

Agnieszka Szpak, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Faculty of Political Science and Security Studies, Toruń, Poland, aszpak@umk.pl (ORCID: 0000-0001-7601-1230)

Robert Gawłowski, WSB Merito University in Toruń, Faculty of Finance and Management in Bydgoszcz, Poland, robert.gawlowski@wsb.bydgoszcz.pl (ORCID: 0000-0002-3419-7679)

Joanna Modrzyńska, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Faculty of Political Science and Security Studies, Toruń, Poland, jmod@umk.pl (ORCID: 0000-0002-5409-6787)

Paweł Modrzyński, Bydgoszcz University of Science and Technology, Faculty of Management, Poland, pawel.modrzyński@pbs.edu.pl (ORCID: 0000-0003-1861-0643)

Michał Dahl, Alberta International School of Recreation, Sport and Tourism, Beijing Sport University, China, dahl.michal@gmail.com (ORCID: 0000-0003-2803-2648)

What if mayors ruled the world? – decade after the publishing of Benjamin Barber’s book

This research was funded in part by the National Science Centre, Poland, grant number 2024/55/B/HS5/01968. For the purpose of Open Access, the author has applied a CC-BY public copyright licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript (AAM) version arising from this submission.

Artykuł opublikowany jako: Agnieszka Szpak, Robert Gawłowski, Joanna Modrzyńska, Paweł Modrzyński, Michał Dahl, *What if mayors ruled the world? – 10 years after the publishing of Benjamin Barber’s book*, “Administrative Theory & Praxis”, 2026, DOI: 10.1080/10841806.2026.2622229.

Abstract: This article revisits the ideas presented in Benjamin Barber’s *If Mayors Ruled the World*, a decade after its publication, analyzing the evolving role of cities in global governance in theoretical and practical context. The study assesses whether Barber’s vision of cities as essential actors in solving global challenges has materialized, particularly in light of the increasing dysfunctionality of nation-states and the growing relevance of cities in international decision-making. The authors examine changes in central-local relations, the impact of crises, and the shifting dynamics of globalization. The discussion highlights how cities adapt international legal standards and actively shape them, often bypassing state authority. While Barber’s notion that cities could “save the world” remains debatable, the past decade has undeniably reinforced their influence in addressing transnational challenges.

Introduction

In 2013, Benjamin Barber famously asked, “What if mayors ruled the world?” and provoked many discussions about the role of states and cities in current circumstances. Initially, his convictions about the dysfunctional states, alongside a lack of capabilities for pragmatic cooperation that could be addressed by including cities in international governance, caused many controversies. Many reviewers argued that the idea of cities carrying the burden of global problem-solving was unconvincing. Others added that cities run much of the world, but do not rule the world and have limitations. However, there is no doubt that Barber's publication has drawn massive attention to cities and their role in facing global challenges. What could we say today about their role in the world a decade after the book's publication? Do states become more dysfunctional, and at the same time, cities become more indispensable in global governance? Or perhaps the passing decade has shown that Barber was wrong in his assumptions, or at least they turned out to be too far-fetched?

The role of the state during the last decade

Barber's proposal to increase the role of cities in international multi-level governance (MLG) resulted from state dysfunctionality. The basic concept of statehood – sovereignty – makes them incapable of acting successfully globally and causes a low level of public trust and a lack of pragmatism to face many challenges. The reason for this is the changing and volatile nature of the global order – the growing role of interdependence or the considerable influence of international organizations from the financial industry (Barber, 2013). In this context, the state was seen as an actor who could take action and exert influence on public issues. Did the state become even more dysfunctional during the last decade?

Since Barber published his book, external circumstances and the global governance system have become much more complicated. In 2023, the number of state-based conflicts reached the highest since 1946, and the last years were the most violent in the last three decades (Rustad, 2024). On top of that, we have suffered from a polycrisis linked to a pandemic, access to energy resources, and an economic crisis. All of that brought us to the question of the state's role or even the viewing of the 'return of the state' (Streeck, 2024).

The last decade has brought a noticeable change in central-local relations, including international city engagement. As Barber noticed, cities have shown tremendous creativity and commitment at the international level because these areas of public policy have remained narrowly formalized, and domestic law in many countries has touched this issue very narrowly.

This situation has changed both in terms of legal framework and practice. Firstly, some countries implemented regulations that enacted cities' international cooperation to maximize these diplomatic channels. From the state's perspective, conducting specific actions by subnational entities might be helpful, but it might not show on the broader national agenda (Pejic & Acuto, 2022). The City and State Diplomacy Act, introduced in the US Congress, and Australia's Foreign Relations (State and Territory Arrangements) Bill 2020 exemplify this. If this change direction continues, paradiplomacy activities will become more formalized and less legal limbo than in many cases (Casson & Dardanelli, 2012).

Central-local relations substantially changed during the polycrisis times, especially in the context of policy processes. In many states, the initial overly centralized intergovernmental process had become increasingly flexible, insufficiently based on operational knowledge, and lacking lower-level consultation (Kuhlman et al., 2024). This means that the intensity of conflict in intergovernmental relations was reduced. The experience of this kind of cooperation gave the cities a great opportunity to take part in decision-making processes and use knowledge and practices from cities abroad.

What is the significance of globalization today? Has this process been strengthened or weakened over the last decade?

Over the centuries, cities have been the scene of enormous transformations. According to Schwab (2017), the situation is the same as that of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (also called the Digital Revolution). The introduction of big data, supercomputing, and artificial intelligence has not only changed technology as a whole but also affected the conceptualization and creation of cities and urban spaces. As hubs of experimentation and innovation, cities are engines of economic growth and key to nations' future competitiveness (Schwab 2017, pp. 76-78). The automation and enhancement of urban services and spaces enable the processes of (re)definition, (re)creation, and (re)envisioning of cities. The COVID-19 pandemic brought additional changes and accelerated the process of making cities smarter. Rosencrance (2021) underlines that the pandemic affected all actors in the international and national arenas and that the smart city is no longer about replacing manually repeated tasks with process automation. Tools such as the Internet of Things (IoT) and blockchain technology remodel the priorities of smart cities and focus on the evolution of urbanization, reorganization of work, and providing services for residents in a faster, safer, and more effective way (Szpak et al., 2022, p. 196). Additionally, the concept of 'global city' indicates the special place of cities in international relations (IR) and the process of globalization. According to Amen et al. (2011, p. 24), this term

specifies much more than size or composition. “It specifies a relationship between a city and the rest of the world. It suggests a city no longer so embedded, enmeshed, or nested in a national urban system and governance hierarchy and now participating more directly in global governance”. Sassen (2006) underlines that global cities are the command and control centers in the organization of the world economy, key locations, and marketplaces for leading industries. Taylor (2011, p. 201) focuses on the structural shift that takes place from “a mosaic (states) spatial structure premised on boundaries, to a spatial structure of nodes (cities) premised on flows” and considers “the rise of world city networks as an organizational skeleton of contemporary globalization”.

Although Barber’s diagnosis that only well-functioning global democratic bodies are able to protect humanity from war and terrorism, it has not been realized. Despite the multiplicity of multilateral institutions, their effectiveness is often dependent on the vested interests of individual actors – mostly states and thus appears limited (e.g. considering the UN’s reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine). This means that cities have a significant role to play in shaping globalization in the future. It allows us to place contemporary cities at the center of globalization processes and emphasize their importance in IR.

The role of cities in international decision-making processes

Historically, cities are undoubtedly among history’s most innovative and rapidly developing entities (Szpak et al., 2020, pp. 1-2). Since ancient times, they have also been a forge of ideas and concepts used to this day. For example, ancient Athens is considered the cradle of democracy, and we owe the foundations and codification of law to ancient Rome. The beginnings of diplomacy can be found in Greek city-states. Italian city-states then continued this tradition on the occasion of extensive trade contacts (Chan, 2016, pp. 139-140; van der Pluijm & Melissen, 2007; Shaw, 2003, p. 16). We cannot forget about the Hanseatic League, which spread across northern Europe and is often considered the first international network of cities (Norwich, 2009). The Peace of Westphalia, ending the Thirty Years’ War (1648), admittedly gave primacy to states in IR, although the 20th century brought significant changes in this area. Contemporary IR are not only about relations between nation-states. Global MLG is a concept that is gaining popularity and refers to the participation of many non-state actors (e.g., international organizations, non-governmental organizations, transnational corporations, and cities). There are several reasons for this state of affairs: states have lost their monopoly on decision-making due to the growing complexity of problems that require collective decision-making, whereas contemporary policy networks can connect multiple actors at all levels and

promote dispersion of authority, which gives a sense of participatory to a more significant number of interested parties (Szpak et al., 2020, pp. 8-9; Stephenson, 2013, p. 821; Hooghe & Marks, 2001, p. 3).

The first generation of MLG brought significant changes and a debate on partnership and coordination at various stages (establishment of the Congress of Regional and Local Authorities of the Council of Europe and the European Committee of Regions of the European Union). This cooperation focused on states and regional-level entities (Stephenson, 2013). The second generation of MLG involved additional entities, such as private and non-governmental actors, and focused on subjects other than the state, international, and intergovernmental organizations. Nowadays, we are witnessing the creation of the third generation of MLG, in which different actors, like cities, are increasingly involved in international cooperation. This confirms Barber's predictions from a decade ago on the growing role of cities in solving global problems and their increasing presence in IR. This involvement takes various forms, from individual actions through bilateral cooperations to activities in the framework of city networks (e.g., UCLG, Eurocities, C40).

Nowadays, cities are among the top actors taking action to combat climate change (e.g., the Mexico City Pact on Climate signed in 2010 or American cities announcing their commitment to the Kyoto Protocol, even though the USA withdrew from the agreement). In 2019, four Central European capital mayors signed the Pact of Free Cities to protect shared values, exchange good practices, and lobby at the EU level for direct urban funding (Szpak et al., pp. 28-30). The United Nations Advisory Committee of Local Authorities (UNACLA) has represented local authorities and served as an advisory body to the United Nations System since 1999. Cities are also increasingly mentioned in documents of the United Nations (e.g., Sustainable Development Goals, The New Urban Agenda) or the European Union (The Urban Agenda for the EU) as actors necessary for the successful implementation of planned projects. Over the last three decades, we have witnessed the growing role of cities as actions undertaken by cities and city networks often fill the gap left by states or are an excellent complement to states in IR.

Cities as an actor on an international level

Cities often implement international conventions that their states have not ratified. The Child-Friendly Cities Initiative applies the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child locally, even in U.S. cities, despite the U.S. not ratifying it. Similarly, cities like Los Angeles and San Francisco have adopted CEDAW principles (Lin, 2018, pp. 47–51; Knop, 2012; Resnik, 2012; Wexler,

2006). Seattle's Mayor Greg Nickels initiated city-level climate action aligned with the Kyoto Protocol in 2005, creating a network of over 1,000 cities (Grandi, 2020, p. 116; Nijman, 2011, p. 222). After the U.S. withdrew from the Paris Agreement, cities reaffirmed their commitments through initiatives like "We Are Still In" and America's Pledge (About America's Pledge, n.d.). Knop (2012, p. 5) argues that cities can shape themselves through international law, especially within "disaggregated democratic states". Swiney (2020, p. 262) calls this growing practice "municipal internationalism". Without robust national leadership, cities fill the gap and gain international support (Porrás, 2008, p. 592). They not only implement but also contribute to shaping international norms through city-level charters such as the European Charter for Safeguarding Human Rights in the City (2000), the Global Charter-Agenda (2011), and the Chicago Climate Charter (2017). This trend, more visible today than when Barber first wrote about cities' global role, signals a deeper challenge to state sovereignty and the traditional architecture of international law. Cities now strategically invoke international norms to legitimize local policies, showing how their legal and political relevance in global governance has grown over the past decade.

Cities as a guarantor of democratic values

Barber referred to cities as "democracy's best hope" (Barber, 2013). Nowadays, cities are indeed key centers for fostering democratic values. This is mainly because local governments globally enjoy an incomparably higher level of trust than institutions at the central level. As Bunting (2023) emphasized, "If public trust is the foundation of politics, then local government is building on a strong foundation". As populism and illiberal leadership rise (Merkel & Scholl, 2018), cities' role in defending democracy grows clearer. Portugali (2023, p. 20) even formulates the thesis that "relations between national and urban democracies, together with democracy [...], are currently in a state of crisis and instability". Democratic backsliding at the national level often pushes cities to adopt participatory approaches to uphold democratic norms. The array of actions cities can take to protect democracy is relatively broad. A significant number are listed in the Global Declaration of Mayors for Democracy. The declaration emphasizes cities' responsibility to uphold shared values such as democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and social justice (Global Declaration of Mayors for Democracy, n.d.). Myrick (2022) underscored the momentous significance of the document while noting that "[m]ayors represent many people's most immediate connection to and experience with democracy. We need to make that experience a good one". There are also examples of cities being proactive in areas such as deliberative democracy, equality and inclusion through

democratic practices, political engagement of youth, or responding to post-COVID-19 challenges (Kling, Gunasekara, & Bosacker, 2023). Beveridge and Koch (2022) even postulate the need to abandon traditional perceptions of democracy and introduce a new vocabulary to describe the contribution of local communities to democracy-making.

On the other hand, despite their efforts, cities rarely influence political systems or state functioning in practice. This is primarily due to the status of cities and their lack of formal subjectivity as actors in IR or the shaping of international law norms. In other words, the most important decisions – and these include issues related to the political system and human rights – are made by parliaments and policymakers. Barber was aware that the biggest challenge for modern democracy is precisely the question of the source of power. Participation is associated with local governance and constitutes the strength of cities, whereas power is the domain of the central government (Barber, 2013, p. 5), and this is unlikely to change soon.

Conclusions

What could we say today about the role of cities in the world after the decade of publishing Barber's book? Are they more effective and influential than states a decade later? During the last few years, states have reinvigorated their role domestically and internationally. Polycrisis has proved that specific capabilities on a national level are indispensable to face unpredicted challenges. Sovereignty did not become an obstacle but an asset to manage the crisis and show agency. On the other hand, cities' role in shaping and implementing international law has increased. Cities play an undeniable and pivotal role in implementing international legal standards. They adapt international law to the local context, localize its provisions, and assume obligations. As the level of government closest to citizens, cities directly impact individuals' rights and freedoms. Increasingly, cities often adopt inter-city agreements, which frequently resemble international treaties concluded by states.

Relations between cities and central governments are often viewed through the lens of bypassing the state, characterized by confrontation or conflict, particularly on contentious issues like environmental policies. However, cities' growing influence on the international stage does not preclude the possibility of more cooperative relationships with central governments. Both levels of administration are integral to the state, sharing the common goal of delivering public services and goods. Hence, cities should complement states in contemporary conditions and not replace them.

Although Barber openly claimed that cities could "save the world", as time goes on, his thesis comes no closer to being confirmed. The question of the shaping role of cities as defenders of

democracy illustrates this well. Even though the successes of cities in promoting specific solutions, implementing them at the local level, it will take over a decade to translate into visible changes in democratization implemented in individual countries and contribute to cementing the democratic system.

References

- About America's Pledge (n.d.), <https://www.americaspledgeonclimate.com/about/>.
- Amen, M., Toly, N. J., Mc Carney, P., Segber, K. *Sighting or Slighting Cities in International Relations in Amen, M. et al. (eds) Cities and Global Governance: New Sites for International Relations*, (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.2011)
- Barber, B. *If Mayors Ruled the World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities*, (Yale University Press 2013).
- Beveridge, R., & Koch, P. *How Cities Can Transform Democracy*, (Cambridge: Polity 2022).
- Bunting, H. The core principles of trust applied to local government, *Local Government Information Unit* 2023. <https://lgiu.org/blog-article/the-core-principles-of-trust-applied-to-local-government/>.
- Casson, R. & Dardanelli, P. Local Government Paradiplomacy in the UK: The Case of the Kent-Virginia Project. *Local Government Studies*. Vol. 38(5), 599-614 (2012).
- Chan, D.K.-H. City diplomacy and “glocal” governance: revitalizing cosmopolitan democracy, *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, 29(2), 134-160 (2016).
- Global Declaration of Mayors for Democracy (n.d.), <https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/GDMD.pdf>.
- Grandi, L. K. *City Diplomacy*, (Palgrave Macmillan 2020).
- Hooghe, L. and Marks, G. *Multi-level Governance and European Integration*, (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield 2001).
- Kling, S., Gunasekara, F., & Bosacker, S. (eds.). *Democracy and the life of cities*, The Chicago Council on Global Affairs & the German Marshall Fund, <https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/Democracy%20and%20the%20Life%20of%20Cities.pdf> 2023,
- Knop, K. *International Law and the Disaggregated Democratic State: Two Case Studies on Women's Human Rights and the United States*, Rapoport Center Human Rights Working Paper Series, <https://law.utexas.edu/humanrights/projects/international-law-and-the-disaggregated-democratic-state/> (2012).

Kuhlman, S., Laffin, M., Wayenberg, E., Bergström. *New Perspectives on Intergovernmental Relations. Crisis and Reform*. (Palgrave Macmillan 2024).

Lin, J. *Governing Climate Change. Global Cities and Transnational Lawmaking*, (Cambridge University Press 2018).

Merkel, W., & Scholl, F. Illiberalism, populism and democracy in East and West, *Politologický časopis – Czech Journal of Political Science*, 25(1), 28-44 (2018).

Myrick, S. How Mayors Guard Democracy, *Democracy*, 66 (2020), https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/66/how-mayors-guard-democracy/?fbclid=IwY2xjawHQa3hleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHVISMCBQ8G6pTdtV639qnwQSee6nbaUpj2KEja2p_ZMVHTgIauftr3AT1w_aem_-nfcNHTPx5lNuC5gfAGWuQ 2022.

Nijman, J. *The Future of the City and the International Law of the Future*, in S. Muller et al. (eds), *The Law of the Future and the Future of Law*, Torkel Opsahl Academic EPublisher, 213-229 2011.

Pejic, D. & Acuto, M. City diplomacy back home: central-local tensions in a time of global urban governance. *Journal of International Affairs* Vol. 74, Issue 1, 1-23 (2022).

Porras, I. The City and International Law: In Pursuit of Sustainable Development, *Fordham Urban Law Journal*, 8, 537-601 (2008).

Portugali, J. *The crisis of democracy in the age of cities and complexity*, in J. Portugali (ed.), *The Crisis of Democracy in the Age of Cities*, (Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd., 2023).

Resnik, J. Comparative (in)equalities: CEDAW, the jurisdiction of gender, and the heterogeneity of transnational law production, *I Con* 10 (2), 531-550 (2012).

Rosencrance, L. How smart environments will take shape post-COVID-19, *IoT World Today*, 14 April, accessed 15 December 2024 at: <https://www.iotworldtoday.com/smart-cities/how-smart-environments-will-take-shape-post-covid-19> (2021).

Sassen, S. *Cities in a World Economy*, 3rd edition (Pine Forge Press 2006).

Schwab, K. *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*. (Crown Business 2017).

Shaw, M.N. *International Law*, 5th edition (Oxford University Press 2003),

Stephenson, P. Twenty years of multi-level governance: Where does it come from? What is it? Where is it going, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 20(6), 817-837 (2013).

Streeck, W. *Taking Back Control? States and State Systems After Globalism*. (Verso Publishing House 2024).

Szpak, A., Gawłowski, R., Modrzyńska, J. Modrzyński P., Dahl, M. *Role of Cities in International relations. The Third-generation of Multi-level governance?* (Edward Elgar Publishing 2022).

Szpak, A., Gawłowski, R., Modrzyńska, J., & Modrzyński, P. Pact of Free Cities – A New Form of European Cities' Cooperation, *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, 52, 1-17 (2023), . DOI: 10.15804/ppsy202308.

Taylor, P. *World City Networks: Measurement, Social Organization, Global Governance and Structural Change* in Amen, M., Noah J. Toly, Patricia, L. McCarney, Segbers, K. (eds) *Cities and Global Governance: New Sites for International Relations*, (Ashgate Publishing Ltd 2011).

Van der Pluijm, R. and Melissen, J. *City diplomacy: the expanding role of cities in international politics*, accessed December 14, 2024 at https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/20070400_cdsp_paper_pluijm.pdf (2007).

van Apeldoorn, B., & de Graaff, N. The state in global capitalism before and after the Covid-19 crisis. *Contemporary Politics*, 28(3), 306–327 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2021.2022337>

Wexler, L. Take the Long Way Home: Sub-Federal Integration of Unratified and Non-Self-Executing Treaty Law, *Michigan Journal of International Law*, 28(1), 1-48 (2006).

Rustad, Siri As Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2023. *PRIO Paper*. Oslo: PRIO (2024).