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City Diplomacy: The EU's Hidden Capacity to Act

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Under the auspices of the EU, mayors are beginning to act like diplomats, brokering deals and defusing geopolitical disputes. On the one hand, such "city diplomacy" offers benefits: cities are reaching spots that the EU ordinarily cannot, flipping conventional hierarchies and making big issues seem small. On the other, it is potentially destabilizing in an era in which the exercise of power can have far-reaching consequences. Harnessing the activism of cities will be difficult, but not impossible.

— While Lebanon and Belarus mark failures of EU foreign policy, they have been minor success stories for EU city diplomacy. Across the EU's neighborhood, EU cities have begun to broker deals, address territorial splits, and reaffirm the role of human intelligence in international relations.

— Although the EU had seemed to be on the verge of formalizing city diplomacy, the practice remains improvised. A handful of cities are thus eroding the EU's monopoly on diplomacy, speaking as if on behalf of the EU while only being accountable to a few voters.

— To properly harness city diplomacy, the EU must face up to current weaknesses at both its top and bottom. Three concepts can ensure cohesive city diplomacy: "local affairs first," "counterbalancing the center," and "opportunism needs structure."

In its 2016 Global Strategy, the EU clearly stated that promoting reform was the best way to stave off crisis in the states on its eastern and southern flanks.[1] This argument has been eloquently confirmed by the current turmoil in Belarus, Lebanon, and the Aegean – as have the EU's own shortcomings.

In Beirut, the lack of reform literally proved explosive. Although the EU Commission had pinpointed sclerotic border and port management as a risk and even deployed a reform program and liaison officer there, it failed to adapt to local conditions, instead trying unsuccessfully to export the EU's own border model. Europe's diplomats had the opposite problem. They preferred to work with the status quo and local elites rather than risk triggering destabilizing reforms. For example, it is no secret that European governments came to rely on the Shi'ite major general who watches over Beirut's seaports and airports, as well as the highway to Damascus, to hold back the flow of Sunni refugees and terrorists from Syria. Indeed, Europe's diplomats may have allowed the militant Shi'ite group Hezbollah to piggyback on that relationship. They turned a blind eye when Hezbollah exploited the sea and air routes through Beirut for its own nefarious purposes.

Against the backdrop of Beirut's devastation, there have been calls for new forms of EU engagement abroad – including city diplomacy.[2] A port city like Rotterdam can offer Beirut not only relevant expertise, but also advice on novel ways to soften its politics. Europe's cities have already made a contribution in the Levant, where they brought city representatives from hostile countries together in ways impossible at the national level.[3] They have also promoted cross-border cooperation and improved water management in this parched terrain, all under an EU umbrella.

THREE VECTORS OF EU CITY DIPLOMACY

In the EU's eastern and southern neighborhoods, EU cities are currently practicing diplomacy along three strands:

As Players

The EU's cities are learning to broker deals, focusing on weak states – for example, Libya. Central authority in Libya has all but collapsed, depriving the EU of a channel to engage. While EU diplomats have generally responded by "going high," seeking UN backing for action, Europe's cities and regions have gone "low," making contact to mayors, the only Libyans with an undisputed democratic mandate.

Mayors in Libya, as in other weak states, can potentially form a bedrock in the political quicksand. All are adamant that their citizens will not fall victim to militias and terrorists, and they have vowed to prevent migrants from falling prey to traffickers. The mayors share these aims because many of them suffered persecution at the hands of former leader Muammar el-Qaddafi, who brutally played cities off one another – foremost Benghazi and Tripoli. Last year, representatives of EU cities helped bring the mayors of these former rivals to Brussels. There, the pair reconciled and laid out their expectations of the EU, which marked a small but significant breakthrough.

Europe's cities have done as much as anyone to expunge Qaddafi's legacy, also helping a cluster of eight Libyan mayors to work together on everything from waste management to countering violent extremism. The constructive role of EU cities compares favorably with the machinations of diplomats from some member states. In 2017, when Italy became aware of how useful Libyan cities might be in stemming migration, it reputedly sponsored the establishment of Brigade 48, a militia to guard oil refineries and cut migration flows.[4] Although Italy then co-opted Libyan mayors into supporting this brigade, it soon deteriorated into an urban protection racket.

1 European Union External Action Service, "Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe," June 2016, p. 23: <https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf> (accessed September 8, 2020).

2 Government of the Netherlands, "Intervention by Sigrid Kaag at the International Conference of Support and Assistance to Beirut," August 9, 2020: <https://www.government.nl/documents/speeches/2020/08/09/intervention-by-sigrid-kaag-at-the-international-conference-of-support-and-assistance-to-beirut> (accessed September 8, 2020).

3 See, for instance, the attendees at the January 2020 plenary session of the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly, coordinated by the EU's Committee of the Regions.

4 Maggie Michael, "Backed by Italy, Libya enlists militias to stop migrants," AP News, August 29, 2017: <https://apnews.com/9e808574a4d04eb38fa8c688d110a23d> (accessed September 8, 2020).

As Places

Europe's cities are defusing territorial tensions in the EU's neighborhood by using their newly discovered talent for geostrategy. Town planning and urban administration involve controlling space across time – the epitome of geostrategy, albeit on a very modest scale. Europe's cities and regions have put this talent to good use in the Eastern Neighborhood, where five of the EU's six partner states are embroiled in territorial issues, with Belarus in danger of completing the set. In Ukraine, local EU authorities have helped redraw administrative boundaries, facilitating a tentative decentralization of power.[5]

These local authorities could well achieve something there that Europe's diplomats have long desired. European diplomats view decentralization and boundary change as a means of protecting minorities in the neighborhood, giving them language rights or proper access to healthcare, and so stemming secessionist tendencies. But Kyiv, Chisinau, and Tbilisi have consistently rebuffed their overtures; they fear "federalization" would see them divided into Russian and pro-European spheres of influence. Yet they do seem to trust Europe's local authorities with the task because these players have no geopolitical blueprint for the country as a whole.

The EU Commission has its own way of dealing with territorial problems in the neighborhood, which likewise reduces big tensions to technical trifles. The Commission typically dispatches a group of border experts to depoliticize the situation in the disputed area, then links territories up in a "macro-region" or giant transport corridor. But Moscow says it no longer sees the presence of EU border experts as neutral. And Beijing is turning questions of cross-border connectivity into high geopolitics. This helps explain why the Commission's Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) has begun to use Europe's cities and regions as partners.

As Percolators

European city representatives have become antennae, picking up social and political signals abroad. Because they are transparent about Europe's own problems and keep their ears open for policy ideas, they hear things that EU diplomats do not. Europe's

mayors will not, for example, have been surprised by the boldness of the uprising in Belarus. A group of them visited there in 2017 to see what *they* could learn. Belarusian mayors are, after all, at the forefront of the digitalization of public services. One reason for this is that they use the internet to give vent to local frustrations.

EU officials are not always so receptive to such signals. They still see it as their role to export European policies and tend to place countries into rigid categories according to their convergence with EU norms. EU diplomats would not sit down as equals with representatives of, say, Turkey or Ukraine, let alone bring them together to discuss shared concerns such as cooperation related to the Black Sea. Europe's cities have no such hang-ups. Kyiv and Ankara – with populations of 2.9 million and 5.5 million, respectively – dwarf them. Consequently, European mayors would not dare lecture them or place them in Eurocentric categories.

But Europe's city diplomats would be the first to acknowledge how much they profit from the EU and its foreign policy apparatus. The EU's mercurial international status has helped them escape the stale conventions of national city diplomacy – twinning, tourism, and technical cooperation – and avoid being hijacked by governments who see it as a matter of prestige to set the global template for the "smart megacity."[6] The EU offers mayors space to experiment, an attractive alternative to the rather programmatic activities of the Council of Europe and the sometimes empty hype of UN city diplomacy.

HARNESSING EU CITY DIPLOMACY

If EU city diplomacy has transformed into something unusually geopolitical, it is largely thanks to the Committee of the Regions (CoR). Founded in 1994, the CoR spent its first decade focusing on local issues and EU enlargement, downsizing this latter strand of its work in 2004. But as of 2008, it built up two international fora: the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP) and the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM). These fora, which convene local representatives from their respective re-

5 See the Ukraine Task Force: <https://cor.europa.eu/en/our-work/Pages/Ukraine.aspx> (accessed September 8, 2020). Poland has, for example, undergone a decentralization of power, and local Polish authorities have clear ideas about the optimal borough size.

6 Alice Ekman, "China's Smart Cities: The New Geopolitical Battleground," Etudes de l'Ifri, December 2019: <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/etudes-de-lifri/chinas-smart-cities-new-geopolitical-battleground> (accessed September 8, 2020).

gions, proved especially useful in 2015 when a wave of international migration and terrorism hit the EU.

The spine of EU city diplomacy is provided by the CoR's Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional, and External Affairs (CIVEX). Its members oversee the CoR's international activities, and its secretariat supports CORLEAP and ARLEM. But if the structured core of EU city diplomacy is provided by CIVEX, its outer bounds remain amorphous. Before playing a role in Libya, Ukraine, and Belarus, European cities and regions had to clear significant hurdles: a formal request from the third country, the determined efforts of a mayor or regional representative in the CoR, and a funder to foot the bill.

The results have been hit-and-miss. While the EU's cities and local authorities can act as implementers for EU development cooperation, they are not a routine reference point for the Commission's Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO) as compared to "civil society" or "the social partners." Consequently, DEVCO has cultivated its own relations to African cities without the mediation of EU cities, meaning it largely ignores the CoR's web of small-town partners and

focuses on Africa's metropolises instead. Sometimes, it uses aid implementers who do not cover war-torn cities like Benghazi, hotspots where EU towns and cities still readily engage.

A LOSS OF MOMENTUM

The scattergun role of cities is ripe for rationalization. Last year, the CoR successfully brought to fruition several pilot projects that, together, offered a convincing proof of concept for a formal EU city diplomacy. The outgoing High Representative and Neighborhood Commissioner appeared convinced, and cities seemed set to receive a green light to really act along the three strands outlined above:

1. As players building "islands of security" in weak states such as Libya or Syria;

2. As places promoting decentralization in broken states such Ukraine or Georgia;

3. And as percolators spreading ideas about good governance in places more or less closed to diplomats such as Palestine or Belarus.

THE CoR CAN COORDINATE CITIES AND REGIONS AS PLAYERS
BUILDING RESILIENCE ESPECIALLY IN WEAK STATES

Middle-East flashpoints   Azeri-Armenian Conflict   East-West Ukraine   East-West Libya   Refugee Protection in Home Regions   Brexit/ Northern Ireland

THE CoR CAN SUPPORT CITIES AND REGIONS AS PLACES
TO DEFUSE INTERNATIONAL TENSIONS

Decentralization   Political Transition   Local Elections   Migration Cooperation   Fisheries

Karlstad
Gdansk   Grodno   Minsk
Brussels
Radlo   Vinnytsia   Kharkiv
Salzburg   Mariupol
Venezia Giulia
Galicia   Mostar
        Haskovo
        Edirne
        Izmir
            Nicosia
        Tobruk
    Sirte

THE CoR CAN OFFER A PLATFORM TO CITIES AND REGIONS AS PERCOLATORS
TO HELP SPREAD IDEAS

City Diplomacy   Climate and Migration   EU-Africa Exchange   UN Sustainable Development Goal 11

North Rhine Westphalia   Warsaw
Brussels
        Prague
Coulaines   Bratislava
        Budapest
Galicia
    Nouvelle Acquitaine
Basque
Country   Catalonia
Seville
    Algiers   Nicosia
Al Hoceima
Rabat
        Ganei Tikva   Ramallah

That momentum has, however, been lost due to a series of unexpected setbacks. First, an overhaul of the role of local authorities in EU policymaking – the Timmermans Reform – confined itself to internal EU affairs. Second, some of the CoR's most active city diplomats lost their seats, a perpetual problem in a forum with a constant turnover of members. Third, the CoR's new president proved reluctant to embrace international affairs (reputedly for fear of jeopardizing his native Greece's line on Turkey and Russia). And, fourth, a reform of the EU aid budget failed to produce the €500 million for which local authorities had hoped.

But it is a fifth development – the coronavirus pandemic – that has most slowed momentum. Before the spread of COVID-19, the CoR had been expected to create a new committee for external affairs, breaking up CIVEX, which covers both home ("CIV-") and external ("-EX") affairs. Now, it seems that the CoR will not only retain CIVEX, but it also may shrink its external work. With its members focusing on meeting the local challenges of recovery, CoR is returning to a classic understanding of subsidiarity, the principle that political action should occur at the lowest possible level.[7] EU diplomats and the Commission DGs NEAR and DEVCO are likewise focusing on their core business – improving the worsening international mood.

THE RE-CENTRALIZATION OF FOREIGN POLICY

The trouble with this return to first principles is that they no longer apply. Subsidiarity became a general principle of EU law in 1993, during an era in which local affairs were still clearly local, and the EU had few good reasons for encroaching on them. Now, things are less clear cut. Local matters have become issues of geopolitical competition, placing them squarely in the realm of the EU's trained diplomats. As China, Russia, and Turkey exploit the EU's societal vulnerabilities, Europe's diplomats can legitimately claim to be the right ones to deal with everything

from internet provision to healthcare or asylum processing. Today, subsidiarity justifies a *centralization* of local affairs.

With the stakes so high, European diplomats are also losing their appetite to consult cities on these local matters, let alone give them a front-line role abroad. They tend to view Europe's mayors and regional potentates as blundering amateurs – dilettante diplomats who do not understand that a partnership with a Belarusian mayor can undermine the EU's whole sanctions regime,[8] that an urban boundary change in Israel can have massive geopolitical ramifications,[9] or that, by posing as an election observer in Ukraine, they are representing the EU itself.[10]

Some EU mayors are even considered pawns and proxies. Because mayors are seldom rewarded by their voters for playing an active international role, they must logically have an ulterior motive. Sure enough, in Hungary, mayors who are members of Fidesz, the ruling party, use the international sphere to launder the reputation of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán; simultaneously, opposition-run Budapest uses it to attack the government. In Flanders and Catalonia, mayors use their international profile to differentiate themselves from the national position. In Turkey, Russia, and China, national leaders may exploit local divisions in the EU or deploy their own pet mayors to alter territorial boundaries abroad, citing an EU precedent.

PRESSURE FOR DE-CENTRALIZATION

The CoR still contains committed proponents of EU city diplomacy who make a case for broad new rights to cooperate abroad. They say that subsidiarity was never just a principle of vertical organization; rather, it is also a principle of *horizontal* association. It dates to a time of city states and confers an ancient right to associate with other cities without being constrained by borders imposed from above.[11] These mayors thus want DEVCO and NEAR to provide them

7 Glossary of Summaries, "Subsidiarity" as defined by Article 5 of the Treaty on European Union, EUR-Lex: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/subsidiarity.html> (accessed September 8, 2020).

8 Belarus was due to take on the co-chair of CORLEAP in October 2020; not all the Belarusian representatives are mayors or locally-elected officials.

9 Betty Herschman, "Changing the Demographics of Jerusalem," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 13, 2017: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/75006> (accessed September 8, 2020).

10 The CoR previously aligned with the Council of Europe to send election observers to Eastern Europe, but the affiliation of its members was not always clear to local reporters there.

11 After the religious wars of the 16th century, a town in a Protestant area would either defy its overlord in order to associate with a Catholic town or call on the protection of the pope. This unsatisfactory state of affairs spurred the development of "subsidiarity" as a right of communities to associate across boundaries.

with cash without strings, arguing that there are enough problems in the world to enable them to act without ever stepping on the toes of the EU.

Advocates of city diplomacy point to examples of mayors having successfully corrected the EU's top-heavy foreign policy. Recently, for example, the EU Commission – supported by Europe's food industry and Italy's hungry fishing fleet – offered Libyan ports help to modernize their fishing practices. European cities and regions stepped in to ensure a bottom-up approach. An Italian port that runs a fishing cooperative joined forces with a Spanish town that excels in fish processing and so on. They constructed an exemplary value chain, which helped Libyan ports avoid the heavy industrial approach of European fisheries policy.

Mayors can also claim credit for professionalizing aspects of the EU's diplomacy. The Covenant of Mayors is one such example. Envisioned by the Commission as a PR exercise to showcase European climate efforts, the Covenant was transformed into a global phenomenon by Europe's mayors. Cities everywhere now sign up to its motivational climate goals. Still, it seems the Commission has not yet learned its lesson. It recently launched a new PR blitz – a "Climate Pact" – that threatens to duplicate the earlier exercise by encouraging cities and civil society to sign up to a similar set of commitments. It is also uneasy about passing on ownership of the Covenant to Michael Bloomberg, the ex-mayor of New York.

THREE PRINCIPLES FOR EU CITY DIPLOMACY

Today's global politics – in a "G-zero world"[12] populated by power players such as China, Russia, and Turkey – are characterized by two contradictory traits: they are both diffuse and centralized. The EU is struggling to adapt. Although it has tried to build coherence by centralizing its foreign policy, this has alienated vital local players like cities. That has decreased the decentralized range of channels through which it needs to exercise influence. As the levers of power shrink, its central institutions are competing to control them. Far from becoming more coherent,

the EU is tugging itself apart at the top and weakening its influence at the bottom.

The Commission is attempting to assert its control of EU foreign policy by using its power of the purse. The president of the European Council has responded by trying to repatriate prerogatives from the EU, then seeking a shared European line among national leaders. And the High Representative now spends his time mediating between these internal stakeholders rather than seeking to expand the EU's range of international interlocutors. Meanwhile, there is still no critical mass to constitute an EU city diplomacy. It is driven by just a few activist mayors, and their enthusiasm would be crushed by attempts at top-down control.

Still, every cloud has a silver lining. The EU's failure to create a framework for city diplomacy may yet prove to be a lucky escape. The best results have come about by happy accident – for example, when mayors were free to adopt the mantle of "EU city diplomats" where suitable or to elide it by working through representatives of Europe's regions where a broader approach was more effective. In contrast, in the few fields in which the EU has closely integrated mayors into its foreign policy, it has blunted them – for example, in EU enlargement policy.[13] The EU can harmoniously harness this dynamic if it adopts three new principles.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The first principle is counter-intuitive: **"local affairs first."** The fact that the CoR is focusing inward need not imply a zero-sum shift away from foreign affairs. Rather, it could be the catalyst for finally establishing cities as a cohesive group in EU affairs. The task is to ensure that this internal cohesion is transferred outward – and here the continued link between "CIV-" and "-EX" could prove vital. The same can be said of the European External Action Service's own inward turn. As the EEAS improves relations between stakeholders inside the EU, it might train city officials or even hire them in fields like strategic communications. The long-term result would be a cadre of city diplomats.

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12 "G-Zero" is a reference to a perceived shift away from the preeminence of the Group of Seven industrialized countries and the expanded Group of Twenty, which includes major emerging powers such as China, India, Brazil, Turkey, and others.

13 EU cities tend to have good relations with states that are actively pursuing accession to the EU and poor relations to laggards. While Turkey has recently shown an interest in deepening its links with EU cities and the CoR, the negative turn in EU-Turkey relations has meant that the CoR has not been able to reciprocate. Only on rare occasions have EU cities and regions driven developments forward – for example, in the Western Balkans, when, in 2019, the then-president of the CoR visited Skopje or, more recently, when the CoR and Council of Europe teamed up to promote local elections in Mostar.

The second principle is **"counterbalancing the center."** As the Commission and European Council drive a top-heavy foreign policy, cities can offer a useful counterweight. But they must do so in a concerted way. When DEVCO focuses on large African cities, for example, the CoR has a justification to develop a web of smaller development initiatives. When NEAR butts heads with leaders in the Western Balkans, cities have grounds to seek out willing partners at the local level. And when EU leaders reach out to autocratic counterparts like Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, European mayors can try to open channels to opposition and Kurdish mayors.

The third principle is a matter of alchemy: **"opportunism needs structure."** Although the EU clearly needs to graduate from its *sui generis* approach to city diplomacy, it cannot afford to smother the random interactions that bring city diplomacy to life. What it needs is a personality to guide these amalgamations, studying their strange contours and spotting opportunities. In this regard, one name pops up repeatedly: Donald Tusk. The former prime minister of Poland and former president of the European Council is a man known for his attachment to Gdansk, a city with a defined international profile. Free-floating, such a person would be at home at the lowest and highest levels of EU politics, but not bound to either.