Policy Alignment Perspectives for a Transforming Climate Action in the EU



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Over the last decades, the European Union has emerged as an international climate leader (Wurzel et al., 2010). The action foreseen by the EU institutions to comply with international agreements has been transposed to policy frameworks implemented at the country level. The EU directives have created national obligations concerning this policy field but in a few cases, the strategies and plans passed in the different Member States (MS) have involved policy obligations for cities. Only the United Kingdom (former Member State), France, Denmark, and Slovakia have created regulatory frameworks that oblige cities to develop their climate strategies (Reckien et al., 2018). Because of this, the Europeanization of

the climate local policy has taken place mainly through the influence of cities' networks such as the Covenant of Mayors (Kern et al., 2009), launched with the support of the European Commission in 2008, and the relevant involvement of cities in transnational EU programmes for climate action or to advance research and practice in an interrelated manner (De Gregorio Hurtado, 2014). These vectors of Europeanization explain the general similar approach with which cities in different countries, with highly different vulnerabilities and public policy traditions, are acting to mitigate and to adapt to climate change in the EU.

This two-levels-action explains also to a relevant extent the insufficient integration in terms of policy coordination among EU-led national climate and local climate policies in many MS. The policy gap among the two levels is bigger in the most "reactive countries" (the countries that have developed their climate action mainly as a result of the EU directives transposition).

While, in general, the national level pursues climate international and EU goals highly determined by its policy priorities, funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund (CF), cities are implementing mitigation and adaptation measures through specific climate strategies, or in an indirect way through sectoral plans and measures highly determined by other policy fields that face urgent pressing risks (as the quality of the air in bigger cities, the heat island effect in dense urban areas, etc.) or that fall within more "mature" policy fields (e.g. urban mobility and transport, energy, building rehabilitation, etc.).

Putting attention on how national and local climate policies have evolved from a Europeanization perspective in the MS is highly relevant in the present scene. This is because:

i) The role that cities need to play to achieve the national and EU climate objectives (and particularly to achieve carbon neutrality in 2050). In an "urban world" in which cities are empowering themselves as crucial climate actors, and in which the international frameworks have legitimized and enhanced their protagonist role (e.g., the Paris Agreement, the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, the New Urban Agenda), the European Commission has expressed its engagement to offer a voice to the local level in the negotiations for the definition of the urban dimension of the Cohesion Policy and the Green Deal for the programming period post-2020. The design and implementation of both

policies are understood as multi-level processes in which cities are recognized as actors that need to have a sit in the table. Cities will also be crucial in the framework of the recently announced "Marshall Plan for the EU" within the future Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) that aims to be a European answer for the Corona-crisis. According to the words of President Von der Leyen (*Speech of The European Commission President, Ursula Von der Leyen, in the evening of the 16th April 2020*), this plan will be aimed to enhance public and private investment and to revive the economy creating new jobs. Because of all this, this instrument has the potential to become the very expected opportunity to invest in the local mitigation and adaptation to climate change as strategic sectors to boost the economy and reinforce social cohesion at the EU level.

ii) At the same time, the Member States have submitted recently their route-maps to meet the EU's energy and climate targets for 2030, the so-called National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs) introduced under the Regulation on the governance of the energy union and climate action (EU/2018/1999). These plans, along with the legislation for their implementation (e.g. the Spanish Government working on the Climate Change Act) will set the framework in which the different actors will have to face the decarbonization of the economy and the adaptation to climate change effects in the short and medium-term. They will determine the role that the lower levels of government need to play in this regard (the regions, metropolitan areas, counties, cities, etc., who emerge as crucial stakeholders to achieve the carbon reduction), but also how to do it in a coherent regenerative and socially fair manner, taking into account territorial differences through place-based action.

The observation of this juncture identifies a timely policy opportunity. This is because the current scene offers the possibility to align and further integrate national and local action through EU procedures and norms with real potential to be incorporated in the logic of domestic (national and sub-national) discourses and public (climate) policies (Radaelli, 2003). This could happen if in the following MFF the NECPs are set as the route-maps to enhance local climate action counting on the support of the ESIF Funds. The alignment between the NECP and the local climate action enhanced by EU funding and instruments could be formalized through:

- The urban dimension of the EU policy that will ring-fence 6% of the ERDF in each MS for sustainable urban development from 2021. The urban

dimension should fully integrate the climate issue through concrete measures based on place-based solutions in coherence with the NECPs and the local climate plans. This can be transformative at the EU level, as this policy has demonstrated its capability to build local capacity in big, medium, and small cities and to boost innovation. EU cities need to count within this framework on instruments that allow them to innovate (providing them time and funding to test climate solutions in the field of sustainable urban and territorial development).

- To stress the relationship between the climate plans developed by cities and the NECPs. For that, the NECPs could benefit from EU funding to incentivize cities to develop their local mitigation and adaptation plans (e.g. similar existing instruments incentivize cities and/or metropolitan areas to develop their sustainable mobility plans, to implement sustainable urban development strategies following the principles of the Urban Acquis of the EU, etc.).
- To analyze how the New Deal can contribute, in the framework of the proposed "Marshall Plan", to the objectives of the PNECs by acting through climate local strategies. For this, local climate plans should focus on strategic sectors (e.g. public spaces and buildings in the EU offer a relevant field for climate mitigation and adaptation and, at the same time, they provide a substantial area for job creation and to advance social cohesion, etc.).

The present moment has been defined as a "turning point in the future of Europe". These words pronounced in January 2020 in the Cities Forum by Commissioner Elisa Ferreira are today even more significant because the COVID-19 sanitary and socio-economic crisis is making the socio-economic and environmental vulnerabilities of EU cities and the risk of de-Europeanization more pressing and visible. The reinforcement of the coherence of the multi-level EU climate policy emerges in the current scene as an opportunity to root local climate action in the core of the EU economic response to this crisis, acting on place-based integrated projects that leave no one behind.

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