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The role of cities in the reconstruction of Ukraine

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Abstract: Throughout human history, cities have been targeted in wars due to their significance for politics, economy, communication and population. Today such Ukrainian cities as Kyiv, Mariupol, Kharkiv and Irpin can be added to this list. This commentary focuses on the long-term challenge of the reconstruction of Ukraine and the role cities may play in this process given their growing role in international decision-making processes. These roles include through the bilateral channels of the twin or sister cities system and international and national city networks. Furthermore, some such reconstruction efforts are already evident in Ukraine and which highlight how city support activities are not limited only to the post-conflict phase.

Cities in search for autonomy: a lesson from the war in Ukraine

Throughout human history, cities have been targeted in wars due to their significance for politics, economy, communication and population. As warfare has evolved, new methods have been employed to destroy cities when capture is not possible, such as aerial bombings and nuclear explosions. Some conflicts have involved prolonged urban fighting to capture or recapture cities, as seen in Nanjing, Stalingrad, Berlin, Sarajevo, Grozny and Aleppo (Palmieri 2021; Mourby 2015). Today such Ukrainian cities as Kyiv, Mariupol, Kharkiv and Irpin can be added to this list.

Nowadays, the role of cities in multi-level global governance is growing, and the impact of modern-day cities on global initiatives is comparable to the power of Italian city-states during the Renaissance (Swiney and Foster 2019). Cities are taking action on urgent global challenges such as pandemics, climate change, migration, housing, inequality and extremism, sometimes without the support of their states. As a result, cities are becoming more influential at the national and international levels, leading to a paradigm shift in global politics (Swiney 2020, 228). In response to this shift, cities are demanding recognition of their position and participation in decision-making processes within the United Nations system (the Joint Political Declaration from the Virtual Mayor's Summit in Mannheim in 2020).

While the full-scale stage of the war in Ukraine began on 24 February 2022, the war itself has been ongoing since 2014. The invasion by Russia has caused significant damage to Ukrainian cities. As of the end of 2022 experts estimate the total cost of destruction to be more than EUR 750 billion, with a predicted 35 percent decrease in GDP according to the International Monetary Fund. The economy of Ukraine has experienced a 30 to 50 percent reduction in its

productive capacity, particularly in the crucial economic areas located in Eastern and Southern Ukraine (CoR 2022, para. 2).

This commentary focuses on the long-term challenge of the reconstruction of Ukraine and the role cities may/should play in this process, a process that has to be planned and coordinated to be effective. At the same time, it sheds light on a very important aspect of contemporary international relations pertaining to the growing role of cities in international decision-making processes. We attempt to offer some reflection on the following questions: what avenues are there for cities to support or participate in Ukraine's reconstruction and how can cities take part in this process? Are such recovery activities restricted only to post-conflict period or are they being undertaken while the armed conflict still lasts? In the following we identify the ways cities may contribute to the reconstruction of Ukraine as well as phases when such contribution takes place (post-conflict or/and during conflict).

There is little literature on the role or participation of cities in post-conflict reconstruction in general and on foreign cities contributing to the post-conflict reconstruction of another state (mostly of its cities) in particular. The available literature refers to the post-conflict reconstruction *in* cities and not *by* cities. Hence, cities are treated as objects, places and spaces to be rebuilt and not as actors that may/should contribute to this process (Assem, Abdelmohsen, and Ezzeldin 2020; Hussein, Abdulla and Daood 2019; Steinø, Dabaieh and Bih 2020). The literature also encompasses the concept of destruction in the form of “urbicide” meaning the “city killing”. This body of literature holds importance in understanding the scope and approaches to urban reconstruction in Ukraine (Graham 2002, 2006; Coward 2002, 2009). One of the rare publications focusing on the role of cities in the post-conflict reconstruction of a state is by Henri-Paul Normandin (2022) where the author stresses that cities must be part of the reconstruction of Ukraine. This commentary argues that cities are not only objects but also subjects of post-conflict reconstruction processes. The Russian aggression against Ukraine combined with the growing role of cities in international relations has created conditions for the increase of cities' potential to participate in the post-conflict reconstruction.

Through a focus on post-conflict urban reconstruction, we shift from considering cities as passive recipients of reconstruction efforts to recognizing them as active participants who play a crucial role in rebuilding foreign states and their cities.

Avenues cities may use in the process of Ukraine's reconstruction

Reconstructing Ukraine after the conflict will be a colossal effort, complicated by the typical obstacles that accompany any such undertaking, such as coordinating with numerous international and Ukrainian parties. Ultimately, decision-makers will need to create systems

that fit the unique circumstances at hand. It is essential to recognise that, unlike many other post-war scenarios, Ukraine is not a failed state, and therefore it must be in control of the reconstruction process (Normandin 2022, 1-2).

Cities should be a part of this process. There seem to be two possible main avenues for cities to contribute: through bilateral relations in the form of sister cities; and through international contacts in the form of city networks. These two channels are not new, but since the start of the large-scale conflict in Ukraine, collaborations of this nature have taken on a new significance, and twin cities from around the globe have shown even greater than before support for their Ukrainian counterparts (Anakina, Salek-Lipcean, Kovalchuk 2022, 18).

At the Eurocities Conference in 2022, politicians and officials from Ukraine discussed ideas for the reconstruction of Ukrainian cities and how Eurocities can assist. They emphasised the need for city-to-city partnerships with Ukrainian cities, coordinated through Eurocities. Eurocities President and Mayor of Florence Dario Nardella suggested mapping out each city's contributions and matching them with requests from Ukrainian peers, focusing on rebuilding schools, hospitals and critical infrastructure. The Eurocities Executive Committee agreed on guidelines and principles for collaboration with Ukrainian cities, building on existing partnerships and focusing on the needs of citizens and sustainable development (Cities preparing the ground for Ukraine reconstruction 2022).

Within the Eurocities framework, on 19 August 2022 mayors from various European cities went to Kyiv to sign a political agreement that aims to support the sustainable reconstruction of cities in Ukraine (Memorandum of understanding to support the sustainable rebuilding of Ukrainian cities 2022). The agreement includes plans to align the reconstruction needs of Ukraine with the capacities of other European cities. The mayors pledged to provide immediate reconstruction support and to coordinate with other emerging initiatives, such as the EU's RebuildUkraine and the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Ukraine. Moreover, Eurocities will utilise its network of more than 200 cities (including four Ukrainian ones) to support the rebuilding of Ukrainian cities. Meanwhile, Ukraine's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities will provide information on the vital reconstruction required in the affected cities. Additionally, the Congress will oversee the rebuilding efforts to prevent duplication and ensure efficient coordination (On Ukraine visit, Mayors pledge sustainable rebuilding, 2022). These remarks indicate the coordinating, facilitating and mobilising role of Eurocities towards the reconstruction efforts.

Regarding twin or sister cities, the pre-war twinning agreements in existence primarily emphasised cultural and educational collaboration, as well as knowledge-sharing related to

decentralisation reform, the functions of local and public administration, and various other aspects of effective local and regional governance, including urban planning. After the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, these agreements have been modified to meet the new requirements of Ukrainian local and regional authorities, particularly in places that have been on the frontlines of the hostilities. Cities in Ukraine have been actively pursuing and receiving requests from cities, towns, and regions around Europe and the world to establish new partnerships. These partnerships have been primarily focused on providing humanitarian aid such as food, medical supplies, vehicles and accommodations for refugees (Szpak et al. 2022). However, there are also plans for longer-term reconstruction efforts. For example, in April 2022, Stockholm expressed its desire to become a twin city of Kyiv and provide expertise in various fields such as education, democratic governance, sewage and water management, urban planning, electricity and information technology (Anakina, Salek-Lipcean, Kovalchuk 2022, 18). Stockholm's move is quite remarkable as, according to its international strategy, Stockholm should not sign any twinning agreement except for those with a clear purpose and time limits (Stockholm's International Strategy 2016, 5). The twinning agreement with Kyiv may be regarded as such an agreement. Among the Ukrainian cities, Kyiv is the one that has such ties with some of the cities examined in a larger project – Brussels, Geneva, Munich, Paris and since 2022 Barcelona, Madrid and Stockholm (Bilateral cooperation n.d.; We are Ukraine 2023; Barcelona Ciutat Global 2022; Anakina, Salek-Lipcean, Kovalchuk 2022, 18).

Another example is The Hague. Recently, the deputy mayors of Kherson, Mykolaiv and Mariupol visited The Hague and spoke with its mayor about Ukraine reconstruction plans. It is expected that the coordination of municipal aid will be done through the Dutch Association of Municipalities (Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten, VNG) (e-mail answer from Rob Schuurmans, Deputy Director of International Affairs, Municipality of The Hague, 6 April 2023). Similarly, Amsterdam's involvement in this effort is facilitated by the Dutch Association of Municipalities. At the request of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, VNG has collaborated with its Ukrainian counterpart Association of Ukrainian Cities to create a collaboration program (e-mail answer from Sabine Gimbrère, Director of the International Office/City of Amsterdam, 6 April 2023).

According to the new Cooperation Master Plan 2023-2026 of Barcelona City Council, which has been initially approved, Kyiv is a new priority city. When signing the twin city agreement in September 2022, Barcelona and Kyiv decided that over the next three years, efforts would be made to enhance the connections between the two cities in areas such as technology, education, healthcare, arts and culture, tourism, transportation, urban management, and public

safety (Barcelona Ciutat Global 2022). These areas may be regarded as fields of expertise where Barcelona is strong and experienced and where it can provide some lessons and good practice exchange – with all this to be achieved within the twin city collaboration. Barcelona has already collaborated with the Ukrainian Consulate in Barcelona, the Ukrainian State Emergency System, and the Department of Global Justice and International Cooperation of the Barcelona City Council to coordinate the delivery of specialized equipment and material for firefighting and people rescue (Barcelona Ciutat Global 2022). In 2022 Barcelona allocated 354,000 EUR from an Emergency Appeal to subsidise five projects carried out by entities working on the ground in Ukraine: the Catalan Committee for Refugees, the Red Cross, Farmamundi, Clowns Without Borders, and UNICEF. The institution collaborating with these projects is the Global Justice and International Cooperation Directorate of the Barcelona City Council (e-mail from Jorge Fuentealba, an assistant to the Director of the Department of International Relations of Barcelona, 14 April 2023). This indicates that cities are also cooperating with entities other than cities.

Another Spanish city, the capital Madrid, also signed a partnership agreement with Kyiv on 29 June 2022, concentrating on sustainable development, technical cooperation, culture and tourism, and infrastructure (Anakina, Spalek-Lipcean, Kovalchuk 2022, 94). These are the areas where Madrid has comparable advantages and a lot to share. Madrid has implemented many initiatives, including “Ukraine Needs You” aimed at collecting material aid and donations for Ukrainian cities that have contributed to their reconstruction during the war. The Madrid City Council has set aside 2.4 million EUR in funding to directly support projects in Ukraine (which is another example of in-conflict reconstruction efforts) and has also outlined other measures to assist Ukrainian refugees (Anakina, Spalek-Lipcean, Kovalchuk 2022, 101).

The City and Eurometropolis of Strasbourg engaged with its German twin cities, Stuttgart and Dresden, in a partnership with the western Ukrainian city of Khmelnytskyi. This original and unprecedented quadripartite partnership format aims, beyond emergency aid, to achieve a long-term objective of reconstruction and resilience of territories through the exchange of experiences and concrete projects that respond to local needs and populations (e-mail from Ignacio Felpeto Santero, Chargé de mission «Strasbourg Capitale Européenne» Ville et Eurométropole de Strasbourg Direction des Relations européennes, internationales et transfrontalières/Department of European, international and cross-border relations, 19 April 2023; Strasbourg.eu, 2023).

Conclusions

It is expected that international city partners will offer tangible aid for both emergency relief and reconstruction, but their financial contribution will be significantly lower compared to national governments and multilateral agencies. Hence, the expertise and know-how of cities, ranging from urban planning to the provision of essential services and addressing social issues, is likely to be their real added value. However, it is important to acknowledge that despite good intentions and available resources, effective development cannot be guaranteed solely by international cooperation. Many assistance programs have failed due to insufficient local knowledge, dysfunctional partnerships, inadequate management, incomplete risk assessment or unforeseeable circumstances (Normandin 2022, 2). Ideally a diverse group of stakeholders – such as international, regional, and local actors, including community organisations, urban planners, engineers, architects, politicians, donors, local and international NGOs, economists and sociologists – collaborate and engage in consultations. These individuals and organizations may have distinct objectives and capabilities in their participation in the reconstruction process (Briefing paper 11, 2019, 4). Hence, it is so important to match the capabilities of the helpers with the needs of the recipients.

The avenues that might/should be used by cities to participate in Ukraine's reconstruction include bilateral channels of twin or sister cities system and international/national city networks as shown by the examples of Eurocities and Dutch VNG. Institutions such as the EU CoR or the CoE Congress of Local and Regional Authorities act as supplementary institutions creating a general framework for reconstruction as well as a discussion forum for cities. One of the newest examples of such a framework is the Declaration of the International Summit of Cities and Regions of 20 April 2023 that took place in Kyiv and gathered representatives of local governments from Europe, the USA and Israel as well as the EU CoR and the CoE Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. All the participants expressed their readiness “to promote Ukraine's ownership, close cooperation and coordination with international donors and partners; to support the initiative to provide coordinated political, financial, expert and technical assistance for the post-war reconstruction of Ukrainian communities and regions based on a bottom-up approach” (Declaration of International Summit of Cities and Regions, 2023).

As this commentary shows, some reconstruction efforts have already been made, which means that they are not limited only to the post-conflict phase. This conclusion is in line with another one that the reconstruction involves providing immediate stabilisation through humanitarian and technical assistance. War in Ukraine and the growing role of cities in multi-level governance have given rise to unprecedented – both current and even more so future –

participation of cities in the post-conflict reconstruction of Ukraine, a state destroyed by an aggressive war.

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