

THE 'EUROPEAN CITY' AT THE CROSSROADS: FOUR ANALYTICAL ELEMENTS FOR UNDERSTANDING CONVERGENCE AND DIFFERENTIATION

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Received: December 2022; accepted November 2023

ABSTRACT

This theoretical contribution explores the use of four analytical elements to understand European cities' commonalities and distinctive characteristics in the face of the challenges presented by structural global changes and supra-national governance mechanisms: sovereignty, policy, politics, context. The article shows how institutional and contextual opportunities mediate globalization's repercussions to varying degrees at the urban level, according to national and regional dynamics and institutional frameworks as well as urban governance structures. Additionally, the article argues that the local policy capacity of cities and their ability to innovate and deal with new social challenges are shaped by the interplay among the four specific elements mentioned before.

Key words: European cities; urban policies; socio-spatial inequalities; local welfare; multilevel policies

INTRODUCTION

European cities have attracted considerable theoretical and empirical attention ever since Max Weber (1978) identified the prerequisite conditions for the development of capitalism in medieval occidental cities (Kazepov and Cucca 2018). Subsequently, scholars from different disciplines have attempted to highlight their distinctive characteristics and trace their development and changing nature. From this perspective, the study of the European city becomes a peculiar way of looking into the broader role of cities in the development of specific social, political and economic outcomes and the possible role played by contextual factors. In fact, the complex layering of social, economic, political and cultural history does not allow to identify one single European

city model (Pinol *et al.* 2003). Rather, it has led scholars to identify a common heritage, paralleled by differentiating factors. While political economy perspectives of urban globalization tend to generalize the economic pressures upon cities' socio-political transformations (see Brenner 2011), recent European research has stressed the institutional context of cities as collective actors (see Le Galès 2002; Kazepov 2010; Musterd *et al.* 2017; Cucca and Ranci 2022).

In this article, we offer a new theoretical contribution to the debate, focusing on four analytical elements that play an important role in shaping European cities' commonalities and distinctive characteristics. We consider both structuralist accounts of global convergence (Brenner *et al.* 2010) and institutionalist accounts of regional divergence

(Rodríguez-Pose 2018). By doing so, we combine various analytical elements used in urban studies to understand how the particular modes of regulation mediate globalization's repercussions differently at the urban level. We provide this by reviewing the relevant theoretical literature and European comparative urban studies, focusing on socio-spatial inequalities, local welfare and social cohesion policies published over the past two decades.

According to our understanding, structural global challenges interact and affect local contexts in different ways, being filtered by specific national and regional institutions, urban governance structures and socio-economic peculiarities. This complex interaction affects cities' degrees of freedom, their local policy capacity and their ability to innovate and deal with new challenges and social needs.

In order to unpack these mechanisms and their outcomes, in the following sections, we present four analytical elements that in our opinion are useful to investigate every city (Kazepov *et al.* 2022), which – in their specific intersection – help us to understand converging and diverging trends among European cities: (1) *sovereignty*, which pertains to the territorial organization of regulatory jurisdictions, their legitimacy and the distribution of powers and responsibilities in multilevel institutional arrangements; (2) *policy*, which pertains to the institutional design connected to specific regulatory principles that might be scale-specific; (3) *politics*, which unfolds within the arena constituted by the aforementioned two elements, steering how regulatory designs and policies are implemented on the basis of the interaction between different stakeholders, both public and private as well as for- and not-for-profit and, complementing these three more institutional elements, (4) the *context*, which provides the actual configuration of needs that regulatory jurisdictions have to cope with, and where policies are implemented and exert their effects.

In the final section, we conclude with some remarks on common and diverging trends currently emerging in European cities, highlighting possible pathways for research. We argue that the peculiar interaction among the four

analytical aspects we present gives rise to increasingly diversified urban regimes in Europe, characterized by different policy capacities to deal with recent social challenges.

FOUR ANALYTICAL ELEMENTS FOR UNDERSTANDING CONVERGENCE AND DIFFERENTIATION

In the early 2000s, Weber's notion of the 'occidental city' gained momentum in urban studies as an analytical concept for understanding the defining characteristics of a 'European city model' (Le Galès 2002; Häußermann 2005), compared to global (Sassen 2005), Asian (Wu and Keil 2023) or African cities (Simone 2008). In particular, consideration of a 'European city' – as a social and political actor with a higher degree of autonomy than is true of big metropolises in other parts of the world – has been used to contrast the overall pessimistic views concerning the declining significance of cities as actors in a globalizing world (Bagnasco and Le Galès 2000).

From the 1970s, neo-Marxist geographers envisioned the production of urban patterns, necessitating a broader analysis of the overall socio-economic structures of individual actions (Harvey 1973). In particular, Harvey's work on 'urban entrepreneurialism' (1989) paved the way for analyses of the processes of 'urban neoliberalization' as an overall converging trend (see Peck *et al.* 2013; Robinson 2011; see also Rossi and Vanolo 2015).

However, critical positions on the inexorable trend driven by neoliberalism have emerged, which reject a homogeneous convergence thesis (see Clarke 2008; Venugopal 2015; Le Galès 2016; Storper 2016). While recognizing the emerging trend towards urban convergence in different cities, a growing body of literature stresses differences and variations in their socio-economic and -political transformation, resulting in the place-specific outcomes of the neoliberal turn.

In contrast to the neo-Marxist assumption regarding the neoliberal configuration of cities in global capitalism, renewed interest in the Weberian perspective on modern

cities saw cities as differing in terms of their distinctive national and local institutional arrangements, dependent on their own governance regimes (Isin 2003). Scholars in this line of argument prioritized the institutional and contextual opportunity structures of cities in different regions of the world, whose particular modes of regulation mediate globalization's repercussions to different extents at their specific urban level (Bagnasco and Le Galès 2000; Le Galès 2002; Häußermann 2005).

This approach saw urban governance regimes as the main determinant of the different trajectories of urban transformation and their differentiated outcomes, as exemplified in neoliberal and private market-oriented American cities or welfare-driven and less market-dependent European cities. It is at this particular point that scholars in the neo-Weberian debate saw European cities once again as 'cultural and political laboratories for participation and government' (Kazepov 2005, p. 13) and called for a context-specific intervention into the conceptualization of neoliberalism in critical urban studies (see Pinson and Morel Journal 2016).

Specifically, this strand of literature highlights the strong role of public administration in European cities, which, together with other characteristics like their small and medium size and the persisting presence of a middle and lower-middle class, have continued to mitigate inequalities and segregation (see Kazepov and Cucca 2018; Le Galès 2018). Contrary to the neoliberalisation thesis on the erosion of regulatory mechanisms in cities and regions within global capitalism, the European city model underlines the strong role of the local welfare state, the activism of municipal authorities and the presence of an active civil society in providing more equal redistribution and representation in public institutions and policies (McEwen and Moreno 2008; see also Mocca 2023).

However, there is evidence that new challenges are arising from long-standing economic restructuring in their post-industrial transition. A growing trend towards flexibilization in post-industrial European cities has meant a shift in urban policy priorities and an increased need to mediate between the traditional model of social cohesion and greater

economic competitiveness (Cucca and Ranci 2017). Together with the recalibration processes of welfare policies at the national level, these have contributed to increasing social inequalities in urban labour and housing markets in some cities and countries (see Musterd *et al.* 2017).

In this light, an emerging body of literature has increasingly touched upon the structural and institutional factors that shape the different trajectories and outcomes of such a shift in European cities. The different degrees of autonomy allocated to local authorities, for instance, are both path-dependent and the result of a territorial reorganization of social policies through ad hoc reforms, which have taken place over the past 30 years and have differed from country to country (Sellers and Lindström 2007; Barberis *et al.* 2010; Kazepov 2010). This complex process, which has changed the relationship between the nation-state and the city, is a key analytical element for understanding how the European city model changes, in particular concerning how the transformative role of governance actors is embedded in their respective regulatory capacity of specific multilevel governance settings and specific socio-economic contexts.

Nevertheless, extant research has rarely combined different spatial contexts and their transformation into a systematic analysis for understanding the role of distinctive institutional arrangements and opportunity structures of European cities. Our main hypothesis is that their capacity to respond to external pressures and their ability to innovate further may depend on the specific local interplay among four analytical elements: sovereignty, policy, politics and context. Although some reflections on the transformative role of such elements exist in comparative urban studies, our main argument is that these should be considered in a much more integrated way. It is in fact the peculiar mix they present in European cities that contribute to explain converging and diverging paths (Figure 1).

Sovereignty: The state and multilevel governance in Europe – The first element pertains to the sovereignty that a state has in defining its own policies and the territorial level to which they apply. A state can define

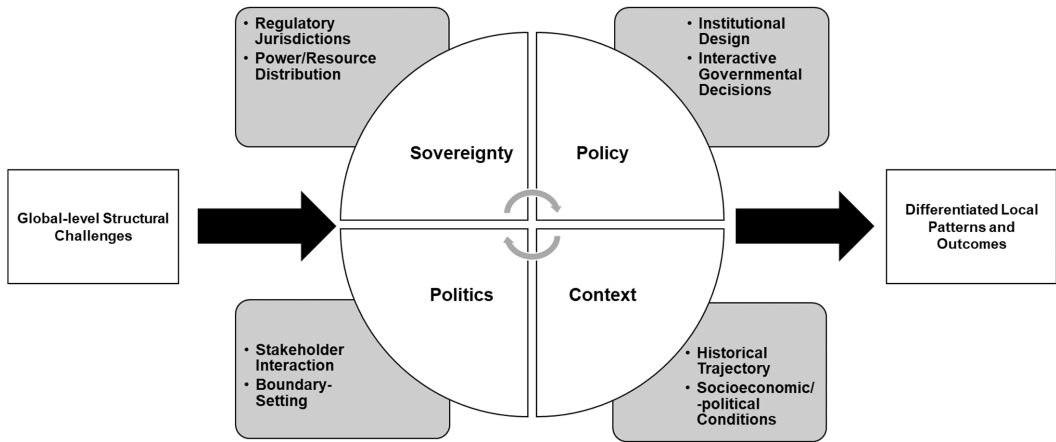


Figure 1. A heuristic model.

national policies that are to be applied to all resident citizens or adopt a state form (e.g. federalism) that devolves sovereignty over specific policy areas to lower scales of government. Certain competencies can also be decentralized to the urban level, and municipalities might additionally have some degree of freedom within their own administrative boundaries to design, finance, manage and implement-specific social policies. However, sovereignty – at least since the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) – pertains to the nation-state. This still holds true, despite tendencies to redistribute central state competencies to both higher and lower levels of authority.

The European city and its history are deeply intertwined with the parallel process of state formation (Therborn 2017). Nonetheless, their long-term transformation since the Fordist period deserves closer attention to this relationship in the context of post-war welfare state development. Regarding the specific ways in which municipalities and national states mutually influenced one another in this period, a few converging aspects bear particular importance, namely: the role of nation-states and welfare systems for the contemporary European city, and that of recent transformations in changing the relationship between the city and the nation-state.

During the post-war decades, most European countries experienced an unprecedented period of economic growth and an

increase in quality of life. Simultaneously, most Western European states expanded the scope of social protection measures to cover numerous risks stemming from old age, unemployment, housing and illness. Investigating these policies, Esping-Andersen (1990) has proposed that the different welfare regimes across western Europe were mainly the result of specific trajectories of working-class struggle. For him, the answers of national states and elites to these claims would ultimately explain the forms of decommodification and social stratification found in different countries. Whereas the strong post-war welfare states have experienced significant pressures to reduce or recalibrate spending over the past four decades (Hemerijck 2013), popular preferences for social benefits and the rise of new social risks have strongly framed the range of possible reforms (Pierson 2001).

Simultaneously, globalization made national economies ever more dependent on the logic of transnational capital flows. Globalization, therefore, appears as a rescaling of ‘socio-economic and political-institutional spaces’ (Brenner 1999, p. 431), within which state action has to be understood through dynamics occurring at different scales. In this sense, the primacy of national dynamics must include the influence of forces coming from above and below, resulting in dynamic multilevel governance arrangements.

The development of the European Union’s (EU) political and legislative capacities in the

past three decades is particularly relevant in this regard. It has not only resulted in a transnational economic space but also has affected the policy autonomy of its states in key policy areas. This can be viewed through the slow building of 'European citizenship', a system of rights and responsibilities that is no longer strictly national but rather shared across member states (Jenson 2007). For lower scales, the enshrining of subsidiarity in Article 5 of the Treaty on European Union (1992) introduced an incentive to move policy responsibilities downwards to the lowest level capable of carrying out the task. At the intersection of all these changes, it appears more important than ever to reconsider the relationship between the European city and the state through territorially more articulated lenses.

On the one hand, this should be done at the regional level, given the increasing relevance of this level of government for social and social cohesion policies in Europe and, on the other, at the supranational level (Kazepov 2010). Indeed, as much as the post-war European city could be understood through the lens of nationally centred policies, the current situation points towards a multiplicity of (vertical) levels actually involved in policy design, implementation, funding and management. *Subsidiarization*, as a result of the shifting of policy responsibilities away from the national government, has been an important trend for cities across the European Union (Kazepov and Barberis 2019). This has meant that local and regional governments have received an ever more important role in policy-making and implementation. Similarly, the issues tackled, and the range of actors involved, have been on the rise horizontally at each level.

Despite several commonalities, these processes have occurred in different ways across the continent, with various formats of devolution of responsibilities and financial resources, often closely linked to regime specificities. Unpacking the issues related to contemporary multilevel governance arrangements implies, therefore, analysing shifts and reproduction mechanisms that are important to understanding how European cities are changing today (Andreotti *et al.* 2018).

It is especially crucial to gain insight into how European cities have reacted to current transformations and their related challenges. Indeed, cities' abilities to govern social and economic transformations effectively have been challenged by the emergence of a new policy trilemma (Cucca and Ranci 2022): (1) growing social needs which demand further social cohesion policy; (2) increasing responsibility in key policy areas due to devolution programmes or the inability of central government policies to deal with critical local situations and (3) stronger financial constraints caused by austerity policies, cuts in government funding and greater central constraints on local funding and expenditure. In response to this trilemma, increasing diversification in urban policy has occurred. Cities' varying capacity to govern change is the result of a number of factors, including the specific policy orientation and capacity of local governments, the public resonance of 'neo-liberal versus progressive' discourse, the availability or lack of public funds within the national and/or European framework, and the different roles played by traditional and new social stakeholders in setting urban policy agendas (Oosterlynck *et al.* 2020).

Additionally, the institutional framework regulating the state-city relationship has become even more crucial in enabling local governments to act in favour of social cohesion (Therborn 2017). Although several researchers have highlighted the relevance of this analytical element, it remains somewhat neglected in the analysis of urban policies for social cohesion and socio-spatial inequalities in the EU. Indeed, urban governance theories view the intergovernmental relationship as contingencies that can be managed through ad hoc, contextual forms of collaborative arrangements (Bell and Hindmoor 2009). In reproducing the traditional dichotomy between structure and agency, these approaches do not adequately consider how strongly administrative rules and resources are filtered through the state-city nexus to shape urban governance, ambiguously facilitating and constraining political action (Pierre 2014).

Policy: Instruments and tools for social cohesion – The second element is *policy* and refers to policy instruments, mechanisms and

tools, through which governments attempt to realize their aims and goals (Lascoumes and Le Galès 2007). Their design is inspired by specific regulatory principles which – rooted in certain ideas of justice, deservingness and freedom – translate into precise mechanisms that also tend to produce specific outputs. Policies based on universal access criteria, for instance, are more inclusive than those based on the payment of contributions or those that are means-tested, besides the varying spatial implications that these can have. This is particularly true when they are regulated, financed, managed and implemented at different scales in varying mixes. A policy might be regulated at the national level, co-financed by the national and regional levels and managed and implemented by municipalities. Each of these mixes contributes towards defining specific borders that include or exclude (institutionally) not only individuals and social groups but also territories, recognizing rights and redistributing resources within distinct bounded communities.

Especially since the 1990s, social policies have undergone important reform processes in European countries, re-drawing the boundaries of ‘social citizenship’ and giving a more prominent role to cities and local social policies (Kazepov and Barberis 2019). This owes to the expanding role of social services for some targeted groups, such as elderly care policies, activation policies on the labour-market and social assistance schemes coupled with integration policies. At the urban level, European cities also differ largely in relation to the definition of policy instruments that are predominantly designed and implemented, targeting what are considered to be more specifically ‘urban’ issues in the social policy literature (Kazepov *et al.* 2022): housing, immigration, de-segregation and social mix, school segregation.

Housing affordability issues, for example, are increasingly afflicting large and growing cities. The retrenchment of the public housing sector in many countries and the spread of market regulation within the housing sector have jointly contributed to the growing segregation of disadvantaged groups both socially and physically. One exemplary case is the city of Amsterdam (Kadi and Musterd 2015); in

the last two decades, Amsterdam’s housing market has come under neo-liberal pressure. First, provision of de-commodified housing has lost its appeal in the context of the retreating national welfare state. Second, housing re-commodification has become an element in its entrepreneurial strategies to boost urban competitiveness. Third, the European Union pressured the Dutch government under the EU competition directives to give market principles greater purchase. According to Musterd (2022), European cities adopt two different approaches to deal with residential segregation: (a) area-based interventions in deprived areas in order to develop better infrastructure (such as the *Soziale Stadt* in German cities, see Güntner 2022) and (b) sectorial policies intended to combat social inequalities and provide more affordable housing solutions (such as Municipal Socialism in Vienna, see Kazepov and Verwiebe 2021).

Cities are not only places where specific social problems are more visible but are also contexts that are supposed to serve as platforms for innovation in social policy, as is true of migration policies at the local level, for example (Campomori *et al.* 2023). In particular, contexts with higher shares of migrants constitute fertile ground for migrant political agency, serving as battlegrounds for the acquisition of social rights (Barberis and Angelucci 2022). Such a trend has once again made European cities ‘laboratories for innovative social policies’ (Kazepov and Cucca 2018, p. 7). These challenges provide some European cities with new opportunities and capacities for local actors to compensate for the weakening role of the welfare state and to minimize the growing gap between economic competitiveness and social cohesion. At the same time, in other cities, these challenges are proving difficult to handle in the absence of a supportive system of multi-level governance.

Politics: Local agency and bottom-linked governance – Another significant factor to examine for understanding the convergence and differentiation of European cities is local politics. The territoriality of local politics is structured by governance processes, policy

execution and policy failure, collective action, organized actors and protest (Le Galès 2021). Local politics frequently includes anti-state protest, seeking alternative and informal forms of politics, sometimes against state elites. Local politics is also about day-to-day experiences with street-level bureaucracy (Hupe and Hill 2007), such as interactions with public authorities (police, social services, transportation and health care) on the one hand and illegal and/or informal activities (squatters, illegal markets and corruption) on the other, all of which are linked to the exercise of authority and conflicts.

If it is possible to generalize the importance of the national state on the development of post-war European cities, it is also important to acknowledge variations across different countries and welfare regimes. Indeed, local authorities play different roles in different countries. This is due both to the different multi-level governance settings, as described in the section above, and the role of civil society in the economic and political life of cities (see Davies and Blanco 2017). It is therefore important to stress the critical importance of the city, its inhabitants and urbanization as a driver of change and reform: what Soja defines as the 'generative power of cities' (Soja 2011, p. 218).

In this sense, one should remember that the class struggles that led to the development of the welfare state were intimately linked to the urbanized working class. The same applies to recent protests against austerity, populism and neoliberalism. In Berlin, for example, urban neighbourhood initiatives have been active in political struggles pertaining to social housing and displacement and working against racism and neoliberal urban politics. In the larger context of urban protest movements, some initiatives managed to overcome a series of political challenges and to build a long-lasting organizing practice (Hamann and Türkmen 2020). Similarly, it would be misleading to depict cities as historically passive actors in the development of welfare states. For this purpose, one must simply look at the emergence of local social policies in some cities of interwar Europe, which rivalled those of their national governments (Wagenaar and Wenninger 2020), or

more recently to the phenomenon of 'new municipalism' (see Thompson 2021).

New municipalism has arisen in recent years as a set of urban-rooted, leftist political initiatives aimed at opposing neoliberal austerity regimes. Proponents of new municipalism regard cities as a key 'entry point' for creating progressive politics through strategies carried out both by social movements and state actors, working in a conflictual/collaborative tension to change the production and reproduction of urban life and beyond, in accordance with egalitarian ideals (Russell 2019). This entails establishing a range of measures, from the formation of an independent counterpower to the use of local governmental machinery for emancipatory reasons (Mocca 2023). As a result, new municipalism seeks to pluralize local political action by overcoming state-centred party politics and democratizing public administration (see Blanco and Gomà 2020).

In many European cities, new solutions to contemporary urban and social issues are increasingly characterized by overlapping roles and responsibilities between public, private and civil society actors (e.g. public-private partnerships, social enterprises, forms of collaboration between public administrations and civil society). At the various administrative levels, municipal governments are introducing new cooperative methods for civic involvement in urban planning (Boonstra and Boelens 2011) and policy-making, offering greater power to local communities in taking control of local assets. Barcelona is often cited as an emblematic case study to understand these processes (Martínez and Wissink 2023).

To sum up, we can identify European cities in two main directions. On the one side, the re-emergence of local politics as urban politics is partly explained by the competition between cities, often fostered by the state to attract capital and educated populations. This has led to more or less entrepreneurial urban modes of governance or regimes which are well known in urban politics. On the other side, not all configurations of urban governance can be subsumed into the category of variegated neoliberalism. Several cases in Europe demonstrate that in some

circumstances, a strong culture of participatory welfarism can survive in juxtaposition with vigorous entrepreneurialism (Davies and Blanco 2017).

Context: Social needs and opportunities at the local level – The last element relates to the *context* and to the specificities within which needs are produced and policies are implemented. Context influences the impact and effectiveness of policies and is all too often neglected in (comparative) analysis. A particular measure might produce entirely different effects when implemented in a local context with a stable demographic structure, dynamic labour market, balanced socio-economic structure and strong social infrastructure compared to the very same measure in another local context characterized by a stagnating labour market, decreasing demographic trends, socio-economic polarization and a civil society less able to mobilize. Therefore, contextual differences might also substantially affect the success of a policy. This is why context-sensitivity should be built into the institutional design of every policy.

Despite a growing trend towards social and spatial inequalities in most post-industrial European cities, the varying outcomes of urban transformations in each city are the result of distinctive demographic trends, social structures and institutional arrangements that contribute to largely different trajectories and outcomes of deindustrialization (Body-Gendrot *et al.* 2012; Musterd *et al.* 2017). Since the shift towards flexibilization and specialization of urban economies, post-Fordist economic restructuring has exacerbated the repercussions of globalization and deteriorated the traditional equilibrium between economic competitiveness and social cohesion in European cities (Buck *et al.* 2005; Ache *et al.* 2008). In line with the growing depth of austerity measures at the national level, with repercussions at the urban level, a trend towards the neoliberalisation of urban economies has meant an acceleration of new forms of social and spatial inequalities that have facilitated a dualism in the occupational hierarchy (Gallie 2007) and residential segregation in housing markets (Arbaci 2019).

At the same time, the de-industrialization process has not affected regions and cities in the same way. Indeed, some cities, such as Munich, have been able to develop a production system characterized by high levels of research and innovation (Thierstein *et al.* 2017). In such cities, it would be wrong to regard the survival of the manufacturing sector as marginal or as an element of backwardness, as they result from specific local development policies promoted especially by regional and/or national strategies. By contrast, other cities have retained a more traditional segment of local production and have been affected by severe processes of decline and shrinkage, while still others (such as Leipzig) have started to grow once again after having experienced decreasing trends (Rink *et al.* 2022).

In this vein, the growing diversification of cities along socio-economic and socio-political indicators challenges the analytical homogeneity that a European city model or a welfare regime lens might produce (Ranci 2011; Tamaru *et al.* 2016). For example, Amsterdam and Vienna – which are both characterized by corporatist welfare policies and unitary housing systems – exhibit different forms of occupational and residential segregation, due to their distinctive urban regimes, spatial organizations and migration trajectories (Kazepov and Verwiebe 2021; Boterman and van Gent 2022).

The differentiation process is also taking place in cities of post-socialist Eastern Europe, of which changing patterns of socio-economic and socio-spatial segregation show variegated outcomes, despite their ‘fast-track’ transition to neoliberal capitalism (Marcinićzak *et al.* 2015; see also Serbanica and Constantin 2017). Such differentiation, which owes to the widely contrasting demographic, economic and spatial compositions of post-socialist urban environments, is most visible in the segregation trends in the capital cities of the Baltic countries. Here, the pace of neoliberal-inspired reforms of the welfare state has been particularly dramatic. Weak welfare regimes and ethnic discrimination characterize the dissimilar patterns of socio-economic and socio-spatial inequalities that have unfolded differently in each

context. In contrast, the 'paradox of post-socialist segregation' – that is, the survival of socialist regulatory mechanisms and slower privatization – has engendered a rather smooth shift towards market-oriented regulation in some cities of Central and Eastern Europe, for example, Budapest and Prague (see Tammaru *et al.* 2016).

The rise of social and spatial inequalities in European cities has been also reinforced by recent population changes, which are due especially to low birth rates, changing household types and international migration. These trends followed different dynamics according to specific historical, geographical and institutional configurations (Mykhnenko and Turok 2008). Birth and net migration rates differ considerably between cities in Western European member states and those in Central and Eastern European member states (European Union 2022). Urban shrinkage, for instance, has followed specific diversified patterns across Europe despite becoming a global phenomenon (Martinez-Fernandez *et al.* 2012; Mallach *et al.* 2017).

While the slowdown of urban growth occurred much earlier in Western European cities that never declined on average, the magnitude of shrinkage in their Eastern counterparts, where general demographic decline is far greater, has proved to be much more severe (Ferenčuhová and Gentile 2016). In Eastern European cities, such shrinkage is the joint outcome of the rapid collapse of state socialism in the early 1990s, deindustrialization and out-migration (Gentile *et al.* 2012). These trends have mutually reinforced one another, exacerbating the processes of urban decline (Steinführer and Haase 2007). The intra-European differentiation occurring in capital regions has also intensified in the past decade. More specifically, capital regions in the wealthier countries have shown an uneven increase in overall population growth rates in this period, reaching almost 10 per cent (apart from Paris). Meanwhile, the pace has been rather moderate in Southern and Eastern European cities, for example, Bucharest and Vilnius, and even negative in some cases, for example, Athens, Sofia, Riga, Rome and Zagreb (European Union 2016).

However, whether this trend can facilitate positive economic outcomes – in terms of

productivity, too – largely depends on the social and institutional capacities of cities as well as the occupational and industrial structures of their respective urban labour markets. For example, overall population decline in cities in Central and Eastern European countries is an indicator of the fact that these regions appeal less to young people and migrants alike, due to their lack of diverse employment opportunities in less specialized urban economies (see Stryjakiewicz 2022).

This is especially true for the growing number of non-EU migrants, whose accessibility to and mobility within urban labour- and housing markets are markedly more difficult than for natives and EU migrants with freedom of movement. In the majority of countries, severe housing deprivation is predominant in cities, especially in those urban contexts most affected by international migration (European Union 2016). The degree to which the growth of migrants can have a positive or negative impact on the urban environment largely depends on the interplay between socio-economic characteristics and social inclusion policies that do or do not incorporate the migrant newcomers into urban labour and housing markets (Costa and Ewert 2014). New forms of fragmentation and segregation are also becoming evident in multicultural European cities and threaten the ethos of social inclusion that had characterized them up until the post-war period (Dukes and Musterd 2012; Eizaguirre *et al.* 2012; Noy *et al.* 2012).

CONCLUSIONS

This theoretical contribution has explored the use of four analytical elements that may be helpful for understanding European cities' commonalities and distinctive characteristics in the face of the challenges presented by structural global challenges and supra-national governance mechanisms. Indeed, institutional and contextual opportunities mediate globalization's repercussions differently (to varying degrees) at the urban level, according to national and regional dynamics and institutional frameworks as well as urban governance structures (Kazepov *et al.* 2022). According to our

interpretation, the local policy capacity of cities and their ability to innovate and deal with new challenges and social needs are shaped by the interplay among the four specific elements mentioned before.

On the one side, there are still clear signs of convergence around some basic principles. The way in which European cities have developed over the long-term influences how they respond to major challenges today. This influence, through welfare policies and urban planning, has led to local contexts characterized by lower levels of social inequalities in comparison to counterparts elsewhere in the world. The ability to govern social changes shown by many European local institutions has largely been recognized internationally and still represents a key reference for planners and scholars keen on researching urban policies and strategies oriented towards social and spatial justice (see Fainstein 2010).

However, on the other side, European cities are today under strong pressure due to long-term transformations. According to *The State of European Cities 2016*, 'European cities harbour a number of paradoxes: they are relatively safe but many people feel insecure. Housing in cities is smaller but more expensive. Cities have many job opportunities but unemployment and low work intensity rates are high in many cities. Cities are more productive but poverty rates are higher in cities in some of the most productive countries' (European Commission and UN Habitat 2016, p. 110). The report provides evidence of an increasingly complex urban landscape in Europe which has been further challenged by recent crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian–Ukrainian war. The trade-off between the generally strong economic performance of a large number of European cities on the one hand and very high levels of labour-market exclusion, overcrowding and housing affordability problems in those same cities on the other, becomes more nuanced once we zoom in and investigate the interplay of the many dimensions influencing the outcome. The differences between cities within distinctive welfare regimes and political–institutional and cultural contexts are remarkable, despite the fact that most of these cities are embedded in the

capitalist system and are influenced by the dynamics of changing capitalism (Andreotti *et al.* 2018).

The new risks emerging in Europe affect young people especially, who face increasing difficulties in entering the labour market and are among the most exposed to precariousness, while also dealing with care responsibilities in their early stages of family creation. These challenges are even greater among minorities, who typically rely less on support from the family and the state (O'Reilly *et al.* 2015; see also Kilkey 2017). To this we must add that social risks are unevenly distributed across Europe and specific social risk configurations characterize each regional and urban context (Ranci *et al.* 2014). The differentiating factors – which can be socio-economic, socio-demographic or political – highlight the emergence of different and fragmented developments of the European city model(s) that require multilevel governance settings on the one side, and the ability of local institutions to deal with new social needs and problems on the other.

Few cities in Europe can still count on a supportive system of multilevel governance, characterized by a certain degree of freedom in local actions – within general coordination – that provides them with selective support from state and regional governments. However, most of them are characterized by very tight financial constraints set by central authorities, accompanied by weak financial support from the central state (Cucca and Ranci 2022). Squeezed between changing state financial support and increasing social needs, some cities are learning to innovate their policies in order to reduce the gap between emerging problems and financial constraints, eventually involving civil society actors, such as the cases of Barcelona and Berlin recently (Blanco and León 2017). In these cities, spontaneous initiatives that emerged to counteract the effects of the crisis at the community level are simultaneously serving as platforms for reciprocity and political contestation, especially on issues related to housing affordability. Other cities instead face huge problems in mitigating the social impacts of the economic crisis that started in 2008 and the austerity policies that

have followed. Despite this scenario, most European cities are still showing a great ability to govern social change. It is the capacity to close/reduce these gaps that may be interpreted as a measure of the resilience and orientation towards social justice historically characterizing the European city. In this light, future comparative research is needed to understand the different patterns of development of cities in the general European city model (Colomb and Kazepov 2023), considering the intersection between the four elements discussed in this article.

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