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"City diplomacy". A new chance for the Italian G20 Presidency

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We are living in the century of the cities. 55% of the world population lives in cities nowadays. 80% of the world GDP can be attributed to cities' economy. Urban centers are not only growing and raising internationally, but they have become crucial places for the concentration of human, financial, technological and cultural resources. Demographic and economic data, as well as new local democratic practices or new diplomatic achievements are there to show it. Hence, cities are among the most suitable places to tackle the challenging issues of the future, from economic development to environment sustainability or democratic renovation, just to name a few. While cities are getting back, we often do not realize it because we keep thinking in a Westphalian manner. Italian national government, local authorities and civil society need to realize this especially at a moment when our country has taken the Presidency of the G20, the main forum for global economic and financial cooperation. Within the G20 framework, as a matter of fact, the engagement group of the Urban-20 (U20) will be hosted by Rome and Milan to gather the Mayors from the most important cities in the world to inform the discussions of national leaders at the G20. The development of an integrated approach to city diplomacy by our country is much needed to exploit the possibilities that lie ahead.

We are living in the century of the cities and we need to change our mental map accordingly. Reality is changing fast while we are stuck to a stato-centric understanding of international affairs. With the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, cities were kicked out of the mental scene after being identified with the sites of action for many centuries. Today, cities are getting back, but we often do not realize it because we continue to think in a Westphalian manner. The Italian government, local authorities and civil society need to realize this especially at a moment when our country has taken the Presidency of the G20, the main forum for global economic and financial cooperation. As a matter of fact, it is no accident that since 2017 G20 launched U20, Urban-20, to bring together Mayors from major G20 cities to inform the discussions of national leaders at the G20. The U20 officially aims "at facilitating lasting engagement between the G20 and cities, raise the profile of urban issues in the G20 agenda, and establish a forum for cities to develop a collective message and perspective to inform G20 negotiations".

Socio-economic relevance

In 2007, for the first time in history, more people lived in urban areas rather than rural areas. The global population living in cities moved from 3% (1800), to 14% (1900) to 40% (2000) and is today 55% according to the World Bank, with an estimated prospect of 70% in 2050. The prospect for the future included some massive urban conglomerate that mankind has never experienced in its history. For instance, Lagos Metropolitan Area, Nigeria, is projected to reach the enormous amount of 80/100 million by 2100. Mexico City already has up to 100,000 members in its police force, larger than the law enforcement agencies of 115 countries. Over the past 50 years the number of nation states doubled to reach 193, but the number and size of cities with more than 100,000 people increased tenfold over the same period to over 4,000.

Today the most significant activities take place in cities and yet we only "see" states as actors in the world. Economic growth and fiscal experiments all take place in urban contexts. Cities are influencing but are also strongly influenced by globalization. Global economy, in particular, has made cities crucial hubs within a worldwide grid of complex networks that go beyond national borders and the old divides like North-South/developed-developing countries. In both developed and developing countries, as a matter of fact, cities produce a disproportionate higher rate of economic growth in comparison to the countryside. For instance, in 2011, Tokyo and London – with respectively 26.8% and 20.3% of the total population of Japan and United Kingdom – accounted for 34.1% and 26.5% of their countries' total GDP. Cities in general are the center of the world economy with 80% of global GDP. New York City, in the US, manages an annual budget of roughly $88 billion, bigger than the national budget of 120 countries around the world. Political reforms, social innovations, protests and revolutions also occur in cities. Criminal activities, terrorist actions, counterinsurgency, missile attacks and wars are developed in cities. Pandemics spread in large urban conglomerates. Cities are sources of global pollution (80% of carbon emissions come from cities), as well as of

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environmental transformations such as urban gardening. Knowledge production, big data collection, and tech innovation all spur from intense urban interaction. Cities are the meeting points between cultures, religions and identities. Cities are the pivot of civilizations and the cradle of the future.

Political relevance

Global politics is significantly shaped by a number of cities that are increasingly active on the world stage. They develop twinning networks and projects, share information, sign cooperation agreements, contribute to the drafting of national and international policies, provide development aid, promote assistance to refugees and do territorial marketing through decentralized city-city or district-district cooperation. Decentralization and subsidiarity play an important role in creating the political opportunities structure within which cities go international. Cities do what "municipalities" used to do many centuries ago: they cooperate but also enter intense competitive dynamics. For this reason, we need to have at least two mental maps in mind, the state-centered map and the non-state centered map, if we want to understand socio-political dynamics on a planetary level. Along with the state-centered Westphalian model, born in the 17th century, it is now useful to recall a previous record of diplomacy that was extremely reach and carried out to a large extent by cities. From classic Greek cities and the Athens' diplomacy to the experience of Renaissance Italy, with the diplomatic corps and missions abroad of Florence. Vast city-states such as Chengdu in China and Venice in Italy used to play an outsized role in shaping the terms of trade between societies. After a 300-years hiatus, cities are back. We can identify a few out of many examples of this trend:

a) When U.S. President Donald Trump recently announced the withdrawal of its country from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, one of the strongest reactions came for Mayors of big American cities. From New York City to Los Angeles though Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Seattle and New Orleans, a group of 61 U.S. Mayors affirmed that they would remain committed to the Paris deal and pledged to go forwards and to work together in order to reduce carbon emissions. The so called "Climate Mayors" became a national political actor by both taking a hard stance vis-à-vis the federal government and implementing city policies in stark contrast with the national orientation. Referring to an international agreement reached by nation states, this action had an impact on the international arena.

b) Cities' diplomacy can become so important that nation states try to politicize it. For instance, last year, in China, Li Xiaolin, President of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, stated that "Sister city relation play an important role in boosting cooperation and exchanges among Chinese and foreign cities under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)". Chinese cities have by now established 2,629 sister cities and provinces overseas and have formed sister city relations with more than 700 cities in countries involved in the BRI. Beijing alone is

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sister city with no fewer than 21 capitals of countries that have signed on to the BRI. This soft power strategy, being so significant, can also become controversial. In Czechia, Beijing canceled its sister city agreement with Prague after the city council approved a similar agreement with Taipei. In Sweden, because of the deterioration of the bilateral relations at the central government level, a number of city agreements have been cancelled. And so on.

c) Italy has also been involved in different kinds of "city diplomacy". For instance, in 2017, the Italian Minister of the Interior, Marco Minniti, promoted an official mission by Italian city councils in order to foster cooperation with Libyan local authorities. Economic and technical cooperation at the city level would foster a broader cooperation within society, in order to foster social stability in the country, also making immigration control easier at the national level. That kind of city-to-city cooperation is still at work today. Not only that. In the summer of 2020, the Italian President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella and the German President of the Republic Frank-Walter Steinmeier have sent a joint letter to the Mayors of the two countries, pushing for stronger and deeper sister city relations in the two countries. According to our Presidents, city diplomacy – at a time of strengthening bilateral relations at the core of Europe (see Aachen Treaty between Germany and France, as well as the Quirinale Treaty between Italy and France) – could become the driving factor of an Italian-German new welcome rapprochement.

City diplomacy at the U20: from theoretical to practical relevance

The dynamics of globalization have accentuated the diminishing exclusivity of nation states as actors of international relations. In the contemporary global system, as it has been studied now for decades, non-state actors (NSAs) have increasingly become protagonists at the international level. Among NSAs, four typologies are particularly relevant: the profit-oriented transnational enterprises, the non-governmental organizations of civil society, the local authorities (including both regions and cities), private or hybrid organizations that regulate specific sectors through the formulation of standards (the so-called standard setting bodies). Demographic and economic changes associated to the globalization process, as seen before, are among the main reasons for the boom of city diplomacy in particular. On top of this, two logics underpin the contemporary focus on the city. First, the logic of efficiency and effectiveness: a good city governance is seen – especially by some mayors animated by personal determination – as the best instrument to achieve social effectiveness because of its directness and proximity to citizens. Local management, micro-practices and the principle of subsidiarity embody a model that emphasizes the economic efficiency and the development that supposedly comes with decentralization and local power. In the logic of democracy, instead, a good city governance is seen as the best tool to implement the democratic ideal; localities become instruments for achieving community empowerment and democratic self-determination. As a matter of fact, city diplomacy can originate also from bottom-up pressure

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of citizens' activism, as in the case of the nuclear free cities. City diplomacy somehow connects local citizens to global affairs, thus overcoming democratic deficits.

Such growing relevance of our cities in contemporary nation-state life and in international relations is not free of challenges. As showed for examples by either the Brexit referendum or the Trump election, a growing social, economic or cultural divide between the city and the rest (or the countryside) can become politically very relevant in shaping political outcomes at a national and international level. Cities' voices have become clearer and louder on the international arena, but everybody's voices should be heard and somehow taken into account in shaping our future. At the next U20 summit, a number of policy recommendations could be drawn with the aims to minimize risks and maximize opportunities for cities' engagement in global affairs.

a) **Better internal institutional design.** Setting up a clear institutional process to design, implement and monitor the "municipal foreign policy", a long-term, coherent strategy that defines the international role of the city (purposes, actors, tools, contents and partners). A "city diplomacy" office should be specifically established, with professional, specialized civil servants and the additional support of external advisors, think tank and the other relevant urban actors from diverse fields such as business, education and culture, civil society and so on.

b) **Better societal awareness.** Spreading into society the recognition of the added value of the city international engagement.

c) **Better coordination with national governments.** Adjusting the civic institutional structure in order to have permanent contacts with national diplomacy. Coordinating and collaborating with other levels of government (central state, regions and provinces) in order to avoid institutional competition and overlapping.

d) **Better coordination with other international actors.** Searching for an enhanced cooperation with international organizations, multinational corporations, international non-governmental organizations, global media broadcast, think tanks, etc.

e) **Better coordination with urban counterparts.** Getting involved in bilateral and especially multilateral initiative in the form of city networks.

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For an in-depth version of this same subject, please refer to
R. Marchetti, "City Diplomacy. From City-States to Global Cities",
Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press (2021)