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Pact of Free Cities – a new form of European cities' cooperation

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Abstract

International cooperation of cities is a crucial part of multi-level governance, yet, nowadays it is facing new challenges such as the pandemic or the growing role of populist movements, not to mention the war in Ukraine. The research goal of the paper is to determine what drives cities to participate in the Pact of Free Cities and what the perspectives of such an enterprise are. To reach this goal, the authors attempt to answer questions regarding the Pact's intentions, methods of achieving its objectives and chances to do so, possible EU interest in this kind of initiative, and chances that other cities will be inspired to follow. Do cities want to bypass governments or are there other reasons why they have decided to set up such cooperation? This exploratory case study aims to show a new form of city cooperation introduced by the Pact of Free Cities initiative.

Key words: Pact of Free Cities, Visegrad Group; cities' cooperation, European urban policy, cities bypassing States, illiberal democracies

Introduction

By the turn of the century, cities have become places most threatened by current and predicted challenges: anything happening at a global or national level, from growing global inequality and climate change to refugee crises, terrorist attacks, pandemics or even lack of affordable housing, is likely to strike large cities first and strongest. The growing prominence of populist movements, which is of direct relevance to the subject matter, should also be included in this list. It is cities that suffer from these problems and have to deal with them – and now cities are voicing the opinion that in these circumstances, they play a major role in developing solutions (Swiney 2019). Unlike nation-states, cities and city authorities have been industriously facing the global challenges of the new millennium. More and more mayors are attempting to actively limit the carbon footprints of their cities, to implement renewable energy solutions, to build, expand and utilize digital economy infrastructure, to offer migrants protection and help them adapt, as well as to alleviate inequalities in the society. Therefore, considering their diplomatic and economic influence as well as international connectivity, cities are emerging as new actors in the international arena (Szpak et. al, 2022a). While nation-states are certain to remain, they are being replaced, at least in some aspects, by alternate networks and power-distribution forms (Muggah 2020). Due to their perceived unresponsiveness or dysfunctionality in dealing with some of the most serious current challenges and threats, national governments are losing trust of their societies, which today consist mostly of city-dwellers. Into this gap cities are stepping, promising a remodelling of the world political order (Swiney 2019). Additionally, apart from States, which are more conservative, cities should be perceived as engines of innovation operating since ancient times, as world-changing entities thanks to their ability to produce new thinking (Taylor 2013, pp. 3-4).

The parameters of international statecraft are being busily redefined by cities, which implement increasingly entrepreneurial forms of diplomacy. Firstly, they display growing assertiveness in this area. To draw investors, they set up promotion offices and commercial ventures. To facilitate operations, new municipal policies are developed, bilateral ties are tightened, and city networks are established with objectives ranging from cultural/educational/research exchange to humanitarian relief and hosting refugees. Secondly, cities are establishing and expanding collaborative networks by pooling their resources; the purpose of these structures is to give the cities a voice audible at the international level (Muggah 2020). Over the last decades, more than 300 formalized networks of cities have been established, some of them holding considerable power, e.g. the Global Covenant of Mayors, the C40, Metropolis, the Global Parliament of Mayors, ICLEI and UCLG, as well as the

Strong City Network. They offer practical ways for cities to mobilize resources, become involved in global advocacy, and share innovative technologies and practices that can be used to remodel local policies (Muggah 2020).

Among the various forms of cooperation between cities that exist today, a notable one is the Pact of Free Cities, which is already visible on the international arena despite its limited experience. This paper intends to determine what drives cities to participate in the Pact of Free Cities and what the perspectives of such an enterprise are. To this aim, the authors have to answer questions regarding the Pact's intentions, methods of achieving its goals and chances to do so, possible EU's interest in this kind of initiatives, and chances that other cities will be inspired to follow. The article is an exploratory case study which presents a new form of inter-city cooperation introduced by the Pact of Free Cities initiative. To the authors' knowledge, it is the first analysis of this novel form of municipal cooperation, which is also a way for cities to bypass their states. Furthermore, it has to be emphasized that the Pact has quickly grown from the original 4 members, presented as liberal islands in the countries of the Visegrád group, to a much larger group of more than 30 cities from Europe and other continents. Kyiv joined in September 2022, in – but other Pact cities had already been playing an important role in helping Ukraine during the ongoing war on its territory. The relatively short time of its activity has shown that the Pact is becoming a hub for value driven cities interested in cooperation among very active and like-minded cities.

The research methods include the institutional-legal analysis and interview through a survey of municipal decision-makers. The former means an examination of the content of legal acts and other documents in order to select and interpret the documents relevant for the research. Application of this method is justified by the fact that this paper examines the founders' declaration of the Pact of Free Cities adopted by municipal authorities at the international level. The analysis of this document made it possible to reconstruct the objectives of the Pact of Free Cities network. The second method was used to ask several detailed questions in a survey conducted among municipal decision-makers representing the local governments.

The main reason why the authors decided to take up the topic was the lack of literature on the Pact of Free Cities as the association is very recent. The initiative also fits in with current trends aiming at greater involvement of the state as one of the significant stakeholders on international level. This paper is among the first (if not the first ever) to analyze the Pact, its foundations and potential. There is, however, rich literature on the growing role of cities in international law/relations, including cities bypassing or complementing nation-states. One

should mention Auby (2011), Blank (2006), Frug and Barron (2006), and Aust (2015). The latter points to the need to analyze cities in the field of international law/relations. The international relations and political science literature includes also such texts as Acuto (2013); Amen, Toly, McCarney and Segbers (2011); Davis and de Duren (2011); Curtis (2014); Taylor, Derudder, Saey and Wiltox (2007) (this book actually contains just one brief chapter on the politics and international relations of cities such as the Hague, Geneva, Brussels and Vienna, considered mainly as headquarters of the international governmental organizations) and Alger (2014). One of the most important publications is a book by Benjamin Barber *If Mayors Ruled the World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities*. It may also be termed seminal as the author introduces and strongly supports the idea of cities ruling the world and partly bypassing states because the former are better at handling global challenges such as climate change or even national security.

The structure of the paper is as follows: it starts with an introduction containing several reflections on cities bypassing States. The second section presents the genesis and content of the Pact of Free Cities initiative. In the final part the authors attempt to establish the motives behind this initiative and its future prospects, as well as present their conclusions.

The political *status quo* has been disrupted by recent developments: cities now often bypass states and relate directly to international treaties, commitments and instruments, as in the case of the Paris Agreement, actively championed by a large number of cities against the policies of their central government (Acuto, 2017). As they may perform some of the States' functions, cities may become an alternative, thus bypassing States (mostly by complementing the latter's some functions). Cooperating cities can participate in international relations or enforce international laws; one can look no further than the 2010 World Mayors Summit on Climate, held in Mexico, when *Global Cities Covenant on Climate – the Mexico City Pact* was signed by 207 city mayors An example of an initiative independent from the State was the appeal which Mayor of Seattle made to cities, asking their authorities to conform locally to the Kyoto protocol and reduce GHG emission levels. The appeal met with positive responses, and this exchange was a starting point of a network including more than 1000 cities named in the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement (Nijman, 2011, p. 222). Joining the Agreement meant that the cities locally adopted the Kyoto protocol while their state did not. Thus those cities identified themselves as global actors, taking their share of responsibility for the governance of climate change, i.e. one of the most significant global challenges (Nijman, 2011, p. 222). While the *Paris Climate Agreement* was finally adopted by the international community, its implementation has been limited as the US threatened to

withdraw from it and ultimately did so in 2020. When President Donald Trump explained his motivations by claiming that he was elected to represent the people of Pittsburgh, not Paris, the mayor of Pittsburgh Bill Peduto quickly announced that Pittsburgh will adhere to the provisions of the Paris Agreement, for it is beneficial to the city's inhabitants, economy and future perspectives (Roberts, 2017, p. 12). Around 30 mayors of other American cities followed Pittsburgh's example. Together with three governors, more than 100 companies and over 80 university presidents, they began hitherto unprecedented attempts to negotiate with the UN the possible signing of the Paris Agreement (Roberts, 2017, p. 12). This environmental case shows that international cities' cooperation is not only a way to deliver public services but also a form of democratic response to decisions made by national governments, with particular emphasis on governments composed of, among others, representatives of populist parties. As Stoker (2019) pointed out, populism as a political force has moved from a sideshow in contemporary democracies to the centre stage and as a result has become a governance paradigm when under threat (p. 4).

Another sphere where cities can act instead of states, or at least parallel to them, are human rights, implemented by the cities even though host countries had not ratified relevant conventions, as in the case of the Ordinance 1998 on the Local Implementation of the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women adopted by San Francisco, and the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted by Los Angeles although the USA did not ratify the Convention (Frug & Barron, 2006, p. 22; Nijman, 2011, p. 222-223). Human rights could be seen as an example of competition based on values and principles that might be differently perceived at central and city level. Embodiment of this kind of tensions in CEE region could be seen in the concept of illiberal democracy. This concept is frequently associated with Zakaria (1997) and famous Victor Orbán's speech in which he mentioned that Hungary had abandoned the liberal principles of societal organisation and, inspired by today's "international stars" such as China, Singapore, Turkey and Russia, would adopt an illiberal form of governance (Orbán, 2014). Orbán reasoned that as liberalism promotes the selfish interests of – often unpatriotic – individuals, only an illiberal democracy can devotedly serve the general interest of the whole nation (Bíró-Nagy, 2017). The next steps of his political agenda were a series of reforms that covered such areas as media landscapes (Surowiec and Štětka, 2019); cultural policies (Bonet and Zamorano, 2020); judiciaries and the way in which the constitutional principle of the rule of law was exercised (Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała, 2019); and last but not least, the basic principles of political system (Buzogány, 2016; Plattner, 2020). Given that, it is fair to say

that state-cities backlash is a part of cultural values, not to the mention an electoral division in voting intentions between liberal cities and illiberal rest parts of the country. Furthermore, according to the results of the research on the urban-rural polarisation of political disenchantment – there are strong and statistically significant differences between the populations in these two settings. On average, rural dwellers show stronger levels of dissatisfaction with democracy and lower trust in the political system (Kenny and Luca, 2020). This kind of circumstances create an additional context where state-cities relations are vulnerable to end up in conflict.

The last two years have brought further, unusually strong evidence that cities play an increasingly important role not only in their countries, but also internationally. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, cities have become even more active players in the international arena, while the intensity of direct and institutionalized relations between cities and global stakeholders has reached an unprecedented level. Furthermore, the war in Ukraine proved that help provided to refugees as well as material aid provided to Ukraine on the spot was often – especially at the beginning –organized provided and delivered by cities (Szpak et al., 2022b).

As we have seen recently, outbreaks of infectious diseases can compound the other problems faced by urban populations as cities are places where largest numbers of people come into daily contact with each other, thus creating a potential for intensified transmission of pathogens – a considerable risk since currently more than half of the Earth's population (approximately 4 billion people) is concentrated in cities (Muggah, Katz, 2020). It is predicted tha $^{2}/_{3}$ of the world's population will live in cities by 2050, while 80 percent of the world's GDP is already generated in metropolitan areas (Hachigian and Pipa, 2020). According to the McKinsey Global Institute (MGI), 1.5 billion people live in 600 largest cities; in 2007, this meant 22 percent of the global population and $30 trillion of GDP, which was more than half of the global GDP. Top 100 cities generated $21 trillion of GDP in 2007, which gives 38 percent of the global total. According to the authors of the report, over the next 15 years, the list of top 600 cities will change as the center of gravity of the urban world is moving towards south and, even more decisively, east. The MGI expects 136 new cities to enter the top 600 by 2025, all of them either from the developing world or from China (an overwhelming majority of ca. 100 new major cities) (McKinsley Global Institute, 2011).

Cities have proved to be an essential part of the solution and have shown leadership where their nation-states fail. More and more often, states lack strength and political will to deal with such global-level challenges as economic globalization, climate change or the COVID-19 pandemic, while cities in such cases may and very often do act efficiently and

without many constraints that restrict the actions of states – it is cities that actually have enough economic, intellectual and cultural potential to face such threats, at least at the local level. As French (2004) points out, we can observe the decline of traditional concepts of sovereignty. The concept of the nation-state has been evolving, and such entity is no longer inherently superior in the international arena; now it is just one of many actors there. Political, socio-economic and even military power is dispersing more and more widely, no longer a prerogative of state governments only (p. 62-63).

The challenge for multilateral institutions is how to best leverage the leadership and creative solutions emerging from cities' pragmatism while continuing to serve the interests of their member states. The pandemic has added a new urgency to the widespread agreement that the multilateral system must evolve to be more effective in addressing global challenges, and its toughest skeptics are clamoring ever louder for reform. Supporting and learning from mayors as well as inviting their perspective on key global policy decisions, offers a significant opportunity to introduce such changes.

The coronavirus pandemic created many opportunities for cities to operate in the fields which until now were primarily reserved for states. While many national governments and international organizations were accused of acting slowly, numerous mayors and governors were working tirelessly to protect their residents. An example of such activities that put the good of citizens first was the preparation for the presidential election in Poland. The elections were originally planned for 10th of May, 2020. At the last minute, the Polish government decided to hold elections by post without an appropriate legal basis or proper preparation. In response, many Polish cities opposed these plans in the interest of the safety and health of their residents. A number of mayors refused to provide current voter lists for fear of further spreading the coronavirus, which was one of the reasons for postponing the election to June 28, 2020. Such activities prove that cities are already bypassing or even confronting States in very practical ways.

As demonstrated by the above examples, the phenomenon of cities bypassing states is already occurring, particularly in the spheres of human rights and climate change mitigation and prevention. Thus the cities have joined the states as problem-solving actors in the international arena. Cities also have a great potential for providing solutions for global problems; they become even more efficient when they form networks, thus multiplying their strengths and power. Through taking part in global multi-level governance, cities participate in managing global problems, particularly those related to sustained development and climate change (Goldin, 2013, p. 3). Bypassing national sovereignty, the cities may represent a more

efficient mechanism of dealing with global problems. In general, cities are more practical than ideological when dealing with problems; they also may have better emotional intelligence than nation-states, and are recognizable as global brands that attract creative people (Coll, 2015). Unsurprisingly, with such advantages the role of cities is increasing.

The Pact of Free Cities

The Pact of Free Cities fits perfectly into the phenomenon of cities bypassing states and making efforts towards dealing with contemporary global problems from the urban point of view. It was signed in the capital of Hungary on December 16, 2019 by representatives of four capital cities: Bratislava (Slovakia), Budapest (Hungary), Prague (the Czech Republic) and Warsaw (Poland). Additionally, in August 2021, Tomislav Tomašević, the Mayor of Zagreb (Croatia), was invited to join the Pact, whereas in autumn 2021 more cities – not only European but also Asian – were encouraged to participate in the Pact activities. Furthermore, the year 2022 turned out to be essential for the Pact due to the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and admission of new members from the countries that used to be parts of the USSR – Latvia (Riga), Lithuania (Vilnius) as well as(Riga, Vilnius), Ukraine itself (Kyiv).

The growing role of cities and the intensification of globalization requires a new approach to cities as powerful actors of global multilevel governance. Cities and other urban areas are underrepresented in the literature on international relations, including foreign policy analysis. They are also almost absent in literature on international law, especially in international law textbooks. Yet cities' role in creating and implementing international law is growing (in other words, the room for their manoeuvering in the realm of international relations and international law decision-making is widening). Therefore, the research on cities in the global politics and their impact on nation-States, sovereignty and international law must by definition be inter-disciplinary. Two of the very rare examples of international law interest in cities are the status of the Free City of Danzig (Gdańsk) and of the International City of Tangiers. The former was under the control of the League of Nations, and the latter was subjected to the control of a multilateral body comprised of officials from various States. What is important is that those cities were not regarded as fully independent separate entities with legal personality (Blank, 2006, p. 886).

Yet even though the interest in cities as international actors has attracted academic attention only recently, Peter J. Taylor examines different aspects of city/state relations to illustrate that past and present city-states have many features characteristic to states and to prove that prosperous cities need primarily economic autonomy, whereas political sovereignty

is not *sine qua non*. As examples Taylor describes German Hanse (13th – 15th century), Genoa (15th – 16th century), Amsterdam (a neutral city in 17th century), Venice (19th century), Salonica (20th century), and London (21st century) (Taylor, 2007).

Cooperation between these four European cities is not accidental. From the very beginning the Pact of Free Cities has been presented as a global network of cities determined to stand up for progressive values and fight against nationalistic populism. As stated on the official website, "The Pact of Free Cities has been created to highlight the growing importance of cities in preserving and protecting democracy and open society. The vision for the Pact is to build a value-driven mayoral network, agile to adapt to the ever-changing political environment and bring about meaningful change". They are connected not merely by their geographical proximity, but above all by the personalities of their mayors – young but at the same time extremely experienced politicians – and the extensive experience of the cities they are currently leading in cooperation within the most dynamically operating European and international cities networks (i.e. Association of Cities and Regions for Sustainable Resource Management, C40 Cities, Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy, Eurocities, Polis).

The idea of signing the Pact and therefore establishing closer cooperation between the capitals of the Visegrad Group countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) was born during talks between their mayors, one of which took place during a meeting held on November 9, 2019 in Berlin to commemorate the fall of the Berlin Wall. Already at that time the authorities of Budapest, Prague and Warsaw mentioned joint plans to adopt the so-called 'Little Visegrad' declaration, as they initially labelled their initiative. The power in those four capital cities had been taken over by young and progressive politicians sharing a similar vision of a modern city: open, tolerant and caring for the natural environment. The mayors have been united not only by converging views, but also by the fact that they were elected at a similar time[1]: The mayors have often emphasized that signing the Pact should not be perceived as a mere symbol in the fight against growing populism, but above all it should be viewed as a platform for cooperation that develops and promotes practical solutions for cities. European media very quickly noticed and highlighted the common features of the mayors of these Central European capitals. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) wrote about 'a defence alliance against populist state governments' and called the Pact's signatories 'Visegrad rebels'. 'Social democrat in Budapest, Christian democrat in Warsaw, green

[1] The mayor of Bratislava Matúš Vallo took office on December 7, 2018 for a 4-year term. The President of Budapest Gergely Karacsony took office on October 13, 2019 for a 4-year term. The President of Prague Zdenek Hřib took office on November 18, 2018 for a 4-year term. The President of Warsaw Rafał Trzaskowski took up the post on November 22, 2018 for a 5-year term.

“Pirate” in Prague and left-wing liberal in Bratislava. Although the political affiliation of the four mayors is very different, they are connected by the fact that their parties are in opposition to the central governments in their countries. (...)’ (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, December 17, 2019). The FAZ also noted that in the municipal elections the ‘trend of progressive liberalism’ prevails, reflecting ‘the new requirements of the municipal language course, which has become more ecologically aware and more liberal in cultural matters, and much more intolerant of corruption’. It also emphasized that the ambitions of the mayors of the capitals of the Visegrad Group countries go far beyond city management in matters of ecology, culture or communication networks, and begin to touch upon foreign policy issues. An example was the mayor of Prague Zdenek Hřib, who extended his invitation to the New Year’s party to a representative of Taiwan, which resulted in the termination of the city’s partnership with Beijing. It should be emphasized that the mayors themselves want to be perceived as independent managers of European capitals, for whom the development of the city they govern is the most important value. “We want to respond to the most important challenges of today. We want to be close to people, make decisions based on shared experiences and facts, and away from ideology” (Łań 2020).

The mayors of the Pact cities do not hide the motives that led them to undertake this initiative. The main reason is the difficulty in getting the representatives of central and local government to agree, which is a common problem in relations between these entities. However, it is due not only to the frequent differences in priorities regarding the implemented activities. The differences in the goals and importance of the activities undertaken by central and local authorities mainly result from the fact that the European capitals that signed the Pact are headed by politicians from parties that are in opposition to the parties currently ruling in those countries. For example, the mayor of Warsaw Rafał Trzaskowski in an interview with Deutsche Welle mentioned that Polish local governments are getting less and less tax revenue, while more and more responsibilities are assigned to them (e.g. related to the latest reform of the education system). In addition, Trzaskowski pointed to the fact that the central government systematically attempts to weaken the position of Polish local governments (Szymański 2019).

At the same time the mayor of Warsaw emphasized that the Visegrad Group initiative, although new, does not contradict the current practice. ‘In the EU, local regions and cities fight for their own interests. It’s always been that way, and it always will be.’ Trzaskowski said. ‘It’s not a measure that’s being taken against the state, it’s a supplement.’ (Deutsche Welle 2019). A similar approach was taken by Zdeněk Hřib, who expressed his hope that

increased support for funding going directly to regions and cities will cut down on bureaucracy and make the EU closer to the people. Hřib went on to warn that lack of support for cities' innovativeness will lead to them being sidelined in terms of global ambitions as it is cities that power the economic growth of the states (Eurocities 2019).

The main objectives of the Pact included in the agreement can be divided into the following categories: (1) protecting and promoting common values, (2) sharing best practices, starting joint projects in urban development, and seeking solutions to common problems facing cities, (3) advocating for increase in the role of cities and lobbying for direct urban funding at EU level, (4) creating a platform to help cities coordinate their policies, (5) keeping cooperation open to other cities and entities that share the same values.

Therefore, cooperation priorities included in the Pact regard joint lobbying in the European Union to increase the financial resources that the EU transfers directly to cities, bypassing central governments. The mayors admit that before signing the Pact they had held talks with the Directorate General responsible for regional development in the EU and representatives of the European Commission, and they had obtained confirmation of such a possibility (Szymański 2019).

The signatories of the Pact are convinced of the rightness of the path they have chosen, and they indicate that so far not only countries but also regions have been entitled to applying for the European Union funds (particularly in the light of the Green Deal, the EU Industrial Plan and the overall shape of the 2021-27 EU Multiannual Financial Framework alongside with the instrument NextGenerationEU supporting the recovery plan for Europe). It proves that not only central governments are entitled to participating in the distribution of the EU funds; hence the signatories of the Pact postulate that the list of current entities (central and regional governments) benefiting from co-financing from the EU funds should be expanded to include cities' governments as well. Historically, all the existing Structural Funds have been targeted primarily at regions in need. In turn, among the main European Funds focused on equalizing disproportions in the development of both individual Member States and their regions, only the Cohesion Fund has been allocated for the implementation of projects of significance to the Member States and the entire European Union. Hence, among the signatories of the Pact an idea arose to follow in the footsteps of non-state actors (regions) and work out their own mechanism for obtaining the EU funds for cities' purposes and bypassing central authorities.

Although the Pact of Free Cities fits into the above mentioned phenomenon of bypassing states, the mayors of the four Pact's capitals are far from equating their actions with

a desire to replace or bypass national governments as such. They still perceive national governments as the cornerstoneof European integration and cooperation. In the process of lobbying for direct funding, they do not advocate a large-scale re-structuring of current allocation mechanisms because they agree that national governments are the primary stakeholders. However, mayors of the Pact's capitals are more likely to want to devise some financial tools and programs that are focused on cities in particular (Ibolya 2020).

The mayors also draw attention to the fact that the efforts made towards local governments' direct access to the EU funds are to ensure not only greater independence but above all to enable more effective fight against problems that their central governments fail to solve adequately or to which they do not pay enough attention, such as the climate crisis. Pact signatories declare their willingness to learn from each other and exchange experiences and practices in order to improve the quality of life of urban residents; therefore they envision the implementation of the assumptions of the Pact through regular consultations of experts and officials as well as exchange of youth. Undertaking the activities provided for in the Pact is also expected to increase the position of local governments in the international arena; hence, in order to strengthen their voice, the signatories of the Pact invited all other cities that share the same values and priorities to join.

Still, it has to be emphasized that the Pact is not merely a question of money. Although the text of the Pact itself is relatively short and consists primarily of references to the values the signatories share and indication of areas in which cooperation is to take place, the text is very informative and contains references to the main goals set clear by the signatories. The Preamble to the Pact contains references to historical ties and common heritage linking the capitals of the Visegrad Group and similar experiences of 30 years of social and economic transformation combined with 15 years of EU membership. The authors also speak of their common values: the need to protect the individual, social, ethnic and other minorities against discrimination in accordance with the provisions of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. In the Preamble, the mayors highlight the challenges facing modern cities, including the climate and housing crisis, increasing inequalities and social stratification, aging populations, and political tribalism. They also encourage the involvement of local civic organizations in city life and refer to the principles of subsidiarity and self-governance as elements guaranteeing that local communities will be able to achieve their goals. Finally, the Preamble emphasizes how valuable international cooperation and cities' networks are for cities and their residents. Experience sharing as well as working together on environmental

issues and Smart Cities Technologies are frequently cited future areas of cooperation, alongside joint applications for EU funds (Deutsche Welle 2019).

Moreover, the mayors of the Visegrad Group capitals often underline their commitment to protecting and promoting common values – freedom, human dignity, democracy, equality, the rule of law, social justice, tolerance and cultural diversity. The Mayor of Bratislava Matúš Vallo argued that cities were the best place to lead the charge to protect European values of tolerance and openness because 'it is in our capitals that the highest concentration of diversity [whether] social, religious, political, ethnic' can be found (Euronews 2019). The mayors also emphasize the willingness to share best practices in the field of intelligent and socially aware city management, especially in the field of sustainable spatial planning, climate protection, social integration, housing, transport, the digital agenda and other areas of common interest. Furthermore, the mayors stress the necessity to coordinate efforts to promote tailored solutions for cities under European Union policies, in particular those concerning cohesion, employment, environmental protection, climate, energy, transport and economy, and as part of the legislative process – the European Pillar of Social Rights. The Pact of Free Cities also emphasizes the need for mutual support and joint actions with the EU institutions, agencies and decision-makers regarding future programs targeted at cities and providing them with more direct funding. Finally, the signatories invite other cities and partners to support the objectives of the Pact.

It is important to emphasize that The Pact of Free Cities does not create any new organisation which has a legal personality. As a result, it is more of a target-oriented form of cooperation than a typical inter-municipal organisation. Members of the Pact devote their means to actions based on specific, mutual goals. As stated by the Director of International Cooperation Unit in Warsaw Town Hall Jacek Najder (2020), they do not intend to begin cooperation by discussing administrative problems and financial contributions. What is far more important than any further institutionalization of the initiative is setting the agenda and working jointly towards strengthening their position on urban policy at the European level. They would like to cooperate with the Committee of Regions, Eurocities and other European cities on developing the initiative.

Contrary to many initially negative comments, perceiving the Pact as a declaration that would not be followed by any concrete work, its signatories did not stop at a single activity, which was the ceremonial declaration signing in Budapest. The examples of specific actions that followed are summarized in Table 1 below. The Pact founders encouraged new cities to

join, including those from outside Europe, and the Pact as a whole became particularly involved in helping Ukraine, its cities and inhabitants.

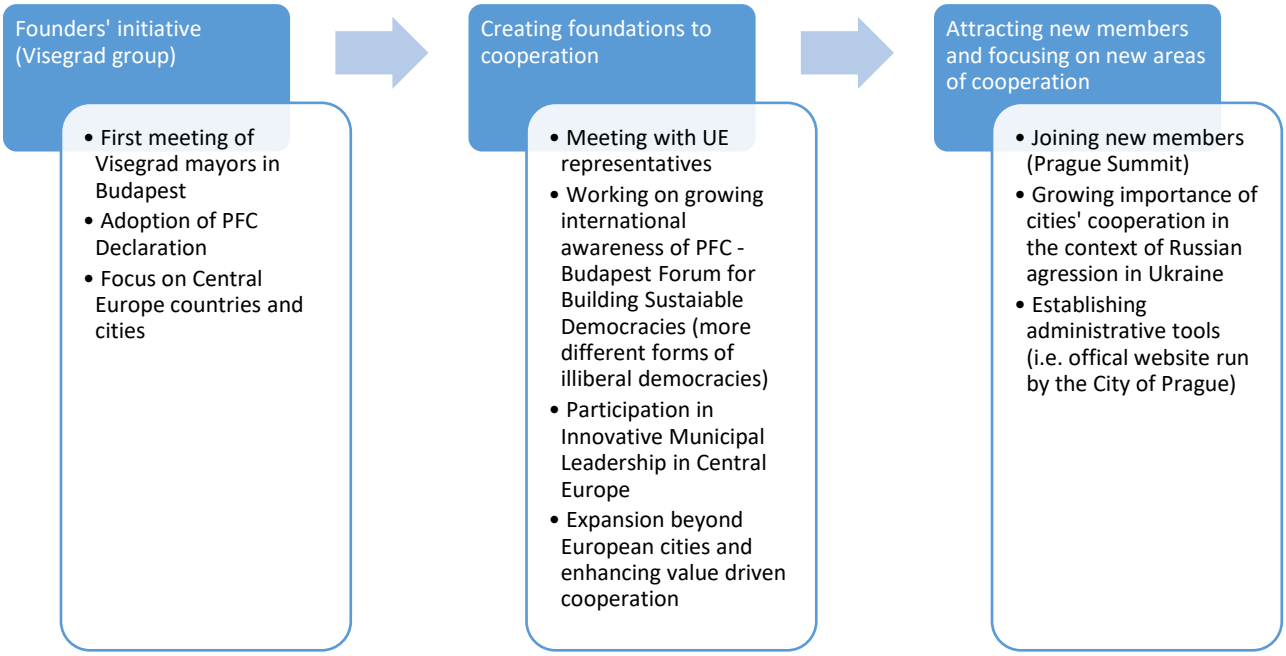
Table 1. Actions taken within the Pact of Free Cities

Date	Details
February 12, 2020	During a visit to Brussels, the mayors of Budapest, Prague, and Warsaw, and the representatives of Bratislava in the absence of its mayor delivered a letter personally to the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, in which they asked for increased allocation of EU funds to be directly distributed to the EU's major cities. The three mayors also met with EC Vice President for Climate Frans Timmermans and the European Commissioner for regional policy Elisa Ferreira (Zalan 2020).
September 16-17, 2021	Budapest Municipality, Political Capital, and CEU Democracy Institute held the inaugural Budapest Forum for Building Sustainable Democracies, which is intended to become a new annual event. Another cities (Amsterdam, Athens, Barcelona, Florence, Frankfurt, Gdańsk, Ljubljana, London, Los Angeles, Mannheim, Milan, Neu-Ulm, Paris, Podgorica, Rijeka, Rome, Stuttgart, Taipei, Taoyuan, Tirana, Ulm, Vienna, and Zagreb) joined the Pact of Free Cities, which means a successful expansion of the Pact not only to the rest of Europe, but also to Asian and American cities.
December 2, 2021	The four founding mayors were invited to "Innovative Municipal Leadership in Central Europe" hearing organized by US Foreign Affairs Committee.
December 6, 2021	On behalf of the Pact of Free Cities mayors, Rafał Trzaskowski participated in one of the meetings of the Summit for Democracy – "Mayors Delivering Democracy Daily" organized by the White House.
February 15, 2022	During a meeting in Kyiv the mayors of Prague and Warsaw invited Vitali Klitschko, the Mayor of Kyiv, to join the Pact of Free Cities. The invitation was signed by 13 member cities

	(Amsterdam, Bratislava, Budapest, Gdańsk, Los Angeles, Paris, Podgorica, Prague, Taipei, Taoyuan, Ulm, Neu-Ulm and Warsaw). The letter expressed the concern about the situation between Russia and Ukraine and was a demonstration of solidarity with the citizens of Ukraine, who were facing war threats and pressure from Russia at that moment.
February 24, 2022	Statement by the mayors of the Pact of Free Cities condemning the attack and invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army.
September 26-27, 2022	Prague Summit – admission of new members (Berlin, Brussels, Hamburg, Kyiv, Riga, and Vilnius). The Summit focused on Ukraine's post-war reconstruction and discussion on the future and development of the cities; the participants included member cities' representatives, Eurocities' delegation and the Vice-President of the European Commission Frans Timmermans.

The above table perfectly highlights the two breakthroughs in cooperation within the Pact of the Free Cities. The first was the fall of 2021, when the pact was joined by many more cities , not only from Europe, but also from North America and Asia. The second turning point was Russia's invasion in Ukraine and the member cities of the Pact expressing concern and providing aid to Ukrainian cities. Currently, the Pact member cities tighten cooperation, often present common positions and coordinate assistance provided to Ukraine

Table 2. Evolution of the Pact of Free Cites Initiative



As the war evolves, it creates a humanitarian emergency in Ukraine, therefore the municipalities of the Pact of Free Cities increase their efforts to provide much-needed material and financial aid to the people of Ukraine. The mayors of Bratislava, Budapest, Prague and Warsaw recorded a Youtube message declaring they will find ways of providing concrete help to the Ukrainian citizens and authorities in these most unusual circumstances (https://eurocities.eu/latest/cities-rally-around-ukraine/).

This recording, however, was only introduction preamble to the enormous scope of humanitarian aid provided by the member cities of the Pact. Transports of food and medical supplies as well as financial aid began to reach Ukrainian cities almost immediately. In addition, cities, particularly those located in Central Europe, have become a destination point for refugees from Ukraine, who for several months have been hosted in private homes, as well as in many refugee centers organized in Warsaw, Bratislava and Prague.

It has to be emphasized that the Pact's activity has been well aimed to the need of their populations and is a reflection of a current trend we are facing. There is a great interest in the presented proposals, in particular on the part of the European Parliament and the European Commission. The role of local governments in implementing strategic European objectives should be acknowledged, which is increasingly understood by EU institutions. In addition, both the European Committee of the Regions and Eurocities have long advocated for similar measures. This is a trend that will only gain momentum in the future, so Pact signatories are very optimistic about the outcome of their efforts. Moreover, cities and metropolitan areas

play an ever increasing role in European public policy – approx. $^{2}/_{3}$ of Europe's population live in cities – their residents are mostly progressive electorates that are well suited to act and support actions proposed in the Pact that lead to empowering cities and making them strategic partners in implementing EU objectives (Ibolya 2020).

Conclusions

Recent events have clearly shown that city leadership is becoming more and more fundamental not only when it comes to solving the world's most difficult challenges such as climate change, migration, inequality and, most recently, pandemic-related issues but also in terms of democratic values, which are currently the subject of much scrutiny and analysis. Having said that, the Pact of Free Cities contradicts Barber's assumption regarding city mayors as leaders focused only on solving citizens' problems.

According to Hachigian and Pipa, '(t)he traditional multilateral system was set up by and for national governments. Local leaders are outside the circle as the world develops its so-called collective response, despite being the ones who come face to face with the implications, and solutions, for real people and communities' (Hachigian & Pipa 2020).

Although the Pact of Free Cities as an urban initiative cannot be considered groundbreaking, it fits in well with current trends, and convincingly proves that the voices and influence of cities and their representatives are becoming essential, with special regards to global aims and messages. Therefore their voices and opinions have to be heard and perceived as a thermometer to gauge the substantial change of global politics.

The analysis of the Pact brings many conclusions, among which it should be emphasized that it may be recognized as a new tool for solving old problems. Its advantage arises from the fact that cities' cooperation is seldom highly institutionalised; this is less important than setting a common agenda and working jointly towards strengthening their position on urban policy not only at the European level, but also at the global level after inclusion of new member cities. The future outcomes will show whether this strategy can prove effective and successful.

The Pact may be also seen as a paradoxical result of the illiberal democracy agenda implemented by some CEE governments. It is particularly visible in the founding declaration that evokes such values as tolerance, openness and high concentration of diversity.

Moreover, the Pact adheres to the notion that cities may follow in the footsteps of non-state actors (regions) and develop their own mechanism for obtaining EU funds for cities' purposes that bypasses central authorities. Although the Visegrad Group mayors insist that

their idea is to be perceived as a logical complement to states, this is a clear example of cities bypassing states. The Pact may/should inspire cities all over the world to attempt to directly contact other international organizations/institutions or obtain funds straight from them. The first signs of this new trend could be observed in the case of Rio de Janeiro, which in 2010 directly applied for and was granted a loan from the World Bank (Riegner 2021). Still, the scale and scope of the Pact of Free Cities are more comprehensive and ambitious than such one-time initiatives.

Many factors indicate that the signatories of the Pact of Free Cities chose a very good moment for launching the initiative. Obviously, the pandemic could not have been predicted, but putting together forces in the light of the EU's new financial perspective being negotiated is the best evidence of forward-looking planning. Cities' efforts to link the availability of EU financial resources to compliance with democratic principles and simultaneously to create a EU mechanism dedicated for cities can be a successful venture that will not only act as an additional impulse to pursue sustainable urban development but also – and above all – become the next stage in the process of turning cities into fully-fledged actors in international relations. At the moment, the key aspect conditioning the success or failure of the initiative is the maximum reduction of the time necessary for making and implementing decisions.

The fact that within two years the number of member cities increased from 4 to 33 is the best proof of the emerging need for city cooperation that is not limited to specific areas such as environmental protection or promotion of tourist values. Currently the issues so far reserved for states are becoming the common denominator motivating cities to unite. In the case of the Pact, such matters are democracy, freedom, sustainable development and the fight against populism, nationalism and climate change. Therefore, cities can and should be viewed today as a true epicentre of change.

If the Free Cities alliance develops, expands, and prevails through collaboration, pragmatism and innovative approach, it has every chance to become, alongside other international cities networks, the long-awaited way of salvaging the multilateral system.

As the mayor of Warsaw emphasized in the letter to the President of the European Commission, 'The fight against climate change will be won or lost in cities'. And it is not only climate that can and should be considered. The Pact of Free Cities as an example of grassroots democracy has a chance to become a cure for the ills that plague not only Central Europe but also other regions.

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