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## Measuring the impact of international tools in local governance: The new urban diplomacy

**Abstract:** Which is the added-value of the international action of cities? Is this action legitimate? Our analysis proposes to invert the famous slogan and get local authorities to think local and act global. This reversed framework, that we may call “new urban diplomacy” focuses on governance and more specifically in the urban project, understood as the policy agenda of the city council. Based on active subsidiarity, local development moves through new urban diplomacy to a foreground where European policies are a tactical choice among other planning tools. Thus, in order to explore how this framework works, our analysis will examine three categories of instruments: programming, communication and representation, notwithstanding with the role of city networks. Our proposal to structure this new urban diplomacy is the result of a process of participatory observation (almost 15 years) supported by grounded theory. Three main approaches of the international role of cities rooted our analysis: economic (global cities, city branding), political (governance, international relations) and geographical (territorial development, urban planning). So as to define the contours of new urban diplomacy as a lever for the urban project, this proposal presents three main indicators (capacity, intensity and coordination) and three possible scenarios (the bywatcher, the silent silo and the strategist). Our results highlight two key factors: one external (the europeanisation processes of local authorities) and another internal (talent, perceived both as the implication of the municipality and the creation of a local think tank, that we called Noodle). Our final goal is to offer a guide for analysis and further research. This guide should also serve cities in search of additional tools for their urban project.

**Key words:** new urban diplomacy, urban project, policy tools, local governance, urban studies

Cities, and notably their role at the international level, have recently become a popular subject of study (Barber 2013). In 2016, the approval of UN’s Urban Agenda in Quito and, EU’s Urban Agenda in Amsterdam underlined this global urban awareness. Additionally, authors such as Curtis (2011), Acuto (2013) or Amiri & Sevin (2020) call for the recognition of cities as full-fledged actors in the world scene.

Certainly, research has developed a significant literature about the role of cities in global issues, finely summed up as a top-down process: “Think global,

act local". The contributions of paradiplomacy (Soldatos 1996, Aldecoa, Keating 1999) and public diplomacy (Cull 2008) clearly influenced city diplomacy (Kihlgren Grandi, 2020). In general terms, city diplomacy defines how cities acquire, expand and use their (soft) power at the international level, concerning global matters.

However, the analysis may be widened to explain how cities use their own (hard) power at the international level, regarding local needs. Furthermore, the point of view may be reordered ("think local, act global") in order to better explore the benefits of transnational tools for urban planning. Such was the stance we took for our PhD thesis (Espiñeira-Guirao 2021), whose main results are discussed in the present paper. This ascending strategy, that we have called "urban diplomacy" in our PhD, relies on a governance system justified by active subsidiarity. In our proposal, (new) urban diplomacy functions as a transnational lever of the urban strategy. It provides solutions for the local agenda that are not available (or optimal) elsewhere. We are no longer in the realm of soft power and influence; urban diplomacy is proposed as a complementary (international) option to support local policies – this notion may thus respond to the missing link between urban planning and international engagement (Troy 2017, Bassens et al. 2018).

Therefore, while city diplomacy represents interests in the realm of international relations; new urban diplomacy, as we may understand it, is more pragmatic. It implements a predefined local development strategy, *also* at international level.

This research thus intends to deepen the knowledge on the connection between the urban project and the international tools available for local governance. So, our research question was to discover how this *urban diplomacy* works. Secondary questions were to know (i) the positive (and negative) factors for its implementation and (ii) if models existed and could be identified. Our first analysis chose the case of European cities. The main outcome was a theoretical and practical guide of urban diplomacy which is presented more extensively in our PhD dissertation. In order to better mark the difference with city diplomacy, in this paper, we will call this mechanism "new urban diplomacy"<sup>1</sup>.

In the present paper, these results will be discussed and complemented by our current research. In our first part, they are contextualised by a literature review, focused on the evolution of cities as economic, political and territorial actors. Secondly, the study will show the methodological complementarity of participant observation (Mead 1928) and grounded theory (Glaser, Strauss 1967). Our results, how to use new urban diplomacy to enhance urban planning, will be presented in the third part of this essay. The fourth section will discuss those results from a comparative perspective. Some conclusions and solutions will be presented at the end.

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<sup>1</sup> As city and *urban* diplomacy have been used as synonyms for long, we add «new» for further differentiation.

## Literature review: Cities speaking softly, no stick<sup>2</sup>

As we will see later, our concept is strongly determined by a process of grounded theory that structured a long observation period, provided by our professional career. This research method gives literature a secondary place. Nevertheless, three main theoretical approaches based our work: two top-down: (i) economic (global cities and territorial marketing) (ii) political (governance, international relations and European affairs) and one bottom-up (iii) geographical (territorial development, urban studies).

In the first theory set, cities (mainly metropolises) are perceived as actors of the global economy. The works of Sassen (1991) defining the stance of global cities are paramount, as confirmed later by Curtis (2011). As pointed by Swyngedouw (2004) the double process of “glocalization”/“rescaling” describes the trade-offs between supranational, national and local levels. At local level, city branding is a major approach for this *business* perspective. While well-known labels such as *Creative city* (Scott 2010) are widely sought by local authorities, Karvaratzis (2004) and Anttiroiko (2014) propose, among others, a deeper analysis of the implications of city branding.

The second theoretical line brings forward policymaking issues, such as governance and international affairs. Foremost, *governance* is observed from the point of view of multilevel governance (Hooghe, Marks 2002, Kern, Bulkeley 2009), a system ruled by “passive” subsidiarity, described as a predefined distribution of competencies. In parallel, we analysed governance as a local strategy (i.e. the urban project as defined by Pinson 2009), ruled by “active” subsidiarity (Calamé 2016). Secondly, the influence of the diverse (and somewhat complementary) theories of international relations can be useful when observing cities’ international activity, in terms of power, cooperation or institutions. In EU cities’ case, europeanisation (Goldsmith 1993, Armondi 2019) seems a significant factor for confluence between local and EU interests. Conversely, the international activity of local authorities is often observed by paradiplomacy (Soldatos 1996, Aldecoa, Keating 1999) and by public diplomacy (Cull, 2008). Both approaches reveal the possibilities for local governments to exercise a diplomatic activity which is parallel or additional to the State’s. Consequently, the concept of city diplomacy, as defined by van der Pluijm & Melissen in 2007, sets the stage for the international role of local authorities (Viltard, 2008, Acuto, 2013,) Beyond, city networks are increasingly cited as cooperative international systems and soft power multipliers (Kern, Bulkeley 2009, Mocca 2015, Fernandez de Losada et Abdullah 2019).

The third line is inspired by Courlet & Pecqueur’s (2013) “retour du territoire” (“territory is back”). This concept reflects the growing importance of the local-based approach that was stressed by the Barca report<sup>3</sup>. This *coming back* of spatial planning is enhanced by the role and structure of public policy instruments (i.e. Lascoumes 2008). This “new” spatial dimension also includes cities.

<sup>2</sup> “Speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far”. Citation (1900) about diplomacy by US president, Theodore Roosevelt.

<sup>3</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/archive/policy/future/barca\\_fr.htm](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/archive/policy/future/barca_fr.htm)

It studies particularly their strategies and planning (Bassens et al. 2018), urban governance (Le Galès 2003) and the “urban project”<sup>4</sup> as a central node for theory (Masbounji 2005, Pinson 2009, Ciattoni, Veyret 2018). As far as European cities are concerned, the analytical production of the EU institutions cannot be ignored. EU bodies, specially EU Commission, foster a distinct urban policy in the 27 EU member states, through their policy initiatives, programmes, reports and studies. In this sense, specific research on European territorial cooperation has also examined the role of cities in EU programmes, as shown by the works of Escach (2014) or Boulineau (2017).

Consequently, this last theory line also stresses the intrinsic links between spatial planning and europeanisation, as described by Faludi (2002) and Plannger (2018) and operationally applied by ESPON projects such as ATTREG<sup>5</sup>.

## Methods: From action to observation, from observation to research and back

When describing city diplomacy, Acuto (2013, p. 4) favours global cities, as their advantaged position and size may serve as a lever in the international scene. Yet, in the context of the EU, even small towns can be the leaders of large transnational activities. This was the case of Rethymnon (Greece, 52,000 inhabitants), lead partner of the INTERREG project PLASTEKO<sup>6</sup>. Thus, we may explore other factors than size to justify cities’ international activity. Besides, Bassens et al. (2018) state the need to establish the relations between urbanism and the international policy of cities. Troy (2017) calls for city diplomacy to go beyond global affairs and towards a more operational approach. Therefore, our final goal was to confirm new urban diplomacy as the lever that integrates urban governance and planning with international (EU in our case) policy tools. Our main hypothesis stemmed from Mayors’ comments when they were presented with an international project: “What’s in for the daily needs of my city?”

In the particular context post-2008, working with cities at the international level required a more operational approach. The research question had already arisen within our practitioner work: we were called to justify the added-value of the international dimension. Being the coordinator of an EU city network, we had the privileged position of a practitioner directly working with local and regional governments in EU affairs for more than twelve years. Even if our PhD started in 2014, it was possible to use, in the grounds of participant observation, the different pieces of analysis made several years before.

Accordingly, our PhD project declined that year the questions as follows:

(i) What is the involvement of European cities in urban diplomacy? (ii) Which

<sup>4</sup> Understood as the strategy of a city, the local agenda.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.espon.eu/programme/projects/espon-2013/applied-research/attreg-attractiveness-european-regions-and-cities>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.interregeurope.eu/plasteco/>

instruments and fields of action are involved? (iii) What were the factors that influenced them? (iv) Who are the key actors and actions of this strategy? (v) What results? In this previous document, the concept of “urban diplomacy” was not yet defined and somewhat confusing – it was influenced by “attractivity” as a notion and the difference with city diplomacy was still tenuous.

Given this background and before a vast amount of information, the best option seemed a research-action approach: joining participant observation (Mead 1928) to grounded theory (Glaser, Strauss 1967). This combination shaped a professional involvement that spanned between 2007 and 2020. Earmarked by our research problem (“what is urban diplomacy and how does it work?”) both qualitative methods allowed for iteration between data collecting, coding and analysing findings and developing theory (Bitsch 2005, p. 77).

In participant observation, and notably within an extended experience, the researcher is the object of a double challenge: avoiding a mere reduction of reality while separating herself from it. Thus, we may divide our observation in two main periods: (i) 2007–2014 as an “unconscious” observation (and thus, open coding as per grounded theory) and (ii) 2014–2020 for participant observation (axial and finally selective coding). In this second period, several safeguards were installed to avoid biases and negative effects of the participant observation: (i) employer cities were not used as examples (ii) discretion was a rule of thumb (iii) research was not highlighted in our public profile (iv) listening and note-taking were privileged to more direct interaction (v) our “professional working methods were not directly used. Nonetheless, our role as practitioner cannot be dismissed.

Grounded theory is an inductive method of research that helps to formulate the general theoretical principles of a subject which remains “unknown”. Its substance is a continuous iteration between theory construction and empirical observation and data; any strict determinism should be rejected. This approach suggests that previous research has ignored (for various reasons) elements that could contribute to the progress of the discipline; careful observation is therefore essential (Joannides, Berland 2008, p. 142). This method counterbalances participant observation with a theoretical framework. This contrast is even more useful in a political context like ours, where the level of confidentiality is high. An abstraction of our iteration is described in Figure 1 below.

Our coding was done by hand to avoid excessive formalism and to be able to play with colours and mind maps. Corresponding to the elements of new urban diplomacy (instruments, factors and indicators), the categories evolved in all levels of analysis. For instance, *city branding* was considered at first a level 1 category of instruments while *communication* was a subordinate. However, in our results, we defined a new level 1 category (*specific communication*) where *city branding* is a subordinate. The theoretical memo, a mandatory step in grounded theory, was written in 2019 and published as a book chapter in 2020 (Espifeira-Guirao 2020).

Our research confronted three major challenges. They participated in the evolution of our grounded theory of new urban diplomacy:

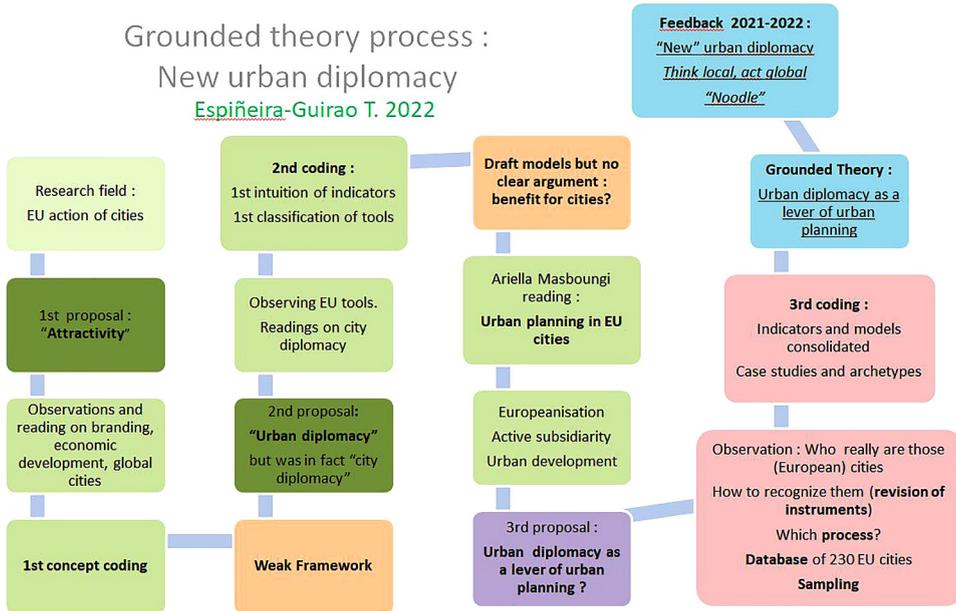


Fig. 1. Grounded theory iteration for new urban diplomacy  
Source: Own elaboration (July 2022).

1. Previous data from participant observation (those between 2007 and 2014) needed to be filtered and systematised. In order to get some prioritising, we conducted some quality interviews in the first months. Besides, a deeper analysis of European (urban) policies completed our initial overview of the possible urban instruments and their popularity. This long review also specified the cities to be studied, going beyond those already included in our daily work. Nevertheless, the professional context delivered important inputs. These would vary between (i) cities' questions such as "where do I have to go to find a grant for this local action", (ii) participation in international meetings (as the inaugural convention of the Global Parliament of Mayors in 2016), (iii) confidential exchanges with mayors, (iv) shared work with officials from cities, ministries and EU institutions, (v) writing EU urban policy positions (together with city members), (vi) drafting EU projects, etc.
2. Secondly, the concept of *new urban diplomacy* needed to be singled out of those of europeanisation, city diplomacy, public diplomacy and paradiplomacy. Thus, the theoretical structuring demanded a subtle balance between observer distance, insider knowledge and scientific construction. Our goal was to "reverse" the perspective and to focus on urban development and cities' needs. This emphasis requested the study of urban projects and the identification of EU instruments for cities further than "typical" initiatives such as EU projects (thus enlarging the list of level 2 categories). Feedback after the PhD convinced us (i) to insist in the bottom-up approach, so we underlined the "Think local, act global" slogan (ii) to add the adjective "new" to better mark

the differences with the overlapping concepts (iii) to clarify the definition of the “new” urban diplomacy living lab.

3. Third, errors, blockages and setbacks had to be assumed, as they are the core of grounded theory. All of them were set aside by new observations, by checking final results with practitioners and researchers, by coming back to the old inputs, and by enlarging the literature scope. Consequently, in the final iterations, we completed observation by creating a database of more than 230 European cities mentioned in EU instrument catalogues. This database and its course allowed for the setting of three urban diplomacy indicators. Those and Miller & Friesen’s (1978) strategic archetypes supplied the three standard models of new urban diplomacy. Finally, sampling and random draw (10%) plus quota selection among the cities’ database drove us to choose five study cases.

## **Results: Urban planning enhanced by urban diplomacy**

Our research<sup>7</sup> produced a framework to add missing resources to urban planning by including available international tools. We called this strategic lever *new urban diplomacy*. This concept hinges on active subsidiarity (Calamé 2016) making cities act as entrepreneurs that exploit European/international law and policies.

New urban diplomacy relies on a set of transnational instruments targeted in relation to the objectives of the urban project. In more operational terms, this strategy is modulated by factors (talent, degree of Europeanisation / internationalisation) and indicators (capacity, coordination and intensity). As from the different combinations of these dimensions, we may propose three models (or scenarios) that cities may use when adopting new urban diplomacy.

### **Sticks for new urban diplomacy: active subsidiarity and instruments**

Subsidiarity, as defined by the EU institutions in the treaties<sup>8</sup>, “aims to ensure that decisions are taken as closely as possible to the citizen<sup>9</sup>” In practical terms, it corresponds to a list that allocates competencies between levels of governance. Local authorities are thus limited by a division of powers which is externally imposed. We may thus speak about “passive” subsidiarity.

On the contrary, active subsidiarity (Calamé 2016) surpasses this restrained allotment of options. Competencies should only depend on the actual mandate; thus, at the local level, on the urban project. Therefore, active subsidiarity can be defined as a mean to efficiently manage complexity, supporting the choices of local authorities on their mission, needs and priorities rather than in an aleatory list of powers. In this sense, urban planning can use any instrument available at

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<sup>7</sup> As this part presents results of the grounded (and thus unknown) theory, external references will be reduced.

<sup>8</sup> Article 5 of the Treaty on European Union.

<sup>9</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/subsidiarity.html>

any governance level by its own and not depending on national/supranational negotiations and trade-offs.

Hence, to fulfil the political mission of the city (the urban project as defined by Pinson in 2009), new urban diplomacy will (“also”) deploy supranational mechanisms (Dossi 2012). As our research concentrated in the EU setting, we classified these tools in three main categories: programming, representation and communication; notwithstanding with the role of city networks as multipliers for the international (European) activity of cities. Figure 2 below presents the instruments that cities can mobilise at EU level.



Fig. 2. EU instruments for new urban diplomacy  
 Source: Own elaboration (May 2021).

As per programming tools, we may understand those that contribute to organise urban planning, by raising funds and by defining strategy. Accordingly, the mechanisms identified were: EU’s integrated strategies (like ITI), EU projects, the European Urban Agenda, the Leipzig charter and the Green deal. Main sources concerning programming instruments were the work of significant researchers as De Gregorio (2018) or Purkarthofer (2018) and the different guides on EU programmes.

Representation encompasses all those tools dealing with diplomacy (i.e. representation missions), influence and lobby. Likewise, it includes direct participation (i) in EU policy consultations, (ii) in political fora and (iii) inside EU institutions and bodies (the Committee of the Regions, the European Commission and the European Parliament). As key authors, we may quote La Porte (2013) or Tatham (2008) but the analysis of the grey literature issued by EU bodies was as well significant.

Built on the general theories of territorial marketing, our research brought forward a *specific* EU set of communication mechanisms available for local governance. These devices aim to gain leverage by raising the EU position of a particular urban project. Among these, we may highlight: (i) good practices’ catalogues,

(ii) EU events (i.e. *weeks*), (iii) EU competitions for cities (particularly European capitals) and (iv) city rankings. Further on, our analysis contemplated other EU unique features, such as (i) its particular audience, (ii) its concrete naming mechanisms (i.e. the Treaty of *Maastricht*), and (iii) EU values and storytelling. Besides our own experience and observations, the main sources for this area where EU tools themselves, notably the communication manuals of INTERREG programmes.

European city networks are a particular case among cities' international associations, as they compose the main factor of horizontal europeanisation, sharing EU values among pairs (Dossi 2012). Moreover, as a result of the application of the principle of active subsidiarity, our research separates two types of groupings. As Fernandez de Losada and Abdullah (2019) we see a difference between city networks (those where cities are the main decision-makers) and other hybrid associative forms (led by a third party) such as semi-private platforms (100 Cities), EU initiatives (the Covenant of Mayors) or even EU projects (as in UR-BACT). Covering the three types of instruments, city networks work as accelerators for any urban diplomacy strategy, while the hybrid platforms should be pondered as plain instruments.

## Speaking softly and preparing to engage: factors of urban diplomacy

In this context of active subsidiarity (Calamé 2016) and thus of full international agency (Acuto 2013), we identified talent as a mandatory inner factor. Hence, the figure of the internal entrepreneur comes as a condition for the strategy to be successful (Kern, Bulkeley 2009, p. 326) Therefore, the involvement and the profile of the Mayor (and/or his/her political team) is paramount to produce the necessary integration between the urban project and new urban diplomacy. Effective representation and communication heavily depend on political engagement; elected representatives embody the urban project. In addition, the local government may be technically supported by an international expert: the urban diplomat. This professional profile (being it a sole person or a team) should be acquainted with the transnational scene, its rules and its possibilities. S/he may speak several languages and, above all, closely work with the Mayor.

As the urban project itself, new urban diplomacy should be rooted on local intelligence. So, a *New Urban Diplomacy Living Lab* (NUDLL or "Noodle") can help filling in the gap between supranational opportunities and local needs. This *Noodle* may be composed of the city government and services, the urban diplomat and of all stakeholders interested, urban planners and international experts among them. The term "noodle" is chosen as a reference to the *spaghetti bowl effect*: the blurring in international action that occurs when countries join simultaneously several international trade agreements (Bhagwati, 1995). In our case, we propose a single "Noodle" instead of a chaotic bowl to better align local policy with international tools, create scale economies, reduce dispersion and avoid overlapping.

As per the external factors, in the international scene, it is conceivable that the degree of internationalisation of the city plays a role, as shown by the works of Lara-Pacheco (2019). In our case, europeanisation, and more specifically the heritage of the URBAN programme (Dossi 2012, p. 52), created the grounds for new urban diplomacy, in a learning by doing approach that persisted among European cities. Thus, many of them gradually included EU resources inside their own planning and kept doing so even after URBAN was declared dead by the European Commission. The new urban diplomacy would so take the form of an “autonomous” europeanisation, where the stakes are upturned. In this *fourth* europeanisation of cities, opportunities are no longer coming from the European Union (descending europeanisation), neither earmarked by EU institutions (ascending) nor only the fruit of mutual inspiration (horizontal). As authority is redistributed (Le Galès 2013, p. 24), EU opportunities are selected upon a rational decision inspired by urban planning.

### **Analysing the new urban diplomacy: indicators and models**

Participant observation of the EU endeavours of cities for more than a decade brought to our research significant differences between them. Curiously, we could observe: (i) different degrees of European investment among cities of similar size, location and constraints (or even political colour), (ii) large towns with little interest in the European context and small or tiny towns that were very active within EU institutions, (iii) a gap between the window of EU opportunity and the moment when the city is positioned. These three elements called for further exploration of the rationale behind cities’ international involvement (Espiñeira-Guirao 2020). They additionally revealed the correlation between the urban project and the international (European) choices of the cities. Even more, the restrictions after the crisis of 2008 provoked a strong mandate to justify any international expense. This mandate was clearly described by Viltard in 2008 (p. 512):

“In fact, researchers today are practically called upon, by the practitioners in charge of the external relations of sub state units, to give meaning and legitimacy to their international activity” (our translation).

In our PhD, we opted to apply Steyn’s strategy model (2003, p. 176) to find out the drivers of cities when including transnational instruments in their urban project. Steyn proposes the following components: (i) analysis of the internal environment, (ii) examination of the actors and their relationships, (iii) exploring the organization’s key strategic issues and their implications; and (iv) proposing the strategy. Adapting the reasoning to new urban diplomacy, Table 1 shows the indicators chosen to assess its tactical approach.

Centred on the analysis of the internal environment, our first measurement was proposed as *capacity*. This indicator weighs the inner “talent” factor as described above, both in quantity (how many people are dedicated to urban diplomacy?) and in quality (which expertise? hierarchy? political role?). Our budgetary analysis differs from the global/financial size of the city, here *capacity* looks only into funding allocated to new urban diplomacy.

Table 1. Indicators of new urban diplomacy

Steyn (Strategical Thinking Model 2003)	Primary Indicators	Secondary Indicators
Analysis of internal environment	Capacity	Invested resources (HR, funds, other) Quality of resources (i.e. hierarchy)
Exploration of strategical challenges	Intensity	Frequency Validity (relevance for the urban project)
Analysis of actors and their relationships	Coordination	Number of involved departments/Degree of collaboration EU dimension of work “Noodle” approach

Source: Own elaboration (July 2022) from Steyn’s model (2003) and participant observation (2009–2020).

As per the strategical challenges, we use *intensity* to evaluate the consistency between the EU (or international) action and the urban project. Intensity refers to both the *frequency* with which the instruments are used – how long, how often – and their *validity* as city policy. Their combination provides the measure: the instruments can be used on an ad hoc basis when there is a concrete objective and a window of opportunity (low intensity) or recurrently in the framework of the local strategy (high intensity). More importantly, validity is a pre-condition of urban diplomacy, if the international action of the city is not aligned with the urban project, it represents international relations, not urban planning.

Steyn’s third element looks at actors and their relationships, an item that we translated by *coordination*. First, this dimension appraises the degree of integration of the EU (international) activity of the city across departments, how many and how they work (or not) transnationally together. If each department works alone and only one or two of them are involved in European affairs, the city council is deemed to have weak coordination. If they are synchronized and consider the European dimension of their tasks, coordination is high. A second coordination sub indicator would scrutinize the engagement with the EU activity as such, i.e. does the city municipality forget to publish the EU logo together with the actions co-financed? The third sub-indicator, the *Noodle* approach, was already explained above.

As shown by Figure 3, the three indicators (capacity, intensity and coordination) help to identify three models of interaction between the urban project and EU instruments; the *bywatcher*, the *silent silo* and the *strategist*.

As cautionary advice, the reader should realise that they are presented as a dynamic continuum of options, and not as a static and fixed “how to”. There is not any hierarchy among the three scenarios, bywatchers are not worse than strategists. As a by-product of their own evolution, cities can switch models over time.

The first model, *the bywatcher*, has low capacity, intensity and coordination. In this case, the city council reacts only to very concrete opportunities. As study cases, our research chose Nijmegen, 172,000 inhabitants (and their *sole* candidacy

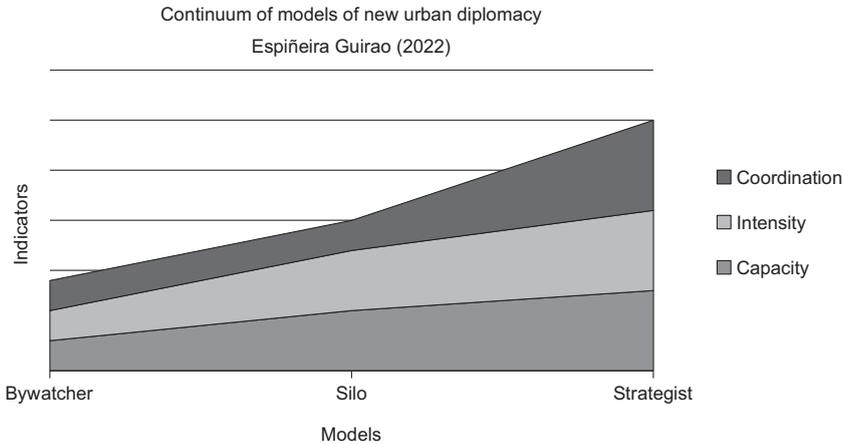


Fig. 3. Models of new urban diplomacy

Source: Own elaboration (July 2022) from Espiñeira-Guirao (2020, 2021).

to European Green Capital<sup>10</sup>) and Balatonfüred, 13,000 inhabitants (mainly for their membership of the Committee of the Regions<sup>11</sup>).

The silent silo scenario reflects a situation where each city department acts on their own upon opportunities. It oscillates between medium to high capacity and intensity but coordination is poor. Our first study case for this scenario was the city of Dresden, 548,000 inhabitants, which has an impressive record of European activity but whose EU reports in 2017<sup>12</sup> and in 2018<sup>13</sup> show the independency between city departments – key events such as the application to the European Capital of Culture are missing. The second example was again Nijmegen, as its new urban diplomacy evolved after the European Green capital year to a substantial role in EU environmental initiatives<sup>14</sup> with no significant impact in other city departments.

When the urban project and new urban diplomacy are interdependent, our model would be the *strategist*. In this setting, the city develops medium to high capacity, intensity and coordination according to the needs of its own development. The case of Óbidos, 12,000 inhabitants, showed us the way not only to this model, but to the whole framework of new urban diplomacy. This tiny Portuguese city is a clear example of the strategist scenario (Espiñeira-Guirao 2020). Óbidos' dimension questions as well causality between size and international activity. The city was the leader of Creative Clusters<sup>15</sup>, an URBACT project consistent with its urban project (becoming a Creative City) and the internal

<sup>10</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Introduction\\_Nijmegen-2018.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Introduction_Nijmegen-2018.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> <https://cor.europa.eu/en/members/Pages/memberprofile.aspx?MemberId=2025939>

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.dresden.de/media/pdf/europa/bf\\_Europabericht\\_2017.pdf](https://www.dresden.de/media/pdf/europa/bf_Europabericht_2017.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.dresden.de/media/pdf/europa/bf\\_Europabericht\\_2018.pdf](https://www.dresden.de/media/pdf/europa/bf_Europabericht_2018.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.innovaclimate.org/background/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://urbact.eu/creative-clusters>

organisation of the municipality. Our second case was the city of Solna, 82,584 inhabitants, whose urban project was, at the time, clearly aligned with Europe’s strategy 2020, as shown by Figure 4.

## Example - Education

Flagship Initiative EU	National Reform Programme Sweden	Orientation Objective Solna	Outcome Objective – Target EU	Outcome Objective – Target Sweden	Outcome Objective examples Solna
Youth on the move  Enhance performance/attractiveness of higher education, raise quality of education and training by promoting mobility, improve employment situation	Increased knowledge  Strengthen teacher’s competence, education in mathematics, sciences and technology, promote creativity, entrepreneurship, vocational training, foster quality in higher education	Solna’s pre-schools and schools shall provide children, young people and adults with knowledge that affords them good opportunities to continue their studies and work	The share of early school leavers should be under 10 % and at least 40 % of the younger generation should have a tertiary degree	Less than 10 % of 18-24 year-olds who have not completed upper secondary school and who are not studying.  40-45 % of 30-34 year –olds should have at least two year post-secondary education	Pupils qualified for national programmes in upper secondary school should increase (92 % 2009)  Pupils with general qualification for higher education should increase (88 % 2009)



CITY OF SOLNA

Fig. 4. New urban diplomacy strategy of Solna  
Source: Website of Solna Municipality (solna.se) – last seen November 2020.

## Discussion: Comparing different options to measure cities’ international activity

As a result of a grounded theory process, our research created a twofold strategic framework, the *new urban diplomacy*. Taking the urban project as its core, it serves both (i) to measure the use of international (EU) devices in urban planning and (ii) to guide cities to start, modify or improve their own urban project with the help of transnational tools.

Moreover, it intends to proceed from a vision where cities are limited by (multi-level) governance rules and *passive* subsidiarity towards a scenario where the local agenda is the reason for extending cities’ competencies beyond premade lists (thus for using active subsidiarity). Consequently, we presented three different sets of instruments (programming, representation and communication), a lever (city networks), indicators to assess and define strategy (capacity, intensity and coordination) as well as three positioning scenarios (the bywatcher, the silent silo and the strategist).

First of all, it seems necessary to strictly focus in the three pillars: the urban project, active subsidiarity and the international dimension of (supplementary) tools. This frame avoids confusion with foreign (city) policy. Furthermore, the repertoire of instruments would deserve today an update, as in our PhD we only observed EU instruments between 2014 and 2020. Third, a sectoral perspective may enlighten new urban diplomacy, as shown by the example of Nijmegen and the environmental projects. Again, with regard to models that would guide strategic decision-making processes, it seems possible to quantify them and translate them into software tools. Finally, it seemed appropriate to find a more evident nomenclature, distinguishable from similar concepts but still accessible to local authorities. The term “new urban diplomacy” seems more accessible for local authorities than “autonomous europeanisation”.

Subsequently, the analysis may further denote the difference between (new) urban diplomacy and other notions such as city diplomacy, Europeanization, or even European integrated strategies (e.g. the ITI mechanism). While city diplomacy could, in general, be identified with the international relations of the town (van der Pluijm, Melissen 2007), new urban diplomacy would be a tactical thrust of the local agenda, a lever only available at the international level. Else, these concepts differ in their core topics, their position inside the budget (expense vs. funding source) or even their legitimacy grounds (soft power vs. active subsidiarity). Nonetheless, their linguistic and conceptual proximity and their indistinct use as “adjectives” led us to include “new” for further separation.

Our PhD research observed the effects on cities of europeanisation (ascending, descending and horizontal). Within the framework of new urban diplomacy, these three waves of europeanisation were defined as an external factor. In addition, as a tactical process of decision-making, *autonomous* europeanisation (a fourth way) would then allow cities to exercise their active subsidiarity. They would then be able to support their urban project with a strategy of new urban diplomacy. As shown in Table 2, the differences among ascending, horizontal and this “fourth” version would come from “who” really holds the initiative.

Table 2. Differences between europeanisation processes

Ascending (2 <sup>nd</sup> )	Horizontal (3 <sup>rd</sup> )	Autonomous (4 <sup>th</sup> ) (New urban diplomacy)
Cities’ proposals for EU opportunities are based mainly on the mechanisms already identified by EU institutions	EU city networks are seen as europeanisation labs but their autonomy is relative, as many are heavily funded by the EU itself.	Urban project and local mandate Active subsidiarity Independent decisions

Source: Own elaboration (January 2021).

Another question remains open: does this new urban diplomacy exist beyond the European Union? It would be possible to make a distinction between the more theoretical/political dimension (europeanisation, internationalisation) and the more practical/policy dimension (new urban diplomacy). This division seems

to indicate that it is feasible to extend the new urban diplomacy concept to the global scene given the parallelisms.

Likewise, it may seem that new urban diplomacy can take the form of an integrated European strategy, because it: (i) proposes an efficient combination of objectives, resources and methods (ii) it uses the European programmes and initiatives (iii) relies on a participatory process (the Noodle) (iv) incorporates an action plan and a funding plan. This similarity could be further explored in the future. Therefore, this parallelism would help to widen the framework to other forms which articulate, just like new urban diplomacy, the urban project with international tools, such as ITIs, Action Plans of the Covenant of Mayors, Smart Cities, SUMP's<sup>16</sup>, etc.

Thirdly, it seems possible to test our proposal on other structures such as genuine city networks. In that case, it would be necessary to assume that these associations also apply urban projects, even if they are shared among a group of cities. Due to their transnational nature, networks of cities benefit from an inherent international legitimacy that can provide the grounds for a *collective* active subsidiarity. Certain indicators should be reformulated and extended. In this case, we must add a measure of the internal *coordination* between the network members (for example, how many European projects do they collaborate on?), in addition to the coordination between the "departments" of the network (or its secretariat). The *intensity* indicator would need a secondary frequency (i.e. in how many instruments is the network associated with its member cities?)

## Conclusions

Cities have the right to exercise the powers derived (expected?) from their political mandate, their legal existence but, above all, their accountability to citizens. These dimensions, represented by the urban project, could justify, at the international level, a transition from actions of influence and soft power towards active subsidiarity as defined by Calamé (2016). In the case of active subsidiarity, the local authority also exercises its competence at international level without consulting the regional or the national levels and not being limited by devolution schemes. Active subsidiarity thus provokes a natural decentralization, in alignment with the objectives of the urban project and beyond constitutional considerations.

So, which are these strategies that, as proposed by Calamé, no longer see competencies in terms of distribution but of managing complexity? Our analysis proposed new urban diplomacy as an institutional experimentation of cities' governance where they carry their local agendas *also* at the transnational level.

The research question envisaged therefore to define the functioning of this framework. Subsequently, results showed the importance for local governance of international instruments and how they were mobilised inside the urban project.

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<sup>16</sup> Sustainable urban mobility plans.

This use of transnational devices may therefore reveal key elements (indicators) inside the municipality: its dedicated *capacity*, its *coordination* methods and how *intensely* it uses transnational tools. Responding to a secondary research question, these indicators served to build three scenarios (or models) that can illustrate the actual practice of new urban diplomacy: *the bywatcher* (“once upon a time”, a time-server city), the *silent silo* (a city where international activity is fragmented and not strongly linked to the urban project) and the *strategist* (generally: a city that identifies its urban project and all instruments at the same time, also those transnational). Related to indicators, another secondary research question brought forward two indispensable factors: one external (europeanisation, notably through the URBAN programme) and one internal (talent, based on political and technical implication and on the creation of a local think tank, the Noodle).

Nevertheless, as mentioned previously, it seems necessary to reconsider the different integrated strategies that exist at the urban level; as their approach is complementary to new urban diplomacy. It would also seem essential to investigate a concrete sector (environment, employment, health...) where two cities are specialised, to compare their new urban diplomacy strategies.

Finally, we proposed a wide range of instruments, even if confined to three concrete categories: programming, representation and communication. Still, a compilation of instruments would only seem useful in the presence of a *modus operandi* that facilitates strategic choices. The decision-making process can be materialized in a more extended handbook. This guide would allow cities to grow from the list of international opportunities to a consistent alignment with the urban project. This is the main goal of new urban diplomacy.

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## Rola instrumentów międzynarodowych w zarządzaniu lokalnym: nowa dyplomacja miejska

**Zarys treści:** Jaka jest wartość dodana zagranicznej współpracy i międzynarodowego pozycjonowania miast? Czy działania te są zgodne z prawem i kompetencjami władz lokalnych? Nasza analiza proponuje odwrócenie słynnego hasła i skłonienie władz lokalnych do kierowania się ideą „myśl lokalnie i działaj globalnie”. Podejście to nazwane zostało „nową dyplomacją miejską” i traktowane jest jako innowacyjny program polityczny władz miasta. W oparciu o wsparcie europejskie i nową dyplomację miejską rozwój lokalny staje się taktycznym wyborem spośród innych narzędzi planowania. W związku z tym w artykule analizie poddano trzy kategorie instrumentów: programowanie rozwoju, komunikację i promocję oraz tworzenie sieci miejskich. Nasza propozycja zawiera ustrukturyzowanie „nowej dyplomacji miejskiej” i jest wynikiem procesu obserwacji uczestniczącej (trwającej prawie 15 lat) popartej ugruntowaną teorią. W naszej analizie zakorzenione są trzy główne podejścia do międzynarodowej roli miast: ekonomiczne (globalne miasta, branding miast), polityczne (zarządzanie, stosunki międzynarodowe) i przestrzenne (rozwój terytorialny, urbanistyka). Aby zdefiniować zakres nowej dyplomacji miejskiej jako dźwigni dla rozwoju miast, artykuł przedstawia trzy główne wskaźniki (pojemność, intensywność i koordynacja) oraz trzy możliwe scenariusze („obserwator, silos i strateg”). Wyniki analizy wskazują na dwa kluczowe czynniki: jeden zewnętrzny (procesy europeizacji władz lokalnych) i drugi wewnętrzny (talent, innowacyjność), oba postrzegane jako implikacja i tworzenie lokalnego think tanku. Ostatecznym celem opracowania jest skonstruowanie postulatów do dalszych badań, a także rekomendacji dla miast, które chcą uzupełnić swój projekt miejski o mechanizmy międzynarodowe.

**Słowa kluczowe:** nowa dyplomacja miejska, projekt miejski, narzędzia polityki, zarządzanie lokalne, studia miejskie