***Ildikó Egyed*[15] *– Réka Horeczki*[16] *– Szilárd Rácz* [17]**

Urban empowerment factors and issues in the context of international networks

City diplomacy, reflected in the increasing role of cities and the diminishing exclusivity of nation states in international relations, is a relatively recent phenomenon in scholarly literature. From the perspective of the nation state, it produces a vertical fragmentation of national foreign policy, while horizontal processes dominate the relations within international organisations (Marchetti 2021). Globalisation, metropolisation and the rise of networks are among the main explanatory variables behind the quest of cities to „gain a seat at the table of global diplomacy" in the post-Paris landscape of hybrid multilateralism (Bäckstrand et al. 2017, Dzebo et al. 2019). International regimes such as the UNFCCC framework rely on multistakeholder partnerships involving states and non-state actors (cities, regional governments, NGOs, corporations, financial institutions) that address global problems, with a view to improving the legitimacy of the international system. Networked forms of collaboration between cities transcend the multilateral frame, with soft power politics as the dominant means to achieving the common objectives of international organisations. The paper examines city diplomacy based on the exercise of soft power in various global policy fields. It argues that city diplomacy, as practised within transnational networks such as ICLEI, C40, U20 or the Global Covenant of Mayors, allows cities to tackle global challenges more efficiently whilst advancing their specific viewpoints and local interests in the international arena.
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Introduction

Various studies have discussed the role of cities as leading actors on the world stage by virtue of their economic, political and symbolic capital, reflecting the diminishing exclusivity of state-centric international relations. The connection between globalisation and networking is crucial. Elements of economic activity are spatially segregated, while the competitive structure of large firms and competition is becoming increasingly internationalised (this is true not only for advanced business services or new industries, but also for traditional sectors and decision-making methods). This internationalisation, the emergence of global networks, also applies to other sectors (e.g. research, climate change) and can be interpreted in terms of inter-city relations (competition/collaboration/lobbying). Analysis of European and global cooperative alliances of cities is essential for their contribution to global goals and the effective functioning of participatory democracy. The importance of examining (all types of) inter-city relations has become a priority in the 21st century, as it is no longer only nations or regions that can represent economic and political power, but also cities themselves.

The term paradiplomacy first entered academic literature in the pioneer work of Duchacek (1984) as the abbreviation of „parallel diplomacy", denoting the international activities or political agency of subnational governments and their ancilliary and subsidiary nature in the context of R. Nixon's "new federalism". Duchacek argues that these non-central actors "perforate" state sovereignty, by promoting their particularistic interests through cross-boundary, trans-regional

[15] research fellow, Institute for Regional Studies, HUN-REN Centre for Economic and Regional Studies; Papnövelde u. 22., H-7621 Pécs, Hungary; egyed.ildiko@krtk.hun-ren.hu
[16] senior research fellow, Institute for Regional Studies, HUN-REN Centre for Economic and Regional Studies; Papnövelde u. 22., H-7621 Pécs, Hungary; horeczki.reka@krtk.hun-ren.hu
[17] senior research fellow, Institute for Regional Studies, HUN-REN Centre for Economic and Regional Studies; Papnövelde u. 22., H-7621 Pécs, Hungary; racz.szilard@krtk.hun-ren.hu

and global connections (Duchacek 1988, cited by Acuto 2013b). The paradiplomacy of cities, or municipal foreign policy (Leffel 2018) gaining growing traction since the 1990s, is a relatively understudied area in mainstream political analyses of international relations (IR), particularly in non-federal contexts (see Chan 2016, Amiri 2022, Clausen 2022). According to Ljungkvist (2014), what distinguishes paradiplomacy from city diplomacy is its overwhelming focus on subnational regional actors due to its origins in comparative federalism studies. To quote Marchetti (2021, 44), city diplomacy is struggling to find a place in the traditional theoretical frameworks of international relations, which „tend to ignore the subtleties of subnational-national-international interactions". Szpak et al. (2022) note that in general, urban areas have been under-represented in IR domains, such as foreign policy analysis and the literature on international law. Likewise, the global agency and influence of cities, i.e. their ability to pursue and produce meaningful effects on the world (Gordon 2019) has received scant theoretical attention from IR scholars (Curtis 2011, Acuto 2013, Tavares 2016, Amiri-Sevin 2020, Balbim 2023, Acuto et al. 2023)**.** The United Nations (UN) provides a particularly fertile ground for exploring notions of city agency within a traditionally state centric system (Acuto et al. 2023). The limited scholarly discussions of relevance include Chadwick Alger's work on the UN system and cities in global governance where the international relations of the world are interpreted as relations among cities, and the tyranny of the nation-state unit of analysis is rejected (Alger 2014, 35). Several factors contributed to the growing legitimacy and authority of cities and local governments in international relations, *inter alia*, the development of the city focus of global governance by the UN and other international organisations (IOs) in the 1970s-1990s, and the growing prominence of the paradiplomacy of cities in the international arena since the 1990s associated with UN conferences on human rights, environmental, social and urban issues. The New Urban Agenda (NUA), for instance, was the first UN declaration that granted direct responsibility to local authorities for protecting, respecting and promoting human rights in all fields of local competence (see Da Silva 2018). The role of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN Habitat) was paramount in the gradual penetration of cities to the UN system. In 1999, the UN Advisory Committee of Local Authorities was established as an advisory body to United Nations System (UNACLA website), composed of a group of mayors representative of the global networks of local and regional authorities, involved in the implementation of the Habitat Agenda. A landmark event for international municipalism was the setting up of the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments as a consultative and coordination mechanism bringing together the major international networks of local governments, with an advisory role in key policy areas such as climate change and the New Urban Agenda. Notwithstanding their increasing advocacy for formal recognition as legitimate actors in their own standing in UN bodies, local and regional governments are still lacking formal decision-making functions despite being consulted and taken into account (see Salomón-Sanchez 2008, De Losada-Galceran-Vercher 2022).

The increasing influence of cities in economic and political decision-making

In the emerging literature on city diplomacy, "municipal internationalism", "transnational municipal networking" municipal foreign policymaking" or "paradiplomacy" are used interchangeably. The concept of city diplomacy was first introduced into academic literature by Jan Melissen and Rogier van der Pluijm (2007, 6), who define city diplomacy as the „*institutions and processes by which cities engage in relations with actors on an international political stage with the aim of representing themselves and their interest to one another*". Pluijm and Melissen (idem) see the role of city diplomacy as the decentralisation of international relations management, with cities as the main actors. The emphasis here is on the direct actions of cities and regions undertaken independently of the national sphere, with an overwhelming focus on building bridges, confidence and capacity in conflict or post-conflict areas (Terruso 2016).

According to Swiney (2020, 245) what distinguishes the city networks of earlier times focused on city-to-city twinning or providing fora for exchanging best practices from the

international city networks active today, is the attempt to access and influence the international policymaking process in novel and unprecedented ways. Acuto (2013b) conceptualizes cities as loci of governance capable of formulating collective agency in function of their embeddedness in transnational municipal networks, presented, in an actor-network theoretical framing, as "multiscalar assemblages of global governance". Taking the C40 Climate Leadership Group as an example, Acuto demonstrates how cities are not merely passive actants, but actors that can purposefully develop networked responses to engage in world political problems such as climate change and also how networks of cities (or assemblages) such as the C40 might 'supervene' the agency of their members. As pointed out by Acuto (2013b), earlier studies tended to treat cities either as the locus of international relations or subsumed as lower level governmental entities with a limited reach, whereas through their paradiplomatic engagements, cities may circumvent state-centric assumptions labelling them as „mere places". More recently, a volume of studies exploring the role of cities in international relations (Amiri-Sevin 2020, 4) has used city diplomacy as an umbrella term to describe the actions of local governments intended to raise the global profile of their cities and to influence global policies in ways that promote the interests of their constituents, highlighting the conditions under which city networks may exert agency as actors *per se*, with a capacity to shape both the global governance agenda and local governance activities. This requires, according to Balbim (2023), overcoming two limiting perspectives: (1) the Durkheimian view of cities as an additional layer of new international bureaucracy; (2) treating city diplomacy as a phenomenan exclusively related to IR. Instead, Balbim proposes a definition of city diplomacy as the constitution of spaces of power. The transforming role of cities and their networks in the state-centric global governance architecture is analysed by Szpak et al. (2022), with a deliberate focus on Europe, where larger world cities are scarce (with the exception of Paris and London). The volume fills an important lacuna in political science as it adopts a new approach to the study of cities and their networks as emerging actors in global multi-level governance, participants in international relations and entities with some degree of legal subjectivity, despite being partial subjects in international law with barely emerging legal personalities (idem, p. 43). Salomón and Sanchez (2008) highlight the "mixed actor" (partially sovereignty-bound, partially sovereignty-free) character of subnational governments acting internationally vis-à-vis the UN system and its governing body composed of nation-states. The positioning of the city network "United Cities and Local Governments" (UCLG) in 2004 as the main interlocutor within the UN can be interpreted as the emergence of a new global political actor (with over 240,000 towns, cities, regions, and metropolitan areas and over 175 local and regional government associations in 140 UN member states among its members, UCLG is the world's largest organisation of local and regional governments, representing 5 billion people, or 70% of the world's population), albeit with limited power resources (Salomón-Sanchéz 2008). A study by Martinez (2022) discusses the legitimation strategy of UCLG vis-à-vis the multilateral system, as a global actor acting with a single representative voice committed to the global agendas adopted by the international community of states, in particular, the UN 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of 2015. UCLG highlights its role in bringing local views to the global stage, in particular, by being a co-funder of the Local 2030 Network, a multistakeholder hub led by the UN Secretary General's Executive Office to accelerate the implementation of SDGs (UCLG 2019). In the context of efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda, they are working together with other networks and municipal alliances in the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (GTF), which was facilitated by the UCLG. UCLG, on behalf of the GTF, produces the annual "Towards the localisation of SDGs" Report since 2017, analysing local and regional governments' initiatives and contributions to the SDGs – ending poverty (SDG1&2), fight against climate change (SDG13), or achieving cities and territories of peace and rebuild trust (SDG16). UCLG also facilitates the convening of the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments, the joint voice of local and regional leaders from around the world. It is the main supporter of the annual gathering of human rights cities, the World Human Rights Cities Forum. In 2023, UCLG launched a global campaign "10, 100, 1000 Human Rights Cities and Territories by 2030", aimed at

gathering 1000 local and regional governments from all over the world to strengthen the global network of Human Rights Cities and Territories.

A growing body of literature is arguing for a need to reform the multilateral system to be more inclusive of local and regional goverments, with more national assistance in linking cities to global governance (Leffel 2021, Galceran-Vercher 2021, Bilsky-Cibrario 2023). Kurz (2022) argues that instead of treating them as stakeholders or implementers of international agreements, cities should be included in negotiations with IOs such as the UN, participating as acknowledged partners and an important level of government. A survey of the global ecosystem of city networks (Acuto-Leffel 2020) reinforces this view, arguing that networks need to be recognised as institutions with agency in the political geography of (international) urban development, not merely as spokes connecting nodes (i.e. cities or local governments) as suggested by quantitative analyses of city networking (e.g. GAWC index). The Global Parliament of Mayors (GPM) is a case in point: being much more than a network, it is described as a blueprint for a governance body of, by and for mayors, connecting cities and harnessing the power of city diplomacy (Kurz 2022).

Kamiński and Ciesielska-Klikowska (2023) highlight the numerous benefits of paradiplomacy, whereby sub-state actors establish links with foreign (state and non-state) partners and contribute to a pluralisation of diplomacy, creating an alternative political channel of communication with foreign partners in various low-policy issues (e.g., waste management, public transport, education) even against the backdrop of conflictual international relations among national governments.

Herrschel and Newman (2017, 94) stress the urgency of bridging the conceptual gap between IR, ie., political science, and the largely economy-centric urban studies and highlight the role of paradiplomacy as a possible connector between the two distinct academic traditions. The authors attribute the „thickening" or sometimes „growing disorder" of international governance" () to the deeper and multi-layered vertical engagement of subnational actors seeking to tackle global and increasingly interconnected economic environmental and other challenges, defying the flat and one-dimensional perspective of traditional IR studies fixated on the nation-state. Tavares (2016) describes paradiplomacy as a direct consequence of globalisation and the ICT revolution that empowered decentralised networks, unsettling state-centred hierarchies. For Nijman (2011), the urbanisation of international relations is underlined by well-established phenomena – city diplomacy, urban offices for international relations, urban missions to international organisations, etc. – that are the markers of a global society. In her seminal work, Sassen (2006a) calls on urban scholars to rethink conventional views of cities as „sub-units of their nation-states" in the case of increasingly transnationalised and interconnected global cities. Global cities as the backbone of the global economy concentrate corporate headquarters and „corporate service complexes" (Sassen 1991), i.e. sophisticated networks of finance, legal, management, accounting, and advertising firms. Sassen (1991) coined the term „global cities" to describe cities that are not only the highly concentrated command points of the world economy but also advanced postindustrial production sites, for financial innovations and markets for these products and innovations. In line with the world city hypothesis, centrality in the network of world cities connected by intercity flows of capital correlates with a city's power in the world economy, conventionally measured by the world city hierarchy.

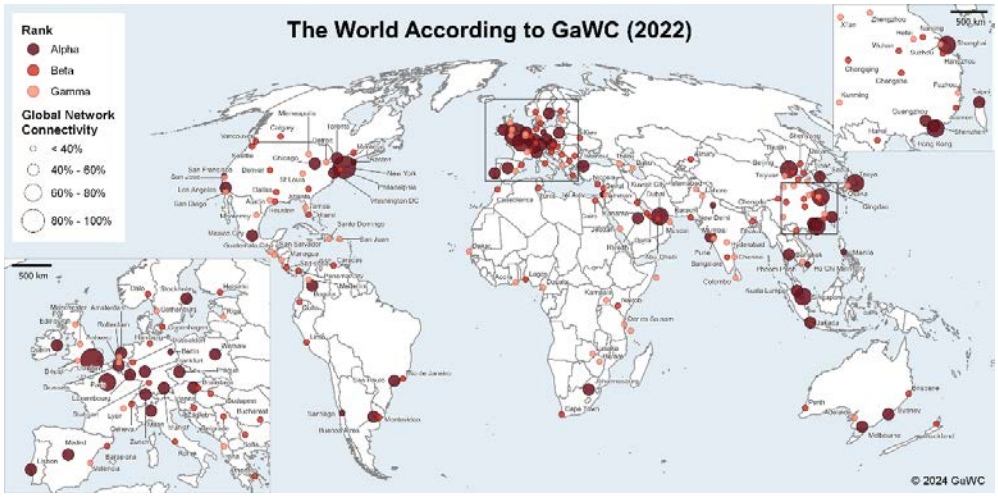

Figure 1 The World According to GaWC (2022)
Source: https://gawc.lboro.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/GNC2022.png

Elsewhere, Sassen (2006b, 347) treats the cross-border networks of global cities as one of the key components in the architecture of international relations. Taking account of Sassen's definition, the Globalization and World Cities Research Network (GaWC), founded in 1998, has published a biannual analysis of the global city hierarchy with a focus on the external business service connections of world cities (Taylor 2020). The GaWC group treats global cities not as discrete and independent entities but as sites for certain service economy activities, which are interconnected in a network where the different hierarchical tiers exhibit varying degrees of flow control, resulting in the oft-cited alpha-beta-gamma-sufficiency-unranked typology (see more about GAWC website). Using a limited set of economic indicators, a city's integration into the world city network is computed in terms of the prevalence of advanced producer services (APS) firms involved in accountancy, advertising, banking/finance and law (Figure 1).

Globalist accounts view cities not only as nested in their national urban system but as actors directly participating in global governance (Brenner - Kiel 2020). Overcoming the economic reductionism of global city theory that presents major cities as global financial centers, as headquarters locations for TNCs or as agglomerations for advanced producer services (APS) industries, the authors offer a new perspective on global cities as the main drivers of restructuring urban governance, whose analysis should take into account the new social, cultural, political, ecological, media and diasporic networks. By virtue of their strong economic capacity, image and institutional capacity global cities can assume leadership when national governments are falling short of their international commitments (Tavares 2016, Martinez 2022). In the case of the largest global cities whose economic weight allows for a large degree of liberty from their national territorial and institutional embeddedness, it is the state that becomes dependent on or constrained by their policy choices. As argued by Manfredi-Sánchez (2023), this group is capable of setting standards in a wide range of fields of public policy, to be eventually adopted by similar cities and then followed by countries.

An important hiatus in academic research on city diplomacy is its overwhelming focus on global cities as a marker of success, with a strong correlation detected between city size and the level of international activities (Grandi 2020), and the corresponding lack of visibility and recognition of the international activities of small and intermediary cities and towns (Nugraha et al. 2023). The latter trend is reinforced by the scarcity of city diplomacy activities in the case of small towns and mid-sized cities (see Clerc 2021, Koelemaij-Derudder 2022). Balbim (2023) sees an urgent need to overcome the reductionism of global city theory in order to explain the internationalisation of ordinary cities and their active participation in the constitution of new

power spaces. For the sake of greater inclusivity, Manfredi-Sánchez (2023) urges a transition from „city diplomacy" to „urban diplomacy", arguing that all cities can participate in the implementation of the global agenda irrespective of their capacities, economic strength or and size, as the most pressing global issues can be addressed at the local level. Citing examples of the expression of identity, the inclusion of the gender perspective and the impact of climate change, policies on migration, mobility, and digital transformation, Manfredi-Sanchez (idem) theorizes urban diplomacy from the perspective of citizens' demands for a global approach to local problems, an extension of citizenship above and beyond the nation-state.

Cities' international engagements: On the road to achieving formal recognition?

Diplomatic activities can be underpinned by normative goals conceptualised within the framework of a world society (desire for peace, security concerns, solidarity with refugees, fighting populism), de-emphasising financial or material gains (Leffel 2018, Amiri-Grandi 2021) or else these can defy state-based one-size-fits-all approaches or contrast with the national interest (negative paradiplomacy). Considering city diplomacy's relationship with public institutions at the national level, Marchetti (2021) distinguishes cooperative and competitive interactions, competitive collaboration and indifference: the state can use city diplomacy as an instrument of national foreign policy, resulting, in some cases, in the concession of foreign rights to cities, but competition is the more typical, where the city develops its diplomatic activities independently of the state in ways that might challenge the established national foreign policy. Manfredi-Sánchez (2021) describes the processes and practices of global cities and city diplomacy as constitutive of „urban soft power", highlighting city diplomacy's ability to achieve global impact without use of force or coercion. Through the example of the C40 Climate leadership Group, Acuto (2013b) demonstrates how political agency of worldwide significance can also be identified as an emergent property of the global city as a "group agent" capable of undertaking diplomatic activities quite similar to more traditional international actors.

Lacking hard power (security, defense, binding legal instruments and actions), consular relations or a grand strategy as the traditional features of state diplomacy, cities appear powerless, despite a notable increase in their soft power arsenal. The partnerships, agreements and cooperation in cultural, economic, environmental spheres that result from cities' engagement in diplomatic relations within non-hierarchical and polycentric transnational networks are non-binding by nature and cooperation is informal and voluntary. In the absence of coercive measures and hard law international frameworks, networks use the power of persuasion and soft governance instruments – information sharing, rule setting, capacity building – to steer members toward the desired objectives (Busch et al. 2018). Accordingly, Nijman (2011, 228-229) envisions a substantial increase of "soft law" made by cities or city involvement in networks, in parallel to the "urbanisation of (hard) international law", whereby the interests of the state will be increasingly defined by the interests of its cities.

The paradiplomacy or international action of cities, based on the shared values of peace, culture and sustainability, reflects city leaders' aspirations to extend their influence beyond the confines of their settlements and to engage in matters beyond their competencies. As pointed out by Acuto (2013a), the transnational agency of mayors in global governance, put in practice by city diplomacy, has primarily rested on mayor's self-appointment to the central stage of global policymaking, who act as policy implementers and governance facilitators of broader agendas. By harnessing the power of significant international city networks such as ICLEI, UCLG, C40 or and the Global Parliament of Mayors, cities operate beyond their own local and national borders, using these as conduits to exert influence on global agendas, development goals and international norms. This allows them to formulate a new counter-narrative to the nation-centric international system (e.g. cities can save the planet), to transcend IR-dominated theoretical frames of reference, bypassing scalar (globe, state, region) as well as political (supra-national, governmental, regional and local) hierarchies (Acuto 2013b).

Transnational networking relies on the hybridization of governance structures (Acuto 2013a), i.e. the growing involvement of the private sector in city governance as well as the growing reliance of local governments on public-private governance structures not only for essential service delivery, but for their transnational paradiplomatic activities (idem, 488-490). The New Urban Agenda stresses the need for "an enabling, fair and responsive business environment based on the principles of environmental sustainability and inclusive prosperity" and their connection with subnational and city-level governments in functional and accountable governance partnerships (UN 2016, p. 17). Article 90 (idem, p. 24) expressly states that „We will encourage appropriate regulatory frameworks and support to local governments in partnering with communities, civil society and the private sector to develop and manage basic services and infrastructure, ensuring that the public interest is preserved and concise goals, responsibilities and accountability mechanisms are clearly defined." The hybridization of governance is crucial for filling capacity gaps of local governments in the pursuit of implementing the SDGs, it is not surprising therefore that the largest number of formalised business partnerships are found within environmentally focused networks (Acuto-Leffel 2020). While the second half of the twentieth century already saw a proliferation of networks of local governments (Gilbert et al. 1996), their expansion has gained true momentum since the turn of the millennium, with four new networks emerging each year (Rapoport et al. 2019). In the environmental and sustainability dimension, Acuto et al. (2017) document over sixty networks dedicated to such policies active by the second half of the 2010s. Some of the most important networks emerged in this more recent period, such as the UCLG (United Cities and Local Governments) in 2004, 100 Resilient Cities (2011), and the Global Covenant of Mayors. A survey conducted by the Connected Cities Lab (Acuto-Leffel 2020) demonstrates a significant internationalisation and institutionalisation of cities' networking partnerships, with 20% of the total sample of 202 networks comprising international networks, some 26.5% constituting regional-based networks, and the largest group, 53%, made up of national networks.

Transnational networking as a common form of city diplomacy facilitates policy diffusion between cities and catalyses policy influence of cities in international relations and policies (Acuto 2013a, Acuto et al. 2017), enabling cities to pursue their city goals beyond their municipal as well as their national borders (Marchetti 2021). To cite Herrschel – Newman (2017, p. 19) they serve as amplifiers for local governments' international policy agendas, particularly in instances where local actors are lacking capacities or confidence due to economic weakness, constitutional constraints or limited size. As argued by Gordon (2019, p. 25), transnational municipal networks work to activate and augment the individual agency of cities, notably, by sharing information and ideas, demonstrating the benefits of particular courses of action, establishing and incentivizing rules to guide member behavior, or facilitating access to material resources. The benefits of membership can range from access to services, information, funding, technical support, exchange of best practices, policy learning, developing projects, and the representation of sub-national interest (Tortola-Couperus 2022). A survey by Busch et al. (2018) focusing on German cities shows that all kinds of cities benefit from their membership in transnational municipal networks, not just the pioneers or frontier cities that visibly dominate international agendas. Furthermore, as noted by Szpak et al. (2022) a strong city network secretariat is a key facilitator of city-to-city cooperation and learning and a crucial tool for cities striving to strengthen their international position.

Durmus (2021) examines cities as rising soft power actors, noting that a growing preference for soft law in urban contexts over the past decades has allowed for circumventing issues of subjectivity in international law and focusing instead on the widest possible societal consensus. The use of soft law instruments including guidelines, declarations, covenants, ethical codes, and standards mirrors the new regulation and governance model for urban spaces that seek to address long-term challenges and modes of thinking (e.g., sustainability). Recent examples of such non-binding agreements and guidelines include the Sustainable Development Goals, the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, or the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.

The New Urban Agenda as a soft law instrument (Mosmouti 2020), ratified by all member states of the UN in 2016 has enabled cities to employ soft law with the primary aim to assert their position on the international stage. The inclusion of a standalone SDG focused on cities (SDG11 "Sustainable Cities and Communities") within its framework is considered as the most significant joint achievement of cities, city networks and the UCLG. In the literature, the strategies of local governments to act beyond their scope are qualified as soft law (Voorwinden-Ranchordás 2023), including the creation of intercity alliances through transnational municipal networks, or the drafting of international charters for local self-governments (e.g. the European Council's European Charter of Local Self-Governments of 1985). From the turn of the century, the rising significance, influence, assertiveness of cities and ability to shape outcomes at the international level (i.e. their soft power), underpinned by their city diplomatic activities, has led various authors to treat them as emerging *lawmaking actors* in areas such as human rights, migration or climate mitigation (Nijman 2011, Lin 2018, Swiney 2020, Szpak et al. 2022). The European Charter for the Safeguarding of Human Rights in the City (signed in Saint Denis, 2001) is an example of a global law initiated by cities, connected to the cities for human rights movement, and complementing the intergovernmental human rights conventions ratified by states (Szpak et al. 2022). Cities (large and small) across the globe have positioned themselves as *human rights cities* (with Rosario as the first such city established in 1997), setting good examples of the localisation of international human rights law as a core municipal task (Da Silva 2018). The NGO "The People's Movement for Human Rights Learning" (PDHRE 2007) defines the human rights city as "the city or a community where people of good will, in government, in organizations and in institutions, try and let a human rights framework guide the development of the life of the community" (Voorwinden-Ranchordás 2023). Cities such as Graz, Vienna, Middelburg, Lund, Utrecht, Boston, York or Bogota have experimented with a bottom up (not necessarily legal) approach by formulating a commitment to human rights, albeit varying in their approach to implementing these rights, designing their human rights policy or setting up their local charter. Barcelona, for instance, adopted the 2010 Charter of Rights and Duties in its quest to redefine itself as "the city of rights", integrating the human rights approach to its public policies. The City Council of Graz, an Austrian city with 302,749 people in 1. January 2024 (citypopulation.de), declared itself a human rights city in February 2001 and set up a Human Rights Council in 2007 involving members from politics, administration and civil society organisations, nominated by the mayor (Oomen-Baumgärtel, 2018). As pointed out by Pieterse (2022), with the voluntary adoption of international human rights obligations and their mainstreaming into urban governance policies, the above cities have asserted a human rights-based governance vision (centered around socioeconomic rights) as a way of enhancing their autonomy and capacity *vis-à-vis* their national governments.

According to Lin (2018), global cities and their networks play an important normative role in the fragmented, decentralised and polycentric "transnational regime complex" for climate change management, comprised of a plethora of loosely connected governance institutions and actors (Abbott 2013). Lin (2018, p. 128-130) coined the term "urban climate law" to refer to the norms, practices, and voluntary standards (i.e. soft law) developed by global cities and implemented through their transnational networks, and highlights its important complementary role to the international climate regime. According to research by Manfredi-Sanchez and Perez (2020), in the field of climate change mitigation, city-based public diplomacy is more effective than bilateral public diplomacy and horizontal networks of cities have emerged as the major promoters and advancers of climate policy, alongside or sometimes in defiance of nation-states. With the adoption of the Urban Agenda in 2016, Habitat III was instrumental in the recognition of cities as the drivers of sustainable development, initiating a city-centric shift in global policy making (see Parnell 2016). This was evident in the highly political nature of the discursive shift away from cities as sites of developmental intervention (Habitat II of 1996) to cities as vectors of change, no longer represented as „sustainability problems" but as „sustainability solutions" (Angelo-Wachsmuth 2020). As prime examples of global urban diplomacy, the Global Covenant

of Mayors for Climate and Energy, ICLEI Local Governments for Sustainability and the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group stand out for their efforts to enhance city-level commitment in concrete actions and advocacy for the global recognition of cities' leadership in climate change mitigation, setting ambitious urban GHG emission reduction targets (Grandi 2020). ICLEI was among the earliest networks with a distinctively environmental agenda launched in 1990 by 200 cities at the World Congress of Local Governments for a Sustainable Future in New York. Today it is the world's largest global city network with regional offices present in 2500 cities of 125 countries, and covering 25 percent of the world's urban population. According to their website, the Global Covenant of Mayors brings together 13,500 cities and local governments voluntarily committed to implementing ambitious climate and energy objectives on their territory. The London-based *C40*, established in 2008 by the then mayor Ken Livingstone, has greatly enhanced the soft power of London, with membership bringing extensive benefits to the city. C40 as an elite group of the world's global cities, sponsored by the Michael Bloomberg Foundation, showcases the pivotal role of mayors in policy development, as indicated by the oft-cited assertion that „while nations talk, cities act". According to Acuto (2013b, 139), the C40 showcases not only the capacity of global cities to engage in cross-border collective action, but also their pooled influence in creating a transnational structure which can also acquire international agency. Membership is not based on fees but performance indicators, with over 60 of the member cities implementing bolder climate action plans that go beyond national commitments to the Paris Agreement, as reported by the organisation's webpage. Using the C40 Climate Leadership Group as an example, Gordon (2019) highlights the role of cities as „global climate governors" in transnational municipal networks as a new dimension of the ongoing disembedding of cities from national contexts, whose collective identity is underpinned by a shared understanding of their role as crucial participants in the global response to climate change as well as their particular governance practices and standards (e.g. uptake of the Global Greenhouse Gas Protocol for Cities). On the other hand, the author warns that city diplomacy can contribute to growing urban inequality between global cities actively shaping the global agenda and small-and medium sized cities where mayoral impact is less evident. Moreover, as Gordon (2019) notes, the agency of networks and cities is always limited and contingent on structural, local political, institutional and demographic conditions, despite their ability to act as an entrepreneur, facilitator, or enabler in encouraging the diffusion of norms, policies, and practices through processes of learning and emulation. Given their inability to enforce compliance with nominal commitments (Gordon 2016), they are compelled to rely on alternative sources of authority (material resources, reputation, organisational capacity).

Conclusion

The various global networks are becoming increasingly extended (both geographically and in terms of political power), with cities and city-regions integrated into global systems becoming nodes of varying importance in these networks. These world cities, global cities, have the highest concentration of population, economic, institutional, and power concentration, and their distinctive international network functions are partly derived from this and partly a consequence of each other. This process of transformation is significantly influenced by the drivers of economic transformation – new industries and innovations, the spread of digitalisation, changes in transport costs and economic growth, and periodic crises – as well as by various supranational integrations and economic policy agreements.

In the next phase of the research, our empirical results can help to identify the main features of effective advocacy and networking at the international level, by showcasing successful good practices that have contributed to organisational learning in local government, to the enrichment, diversification and empowerment of resources not only in cities but also in small and medium-sized towns, and deepen the culture of cooperation.

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