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Complementing traditional diplomacy: regional and local authorities going international

Filippo Terruso

Abstract   Regional and local authorities already promote their own policies and actions in the international arena for humanitarian, political, commercial, cultural and institutional reasons. From cross-border to decentralised cooperation, under the concept of *City diplomacy*, local authorities often move independently and actively, both in the international arena and in the EU's decision-making processes. They act during conflicts, providing peace-building and dialogue opportunities, and take action in post-conflict regions or regions in need. This form of diplomacy complements traditional diplomacy and is mostly activated when the latter is frozen or required to remain low profile for contingent, political reasons. These new actors, with strong devolved powers at home and strong political leadership, deserve more attention from international players such as the European Commission and some of the United Nations' agencies. The current scheme of international cooperation is overly rigid. There is a need for more flexibility so that support—including financial support—can be better targeted to meet specific needs. This could lead to regional and local actors becoming direct recipients

F. Terruso (✉)
Committee of the Regions, Rue Belliard 99-101, 1000 Brussels, Belgium
e-mail: Filippo.terruso@cor.europa.eu

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of international financial support for planning and running decentralised or bottom-up forms of cooperation, partnership and political dialogue.

Introduction

Even if major international actions remain in the hands of chancelleries and are almost entirely left to international bodies, other public bodies—such as cities and regions—do take initiative independently of the national sphere. Indeed, local authorities are led by elected political actors who share similar responsibilities to state actors (but with less means) when it comes to protecting universal and fundamental rights, including peace, democracy and the rule of law, or providing humanitarian aid. Channels for dialogue are therefore also created by local actors, who may serve as a first point of contact for all levels of governance to resolve emergency situations, propose confidence-building measures, support capacity-building actions or provide assistance to deliver services of general interest in conflict or post-conflict regions. Local authorities' direct involvement in the programmes run by the UN's agencies for decentralised cooperation, or in the negotiation of International Conferences offer new opportunities which can be embraced by the international community to enhance citizens' participation in, ownership of and commitment to tackling common challenges. In this context, local and regional authorities have become fully fledged partners in multilevel international governance relations, a role which has been developing under the EU's management of its own policies.

Adapting the instruments

In an evolving political environment, where traditional political players are being required to adapt to better understand and address new issues, and where national actions have become inadequate to deal with global challenges—from the financial and economic crisis to global, cross-border threats such as climate change or international terrorism—classical diplomacy cannot remain static and immune to the multiplication of players and targets on the international scene. Diplomacy which remains anchored to the national horizon and to the classical instruments of dialogue risks slowing down the solution-finding process and diluting its effects. By limiting the instruments at hand to the classical ones, the international community risks losing time, momentum and opportunities to forge pragmatic solutions. In contrast, 'quick wins' with local, but visible, impact and relief can provide tangible solutions for citizens through their political representatives in local authorities. A closer approach, built up by local politicians for local politicians, that is, non-state actors with a territorial dimension, can help to pave the way towards sustainable, political solutions on the ground.

Unfortunately, classical diplomacy as practised by a large number of small or medium-sized powers has the activity and limitations of a no man's land, despite the fact that the involvement of other actors could change this. There is also the issue of the persistent vacuum that exists when 'non-war' solutions instead of peace are proposed, as in the 'frozen conflicts' in the Caucasus; such diplomacy lives in the shade of the weakness of international law, where it gains little and concedes too much. When, for example, the rule of law is not rigorously applied, it enables the consolidation of cases such as the occupation of the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine; the 40-year-old stalemate dividing Cyprus; and the constant interim solutions for the Western Sahara, the Kurds, and the Palestinian refugees. Finally, classical diplomacy bears the embarrassment of the incapacity to implement the decisions taken, as in the case of enforcing the Oslo Agreement concerning the settlement policy in the Holy Land. These are only a few of classical diplomacy's recent results and do not even mention the unbalanced behaviour of EU member states on the national level with regard to refugees, the Geneva Convention or the Copenhagen criteria for EU enlargement. Of course, diplomacy must be sufficiently flexible to avoid situations reaching breaking point, which risks creating room for unwelcome alternatives. However, in this regard, other measures are available to local actors who are working for both political results and pragmatic solutions on the ground.

National governments acting in the context of 'international cooperation' often tend to focus on rebuilding central government structures after conflicts, ignoring the impact of conflict on local or regional authorities and underestimating their role, both in internal stabilisation processes and in forging external links with potential partners. International cooperation that aims to rebuild political dialogue in a conflict zone should take advantage of the bottom-up approach: for this approach to be operational, it must be driven by local actors, the closest level of governance to the citizens, who should have a leading role in shaping and managing activities alongside non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international institutions or bodies.

New actors and new instruments of diplomacy

The consolidation of the EU as a major actor in economic, financial, environmental, trade, migration and other horizontal contexts, such as climate change and extreme poverty, has strengthened the emergence of this new non-state actor in the international arena. The EU, and its External Action Service, is no longer an inter-governmental body, but rather a multilevel broker, coordinating 28 national diplomacies in the international context (from various UN conferences to trade and investment partnership agreements).

It is in this new context that innovative ways of working are called for, which complement classical diplomacy when circumstances require or, if a given context calls for action on the ground, enables people-to-people contact and open dialogue. Regional and local authorities (RLAs), with their proximity to citizens, can play a role on the international scene by offering new, alternative solutions. This multilevel governance of

diplomacy is occurring in several fields, leading to cooperation between parliaments and research agencies, through the arts, culture and in sport.

Furthermore, due to decentralisation processes in many countries, today RLAs share competences with national or federal governments in areas such as trade and the environment: this further enhances RLAs' ambitions to develop their own international policies. For instance, the Covenant of Mayors (now merged with the Compact of Mayors for a new global Covenant for Climate and Energy) brings together thousands of RLAs voluntarily committed to implementing EU climate and energy objectives within their territories, both within and outside the EU, independent of their national governments' roadmaps; in several cases, regions have seen fully fledged results prior to national commitment to common goals.

City diplomacy

City diplomacy (CD) is a concept whereby regions or cities act directly; in association with each other; or through international bodies, institutions and civil society, to help partner regions and cities by sharing expertise and advice, based on their duties as service providers. Rogier van der Pluijm (2007) defines the role of CD as a 'form of decentralization of international relations' management choosing cities as the key actors.' Services (e.g. waste management or water treatment) are often jeopardised in conflict or post-conflict areas. In this context, RLAs are becoming peace brokers. Local politicians, often already active in cross-border or macro-regional cooperation, are keen to apply the universal rights which national and international institutions stand for at the local level, and in a very practical and tangible way for their citizens. However, CD has never been conceived or 'structured' as a way to stop conflicts on the ground or to impose ceasefires or sanctions, which ultimately remain the duty of international organisations and other levels of governance. The geopolitical sphere of city intervention is nevertheless the same; RLAs share the ultimate goals of stability, peace and the rule of law, enshrined in the international treaties which apply to them as political bodies and, to some extent, as individuals. Enjoying a less political, more civilian role, cities can bring added value compared to international actors, particularly in post-conflict dialogue and the stabilisation phase. That said, so far CD has mostly been used to build bridges, confidence and capacity in conflict or post-conflict areas.

CD is not a new phenomenon, having its roots in the post–Second World War years when city-to-city post-conflict policies were developed, often based on cultural exchanges, and initially as a result of migration flows. The post-war situation pushed cities to promote integration policies; undertake economic missions, often in cooperation with the local chambers of commerce; and promote tourism. After the Second World War, the enthusiasm for direct participation in an international context grew, with public debate over international issues echoed within national politics. Citizens and their directly elected local representatives began to feel the need to be more involved in international affairs. As a result, civil society started to organise itself, alongside NGOs and local authorities, to claim an active role in international relations. This led to the creation

of citizens' movements in the 1960s and following decades. At the Helsinki Conference in 1975, non-state actors, including civil society organisations, developed a certain self-confidence and put themselves forward as the new players on the international political scene, promoting the so-called third-basket issues. These groups also took individual stands during the Cold War (with some cities supporting Solidarność in Poland) and in the struggle for human rights (acting against apartheid in South Africa), to give just a couple of examples. This trend grew and has since provided the setting for the development of various local authority movements, ranging from cities' policies against nuclear power, notably during the Cold War, to today's involvement in international trade agreements or conferences on environmental issues.

In addition, some cities' or regions' activism is deeply rooted in the past, in the era prior to the emergence of nation-states, when cities were commercial or military powers, or political or even religious points of reference for the whole European continent and beyond. In some respects, the inheritance of these diplomatic or political roles has never faded and can still be seen in the proactive roles that some places take today, particularly in certain cross-border areas and in certain actions covered by decentralised cooperation. Decentralised cooperation probably remains one of the most visible external actions managed by local authorities, currently promoted and financed by the EU and the UN in order to achieve sustainable development, eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, promote gender equality and ensure primary education for all (UN 2015). Furthermore, some local actors have stepped in to resolve specific issues due to historical political connections, such as the city of Antwerp's work on waste management in Beirut in cooperation with the UN Environment Programme, or certain regional governments' commitment, alongside nation-states, to directly funding UN agencies such as the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine in the Near East for Palestinian refugees.

Confidence building

Actions on the ground can develop into confidence-building instruments if they involve dialogue between communities. The development of the Nicosia Master Plan which involved the Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot communities is a good example. A similar approach has been taken by local authorities in Cyprus in order to rehabilitate the ghost town of Varosha (south of Famagusta, still sealed off from the rest of the island after the events of 1974). They have proposed that urban planners from the UN enter the town with a fact-finding mission to plan actions for the future restoration of the town. Likewise, the proactivity of local actors in Libya in 2015 tried to help to overcome the internal stalemate there by proposing the setting up of a temporary assembly formed of elected local authorities. This proposition was put forward as a result of informal contacts during the UN-led efforts to form a unity government in 2015. The proposal was all the more compelling because it was grounded in the legitimacy given to the local authorities by the citizens' votes.

Peace building

Local authorities can also promote dialogue during conflict: an example is the confidence-building talks that took place between the Serbians and the Croatians in East Croatia in 1998, brokered by the Dutch town of Wageningen. Peace-building actions require established cooperation and trust at all levels of governance. The overcoming of internal conflicts through dialogue between local parties can be facilitated by local authorities, particularly when democracy is in some way 'imposed' by the international community: when this happens during the interim phase (before elections or the setting up of a government after conflicts), it can lead to stabilisation and regular democratic processes within a given country. Libya represents an interesting case as, in 2015, about 30 mayors met to facilitate the process for the ceasefire under the auspices of the UN and the international community, marking the start of an internal dialogue which was instrumental to the ending of the civil war and paved the way for the formation of a national unity government. With or without the intervention of third parties, local authorities have demonstrated the value they add when restarting a political dialogue: in this case the process involved more internal local authorities than external ones acting as brokers.

Proximity diplomacy

As global challenges increase, international policy and classical diplomacy need to integrate new forms of partnership and relationship at all levels of governance, reflecting the emergence of local and regional policymakers. Proximity, or bottom-up diplomacy, is not only possible for RLAs willing to help partners to achieve peace and stability, but is also a necessity given RLAs' role in shaping and implementing international commitments. For instance, the 2015 Paris Conference on Climate Change invited RLAs to both the preparatory meetings and the conference due to their role in implementing the objectives on the ground (the reduction of CO_2 emissions and measures for energy efficiency). Prior to the latest Conference of the Parties in Paris, RLAs shaped the final decisions for their own countries and worked together at the international level. One could consider this proactive policy as mere lobbying, but RLAs are a distinct stakeholder, clearly representing the public and not just sectoral or private interests. They enjoy an institutional legitimacy due to their governance role and their political function. RLAs have proven adept at using EU tools for territorial development, such as cross-border cooperation (for instance the European Neighbourhood Policy's Cross-Border Cooperation instrument), macro-regional strategies (covering the Baltic Sea, Danube area, Alpine area and Adriatic–Ionian area) and the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation, which also includes non-EU member states and can therefore play a role within the European Neighbourhood Policy.

International contacts built up through proximity diplomacy actions have proven to be useful for mayors dealing with social and cultural phenomena related to migrant integration, refugee resettlement, the fight against violent radicalisation, and, more

generally, intercultural and interreligious debate. However, in general terms, capacity-building actions led by RLAs lack sustainable financial support, since formal channels for cooperation or diplomacy are more often run by well-known national or international structures, which tend to impose their own priorities and a top-down approach to cooperation. As a consequence, several grass-roots micro initiatives led by RLAs have faced significant challenges after an initial political (often personal) commitment. In relation to this, a further problem arises when local and national politicians do not see eye to eye. Dedicated financial support for RLAs to help sustain their efforts in specific areas of geostrategic interest to international bodies (the UN) or supranational bodies (the EU) should therefore be proposed in a systematic way, as has been the case for civil society and NGOs, which are sometimes quite varied and not always transparent in countries where, on behalf of their respective governments, and they act in the context of decentralised cooperation under various labels.

Economic, social and territorial development activities can also stabilise an area, as often happens in cross-border regions. The proactivity of RLAs is perceived not just as a political duty, but also as a way to open up opportunities for future investment in a given territorial area. The EU's Committee of the Regions (CoR), for instance, provides the means for RLAs to interact through a portal on decentralised cooperation by facilitating the matching of requests and offers. Together with the European Commission, the CoR has also helped RLAs from acceding countries to obtain information and know-how on the *acquis communautaire* through the Local Administration Facility, the Technical Assistance and Information Exchange Instrument, and the Twinning instrument, all programmes aimed at helping local public administrations to manage pre-accession funds. Similarly, the added value of people-to-people contact via this form of cooperation has proved extremely useful in assuring the endorsement of the accession when citizens finally vote to accede to the EU.

The territorial dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy

In carrying out diplomacy, cities and regions often use national channels (city-based associations, or international bodies such as United Cities and Local Governments), or act individually or in small groups. A different approach to CD is taken when RLAs work together through an institutional body that acts as a catalyst and political representative. An example is the CoR, an EU institution used by RLAs to reach out to non-EU partners. In this case, RLAs use the CoR's platforms for political debate with counterparts from acceding countries through its joint consultative committees, and from neighbouring EU countries through its joint assemblies: the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (within the Eastern Partnership), and the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM, within the Union for the Mediterranean). This development has been supported by Federica Mogherini, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, who sees city diplomacy as one layer within a wider system:

You are players in our foreign policy. Global challenges call for global alliances, but also for local responses. We need to think to new architectures, where all levels—the international, the regional, the national, the local—have a place and play their part. An architecture harmonising the macro and the micro. Think big, act local. This is a goal we can only achieve together. (Mogherini 2015)

Another pan-European institution that RLA actors use to promote dialogue and cooperation is the Congress of the Council of Europe, which has a strong tradition of promoting local democracy, the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights. The Congress uses the concept of multilevel governance to describe a wide spectrum of activities which would ordinarily be described as classical diplomacy if undertaken by central government: be it local election monitoring or ensuring implementation of the 1985 European Charter of Local Self-Government.

Through the setting up of joint assemblies representing RLAs within the Eastern Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean, the CoR has managed to ensure the voice of RLAs is heard in EU policymaking related to the European Neighbourhood Policy. RLAs have taken an active role in intergovernmental meetings, by ensuring a 'territorial dimension' to the EU and its partners' policymaking. RLAs backed Ukraine during the Euromaidan and, since 2015, have continued to support the process of decentralisation through a dedicated Task Force established within the CoR (in this context the CoR adopted two political resolutions in January (CoR 2014a) and April (CoR 2014b) 2014). Political support from RLAs has also been given to Ukraine's government during the process of amalgamating its counties in order to rationalise the regional system. In addition, the need to shape a special status for the Donbas region, as requested by the Minsk II Agreement, could lead Ukrainian actors to study how after the Second World War European countries resolved contentious border and regional statuses, which later led to the introduction of special rights and protection for minorities. Concerning Ukraine, the CoR and the Council of Europe have promoted cross-border cooperation with neighbouring countries, while the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation has promoted a new form of cooperation between Hungary and Ukraine. In addition there have been peer-to-peer exercises to strengthen the capacity of local authorities to manage the new tools granted by decentralisation reforms and to develop the economy through smart specialisation in given territories, harbours, for instance. Concerning the Union for the Mediterranean, RLAs represented in the ARLEM are using capacity-building measures to promote, for instance, sustainable urban policies on the Mediterranean coast. Furthermore, European RLAs are joining forces to restore the capacity of Libyan municipalities as service providers by organising technical meetings on the management of solid waste, management and treatment of water, public administration and decentralised cooperation, and municipal centres for first aid (the Nicosia Initiative for Libyan Local Authorities, an ARLEM network set up to develop new partnerships with European local authorities). When the international community and donors were immobilised by instability in the country and a lack of defined channels for dialogue and cooperation, RLAs took the initiative to cooperate and share with the same objective: quite an achievement in political and practical terms, not only for the European side, where classical diplomacy had lost precious time, but also for the Libyans, where local authorities and the respective militias decided to end their conflicts and cooperate in

partnership with their European counterparts. This experience is also particularly interesting as it offers an example of a bottom-up approach where the requests for help came before the offers. The cooperation guarantees a geographical balance among the Libyan local authorities by ensuring that all communities are eligible for this modest but enriching partnership. This is significant as currently Libya is only an observer of the Union for the Mediterranean's instruments, and remains in the margins of the larger EU cooperation tools, including the Cross-Border Cooperation Med programme.

Conclusion

The definition of diplomacy by RLAs covers a wide range of activities in the international arena. This includes direct action and working in conjunction with external partners, such as the EU institutions. Indeed, even their participation in the EU's decision-making process could be considered part of their 'external' mission. For several decades CD has been achieving results in conflict or post-conflict regions. This has involved a variety of objectives: confidence- or peace-building, conflict prevention or resolution, post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation, the promotion of social cohesion, environmental sustainability, decentralised cooperation, preparation for accession to the EU and being good neighbours. If their external activity is self-evident in cross-border actions, it has also become justified due to the globalisation of challenges—from migration to climate change—which require better coordination between RLAs internationally. In addition, the new competences given to regional authorities by certain EU member states have made them fundamental to the ratification of international treaties, whether these be revisions of EU treaties or trade agreements such as the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement with Canada or the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership with the US. Finally, the achievement of a certain degree of territorial cohesion and stability is considered a civic duty and economically relevant to the citizens, civil society and local businesses represented by local authorities. The developments discussed above have moved local actors to be increasingly proactive and to take an international role, using their own budget or sharing their know-how, mostly in the provision of local services, public administration, and urban and regional planning.

The direct participation of RLAs in international affairs could be considered a new tool for European external action, to be used as an informal channel for dialogue and pragmatic service delivery. Quick-win operations, mostly carried out by municipalities, are a prerequisite for building favourable conditions for broader political talks. These actions therefore deserve not just political support from national, international and European bodies, but also a dedicated budget to ensure the coherence, continuity and feasibility of RLA initiatives. The UN has shown its openness to working with RLAs when it comes to achieving goals for development. The UNDP and other agencies are working to promote local democracy and territorial development and are seeking partnerships at a local level to implement international agreements (e.g. Conference of the Parties 21 in Paris, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, and the UN's Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development). In this context RLAs are working towards recognition within the UN General Assembly—a special status which could

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allow them or their international associations to be linked with the policies that have a territorial impact or require a territorial partnership to fully be implemented.

A truly bottom-up approach to defining the main lines of international cooperation is lacking. Years of favouring a top-down approach in internal or cooperation policies, where the financial support or political interests of the dominant sponsor dictated the priority, have taken their toll. As a consequence, projects too often go to where cooperation already exists, which is sometimes not where the need is greatest. Such a vicious circle tends to help a small number of actors. It excludes the systematic involvement of (new) actors on the ground and in particular risks sidelining decentralised processes based on real needs—City diplomacy sometimes being too atypical for a rigid and formal scheme of international cooperation. Thus, there is space for local actors to intervene in diplomacy, and to listen before acting so that measures can be better targeted. Proximity diplomacy could invert this tendency: recipient mayors could ensure that their requests are seen before offers are made, while the international community could help them to match demands and offers by keeping the system open to newcomers and new forms of funding. This model would assure sustainability by ensuring that financial support from international organisations responds to actual demands and delivers tailor-made solutions.

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Filippo Terruso *works for the European People's Party Group in the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) and has served five presidents of the CoR, working on external relations, including the Eastern Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean, as well as decentralised cooperation and the Enlargement process.*