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## CONCLUSIONS

- CITY DIPLOMACY IN THE POSTMODERN ERA:  
NETWORKS FLOURISH, TERRITORIES WITHER?

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### **I. Paradigm shift in international relations**

International relations today differ greatly from those that have dominated the global scene since the Treaty of Westphalia was signed in 1648 and an international regime was established with the nation-state at its centre. Since the end of the 20th century, globalisation has been eroding the nation-state's position as the political unit of reference, along with one of its fundamental attributes: sovereignty. For centuries, sovereignty has been the foundation of many of the state's political functions, such as participation in international relations. As a result of this crisis of the nation-state (Castells, 2003), the global scene has become fragmented, facilitating the emergence of other actors that have come to play increasingly important roles in global governance. It is in this context that cities are becoming new actors in international relations (Oosterlynck et al., 2019), especially once they join transnational networks and platforms in order to operate internationally.

The preceding chapters have shown that this phenomenon has a historical background. The first forerunners of today's international municipal movement date from the early 20<sup>th</sup> (Fernández de Losada and Abdullah, in this volume) and even 19th centuries (Acuto and Rayner, 2016). But what is really notable is the momentum it has acquired since the 1990s and, above all, since the 2000s. Some authors have analysed the historical evolution and configuration of certain city networks (Alger, 2011). Nevertheless, the existing academic international relations literature on city diplomacy in a broad sense, and on city networks in particular, remains scarce.

This monograph thus seeks to contribute to a debate that is still taking shape and attempts to do so by giving a voice directly to its protagonists. They are the representatives of several of the most influential city networks with the strongest political presence, such as United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Cities Alliance, C40, Eurocities, Educating Cities (IAEC), Metropolis and 100 Resilient Cities. Three main axes have shaped the analysis in this volume: the role of cities in global governance, the emergence of new city networks, and the opportunities for

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complementarity between these and traditional networks. Numerous interesting reflections have been made around these larger questions in the foregoing chapters. And as the introduction provides a panoramic view of the main issues, the focus of this conclusion will be to highlight certain key ideas and close with a provocation or two that may serve to indicate possible future lines of research.

## II. The flourishing of city networks

This volume takes it as read that the current ecosystem of networks is remarkably dense and rich: numerous city platforms are working to increase the presence and participation of city governments in global governance. Several authors underline the need to improve dialogue and collaboration between them in order to optimise efforts and gain greater capacity for political influence (Fernández de Losada and de la Varga, among others). The main routes they suggest exploring in this regard are, on the one hand, the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (GTF) as a space for strategic coordination between city networks and, on the other, the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments (promoted by the GTF), as a place for meeting and political debate between elected representatives at local and regional levels. Other authors have emphasised the need to promote a generational renewal of the staff managing these platforms, to improve the communication strategies of the *longstanding networks*, to strengthen the democratic legitimacy of the *new generation* of networks (those driven by philanthropic organisations) and to develop indicators and support instruments for the design of local public policies (Roca and Cardama, among others).

These proposals seek to respond to some of the main challenges faced by the current ecosystem of city networks, and to suggest potential opportunities for its improvement. However, the red thread running through the chapters is a strong idea that merits proper consideration. This idea can be summarized as follows: the emergence of cities as new actors in international relations and city networks' participation in global governance (with more or less real political impact) are inherently positive developments. But not everyone accepts this assumption. The realist school of international relations looks with concern upon the fragmentation of foreign policy caused by the increased number of actors participating in international relations (Barbé, 1987). Given these criticisms, should the questions surrounding the challenges and opportunities facing the current saturated and complex ecosystem of networks encourage a critical reflection on the role of cities in global governance? In other words, why should the new protagonism of cities and their networks in international relations be considered something positive *per se*? To what extent does the fragmentation of foreign policy constitute a sufficient argument for questioning city diplomacy?

In order to answer these questions, the focus of analysis must be widened for a moment to take in a macrostructural dimension of our postmodern era. Fragmentation, far from being the exception, has become the rule and the characteristic feature of multiple facets of

life: it affects society, as Beck (1997) and Jameson (1991) have shown; identity, as analysed by Butler (1990) and Kaplan (1997); and the city, as demonstrated by Garreau (1991) and Augé (1992), among others. The postmodern era is the era of the plural, of diversities and of the emergence of differences (perhaps the rise of authoritarian, populist and far-right regimes across the world is a counter-reaction to this). In the international relations field, especially since the turn of the millennium, this process of *disintegration* of the political units of reference has crystallised not only in the emergence of cities as actors in international relations, but also in the proliferation of actors from organised civil society (especially, as Allegretti also points out in this volume, since the emergence of the alter-globalist movement), among others. Foreign policy fragmentation is thus a translation of a global and multidimensional trend into international relations. This means that such fragmentation is not a specific challenge provoked by hyperactive city diplomacy, but rather an element that must inevitably be faced in the current postmodern era.

This does not mean, of course, that it is not necessary to critically question the idea that it is positive *per se* that cities have become actors in international relations. Otherwise, we would be left with a self-congratulatory debate led by the protagonists of this phenomenon. And this would easily trap us in a lobbying rationale similar to that of non-institutional political stakeholders that are pursuing an even bigger role in global governance. The argument that grants most legitimacy to defending municipalism on the global scene is probably the representative nature of its participating political units. Most of the world's population is concentrated in cities. As a result, local governments become highly qualified to participate in the decisions that will affect the territories they are managing. But they must act in the general interest and avoid pursuing other aims. Herein lies the main added value of city diplomacy vis-à-vis other actors in paradiplomacy (Duchacek et al., 1988); and herein lies the opportunity to take global governance in a more democratic direction.

In short, is it positive that cities have become actors in international relations? To the extent that they contribute to making global governance more democratic, it may be, but not if they merely focus on transferring the interests and concerns of cities to global agendas. If such interests and concerns only stem from certain cities (or groups of cities) and if they do not represent a global democratic consensus built with the participation of the different existing urban territories, city diplomacy will be biased and reproduce neocolonial patterns.

### III. More but less representative networks?

The urbanisation currently dominating the planet takes multiple forms, ranging from metropolitan typologies of megalopolises, metacities and city-regions (UN-HABITAT, 2008), intermediary cities with populations of between 50,000 and a million inhabitants (UCLG, 2017) to small cities and “rurban” settlements (Iglesias, 2019). Even within the first group – the metropolitan – it is important to distinguish between the cities at the centre and their peripheries, as they have different

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characteristics. These differences are both demographic – linked to socioeconomic and cultural issues – and institutional, as local government capacity may be of a different order. One example of this centre–periphery contrast is Paris (centre) and Saint-Denis (*banlieue* or periphery at the northern edge of the metropolitan area, which has concentrated many of the historical social segregation problems that have plagued the French capital).

So, given this amalgam of diverse urban typologies, it should be asked which territories city networks represent. With the exception of Metropolis, whose mission specifically consists of representing capital cities and urban areas with populations of at least one million inhabitants, the city networks that have been the subject of this volume are not based around a certain city typology.<sup>1</sup> And yet, although the type of city permitted to join these networks is not determined *a priori*, we observe that, de facto, membership does not necessarily reflect the diversity of contemporary urban fabrics and developments. In fact, it could be argued that two groups exist in the sample of networks represented in this volume. They are related to two underlying tendencies within the ecosystem of city networks that are closely linked to the historical moment in which they were created. We can distinguish between those networks that emerged between the late 1980s and 2004, on the one hand, and those created since then, on the other.

The networks that emerged during the first phase (1986–2004) appear to be more broadly representative. They include cities of various sizes, from capitals and large cities to small municipalities, including intermediary cities. Eurocities (1986), Educating Cities (1990) and UCLG (2004) are in this first group. It is the creation of UCLG that marks a turning point in the configuration of the ecosystem of city networks. From the date of its foundation, a significant shift occurs towards the articulation of networks that are more oriented to forming exclusive clubs of cities or partnerships that focus on mobilising certain cities. Networks such as C40 and 100 Resilient Cities (founded in 2005 and 2013, respectively) are in this group. Unlike the networks from the first phase, this second generation of networks is formed mainly of capitals, large cities or, at best, intermediary cities. C40 is the one that most resembles an exclusive club, which the organisation justifies by arguing that the fight against climate change is down to large cities adopting measures in this field.

In light of this second tendency of city networks, it is necessary to point out one important aspect: to further democratise global governance more reflection should be given to the fact that the new generation of networks is less representative. These networks should broaden the spectrum of governments they work with in order to “leave no one behind,” as the 2030 Agenda aspires (UN, 2015). If efforts are directed only at improving, for example, the fight against climate change or the resilience of the most influential cities, a hierarchy between urban territories and between urban citizens will be created. The risks this entails should not be ignored: neglecting the diversity of territories (intermediary, peripheral, small cities and *rur-*

1. Cities Alliance, also analysed in this monograph, is not considered here, as it is not a true network of cities, but rather a multi-actor platform in which city networks also participate (but not cities directly).

*ban* areas), and ignoring the unequal power relations between them means privileging large-scale urbanisation. It would also mean missing the opportunity to cater to city typologies that can, on the one hand, stabilise the growth of large cities if they are able to provide sufficient opportunities and services and, on the other, stop the desertification of rural environments. Addressing the rural–urban divide also requires listening to the diverse voices of local governments within the global governance framework.

#### **IV. “Leave no place behind”, but also acknowledge North–South power relations**

Adapting the slogan “leave no one behind” to the urban context, UCLG advocates for “leaving no place behind” to express its aim to represent not only capital and large cities (Metropolis fulfils this role as a UCLG member), but also to address the needs of other territories. To do this, it organises working platforms (so-called “forums”) in which intermediary cities and peripheral cities actively participate. It also supports research on the diversity of urban territories (UCLG, 2017). Educating Cities, as Canals explains in this volume, is another network that benefits from the active participation of highly diverse cities, with even small cities being major users of and contributors to the network. The case of Eurocities is similar.

Networks such as UCLG, Eurocities and Educating Cities can therefore play an important role in “leaving no place behind”. However, when it comes to transferring this message to the global governance system, UCLG has a particular responsibility as it is a global network devoted to policy advocacy (among other goals). This is not the case for Eurocities, a regional platform, or for Educating Cities, which focus on facilitating the exchange of experiences, knowledge transfer and influencing local policies.

But the major democratic challenges also concern these networks. Playing host to diverse urban realities is not enough. They also need to put in place sufficiently democratic, transparent and agile internal governance mechanisms. There is a real risk of excessive bureaucratisation and less transparency than is desirable when managing public funds. Also, it has to be noted that a genuine democratisation of the global voice of cities must be based on the participation of different urban geographies, both in the Global North and South, and both in the west and in the east. Relations between countries, like those between cities, are still strongly dominated by an unequal map of power relations that is colonial in origin. In this sense, the mainstream urban voice does not only stem from major cities, but also from the historical power centres located along the Global North–Western axis. The first-generation networks are not immune from this problem. It remains to be seen to what extent the latter, and the ecosystem of networks as a whole, will be capable of overturning the existing global hegemonies between cities so that the message conveyed to the global governance structures is more inclusive and representative.

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