

Entry for *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History* (2009)

## United Cities and Local Government

United Cities and Local Government held its first Congress in 2004. Its creation signals the increasing role local authorities are eager to play in the regulation of the world order. Cross-national associations of cities have been in operation since the beginning of the 20th century, reflecting the municipalities' concern to be protagonists on the global scene. The International Union of Local Authorities, one of three groups that created UCLG, was born in 1913. Its history testifies that cities are not bursting in on the international scene in the 1990s.

The *Union Internationale des Villes* was created during the 'First International Congress of Cities and Compared Exhibition of Cities' (Ghent, Belgium, 1913). After several other attempts to organise municipalities in an international association, UIV was successful because of its solid logistic base, embedded in the socialist European networks and in the fabric of international groups created by Paul Otlet and Henri la Fontaine in Brussels. The Union executive director, Belgian socialist senator Emile Vinck, was the man behind the Union until 1948. He kept the organisation going after WW1, as a mouthpiece for self-government and a documentation network to share municipal policies and technologies information. He lured in the English speaking world municipal organizations (hence the name IULA from 1928). But he was not able to connect the Union and the League of Nations system. Organized on a national sections basis, the Union spent its early life on the knife-edge, its conferences being vital occasions to refurbish its cash flow. This changed in the mid-1930s when the German and US sections notably increased their participation. The latter, powered by Rockefeller philanthropic money and project, wanted to use the Union as a touchstone to establish a transatlantic exchange in public administration practices. The former, imbued with the Nazi project of *Neue Europa*, was eager to seize power in several international associations. The (soft) clash between those two universal ambitions oriented the Union towards the discussion of technical and administrative subjects, throughout the periodicals and conferences it had been supporting since 1913.

WW2, during which the Nazis seized upon the Union, created the conditions for its revamping. Led by its Dutch and US components, the headquarters moved to The Hague (Netherlands) in 1948. The Union began to develop a worldwide strategy to expand beyond its mostly Western domain, and to create strong links with the UN agencies. This was done in a disputed sphere, as other municipal groups were created in Europe to foster intermunicipal links and relations (Council of European Municipalities 1951, United Towns Organization 1957). Very progressively, IULA information work about 'best municipal practices' was coupled with installation, training and demonstration projects. From the 1980s, municipal autonomy and self government recovered their importance in the Union discourse. They echoed favourably the globalization discourse of the 1990s, and espoused the increasing concern for the governance of global problems. IULA played its part in the creation of successive institutions through which local authorities were called to cooperate with

UN agencies : International Council for Local Environment Initiative (1990), World Associations of Cities and Local Authorities Coordination (1996), Cities Alliance Program (1999), United Nations Committee of Local Authorities (1999). The creation of UCLG in 2004, merging IULA, United Towns Organization and the 'Metropolis' network, does not end the competition to embody the voice of local governments. Other organizations such as the Arab Towns Organisation, the Eurocities cluster or the Asian Citynet are walking their own way. But the birth of the new organisation clearly points the converging interest of local government leaders and supranational institutions, to bypass national governments in fields such as environment or development.

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Cross references : cities in cooperation and competition ; city twinning ;

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Acronyms table :

IULA : International Union of Local Authorities  
UCLG ; United Cities and Local Government  
UIV : Union Internationale des Villes