

THE URBANISATION DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE EU AND CHINA. A REALITY CHECK.

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Introduction

In the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation a whole chapter addressed urbanisation. Both sides resolved to improve the governing framework of the EU-China Partnership, support the development of numerous relevant city pairings and steer EU-China urbanisation cooperation by a Joint Steering Committee of the EU-China Urbanisation Partnership.

A few years later officials from the European Commission (EC) and European External Action Service (EEAS) express feelings of disappointment with the results of the EU's actions aimed at promotion of sub-state cooperation with China and urbanisation has disappeared from the top of the EU-China political agenda. In the EU's strategy on China, published in 2016, the urbanisation partnership was not even mentioned. The Joint Steering Committee of the EU-China Urbanisation Partnership has never been established.

The paper¹ focuses on why the urbanisation dialogue with China has not been developed as planned. The author also sketches a list of activities that should be undertaken if the EU wants to benefit from the development of city-to-city contacts with China.

Urbanisation as a strategic area of collaboration with China

The first activities of the EU to promote sub-state cooperation with China were organised as regional policy dialogues. Since 2006, when the First EU-China High Level Dialogue and Seminar on Regional Policy took place in

Beijing, the European Commission has been sharing its experience and knowledge about the EU's regional policy.² The importance of sub-state cooperation was officially acknowledged in the EU-China dialogue on urbanisation.

Following an announcement from the EU-China Summit in Beijing on 14 February 2012, Jose Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission and Chinese vice-Prime Minister, Li Keqiang, signed a joint declaration to establish a China-EU Partnership on Urbanisation in May 2012. The partnership was aimed at promoting exchange and cooperation at "all appropriate levels, including national, regional and local"³. Europeans have viewed urban development in China as an opportunity to sell European products and technologies as the Chinese are in need of technologies and technological know-how and expertise.⁴

In September 2012, the first China-EU Mayors' Forum was held at the Committee of the Regions (CoR) in Brussels, where the EU-China Mayors Charter was signed.⁵ To strengthen the political declaration of the mayors, the EU announced the start of a project to help Chinese cities adopt energy and resource-efficient ecological solutions shared from European experience on sustainable urbanisation.⁶

In November 2013 during the 16th EU-China Summit, Europe and China signed the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation (hereafter referred as the Agenda).⁷ In the document the topic of urbanisation has a very prominent place - a whole chapter addressed this issue and both sides declared the will to "strengthen collabo-

ration" in this field of "strategic interest". The dialogue on urbanisation was to cover various challenges faced by cities in Europe and in China from urban planning and design, through socio-economic issues and natural and cultural heritage preservation, to climate change. Even if "green development" and transition to low-carbon economy were perceived as the core areas of cooperation, it was not to be limited to it. The EU-China cooperation was to be built on various initiatives that had been developed before.

Firstly, both sides declared further development of the EU-China Urbanisation Partnership set up in 2012. The governing framework of the partnership was to be improved and the Joint Steering Committee established. The development of numerous relevant city pairings was to be supported and both sides agreed to "promote advanced technology and managerial experience in sustainable urban development planning, urban infrastructure and management and urban-rural integration, including transparent and equitable consultative procedures with public and business stakeholders".

Secondly, a few specific existing initiatives were mentioned in the document, such as the EU-China City Expo and the EU-China Mayors' Forum. On the top of that the 10 million EUR "Europe-China Eco-Cities" EC-LINK project was launched at the 2013 summit. The main aim of the project was to offer technical assistance and best practice sharing for the Chinese Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, as well as cities in China chosen for this pilot project⁸.

To sum up, in the Agenda both sides praised city-to-city cooperation as the "flagship" of the strategic partnership and declared their intent to promote cooperation between cities and joint research and innovation initiatives in area of sustainable urbanisation.

Reality check. The effects of the EU-China urbanisation dialogue

A few years after the inauguration of the Urbanisation Partnership, officials from the European Commission and EEAS express fatigue and feelings of disappointment with the results. We can identify three main weaknesses of the dialogue. First of all, the clear concentration of the EU on

pilot projects and annual events proved to be inadequate. The real impact of such activities turned out to be limited. Secondly, the dialogue has never become as institutionalised as planned. Finally, the EU lacks strategic approach to the subnational layer of European contacts with China.

Limited resources

As far as pilot projects are concerned, the EU financed few of them. The first was the already mentioned EC-Link, a flagship project for the whole Partnership. According to an official in DG Regio, "there were a lot of problems related to this project and it has not delivered in time the result that were expected". One of the problems was the inefficient work of the project secretariat in China.⁹

The two-year long "China Component" of the much wider "World Cities" programme started in 2015, engaging a few Chinese and European cities and regions¹⁰. This project was a continuation of the CETREGIO project, which promoted commercial, educational and cultural cooperation on the sub-state level.

In December 2016, the EU approved a new project called "International Urban Cooperation: Sustainable and Innovative Cities and Regions" (IUC)¹¹. In the first selection round, cooperation between five Chinese and five European subnational units was supported.¹²

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The URBAN-EU-CHINA project, launched in March 2017 during the EU-China Forum on Sustainable Urban Development in Chinese city of Putian, is dedicated to fostering EU-China sustainable urbanisation cooperation. However, struggling with limited resources, it is also far away from its goals. According

to an interview with a project officer from Eurocities, one of the project partners, the initial goal of creating 10 new city-to-city partnerships a year under the frame of this project proved to be impossible to reach. The project has a limited budget and cannot offer any substantial incentives for cities to established new links.

There is not even budget for travel - I mean to cover travel costs for cities' officials going to China. In the end of all we can hope for is to create a nice environment and some tools for cities to do that job.¹³

Even if the project activities seem to be quite useful (for example, it has produced guidelines for cities that want to establish cooperation with China), the actual impact on the creation of partnerships is very limited. The project supported some existing partnerships, but no new connections have been established "because of the project".

Besides pilot projects, the EU was also engaged in organising big conferences on urbanisation, such as the Urbanisation Forum, which gathered hundreds of participants from regional authorities. The first Forum was held in Beijing on 21 November 2013, with high-level political participation from presidents Barroso and Van Rompuy as well as premier Li Keqiang. As one of the participants put it: "Shocking event. I think that it was the largest in my life, because it was in the Great Hall of the People at Tianamen Square (...) with over one thousand people invited (...)
The event was great, and the day after there was nothing for months, and the Chinese did not answer the telephone"¹⁴.

Another big event was organised in June 2015 in Brussels but with the same result: huge organisational efforts, success in terms of number of participants but almost no follow-up. The EU official engaged in the organisation of the events believed the Chinese were too focused on the events itself, but much less committed to daily cooperation with their European partners.¹⁵

The concentration of the EU-China urbanisation dialogue on pilot projects and events was the natural result of the limited allocation of resources. Initially, the urbanisation dialogue with China was delegated to DG ENER, without any substantial human and financial resources. Later, it was moved to the DG REGIO, but the budget for cooperation with China remained too little to organise anything substantial. In the 2014-2020 EU budget framework there are no resources for anything more ambitious than IUC, a project with only 5.6 million EUR assigned to Asia, including China.¹⁶

Institutionalisation

As for the institutionalisation of the dialogue, one can say that goals have not been met. The Joint Steering Committee of the EU-China Urbanisation Partnership, announced in the Agenda, has never been established¹⁷. Moreover, sub-state cooperation with China and the urbanisation quickly disappeared from the top of the EU-China political agenda. In the EU's Elements for a new EU strategy on China, published in 2016, the urbanisation partnership was not even mentioned.

IN 2017 THE URBANISATION DIALOGUE WITH CHINA WAS TAKEN FROM DG ENER AND DELEGATED TO DG REGIO. HOWEVER, THE COLLABORATION WITH THE CONVENT OF MAYORS FOR CLIMATE AND ON ENERGY HAS REMAINED IN DG ENER.

Secondly, activities related to the urbanisation partnership have been spread among different parts of the Commission (mainly DG ENER and DG REGIO), with EEAS hardly being able to coordinate them. From the very beginning, the urbanisation dialogue has been based on the experience of the Convent of Mayors for Climate and Energy launched in 2008, with the goal of local governments voluntarily committing to achieving the EU climate and energy targets. In consequence, the topic has been delegated to DG ENER, part of the European Commission responsible for energy policy. It limited the urbanisation dialogue initiative to the problem of sustainable development, despite the sub-state collaboration with China naturally having much broader scope. As DG ENER officer explained: It was put upon the principles of the Covenant. Because of that something that was a very broad subject, urbanisation, came to a very specific topic, energy. It was a nonsense from my point of view, but it was because the Chinese and the Commission wanted to benefit from the experience of the Covenant.¹⁸

In 2017 the urbanisation dialogue with China was taken from DG ENER and delegated to DG REGIO. However, the collaboration with the Convent of Mayors for Climate and on energy has remained in DG ENER. In consequence, some initiatives have to be realised by both DG's. This is the case of IUC project which has different components: the one concerning city-to-city cooperation is supervised by the DG Regio and the second regarding the Global Covenant of Mayors by DG ENER.¹⁹ The other projects related to the urbanisation are financed and implemented in the framework of Horizon 2020 by the DG RTD. It is worth noting that the urbanisation dialogue is institutionally linked neither with climate change dialogue, led by DG CLIMA, nor with China policy led by the EEAS.

Such location in the institutional matrix of the EU has at least three weaknesses. Firstly, it creates potential for institutional conflict, what is characteristic for the institutional configuration of the EU external relations²⁰. Secondly, it strengthens the tendency to view urbanisation as technical area of policymaking, which is the remit of specialists, rather than an element of the broader strategic framework of policy towards China. Finally, project officers from DGs lacked the authority to coordinate activities of other DGs. In practice, it means that activities related to urbanisation are realised separately in institutional "black boxes" what do not reflect at all the multi-dimensional character of sub-state cooperation between cities.

Strategic vision

The third and last problem is the lack of strategic vision in the European Commission on how to approach the subnational layer of EU-China contacts. The fast-growing network of sub-state contacts in Sino-European relations creates new opportunities for the EU to implement its foreign policy. Theoretically, the EU can use city-to-city

contacts to advance its interests, norms and values. However, in practice, acknowledgement of the potency of such a political instrument in Brussels has been limited. Neither EEAS nor European Commission monitor the sub-state level of European relation of China. The last review of sub-state partnerships with China was commissioned in 2012. Since then, the sub-stated dimension of EU-China contacts has been developed rapidly in many European countries.²¹ This phenomenon of the rising number of partnerships in recent years has been overlooked by EU institutions.²² Nobody in the EU knows, for example, if the scope of undertaken activities by cities is in line with European policy priorities, including those related to climate change dialogue with third countries. Nobody knows, because nobody monitors those activities.

Moreover, the EU does not treat subnational relations as an instrument of its foreign policy, in contrast to the Chinese government which instrumentally uses local authorities to conduct international activities in frames of foreign policy strategy of the state²³. The EU's approach to the role of

local actors manifests itself in the fact that nobody has made any strategic plans to pursue opportunities afforded by sub-state EU-China relations.²⁴

The future of the urbanisation dialogue

Surprisingly, or not, city-to-city cooperation with Chinese partners has been developing rapidly without the EU support and supervision. Cities establish bilateral links and collaborate through international networks. In 2012 the EC made a list of 700 existing partnerships between European and Chinese regions and cities. Now the list would be

probably much longer due to the increasing internationalisation of Chinese sub-state actors under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative²⁵.

The development of city partnerships with China, despite their limited role in the EU within the frame of the Urbanisation Partnership, shows, that, perhaps, there is a limited need for the EU intervention in this area. The pluralisation of the international relations²⁶ will impel cities to develop links with China regardless

of the position and engagement of the European Union. Assuming that city-to-city contacts with China will further develop, the question is what the EU should do to benefit from the growing interconnections on sub-state level?

First of all, the EU should acknowledge the importance of the subnational dimension of EU-China relations and pay much more attention to it. Potentially, it may be a useful channel of communication with China in many policy areas. Therefore, the dialogue should not be limited to sustainable urbanisation, but this topic should be one of at least several. It means that European diplomacy should build a coordination mechanism for activities executed by different DGs in EC.

Secondly, the EU should abstain from financing pilot projects and conduct some systematic activities instead. The EC or EEAS should monitor international activities of cities (and regions!) to provide policy makers with up-to-date knowledge about the sub-state layer of the Sino-European relations. It helps to identify opportunities as well

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as potential threats for the EU policy towards China. Apart from monitoring, the EU should communicate with city authorities, informing them about European policy priorities. Even if the EU has no legal right to impose anything on sub-state authorities, it can influence them in soft way by showing what are European interests in relation to China. Some local authorities stressed in interviews that they want to be aware of the European policy plans towards China because it would help them in planning their own activities²⁷. In other words, cities should be recognised as stakeholders and partners in the EU's China policy.

Thirdly, the EU should continuously support the development of city-to-city links through capacity building in cities (eg. teaching officials from municipalities how to deal with China, what are the opportunities and threats) and facilitating networking. Even if big pan-European events were disappointing it does not mean that smaller, thematic ones should not be supported. ☺

1 This paper results from the project "The Role of the Regions in the European Union Policy Towards China", financed by the Polish National Science Centre (Grant Agreement No. 2015/19/B/HS5/02534). **2** M. Dąbrowski, I. Musiałkowska, & L. Polverari, "EU-China and EU-Brazil policy transfer in regional policy" *Regional Studies*, 52(9), 2018, pp. 1169–1180. **3** T. Kamiński, "China's Regional Policy and the influence of the EU Assistance", *European Spatial Research Policy*, n. 16, 2009, pp. 93–114. **4** The European Union and People's Republic of China, Joint Declaration on the EU-China partnership on urbanisation, Brussels, May 3rd 2012. **5** K. R. Kunzmann, "Urbanization in China: learning from Europe? A European perspective", *International Journal of Urban Sciences*, vol. 19 no 2, 2015, pp. 119–135. **6** EU Covenant of Mayors & China Association of Mayors, The EU-China Mayor's Charter, Brussels, 20 September 2012. **7** European Commission, The European Union and China join forces to address environment, urbanisation and climate change challenges, Brussels, 20 September 2012. **8** The European Union and China, The EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation, Brussels, 23 November 2013. **9** See also project website: <http://www.eclink.org/eclink/en/about> Retrieved 16.06.2019. **10** Interview with an official, DG REGIO, the European Commission, Brussels, 16 November 2017. **11** Guangzhou, Tianjin, Wuhan and Chengdu from China and Lyon, Lazio, Barcelona, and Birmingham/West Midlands. See the project website: <http://world-cities.eu/> **12** See the project website: <http://www.iuc.eu/> **13** Interview with an official, DG REGIO, op. cit. **14** Interview with a project officer, EURO CITIES, Brussels, 30.01.2019. **15** Interview with an official, DG ENER, Brussels, 17.01.2018. **16** Interview with an official, DG REGIO, op. cit. **17** Interview with an EEAS officer, 2017. **18** Interview with an official, DG ENER, op. cit. **19** Interview with an official, DG REGIO, op. cit. **20** D. Torney, "Challenges of European Union Climate Diplomacy: The Case of China", *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol 19 no 3, pp. 119–134. **21** See eg. T. Kamiński, "What are the factors behind the successful EU-China cooperation on the subnational level? Case study of the Lodzkie region in Poland", *Asia Europe Journal*, Vol 17, no 2., pp 227-242; A. Goette & G. Qinlan, *Deutsch-Chinesische Kommunalbeziehungen, Servicestelle Kommunen in der Einen Welt*, Bonn 2018. **22** Interview with an official, EEAS, Brussels, 15 November 2017. **23** See eg. D. Mierzejewski, *Local Governments in China's Policy Towards ASEAN: Roles, Structures and Implications*, CRISEA Policy Briefs, Brussels, August 2018, <http://crisea.eu/publications/crisea-policy-brief-1-local-governments-in-chinas-policy-towards-asean> **24** Interview with an official, EEAS, op. cit. **25** D. Mierzejewski, "The Role of Local Governments in the New Silk Road" in C. Mendes (Ed.), *China's New Silk Road. An Emerging World Order* London-New York 2018, Routledge pp. 135–151. **26** Diplomatic practices, institutions and discourses are no longer limited to traditional inter-state diplomacy. **27** Interview with an official, Lodzkie Marshall Office, Lodz, 17.07.2017.



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