Active participant or passive witness? Role of city councils in the creation and scrutiny of cities' international cooperation

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Funding

Abstract: The growing role of cities in international relations and their impact on nation-states have been unprecedented in recent decades. What has yet to be revealed is the part city councils play in this process. This article aims to examine whether city councils are active participants or are dominated by mayors and to classify what tools they have at their disposal to exert influence in cities' international cooperation. The research methods include desk research of strategy documents and multiple case studies. The information was obtained primarily from the respective city councils as well as via interviews with the international affairs officers of examined cities. In conclusion, the authors state that the role of city councils in creating and scrutinizing international cooperation is relatively narrow, and the whole activity of cities is determined mainly by the mayors' leadership and perception of international cooperation.

Keywords: cities' international cooperation; city councils; accountability; city networks; strategic planning of cooperation

Introduction

In the last decade or so, cities have been playing an increasing role on an international level (Barber, 2014; Preston, 2018; Enora & Acuto, 2023). Even though they are not perceived as legal actors in international relations, there is a growing awareness of their role in this context, especially when it comes to the examination of the impact cities have on the nation-state, state sovereignty, and its territorial authority or possibility to bypass states in certain circumstances (Szpak et al., 2022b). Moreover, cities are visibly active both in politics and policies; certain global issues cannot be solved without their involvement – climate change (Khan, 2006; Flint & Rao, 2012), migration (UNESCO, 2016; Oomen & Baumgärtel, 2018; Hirschl, 2020), safety and security (Sassen, 2011; Grigolo, 2017), and sustainable development (UN Habitat, 2016;

UN-Habitat, 2020; UN Habitat 2022; Kaza et al., 2018; Grandi, 2020). In this context, cities are very dynamic actors and use a vast variety of collaboration formats, from city twinning and networking, institutional presence in such organizations as the Council of Europe (Congress of Local and Regional Authorities) and the European Union (the European Committee of the Regions), to creating their own organisations (e.g. UCLG, Eurocities, C40) that operate on a different geographical scale (regional, continental or even global). Cities are not only an indispensable part of the multi-level governance that allows dealing with global challenges but also support international standards through humanitarian assistance and implementation of sanctions. A good example of that could be the ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine, during which many cities have reinvigorated their sister cities' cooperation format to provide tangible support (Szpak et al., 2022a). In this context, nowadays, cities, by engaging in international cooperation, have been playing a crucial part in a whole range of public policies, and it is hard to imagine that this trend might reverse in the foreseeable future.

In research devoted to the growing role of cities in international relations, many aspects have been taken into consideration, such as the networking of cities (Acuto, 2013); different scales of cooperation (Davis & de Duren, 2011); "global city" (Bagnasco & Le Galès, 2000); multi-level governance (Khare & Beckman, 2013), and sectoral issues such as environmental and climate change (Khan, 2006; Khan, 2016); migration (Raczyński, 2015); sustainable development (Simon, 2023; Taylor, 2021) or, last but definitely not least, security (Lin, 2018). A common feature of all these research papers is that cities are treated as unified actors so that institutional dynamics inside the cities remain overlooked. Since cities' international cooperation has been getting growing interest, the vast majority of research has focused on relations between cities. Scholars have been looking at the changing and losing superior position of states (Keating, 1997; French, 2004) and the economic, cultural, and intellectual resources that cities have at their disposal, which make them almost equal to the states, except for sovereignty and the use of force (still a state monopoly) (Amen et al., 2011; Zamorano & Morató, 2014). Moreover, cities have been perceived as actors in a multi-level governance system that could add value to global problem-solving (Davis & de Duren, 2011; Acuto, 2013) or even bypass the states (Amen et al., 2011; Goldin 2013). The role of cities in creating international law has been a subject of extensive debate and research in many fields, but not too much in terms of legal studies. There are two reasons for this situation. Local government lawyers are traditionally not too concerned with international discourse.

In contrast, international lawyers have tended to neglect this development for a long time due to their state-centered perspective regarding legal personality when creating

international law (Aust & Nijman 2020, p. 1-2; Nijman, 2011). Nevertheless, there are some fruitful contributions to the debate about the role of cities in the international order from the perspective of legal studies. Katherine Schroeder (2021) has gone even further and urged international lawyers to give cities the attention they deserve in international law after years of neglect. Consequently, the growing voice of cities in international affairs may push international law towards a greater emphasis on subsidiarity, local implementation, and issues of municipal concern (Szpak et al., 2025). Despite this, all contributions to the debate about cities' international cooperation mentioned above have the same feature. They see the cities as single and consistent actors, which is very simplistic. Cities' international cooperation is an activity that is driven by a particular ecosystem of actors, and each of them contributes to the decision-making process. To mention just a couple of actors, there are political figures, bureaucrats, top officials, non-governmental organizations operating in the cities, and last but not least, the city council, which is one of the most important ones. This is where crucial decisions are made regarding policy priorities, budget allocation, or outcomes evaluation of each public policy. Needless to say, cities' international cooperation is being seen mainly as 'city diplomacy' or 'paradiplomacy'. In each case, no sufficient attention was paid to local legislative bodies. Cities councils have been analysed to a very narrow extent up to this point. They play an important role in many aspects of democratic processes. Councillors, who constitute local legislative, are directly elected by local communities to represent the latter's needs and priorities. In pursuit of this, councillors decide on the implementation of public policies, the level of financial spending, and control over the executive. Despite different political models of local governance across countries, there are two fundamentally democratic principles under which most councils' work can be categorised and which councillors can be expected to uphold: representation and scrutiny (Kerley, Liddle, Dunning, 2019). The role of city councils has been examined from different perspectives, such as the development of citizenship and social justice (Seguro et al., 2012), their role in a multi-level system of governance (Fimreite & Aars, 2008), empowering citizens in decision-making processes (Vogelsang-Coombs, 2012; Przeybilovicz et al., 2022), or different political models of city councils (Davis & Daly, 2004; van Assche & Dierickx, 2007; Lapuente, 2010; Headlam & Hepburn, 2017). In this context, the role of city councils in cities' international cooperation has remained unexplored and needs a closer look to understand better the process of commissioning and scrutiny of this specific area of public policy.

This paper aims to examine the role of city councils in initiating and scrutinising cities' international cooperation. The latter is understood as a process during which councillors have

a legal and factional role in creating, commissioning, and scrutinising how their city cooperates with international partners such as other cities or international organisations. It is essential to fill this knowledge gap to understand better the extent to which city councils are active participants or passive witnesses. The main research question is formulated as follows: does the executive play a dominant role in cities' international cooperation or is there room for city councils to cover? By adopting the concept of local autonomy, which is widely used in local government research, this study focuses on checking to what extent councils have real circumstances to engage themselves in policy formulation and evaluation. The main research question is whether city councils play an active role in creating cities' international cooperation or are only passive witnesses to the decisions made by the executive bodies of the cities.

Another layer of analysis will be added by referring to the well-established traditions of public administration. The aim of the study is to find out whether the position of city councils on the international cooperation of cities reflects the differences and similarities of those traditions. However, while the contemporary administrative system may not be a replica of a historical administration pattern, there are 'legacies' that continue to influence public bureaucracies (Meyer-Sahling, 2009). Contemporary political and administrative systems are products of political and managerial changes and underlying ideas and traditions. All of them affect its structure and behaviour. Based on the administrative traditions approach, we can check if it allows us to understand cities' international cooperation better. Taking this into consideration, the authors have used the typology of administrative traditions proposed by G. Peters: (1) Napoleonic, (2) Germanic, (3) Scandinavian, (4) Anglo-American, and (5) other (Peters, 2021).

This paper is organised as follows: the concept of local autonomy in the city council is presented in the next section. The text goes on to the research's methodological explanation, followed by the research results. The paper ends with some concluding remarks.

Local autonomy in the context of city councils

Among many different ways of describing the position of local government in the public administration system is the concept of local autonomy. As Ladner et al. (2019, p. 64) noted, despite the importance of the concept, there is little theoretical convergence regarding the core elements of local autonomy. The main idea is based on the assumption that the extent of local autonomy is determined by measuring the central legal and financial competence, after which the remaining room for local decision-making is determined (Fleurke & Willemse, 2007). This leads to the conviction that local autonomy creates circumstances for more citizens'

involvement in decision-making processes, increasing accountability and efficiency of public service delivery. To put it in other words and look at the issue from a broader perspective, local autonomy plays an important role in citizens' lives, and its impact can be considered predominantly beneficial (Bastianen & Keuffler, 2024). However, there is a growing discussion about whether legal, functional, financial, organisational, and vertical aspects of autonomy are equally important or whether they must be weighted by creating an index of local autonomy (Ladner & Keuffer, 2018). It is argued that local autonomy might be considered from a legalist approach and implies more focus on decision-making powers that are mentioned in the European Charter of Local Self-Government, adopted by the Council of Europe in 1985. Local autonomy is defined here as the ability of local government to have an independent impact on the well-being of its citizens (Wolman & Goldsmith, 1992). Local autonomy is also analysed from the point of view of functional powers and means the scope of services delivered by local government (Ansell, 2020). Lastly, it is possible to consider this issue from the perspective of vertical relations as an intergovernmental power game, which is described in terms of the sense of control and access to the decision-making process. In this respect, the most important question is to what extent the local government has the power to make a decision or is supervised by higher tiers of government (James, 2016; Strohmeier, 2015).

Research design

This research is focused on 12 European cities that have been selected according to the available rankings and lists for the purpose of the research grant (Global Power City Index 2020; Global City Index 2020; Cities of Influence, 2018; OECD National GDP growth contributed by metropolitan areas 2016; Most dynamic cities in Europe; The richest cities in the world in 2020 and Largest urban agglomerations in Europe in 2020). Those listed more than twice were placed in a matrix to identify the cities most frequently mentioned in the rankings. This resulted in the selection of nine cities: London and Paris, which appeared seven times; Madrid, which appeared five times; and Barcelona and Moscow, each listed four times (though Moscow was excluded due to Russian aggression against Ukraine). Additional cities selected due to frequent appearances were Amsterdam, Berlin, Munich, and Stockholm, each appearing three times. The list was expanded to include four more cities: Brussels, The Hague, Geneva, and Strasbourg. These cities were already scheduled for visits to conduct interviews (e.g., with the Global Parliament of Mayors representative in The Hague) and research in libraries (such as those associated with the EU and UN). This paper is part of a research project funded by the National Research Centre (because of a double-blind review, the name of the

State will be added later), where the authors have analyzed cities' role in multi-level governance. When implementing the project, the authors noticed that city councils were abandoned, and scarcely attention was drawn to their role in international cooperation.

In the final version, the list consists of 12 cities because was eventually excluded. This variety of cities makes it possible to indicate a representative case of each administrative tradition. The next step of the research was based on qualitative methods, which were desk analysis and multiple case studies. Regarding desk analysis, a challenge in preparing the article was the large number of valuable materials devoted to city diplomacy. At the same time, there were relatively few publications devoted explicitly to the role of city councils in shaping municipal strategies for international engagement. Accordingly, we selected sources based primarily on their relevance to the topic, as well as the degree to which they fit into the objectives we had set. The information has been gathered twofold. The first source of knowledge about the role of city councils is from official documents devoted to the international cooperation of cities and the statute books of the selected cities. The second one is direct contact with the International Affairs offices/officers of examined cities. Questionnaires and interviews with city representatives were conducted between September 2022 and May 2023. In terms of interviews and questionnaires, they are a good way to collect as much information as possible. Questionnaires allowed us to identify the most important legal documents and official reports, while interviews allowed us to ask about the practice of functioning of the city councils. The research was divided into two parts. In the first, the authors asked cities' representatives how city councils participate in creating international cooperation of cities (not every city responded). The second part of the research was devoted to the scrutiny process over international cooperation activities, primarily how councillors evaluate the outcomes of their cities' international cooperation. This strategy allowed us to identify and compare official information published in open sources with daily operations and implementation by conducting the above-mentioned interviews. In order to pursue the aim of the research, Clark's typology of local autonomy has been adopted. Combining the two principles of local power – initiative and immunity – he identifies four types of autonomy (Clark, 1984). His approach consists of two conditions that have to be fulfilled to reach the highest degree of autonomy: the powers of initiation and the power of immunity. The extent of the two respective powers indicates the configuration of local autonomy. The initiative is understood as a situation in which local governments are able to initiate their own policies, and simultaneously, they are free from outside interference. When it comes to immunity it means the power of localities to act without

fear of the supervisory authority of higher tiers of the state. Given these two principles, the following types of local autonomy were differentiated:

- Type 1 – Initiation and immunity are high – locality "is totally autonomous from others and higher tiers of the state". The power of initiation and the power of immunity draw their legitimacy directly from the citizens.

- Type 2 – Initiation is high, immunity is low – even if the action of local government can be constrained, its legitimacy is created bottom-up. It is the local citizens who decide on the realm of local affairs, the agendas, and the functions according to their needs.

- Type 3 – Initiation is low, immunity is high – local authorities have no fear of the review of their decisions by higher tiers of government, but they enjoy no power for local initiation.

- Type 4 – Initiation and immunity are low – this configuration qualifies local government 'creatures' of the state in the sense that they hold no power of initiative and are subject to strict control (Clark, 1984, p. 71-74).

Each of them is an ideal concept and describes an extreme position that might not be entirely pure in practice. In the context of the given research, local autonomy will be examined in relation to cities' international cooperation provided by city councils. However, it helps us better understand the similarities and differences between cities in terms of international cooperation, even though each has operated in different legal and institutional contexts.

Results

According to information gathered during the research, most city councils that answered the query should be classified as Type 1 regarding international city cooperation. There are several ways in which councillors can initiate some actions and play a role in shaping how the city engages with partners on the international level. The most common one is by launching an international policy document. Almost every city council prepares and votes for such a document, which might be called a report, a strategy, or a program (see Barcelona Global City, 2020; Stockholm International Strategy, 2021; Paris International, 2021). However, these documents provide general guidelines and a framework of international cooperation that local administrations and mayors later execute. Based on that, city councils orchestrate annual discussions about the general direction of international cooperation (Amsterdam, Madrid, Stockholm, Barcelona, Paris). It is hard to find any examples of specific goals or indicators that

councillors could use to scrutinise international cooperation policy. As many respondents stated, how they see the outcomes of the mayor's work speaks more about the political preferences of councillors or their political affiliation with the governing majority or the opposition (interview with Juan Carlos de Castro, Deputy Manager for International Relations, City of Madrid and with Martin Born, Directorate of International Affairs, Municipality of The Hague). On top of that, there is an example of a more specific strategic document entirely devoted to particular issues, such as Asia (see Asia Strategy of Barcelona, 2022), and global justice (see Barcelona Master Plan of Cooperation for Global Justice, 2017).

The interest in international cooperation among councillors grows in two cases. The first situation is when a new cooperation agreement or memorandum of understanding is tabled during a plenary section. This point of agenda is always a good excuse for discussing the issue of international agreement more vividly. Specific partners of future cooperation may initiate a political debate about the necessity of such cooperation. Another example is not a specific city or organisation but a particular area of international cooperation, such as human rights issues or environmental challenges. In this case, cities are open to cooperating and initiating international action, such as an appeal to the European Court of Justice commenced against the national governments by Paris and Barcelona due to the lack of action to obey international standards (interview with Elisenda Alamany Gutiérrez, Regidora Portaveu, Grup Municipal d'Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, Ajuntament de Barcelona). In general, as a representative of Barcelona noted, the international field is not generally one of the top priorities at the political level. People tend not to understand its importance or impact on everyone's lives, so political parties are not putting these issues on the front lines. There are always exceptions, such as the war in Ukraine or human rights violations against women in Iran. Nevertheless, each political party has a representative in the Municipal Council of International Cooperation so everyone might be involved in international politics (interview with Kristoffer Bengtsson, International Affairs Officer, City of Stockholm, Executive Office). Creating committees is another way to play an active role in developing international city cooperation. In Stockholm, it is the International Committee (Internationella beredningen); it makes decisions on participation in conferences and other events abroad as commissioned by the City Executive Board and handles involvement in any international initiatives and declarations that do not require allocation of the city's resources. It not only provides a way to conduct a dialogue between all parties about international issues but also to assess Stockholm's international commitments in a long-term perspective and produce an account of the use of public funds. Similar functions are performed by the Municipal Council of International

Cooperation in Barcelona. Moreover, this is an organism of assessment and consultation of the municipal policy of cooperation for development and the meeting point with the solidarity fabric of society, aiming to create synergies and cross-relations. However, there is no such body for Amsterdam, Madrid, or Paris, which means that international cooperation is not treated as a sufficiently important policy area that needs to be scrutinized by a specific committee.

The role of councillors in establishing and scrutinising international cooperation is very similar to their role in other public policies. In each city, councillors are eligible to ask formal questions about the actions taken by the mayor, table a motion on a plenary discussion about the city's international engagement, or propose official statements of the council regarding specific situations. This kind of action does not cause any legally binding commitments but shows the public attitude towards the latest developments. However, it is important to emphasize that councillors are very rarely engaged in work at the international level. They are very open to presenting their opinions and deciding on the planning part of international cooperation (by voting for strategy/ framework); however, they avoid taking part in the work of international organisations. A specific situation is in Barcelona, where there is the Plenary of the Municipal Council of International Cooperation and other bodies such as the Permanent Commission. It is the body in charge of ensuring the impetus and sound development of the Council, and it assumes the functions of informing, studying and deliberating on the matters that must be debated in the Plenary. The Permanent Commission comprises the Presidency, the Vice-Presidency, a minimum of eight entities, institutions, or organizations elected by the Plenary from among the candidates submitted, and a minimum of three municipal technicians appointed or designated by the City Council.

Moreover, there is the Municipal Council of International Cooperation, which is the instrument of active citizenship with regard to international cooperation and solidarity. However, the national government has defined the main guidelines for international cooperation in Barcelona. In this, city council members can also influence international cooperation by filing motions or asking written questions to the city executive (interview with Elisenda Alamany Gutiérrez, Regidora Portaveu, Grup Municipal d'Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, Ajuntament de Barcelona). However, they are not involved in the work of the international organisations in the city. According to the answers received from the sent questionnaires, a similar situation is in Geneva and Brussels. Although both cities have international status due to the presence of many international organisations and representative

offices, their authorities try to play primarily the role of hosts facilitating the everyday functioning of international actors without actually engaging in international activities.

All cities under investigation have the power to act independently without fear of the supervisory authority of higher tiers regarding international cooperation of cities. This immunity is exercised in two different ways. The first one is based on the legal position of the national/regional government. This means that upper tiers of government set the general directions for international cooperation, and cities have to refer to it in their international actions. In most cases, this kind of relation between state and city is enshrined in legal acts and bonds all cities across the country (i.e. Switzerland, France). In this context, strategies implemented by the city councils are a way of fulfilling national/regional documents.

The second way national/regional governments exert influence on cities in terms of international cooperation is by setting their own policy agenda that is a reference point for the cities. A good example is the Madrid city council; here, the decisive role in international cooperation falls to the regional conference where general public policy directions, including international ones, are discussed. This is a combination of debates conducted to find a solution to challenging issues and the kind of influence cities could exert on the national level of the government. However, an important point worth highlighting here is that the Madrid city council is allowed to decide independently about the scope of the budget they would like to devote to international cooperation (interview with Juan Carlos de Castro, Deputy Manager for International Relations, City of Madrid). As to France, in the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, there is a special department for coordinating cities' international cooperation; it has a dedicated service to help cities set up and fund projects called DAECT (Delegation for the International Action of Local Governments). Each year, local governments have to declare their Official Development Assistance, which is aggregated by DAECT (interview with Yann Bhogal and Lea Boniface, Leader of Diplomatic Relations with Europe; Department of International Relations in City of Paris).

With regard to The Hague, the Municipality follows international documents that the national government adopts. The international policy areas that are interesting for The Hague are international law, peace and justice, (cyber)security, resilience, smart cities, AI and robotics, economy, sustainability, culture, and sports (answers from Martin Born, Directorate of International Affairs, Municipality of The Hague).

TAB. 1. The role of city councils in cities' international cooperation

		INITIATIVE (the city council is able to initiate their own policies in terms of international cities cooperation)	
		HIGH	LOW
IMMUNITY (the extent to which the city council has the power to act without fear of the supervisory authority)	HIGH	Amsterdam, Hague, Stockholm, Barcelona, Paris, Madrid, Geneva, Brussels, Munich, Berlin	London
	LOW	Strasbourg	

Source: Own research.

Strasbourg is the city that best represents type 2 of local autonomy in terms of international cooperation. The City Council regularly discusses the city's cooperation in the context of submitting new grant projects, partnership agreements, or statements related to international situations. The Agora is a space for dialogue, coordination of joint actions, support, and implementation of initiatives to promote Europe in Strasbourg. It brings together all the active forces working in this direction: institutional, associative, and cross-border. The objective of the city council's decision of 26 September 2021 is to extend this system to the university, economic, and cultural sectors according to three pillars: ecological, social, and democratic transition. Thus, the Agora is part of the general ambition of the Eurometropolis of Strasbourg and the municipality of Strasbourg to give more space to local democracy and the development of a common European culture based on all the European institutions present in Strasbourg. Elected officials, associations, and residents are therefore invited to participate. This kind of institutional arrangement is the one most open to participation from other entities such as experts, think tanks, and, last but not least, citizens. Moreover, councillors are designated by the Council to represent Strasbourg within international organisations. There are also several commissions that cover cross-border cooperation, as well as European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation. The aims are to set an agenda of cooperation and allocate funds for it.

Strasbourg serves as an international city due to the fact that many institutions are based there, and has fewer limitations for the upper tiers of government in terms of immunity. Its active position in terms of international issues (such as environmental challenges or support for international solidarity actions) creates an opportunity for additional value for a country.

A complete contradiction to Type 2 is Type 3, which can be observed in London. Greater London Authority, as an example of administrative devolution, has a limited role in creating international cooperation. Metropolitan councillors gathered in the Greater London Council are eligible to discuss and comment on the mayor's work as well as propose new directions for the policy conducted by the London metropolitan government. However, it is hard to find any example of direct involvement in international cooperation made by councillors (the last one dated March 2007). From London's perspective, its international cooperation is driven mostly by promoting the city overseas through the mayor's commitment to championing London industry, retaining privileged access to international talent after Brexit or leading campaigns to promote that London remains open for business and international cooperation following the EU referendum (The Mayor of London Annual Report 2022-2023).

Conclusions

City councils are the bodies responsible for creating and scrutinizing policies pursued by executives. It is done with many tools, such as agenda setting, adopting strategic documents, and allocating public money. Thus, it is expected that they could also play a vital role in cities' international cooperation as well or even be an active partner in this policy. Based on the research conducted, the authors concluded that its actual role is very limited, and the whole onus of creating and executing agendas in this realm is on executing bodies. Councillors' activity is rather occasional than systematic and mainly focused on approving planning documents rather than specific decisions. No serious disputes between the executive and legislative bodies have been identified during the research, which may mean that there is a political consensus about the international cooperation of cities among local politicians. This situation creates a vast opportunity for mayors to decide not only about general direction but also specific projects they want to engage in. It might be seen as a paradox that while cities are becoming more and more influential actors in multi-level governance system, it does not mean that they manage international cooperation through a governance approach. The position of the mayor is more likely to be described as a governor rather than a governance coordinator. Additional research has to be conducted to learn more about the relations between councillors and mayors. It would be interesting to know why – whether it is not interesting for local

councillors or politically irrelevant for voters. Does political reasoning presented by the councillors differ among cities? It is worth highlighting that among the European cities chosen in this research, there are visible similarities regarding the position of city councils. The lack of proper democratic scrutiny over the mayor's decisions by councillors raises a question about the stability of the international cooperation of cities. Does this mean international engagement is very volatile and could be substantially changed by local election results? Or, maybe the stability is guaranteed by the top officials and bureaucrats? Answers to these questions would help to understand better the political context and power play over the international cooperation of cities. It seems that more robust cooperation between councillors and mayors might be one element that helps to create stronger and more strategic networking opportunities in terms of international cooperation.

Despite representing different administrative traditions by the cities, the situation is not different. Type 1 of local autonomy dominates in researched city councils, and the differences between cities are minor. The authors know that the Europe-centric composition of cities dominates in our research and is not a solid basis for generalization. However, it might change in the context of different geographical areas where administrative traditions differ vastly from European ones.

As to the significance of the city councils for international cooperation of cities, international city cooperation is often not an outcome of public debate conducted at the plenary session of the city council, but rather a decision made by the executive body or civil servants that are working in the city's administration. This conclusion led the authors to two important consequences for further research on international city cooperation. The first one is that what this policy will look like is a matter of the mayor's knowledge, perception, and leadership. The council's role in this context is advisory rather than decisive. The vast majority of councillors do not participate in the work of international partnerships/ networks or international organisations. Moreover, in the context of public policy perspectives, cities' international cooperation is much less formalized and scrutinized. Official documents are very descriptive and fail to provide clear objectives that cities should reach.

The second point is that councillors might influence how their cities cooperate on the international stage. They have many tools to formulate, implement, and evaluate the direction of international cooperation of cities. Neither legal competencies nor scrutiny from the higher tier of authority limit their opportunities. However, it is not a strategic document that matters most; it is an allocation of resources (i.e., budget) that determines the scale of and involvement in such cooperation. This point is often raised in the context of expanding cities' international

cooperation. The lack of allocated resources and weak integration between local demands with international agenda is seen as a burden in enhancing the role of the cities in international relations (Acuto at al., 2018; Kamiński & Groen, 2022; Matiaszczyk, 2023). In this context, local councillors engagement might be an important element in this discussion.

Finally, the local autonomy index and implemented typology of local autonomy in the context of international cooperation of cities is a very useful tool for analysing cities' ability to commission their international cooperation policy. The main advantage of this approach is seen from the public policy perspective. However, as this research shows, it is mostly a formal and institutional approach that is considered. As a result, in future research, greater attention should be given to qualitative studies among council members to advance our conceptual and empirical understanding of relations between the executive and legislative bodies on the city level.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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