An Urban Agenda for the European Union: *About* cities or *with* cities?
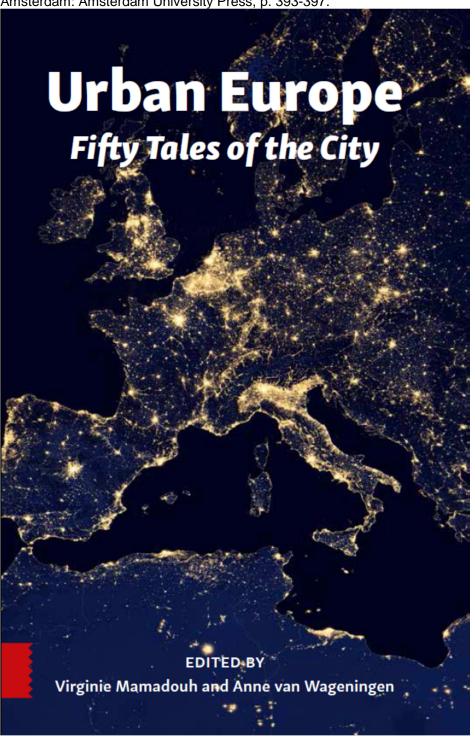Wouter van der Heijde

<u>verschenen in:</u>
Mamadouh, V. and A. van Wageningen (red.) *Urban Europe; Fifty Tales of the City*,
Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, p. 393-397.

In any discussion about cities that takes place in Brussels, the 'Urban Agenda' for the European Union is sure to be mentioned. Is this agenda a programme with priorities for European cities or an approach to involve cities in the European debate? And did both tracks come together during the Dutch presidency of the European Union in 2016.

The debate about cities has a long history in Europe. Much of what the European Union does affects cities, but cities are often not directly involved in the shaping of initiatives that come out of Brussels. And yet the main societal challenges in Europe such as work, energy, immigration, etc. are frequently metropolitan projects. What is striking is that there is much talk *about* cities and not so much *with* cities themselves, while cities are increasingly important for economic growth, sustainability and innovation. Already approximately 67 percent of Europe's GDP is generated in urban areas.

The three goals of the Urban Agenda for the EU
Generally speaking, the European Urban Agenda has three goals. The first is to set the agenda for cities within the European Union. Much of what the EU does is not specifically focused on cities, even though more than 70 percent of Europeans live in cities and cities contribute significantly to the European economy. At the same time, cities are also concentrations of problems. This combination means that cities require extra attention and, for example, easier access to European subsidies.

The second goal of the European Urban Agenda is to ensure better coherence in European policies that affect cities. EU policies are usually generic in nature, but they do have implications for cities. Placing a greater emphasis on the city would make it clear where the problem lies. For example, clean air and cars with low emissions are both regulated by the EU, but the regulations are not synchronised. The result is that cities cannot meet the European air quality standards because the European source-based policy on vehicles takes effect later than the air quality standards. An Urban Agenda should prevent this from happening.

And third, the European Urban Agenda aims to ensure that all the substantive issues that are important for cities are brought together. This type of programme with priorities is probably what first comes to mind when one hears the term 'agenda'.

Many players, many visions
Many players are involved in the European Urban Agenda. The focus of the Urban Agenda as well as the objectives and instruments to be worked out will be slightly different depending on the person you speak to. In other words, the process is well underway. Below, I summarise the most important players and their positions.

In 2014, the Member States adopted the conclusions of the European Council urging them and the European Commission to develop an Urban Agenda. At several ministerial meetings, the topic of cities in Europe was put on the table. In 2011, the European Commission published the report 'Cities of Tomorrow', which outlines the challenges facing European cities and sets out a vision of the development of smart, sustainable and inclusive cities as well as benchmarks of urban development. The report also describes measures to strengthen the European urban network. In 2015 the European Commission took an important step by publishing the results of a consultation on EU urban policy. The consultation identifies the main objectives of the European Union (the so-called Juncker priorities) that have an urban dimension: 1) Jobs, Growth and Investment; 2) Digital Single Market; 3) Energy and Climate; 4) Migration; and 5) Democratic Change. In addition, the European Commission has indicated how it will approach the EU Urban Agenda. Moreover, the name of the directorate-general responsible for regions and cities has been changed to DG Regional and Urban Policy.

The European Parliament also has an opinion about cities in Europe. It has called on the European Commission and the Member States to step up the pace of the Urban Agenda. It too believes that cities should be more involved in the European Union's initiatives. The Parliament has asked the Commission to examine the effects of EU initiatives on cities from a more comprehensive perspective and to invest more in the exchange of knowledge and best practices between cities.

Cities are also making themselves heard – both through the Committee of the Regions, which formally represents cities and regions in Brussels, and via urban networks. The Committee adopted among others a proposal by the mayor of Delft to write up an advisory report on the need for an EU Urban Agenda. EUROCITIES, an important voice of cities in Europe, is closely involved in all these developments. EUROCITIES issues statements and lobbies on behalf of the cities. And then there are the mayors of the capital cities within the European Union that are also contributing to the debate. Since 2012, these mayors have been meeting on a regular basis in the presence of the European Commissioner for Regional and Urban Policy. At their last conference in Amsterdam, they expressed their support for a European Urban Agenda.

Partnerships
Various instruments have been devised to achieve the different objectives of the European Urban Agenda. For example, within the European Commission, an *urban lead* (an urban representative) might be appointed to direct more attention to cities. And *urban proofing* (an impact assessment) of EU policy will involve systematically assessing the effects of new European initiatives on urban areas. This requires more and better data about cities in Europe, because much of the existing statistical information is not gathered at the city level. Another idea has been recently implemented: a website with European initiatives that have an urban dimension which shows at a glance exactly how and in what areas Europe and cities affect each other.

In order to further develop the priority themes of the Urban Agenda, partnerships are established in which players interested in a particular theme work together in developing them. In this way, like-minded people can find each other and share knowledge and expertise. The partnerships should contribute to better EU legislation, lead to the better use of EU funding, and ensure a better sharing of knowledge base and knowledge exchange.

As is common, each actor has its own list of priority themes. The Commission would like to focus on smart, green and inclusive cities. Among the Member States, the main topics are youth unemployment, affordable housing, energy efficiency of built-up areas, disadvantaged neighbourhoods, etc. EUROCITIES is concentrating on jobs, refugees, migration within the European Union, air quality, sustainability and energy, and affordable housing. Eventually an agreement was reached on twelve priority themes that the partnerships will focus on. This decision was not taken by the cities themselves.

The Urban Agenda in Amsterdam
Did the different ambitions and interpretations of the EU Urban Agenda converge in 2016 within the Pact of Amsterdam that formally establishes the Urban Agenda for the EU? And what role will cities play in this? During the presidency of the Netherlands in the first semester of 2016, all the official meetings in the Netherlands took place in Amsterdam. A number of these meetings were about the EU Urban Agenda, some were *about* cities (such as the informal ministerial meeting that agreed on the Pact of Amsterdam), others were *with* cities (such as the mayors' conference where there was direct dialogue between the capitals and the European Commission). In addition, there were meetings with city dwellers themselves who put forth their own ideas on an Urban Agenda in Europe.

All the players involved did not follow exactly the same line in Amsterdam, but there is nothing wrong with that. *Europe* thrives on diversity and on providing its own interpretation to

developments, and there is no reason to believe that it will be any different with the European Urban Agenda.

The author
Wouter van der Heijde is senior management adviser to the Mayor of Amsterdam on European affairs at the municipality of Amsterdam. He graduated from the University of Amsterdam with a master's degree in urban planning and previously worked among others for the Dutch national government and for UN-HABITAT on international urban development. This contribution was written in a personal capacity.

Further reading
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