change, energy transition, migration, integration, housing...). It is now also widely acknowledged that local authorities are implemented a large share of the EU regulations and policies, not the central bureaucracies of the Member States, and that an early involvement of local authorities in the decision making process could lead to better results and bring the EU closer to its citizens (Mamadouh & Van Wageningen, 2016).

With the Pact of Amsterdam and the Urban Agenda, cities have also been given a formal position in the EU decision making process. They work together with the Member states, Directorate-Generals of the Commission and other European stakeholders, in 12 partnerships to make EU policies urban proof, to ease communication between EU institutions and municipalities and cross-sectoral communication in Brussels, to enhance cities' access to EU programmes and funds, and to improve the circulation of expertise and knowledge about urban issues. The first four pilots were supported by the Dutch presidency (January-June 2016) and pertain to housing, poverty, air quality and the integration of migrants and refugees, four others (pertaining to circular economy, urban mobility, jobs and skills in the local economy, digital transition) started under the Slovakian presidency (July-December 2016), and four more (regarding public procurement, climate adaptation, energy transition, sustainable use of land and nature based solutions) were launched under the Maltese presidency (January-June 2017). According to a recent progress report of the Commission, they are widely supported: 22 of the 28 Member States participate, as well as 84 cities (large metropolises with an active international profile but also smaller municipalities), 13 Directorates-General of the European Commission (almost half of them), two associations of cities (EUROCITIES and the Council of European Municipalities and Regions CEMR) as well as the European Investment Bank EIB (a partner in eight of the twelve partnerships) and a diverse group of stakeholders (research, education, business, NGOs) (European Commission, 2017, p. 4).

The partnerships of the Urban Agenda represent an innovative working method (Potjer & Hajer, 2017), a new tool among the new modes of governance (Warleigh-Lack & Drachenberg, 2010) "putting multi-level governance in practice, the agenda being jointly steered by all involved partners on a voluntary, inclusive and *equal* basis" (my emphasis, European Commission, 2017, p. 2). This method has the potential to spill over to other policy domains, as the open method of coordination did earlier after it was introduced in the early 2000s to allow for common employment policies that were blocked by unwilling Member States according to the community method (Regent, 2003; Warleigh-Lack & Drachenberg, 2010; Zeitlin, 2011).

Cities as influential players

The new formal role for cities in the EU is part of a general trend, rooted in the awareness of the ever growing proportion of the (world and European) population living in cities but also in changing relations between the states and their cities. Many cities have developed their external relations, including activities as diverse as town

twinning, city branding and networking in city associations (Mamadouh & Van der Wusten, 2016). More and more is expected of local authorities. Through decentralisation reforms, many European states have delegated policies to their municipalities. Moreover, mayors and local governments are often expected to be better equipped than the states and the national governments to deal with the daily concerns of their citizens. As the American political scientist Benjamin Barber argues, considering the failure of state governments and the return of nationalist policies, many social and environmental problems would be more effectively dealt with, “if mayors ruled the world” (Barber, 2013). He was involved in a concrete initiative labelled the Global Parliament of Mayors (headquartered in The Hague), that tellingly gave its 2017 annual meeting in Stravanger as theme “A governance revolution empowering cities”. In his last book *Cool Cities* Barber (2017) argues that cities can and must take the lead in the fight against climate change: he advances the notion of urban sovereignty and urban rights and calls for a new contract for sustainability between cities and citizens. Similar arguments are made by others stressing the importance of cities and connectivity over states and territoriality (see also Sassen, 2012; Acuto, 2013; or more provocatively Khanna & Joishy, 2011; Khanna, 2016a, 2016b). Other supranational bodies have recently also adopted and promoted urban agendas. The United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (known as Habitat III) has adopted a New Urban Agenda¹ in Quito in October 2016 to implement the UN sustainable development goals (Habitat III 2016) and the Union for the Mediterranean Urban Agenda has been adopted in Cairo in May 2017.

Shifting city-state relations

These transformations remind us of the fact that city-state relations have evolved over time. European cities in Middle Ages were much more autonomous than their contemporary counterparts after the incorporation and submission of cities to the authority of central states through the territorial consolidation of modern sovereign and territorial states (Jönsson, Tägil, & Gunnar, 2000). Taylor (2007, 2013) has explored these relations through the lens of the complementary relations between the commercial and the guardian syndromes, advanced by the city and the state respectively (two moral syndromes originally articulated by Jacobs, 1992).

What about the EU as new partner in this relation? Contra Taylor’s interpretation of the relation between the EU as guardian of the commercial interest of London as financial centre, the EU is arguably not just a state writ large, or an extra layer in the state scaffolding, mainly endorsing the guardian syndrome. Its normative project is different than that of the Westphalian territorial state and has a strong inclination towards the values of the commercial syndrome that could facilitate an alliance between cities and EU institutions in the day-to-day working of the Urban Agenda. In any event, European integration and the complex multilevel governance it entails with its multi-scalar policy networks and metagovernance (Jessop, 2016) have brought about a reordering of state-city relations, inside Member states and across internal borders. The partnerships of the Urban Agenda introduce a new working method that enable joint work on equal footing between different partners, and might become a

mainstream decision making instruments in EU politics (like the open method of coordination spilled over from labour relations to other policy domains).

With the Urban Agenda, cities may hope to gain more influence on EU policies than they had in the past with their representation in the Committee of the Regions (an advisory body in which most national delegations consist of representatives of regional and local authorities) and their lobby organizations such as Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) and EUROCITIES. National and EU politicians and civil servants may hope that “working with [the cities] can bring the EU closer to [the citizens]” (European Commission, 2017, p. 3). Whether the cities will rescue the EU – and the (Member) States – or whether the cities and their popular mayors will be tainted by their association with the EU project in full existential crisis is now an empirical question.

Note

1. The new urban agenda is not replacing an outdated urban agenda; the document needed an update was entitled *The Habitat Agenda* (Habitat II, 1996).

Disclosure statement

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