Urban Europe

Marini, Gioia, van Wageningen, Anne, Mamadouh, Virginie

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The city is often regarded as a dystopia. The city never sleeps. There is constant movement in the streets. Glaring lights shine everywhere. Tall buildings loom like taut sails in the wind. The city dizzies people, disorientates and hypnotises them. This is how Fritz Lang, the maker of the 1927 movie *Metropolis*, depicted the city of 2026. Now, almost a century after the film's creation, the city is actually associated with many positive things. Cities provide spaces for innovation, recreation, greening, sustainability and creativity. And yet studies on cities also present a gloomier picture. Cities are afflicted by structural issues such as poverty, social inequality, unemployment and inadequate housing. These issues are detrimental to the quality of life and safety in cities. After all, the wealthier and more spacious cities are, the less safety is an issue for them.

This dichotomy visible in and between cities is a cause for concern. First of all, there is the inequality that exists between different cities. Instead of joyful synergy or healthy competition, cities find themselves struggling with an imbalance between growth and contraction, between economic attraction and decline. Cities are being hit by the massive cuts to public spending that have taken place in the past few years, putting significant pressure on public services. In 2012, one in four Europeans lived in poverty or were at risk of poverty. Of Europe's 500 million citizens, 125 million are struggling with socio-economic shortages on a daily basis. Between 2009 and 2012, the number of Europeans living in poverty increased by 10 million. Cities are therefore dealing with a growing need for public funding for
benefits, public services and health care, and doing so in the face of shrinking budgets.

Cities are faced with a wide range of problems, such as immigration, the ageing population, unemployment, social marginalisation, poverty, unaffordable housing, congestion and pollution. Although no direct causal link can be drawn between these problems and the increase of criminality and unsafe streets, they are certainly indicators that weigh negatively on safety in cities. What is also tricky is that these are stubborn problems. People who are living in poverty now will pass this problem on to future generations, providing the problem with a structural, long-term, cumulative character. Women, children, single-parent families, low-skilled workers, migrants and other vulnerable groups such as the disabled are all risk groups for poverty. Underinvestment in educational opportunities for children in particular will lead to higher public expenditure in later stages of the life cycle – in concrete terms, more government intervention in the areas of housing, employment and health care. And, as Thomas Piketty teaches us, the gap between rich and poor is growing. Cities are structurally affected by this, and will have to develop integrated policies to address the issue. The Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG), for example, is using a range of different interventions to address safety, such as tackling radicalisation, creating safe houses, managing public space and working with ex-convicts and juvenile delinquents.

The Urban Agenda has barely addressed the issue of safety explicitly. There appears to be a lacuna here. The document has acknowledged that decentralised governments have to deal with European policy relating to the ‘area of freedom, security and justice’ (AFSJ). The European Union is aware of security issues that transcend city boundaries, such as radicalisation, human trafficking, organised crime and civil rights. The Dutch Presidency of the Council welcomed urban creativity and innovation, in part to combat violence and effectively promote the integration of new EU citizens. However, the topic of safety has drawn insufficient attention. The Urban Agenda has not
explicitly addressed the question of how cities can take concrete administrative action to give further direction to international cooperation on safety and security issues. Fortunately, avenues do exist for a more dynamic interaction between the Urban Agenda and inter-city partnerships in the area of safety.

**Safety on the Urban Agenda of the European Union**

The European Commission's Urban Agenda mentions urban innovation in the areas of energy, transportation and IT. The Urban Agenda also refers to the goal of making cities more resilient, especially in view of threats relating to climate, energy, health and infrastructure. Given the major consequences that calamities, crises and failure of public utilities can have on the day-to-day life of city dwellers and on safety and crime, it is rather surprising that these problems are not explored in the Urban Agenda. In addition to concentrating on creating 'smart cities', there should be a greater focus on 'safe cities'.

The European agenda does focus at length on the development of urban knowledge, including on topics such as safety and crime prevention. In this context, the European Urban Knowledge Network is an excellent example of knowledge sharing and mutual enrichment by cities. The aim is for cities and surrounding municipalities to work together more, which can be promoted through greater synergy and more funding for ambitious projects within metropolises and urban agglomerations. Various partnerships have already been established in the south of the Netherlands – including with Belgium – to combat problematic drug use and the related environmental issues. In the future, cities will increasingly be the testing grounds for European policy. A European Innovation Partnership with smart cities and communities can be a good basis for tackling security issues that transcend city boundaries. Partnerships between cities could strive to exchange knowledge more often, share expertise and establish long-term administrative relationships.
Cities are vulnerable because they can be confronted with crises and calamities, such as the bombings in Madrid (2004) and London (2005). The SafeCity project sees the use of information to predict unsafe situations and facilitate preventative measures as playing a major role. But as with many other projects supported by the European Union, safety seems to be approached primarily from a technological angle. There seems to be far less attention given to how cities deal with safety and security challenges on an administrative level.

State or city: Subsidiarity and managing safety and security

Traditionally, the area of safety and security falls to the Member States to address, but since the Treaty of Lisbon came into effect, many strategies that relate to safety and security – including crime prevention – are developed jointly (i.e. at the community level). Although the principle of subsidiarity stipulates that urban policy does not fall under the competence of the European Union, three-quarters of European regulations are implemented at the local and regional levels. This creates an opportunity to explicitly put the topic of safety on the agenda of cities and partnerships between cities. At the same time, local safety practices could be reviewed in the light of the normative framework laid down in European privacy law and the Charter of Fundamental Rights. This might include policy practices relating to wide-ranging issues such as surveillance, prostitution, human trafficking and drugs, shelter for asylum seekers, access to benefit records or providing fingerprints when applying for identity cards. Europe is becoming increasingly important as a policy partner for decentralised governments.

In any case, where the domain of safety and security is concerned, European regulations will have more and more of an impact at the local level. So far, the European Union has given little consideration to the question of whether cities have
sufficient funding, expertise and human resources to be able to implement new regulations imposed by the EU at the decentralised level. In order to be involved as a fully-fledged partner, cities could take a more proactive approach (exerting influence, lobbying, participating in decision-making), also with a view to absorbing and implementing regulations and funding from the European Union, as well as bringing about organisational changes to the administrative apparatus. This would result in a gradual ‘Europeanising’ of local governments.

Local governments are also increasingly faced with cross-border police and judicial cooperation, for example in the case of cannabis cultivation or football hooligans, but also for disaster and crisis management. The European Commission can in fact initiate proceedings against Member States for non-compliance with European regulations on police and judicial cooperation. It can even ask the Court of Justice to impose a fine or penalty payment on the central government. If the violation has been committed by a local government, the central government can hold the local government responsible or recover damages from them. Cities are ill-prepared for these kinds of eventualities.

Safety as a connection

Marginalisation, safety fears and crime are issues that transcend city boundaries. With the prospect of continuing urbanisation, more citizens will want to move to the cities. With their role as economic engines, cities have a magnetic pull on people looking for employment and education. This also means that cities find themselves faced with a higher proportion of highly educated citizens, who tend to be empowered and engaged. This requires a change in governance, including where safety and security is concerned. A patriarchal, top-down form of government is less and less suited to an informed, active citizenry. Alternative forms of cooperation are very much necessary. Governments – including local governments – will increasingly be able to position
themselves as ‘directors’, providers of a platform, agenda setters or motivators. Of course, it is important to invest in cooperative relationships between all administrative levels, from local to European levels. And cooperation between cities needs to be actively pursued as well. An example of this in the context of the European Union is the Cities Conference on Foreign Fighters to Syria, which was held in 2012 by the Radicalisation Awareness Network. At this conference, local officials and experts discussed the impact of various anti-terrorism measures at the local level, and how to handle those going to fight in Syria before, during and after their journeys. The European Cities Against Drugs network is also an excellent example of cooperation between 250 local authorities in combating drug abuse, with its activities including an annual Mayors’ Conference. It is easy for local governments to get on board. The platform aims to present a clear and consistent stance on drug policy, support and enhance the exchange of information and expertise between policymakers and professionals at the local level, disseminate information about evidence-based practices, develop a network of contacts at all relevant administrative levels, and organise conferences and seminars.

In addition to taking note of good examples and exchanging information – including where this relates to safety and security – cities should be involved a lot more often at all stages of the decision-making process on topics that affect them. In addition to active participation, cities should be given the opportunity, as part of the process of drafting new regulations, of undertaking reviews of the likely impact of new measures on the city. For now, the European Union itself is working towards putting improved regulations and more practicable financial instruments in place, and offering a platform for urban creativity and knowledge development. An important challenge for the European Union is not to lump all cities in together. Some cities are flourishing, while others are struggling.

Finally, the Urban Agenda is lacking an external dimension. After all, the European Union is active in a lot of Third World
countries, in which urbanisation and safety are pressing issues. The issue of safety and security is taking on a hybrid character, moving through ‘glocal’ connections. For example, many of the European External Action Service’s efforts have to do with civil protection and civil crisis management, as well as contributing to good governance. Now that urban warfare is threatening to spread to Europe too, it is advisable to stay alert to the relationship between the safety of European city dwellers and conflicts elsewhere in the world, and to continually be on the lookout for possible contagious effects. European cities can play a central role in the transfer and use of knowledge to benefit cities in Third World countries. The Urban Agenda makes no mention of this external dimension. It is high time that integrated connections be created in the field of security, both within and outside Europe.

The author

Monica den Boer is Director of SeQure Research and Consultancy and Adjunct Professor at the Department of Security & Criminology at Macquarie University, Sydney. Between 2003 and 2015, she held a variety of positions at the Police Academy of The Netherlands in conjunction with a Chair of Comparative Public Administration at the VU University Amsterdam. Between 2003 and 2016 she was a Member of the Committee on European Integration of the Advisory Council on International Affairs.

Further reading

Boer, Monica den. 2014. ‘Police, Policy and Politics in Brussels: Scenarios for the Shift from Sovereignty to Solidarity’, in: