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Investigating the partnership approach in the EU Urban Agenda from the perspective of soft planning

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ABSTRACT

At the European level, several strategic documents concerned with spatial and urban development have been published during the last decades. While these documents are essential to communicate European ideas and objectives, they are often regarded least influential in practice due to their abstract nature, legally non-binding status and lack of allocated resources. Though these limitations apply to the EU Urban Agenda, this recently published policy paper introduces partnerships as a new implementation tool. The partnerships can be regarded as innovative in two respects: On the one hand, they involve new actors, most importantly cities, in European policy debates. On the other hand, they ensure the anchorage of the Urban Agenda with a broad range of actors at various spatial scales without challenging its legally non-binding status. The Urban Agenda can thus be understood as another example of the move towards soft European spatial planning and urban development. This article investigates the notion of partnership as a soft planning and governance tool within the Urban Agenda. Moreover, based on expert interviews, it presents early opinions and expectations of actors involved in the development of the Urban Agenda and the partnerships on affordable housing.

Introduction

In May 2016, in the course of the Dutch presidency of the European Union (EU), the ministers responsible for urban matters enacted the Urban Agenda for the EU (EU Ministers Responsible for Urban Matters, 2016). The Urban Agenda is thus an intergovernmental policy paper at European level, which presents strategic objectives related to urban issues while being legally non-binding. The Urban Agenda is not the first document of its kind to be enacted at the European scale. Prominent successors from the field of spatial development and urban policy include the European Spatial Development Perspective (CEC, 1999), the Leipzig Charter (German Presidency, 2007), the Territorial Agenda (CEC, 2007), the Toledo Declaration (Spanish Presidency, 2010) or the Territorial Agenda 2020 (CEC, 2011). These policy papers are agreed upon at informal ministerial meetings,

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thus not published by the EU institutions, but nonetheless framed by the respective presidency to the EU and supported by the European Commission. While all these documents convey European ideas and objectives related to spatial development, they differ regarding their thematic focus and level of detail and show great variation in their implementation due to their abstract nature, legally non-binding status and lack of allocated resources.

The Urban Agenda, which is the focus of this article, shares these characteristics with other European policy papers, yet, its implementation might differ from previous documents, as it introduces the partnership approach as a new working method (Mamadouh, 2018, p. 2; Potjer & Hajer, 2017). The notion of partnership is not as such new in the context of the European Union or even in intergovernmental European policy papers (Dąbrowski, 2013; Dąbrowski, Bachtler, & Bafoil, 2014; Scott, 2002; Varró, 2008). However, the novelty of the partnerships within the Urban Agenda is that they specify clear rules for participation, working methods and expected outcomes. They can thus be understood as an attempt to ensure the implementation of European policies and to create a link between actors at different spatial scales, ranging from European to local level.

This article is interested in the partnership approach in the EU Urban Agenda and investigates the potential of such partnerships to support the implementation of strategic policy papers without challenging their legal status. To do so, it builds on the theoretical concepts of soft spaces (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2009; Haughton & Allmendinger, 2007) and soft planning (Faludi, 2010a; Purkarthofer, 2016; Stead, 2014). Additionally, the article uses information obtained in semi-structured interviews, which were conducted in different contexts and can thus be understood as different data sets (see Table 1). All interviews were conducted, fully transcribed and where applicable translated by the author. To ensure anonymity, direct quotes are not linked to the interviewees' names but only include a reference to the interviewees' employment positions.

The article first discusses different types of policy interventions applied in European spatial planning and European urban policy and relates them to soft spaces and soft planning. It then briefly outlines the development and contents of the Urban Agenda and elaborates on the characteristics of the partnership approach. Subsequently, it presents early opinions and expectations voiced by actors within the partnership on affordable housing. Finally, it discusses the potentials and uncertainties related to the partnership approach from the perspective of soft planning.

Table 1. Expert interviews: Details on data sets, interviewees and themes discussed.

Data set	Overview	Interviewees	Themes discussed	Reference in text
A	Austria (*n* = 17) Language: German Year: 2017	public officials employed at national, federal, regional and local level	• Planning systems and relation of different planning scales • EU strategy documents, e.g. ESDP, Urban Agenda	Interviewee 1–2
B	Finland (*n* = 18) Language: English, Finnish Year: 2017/2018		• 3 different types of EU policy interventions, their influences and implementation	Interviewee 3–5
C	Belgium & The Netherlands (*n* = 5) Language: English Year: 2017	actors involved in the development of the UA or the housing partnership	• Development and meaning of the Urban Agenda • Relation of Urban Agenda to other policies and strategies • Partnerships: formation, expectations, implementation	Interviewee A-E

European spatial planning and European urban policy: towards soft spaces and soft planning

The debate about spatial development and urban policy at the European level is characterized by complexity, ambiguity and fragmentation. As is well known, the European Union does not have a competence for land use planning or urban policy but shares the competence for spatially relevant policies, such as regional policy, environmental policy or transport policy, with its member states. Since the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon, also territorial cohesion, a concept that is often understood as related to spatial development, is anchored besides economic and social cohesion as one of the goals of the EU. Despite the inclusion of territorial cohesion in the treaty, the concept remains elusive and ambiguous (Medeiros, 2016) and has triggered debate among planning scholars (Abrahams, 2014; Faludi, 2005; Servillo, 2010).

Three types of European policy intervention

However, instead of setting out from competences and legal provisions when discussing European spatial planning and urban policy, one can also consider those policies relevant that affect urban and spatial development in the member states. Following this understanding, we can distinguish between three types of policy interventions: regulatory, remunerative and discursive. This classification is based on Etzioni's (1975) differentiation between coercive, remunerative and normative power which inspired Vedung's (1998) distinction between the 'stick', the 'carrot' and the 'sermon' of policy interventions. While Vedung refers to governance on a general level, the classification can also be applied to specific policy fields, especially fragmented and cross-sectional policy fields such as transport policy (Givoni, Macmillen, Banister, & Feitelson, 2013) or European spatial planning (Purkarthofer, 2016). Regarding spatial development, the EU employs all three types of policy intervention. In certain policy fields, e.g. environmental policy, the EU uses the 'stick' by enacting regulations, which immediately and uniformly apply to all member states, and directives, which are incorporated into national laws. Some of these legally binding acts have immediate spatial implications (e.g. Habitats Directive), while others limit the leeway of domestic authorities in planning matters (e.g. Environmental Noise Directive). In other areas, the EU offers 'carrots' in the form of subsidies and funds. Related to spatial development and urban issues, such funding opportunities originate for example from EU cohesion policy or transport policy. Lastly, strategies and strategic policy papers are published at the European level, either supranationally by the European institutions or intergovernmentally by the responsible national ministers. These legally non-binding documents can be understood as the 'sermon' of European policy making.

The three types of policy intervention differ in their conceptualization at the European level but also result in different responses among domestic actors. Domestic actors are required to abide regulatory interventions and if necessary incorporate them into national laws. If they infringe upon regulations or fail to implement directives correctly, the EU can impose sanctions or take legal action against the member states. Domestic actors are responsible for the administration and absorption of remunerative interventions, and are in many cases required to co-finance European funds. If they do not exploit the

funding opportunities provided by the EU, there are no immediate negative consequences. However, countries or regions that fail to use their allocated funding are losing resources by not utilizing the money they would be entitled to pocket. When it comes to the implementation of discursive policy interventions, domestic actors can use ideas and rhetoric presented at the European level and refer to European documents in their policies. Yet, if they do not attach importance to these documents, there are no legal or financial consequences (Purkarthofer, 2016). Nonetheless, discursive policy interventions can exert normative power through the presentation of knowledge and data, the transfer of knowledge, moral suasion, exhortation, persuasion, and the framing and shaping of attention by affecting what is considered worthwhile of knowing (Vedung, 1998).

This article focuses on discursive policy interventions, as the Urban Agenda falls into this category. While the highest political representatives approve strategic policy papers at the European level, their implementation and outcomes in the member states vary greatly. The documents can serve as reference for domestic policies, either directly or indirectly, e.g. by adopting their objectives and rhetoric, and shape the minds of domestic actors (Faludi, 2001). However, they can also be stalled at national or ministerial level or simply be ignored by domestic actors.

From informal strategies towards strategic informality

Due to its complexity and plurality, spatial development at the European scale is often associated with soft spaces and soft planning (Allmendinger, Chilla, & Sielker, 2014; Faludi, 2010a, 2010b; Metzger & Schmitt, 2012; Purkarthofer, 2018; Santamaria & Elissalde, 2018; Stead, 2014). Soft spaces refer to new geographies transcending administrative entities, often characterized by fuzzy boundaries and not associated with established governmental organizations (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2009). The EU promotes the idea of soft spaces crossing administrative borders on a discursive level but also through the spatialization of its policies, e.g. through the support of cross-border regions through the INTERREG programme (Luukkonen & Moilanen, 2012; Purkarthofer, 2018). Faludi (2010a) claims that '[t]hese soft spaces require, not hard planning that invokes statutory powers, […] but soft planning that relies on a joint formulation of strategy, while retaining dispersed, and thus flexible, powers of action' (p. 21). Instead of developing binding plans or regulations, European interventions thus focus on strategy development, coordination, cooperation, negotiation and learning. This is visible for example in the macro-regional strategies, for which the 'three nos' were defined: no new funding, no new regulations, no new institutions (Faludi, 2013; Sielker, 2016a).

This article sets out to show how the partnerships within the Urban Agenda represent another example of soft territorial governance supported by the European Union. The question remains, however, whether the EU resorts to soft planning and informal strategies because it lacks the competence to develop hard policies regarding spatial development, or whether there is a strategic element inherent to the softness and informality. At the European level, the softness might not be perceived as a limitation or disadvantage, as non-binding policies are met with less resistance and might seem like necessities for the common good (Luukkonen, 2015, p. 188). This is in line with the perception of a policy maker employed at the European Commission interviewed in the course of this study:

> I don't think this even has to be put into question, it's just a fact that there is no competence for spatial planning at the European level. For regional policy and subsidies there is, but not for spatial planning. […] I don't think that a stronger legal competence of the EU regarding spatial planning would be needed, neither regarding urban planning. […] I am convinced that there are many clever things that can be done without any kind of formal competence.
>
> [A, European Commission]

European policy makers could thus deliberately use soft policy interventions and strive for strategic informality. This is not as such problematic. In fact, according to Faludi (2010a, p. 21), soft planning for soft spaces is the preferred or even the only realistic model, yet it will inevitably result in soft interventions being employed selectively. In other words, domestic actors will not necessarily attach importance to the soft policy papers originating from the European scale, as the following examples show.

European policy papers: overlooked and underused by domestic actors?

Empirical data collected in the course of this study suggests that this is the case among administrators in Austria and Finland. In a series of interviews (Data sets A and B), planners and public servants were asked to assess which type of European policy intervention (strategic policy papers, regulations and directives, or funds and subsidies) was most influential for spatial development in their country. In Austria, approximately half of the interviewees claimed that regulations and directives have the strongest influence, while the other half regarded funding instruments and financial incentives as the most crucial influence. Not a single interviewee was of the opinion that strategic policy papers predominantly influence spatial development in Austria. However, several interviewees claimed that they would favour if more importance was attached to EU documents, stating for instance that 'strategy papers should be stronger' (Interviewee 1, city of Vienna) or that 'strategies are the most fascinating but also most challenging element' (Interviewee 2, Federal Chancellery) of European spatial development.

In Finland, a vast majority of interviewees agreed that regulations and directives are the most important factor of influence from the European level, while a few also mentioned the importance of funding instruments. The relevance of strategic policy papers for planning and urban development in Finland was estimated to be minimal. One interviewee claims that 'Those strategies and policy papers are … I don't know … maybe in the background somehow? I cannot point to any things that could come from them.' (Interviewee 3, Regional Council). Others associate interesting contents but little relevance with the European policy papers: 'The ESDP, it had a lot of nice things about regional development and regional structures and urban structures and they were easy to put to the national guidelines. […] Nevertheless, it is a very weak link.' (Interviewee 4, Ministry of Environment). Influence seems to have diminished further with the publication of more recent strategy documents, as one interviewee explains: 'There is also this other agenda, the Territorial Agenda. […] I didn't get it, if I have to be frank. I don't see it in our work.' (Interviewee 5, Regional Council).

While these statements origin from only two of the 28 EU member states, it is likely that the situation is similar in other countries. This assumption is affirmed, for instance, by a large-scale ESPON project evaluating the application of the ESDP (ESPON, 2006). The project claimed that significant or tangible effects on the ground generated by the ESDP

are difficult to identify. This is partly due to the fact that the ESDP reflects general ideas rather than concrete actions and partly due to the fact that it remains 'a secret for the few' (ESPON, 2006, p. 25). According to the study, the number of actors, which are aware of the ESDP and its contents, is relatively small and often identical with a few employees in the ministries who were involved in its development (ESPON, 2006). The ESDP's dissemination process has seen limited success, and correspondingly regional or local actors tend to be unaware of the ESDP's contents, even if regional and local policies might not contradict the basic principles of the ESDP. As the ESDP received a considerable amount of attention in the planning community at the turn of the century, it can be assumed that more recent policy papers, which have been less prominent, have faced similar limitations. In the context of urban development, the report *Ten years after the Leipzig Charter* (BBSR, 2017) gives a slightly more optimistic assessment, yet it acknowledges the heterogeneity of urban policies across Europe and the enduring challenges in the successful implementation of integrated urban development.

European urban policy and the enactment of the Urban Agenda for the EU

The Urban Agenda is not a stand-alone policy but is part of a set of processes that can be summarized as European urban policy. Just like European spatial planning, urban policy at the European level is characterized by fragmentation and changing priorities as well as different types of policy intervention. This section first gives a brief overview of the urban dimension in European policy making and subsequently elaborates on the Urban Agenda and its contents.

The urban dimension in European Union policies

There exists no dedicated urban policy in the European Union but nonetheless the EU has addressed urban issues through different means over the last decades. While a stronger focus on urban issues could be observed during the last years, exemplified for instance through the renaming of the Directorate-General for Regional *and Urban* Policy and the earmarking of a share of the European Regional Development Fund for sustainable urban development (Purkarthofer, 2018), urban policy has a long history in the EU context (van den Berg, Braun, van der Meer, & Mingardo, 2007; Verdonk, 2014). On the one hand, urban issues have been incorporated into the funding schemes related to EU cohesion policy. The community initiatives URBAN I (1994–1999), URBAN II (2000–2006) and URBAN+ (2007–2013) are the most apparent examples of EU funding targeted at cities, complemented by the URBACT programme aimed at knowledge exchange and networking. On the other hand, urban issues have been addressed discursively by the European Commission (CEC, 2008; European Commission, 2011) and by some of the changing EU presidencies.

The Urban Agenda itself already dates back two decades (Atkinson, 2001; de Santiago Rodríguez, 2017; Geppert & Colini, 2015; Verdonk, 2014). In 1997, the European Commission published a communication entitled *Towards an Urban Agenda in the European Union* (CEC, 1997), which was expected to pave the way for an intergovernmental follow-up document enacted by the ministers of the then 15 member states. Even if the ministers, together with hundreds of other urban experts, met in Vienna the following year, an

agreement was never found and the Urban Agenda remained an unresolved issue until approximately 15 years later (Kneeshaw, 2014). In the meantime, however, several documents with an urban focus were published in intergovernmental processes, such as the Bristol Accord (The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2005), the Leipzig Charter (German Presidency, 2007), the Marseille Statement (French Presidency, 2008), the Toledo Declaration (Spanish Presidency, 2010) or the Riga Declaration (Latvian Presidency, 2015). To resume work towards an Urban Agenda in 2014, the European Commission organized the Cities Forum (European Commission, 2014a) and published once again a communication on an EU Urban Agenda (European Commission, 2014b), followed by a public consultation process. The attempt to establish an EU Urban Agenda was also partly motivated by the HABITAT III conference in Quito in October 2016, resulting in the adoption of the New Urban Agenda (see e.g. Sennett, Burdett, & Sassen, 2018).

The Urban Agenda for the EU: the pact of Amsterdam

In the Urban Agenda, the need for an urban policy at the European scale is justified by the fact that more than 70% of Europe's citizens live in urban areas (EU Ministers Responsible for Urban Matters, 2016). Moreover, cities play a crucial role in achieving the objectives of the EU and are the locus of implementation of a large share of EU policies. The Urban Agenda thus aims to involve urban authorities in the design and implementation of policies and to strengthen the urban dimension in European policies. It does so without creating new funding sources, administrative structures or legal competences, a claim that strongly resembles the 'three nos' associated with the macro-regional strategies (Faludi, 2013; Sielker, 2016a). Instead, the Urban Agenda intends to improve EU policies and their implementation by focusing on better regulation, better funding and better knowledge. The Urban Agenda defines twelve priority themes, some of which are highly relevant for spatial development, e.g. affordable housing, climate adaptation, sustainable use of land or urban mobility. Correspondingly, twelve partnerships, each focusing on one priority theme, were established. In addition, the Urban Agenda defines eleven cross-cutting issues, such as effective urban governance, strategic urban planning, and governance across administrative borders, which should be acknowledged in all partnerships. The Urban Agenda thus understand itself as

> a new form of informal multilevel cooperation where Member States, Regions, representatives of Urban Authorities, the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Union's Advisory Bodies (CoR, EESC), the EIB and other relevant actors work in partnership. (EU Ministers Responsible for Urban Matters, 2016, p. 9)

The Urban Agenda concludes by defining the role and responsibilities of different actors, e.g. member states, urban authorities and the European Commission, with regards to the implementation of the Urban Agenda. In the annex, a working programme is presented, specifying the governance arrangements, priority themes and working method of the partnerships.

The notion of partnership: from an abstract principle to an implementation framework

This section discusses the partnership approach in the Urban Agenda, based on the Urban Agenda itself and the expert interviews conducted in the course of this study. The notion

of partnership is not as such new and the term partnership can be found in the context of several European policies including those relevant for spatial development. Supported by Jacques Delors, the president of the European Commission at that time, the partnership approach was specified as one of four guiding principles for EU cohesion policy already in 1988 (Faludi, 2006). Since then, the programmes through which EU cohesion policy funding is disbursed are thus supposed to be developed in collective processes involving authorities at European, regional and local level, social partners and organizations from civil society. The partnership principle has significantly contributed to associate the EU with the concept of multi-level governance (Faludi, 2012; Hooghe & Marks, 1996; Mendez, 2011; Van den Brande, 2014). Partnerships also represent one of seven key features of the LEADER approach, an initiative first introduced in 1991 in the course of the Common Agricultural Policy, intended to support rural development.[1] Partnership in the context of EU regional and rural development policies refers to the idea of horizontal and vertical cooperation between different actors. While there seems to be general agreement on the idea of cooperation, the partnership principle is interpreted and implemented in many different ways. This becomes apparent for instance in the European code of conduct on partnership, which presents a collection of good practices, e.g. relating to the identification and involvement of different partners and the assessment of the implementation and added value of the partnerships (European Commission, 2014c).

The notion of partnership is also used in the intergovernmental documents enacted at the European scale, yet, it usually remains vague. The ESDP, for instance, dedicates a whole chapter to the importance of urban-rural partnerships, i.e. the cooperation between towns and countryside, to solve problems in an integrated manner (CEC, 1999, p. 16). Though the ESDP uses the term partnership for these processes of cooperation and coordination, they should be understood as the abstract intention to diminish the importance of borders and create new, functional planning spaces (Purkarthofer, 2018) rather than a concrete framework for cooperation between different actors. In addition, the application of the ESDP is envisioned at the national, regional and local level. While this implies coordination between the different levels and associated actors, the ESDP does not stipulate any specific rules for cooperation. Similarly, the Leipzig Charter and the Territorial Agenda mention partnerships between cities and rural areas (German Presidency, 2007, p. 3), while the Territorial Agenda 2020 addresses the same themes of cooperation but refrains from using the term partnership.

In the Toledo Declaration, however, the ministers 'call for a real partnership with cities in the implementation of Europe 2020' (Spanish Presidency, 2010, p. III), thus using the term to connect cities to the European level instead of cities to their surroundings. The Urban Agenda picks up this idea and defines the notion of partnership more concretely, thus turning it from an abstract principle into a framework for implementation. The Urban Agenda claims that although it addresses challenges that are commonplace across Europe, the actions to tackle these challenges must be taken not only at the European scale but across all levels of government. Partnerships are thus seen as the key delivery mechanism to ensure the vertical coordination between different actors regarding the priority themes, while also acknowledging the horizontal coordination with other policies regarding the cross-cutting issues. The Working Programme of the Urban Agenda entails clear rules regarding the members of the partnerships, their roles, the phases of the partnership, the expected deliverables and practicalities such as financial support.

The partnership approach in the Urban Agenda

The first four partnerships, focusing on affordable housing, the inclusion of migrants and refugees, air quality and urban poverty respectively, were launched shortly before the publication of the Urban Agenda in May 2016, the next groups of four followed approximately 6 and 12 month later. Despite their different starting dates, all partnership are planned to proceed through the same phases over a period of approximately three years: stocktaking, preparatory actions, definition of objectives and deliverables, implementation of the action plan and evaluation. Each partnership draws together a total number of 15 to 20 partners whose participation is voluntary. The partners should bring experience and expertise regarding the theme of the partnership and be prepared and willing to commit resources, as there is very little financial support available[2]. The involvement of urban authorities, non-governmental actors and private companies – in addition to the member states and the EU institutions – aims to ensure real impact of the Urban Agenda on the ground without hardening the legal status of the strategy. According to one interviewee, this represents a deliberate intent to overcome problems that surfaced during the implementation of previous strategies:

> What we saw with the Territorial Agenda was that there was no real implementation agenda. That's why after some years there was no action taken, there was no discussion about it. So we thought we need something action-oriented, so we came up with the idea of the partnerships to ensure that there would be concrete action taken in the context of the Urban Agenda.

[B, Dutch ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations]

As the Urban Agenda is focused on cities and their surroundings, the involvement of urban authorities is regarded crucial for its successful implementation. Several interviewees emphasize the significance of the involvement of cities and other stakeholders in order to attach importance to strategic documents and ensure that their objectives are pursued:

> I think the crux in every matter of coordination is that the involved stakeholders have a certain ownership for the process. They need to be convinced themselves that it makes sense to implement something. Everything that is voluntary can only work if the actors are convinced that it is reasonable and beneficial.

[A, European Commission]

> The Leipzig Charter was a starting point for us back then, but […] this completely trickled away – simply because it only took place on an institutional level. Only the administrators were involved, and not the real players on the market. […] But now we are sitting at the table, so it's a whole new ball game, because we take care of the reality check.

[C, International Union of Tenants]

Although the partnerships are intended to bring together actors from all levels of government, the interviewees describe an imbalance regarding enthusiasm and commitment. While cities and stakeholders are keen to join the partnerships, ministries from the member states are in some cases less enthusiastic, presumably because their participation in the policy making process is anyway ensured through formal mechanisms.

We were surprised about the interest to participate in the partnerships, especially by cities. This illustrates that cities weren't given enough voice in the EU legislative process and policy making so far.

[A, European Commission]

Another observation is that it is difficult to get member states on board. […] The ministries usually are a bit further away from the Urban Agenda process and to convince them it is a little bit more difficult, because they don't see the added value of being in a partnership. […] In the current situation, cities don't have a voice and that means that member states have a bigger voice. And their influence might decrease when you give cities a better position. So I think that might be one of the considerations they have for not participating.

[B, Dutch ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations]

It always follows the same principle: the stakeholders push the gas pedal, the Commission is set to idle and the member states hit the brakes. That's the way it is. Obviously, member states have little interest in the Urban Agenda, because they are already the official contact and negotiation partner of the Commission.

[C, International Union of Tenants]

These statements clearly highlight the demand for cities and other stakeholders to be involved in policy discussions at the European scale. While these actors had the opportunity to make references to European policy papers already before, the involvement of local authorities and stakeholders into discussions at the European level is certainly supported and even required through the partnership approach of the Urban Agenda. The interest of cities in the partnerships is also confirmed in a first report of the European Commission on the Urban Agenda, which specifies that 84 cities are participating in the twelve partnerships (European Commission, 2017).

This section has highlighted that although the notion of partnership has been used in European policy making before, the partnership approach in the Urban Agenda can be regarded innovative for two reasons. On the one hand, the partnerships directly involve new actors, most importantly urban authorities, in policy debates at the European level. Before the Urban Agenda, cities could only indirectly participate in the European policy arena, for example through networks like EUROCITIES or the Council of European Municipalities and Regions. On the other hand, the partnership approach provides a framework for the implementation of the Urban Agenda. Although the Urban Agenda itself as well as the outcomes of the partnership remain legally non-binding, the new mechanism can contribute to anchor the policy with a broad range of actors at various spatial scales. Moreover, as for instance the aim of better regulation highlights, soft policies like the Urban Agenda might in the long run affect hard policies like regulations and directives.

While the partnerships are a novelty in the context of European spatial planning, similar approaches can be found in other planning contexts. In the Austrian federal system, for example, the main responsibilities regarding planning lie with the federal states, leaving the national level in a situation not unlike that of the EU (Faludi, 1998). The Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning, a national level organization without legal mandate to enact plans, thus establishes working groups on specific themes to ensure the implementation of the legally non-binding Austrian Spatial Development

Concept. Similar to the Urban Agenda partnerships, these partnerships involve actors from different organizations, which are expected to implement the results of the partnership in their respective jurisdiction (Humer, 2018).

The Urban Agenda partnership on affordable housing: early opinions and expectations

The partnership on affordable housing was among the first four partnerships launched within the Urban Agenda. The housing partnership aims to respond to the three main themes of the Urban Agenda: better regulation, better funding and better knowledge. This is reflected in the three subgroups of the partnership: The first group deals with state aid regulation and its impact on affordable and social housing. The second group investigates funding and financing mechanisms for housing, e.g. the possibility to involve the European Investment Bank (EIB) into affordable housing investments or to coordinate the provision of affordable housing and the structural funds. The third group addresses general housing policy, i.e. a multitude of issues such as spatial planning, environmental issues or rent control. As stated in the Urban Agenda, the partnership follows a multi-level approach, hence including roughly the same number of partners from the European institutions, member states, cities and networks. To ensure that technical and complex issues can be discussed immediately within the partnership, its partners are experts on housing rather than high-level political actors.

At the time of writing, the partners are in the process of drafting their action plan, identifying challenges, tensions and bottlenecks regarding housing in Europe and proposing concrete responses to be considered at different spatial scales and institutional levels. At this point in time, it is thus impossible to judge the success of the partnership itself or its impact on housing issues. Thus, this article can only give an insight into the early stage opinions and impressions of partners in the housing partnership, contributing to start a broader discussion on the partnership approach in the Urban Agenda and what it might mean for soft governance (Gordon, Kornberger, & Clegg, 2009; Sielker, 2016b). The article addresses five aspects of the housing partnership:

- the partners and their expertise
- cooperation and group dynamics within the partnership
- expectations for the outcome of the partnership
- limitations of the partnership approach
- links between the Urban Agenda and other policies

Table 2 presents direct quotes from the interviewees regarding these five themes, aimed to illustrate some of the interviewees' opinions in their own wording. Subsequently, the findings from the interviews are summarized.

The partners and their expertise

The housing partnership is coordinated by Slovakia and the city of Vienna and includes partners from five cities (Lisbon, Poznan, Riga, Scottish City Alliance, Vienna), four

Table 2. Statements from actors in the housing partnership (Data set C).

The partners and their expertise

D [The European Commission] created this mechanism in order to seek this expertise that they don't have. Because if you are in the EU bubble, you are in the EU bubble, so you really have often less understanding of the dynamics or the issues of provision of affordable housing on the ground […]. They quite rightfully created this mechanism to learn about that.

C In principle it is important to not always go through others, but to bring in practitioners who work on the ground and have actual experience that they can refer to. And we succeeded in doing that with the partnerships. […] The practitioners that are involved really want to change something. And they know exactly, from their daily work, what the weak points of EU legislation are.

B There is a lot of enthusiasm, mainly from cities. They want to participate in this, they tell us: 'this is the first time I am sitting at a table with the Commission, with member states and other stakeholders as equals'. When you speak about urban matters in the EU context, formally it is only member states, the Commission and the Parliament who talk about policy. Now in this framework of the Urban Agenda, they get a voice. It's not a formal forum, but still for them it is important to have these direct discussions with the Commission and, if I would think about concrete results in a couple of years, I think the main result maybe are these informal contacts.

Cooperation and group dynamics within the partnership

A I think this is the backbone, the big idea behind it, that the partnership takes place on an equal footing.

D Well in group dynamics you have always types of personalities and attitudes. Some are much more active and dynamic, interested and committed and resourceful.

E The involvement of the cities is very good, the involvement of the member states is very good, the involvement of EU is, in my view, rather cool. […] They [the European Commission] like to work top-down in the way they do. They have a subject, they write a White Paper or a Green Paper or a whatever paper, they collect the comments from all the member states – never a city, always a state – they do what they do with those comments, they make a new paper, and then there is a new regulation which goes up to the board of ministers, and that's it folks. That's their lifestyle. And this housing partnership, and the other partnerships, are not their lifestyle. They are not used to communicate with the kind of people they have to communicate with in the partnership. And you see their uneasiness with this kind of working.

Expectations for the outcome of the partnership

B The formal process in the EU is so complicated, and it takes a long time to influence new rules. I think they [the partnerships] can have an impact, but it will be more the informal discussions, that will contribute to changes in EU regulations or EU funding. I think that's the main thing or the main result these partnerships will produce.

C Well, all these exchanges of best practices – let me say it bluntly – this 'blah blah' … no, we make legislation! […] I understand the partnership as an opportunity to pool our interests and direct them exactly to where they can have an impact.

E If your action is to change the EU regulation on housing, forget it! It won't work! But perhaps you have one or two good ideas, e.g. on the definition of state aid. […] But first and foremost important is the exchange of knowledge, knowing each other, each other's systems.

D In the end the partnerships produce a certain type, a certain quality of evidence which either supports the current policy or does not. And if there is some strong indication that the current EU policy in certain domains or aspects does not work, the partnership is supposed to prove that.

Limitations of the partnership approach

C We do this on top of everything else. We don't get paid for it, there is not even compensation for travel expenses. […] We cannot even pay researchers to help us. […] There is a little bit of money for a secretary that the Commission has put in place, but what they actually do is write protocols. And we already complained, 'Come on, this money could be better spent on research and experts'.

D It is important to know that for all the meetings, the cost of attending is always on the participants. […] And we have meetings all over Europe. […] So apart from the fact that you always have different individuals and different type of dynamics, then you have also the question of resources, whether people can access these meetings, because for some of the member cities it is a concern.

B There is always a discussion about the money. […] And there are always the cities and the member states complaining that the Commission should put in more money but there is no more budget available.

Links between the Urban Agenda and other policies

B Well, formally in the Pact of Amsterdam it says that we have to connect with the Territorial Agenda but if I look at the partnerships … some of them are naturally related to the Territorial Agenda […] but other partnerships don't have this territorial perspective too much, and I don't think that they will engage this perspective in their work. So I think that is something that could be strengthened, this connection between urban and territorial.

A Well, it depends a lot on what is written there [in the action plan]. The Commission will absorb everything, and we hope that there are actions directed at the Commission, but also some directed at the member states or the Council, or even at the cities themselves.

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

C   The issue is, […] even if we deliver the best results, how will they be implemented? That's something that has to be
     worked on. But let's see how this will play out. […] A challenge is for example that the Commission doesn't have to
     move regarding certain areas of law, such as state aid. […] This is going to be the most difficult task. Nonetheless, I
     believe in people's ability to learn, so if we show that state aid regulations hinder investments on the ground, at
     home, then maybe at some point the penny drops. I am cautiously optimistic that this will work out.
A: interviewee from European Commission
B: interviewee from Dutch ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations
C: interviewee from International Union of Tenants
D: interviewee from Eurocities
E: interviewee from Dutch ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations

member states (Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Slovakia), six stakeholders (AEDES, Eurocities, Housing Europe, International Union of Tenants, URBACT, EIB) and three Directorates-General of the European Commission (DG Regional and Urban Policy, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, and DG Energy). Especially for cities and stakeholders, being part of discussions at the European scale and with the European institutions is a novelty. Correspondingly, these partners were most eager to join the partnership. The participation of urban actors in the partnership aims to broaden the knowledge base regarding housing issues and to highlight specific challenges that EU policies create in cities. Several interviewees identified the connection between practitioners and policy makers and the resulting knowledge transfer as the real added value of the partnership.

Cooperation and group dynamics within the partnership

In informal collaborative settings, the cooperation climate between partners is even more crucial than in formalized structures, as no formal hierarchies are in place. The housing partnership is based on the consensus principle and gives all partners an equal say. When asked about the cooperation climate, all interviewees assured a generally positive attitude and cooperation on an equal footing. Nonetheless, some tensions were identified. In some cases, cooperation is hindered by the lack of time and financial resources, as well as by differences regarding commitment and skills. Moreover, the institutional background was claimed to affect the cooperation climate. One interviewee regards the attitudes and working practice of European Commission partners as problematic. While other partners joined the partnership voluntarily, the European Commission is expected to contribute to every partnership within the Urban Agenda. In contrast to other partners, participation might thus be perceived as an obligation rather than an opportunity.

Expectations for the outcome of the partnership

As far as the partners' expectations are concerned, some differences surfaced in the interviews. Even if the partners agree on the objectives regarding affordable housing, their expectations differ as to what can actually be achieved through the partnership and how. While some interviewees are convinced that the partnership can influence EU legislation directly, others remain sceptical and expect knowledge exchange to be the main outcome of the partnership. It remains to be seen, whether inconsistencies regarding

the long-term effects of the partnership will surface at a later stage of cooperation. While the partners seem optimistic about their involvement and their ability to contribute to the set objectives at this point in time, there is a risk that a rude awakening will follow the initial euphoria about the partnership, if partners realize that they cannot make the impact they intend to.

Limitations of the partnership approach

Despite the general enthusiasm, some limitations regarding the partnership approach were acknowledged by the interviewees. They repeatedly mentioned the lack of financial resources associated with the partnership as hindering factor. The partners thus have to cover their expenses themselves and have to be able to commit their work time to the partnership. This poses a potential challenge especially for smaller organizations and cities. The establishment and financing of a secretariat through the European Commission is viewed critically, as some interviewees perceive this not as the best use of scarce financial resources. Other limitations relate to the uncertain implementation of actions suggested in the course of the partnership. As the partnership cannot enact policies or submit legislative proposals, its success ultimately depends on the embedment of the Urban Agenda in other policy contexts.

Links between the Urban Agenda and other policies

The success of the Urban Agenda generally and each partnership specifically depends greatly on the links established with European and domestic policies. At the EU scale, connections with all three types of policy intervention, i.e. discursive, regulatory and remunerative, are envisioned. A connection with cohesion policy funding, for example, might however prove challenging as the policy cycles are not chronologically aligned. Negotiations on the next cohesion policy programming period (2021–2027) have started already at the end of 2017. While the housing partnership, currently developing its action plan, could at least theoretically have an effect on these negotiations, other partnerships might be too late to influence the funding instruments and distribution mechanisms. Regarding regulations and directives, the interviewees are aware that convincing all member states to agree to changes might be a futile task. Even ensuring a connection with other informal EU policy papers, such as the Territorial Agenda 2020, seems challenging. Additionally, the partnerships should not only relate to European but also national and sub-national policies. So far, the partners in the housing partnership have not yet considered this connection a priority, but several interviewees are optimistic that this will happen in the future. It remains to be seen whether the individual partners succeed in establishing a connection between the discussions at the European scale and the political context of their city, state or organization.

Concluding discussion

In May 2016, the European ministers responsible for urban matters agreed upon the long-awaited Urban Agenda for the EU. The Urban Agenda thus marks the latest addition to a series of legally non-binding strategic documents concerned with spatial development and

urban issues at the EU level. However, the Urban Agenda fundamentally differs from its predecessors in at least one regard, as it introduces implementation partnerships, which focus on certain thematic priorities. The partnerships are claimed to be the key delivery mechanism of the Urban Agenda, which – through the involvement of local authorities, private actors and non-governmental organizations in addition to European institutions and member states – should ensure real impact on the ground without hardening the legal status of the document. Each partnership is expected to develop an action plan focused on a specific theme, which contains concrete proposals regarding better regulation, better funding and better knowledge, without challenging the distribution of competences between different levels of government.

The Urban Agenda is thus another example for the move towards soft planning at the European level. On the one hand, the Urban Agenda clearly emphasizes the importance of functional areas and cooperation between urban areas and surrounding regions (EU Ministers Responsible for Urban Matters, 2016, p. 4), contributing to diminish borders and create soft, conflated spaces across Europe (Purkarthofer, 2018). On the other hand, the partnerships within the Urban Agenda are an example of soft governance, as they provide a multi-level, multi-stakeholder and cross-border cooperation framework (BBSR, 2017). These developments indicate a continuation of the multi-level governance approach within European spatial planning and urban development, supporting new forms of vertical and horizontal cooperation and new actor coalitions. Moreover, they suggest that the member states and the European Commission have reached an unspoken agreement not to extend the EU competences to include matters concerning spatial development, but instead to focus on soft, discursive policy interventions. With the member states generally reluctant to delegate competences, these non-binding interventions seemed for a long time to be the path of least resistance for the European Commission to discuss spatial development and urban issues at the European scale. However, the partnership approach in the Urban Agenda gives the impression of increased coordination and acknowledges that also legally non-binding documents can affect spatial policies in the member states, as long as actors at various spatial and institutional scales are committed to them. These findings support an earlier claim about the influence of the EU on national and sub-national governance, stating that 'it is not sufficient to observe what happens *between* the European Union and its member states but rather how European input is dealt with *within* a country' (Purkarthofer, 2016, 15). EU influences thus need to be viewed in the context of the complex networks of actors and processes within the member states, rather than based on their legal status alone. While the Urban Agenda is clearly a strategic policy paper, it has the potential and deliberately aims to affect also regulations and funding instruments, as is clear from its three goals, namely better regulation, funding and knowledge. The actual effects on all three strands depend on whether the partnerships succeed in convincing decision makers, both at the European, national and sub-national level, of their cause. Even though the implementation of actions stays unassured, the Urban Agenda has already outperformed previous documents when it comes to anchorage within domestic structures and entanglement with sub-national actors through the partnerships as concrete institutional framework. This is a novelty compared to previous discursive relationships between the EU and domestic actors which often remained non-systematic and fragmented (Cotella & Janin Rivolin, 2010).

Based on interviews with actors involved in the development of the Urban Agenda and in the partnership on affordable housing, this study concludes that the partnerships are a promising way to commit actors to deal with, interpret and implement the Urban Agenda in their respective jurisdiction. The partnerships could also be a suitable way to ensure the involvement of cities in EU policy making, which was previously often determined by the willingness of member states and regional authorities to allow cities to participate (Verdonk, 2014, p. 68). The partnerships could also reflect a potential way forward in policy fields characterized by complexity and a plurality of interests, as is the case in the field of housing (Tosics, 2004, 2008; Tulumello, Ferreira, Colombo, Di Giovanni, & Allegra, 2018). Although it is too early to estimate which concrete effects will follow the Urban Agenda and its partnerships, partners are generally optimistic about their involvement. Especially cities and lobby networks appreciate the new framework, giving them a stronger voice and the opportunity to interact with European and national actors on an equal footing. While participants from the national ministries and the European Commission seem generally less enthusiastic about the partnerships – barely surprising given that their participation in EU policy making is ensured through formal mechanisms – the commitment of some national actors is as strong as that of cities, as is the case in the housing partnership. It remains to be seen whether the individual actors involved in the partnerships will be able to affect policy making in their respective local, regional or national jurisdiction or whether they can create enough political momentum via the European Commission, Parliament or Council to induce changes at the EU level.

While the partnership approach certainly holds many potentials, its limitations, such as shortcomings regarding financial resources or coordination with other policies, should not be overlooked. In the end, it will be the responsibility of each partnership to negotiate their way of cooperation, coordination, interaction and potentially implementation. Vast differences regarding effects and outcomes between the different partnerships can thus be expected. Although the Urban Agenda is still in its infancy, the partnership approach is a promising initiative that could be of future interest to researchers as well as practitioners in the field of spatial planning and urban development. Through means of soft governance, the partnerships meet the demand of local authorities to engage with policy making at the European scale, while they also allow European policies to find anchorage at different spatial scales and institutional levels.

This article, with its limited empiric and explorative perspective, can only be understood as a starting point to the discussion, yet it highlights the potentials that exist for the Urban Agenda to become more meaningful than previous policy papers, some of which quickly disappeared into office bookshelves and oblivion. It is the task of future research to monitor the implementation of the Urban Agenda and evaluate whether its potentials have been tapped. The partnerships could prove to be a suitable governance arrangement to discuss urban issues and spatial development across administrative and institutional boundaries and engage different actors in European spatial planning. However, it is now upon these actors at all institutional levels to take ownership of the process and ascribe meaning to the EU Urban Agenda and its partnerships, both in the international discourse and within their own jurisdiction. Ultimately, even if changes in legislation and funding mechanisms might be the exceptional consequence of a partnership rather than the rule, the partnerships could contribute their share to European integration, as one interviewee puts it:

These movements, like the housing partnership, integrate nations. We talk with each other. That is very, very, very important for getting the feeling that we are Europe. Yes, it is a secondary goal, but it is so good to have it. We should do much more of those actions, like talking to each other.

[E, Dutch ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations]

While it might sound naive to expect the partnerships within the Urban Agenda to 'integrate nations', there is a grain of truth in this statement which is applicable not only to spatial development but to European integration in general. Complaints that the European Union is too distant from its citizens could fall silent if the EU is successful in engaging cities and local authorities in European debates and policy making. While this difficult task will surely not be achieved through the Urban Agenda alone, the partnerships might be a step in the right direction and could help to lower the threshold for domestic actors to participate in European policy debates. If the partnerships succeed in providing an implementation framework for cooperation with clearly defined rules, they could contribute to reduce ambiguity and uncertainty, which are so often associated with the European Union.

Notes

1. As of 2014, the LEADER approach is part of Community-Led Local Development (CLLD). However, the partnership approach remains one of the guiding principles for CLLD.
2. In general, there is no funding associated with the EU Urban Agenda. However, under the Dutch presidency in 2016, the first four partnerships received € 50.000 as initial impulse to support their work (for example to hire experts or conduct research). Later, the European Commission allocated some resources to establish a secretariat supporting the partnerships.

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