

RE-THINKING LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN POST-COMMUNIST COUNTRIES: THE CONCEPT OF URBAN TASK FORCES AND ITS APPLICATION IN THE STATUS PROJECT

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While there is a vast literature on the specific problems of small and middle-sized towns in Europe, the effect of planning issues on development opportunities in post-communist countries in these towns has been less documented. In this case, the centralist approach and focus on obsolete normative planning often determines a weak capacity of local authorities and lack of stakeholder involvement in strategic planning processes.

The STATUS project (Strategic Territorial Agendas for "Small and Middle-Sized Towns" Urban Systems) in South-East Europe can be regarded as an attempt to stimulate a paradigm shift in local governance and integrated development in lower tier cities from several post-communist countries. The aim of the project was to design strategic territorial agendas (flexible urban programming tools transposing the results of local workshops into a coherent strategic planning document) for ten partners, based on a participative planning methodology. Through the STATUS project the concept of territorial cohesion was put into practice, making it easier to grasp by decision makers at different levels and defining a governance framework that facilitates a more effective and efficient use of EU structural funds.

This paper overviews the Strategic Territorial Agendas realized in six partner cities located in post-communist countries, with a special focus on the future implementation of these agendas by the Urban Task Forces (UTF). Crystallized during the STATUS project, the latter comprise the most relevant local stakeholders interested in local development. Benefiting, in some cases, from cooperation platforms known as Urban Centers, the UTF can be regarded as an alternative governance framework for ensuring the integration and correlation of sectorial projects at local or metropolitan level.

Keywords: Participative Planning, Small and Middle-Sized Towns, Stakeholder involvement

1. Introduction

The paper is based on the authors' experience in the design and content management of the project STATUS (Strategic Territorial Agendas for "Small and Middle-Sized Towns" Urban Systems), initiative financed by the European Commission under the programme SEE 2007-2013 (South East Europe, assignment running from January 2013 to December 2014). The SEE programme was an instrument that, in the framework of the Regional Policy's Territorial Cooperation Objective of EC, aimed to improve integration and competitiveness in an area (namely Balkans and Adriatic Sea Basin) by presenting, from a geopolitical viewpoint, multiple and articulated identities and sensitive urban questions. STATUS tackled the problem of incoherent urban and regional development in South Eastern European countries by jointly developing an approach that can assist cities in designing integrated and sustainable urban agendas and place based strategies by practice of participatory planning tools (Elisei, 2014a).

Out of the ten territorial partners in the project (Figure 1), six are located in post-communist countries: Montenegro (Herceg Novi), Romania (Alba Iulia, Baia Mare, Satu Mare), Republic of Moldova (Bălți),

Republic of Serbia (Temerin). The aim of this paper is to analyze how the work accomplished in project STATUS has managed to propose an alternative, integrated and participatory planning model in countries where planning systems are often regarded as obsolete and strongly focused on normative and regulatory aspects.

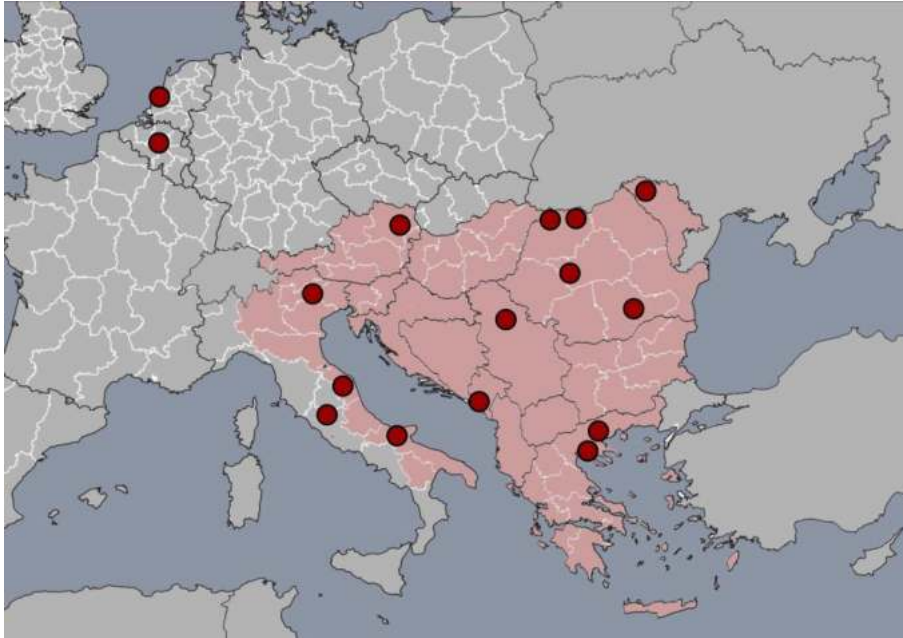


Figure 1. The STATUS project partnership (authors' contribution)

2. Background

Small and middle-sized towns comprise 72% of the European population (OIR, 2006), as 97.9 % of the European cities have a population of under 100,000 inhabitants (Elisei, 2014b). Consequently, there is a need to shift focus in at EU level from High Density Urban Clusters (HDUC) to smaller urban settlements, as a matter not only of policy relevance, but also of spatial justice (Servillo et al, 2014).

Overshadowed by larger urban agglomerations, small towns need to find local solutions to capitalize their endogenous potential, often by strengthening their social and cultural networks (OIR, 2006). However, problems with strategic planning culture are evident in partners in post socialist countries, which often fall short in ensuring coherent long-term development and even access to EU funds.

Strategic planning should be centred on the elaboration of a mutually beneficial dialectic between top-down structural developments and bottom-up local uniqueness (Albrechts, 2004). In the first ten post-revolution years, planning practices in post-socialist countries showed a growing interest, especially from capital cities, in going strategic (Tsenkova, 2005). From the Baltics to the Balkans, cities have gone through a process of strategy development with a varied degree of success (Buckley and Tsenkova, 2001; Maier, 2000; Nedovic-Budic, 2001). This first generation of strategic plans usually have been an “import” of models and methodologies from western planning cultures, but again the ownership of these instruments has been limited to elites and not fully participated by an enlarged arena of urban actors. To generate planning results through participative approaches is still something to achieve, as we still deal and strive with political and technocratic legacy generated in those years. During socialism, strategic

planning was done in the upper echelons of political power, but planners were still called upon to determine how the goals handed down by the bureaucracy will be incorporated in urban space (Stanilov, 2007). Pre-1989 normative plans and procedures, in the post-communist planning environment, were considered to be no more effective and efficient as they represented the legacy of a system shaped according to some principles inspired by the ideology of that time: fast industrialisation, egalitarian development, containment of the built-up areas and collective housing in high density residential areas (Elisei and Pascariu, 2012).

There is a tendency in strategic planning to ensure the design of strategies which allow both the participation of various stakeholders and multi-source funding (Ciaffi, 2005). In this context, new governance allows for a successful integration of horizontal and vertical initiatives and actors, thus including citizens, enterprises, different municipality departments and other public institutions by realizing shared projects (Weeber et al, 2011). While the cooperation between groups to achieve a common goal is referred to as governance, in the case of the EU, where the actors involved can be located at different levels of government, the term multi-level governance is used (Grisel & van de Wart, 2011).

Multi-level governance indicates cooperation among the various players in a vertical order, involving national, regional and local players in the design and implementation of EU policies. But it has its horizontal dimension as well, in compliance with the EU principles of subsidiarity and partnership. The provisions for setting up partnerships at local/regional level and the need for involving relevant stakeholders into planning, programming and implementation of interventions, had already been part of the Structural Funds regulations since 1988. The aim of good governance hasn't changed since then: it requires commitment, involvement and engagement at the various levels of governance. Consequently, the problem of multilevel governance mostly concerns the ways of coordinating activity between and across levels of government, while also taking into account subsidiarity, a key organizing principle of the EU system (Grisel & van de Wart, 2011). It is recommended that bottom-up and top-down processes be integrated within multi-level governance models, as the former refers to an extensive degree of motivation while the latter guarantees resources and specialized means (Ciaffi, 2005).

Tasan-Kok & Vranken (2011) single out spatial policy instruments that are designed to facilitate integrated action from a spatially, administratively and sectorial point of view in a multi-dimensional setting by taking into consideration environmental, social, cultural and organisational aspects. The local actions plans, defined as such instruments, must be developed at local level within a framework established at a higher level of public governance hierarchy. The main aim of this kind of instruments is to avoid fragmented interventions and replace them with strategic interventions which seek integrated actions with a multi-dimensional, multi-actor and multi-scalar setting for achieving better results (Tasan-Kok & Vranken, 2011).

The advantages of participatory instruments are manifold: they focus on goals by creating a framework for structuring diffuse discussion, they are democratic as they ensure the equal participation of all members in the group and are efficient as workshops can bring quick outcomes and answers. In participatory planning approaches, it is crucial to involve target groups into the early stages of the project, as community engagement in the beginning can determine the effectiveness of strategy development and implementation in later stages (Demeter, 2012).

The STATUS project, shortly described below, has placed a great focus on these kinds of participatory instruments, knowing that widening stakeholder involvement and building social networks contribute to the institutional capital (Healey, 1998), with the Urban Task Forces considered to be partnership structures where stakeholders share planning and decision-making responsibilities, strongly resembling

planning committees (Arnstein, 1969) or URBACT Local Support Groups. The introduction of the participatory approach has been a great challenge especially in post-communist countries, where the heritage determined weak local governance systems (Elisei, 2014b).

3. STATUS project: Objectives and Methodology

The STATUS project's overall objective was to assist city authorities of the SEE countries in developing Strategic Territorial/Urban Agendas (ST/UA), depending on the scale of the partners' institutional territorial management, as a tool for sustainable and integrated development, and in implementing Urban Centers (UC). Finally, generated practices and emerging city networks have been archived and promoted through the SEE Web Platform (SEE-WP – www.seecityplatform.net).

STATUS project's main challenge was defining locally rooted urban projects, based on a strong involvement of local communities in the creation of Urban Task Forces, inspired by the URBACT Local Support Group model. The project served as a platform to observe urban community action in South-East Europe states, many of them post-socialist and still operating through centralistic top down decision making, through the interaction with new governance contexts, where strategic territorial and urban decisions are being shared (Elisei, 2014a).

STATUS is structured in three main phases (Figure 2):

1. Analysis
2. Urban programming
3. Creation of urban centers

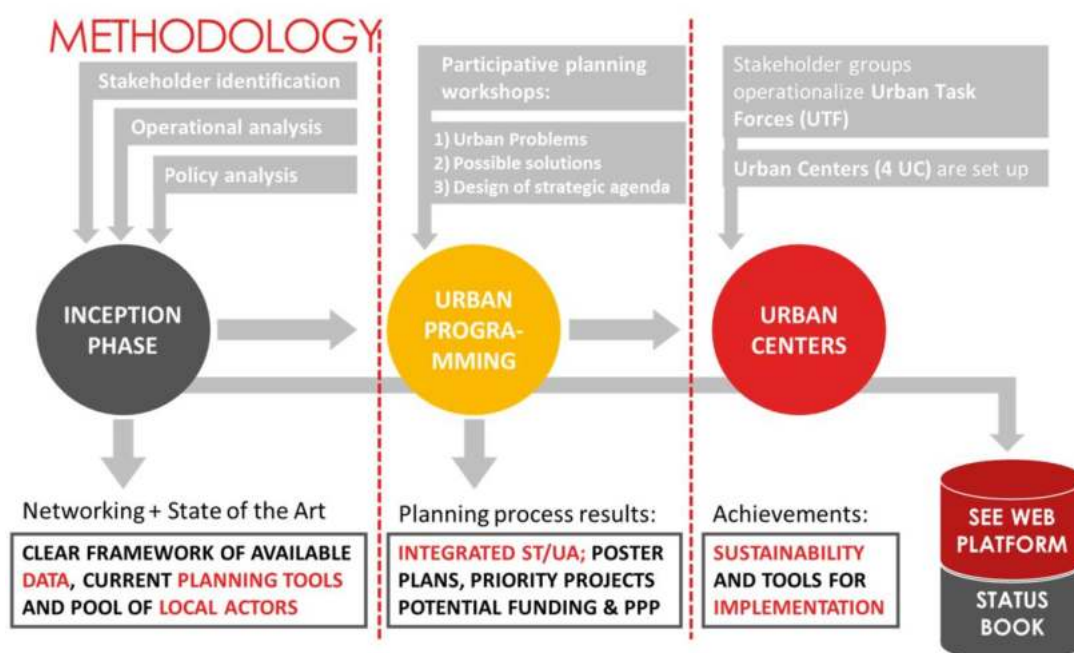


Figure 2. STATUS Project Methodology (authors' contribution)

The first phase has been designed proposing a set of activities that permit planners to assess the current planning “state of art” in the partner territories, from stakeholder analysis to operational analysis and the assessment of each partner’s planning framework.

The second phase was based on the realization, in each partner city, of three workshops involving stakeholders and citizens and focusing on (1) problem identification in a set of planning domains, (2) identification of solutions through the creation of local working groups helped by international experts in town and regional planning and (3) design of the final strategic planning document and graphical representation (poster plan). STATUS aimed at finding the right solution to operationalize the concept of integrated territorial approach, thus the result was named a Strategic Integrated Urban/Territorial Agenda and not a plan, a flexible urban programming tool transposing the results of the local workshops into a coherent strategic planning document which contains the vision, mission, action plan and monitoring. Moreover, the Agendas were designed to be also a tool for future partnership and negotiation with the national and EU levels, containing a portfolio of the flagship projects for each city together with the potential funding sources and local, regional and national opportunities for partnership.

The last phase, which will be further detailed in this article, related to the consolidation of an Urban Task Force (UTF) from the stakeholders involved in the three urban programming workshop, with the opportunity to finance the realization of urban Centers as physical places to be run by the UTFs (Figure 3).

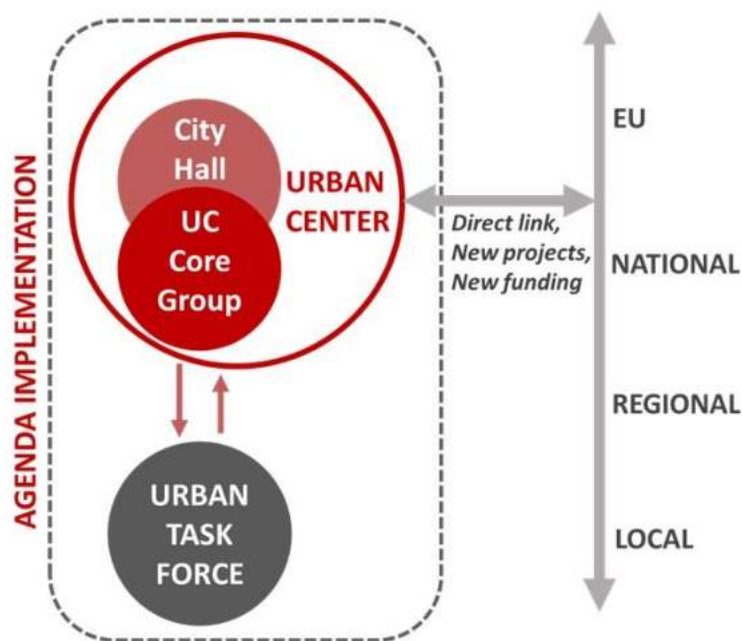


Figure 3. The relation between Urban Task Forces and Urban Centers

Urban centers are places generated by the experience of participation initiated through the STATUS methodology. In these places the continuous urban dialogue that will monitor the agenda results in the incoming years will be generated, but, very important, they will represent the engine of future development initiatives in involved partners' areas.

Synthetically we can describe the role of an Urban Center as (Ginocchini, 2014):

- A *Megaphone*, explaining the city's evolution and promoting its projects and programmes
- An *Antenna*, collecting the ideas received from civil society;
- An *Arena*, a platform for publicly discussing urban projects, with the possibility to thus influence public policy

In the following section, an analysis of Strategic Agenda provisions and Urban Task Forces in the six territorial partners located in post-communist countries will be realized, with the progress regarding the implementation of urban Centers also being taken into account.

4. UTFs – a local governance framework for implementing Strategic Agendas

This section is based on contributions from the territorial partners regarding their process of designing the Strategic Agendas and consolidating their Urban Task Force during the STATUS project.

In the city of **Bălți** (Republic of Moldova), the Strategic Urban Agenda has had a great focus on the revitalization of the city's central area, with the five priority projects related to public space interventions and the provision of different services to the population. The Urban Task Force will function on the basis of a *Regulation on the functioning of the Urban Task Force* and a *Partnership Agreement*, being directly supported by the administration of the City Hall of Bălți municipality. The interesting part about the Urban Task Force in this case is its division into three working groups of *Expert Teams*: (1) economic field group, (2) socio-cultural field and (3) public space field. An Urban Center was also created, as a division within the Local Public Administration managed by the team involved in the implementation of the STATUS project. While created for the specific focus of providing a platform for the implementation of the Strategic Urban Agenda, the Urban Center has become a talking point and is currently promoted as a tool for urban planning and development at the „Upper-Prut” Euro-region level. The sustainability of activities will be ensured by the additional role of the Urban Development Center to constantly search for opportunities and new sources of funding to implement new projects designed together with the Urban Task Force

In the case of **Herceg Novi** (Montenegro), the Strategic Urban Agenda was focused on developing tourism and infrastructure, with the target being to establish the city as a well-established, all year-round touristic destination. The Urban Task Force that emerged throughout the participatory workshops gathered great array of stakeholders: representatives of the public sector, NGOs, planning and engineering experts, professional association representatives, as well as representatives from institutions at national level. This has been an important step forward, if we take into account the fact that, at the beginning of the project, local public authorities had identified weak local public participation as one of the priority problems in the area.

Based on the paradigm of integrated sustainable development, the Strategic Urban Agenda in the city of **Alba Iulia** (Romania) contained projects from all development axes for the 2014-2030 period. The Urban Task Force gathered not only representatives of the local public authority (the city manager, municipal chief architect and directors of the departments of urban planning, environment, mobility and finance), but also other qualified stakeholders from both private sector and civil society: business, academics, NGOs, cultural institutions etc. As a result, more than 30 people are expected to continue to contribute in the implementation of the priority projects proposed by the new Strategic Urban Agenda. While Alba Iulia has not developed an Urban Center within the STATUS project, guidelines for its future development have already been drafted, with special attention being given to the management team of the urban center which would be needed to ensure its financial and functional feasibility.

Baia Mare (Romania) was the only territorial partner in the STATUS project that had its Strategic Agenda designed at metropolitan level. The priority projects selected with the aid of local stakeholders focused mostly on economic development through the creation of a wood-industry cluster related to future industrial parks, as well as on infrastructure development – road network, water and sewage and waste management. Consequently, the Metropolitan Task Force (MTF) formed within the STATUS

project was conceived as an executive entity responsible for preparing and monitoring the implementation of the Strategic Territorial Agenda. Its creation was based on a partnership agreement which was signed between the Metropolitan Area Association, local public authorities at county and local level, professional associations and private companies providing utilities or public transport services. The Metropolitan Center, as the physical space where the Metropolitan Task Force will function, has been established in the premises of the Baia Mare Metropolitan Area Association's headquarters as a „factory of ideas”. The Center's scope is to promote of the efforts undertaken by the Baia Mare Metropolitan Area Association and MTF, while also being the place to collect feedback upon the initiated project proposals. The Metropolitan Center is to ensure its resilience through various means, from constituting the reference point for local knowledge incubator, creative think-tank for wider metropolitan opportunities and facilitating schemes, territorial planning center bridging the private sector and community engagement, as well as a “polis theatre” in accommodating harmonised needs within the metropolitan area, in its capacity of implementing the BMMA Strategic Agenda.

In *Satu Mare* (Romania), the Strategic Urban Agenda included projects related to diverse domains such as accessibility, environment, energy efficiency, tourism development, social and economic development or public administration. The Urban Task Force consisted of a number of stakeholders and City Hall experts who had already been involved in the participatory process of designing the Strategic Agenda. In Satu Mare, the envisaged role for the UTF is that of a consultative body whose main role will be to monitor the implementation of the strategy. The UTF members are set to assume different tasks according to their individual domain of expertise, with the overall structure being flexible enough to allow, if necessary, the creation of thematic or project-based workgroups.

The strategic priorities for the Municipality of *Temerin* (Republic of Serbia) included brownfield redevelopment, tourism and recreational development in areas with historical heritage and eco-farming. The Urban Task Force has included a wide range of experts: a University professor in regional studies, a traffic engineer, an urban planner, an architect, a civil engineer, a regional development specialist, a business cluster manager, an industrial designer, an economist and a lawyer, who have all been involved in the elaboration of the Strategic Urban Agenda. The UTF is shaped as a non-formal association with the primary mission of working on the ideas, methods and tools of proposed in the Strategy.

The Urban Task Forces of the post-socialist countries in STATUS are as diverse as the subjects tackled in their Agendas, but nevertheless there is a core common understanding of their overall role and importance in ensuring the sustainability of the initiative started by the project.

For the partners analysed in this article, which have understood that their participatory processes are very much at the beginning of the roadmap towards true, active and lasting community co-creation of planning instruments, it was important to focus also on *form*: clear provisions on future activities of the UTF and UC, on frequency of meetings and organizational framework, in order to keep the momentum going.

However, in the case of all partners, the aim of creating the Urban Task Forces has been to ensure lasting effects of the actions employed during the project, through a negotiated, better informed and long-term involved local dialogue. Further than that, it was each of the six cities' prior experience and focus of the agenda which made the difference between structure, composition and future activities of the UTFs.

5. Conclusions

The STATUS Project represented a test bed for participatory and integrated area-based strategies for urban areas, focusing cohesion policy resources on performance-yielding interventions, collaboration,

capacity building and fund integration. During its two-year implementation period, it managed to prove an important point – that, given the opportunity of experience exchange between international experts, cities of the more advanced parts of Europe in terms of participatory planning and cities of the ex-EasternBloc, the latter can create and implement the tools necessary to transition from traditional planning to an integrated territorial approach, and truly capitalise on the potential of public participation. It proved that small and middle-sized cities from Romania, Moldavia, Montenegro and Serbia can move away from deterministic and rule-driven planning and invest themselves into adopting, through co-ownership and a collaborative process, a flexible strategy to reach their goals.

Yet the STATUS project has been a guided process, and its main challenge still lies ahead. The future of the Strategic Agendas and set-up local processes lies with both the administrations and the stakeholders which have been involved in STATUS: the Urban Task Forces will need to self-organize and take ownership of the flagship projects designed in the Agendas, while the local administrations will need to ensure a steady investment into the management of the project portfolio and its implementation, making the most out of the European, national and local funding opportunities.

In this sense, the EU Member State cities (Baia Mare, Satu Mare, Alba Iulia, all in Romania) have an advantage: the Partnership Agreements signed for the 2014-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework provide very important funding opportunities for the flagship projects of the Agendas, as well as a framework for the use of two new, innovative tools for integrated development: Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) and Community-Led Local Development (CLLD).

Last but not least, continuing the legacy of STATUS is not just about implementing the co-designed projects of the Agendas, but also keeping new ideas and projects coming, as the needs of the city and its inhabitants change. Perhaps the most important lesson which the partners have learned in STATUS is that the traditional planning instruments and top-down attitude are obsolete tools for fostering coherent urban development, and that the latter can be achieved only by sharing power and adopting more flexible, inclusive and integrated tools. The catalysts for these changes should be the Urban Centers, as participation outlets where the future development of the cities can be monitored, intervened upon should the conditions and opportunities change and further shaped through the generation of new ideas and new projects.

The Strategic Agendas and participatory processes out of which the Urban Task Forces and Urban Centers crystallized responded very well to these challenges so far, and as they are highly replicable instruments, they could be successfully promoted and developed in other post-communist countries and cities that also lack other operational planning instruments.

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