

EU Urban Agenda: An Open and Complex Debate

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The debate on the necessity and the role of an explicit urban focus in the European Integration Project and more specifically in the EU policy agenda is old and, nevertheless, still unsettled (Atkinson 2014).

Since the Treaty of Rome and even before, cities have played, or at least tried to, a central role in the construction of the European Union. For a long period, in fact, European cities' mayors have been among the most active supporters in the making of the "European project". At the same time, they have been struggling and lobbying hard for the introduction of a specific urban focus in social and then in territorial cohesion policies (Grazi 2006; Hamedinger, Wolffhardt 2010). Due to their efforts and challenging presence in the debate during the 1980s, the EU finally identified the crucial roles that cities could play, in general, in the construction of the idea of European citizenship. At the same time, the EU construction process fed a debate on those distinctive characteristics of the cities of Europe that could remain or become pillars for the construction and success of the European Union as such. Since then, cities have been acknowledged as passive and active actors, for example, in the production of economic and social unbalances, as well as engines for economic growth and social equity. More recently, in the nineties, cities have become an object of further concern, due to the emergence of environmental problems, and more recently the focus has moved to cities as resources for innovative and smart growth objectives or as barriers against the crisis.

From the point of view of policy-making, as a follow up to rhetoric, the nineties have been characterized by the highest experimental investment in cities. The first dedicated "urban" initiatives were launched by the European Union with Urban Pilot Projects in 1989. These first experiments were followed by the URBAN 1 Program in 1994–1999 and from 2000 to 2006 by the URBAN 2 Program, which involved, at the end of the day, approximately 200 cities in Europe (Hamedinger, Wolffhardt 2010; Van den Berg et al. 2007; Tofarides 2003; Atkinson 2001) and produced a wide and lively debate across Member States.

Drawing from the experiences accumulated on the basis of this experimental phase, a shared acknowledgement was developed on the necessity to focus on the cities' role in the EU integration project. The URBAN Acquis in 2004 codified the necessity to develop new approaches to urban policy based on area-based projects, integration, subsidiarity, public-private partnership and participative approaches. This was also the result of the development of the URBACT program, which was conceived as a learning platform aimed at supporting cities in developing innovative projects. Together with the promotion of the URBAN AUDIT and ESPON, essential knowledge tools introduced in order to generate knowledge on urban and territorial processes with a comparative approach, the URBACT experience constitutes the second pillar of EU investment in cities, passing through the production and exchange of usable knowledge in the field of urban policies; one of the most innovative tasks of a European project.

More recently, in the last decade, the choice was made to work on policy transfer and mainstreaming innovation, under national frameworks, promoting the support of innovative financial tools (see JESSICA and JASPERS¹, among others). This has produced limited, and sometimes questionable results (Atkinson et al. 2011), and some relevant ones. It has actually reduced the challenging potential, developed in the previous years, through a series of fundamental steps towards the consolidation of an urban dimension in the EU agenda. In 2005, the Bristol Accord declared the importance of sustainable communities in European development and in 2007 the Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities enhanced the interest in an integrated urban development policy approach and deprived neighborhoods. The concept of territorial cohesion was further developed in relation to cities and urban contexts, particularly in the Territorial Agenda in 2007, while in 2008, the Marseille Statement asked for the implementation of the Leipzig Charter.

In the same years, the Barca Report (2009) emphasized place-based approaches in regional and urban developments, while the

2010 Toledo Declaration stressed the necessity to include cities in Europe's 20/20 Strategy. In other words, while Member States had progressively found an agreement on the role of the EU in the field of urban policies, from the operative point of view, the decision was taken to promote the active role of the Member States in implementing the proposed vision at a national level, using EU promoted financial tools to support projects. As some experts have noticed, this idea was probably based on a "too Euclidean" assumption about the possibility of simply passing from a declaration of principles to practices, bypassing path dependency and local planning cultures and traditions.

A new phase was opened in 2011 by the report "Cities of Tomorrow – Challenges, Visions and Ways Forward" and the documents delivered by the URBACT II program, which have re-launched a discussion on the necessity to change the roadmap and develop a thoroughly new urban agenda. The central idea is, in fact, that cities are more than ever confronted with relevant challenges, while the policy response at European Level has remained slow and piecemeal (see the recent contribution of Piskorz 2014).² Some important decisions, together with this relevant document, have supported a new course in this direction.³

First of all, the integration of the urban dimension in the activities and aims of the Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy in 2012. Second, the adoption of the new EU regulation providing new space for action and the role of the urban dimension in the next programming period in the ERDF funds. In particular, the new EU regulation has defined some modalities of action that are destined to involve the urban sphere: a minimum 5% of national ERDF allocations have been earmarked for integrated sustainable development (Article 7, ERDF Regulation). In addition to that, 330 Mio. euros will be designated to support innovative actions in the area of sustainable urban development (Article 8, ERDF regulation) in cities, such as funding urban authorities directly, with no state filtering, to promote innovative and experimental demonstration projects and studies of EU interest in the field of sustainable urban development. Finally, a third central element is the invitation to Member States to develop their own national urban agenda to be able to interact with the innovations introduced by the new EU ERDF regulation⁴. In fact, after years of intense debate, both the Member

States and the European Commission seem to have converged towards a shared position on this policy issue. These have been central steps towards the development of a new possible phase in a short-term period. In a certain sense, according to some authors, all this contains *de facto* the elements of a EU urban agenda. Even if no official document proposing this overall perspective is available, these steps provide the background and support to a "sort of EU-promoted" urban policy (Atkinson 2014).

Last year was characterized by the renewal of the EU Parliament and Commission and has actually been a sort of interlocutory phase in this direction, even if it has provided some new occasions to foster the debate and possibly transform it into new concrete input for the new expected developments. The organization of the conference, "Cities Forum, Cities of Tomorrow: Investing in Europe" held in February 2014 in Bruxelles by the DG Regional and Urban Policy was the first occasion to confirm and discuss these intentions with a large public, as well as the complexity of such an objective for DG Regional and Urban Policy. During the Cities Forum, the then Commissioner Hahn declared the intention to produce such a document and programme by the end of the year. The aim was twofold: first, to increase the quality, efficacy and effectiveness of EU policies, which were still unable to fulfil the objectives of integrated and coordinated action; second, to support cities in actively displaying their potential in the transition period Europe is facing.

In this perspective, the Cities Forum has shown the strong interconnection envisaged between the destiny of the EU project and the destiny of cities all over EU. Nevertheless, the forum has raised a number of questions:

- What kind of urban agenda is needed?
- What type of content is necessary?
- Who will be responsible in the implementation of the urban agenda?

Different options have been formulated by the different actors invited to participate: EU members, cities, stakeholders, practitioners and academics. However, the alternatives are consistent and there emerged a clear need for new open and active exchanges.⁵ All in all, in fact, the results of the Cities Forum can be regarded as positive and challenging. There was a sort of consensus among the participants on the necessity of a new investment in the urban dimension, even though, of course, from different perspectives. Different positions have

emerged on the nature of a EU urban agenda and the governance method, which should characterize it, particularly in relation to the role that cities, states and the EU can play directly in this new phase.

- What kind of cities? Large urban regions and medium-size cities.
- What kind of role for cities? Direct involvement in decision-making, filtered by national frameworks.
- What kind of policy approach? A vision, a strategy with specific actions, a method perhaps.

The large public participation in the event has provided a clear sign of the expectations (as well as the concerns) raised by the announcement of a new urban engagement by the EU. Different possibilities have been envisaged: 1) a EU Urban Agenda could in fact act as a device to promote the making of a national urban agenda in all member states; 2) a framework to support specific cities in the transition phase, those cities that have no resources to get out of the crisis on their own (Calafati⁶).

Others have proposed a major objective to open spaces for innovation, based on local capacity of action to be empowered (Jaquier⁷) or a clear operative framework able to avoid spatially blind initiatives (Tosics⁸). More in general, the discussion envisaged quite different scenarios: “Positions ranged from a method or process without objectives, i.e. “the journey is more important than the destination”; to a medium- to long-term strategy with priorities for the long-term and operational guidelines for the short term, i.e. “the destination is the most important aspect” (see the Report synthesis, available online).⁹

The Cities Forum has provided an excellent occasion to raise the attention of the EU “community” for the urban dimension, especially during such a complex moment as that of the EU parliament elections. DG Regio has in this way managed to accompany the transition and trying to keep the highest possible interest and attention of stakeholders. After the Cities Forum, and following input from it, a wider public consultation was promoted in late July 2014. This initiative has inaugurated a dialogue approach with a wider community. Indeed, it has received a consistent number of contributions in relation to six main questions from more than 200 stakeholders.

1. Why do we need a EU urban agenda? (...) What are the main rationales for an EU urban agenda? Where can EU action bring most added value? What elements of urban devel-

opment would benefit from a more concerted approach between different sectors and levels of governance?

2. What should the EU urban agenda be? (...) Should a EU urban agenda focus on a limited number of urban challenges? Or, should an EU urban agenda provide a general framework to focus attention on the urban dimension of EU policies across the board, strengthening coordination between sector policies, city, national and EU actors?

3. Defining the scope and focus (...) Is the European model of urban development as expressed in “Cities of Tomorrow” a sufficient basis to take the work on the EU urban agenda further?

4. Strengthening cities’ engagement and ownership of EU policies (...) How can urban stakeholders better contribute to the policy development and implementation processes at EU level? Do cities need to be more involved in policymaking at regional, national and EU level? How?

5. Better understanding of urban development processes (...) What are the best ways to support a stronger urban and territorial knowledge base and exchange of experience? What specific elements of the knowledge base need to be strengthened in order to better support policymaking?

6. Ensuring the implementation of the EU urban agenda? (...) What should be the roles of the local, regional, national and EU levels in the definition, development and implementation of an EU urban agenda?¹⁰

The results of the consultation can be found online. It provides interesting material to analyze (see below). In fact, these documents offer quite a remarkable overview of the actors involved and their different positions. A first quick, and not exhaustive, look at the contributions submitted shows, however, how complex and differentiated the expectations are, but also how mature and shared are some concerns about what an EU urban agenda could be.

1. One first general concern is *about the nature of European cities*. Many of the contributors recognize that EU cities are central pillars of the EU project. But what is meant by cities is not to be taken for granted. In fact, the definitions of city and urban provided in the documents are not at all universal: cities, metropolitan regions, small and medium-size cities and towns, rural areas and peri-urban areas are just some of the forms of the urban that aspire to be acknowledged as part of a general strategy about the

“urban” future of Europe. In this perspective, many contributors questioned from the very beginning the identification of the city with administrative boundaries and interpret the idea of the city in challenging ways, with several implications on the governance side, but also not only. More in general, in fact, these different and various definitions ask for a renewed attention for *diversity*: many documents clearly state that there cannot be any simple model of city to lean towards to or to deal with, in the elaboration of a EU urban agenda. European cities are in fact different and, as such, they deserve a differentiated treatment. All these positions force the reader to reflect upon an open question that is central in the academic debate: Can we still think about the “European city” as something distinctive and unique, as it was in Weber’s thoughts (Weber 1966), or more recently discussed (Le Gales, Bagnasco 2000; Kazepov 2005)? Reading the contributions presented at the public consultation, one could argue in a more modest way that the distinctiveness of EU cities, or of the cities of Europe (Kazepov 2005) can no more be identified in one model based on persistent characteristics, such as compactness and density or heterogeneity within social cohesion, but in their permanent vitality and articulation, within different models, scales, size, forms, and organization. At the same time, it is also evident that we are in a condition under which the traditional specific characters of European cities are experiencing relevant changes that have stressed or will stress this specificity, e.g. ageing, shrinking, sprawl, dualization, etc., as more and more affect cities in Europe as well as in the rest of the world. From all these perspectives, there seems to be an urgent and shared necessity for a better understanding of the major transformations that have occurred in European cities, the differentiation European cities are experiencing, the challenges that this differentiation can produce and, finally, how and if this differentiation can be a central part of a strategy for the future of Europe and cities of Europe. In this perspective, the elaboration of a EU urban agenda, must come together with the empowerment and development of knowledge tools: almost all contributions ask for the elaboration and development of new monitoring systems and observatories on urban change, since existing analytical tools, as well as analytical geographies, seem unable to describe contemporary cities and their problems and resources.

2. A second general concern is about the *nature of the urban agenda*. The consultation clearly

highlights a different understanding of it: a vision, an action plan, a coordination model, an operative tool with clear financial basis, a benchmarking and monitoring process of sector policies, etc. There are still very distant positions and expectations. In many cases, it is suggested that the local level should be included in a straightforward way, not only in the implementation phase, but in the decision-making phase. In many others, it is also suggested that managing authorities (Member States or Regions) should be more clearly asked to adopt urban strategies and agenda at a national level. Finally, some key principles of the EU (integrated action, coordination, partnership) are mentioned again as guiding principles, since they are often still undisclosed concepts and poorly implemented. In all these perspectives, one could conclude that there seems to be something like a “distinctive approach” to urban policies in Europe, which has to do with lessons learnt in recent decades. At the same time, the EU is still clearly made up of quite different “planning cultures” (Sanyal 2005; Friedmann 2011). In this respect, the elaboration of a new urban agenda is required to build upon differentiation and diversity, not only of cities, but also of local traditions. Many contributions focus on the relevance of learning networks, rather than the adoption of universal models and on the opportunity to exchange experimentally on policy transferability. Dealing with path-dependency and with different planning cultures is a quite consistent challenge for the elaboration of a EU urban agenda, but it can also highlight the importance and the challenges of a not simplistic interpretation of the relationship between policy design and implementation. This implies not only the possibility to define common reference frameworks, but different roadmaps to address problems, or to develop indicators and benchmarking based on local feasibility, not standardized or standardizing.

3. A third general concern is, further in this direction, about the *roles played by cities and local authorities* in the construction and implementation of the European integration project. Most contributions stress and highlight the necessity to involve local authorities and actors. They are, in fact, considered potential resources for the knowledge they can bring in because of their proximity to local contexts. At the same time, cities are considered central for the capacity to bring the European Union close to citizens. Up to now, the roles assigned by European institutions to

cities seem quite limited and contested. There is a strong and evident demand for permanent involvement in consultation, as well as in decision-making. All contributions converge in depicting the parabola of European cities that since the second half of the last century have been engaged in a long-standing fight to have a voice and a role in the EU project. In this respect, contributions show that this involvement is still limited and that the open method of coordination, though innovative, has mainly influenced the inter-states relationship, but only slightly addressed the issue of trans-scalarity of policy issues, which is more and more a central challenge in contemporary society (Brenner). In this perspective, the elaboration of a EU urban agenda is also loaded by high expectations and indeed, not just rhetoric. Cities need and ask for appropriate and efficacious tools, approaches, governance models and collaboration with the EU in order to build innovative means of action.¹¹

4. A final interesting element is related to the *agency* behind the EU agenda. In fact, the consultation has raised the attention of a number of traditional actors, and also of new ones. On one hand, we can find cities and ministers, while on the other, a network of cities of different natures and special agencies, often trans-scalar, international, and crossing boundaries. More or less institutionalized, based on projects or policy issues, transnational or national, networks have multiplied in recent decades and they offer a different kind of *agency*. Together with NGOS, civil society actors, research networks and international and European interest organizations these have largely contributed to the consultation, showing the necessity to provide space and scope for their active involvement. It is not a case where many contributors express their appreciation for the public consultation and ask for the permanent implementation of the model through the institution of urban forums to be held periodically. It is a clear signal that the arena and the actors, and with them the agency of a EU urban agenda, can count on new interesting assemblages (Latour 2005). Next to these actors, some others provide interesting hints of another front of change; private enterprises or business associations representing trans-scalar issues such as transport, energy, waste, water supply and management, but also real estate or commercial activities, have largely participated in the consultation, expressing their specific points of view about urban policies. A EU urban agenda could be a way to

make these new kind of actors or actors' networks visible, that pragmatically deal with, in their everyday life and business, the trans-scalarity of the urban question. And as such, will compel institutions to address this new challenging condition.

These are just first considerations. In fact, the analysis of the contributions received from the public consultation deserves more in-depth analysis. In so far, it would provide not only to European Institutions, but also to scholars, some interesting elements to reflect upon the contemporary urban question and how it is perceived by different stakeholders. This exercise of reflection could be very important for academic researchers and scholars as well. In fact, the variety of perspectives in academia, about the scope and nature of a EU urban agenda is quite consistent, as shown by contributions to recent debates. Nevertheless, we cannot help noticing that academia should feed the current debate with ideas and thoughtful reflection, also on the basis of a serious evaluation of previous phase results. In fact, the literature available is limited, often nationally based, and is missing comparison and general findings to feed the debate. As a partial conclusion to this modest contribution on the state of the art of the debate, waiting for the next steps of the new Commissioner in charge, we conclude that inviting the academic world to spend some time on a serious evaluation of the moment and a contribution to the open debate on the future urban policies in the European Union and the role that the cities of European institutions should and could play in this new challenging phase.

Notes

- 1 JESSICA (Joint European Support for Sustainable investment in City Areas), JASPERS (Joint Assistance to Support Projects in European Regions); for a further evaluation see Commission Staff Working Document – Financial Instruments in Cohesion Policy. European Commission, Brussels, 27.2.2012, SWD(2012) 36 final.
- 2 https://urbanit2014.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/piskorz-14_10_2014.pdf
- 3 http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/conferences/urban2014/doc/issues_paper_annex.pdf
- 4 Regulation (EU) No 1301/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on the European Regional Development Fund and on specific provisions concerning the Investment for growth and jobs goal and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1080/2006.

- 5 http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/conferences/urban2014/agenda_en.cfm
- 6 http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/conferences/urban2014/doc/presentations/eua_smart_growth.pdf
- 7 http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/conferences/urban2014/doc/presentations/cities_side_event_c.pdf
- 8 http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/conferences/urban2014/doc/presentations/cities_side_event_c.pdf
- 9 http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/conferences/urban2014/doc/report_cities_of_tomorrow_2014.pdf
- 10 http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/consultation/urb_agenda/index_en.cfm
- 11 As clearly shown in the recent Meeting of mayors of capital cities, held in Rome last 1 October under the Italian Presidency; session *La Comunicazione della Commissione Europea: verso un'Agenda Urbana dell'UE*. See Commissioner Hahn's speech, «The role of capital cities in the EU Urban Agenda» at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-14-651_en.html

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