41. Urban diplomacy in Europe

Mutual engagement or business-minded pragmatism?

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Over the past few decades, the role that cities play in international politics has increased. In an age in which people, goods, money and information are more than ever transcending national boundaries, cities serve as platforms for the discussion of shared international issues. Mayors appear at big conferences on climate and sustainability and compete for the right to host international events such as the Olympics or the European Capital of Culture. Where originally diplomacy was primarily the domain of states, nowadays it is also familiar territory for cities. This diplomacy does not only manifest itself globally but also at the European level. New partnerships are established in which European cities join forces to promote shared interests. It is partly because of these developments that the EU regards cities as important partners for the European agenda setting and devising strategies for addressing this agenda. However, the question is whether this type of urban diplomacy can be an avenue for closer European cooperation. Does it attest to a shared engagement with European issues, or is it mainly a platform for business-minded pragmatism?

The diplomatic positioning of cities

Traditionally, diplomacy has mainly been linked to the state, serving as a means to keep the peace, defeat common enemies and promote trade. As far back as Ancient Greece, ambassadors were used as representatives of the Greek city-states outside city boundaries. During the Renaissance, Venice and Milan
regularly organised diplomatic missions abroad, and in the 19th century diplomacy became the domain of the European nation states. Nowadays, states no longer have the monopoly on social, economic and political activity, and a large range of other players are active in the field of diplomacy. For example, cities increasingly act as representatives on issues that can be promoted and addressed at an international level. It is no wonder that diplomacy has become an important part of urban policy. Cities tend to be the hubs where businesses settle, the economy flourishes, migrants meet and young people engage in creativity and innovation. Cities have increasingly become the logical locus of international cross-fertilisation.

The value of urban diplomacy for European cooperation

It is partly because of these developments that the EU sees cities as important partners for European agenda setting and devising strategies for tackling European issues. Partnerships between cities can construct important international bridges, making it possible to address issues that transcend European boundaries. One of the first initiatives in this context was the European Capital of Culture programme. In 1985, the Greek Minister of Culture, Melina Mercouri, proposed that European cities be given a key role in representing European cultural diversity. In so doing, she aimed to confront an issue that the European Community was struggling with at the time: citizens did not feel enough of a connection with the European Community. The European Capital of Culture programme could serve to raise awareness of Europe’s cultural richness and thereby strengthen people’s identification with Europe. Over the years, this intergovernmental programme became one of the European Commission’s flagship cultural initiatives, and was further formalised. A rotation system was introduced, enabling countries – both Member States and candidate Member States – to take turns nominating cities. In addition, certain
criteria were introduced that cities were required to meet if they were to be eligible to bear the title: they needed to invest in civic participation and have a clear notion of the European dimension of the city.

In addition to the European Capital of Culture initiative, since the mid-1990s the European Commission has supported a wide range of partnerships between cities. An example of this is the EUROCITIES network. The objective of this network of European cities is to strengthen the role of local governments at the European level. In doing so, it aims to influence EU legislation in order to be better able to address issues at a city level. The European Commission funds the activities of this network, and is closely involved in tackling social issues in particular. Another example is the establishment of the Covenant of Mayors, under which local and regional governments work to increase energy efficiency and the use of sustainable energy sources in the areas they oversee. The 5882 mayors who are signatories to the Covenant are aiming to achieve a 20% reduction in European carbon emissions by 2020.

These examples demonstrate that the European Union supports urban diplomacy as a way of finding solutions to specifically European issues. The EU becomes involved with existing partnerships to tackle relevant European issues in situations where the national governments of Member States (or candidate Member States) are taking a less proactive approach. It follows from this that the European interest in urban diplomacy is functional in nature. This is also reflected by the EU Urban Agenda that was drawn up by the Commission in 2014. This agenda emphasises the significance of cities in addressing issues relating to the economy, climate, environment and society at large. However, the question is whether European cities share this ambition. For them, what benefit is there in participating in European initiatives and working together with the European authorities? What goals do they hope to achieve, and do these tally with those of the European Commission?
The value of European cooperation for cities

There is no single answer to the above questions. The ways in which different cities use diplomacy at the European level and to what ends depends to a great extent on their social, economic and cultural characteristics, the socio-economic means at their disposal and their general level of self-sufficiency. Cities that are strongly dependent on others (such as national and European government agencies) to meet certain needs tend to be vocal proponents of cooperation. But the opportunities for cooperation tend to be limited in these cases, as the city itself will have relatively little to offer. A city with a lot of potential for innovation, a strong economic position and a highly international complexion, on the other hand, will benefit less directly from this cooperative way of meeting its needs, but will have what it takes to gain international prestige, play a pioneering role and exert influence on decision-making at the European level. Participation in European cooperation projects is also determined by the city’s role in the country that it is in. Cities that play a key role in representing the national interests of this country are more likely to be utilised to support the foundations of the state than to contribute to European integration.

Amsterdam is an example of a city with a clear focus on Europe and the European Union. The Mayor regularly goes on working visits to Brussels, a representative of the city is permanently stationed in Brussels and a European Strategy has been drawn up with the objective of making Amsterdam into a so-called ‘smart global hub’. Amsterdam is promoting itself at the European level because it wants to establish an international reputation for itself as a business hub and breeding ground for the development of knowledge, innovation, sustainable urban development, active citizenship and participation, as is stated in the ‘Amsterdam International Responsible Capital City 2014-2018’ policy document:

Amsterdam is an international city that is open to new developments: a proud, compact and ‘smart’ metropolis that has much to offer Europe, but that also has strong connections with the rest of the world. This position can be strengthened and
expanded, with the European Institutions in Brussels (policy/regulations) and the European cities (knowledge networks, business relations) as the most important target groups. Amsterdam’s ambition of positioning itself as a responsible capital city is borne out by the role it assumes on the European stage: playing the lead and setting the example in some areas, sometimes playing a supporting role, but always endeavouring to connect people.

European cooperation enables Amsterdam to put itself on the map and enter into new partnerships with other European pioneers. The city is looking for ways to capitalise on its already-strong position; it operates independently, and is only partly reliant on the EU.

In many other European cities, the situation is different – and this is perhaps particularly true for cities located in countries that are still in the process of transitioning from socialist societies to liberal democracies and are not – or not yet – members of the European Union. Belgrade is one such city. It, too, is vying for the position of European Capital of Culture, is participating in European urban partnerships such as EUROCITIES and is part of a range of different EU-funded programmes. However, its position with respect to Europe is different from that of a city like Amsterdam. Belgrade is not a pioneer, but operates from the side lines. As a city from a candidate Member State, it has very little influence on the European agenda. In addition, the city is struggling with the legacy of Yugoslavian socialism and recent conflicts which have led national interests to take precedence over European ones. The city is literally still ‘under construction’ and has a lot of catching up to do. Its residents tend to look back nostalgically on the days when the city flourished as a cosmopolitan hub, inextricably linked to the rest of Europe. It was during that time that the cultural and artistic avant-garde emerged in Belgrade, the major cultural institutions flourished and the economy boomed. During the wars in the nineties, the city was cut off from the outside world, the avant-garde was forced underground and the economy collapsed. The aftershocks from this situation can still be felt today, particularly at the national level. The country
remains inward-focused rather than looking out beyond its own horizons. The city is having a difficult time making the leap to reconnecting with Europe and the rest of the world.

Yet the city is still diplomatically active in Europe. The former avant-garde has continued to rebel against the establishment, and with the help of foreign investors has begun turning its back on the government’s isolationist approach. Former links with other European cities are in fact playing a major part in this. In the absence of economic means, the city also finds itself having to take part in competitions and European projects in order to acquire funding that can be invested in gentrification, art and culture, innovation and social facilities. For example, Belgrade has (unsuccessfully) tried to become the European Capital of Culture in 2020 in order to draw tourists to the city, put Serbia on the map in Europe and give the city a new impetus during a time of austerity. Cooperation at the European level thus becomes a way of increasing the city’s self-sufficiency and promoting the national interest while getting out from under the yoke of the state and once again playing a role at the European level. For a city like Belgrade, urban diplomacy is vital – there is no alternative.

Mutual engagement or business-minded pragmatism?

This brief outline demonstrates that European cities have different priorities and motivations for becoming involved in European diplomacy. What they have in common is that these choices cannot be disentangled from local, urban interests. In that sense, European cooperation is not the end goal for these cities, but is primarily a means to an end. Where the European agenda chimes with the local agenda, there is a benefit to working together. Ultimately, cities mainly want to communicate their own ambitions at the European level. Some cities, like Amsterdam, are successful at putting their own interests onto the European agenda. Other cities, like Belgrade, are forced to
adopt measures from the European agenda to increase their chances of being awarded funding for local projects.

For both the EU and cities, pragmatic considerations are key to the decision to work together at the European level. They need each other to achieve certain goals. Does this result in a somewhat superficial form of European cooperation, dominated more by pragmatism than idealism? It does seem that way. However, this does not necessarily mean that there is a lack of engagement in the processes of European unification. Pragmatism is itself, by definition, one of the hallmarks of diplomacy: maintaining contacts with the outside world in order to safeguard one’s own interests. It was also the guiding principle in various aspects of European integration, with the interests of the Member States constantly being weighed up as part of the process of determining the contents of European cooperation. This pragmatism does not preclude genuine mutual engagement; in fact, it is one of the prerequisites for more in-depth involvement in the future.

The author

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Further reading
