

"The European urban fabric in the 21st century"

Fifth European Summit of Regions and Cities

Copenhagen, 22-23 March 2012

by Iván Tosics

Some 300 people came together in Copenhagen on 22-23 March at the Fifth European Summit of Regions and Cities. The Summit titled as "The European urban fabric in the 21st century" was organized by the Committee of the Regions (COR), partly for politicians (mayors and presidents of regions from EU countries), partly for leading architects, urban planners and researchers.

Many people criticize such large meetings saying that these are dominated by pompous but empty statements. With enough patience and open ears, however, interesting statements can be „angled out” from the ocean of words. The following aims to be a collection of statements which I found interesting.

In the opening speech of **Mercedes Bresso, President of the COR**, strong words were used against the Urban Platform (which is one of the novelties planned by the Commissioner for the post 2013 Cohesion Policy regulation). The COR was unhappy about the idea that the Urban Platform would be organized for 300 nominated cities, emphasizing that this plan is not on terms with modern participation practices (open to all cities). According to Bresso's view the EP also shares these worries. These statements resembled a power game between two institutions (the COR and the Commission) regarding domination over the links to the European cities.

Frank Jensen, mayor of Copenhagen highlighted the aims of his city to become the first CO2 neutral capital of the world by 2025. Frank Jensen emphasized the triple challenge Europe's nations, regions and cities are facing: handling climate change and reduce CO2 emissions; creating jobs and economic growth; securing sufficient energy supplies. In his view all these can be tackled by sustainable green growth. Some people missed

from this strategy any hint to social problems which are of crucial importance in many parts of Europe. The explanation can be that Scandinavian countries manage to handle relatively well social problems and keep social polarisation under control. In other countries, however, green growth strategies have to be extended with strong social elements, as well.

The political importance of the Summit could be seen from the presence and speech of **José Manuel Barroso, the President of the European Commission**. In an unusually emotional speech Barroso urged for smart and green, sustainable and inclusive growth instead of artificial growth, fuelled by irresponsible financial behaviour. As metropolitan population (living in urban areas over 250 thousand people) makes up 59% of European population, urban areas have to play vital role in the fulfilment of the new types of growth targets. The knowledge based, resource efficient, carbon free economic development of the cities is of key importance, and must be in accordance with the positive value of the European model of urban development. Barroso argued strongly for the inclusion of the regional and local level into the discussions over the multi-annual financial framework, even if the national governments are reluctant towards this proposal. The audience could be very satisfied with the arguments used by the president of the Commission with the hope that these were not only compliments towards the regional and local leaders but real priorities to which the Commission will insist in the upcoming difficult negotiations about the future of Cohesion Policy. While in the debate many COR members (from the regional level and rural areas) questioned or even opposed the accentuated role planned to be given to the urban areas, **Jan Olbrycht, leader of the**



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Urban Intergroup of the European Parliament emphasized the importance of the 5% as a special ringfencing for urban areas and made it clear that this should only be the minimum, i.e. the investments into cities should be much higher.

The second panel (and in my taste the thematically most interesting part of the meeting) was the debate about the involvement of the citizens in regional and local projects. The **mayor of Bratislava** described the euphoria of people 23 years ago, after the collapse of socialism. This euphoria has turned into apathy in the last years, due to many corruption cases people have lost their trust in elected politicians. Nowadays a new euphoria seems to develop among young people who argue for a new type of policy – they claim that participatory democracy has to be involved into decision making. The **mayor of Ghent** mentioned many types of social innovations, such as the employment of full time neighbourhood organizers, frequent neighbourhood debates, collection of locally suggested projects, etc. which are frequently and successfully used in his city. According to the **mayor of Athens** people argue much easier against something than to give positive opinion. It took a lot of work for the council to convince with arguments people about the need of underground parking in dense urban areas! The local leadership has to take enough time and efforts to inform, debate and convince people about new ideas to win their support. This is even more difficult in complex issues, such as area regeneration, where many strategic details have to be decided and it is much more difficult to take different interests and opinions into account. In his summary **Simon Güntner** expressed his reservations about direct democracy. In his view participative methods do not pay attention to many important aspects, to minority interests, to financial questions ... these can only be discussed in the usual structure of political parties, as these represent certain interests (workers, middle class, etc.) . In his view the reactivation and modernization of party politics is needed.

The second day plenary session started with the presentation of **Jan Gehl**. He is a well known urban planner and architect who contributed a lot to increase the attractiveness of cities. He described the story of Copenhagen, how the city managed every year to become a bit better with less and less cars on the streets. The awful problem of today is the congestion - on the bike lanes! Thus plans are now for doubling the size of bike lanes, taking further space away from cars. Gehl emphasized that the improvement of biking in cities is a policy which is open to poor cities as well, as improvements for the people are much cheaper than improvements for

the cars. In his „People First Policy” biking is only the start towards a more healthy city in which improved public transport is part of the game. He criticized post socialist cities in which politicians think that freedom from communism means freedom for car use.

Michel Delebarre, President of CoR COTER commission has formulated four recommendations for the sustainable and integrated development of cities: a) to avoid the false distinction between urban and rural: instead of that urban regions, metropolitan areas, city regions should be in the focus of discussions and planning; b) do not set out one city against the other, do not plan ideal cities; c) qualitative urban regeneration projects should be put into the heart of european integrated strategies instead of GDP measured growth which masks the difficulties of integrated development; d) partnership approach for the cities, as part of multi-level-governance should be emphasized instead of the policy concentrations suggested by the Commission.

The **mayor of Sarajevo** emphasized that after the difficult years Sarajevo (a city of half million residents, growing but not being overpopulated) wants to open towards all communities, all visitors. A concrete aim for 2014 is the Cultural Capital.

Hella Dunger-Löper, Berlin State Secretary for European Affairs described the efforts of the city to make local communities into the engines of inclusion with the aim to socially integrate the city. The investments into high tech clusters and the opening of the new airport are the large economic projects. Besides many improvements are achieved in public transport (intelligent transport, car-sharing, electric vehicles). Berlin opens internationally, include migrants, ensuring them equal opportunities and participation. The city is well known about its active neighbourhood policy, based on participation, co-creation of social services.

In the debate **Henk Kool, deputy mayor of The Hague** bought up the problem of growing flexibility of working conditions. There are 19 thousand vacancies in The Hague but only 2 thousand stable contracts are offered. Many Polish people, living in poor conditions, migrate around in European cities to find out where are some jobs offered ... It is a key question how jobs could be better allocated and how active labour market policies should look like ... (No real answer was given by anyone on this key question...)



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The last plenary session concentrated on the question how European cities can get into interaction with neighbouring municipalities, and what role the higher administrative levels, particularly regions should play in improving the governance models in peri-urban areas.

Alfonso Vegara, Metropoli Foundation, Spain gave an overarching presentation with world-wide examples how competition and cooperation between cities create a new scale of thinking and planning. Following the earlier steps from labour intensive towards innovation intensive development he considers „urban solutions” as the new buzzword. In the next 30 years 351 trillion USD will be spent on urban solutions – much work is needed in this, to develop new ideas, prototypes... The cities themselves are living labs for developing new ideas.

He concretely mentioned Bilbao as an outstanding example to transform a city from its ruins in the 1980s (after floods) into one of the most innovative places in Europe. Just one example: the motorways built in the 1970s will be turned into sky gardens, connecting areas for walking and biking people! Art – technology – design – eco-technology – urban solutions are the five axes for development! All this should happen in the city-region: Bilbao Next is a brave vision from a 350 th city to become the third largest metropolitan area of Spain with 1,5 million people.

Martin Schulz, President of the European Parliament emphasized that cities have key role to play in meeting people’s fundamental needs (water, wellbeing, mobility...). For this reason the equal, open and free access to services of general interest should become a pillar of the European Social Model. Standards for public services are needed – he would like to have a European framework directive for SSGI safeguarding municipal action that aims at creating legal certainty while guaranteeing local autonomy and security.

Helle Thorning-Schmidt, Prime minister of Denmark mentioned the fiscal compact signed by 25 countries; but fiscal consolidation is only a means to an end; the end must be revitalising the EU social market system. Countries must do more to mainstream integrated urban development into their policy planning. Sustainable green growth is key for Danish government. The most ambitious energy saving agreement in the world with providers has been signed recently: by 2020 half of

DK energy consumption will be provided by wind and water, which will also bring new jobs. The input of Europe’s cities and regions is essential if the transition towards the green economy is to become a practical reality in our daily lives.

Closing the conference **Mercedes Bresso, President of the CoR**, said that cities must be in the front line also in the efforts to change mindset about lifestyles and consumption; they present the lowest but finest level of solidarity.

As part of the preparation for the Rio+20 Earth Summit, where the CoR will form part of an EU Delegation, European regions and cities ask that urban policy and the European social model be upheld and championed within the context of the global strategy for sustainable development.

To demonstrate their commitment to urban sustainable development, CoR members adopted the "**Copenhagen Declaration**" that sets out clear goals for European cities: striving for climate-neutrality, social inclusiveness, higher investment in human capital, education and health, physical infrastructure and new technologies, as well as better integration into their surroundings. Mayors and Presidents of regions called upon the EU to ensure adequate financial support for a cross-cutting urban policy and for European policies to give greater priority to territorial cooperation between European cities. The Declaration also points out the need to strengthen the role of cities and regions in piloting European policies, such as integrated strategies for sustainable regional development and a carbon-free economy.



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