

The European Urban Charter and the Reality of Albanian Cities

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Abstract

The Council of Europe has been implementing for several years the European Urban Charter. Its focus is the city and urban areas in Europe, relating to rights such as urban transport and mobility, environment and nature in cities, urban architectural heritage, cultural integration in the city, civic participation, urban management and urban planning. The European Urban Charter is provided by the Council of Europe in relation to urban policy. It came as a logical outcome of the European campaign for urban renewal organized by the Council of Europe in 1980-1982. The purpose of this charter is to provide a practical tool and a manual for urban management authorities. Moreover, this charter is committed to provide a business card for the Council of Europe on issues related to the environment and the act of building. After this outline of European urban space, the environment and its principles it is clearer which is the road where the Albanian society will have to walk and on what principles will be built the national plan for urban spatial planning. The development of our cities modeled on European cities is likely to be cost, not only because of the historical developments, but more for reasons of political transition in the Albanian society which continues to hold back our cities.

Keywords: European Urban Charter, reform, the Council of Europe, urban spaces, integration, urban management, urban planning, citizen participation, Albanian cities, local authorities etc.

1. Introduction

The Council of Europe, with headquarters in the building of the "Palais de l'Europe" in Strasbourg, France is the first political organization and the widest in Europe. Founded in 1949 by 10 founding members, now it covers almost the entire European continent, with its 47 member states, and thus has become a unique forum to express their concerns, hopes and aspirations of 800 million Europeans.

As clearly stated in Chapter I of its Statute: "The aim of the Council of Europe is to achieve greater unity among its members for the purpose of safeguarding and realizing the ideals and principles which are their common heritage and facilitating their economic progress and social development". Since November 1990, the acceptance of 21 countries of central and eastern Europe (the most recent Serbia and Montenegro in April 2003), has given the Council European a true dimension of pan-European, so now is the organization which represents Greater Europe. The Council of Europe supports human rights, pluralist democracy and the rule of law.

As the first European institution, the Council of Europe was conceived as an instrument for the development of joint agreements on economic sectors, legal, social and cultural, as a European platform for exchange of views. The focus of work of the Council of Europe, is today on the field of human rights and the promotion of democratization processes.

In this context, the wide range of initiatives of the Council of Europe often takes the form of conventions drawn to bring the laws of the Member States in close harmony with each other and with the standards of the Council itself.

Currently there are over 200 such conventions. The best known of these is the European Convention on Human Rights (which defines the rights and freedoms of Member States which are obliged to ensure to all individuals within their jurisdiction) without denying the importance of conventions in the relevant fields. These conventions are complemented by numerous resolutions and recommendations addressed to member states, which play a vital role in finding solutions to our common problems. One of these is the European Urban Charter.

The European Urban Charter is provided by the Council of Europe in relation to urban policy. It came as a logical outcome of the European campaign for urban renewal, organized by the Council of Europe in the years 1980-1982 and

was approved in 1992 by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. This charter marked a crucial stage for recognition of urban reality.¹

The purpose of this charter is to provide a practical tool and a manual of urban management for local authorities and to provide the key elements for a possible future convention on the urban rights, to provide the basis for an international awards scheme for cities which sign the principles of Charter, to create a "business card" for the Council of Europe on issues related to the environment and the act of building. The European Urban Charter sets out the rights of citizens in European towns.

It gives practical guidance on good urban management, covering housing, urban architecture, transportation and mobility, energy, sport and leisure, environmental pollution and nature, cultural integration, disadvantaged and disabled people in cities, urban security and crime prevention, citizen participation, urban management and planning, health, etc.

The philosophy of this Charter relates to the authority of local government on the importance of urban development, solidarity and cooperation between central and local government, and ultimately the collaboration of European cities beyond national borders.

2. European Urban Charter 2 - Manifesto for a new urban reality²

Such an initiative for the adoption of European Urban Charter became the forerunner of a new approach adopted by all Europe marked by the adoption of basic texts in different cities, developed by other international organizations or associations of local authorities. Some are processed by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe; some are processed by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, European Union, United Nations, and civil society associations and other territorial entities. All these texts to which we refer have reflected increased attention to significant changes in recent years.

In general they follow the European urban Charter and in most cases they are adopted by European governments. Drawn by many different organizations with a wide variety of styles, all these texts reaffirm the right that belongs to cities and highlight the unique role of the citizens, which should be the focus of urban policy. However, given the diversity of these texts the International Congress of local and regional authorities saw the need to reword some of the main principles of the European urban Charter by maintaining its original version in its full status as a reference. The purpose of this manifesto, in this century is the beginning to demonstrate the need for a new urban form.

In these 15 years, we have witnessed profound changes in our society, in our economy and culture. In the context of local and global challenges and unprecedented development of urbanization, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe convened in a plenary session in Strasbourg, from 27 May to 29 May 2008 decided to adopt and revise some of the principles contained in the original European Urban Charter in order to update to meet them.

The European Urban Charter 2, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities proposes a manifesto for a new urban reality, a new culture of urban life, which calls on local authorities to build a sustainable European city.

This manifesto sets out a number of principles and concepts common to allow cities and their residents face the challenges of today's urban society. The Congress calls local authorities in all their diversity and in the respect of common European values, to implement public policies, ethical governance for sustainable development and greater solidarity.

This message is optimistic and ambitious which wants to transmit this manifesto to European citizens and to all those who are involved in urban development. This Charter is like an invitation to build a sharing of values and experiences, a new urban project for European cities, enabling each of them to be completely itself and allowing everyone to support the European project, which is an inseparable mixture of humanitarian values, individual freedom, economic prosperity, social solidarity, respect for our planet.

3. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe

The Council of Europe has always recognized the vital importance of democracy at local and regional level. Greater freedom is a need that is felt not just by any individual, but also the nation as a whole. Local government must meet the

¹ "Përparim Kabo" European or local in space planning?!" 16 March 2012, www.balkanweb.com

² The European Urban Charter 2 – Manifesto for a new urban reality, Resolution 269 (dated on 29.05.2008)

needs of all Europeans in cities and villages, central and peripheral and beyond. The European Council took its first step towards local authority representation in 1957 and since then has spread from Iceland to Russia and from Norway to the Balkans.

In 1994, the Council of Europe established the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe, as a consultative body to replace the former Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe. The role of Congress of local and regional authorities consists in representing the voice of the regions and municipalities in the Council of Europe providing a forum where local elected and regional representatives can discuss their common problems, share their experience and express views of their governments, working closely with national and international organizations by representing local and regional government.

The Congress also organizes hearings and conferences, produces regular reports country by country on the situation of local and regional democracy in all member states and acceding to the Council, and in particular, how the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government are implemented and helps new member states with practical aspects of their progress towards the establishment of effective local and regional self-government. The Congress consisting of two chambers meet once a year in Strasbourg, welcomes delegations from accredited European organizations and some non-member states as special guests. Congress divides its work among four statutory committees as follows:

- Institutional Committee which has a special duty to prepare reports on the progress of local and regional democracy in Europe and is assisted by a committee of independent experts;
- Culture and Education Committee, responsible for media, youth, sport and communication;
- Committee on Sustainable Development, responsible for environmental affairs, space and urban planning;
- Committee on Social Cohesion on issues concerning employment, citizenship, migration, inter-community relations, equality between women and men and solidarity;

4. The reality of Albanian cities

Cities belong to citizens and are an economic, social and cultural good that must be transmitted to future generations. Albanian cities are not aware of their new role as a major center of initiatives and creativity. They are already the place where new ways of living, a new social familiar reality, and the flexibility of labor relations are presented. As an indicator for the measuring of urbanization is taken the participation of the population, which normally lives in cities, from the entire population. Democratization and regime change in Albania is the main factor which accelerated the process of urbanization. In western cities civilization feels consolidated with its urban development, whereas in developing countries, urbanization features are attracting the mass more than the civilization within it. The displacement of population rural areas to the city is often anarchic and uncontrolled impossible to be controlled by the state or to be regulated by norms of civilization. The urbanization of the Albanian cities has its positive and negative sides. The positive aspects of urbanization are:

The merging of the virtues of traditional rural population into urban contemporary ones raising the cultural level of education, reduction of population growth, socialization of population etc. The negative aspects of urbanization are: greater pressure on jobs, the pressure on the stock of buildings, transport problems, air pollution, noise, alienation of people, crime, etc.

Urbanization in Albania has gone through three stages since the fall of communism. The first phase was dominated by the informal sector. The second phase was characterized by consolidation and the emergence of the informal sector to the formal sector. The third and current phase consists in strengthening the formal sector and the informal development regulation.

The main objective of the third phase government would formalize and integrate the real estate market. New construction and urbanization in the first two phases have been spontaneous and with little interference from the central government

In this transition period, our cities have been among the first to have felt the general issues relating to the free movement of citizens, new construction, major social and economic changes; increasing social inequality, deepening unemployment, problems in neighborhoods of the city, increasing migration, aging population, mass use of vehicles etc. Another threat that is facing our cities is also the changing of the environment. In a way cities have faced and are facing major challenges.

If we would talk about good urban models of our cities, we can say that they are lacking and this is already a serious concern. The expansion of our cities in the best of cases has not considered a clear functional separation among

residential areas, industrial areas; areas dedicated to leisure, etc. which has led to a massive ecological destruction of our cities' climate. This model has increased abuse of power and weighs even more the environmental damage that is caused. It is not that we are following a "good policy" and the damage caused by it is obvious.

Local government in Albania (without denying the importance of having great central government) will have to keep in mind and implement the basic principles of European Urban Charter to have in the near future cities with a European vision.

Our cities need to rethink about compact urban forms that require minimal resources for their operation and allow citizens to have access to their residences in different structures for which they need, as well as urban services, leisure places, in natural parks and areas. Only consistency and sustainability of our cities will make urban spaces easier and more accessible for all people regardless of their social background, age or health status.

This will not only be a step towards improving the quality of our lives, but a necessary precondition for the prosperous development of our territories. Only a sustained commitment can really deliver results for future projects.

The issue of housing is of great importance, but not the only one. Population movements, which in recent years have contributed to the continued growth of our cities has resulted in many of our cities in a housing crisis, which led to increased land prices, property and residential apartments. Other issues which have not yet found the solution in our cities deal with urban transport, urban heritage, citizen participation in urban planning, public spaces and natural parks, which are almost absent etc.

From the above analysis there is a general problem associated with the size of the development of our cities today, putting us ahead not easy challenges, which have never been more important than now.

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