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The Politics of the EU Urban Agenda: Mobilising the ‘Right to the City’ for European Governance?

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ABSTRACT
The Urban Agenda for the Urban Agenda for the European Union (UAEU) introduces a new stakeholder mechanism for transnational cooperation on sustainable development. Whilst planners welcome this ‘soft’ urban approach to EU policy, globalisation critics warn of network governance impairing the ‘rights to the city’. Indeed, the experience of EU regional policy cautions promises of subnational participation and proposes differentiated institutional effects of political mobilisation. So, how can the urban mechanisms now contribute to European governance? Conceptualising the UAEU as an evolving political field highlights both the potential and limitations of governing diversity, thus contributing to the democratic politicisation of transnational urban governance.

1. Beyond ‘soft’ EU policy: questioning the politics of urban stakeholder cooperation

As European policy-makers contribute to the new urban focus of the global sustainable development goals (SDG 11), the Urban Agenda for the EU (UAEU) introduces a relatively advanced mechanism for transnational cooperation. It turns urban policy from a marginal aspect of territorial development into an integrated stakeholder approach across policy sectors, levels and countries. As Covid now poses yet another challenge for the crisis-ridden EU, the multi-faceted role of cities proves the further political development of the UAEU crucial for transnational governance. But while planners expect wide benefits from this ‘soft’ EU approach, globalisation critics fear that inequalities undermine urban diversity and democratic empowerment. Indeed, the experience of EU regional policy raises doubts as to whether the UAEU can offer new opportunities for participation beyond established EU networks and national institutions. Yet, considering the urban potential for meeting the challenges of global sustainable development, the UAEU is far from politically irrelevant. In addition to setting the agenda for future European policies and mobilising support for transnational urban projects, its stakeholder approach may also evolve into a wider model for the global SDG. So in order to respond to emerging global challenges, how can the UAEU’s political mechanisms actually contribute to European urban governance?
Critically considering not only potentials of the UAEU but also inherent weaknesses from different perspectives of its institutional setting, this paper highlights some relevant political dynamics that may help conceptualise urban stakeholder cooperation as a transnational democratic process.

Reflecting the EU’s lack of legal competence and the largely technical character of preceding measures, the urban agenda has evolved from a range of – so-called – ‘soft’ instruments for spatial planning (Atkinson and Zimmermann 2016; Atkinson and Rossignolo 2010). Embedding discourse, knowledge and networks in thematically focused cooperation, the UAEU’s stakeholder approach is expected to strengthen cities as objects, sources and partners of this soft EU strategy (Mamadouh 2018; Potjer, Hajer, and Pelzer 2018; Purkarthofer 2019). But despite the optimism of the expert community, the empirical research is yet at an initial stage and its grasp of the UAEU’s objectives, processes and actors is still vague. Prior to the UAEU, EU regional policy had introduced subnational participation in EU and state cooperation - though high political expectations have met mixed outcomes in practice. Given the different spatial structures, actors, identities and the strength of national institutions, the Europe of the Regions has worked not so much through direct policies or institutional reforms than as a normative mobilisation frame (Keating 2009, 2018; Hooghe and Keating 1994). While the UAEU now aims to improve the EU policies, critical perspectives of the global urban SDG also point to power relations, interest conflicts and exclusion. As states may opt out of the political promise of stakeholder cooperation, the incorporation of movements and knowledge into transnational governance even risks to neutralise the potential of urban diversity for global sustainable development (Barnett and Parnell 2016; Caprotti et al. 2017; Kaika 2017; Parnell 2016).

The various soft perspectives of UAEU stakeholder cooperation tend to support policymakers’ expectations of uncontroversial expert coordination with optimum outputs for addressing any emerging urban problems. Such a functionalist understanding of urban governance may correspond with Pierre’s (2014; 2019) conception of institutional collective action where the EU offers cooperative incentives which cities can choose to engage flexibly for their various problems and needs. However, challenging the power politics inherent to transnational governance, the right to the city claims economic, political and cultural participation based on urban diversity. Situating democracy in diverse socio-spatial practices, Barnett (2013, 2014) stressed the contentious dynamics of urban politics for politicising, mobilising and institutionalising transnational governance through an interactively emerging process of claims-making. Qualifying critical claims for radical-democratic change against global neoliberal dominance, Smith (2020) pointed to the historic-institutional power of national states as well as that of established actor-networks in structuring and controlling various contexts of social-political transnationalisation. Opening the structural coherency of European cities to plural politics, De Frantz (2008) had conceived the urban integration ideal as guiding and mobilising diverse collective responses to transnational state-transformation in contextually differentiated and open-ended institutional processes. As the urban agenda results from mutual engagement of research and policy, normative, practical and epistemological
differences constitute global sustainable development as diverse transnational political processes (De Frantz 2008; 2018; Barnett and Parnell 2016).

So, how may the UAEU draw on urban diversity to open established policy networks and contribute toward democratizing transnational governance? Connecting EU policy with the urban agenda for global sustainable development, the UAEU’s stakeholder approach initiates an evolving transnational space for urban politics in European governance. As the SDGs have acknowledged the ‘right to the city’, international relations – conventionally a realm of interest politics between states – are opening to diverse transnational processes (Smith 2020; Parnell 2016). At the core of these evolving transnational urban politics, the UAEU introduces a relatively advanced, yet informal stakeholder mechanism into the EU’s already complex legal, political and institutional context of multi-scalar policies, politics and polity building. Adding to the established cooperation between states and the EU, urban stakeholder participation may exert direct influence on policies, empower cities as political players and introduce a pioneering transnational model. But thus politicizing soft cooperation may convert cities from objects to contested issues of EU policies, from partners to winning or losing actors of European politics, and from sources of policy expertise to open-ended contexts of claims-making. While institutional power relations may render exclusion and fragmentation more probable than effective deliberation, urban diversity may constitute the UAEU’s stakeholder processes as a plural and evolving political field reconstructing institutional legitimacies through mutual contextual dynamics of agenda-setting, mobilisation and contention. To understand the contribution of the UAEU to transnational governance, such a political perspective requires us to ask why, how and for whom the new approach seeks to be effective, responsive and inclusive. What should it achieve, how should policy expertise be generated, which stakeholders does it represent and how is this legitimized? Only by thus addressing the inherent power relations as an open-ended as well as contentious quality of stakeholder participation, it will be possible to foster the creative potential of urban diversity and avoid the UAEU’s decline to political irrelevance or more far-reaching fragmentation effects for Europe’s democratic institutions.

In order to contribute towards democratic politicization, this paper proposes to conceptualise the political field of the UAEU as an emblematic case of transnational urban governance. Introducing the ‘right to the city’ in European governance, the paper enquires into the political realm of the various soft powers of EU urban policy (Atkinson and Zimmermann 2016; Mamadouh 2018; Potjer, Hajer, and Pelzer 2018; Purkarthofer 2019) and their mutual potential for open-ended and contentious transnational mobilisation dynamics. In the following, section 2 describes its emergence from the sidelines of EU territorial cohesion toward an integrated approach to European governance, thus embedding ‘soft’ planning in the various relevant literatures on its political-institutional contexts. Section 3 draws out the contributions and methods of this interpretative study for conceptualising the UAEU as an emblematic case of transnational urban politics. Section 4 gives an introductory overview of the UAEU stakeholder mechanisms from relevant discursive sources of its official presentation. Critically reflecting the various institutional logics of functional cooperation, Section 5 explores how the UAEU may make EU urban policy more effective as well as responsive in coordinating complex spaces. To embed responsive output in representative input,
Section 6 draws on the experience of EU regional partnerships to enquire how the UAEU may succeed or fall short on its promise to improve opportunities for participation in the European institutions. Enquiring into the UAEU as a potential transnational model, Section 7 comparatively applies the power critiques of the global urban agenda to examine the UAEU as an emerging transnational process of mobilisation, contention and political construction of European governance. As the practical limitations of stakeholder governance highlight the crucial role of expert practices for transnational democratization, the conclusion draws out some conceptual avenues for critical urban research toward politicizing the European contribution to the global urban agenda.

2. Embedding the emergence of the UAEU in various political-institutional contexts

Existing literature on the UAEU stresses the relevance from various national or policy perspectives (Armondi and Gregorio Hurtado 2019; Vinci and Cutaia 2019) but provides merely rough or early overviews of the transnational stakeholder mechanisms (Mamadouh 2018; Olejnik 2017; Pojter, Hajer, and Pelzer 2018; Neto, Serrano, and Santos 2019; Purkarthofer 2019). Three hypotheses are presented about how the UAEU contributes to EU governance: (1) stakeholder cooperation ensures policy coordination and the implementation of normative EU discourse within the domestic and local contexts of spatial planning and urban development (Purkarthofer 2019); (2) urban knowledge and local experience serve policy learning for experimental EU governance on complex problems that transcend different EU policies and governmental levels (Pojter, Hajer, and Pelzer 2018); and (3) cities become influential partners in European policy-making, transforming city–state relations as well as fostering the role of the EU within states (Mamadouh 2018). Thus, continuing the soft policy approach of discourse, knowledge and networking Purkarthofer 2019; Atkinson and Zimmermann 2016), these various perspectives of the UAEU actually imply different urban dimensions of transnational stakeholder cooperation. Embedding the UAEU also within its wider political-institutional contexts in the EU and globally will further show practical as well as epistemological differences between the various conceptual approaches to governance.

Although the EU Treaty does not confer authority for urban policy on its supranational agencies, urban issues have nevertheless gained importance in EU policies. The EU Commission (EC) has supported urban concerns within cohesion policy, mainly through subsidies for structural measures of territorial development or social employment. Different strategic rationales and interest constellations of the EU and MSs have advanced subnational participation at different times in the political process of EU integration. Regional policy originated in 1975 to facilitate financial transfers between states, developing from there as a result of bargaining over other political interests, such as the accession of new members. In the late 1980s, various EU Treaties turned the initial macroeconomic balancing of territorial disparities into micro-economic promotion of growth poles and local entrepreneurship. This strengthening of structural policy included the cohesive objective of complementing economic integration with social values, solidarity and community building. Several EU institutions, including the Committee of the Regions (CoR), the Council of Europe, the EU Parliament
and the Court of Justice, established a formal status of subnational actors in the EU legal process. In addition to introducing the principles of partnership and subsidiarity, the EC also developed the Europe of the Regions concept to foster subnational participation and civic identification in support of integration (Keating 2018, 2009). The latest EU Treaty (2007) not only acknowledged cohesion as an economic, social and territorial objective, but also stressed subsidiarity and appropriateness as formal principles defining the division of competences between EU and member states (MSs). The EC’s (2014) European Code of Conduct on Partnership specified the criteria for joint programming, which had guided European Regional Development Funds (ERDF) since 1988, as legally binding across all European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) programs. Over the last decade, however, the strategic constellations of several MSs and the general stagnation of EU integration have weakened the dynamic of the Europe of the Regions.

Starting in 1989, an initially small set of EU actions offered direct funding for subnational projects in urban areas. After the first communication of an ‘Urban Agenda’ in 1997, from 2004 to 2005 the EC began to publish a series of strategic policy documents and research reports. Following a 2011 European Parliament Resolution, EU regulation COM 496 of 2012 formally introduced the urban dimension into cohesion policy and the EC’s Directorate General for Regions was renamed DG Regional and Urban Policy. Starting in 2008, a series of political declarations were agreed upon during the Council Presidencies of several MSs, including France, Netherlands, Britain, Germany and Spain. These intergovernmental documents established frameworks for knowledge transfer, which complemented Horizon 2020 research grants and ERDF cooperation instruments. Departing from the initial direct EU funding, urban objectives were mainstreamed by an integrated territorial approach as part of the ERDF criteria for 2007–2013, requiring the MSs to develop national urban agendas as part of their Operational Programmes for the EU budgetary period 2014–2020. Since 2014, DG Regio has been organising a series of City Forum conferences, accompanied by public consultations that led to the adoption of the PoA under the Dutch Presidency in 2016 (Atkinson and Zimmermann 2016, 2018; Fedeli 2014).

As opposed to hard EU statutory powers, soft urban measures result from a long political process in which various adjustments of EU policies interact with states’ interests and expert practices. The ‘discursive concepts of planning experts’ offer a range of ‘imaginative configurations’ to promote Europeanisation through ‘values, practice, joint visions’ in relational spaces ‘criss-crossing existing jurisdictions’ (Faludi 2013, 312). In 2009, the EC constituted the Acquis Urbain in reference to the Acquis Communautaire, the formal body of EU legislation but defined here as a ‘body of semi-official „urban knowledge“’ (…) based on ‘practices and experiences that have been sanctioned by the EU Commission‘ (Atkinson and Zimmermann 2016). The ‘dissemination of good practice in urban policy, supporting innovative urban projects, (…) knowledge transfer between cities and benchmarking’ aims for ‘horizontal and vertical coordination’, ‘integrating local problems (…) and single projects’ into wider and more long-term sustainable urban strategies, progress monitoring by different sets of criteria and indicators’ (Atkinson and Zimmermann 2016, 5–6). Thus, soft policies aim to evoke normative compliance primarily by funding programs, political declarations or expert networks in territorial cohesion policy or local Europeanisation (Atkinson and

However, globalisation critics fear that such a knowledge agenda contributes to legitimate a dominant neoliberal consensus that excludes political alternatives and homogenises diversity, thus weakening urban innovation and democratic renewal. By reducing sustainable development to a modernist, techno-managerial discourse, the urban agenda of the UN-SDGs is criticized as fostering transnational tendencies toward expert-network governance that undergird global inequality as a structural cause of socio-environmental problems. However, particularly for urban problems, scale is often a complex issue and depends on the specific context – neighbourhood, place and local and transnational interconnections. A mere accumulation of facts does not deliver sufficient guidance on the complex causes and social determinants of urban development but often marginalises citizens’ lay knowledge, ‘ordinary’ cities or the ‘periphery’. Discarding comparative evidence, critical researchers focus instead on conflict and its urban conditions to question dominant assumptions and indicate ways of rethinking societal legitimacies. Only mutual learning from bottom-up contentions in different urban contexts of epistemological diversity can constitute global sustainable development as a locally grounded, transnational political process (Caprotti et al. 2017; Kaika 2017; Barnett and Parnell 2016).

3. Contributing an emblematic case toward conceptualising transnational urban politics

To contribute towards conceptualising further critical research on the UAEU partnerships as well as other stakeholder processes, this paper highlights some relevant political institutional perspectives on the evolving transnational urban politics in the context of EU governance. It proposes to elaborate on the various political dimensions of ‘soft’ cooperation in urban governance (Atkinson and Zimmermann 2016; Pierre 2019; Purkarthofer 2019) by beginning to examine the UAEU’s objectives, procedures, actors and their legitimacies within the differentiated transnational and multi-level institutions of the EU.

To recognize and explore the multi-faceted field of power facilitating as well as restricting joint agency constituted by urban stakeholder cooperation, the ‘right to the city’ claims urban diversity as political potential in the institutional processes of European governance. Critically questioning functionalist urban governance (Pierre 2019) at the transnational level, the different perspectives on the political-institutional context of the UAEU highlight epistemological incoherences between the various ‘soft’ collaboration hypotheses (Purkarthofer 2019; Potjer, Hajer, and Pelzer 2018; Mamadouh 2018). New institutional approaches conceive functional logics, interest deliberations and normative-discursive mobilisations as different dimensions of power, that may constitute mutually open-ended political dynamics of multi-level state transformation (Keating 2009, 2018). Elaborating European regional politics in the diverse contexts of cities, the urban notion guides joint objectives for integration of differences along established institutional paths but thus mobilises different interpretative responses to diversification, with open-ended contextual effects for state transformation (De Frantz 2008). To embed contention of power not only in diverse social
practices (Barnett 2013, 2014) but also in differentiated institutions and plural established networks (Smith 2020), interactive claims-making may contribute to reconstruct processes of governance (De Frantz 2008; 2011; 2018). As an emblematic case of transnational urban governance, the informal emergence of the UAEU may thus open soft EU urban policy as a field of functional conflicts, political deliberation, and contentious claims-making in European politics – with open-ended institutional outcomes of integration, fragmentation or politicization.

To prepare further enquiry into the questions of ‘What?’, ‘Who?’, ‘How?’, the critical interpretative methods of this pilot study combine literature review and document analysis. To embed the hypotheses on UAEU cooperation (Purkarthofer 2019; Potjer, Hajer, and Pelzer 2018; Mamadouh 2018) in various urban functions, interests and claims of transnational governance processes (Pierre 2019; Barnett 2013; Smith 2020; De Frantz 2008), the discussion draws on findings from the literatures on soft EU urban policy (Atkinson and Zimmermann 2016), Europe of the Regions (Keating 2009, 2018; Hooghe and Keating 1994) and the global urban agenda (Barnett and Parnell 2016; Caprotti et al. 2017; Kaika 2017; Parnell 2016). To enquire into the political nature of such ‘soft’ urban governance, the different epistemological and practical perspectives of these literatures help embed the UAEU within the specific political-institutional context of the EU and consider the wider transnational relevance of this stakeholder approach.

For this combined reinterpretation of the various relevant state of the art, the case study is analysed through the founding agreement (Pact of Amsterdam, PoA 2016), the main political documents and the EC’s official website for the Urban Agenda (see list in Annex). These texts provide information on partnership themes and participants, their current status, list of outputs, public consultation as well as links to the various formally associated mechanisms. To provide an introductory base for the following critical interpretation, the following section gives a short summary of this official representation of the UAEU.

4. Interpreting the UAEU through its official presentation

Established by the PoA in 2016\(^5\) with reference to the SDGs (2015), the UAEU aims to strengthen the role of cities in European governance and make existing EU policies more effective at responding to urban challenges. The PoA was agreed outside the formal Treaties by an Informal Meeting of responsible Ministers convened by the Durch Presidency at the occasion of a European Council . The principles of ‘better regulation, funding and knowledge’ (p. 5–6) seek to optimise and coordinate established frameworks without adding further legislative or financial provisions to EU competences. Instead, broad political statements offer a rather informal framework for the coordination of existing policies and organisations, connecting them to various urban instruments.\(^6\) The primary institutional innovation is the UAEU’s voluntary partnerships for stakeholder cooperation on different cross-sectoral urban themes. PoA guidelines call for the development of multi-level actions and knowledge exchange with the participation of the EU Commission (EC), national and local governments and transnational organisations. Currently, 14 thematic partnerships\(^7\) are at different stages of finalisation, and the outputs are expected to add to the established range of soft
measures associated with EU urban policy. Given the planned conclusion in 2020, the renewed agreements on the Leipzig Charter and the Territorial Agenda have stressed intergovernmental commitments to the UAEU and the process continues in early 2021 (Website).

The PoA not only stresses the ‘contribution of Urban Areas towards achieving the overall objectives of the Union, its policies and related national priorities’ (p. 5) for the ‘future sustainable development (economic, environmental, and social) of the European Union and its citizens’ (p. 3). It further strives to establish ‘a more effective integrated and coordinated approach to EU policies and legislation with a potential impact on Urban Areas’ (p. 5). The UAEU partnerships as ‘the key delivery mechanisms’ develop a new ‘working method’ for a ‘multi-level and cross-sectoral’ as well as ‘bottom-up approach’ to governance (p. 10). Stakeholder cooperation aims to ‘(t)o involve Urban Authorities in the design of policies, to mobilise Urban Authorities for the implementation of EU policies, and to strengthen the urban dimension in these policies’ so as to ‘overcome unnecessary obstacles’ (p. 5) and reduce ‘conflicting impacts’ (p. 3, 9).

The PoA objectives refer broadly to ‘territorial cohesion’ (p. 3, 5, 6) and ‘urban sustainable development’ (p. 3, 4, 6), enumerating the social dimension in a row with the economy, environment and, in some instances, spatial, cultural or historical aspects. ‘Inclusiveness’ is mentioned as part of the generic contribution to the SDG no. 11 ‘Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’ and the Europe 2020 strategy for ‘smart, sustainable & inclusive growth’ (p. 6, 7), as well as the objectives of the partnerships on ‘inclusion of migrants and refugees’ and on ‘urban poverty’ (Website). Acknowledging that ‘Urban Authorities are often the level of government closest to the citizens’, the PoA (p. 3, 7) aims for ‘Effective urban governance, including citizens participation and new models of governance’, promising ‘Development of appropriate tools and formats to implement a transparent, inclusive and effective implementation’ (PoA, p. 5).

Starting from the first three partnerships (integration of migrants and refugees, urban poverty, air quality), the PoA (p. 7) defined 12 priority themes, which have since grown to 14 (Website). Participation in the partnerships is open, voluntary and self-financed. However, the PoA recommends that each UAEU partnership have 15–20 members, including five urban authorities, five MSs, the relevant EC-DGs, urban umbrella and expert organisations (e.g. Eurocities, CEMR), other stakeholders (e.g. ESIF managing authorities, EIB, civil society actors and private sector representatives), as well as observers (e.g. URBACT, EUKN). The process is coordinated by the DG meeting on Urban Matters (DGUM), which is organised by the EC with the respective MSs holding the rotating Council Presidency and supported by the Expert Group on Urban Development (UDG). In addition to involving MSs and local government authorities, the PoA refers at different instances to ERDF programmes, SDGs and a wide range of other transnational organisations and knowledge frameworks.8

The partnerships are expected to proceed through the same phases over a period of approximately 3 years: stocktaking, preparatory actions, definition of objectives and deliverables, implementation of the action plan and evaluation (PoA, p. 32; Work Programme, p. 7–8). The ensuing operational actions are planned as ‘themes’, ‘horizontal and vertical coordination’, ‘impact assessment’, ‘knowledge’ (p. 9). Following an interim report (EC, 2017), a long list of highly specific and technical policy reports, best
practices, pilot initiatives or cooperation projects presents the current outputs for final evaluation (ToA, 2020). Addressing the ‘fragmented’ character of urban knowledge and ‘the diversity of structures and tasks of Urban Authorities’, a ‘better urban policy knowledge base and the exchange of good practice’ promise ‘reliable data’ for ‘evidence-based urban policy making’ (p. 6).

5. Transnational urban cooperation: effective and responsive governance

Besides strengthening the symbolic role of city-regions and local governments in European governance, the core innovation of the UAEU is procedural: a collaborative approach to EU policy-making, which may establish what Pierre (2019) considers transnational urban governance by institutional collective action. Due to the ‘fuzzy’ and ‘ill-defined’ character of the soft policy thus far, Atkinson and Zimmermann (2016, 1) had doubted a joint European urban strategy made up of cities as actors rather than as mere recipients of funding. But now the UAEU embeds ‘discursive policy interventions’ within partnerships as ‘a multi-level, multi-stakeholder and cross-border new form of informal multi-level cooperation framework’, adding what Purkarthofer (2019, 89, 90, 92 100) calls an element of ‘strategic informality’ to ‘European spatial planning and urban development’. Stressing the need for concrete results, Potjer, Hajer, and Pelzer (2018, 24) see knowledge generation at the core of the UAEU partnerships as a ‘system of experimental learning’. This chapter enquires into how the UAEU may actually serve to coordinate the EC’s ‘top-down perspective’ with the ‘bottom-up and horizontal’ processes ‘at different spatial scales that interact in unpredictable ways and vary (…) across policy domains’ (Atkinson and Zimmermann 2016, 9).

Previous problems were attributed principally to urban criteria that failed to provide common strategic objectives to guide the political priorities and institutional contexts of the EU and its MSs. As EU direct funding of urban initiatives was being replaced by urban mainstreaming, the EU’s urban programs stagnated due to dependence on domestic implementation and different priorities by the MSs. Under the heading of ‘economic, social and territorial cohesion’ inscribed to the EU Treaty’s Article 3, since 2007, the urban focus became a growing priority of EU regional policy. The EC’s initial ‘direct’ actions in the 1990s – a small budget focused on disadvantaged urban areas – have been replaced by a mainstreamed and integrated urban approach. The 2014–20 ERDF program has included a minimum requirement of 5% national co-funding to be reserved for Integrated Urban Actions, and 330 Mio Euros have been provided for Innovative Actions in sustainable urban development in addition to Integrated Territorial Investments combining different budgets for place-based strategies. Also, Community-Led Local Development aims to involve city networks and local stakeholders in the implementation and monitoring of the programs on the ground. The Common Strategic Framework was also introduced for the coordination of all European Structural Investment Funds (ESIF), including ERDF and cohesion policy. Despite these recent formal increases in EU funding for urban policies, the implementation has not met expectations. The broad objectives and diversity of programs came to work like a “menu” MSs can select from according to their interests and priorities’ (Atkinson and Zimmermann 2016, 12).
While the soft character of EU urban policy had previously inhibited a consolidated strategy, Atkinson and Zimmermann (2016) pointed to the indirect and differentiated impact through diffusion of policy and governance principles. Currently, the UAEU appears to systematically foster this soft influence on hard legal and funding instruments through stakeholder cooperation. Stressing the role of the UAEU for the implementation of EU policies, Purkarthofer (2019) expects a coordinating role of partnership cooperation for carrying policy discourses into the different national and local spheres of urban planning. The PoA offers a soft governance tool due to its broad and informal framework, its abstract political commitments, its non-binding status and a lack of allocated resources. Based on an intergovernmental agreement outside the formal EU Treaties constituting supranational competences transferred from the MSs to the EU institutions, the implementation of the PoA or its ensuing partnership outputs cannot be controlled or sanctioned by EU law. Instead, some minimal rules for participation, working methods and expected outcomes aim at setting policy agendas, inter-institutional coordination and developing preliminary strategies and knowledge exchange. Nevertheless, these procedural guidelines for voluntary cooperation, monitoring and mutual learning constitute the stakeholder cooperation as a semi-formal mechanism that extends beyond the informal commitments of previous urban declarations (ibid.).

Introducing the notion of urban laboratories (Evans, Karvonen, and Raven 2016) to EU experimental governance (Zeitlin 2016), collaborative policy-making of subnational spaces involves a re-evaluation of local as well as practical experiences as sources of urban governance (Pierre 2019). To respond to diverse local contexts, European policies require not only disaggregated data at the city level (Simon et al. 2016) but also stakeholder involvement in the production of knowledge (Robin, Steenmans, and Acuto 2017). The need for community-wide standards of EU regional policy had previously led to the introduction of the administrative and statistical unit, NUTS, which often did not correspond to diverse territorial realities (Keating 2009). Since 2003, triannual EU Urban Audits have reported the urban statistics collected by Eurostat from the MSs, although considerable information gaps remained (Balducci and Fedeli 2008). To improve responsiveness by evidence-based EU policy, a new experimental approach for informal coordination has evolved from social and economic policies (Zeitlin 2016), European macro-regions (Gänzle et al. 2019) and EU cohesion policy. In order to make ‘policies more efficient and inclusive’ by ‘addressing the gap between general policy objectives and local conditions, (e)xperimentalist governance theory proposes a virtuous feedback loop between policy design, experimentalist implementation, the pooling and sharing of experiences, reflexive learning, and framework adaptation’ (Telle 2017, 16–17). However, the success of feeding local outputs through monitoring of cohesion programs back into the EC’s policy learning cycles proved limited. Instead, different historical experiences, politico-administrative systems and levels of socio-economic development hampered the expected links between better information, learning, and outcomes (ibid.).

While EU regional partnerships are mediated by national and meso-level administrations within each MS, the new UAEU partnerships include lower-tier local or municipal governments in direct cooperation. To deliver concrete results for implementation, Potjer, Hajer, and Pelzer (2018, 24) hope that the UAEU contributes
a ‘coordination mechanism that can help enable the experimental potential of cities’. The partnerships would connect local experiments with multi-level policy networks for horizontal learning between cities and vertical collaboration with states and the EU. Stressing the networking potential for policy learning, the focus is on horizontal and bottom-up knowledge exchange and the UAEU partnerships are seen as expert networks leading to coordinated policy-making. In addition to the PoA’s references to the EU’s established frameworks of knowledge exchange, benchmarking and smart cities, EU Research and Innovation (RTD) programs (e.g. EC 2016) also contribute explicitly to the UAEU by pilot experimenting with urban laboratories.

However, considering the PoA’s lack of clear guidelines on what constituted such an output of partnership-based learning, Potjer, Hajer, and Pelzer (2018) also recognize the inherent weakness of the UAEU as an informal expert process. Beyond the formal reference to the importance of knowledge and the various frameworks, it should be added that the PoA further lacks provisions on their specific relations or role in partnership cooperation. While Potjer, Hajer, and Pelzer (2018) associate ‘urban experimenting’ with networked cooperation, the PoA contains no specification of such learning cycles. On one side, the different knowledge mechanisms are to be better connected, on the other side, practical local experience should be fed into the process. But the ways in which EU projects, transnational networks or local initiatives communicate with the partnership processes, how mutual learning is organised in and between partnerships and how outside feedback would be integrated are not clear. Application of the outputs across Europe is even more uncertain, as there is little indication of how these would be adjusted within different local contexts.

In addition to different national and local paths, the PoA aims to respond to coordination challenges at the European level by addressing urban problems across different sectors. In particular, the Europe 2020 strategy for ‘smart, sustainable and inclusive growth’ (EC 2010) introduced various pan-European issues – economic, environmental and social – to the territorial focus of cohesion policy (De Bruijn 2017). Although subsidiarity protects democratic self-government from higher-level interventions in principle, EU legislation (e.g. transportation, environment, transport, energy, competition, digitalisation, etc.) also applies to subnational authorities. Different EU policies have explicitly addressed local authorities on such issues as urban transportation, smart cities, air pollution and noise reduction (Heinelt and Niederhafner 2008), and several environmental regulations require mandatory participation of local authorities (Newig and Koontz 2014). Furthermore, the EU’s macro-regional strategies combine cohesion with neighbourhood policy through intergovernmental and subnational cooperation (Gänzle et al. 2019). Based on supranational, shared, or coordinative competences of the EU Treaty, the various sectoral policies imply different organisational processes within the EC’s administration and with the MSs.

As new political problems transcend the territorial jurisdictions of states and the legal competences of the EU, the urban dimension highlights the need for flexible transnational responses to emerging challenges. While the broad meanings of the urban notion had reduced the practical impact of previous declarations, now the UAEU’s combination of wide-ranging objectives with open partnership processes may gain traction as a flexible policy mechanism. Supporting the emerging transnational
cooperation, the loose framework of the PoA determines neither the quantity nor the themes of the partnerships, allowing the policy focus to emerge organically. By extending the urban dimension beyond territorial cohesion policy toward sustainable development, the UAEU potentially concerns all EU policy sectors. In addressing the UN-SDGs, the PoA also sets EU policies in the global context of sustainable development. This international dimension is also stressed by integration of migrants as the first partnership theme – an otherwise highlight sensitive issue of national and European politics. Thus, local governments and social stakeholders, in fostering links with transnational expert organisations, may help interpret the EU’s urban agenda in light of new and cross-sectoral objectives reflecting the needs and experiences on the ground.

However, the wide urban objective and different frameworks of the UAEU also pose the problem that EU policies may vary in priority and purpose and have conflicting implications in local contexts. The lack of clarity surrounding cohesion policy already implied a political tension between Europe 2020’s social and economic objectives, and with the territorial focus of ERDF (De Bruijn 2017). Urban policy was divided between the unequal promotion of cities as European growth poles or spatial balancing by fostering less developed urban areas and social inclusion. But with the new focus on sustainable development, the EU’s anti-poverty and social inclusion measures of the 1990s were complemented by environmental protection and technological innovation (Atkinson and Zimmermann 2016). As ‘European urban policy has become trapped in the ambivalence of linking competitiveness and social cohesion’, Atkinson and Zimmermann (2016, 12) may still find reason to fear that the ‘place-based approach’ to urban sustainable development will degrade to a new generic ‘cure-all’ strategy. Indeed, socio-economic inequality may continue to structure cross-sectoral divides. But the UAEU’s extension toward diverse new thematic objectives may also raise more plural conflicts between the various policy priorities, including contested issues within the partnership cooperation as well as between their policy outputs.

Reflecting the complex and interrelated challenges of urban sustainable development, the PoA’s broad objectives, multi-level functions and diverse knowledge base associate different policies, institutions and practices within open-ended transnational processes. The semi-formal process of networked cooperation aims to combine functions of cities as objects, sources and partners with various governmental institutions, policy frameworks and stakeholder organisations. Thus, UAEU partnerships bring together different perspectives from within and between places and countries as well as from different EU policies. However, embedding both cross-sectoral EU policies and diverse local experience in multi-level and transnational cooperation, the strategic nature of this soft collaborative approach is uncertain. As part of a top-down EU planning strategy, Purkarthofer (2019) stresses the normative-discursive diffusion of EU policy into national and local contexts through urban actor-networks. But urban practices may also offer sources of policy expertise, feeding diverse local experience and practical innovation back into European network governance (Potjer, Hajer, and Pelzer 2018). Indeed, networking may facilitate learning between different contexts and also lead to spill-over of policy discourse beyond the partnerships. But by connecting such different rationales to European governance, the UAEU constitutes urban policy as a transnational political field which implies interest conflicts, plural actors and interpretative strategies. Though cities as well as European policies may profit in various
ways, urban problems are defined by diversity and mere functional cooperation does not help solve any differing priorities (Telle 2017). Instead of an optimum strategy for all affected stakeholders, associating the various logics within consensual orientations risks glossing over weaker and alternative voices in favor of strengthening the various dominant visions of the partnerships, or even fostering contentious escalation between previously dissociated realms. Given the potential conflicts within the diverse and emerging transnational urban field, we need to understand how the UAEU mechanisms integrate the actors and their power relationships with the wider political-institutional contexts of European governance.

6. The UAEU as a political field: urban actors between EU and states

Given these critical problems of functional policy cooperation, this chapter examines the UAEU as a political field of competing interests and actors within European governance. Because UAEU partnerships offer mechanisms for stakeholder cooperation, cities may join the institutional cooperation of states and EU and thus gain influence in European policy-making. In return, the EU may also be strengthened as a partner in domestic politics, changing city–state relations with European governance. Calling for a new contract for sustainability between cities and citizens, Mamadouh (2018, 1437) further expects ‘mayors and local governments (...) to be better equipped than the states and the national governments to deal with the daily concerns of their citizens’. However, according to Purkarthofer (2019), city representatives not only bring an informal, grassroots style to the EU bureaucracy, but they also embrace their new role more enthusiastically than national and EU officials. Indeed, Smith (2020) pointed to the historical continuity of states and other institutional actors, which mediate economic and socio-cultural transnationalisation and sometimes form oligarchic networks. Here, the critical experience of subnational partnerships in the Europe of the Regions (Keating 2009; Hooghe and Keating 1994) serves to analyse the UAEU’s potential to improve cities’ participation in EU policy-making.

Preceding and leading to the urban focus of cohesion policy, structural problems inherent to the Europe of the Regions have affected subnational participation. Overall subsidiarity has come to protect the MSs from EU interference whereas regional participation remains hampered by subnational differences and national control of EU institutions and policy partnerships. The EU Treaties provide the Committee of the Regions only advisory powers on EU legislation, whereby different economic and institutional capacities exacerbate internal cleavages between regional and local authorities. In practice, the political process is mainly organised by national delegations and party-political groups, and thus common subnational statements remain rather generic. The Council of Europe provides for an exceptional delegation of MSs’ seats to subnational governments but this political instrument has been rarely used, mainly to acknowledge the symbolic role of some large regions. While the EC’s partnership strategy may aim at a stronger hold on domestic processes, Europeanisation effects have remained differentiated, working indirectly through principles of good governance. Subnational actors rely on national co-finance and program support in the extensive ERDF bureaucracy while regional partnerships often involve lower-tier administrations and lack broader social participation. Ultimately, the realm and level
of subnational participation relies largely on domestic arrangements, and national authorities have been gatekeepers for EU regional partnerships. In addition to their resource differences, subnational influence through lobbying or direct access to EU agencies has also depended on the EC’s choice of interlocutors (Hooghe and Keating 1994; Keating 2009, 2018). Thus, established EU or national policy networks have often controlled the deliberative stakeholder mechanisms, rather than facilitating democratic participation in EU policy-making.

The UAEU may now contribute to implementing the new partnership regulation, requiring ‘close cooperation between public authorities, economic and social partners and bodies representing civil society at national, regional and local levels’ (EC 2014,1). As cities compete with other subnational regions for EU funding and influence on EU policies, the UAEU not only provides symbolic representation as political actors but also represents the interests of urban and local stakeholders. By including municipal governments and urban organisations, the UAEU offers a transnational forum to address territorial differences that have long paralyzed pan-European regional coordination. But while the cooperation is in principle on equal footing with national governments, the UAEU is also more informal than the mandatory regional partnerships. With no hard enforcement mechanisms, the PoA (p.5) mentions the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, apparently to avoid intervention into MS competences. In addition to inter-institutional coordination of EU policies, the EC can act as an informal leader by setting the intergovernmental agenda in cases of shared competence with the MSs. The EC has not only led the process of preparing the intergovernmental agreement and consultation process but also coordinates the UAEU as co-chair of the DG meeting. The coordination of joint strategies requires the EC’s role as participant; indeed, often various EC-DGs act jointly as key partners in each of the partnership mechanisms. The soft nature of these partnerships may be instrumental in motivating national authorities to engage in such intergovernmental coordination. The partnerships represent opportunities to influence the policy agenda at the European level whereas implementation can be made dependent on whether the outcomes meet the priorities of the participants and their constituencies.

The downside of this rather informal arrangement is that its institutional set-up provides little protection from power politics and partisan interests, posing a risk to the effectiveness of the process. Despite the framework guidelines, the UAEU remains largely a political process, particularly concerning the selection of the partnership themes and members. The effects of the initial URBAN program had been important in Germany but minimal in countries with strong urban policies such as France, The Netherlands or Great Britain (Atkinson and Zimmermann 2016). Currently, the Netherlands, Germany and several other countries with specific urban interests as well as several larger city-regions engage strongly in the UAEU. MSs with less explicit urban profiles, weaker municipalities, smaller towns and peripheral regions have thus less opportunity to set the EU policy agenda. Apart from the coordinative function of the secretariat, there are no provisions for addressing conflicts of interest within the working process or for the implementation of outputs in different policy contexts.

Stakeholder cooperation risks weakening democratic accountability by blurring the responsibilities of public and private actors (Milio 2014), as well as between different levels of government (Hooghe and Keating 1994). Participants in the UAEU
partnerships are largely public authorities, especially national governments, large cities or city-regions, and EU and transnational agencies. No business, universities or research centres have yet participated in a UAEU partnership, though envisaged by the PoA (p. 16). Unlike private firms and social organisations, most national and local officials are democratically elected. While most participating thinktanks are constituted mostly by public agencies to represent joint urban interests, such transnational expert organisations themselves are not legitimated by democratic elections. Indeed, concerning the urban agenda, the sheer number and diversity of potential social and territorial stakeholders raises practical questions about how representative, inclusive and equitable the UAEU partnerships can actually be. In addition to the multiplicity of institutions and contexts, the urban construct encompasses small towns and large cities, metropolitan regions, municipal authorities, local communities, suburban zones or even networks that transcend any territorial definition. Given the complex interconnectedness and contextual specificity of urban challenges, it is difficult to include all interests and identify the appropriate stakeholder representatives.

Although greater inclusiveness widens participation, it also renders the stakeholder process more difficult to manage and increases inefficiencies. EU regional partnerships have already had problems with citizens’ involvement due to lack of information, participation, technical issues, and control by or pressure on policy-makers (Perron 2014). However, beyond the PoA’s mentioned promise for citizens participation, there is little guidance on how to organise such processes so as to embed UAEU partnerships in bottom-up engagement. The founding document, communication strategy and public consultation suggest the importance of public opinion and engagement, and the website provides an extensive amount of documents and tweets. But the complex technical issues and fragmented presentation of these various bits of information probably appeal more to experts than lay stakeholders. Transparency is stressed in principle, yet the formal procedures of the stakeholder deliberations and public consultations are not clear. Neither is the public informed about the political decisions leading to the set-up of partnerships or about the issues, positions or any conflicts of their internal deliberations.

Finally, the voluntary base of the UAEU partnerships and need for self-financing by members risks further weakening local representation and deepening social inequality. There is a danger that only those already engaged in transnational networks will be presented, excluding from participation those with less know-how or resources. Previously, the participation of cities in interurban networks has been shown to vary by institutional values, the agency of individuals or groups and previous cooperative experience (Mocca 2018). Thus, several large cities and strong regions have offices in Brussels and cooperate more closely with the networks and organisation which thus exert influence on the various EU agencies. Smaller European towns, however, may have no representation in the EU arena. The experience of EU projects also shows that cooperation is often stifled by costly management, requiring support from professional consultancies rather than fostering civic initiatives. The UAEU may, inadvertently, promote the institutionalisation of partnerships where mutual interest and established networks already exist, rather than strengthening inclusion. Such voluntary stakeholder linkages may be inadequate to address sensitive political issues or develop new solutions where established paths or powerful interests hinder policy change.
Appealing to ‘urban sovereignty and urban rights‘ and ‘connectivity over states and territoriosity’, Mamadouh (2018) concludes, rather radically, either ‘cities will rescue the EU’ or ‘be tainted’ by its existential crisis’. In fact, the current evaluation of policy outputs and conclusion of the UAEU in end 2020 coincides with the introduction of a single European Urban Initiative in the new cohesion programs for 2021–27. And the recently revised Territorial Agenda and Leipzig Charter (2020) already contain broad commitments from the MSs to further develop the UAEU. Although the participating governmental authorities in the UAEU partnerships represent only a fraction of the Union’s population, they may gain agenda-setting power for trans-European policy development. Instead of better policy coordination or local empowerment, the new stakeholder mechanisms may add further to the complexity of governance and differentiation of political participation. As the UAEU opens a new transnational arena with opportunities for local governments, some large cities may now join the EC and several influential MSs as core actors in the intergovernmental process. The loose rules and voluntary character allow for different set-ups and procedures of the various thematic partnerships, possibly fostering pluralist self-governing processes. But it is more likely that the political setting of the UAEU is bound to be controlled mainly by a few institutional actors with various established transnational networks, increasing their influence in European policy-making.

7. Toward politicizing the UAEU: mobilising and contesting urban diversity

Considering the eroding political consensus on regional policy and emerging sustainability challenge, the UAEU stakeholder experiment may yet evolve as a pilot for wider implementation of the UN-SDGs. Critics of the global urban agenda, however, have stressed its power politics and contentious potential arising from the ‘rights to the city’ (Barnett and Parnell 2016; Caprotti et al. 2017; Kaika 2017; Parnell 2016). Politicizing transnational governance through diverse practices of claims-making, Barnett (2013, 2014) differentiated urban objects of ‘being affected’ by networked deliberation from mediums mobilising publics by ‘learning to be affected’ and physical-institutional ‘agents of concerted change’. Based on the discussed potentials and limitations of the UAEU, this chapter comparatively applies the global critique onto the European context. More than direct subnational participation, Europe of the Regions has worked as a normative notion for political mobilisation, reconstructing statehood in mutually open-ended functional, political and institutional processes (Keating 2009, 2018). Now drawing on urban diversity as a source of knowledge and legitimacy, the UAEU could evolve as a multi-level institution-building project based on an emerging transnational political arena that connects top-down and bottom-up mobilisations in horizontal interactions.

Indeed, the UAEU partnership processes themselves could be considered learning experiments for how to design transnational stakeholder processes. Acknowledging urban knowledge as a source of policy innovation, however, inclusion of urban diversity in transnational policy learning poses difficult organisational as well as political tasks. As critics noted in the UN-SDGs, the expectation for consensual partnership outcomes risks obfuscating not only power relations and interest politics but also the diverse spectrum of urban practices and identities (Caprotti et al. 2017; Kaika 2017; Barnett and
Parnell 2016). While aiming for transnational knowledge cooperation, at present, the PoA remains still unclear on the roles of policy-learning cycles and practical experimenting as well as on any mechanisms for representative participation and conflict deliberation in the stakeholder processes. As Telle (2017) criticized EU cohesion policy, also the UAEU may thus show disproportionate benefits for more powerful actors, lack ideal speech situations for inclusion of social diversity, and fail to reach common understandings that respect contextual differences. As different rational, discursive and sociological dimensions of institutional power (Telle 2017; Keating 2009, 2018) and diverse practical knowledge cultures (Caprotti et al. 2017; Kaika 2017; Barnett and Parnell 2016) challenge functional governance, the UAEU may induce mutually contentious claims for subnational participation in the EU’s multi-level political-institutional process.

By incorporating contentious urban claims (Barnett 2013, 2014) into transnational governance collaboration, Parnell (2016) fears that such political agreements may render the urban agenda toothless. Despite the symbolic acknowledgement of cities within the field of international politics, sweeping statements and the absence of sanctions result in vague objectives that are not implementable. As are UN-SDGs, the UAEU is an intergovernmental agreement that relies on states for implementation, but it can also build on the EU’s supranational institutions. Contrary to a unitary transnational space, the EU is a highly differentiated multi-level process where different legal frameworks, functions, institutions, interests and norms – including currently disintegration – build diverse opportunity structures for subnational strategies (Keating 2018). Based on the competencies established by the EU Treaty in adjacent fields, the EC – in coordination with several MSs and transnational expert associations – has advanced the urban agenda by way of soft means such as discourse, knowledge and networks. By addressing different policy sectors and stakeholders beyond territorial cohesion, the diverse meanings, complex problems and open contexts of urban sustainable development open a wide field for developing the established institutional mechanisms. Thus, embedding ‘hard’ policies within broader objectives, informal norms and open-ended processes of UAEU stakeholder cooperation may convert urban complexity from a redistributive problem into political potential for European governance.

To overcome path-dependent national or EU mechanisms, the UAEU partnerships introduce open and flexible cooperation processes based on voluntary and self-financed participation. While this informal stakeholder model may seem promising also for the UN-SDGs, Parnell’s (2016) concern with inequality may yet prove even more problematic for the EU’s advanced institutions. Indeed, the necessarily selective integration of actors and knowledge risks deepening existing institutional inequalities and adding new lines of political exclusion between different urban spaces and groups. Particularly concerning supranational EU policies, there is a danger that these voluntary inputs might lead to representation deficits and muted outputs, not only for less engaged countries but especially among weaker social groups and more peripheral spaces. Depending on the coordinative capacity of the respective partnerships, the associated knowledge frameworks could help diffuse policy innovations in different national and local spaces across Europe. The guidelines, however, are unspecific on how policy outputs are adjusted to different contexts, nor are there rules for negotiating conflicts
of interest, both of which make partnerships vulnerable to power differentials. If the lack of formality does not weaken compliance, the lack of equal access risks deepening the institutional differentiation of EU policies, as well as social inequalities and democratic deficits. While some stakeholders may yet gain influence on EU policies, UAEU outcomes are prone to fall short of the high expectations for local participation or a transnational urban strategy.

Considering the broader political context of European integration, the EC may indeed pursue a strategic approach (Potjer, Hajer, and Pelzer 2018; Purkarthofer 2019) – to make urban complexity work for European policy-making. However, due to legal restrictions as well as diverse contextual problems on the ground, the soft cooperation strategy may not so much be directed at MSs or local governments than at coordinating EU policies. In previous phases of Treaty development, such soft measures have supported the implementation of existing EU competences and also developed new policy fields. Thus, the EC used its limited legal competences to interpret regional policy in ways that helped advance joint community instruments and mobilised sub-national support for the EU (Keating 2009, 2018). Depending on the degree of inter-governmental consensus and partner engagement, now the UAEU partnerships can serve short-term actions as well as policy development within the discretion of the EU Treaties. As formal European integration is currently stagnating, such subnational cooperation can help maintain the transnational dynamic, adding new political drivers to the European project (Pierre 2019). But in absence of a new Treaty embedding informal outputs within a deliberative consensus of democratic states, the complex and possibly biased effects for institutional differentiation risk to exacerbate the EU’s democratic deficits.

To promote public discussion of urban issues in EU policy-making, the UAEU has the potential to bring European governance closer to citizens’ everyday concerns and help anchor EU policies within local contexts (Mamadouh 2018). Soft rules aim to involve citizens and urban themes hold particular mobilisation potential to increase stakeholder participation and civic engagement. Where supranational EU institutions suffer from democratic deficits, the political participation of urban actors and local authorities may help foster public support for European integration. Similarly, the Europe of the Regions has implied a normative idea of Europe as fostering civic identification, state decentralisation and mobilisation of subnational coalitions through interactive top-down and bottom-up strategies (Keating 2009, 2018). Thus, promoting policies and movements, expert advisors take on new spatial ideas – following a Europe of the Regions model and a place-based approach, now urban sustainable development. While the good fit for a specific local or metropolitan-regional culture can offer a transnational advantage, the diverse and complex character of cities and urbanisation render the subnational concerns of EU policy even more vague. Such political appeals to the urban notion may also meet diverse responses on the ground, thus initiating one-issue protests or even mutual contentions across local and transnational scales instead of promoting a shared sense of European mobilisation.

Turning the ‘right to the city’ into a top-down agenda, partnership mechanisms motivate not only the voluntary contributions of participants but also rely on broad political mobilisation for implementation across Europe. To democratize transnational urban governance (Barnett 2013, 2014), critics see the global urban agenda as ‘a
profound moment for the planning profession’ to continue its activist work (Caprotti et al. 2017, 374). As the soft nature of the UAEU leaves room for political discretion, the central role of expertise raises questions about how knowledge contributes to legitimize or democratize planning and governance. Due to the informal nature of the UAEU, the participating stakeholders may not so much be considered democratic representatives than policy experts. Experts have thus turned from lobbying on behalf of the urban agenda or consulting the policy implementation to actual political participation in European policy-making. Whether the UAEU’s network governance actually opens paths to sustainable development through democratic empowerment depends then on the ways that public and citizens can be involved and the type of expertise considered relevant. So far, however, the public seems to have taken little notice, and despite efforts for public consultations, the process appears complex, technocratic and lacking transparency. In order to render the UAEU’s expert-policy networks more inclusive, critical planners are challenged to claim diverse local experiences and alternative voices in marginalised spaces and communities. In critically addressing the practical implications of policy outcomes in different contexts, it may be necessary to connect the EU’s technocratic procedures to citizens’ specific local experiences and open network governance to public scrutiny and political debate. Urban experts thus face the critical task of translating the knowledge implications for different affected stakeholders and lay publics and then mediating the diverse claims between different contexts of top-down and bottom-up mobilisations towards transnational processes.

8. A case for claiming the rights to the city in European politics

As an explicit intergovernmental effort to support Europe’s contribution to the SDGs, the UAEU aims to combine economic growth with social and environmental sustainabilities by focusing on cities in European governance. Embedding EU policy in an urban perspective, stakeholder cooperation aims at a cross-cutting and inclusive transnational approach to policy-making. Planners tend to stress the benefits of the UAEU’s ‘soft’ cooperation (Mamadouh 2018; Potjer, Hajer, and Pelzer 2018; Purkarthofer 2019), even though the reasonings differ between cities’ functions as objects, sources and partners of European policy-making. Instead of wide participation, concerns over incorporation of the rights to the city have led to critically question such functional approaches to transnational urban governance (Pierre 2019; Telle 2017). Therefore, this enquiry into the political dimensions of transnational stakeholder cooperation (Smith 2020; De Frantz 2008; Barnett 2013, 2014) has elaborated the conceptual bases for better understanding the ways in which UAEU partnerships actually contribute to European urban governance. Indeed, scrutinizing the set-up of the UAEU through the lenses of the Europe of the Regions (Hooghe and Keating 1994; Keating 2009, 2018) and the global urban agenda (Barnett and Parnell 2016; Caprotti et al. 2017; Kaika 2017; Parnell 2016) motivates a critical research agenda for politicizing transnational urban governance.

Embedding the UAEU stakeholder process with a wider political-institutional context has introduced the various urban dimensions into the mutual relations of European policies, politics and polities. Complementing as well as challenging the region as more compact space for vertical cooperation (Keating 2009, 2018), a key political strength of
the urban notion is its associations with socio-cultural diversity as an open-ended, inclusive and transnational frame (De Frantz 2008). The UAEU’s stakeholder cooperation positions these diverse urban claims, actors and mobilisations at the multi-level interstices of the EU’s complex – established as well as evolving – institutional process. Instead of either complementary or competing hypotheses, the various epistemological perspectives highlight different analytical elements of the UAEU’s emerging field of transnational urban politics. Their mutual interaction may strengthen existing institutional networks, set new urban policy objectives or politicize contested issues of diverse practice. It may foster mutual learning as basis for mobilising normative identifications and reconstructing legitimacies; and it may build transnational institutions for joint action or empower specific actors in these processes. While the outcome may give rise to mutually complementary policy innovation on some partial issues, more likely, their mutual dynamics of integration and differentiation constitute a multiple political field of evolving interactions and – at times – contentious processes.

Posing a contentious democratic potential in urban politics (Barnett 2013, 2014), the UAEU’s emerging transnational process of interactive claims-making may imply conflictive issues, winners and losers and diverse legitimacies. By turning urban complexity into an object of European policy-making, the claim for functional effectiveness may raise interest conflicts over different political objectives. Drawing on diverse local experience for transnational policy learning also brings together different knowledge cultures and practical logics into the evolving institutional process. However, inviting urban stakeholders not only mobilises new political actors but also poses practical problems with representation of such diversity. Inequal capacities and differing interests between a wide range of governmental bodies and weak inclusion of social stakeholders may inhibit a joint strategy. Unclear benefits of agenda setting also come at high cost of self-financed participation for weaker stakeholders while national and EU agencies may keep control of the deliberations. Thus, knowledge exchange may be a practical source of EU policy innovation more than serving specifically the interests of cities or social actors. Although cities may yet gain from urban issues being broadly considered in European governance, selective inclusion of participants at the input side also impairs the policy outputs. Thus, claiming the rights of the city in the power politics of the EU and states may actually deepen social inequalities and political exclusion. Given the limits of subnational participation, top-down mobilisation may initiate contentious interactions in and between different socio-spatial contexts and institutional arenas of European urban politics.

So far, however, rather than raising democratic contention, the UAEU appears more at risk of decline to political irrelevance. Indeed, the blur – technocratic as well as informal and intergovernmental – character of the policy-expert processes provides for various exit options that thwart the contentious potential. The process also appears rather detached from popular debates, rendering the public largely unaware of potential effects and democratic accountabilities. Compensating for the current political stagnation of EU integration, the UAEU may serve for functional coordination of joint policy tasks. Inter-city cooperation can thus mitigate economic competition but this also generates restructuring pressures from the global into the local realms. But the differentiated and multi-level institutional contexts of European governance mediate both neoliberal pressures as well as participation. Within the inherent limitations, the
partnership processes offer political opportunities for plural actor networks to voice new – potentially competing – claims with open-ended differentiated effects in and across different contexts. Thus, the various outputs will likely not result in a homogenous top-down global or EU urban strategy and will also fall short on more radical alternatives to established policies and networks (Cochrane 2011; Atkinson and Zimmermann 2016). Yet, by connecting hard EU policies with broad, open objectives, diverse institutional contexts and complex urban practices, the UAEU’s soft cooperation process holds potential for an evolving plural political dynamic.

Thus conceiving the UAEU as an experimental case of institutional learning through an emerging political field aims to embed global sustainable development within a transnational process of urban empowerment. As a potential crisis mechanism extending from soft EU policy making to inducing political dynamics for EU integration, UAEU partnerships may also evolve as a transnational governance model for the SDGs. In view of widening democratic participation, the central role of experts in the UAEU process represents a real opportunity to open institutional networks and incite public engagement by politicizing EU governance concerning concrete urban problems. As an alternative to policy consulting, interpretative policy analysis offers a critical methodological approach to engage diverse publics, translates knowledge in local contexts and empower social participation in democratic claims-making (De Frantz 2018; Fischer 2009). Further research may highlight the various roles of policy-experts in negotiating the urban tensions between effective policy output and redistributive justice, inclusive input and democratic representation, political empowerment and cultural differentiation in EU governance (Schmidt 2013). In addition to understanding the EU’s interplay between supranational institutions and political integration, such a critical deconstruction of urban sustainable development will also need to reflect on Europe’s global role in governing the SDGs. Politicizing EU governance between different urban contexts – from within as well as outside Europe – may strengthen a pluralist transnational vision (De Frantz 2008) to counteract the existing nationalist backlash to global network governance.

Notes

4. E.g. Reference Framework for Sustainable Cities (RFSC – an online toolkit offering a database of indicators to develop and monitor urban strategies), European Urban Knowledge Network (EUKN – an intergovernmental urban platform for urban knowledge and research assistance to public authorities).
5. For clarification of the terms: in this paper, PoA is employed to refer to the text of the political founding document, and UAEU comprises the whole process implementing the
POA through the various partnerships and cooperation between different mechanisms and frameworks.

6. In addition to EU Cohesion policy, the PoA mentions, e.g. UIA, URBACT, ESPON, ‘Covenant of Mayors’, Civitas 2020, RFSC, EUKN, EIP-SCC, Eurocities, CEMR as well as the CoR, EP and EIB.


8. E.g. UIA, Urbact, UDN, JPI Urban Europe, ESPON, EUKN, the European Innovation Partnership ‘Smart Cities and Communities’, the CITIES Forum of the EU Commission, Eurocities, Habitat.


10. The EIP-SCC (2016) featured strong participation by large corporations, but beyond a formal association the PoA does not specify any connection with the UAEU partnerships.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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