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The Pact of Free Cities – Addressing Rule of Law Problems from a Local Perspective*

Abstract: Since December 2019, the Pact of Free Cities, founded by the mayors of the Visegrád capitals, has expressed the dire wish not to be held hostage for their national governments' disrespect for the rule of law. Being cut off from financial support out of political intentions, they lobby for direct EU support. The article explores the dynamics of this initiative, its strategies to reach out to European institutions and their resonance, as well as the meaning of the Pact's city diplomacy from a democratic theory perspective. The analysis of various documents published by the Pact of Free Cities shows how it combines its efforts to promote democracy, the rule of law and sustainable policies by engaging on the EU level. The Pact developed a distinct type of urban experimentalism that established a new link between the European and the city level.

Keywords: *city diplomacy, Pact of Free Cities, democratic resilience, EU budget, urban experimentalism*

Introduction

The role of cities as political actors has grown in recent years. It is related to advanced modes of policy- and decision-making that have become more inclusive and participatory. In addition, many challenges that confront modern societies have implications for cities and need to be regulated there: climate and demographic change, migration, health care in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, education, and more. In the European Union, the local and regional levels have gained importance with the principle of subsidiarity and as a part of its multi-level governance system.

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Besides, for several years, some governments have concentrated regulatory powers in their hands as part of their executive aggrandisement strategies, resulting in democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016). They even use “budgetary clientelism” (Gherghina & Volintiru, 2023) as a strategy to deprive cities run by mayors from opposition parties of access to sufficient local budgets. Consequently, cities cannot sufficiently meet the needs of their inhabitants and might be punished in the next elections. Thus, cities have to cope with a reduction of their capacities while experiencing an increasing number of tasks. The fight to recognise the principle of decentralisation and adequate funding becomes an important component of cities’ struggle for self- or re-empowerment (Hirschl, 2020). Especially in Turkey, Hungary, and Poland, cities try to counteract this erosion of checks and balances (K-Monitor, 2020; Demirtaş, forthcoming). One example of such action is the initiative of the four Visegrád-capitals’ mayors with their Pact of Free Cities, founded in December 2019.

While the Pact as such has not yet received much attention in research except by Szpak et al. (2023), there is a growing general focus on the relevance of cities and literature that covers cities as hubs of democracy (Frick, 2023; Barnett, 2014) and as participants of city diplomacy and trans-municipal networks (Chan, 2016; Curtis & Acuto, 2018). Having a background in democratic theory, law or public governance, both strands of discussion evaluate procedural practices and the meaning that political actors assign to power-sharing with the inhabitants of cities and bottom-up politics. Empirically, the research on city diplomacy and better policymaking mostly refers to migration and climate change mitigation (Acuto et al., 2016; Gordon, 2013; Szpak 2023). Due to the advancement of European integration, there is also a growing literature on how cities engage as lobby organisations and what they achieve on the EU level (Marks et al., 2002; Callanan & Tatham, 2014).

The approach taken here is inspired by this literature but applies a modified perspective adapted to the Pact of Free Cities case. The lenses of city diplomacy and the democratic city help to investigate the following question: To what extent can we understand the Pact of Free Cities as an example of urban experimentalism, a democratic innovation that has the potential to foster the rule of law from below? As a network of mayors, the Pact has a specific, value-oriented character and aims to achieve normative and policy-oriented objectives (Szpak et al., 2023). For both, it has to engage with European decision-making structures and balance or connect its goals to improve democracy and sustainable living conditions. To provide answers to the research question, the article is organised as follows: After elaborating on the mentioned concepts and developing an analytical framework, I will study the efforts of the Pact of Free Cities to realise city diplomacy and their democratic promise for better policies.

Literature Review

The study of cities and city networks as proponents of democratic resilience suggests a mobilisation perspective. To develop explanatory and normative categories that help to analyse

and assess the observations on cities' actorness, city diplomacy is a useful concept. It has been shaped from a global perspective but also analyses territorial interest representation in the EU. Marks et al. (2002) presented one of the first studies that tried to understand what cities do in Brussels. They found that subnational offices considered their representations as listening posts to gather information for networking and as means to exert political influence. To achieve that, office size and the number of staff were crucial, as well as the scope of a region's policy competence. Callanan and Tatham (2014) confirmed that irrespective of the type of subnational authority (regional or local), the organisational capacity and resources are important for successful lobbying. Further factors that influence the strategies and channels the subnational units choose are party politics and interest compatibility between the various levels (Callanan & Tatham, 2014, p. 206).

Following that discussion, Rodriguez-Pose and Courty (2018) investigate regional representations' efforts in financial mobilisation to allocate Structural and Cohesion Funds. They do not see any effect regarding office capacities and number of staff. Rather, the European Commission stuck to its economic indicators when it decided on the distribution of funds. Hence, they conclude the relevant question is how these rules are made and if subnational representations can influence them. As Curtis and Acuto (2018, pp. 8–9) argue, especially clear messages, strategic choices, and collaboration in important networks matter. Similarly, Kosovac et al. (2021) suggest that cities should invest in formalised multilateral engagement and stronger city-level diplomatic capabilities.

The more normative pieces on cities consider them as better democratic spheres compared to the nation-state. Chan (2016) elaborates on how citizens feel more inclined to be involved in politics on the city level because it differs from the national in size and remoteness. When cities collaborate, this can become an alternative global governance model, and city diplomacy enables citizens to engage in "*global* policymaking through *local* institutions" (Chan, 2016, p. 135). The expectation is that cities have a more pragmatic stance on policymaking oriented towards problem-solving and build on greater public trust. Although Chan's ideas about "glocal governance" are quite idealistic, since political interests and conflicts over principles also shape city politics, his emphasis on equal participation and the existence of popular control is important (Chan, 2016, p. 146). Such achievements of cities depend on a constitutional set-up that allows for sufficient decentralisation and provides political power to cities (Hirschl, 2022), but the lack of this is exactly the problem against which the Pact of Free Cities operates.

Frick (2023) adds an interesting notion to the debate that combines the discussion on the establishment and meanings of city networks with the democratic promise of cities. In her understanding, they have a twofold nature: as a political space that local actors address and as political actors with political claims that differ from the nation-state. Considering this, cities can first act as schools of democracy as they "nurture the social preconditions and social capital for the realisation and stabilisation of a democratic order" (Frick, 2023, p. 4); second, cities are spaces, which usually accept mutual differences, so they often develop progressive

policies and engage for human rights (Frick, 2023, p. 6). Although these attributions should not lead to overly optimistic understandings of the democratic performance of cities, they are insightful to understand and further develop the concept of “urban experimentalism” (Frick, 2023, p. 11). According to her, cities’ ability to engage in collective action processes and design innovative practices creates the “democratic promise”. It includes cooperative problem-solving in spatial publics according to the needs of citizens in communicative institutional formats. While Frick looks at practices inside cities, this can be postulated for external actions and cities’ networks as well.

Methods

I borrow Frick’s “urban experimentalism” concept and apply it to the Pact of Free Cities. Their founders called it a new, value-driven format of city collaboration. It aims to foster the rule of law and realise progressive, sustainable policies (Interview Budapest, 2023; Szpak et al., 2023). The extent to which this type of democratic innovation is achieved, thus, depends on various factors and can unfold in various ways. Following the insights from the literature discussed above, I suggest a framework based on Curtis & Acuto’s (2018) emphasis on the clarity of choices and strategies, the reflections on office size, capacities and resources as well as the political context, following Marks et al. (2002), Callanan and Tatham (2014), and Rodriguez-Pose and Courty (2018). Political context means political party affiliations and networks such as the Committee of the Regions (CoR) (Piattoni & Schönlaue, 2015) or Eurocities, uniting 200 major European cities. I distinguish the two types of policies that the Pact engages in, subsuming the first under the label of “city diplomacy” and the second as “democratic promise”, following the distinctions in the literature. I assume that the ways to achieve them are similar in terms of strategies, practices, and resources.

Table 1. Analytical framework – dimensions of urban experimentalism

	City diplomacy	Democratic promise
Policy goals	increase financial means to improve climate policies	foster the rule of law and participatory procedures
Strategies and Practices	lobbying EU institutions cooperation, communication, collective action	
Resources	office size and staff contacts, networks political environment	

Source: own compilation.

In order to investigate the kind of urban experimentalism that the Pact of Free Cities unfolds, I conducted semi-structured interviews with representatives of the Warsaw Town Hall and Budapest City Representation in Brussels. For referencing, I mention them as Warsaw 2023, Prague 2023 and Budapest 2023. In addition, I analysed publications from

the Pact of Free Cities, letters, statements and brochures, and secondary sources, including think tank articles and media outlets, that also cover the EU institutions' responses.

The Pact of Free Cities

History and general objectives

The idea to set up the Pact took shape when Gergely Karácsony (Greens) won the municipal elections in Budapest in October 2019. Already in his first phone call with Warsaw's mayor Rafał Trzaskowski, the two explored this initiative. Both cities struggled with growing tasks but shrinking budgets and wanted to signal Brussels that they support progressive and environmentally friendly policies for their cities. When the mayors met their colleagues from Prague and Bratislava to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall the same month (Szymanski, 2019), the concept became more concrete. On December 16, 2019, they signed the Pact of Free Cities at the Central European University in Budapest. In a publication launched on this occasion with the Council of Foreign Relations, they laid out their shared values and objectives (Hřib et al., 2019) and called other mayors to join and collaborate. By referring to the opposition movements that had stood up against socialist rule in the past, they added a historical chain of legitimacy to their Pact. Additionally, they posted about their initiative on social media and several international newspapers, like the Washington Post, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (Löwenstein & Zimmermann, 2019), the Guardian and others.

The basic meaning of the Pact is a symbolic one, to show Europe that the citizens of Central Europe differ from their national governments (Interview Budapest, 2023). Hence, the Pact filled a space that other city networks, such as Eurocities or C40, do not cover and created a special kind of city diplomacy (Interview Warsaw, 2023). The founders do not consider their Pact a project against democratic backsliding in Poland and Hungary since cities in other member states may face similar challenges (Interview Warsaw, 2023). In addition to their values, the mayors formulated several policy interests. They depict the Pact as "...a progressive network of dynamic cities and empowered citizens..." that will engage to improve sustainable city planning, climate protection measures, housing, and public transport. They emphasise grassroots democracy, inclusive governance, EU integration and respect for civil rights, and the rule of law and wish to "advocate tailored European policy solutions" (Hřib et al., 2019). To achieve that, the mayors ask the European Commission to directly earmark parts of the EU budget for cities (Kirchgeßner, 2021). According to Warsaw's mayor, Rafał Trzaskowski (Szymanski, 2019, p. 3), this would complement the nation-state and does not act against it.

City Diplomacy

Due to the ongoing talks on the new EU budget for 2021–2027, including Next Generation EU and its Recovery and Resilience Facility (RFF), the priority of city diplomacy in 2020 laid on lobbying for money to finance climate-friendly policies. This work unfolded in several steps.

A first lobbying letter signed by 34 European cities' mayors was sent to the presidents of the three main EU institutions on February 11, 2020. The letter highlighted the support for the European Green Deal and underlined the need to redesign existing programmes to involve cities more directly in the implementation process and help them by providing funds. Mayor Karácsony – together with Mayor Trzaskowski and Mayor Hříb – presented the proposals at a press conference in Brussels and met with top-ranking EU officials on February 12, 2020, in Brussels (Budapest Portal, 2020a). A letter from 35 mayors to Commission President von der Leyen in March (Budapest Portal, 2020b) accompanied this initiative, and a position paper from May 2020 explained “The need for direct European funding for cities” (Pact of Free Cities, 2020a). At a webinar held on June 10, 2020, the mayors presented and discussed the position paper with the European Commission, the German EU Presidency, Eurocities, the CoR and MEPs from Renew Europe and the Greens (Budapest Portal, 2020c, p. 5). They emphasised the advantages of cities, that they can act faster and in a less constrained way than national governments, and stressed that they are most confronted with the social and economic impact of crises such as climate change or the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite being the economic powerhouses of their countries – Budapest and Prague contribute 62% of GDP, Warsaw 61%, and Bratislava 40%¹ – the EU budgets are needed to compensate for the missing national sources (Volintiru, 2021, p. 4).

Eurocities had already made similar suggestions. Now, the Pact wanted to give the issue a new push with concrete propositions. First, the European Urban Initiative should receive more financial means. Second, the mayors wished to use Horizon Europe Missions that, in the past, had already worked on climate neutrality and smart cities. Third, they expressed support for the European Parliament's demands to a) increase the means for sustainable urban development in the European Regional Development Fund to 10%, and b) allow cities to get direct access to the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) to improve public transport, without prior consultation of national governments (Pact of Free Cities, 2020a). The latter was an important issue since the Pact had already reminded the EU institutions in February that national governments would not involve the cities in their RFF negotiations as they were obliged to (Pact of Free Cities, 2020b).

The following months were devoted to monitoring the EU's work on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and the New Green Deal. The Pact sent an open letter to the

¹ This is due to lower levels of urban population (54%) in Slovakia, compared to 75% (CZ), 72% (HU) and 60% (PL) (Volintiru, 2021, p. 4).

European Council in June 2020 to intensify the efforts to turn cities into hubs for climate change mitigation. They suggested the European Commission should increase its 2030 target for emission reduction from 40% to 55% and combine the support for economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic with making the construction sector more environmentally friendly via a European Building Renovation Fund (Pact of Free Cities, 2020c). A letter to the then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel from July 14, 2020, when Germany took the EU Presidency, expressed the same concerns and demands and underlined that this position aligned with Eurocities and the CoR (Pact of Free Cities, 2020d). In this period, the Budapest Representative Office in Brussels provided valuable support. It lobbied fractions in the European Parliament to propose amendments to various Commission drafts (Budapest Portal, 2020c, p. 6).

In autumn, when the talks on the budget and the rule of law conditionality seemed to reach an agreement between the Commission and Parliament, several Hungarian mayors wrote to Commission Vice-President Věra Jourová and EP-Vice-President Katharina Barley. They called them to acknowledge that Hungarian citizens do not want to “fall victim to the policies of its government” and that cities are reliable partners (Hungarian Mayors, 2020). Directing parts of the EU’s RFF to municipalities would, as they underlined, help municipalities to improve the rule of law, which the Hungarian government disregarded.

Following the work of the EP and its rapporteurs on the budget talks, the Pact, including the mayors of Barcelona, Lisbon, Milan, Hannover and Paris, stressed another time that they supported the EP’s proposal to earmark at least 10% of RFF for the local level (Pact of Free Cities, 2020e). Mayor Karáscony (2020) sent a similar message to EU Commissioner Dombrovskis, responsible for Finances, on November 20, 2020. He emphasised the importance of the RFF since, e.g., for Budapest, the government cut about one-third of the city’s revenues in 2020. When Hungary and Poland vetoed the RFF decision in the European Council in December 2020, 256 mayors from Hungary and Budapest wrote a protest note to Commission President von der Leyen (Hungarian and Polish Municipalities, 2020).

After long debates, the European Council agreed upon a compromise in December 2020 and the legislative framework for the budget was adopted in 2021 (Kölling, 2022). The Pact considers several achievements as relevant: a) the use of a stronger language that emphasises the participation of local governments in the programming, planning, management and allocation of EU sources in the Common Provision Regulation and the regulations on the RRF and the European Development Fund (EDF); b) the sum allocated for sustainable development in the RFF that at least reached 8%, meaning twice as much as before (Interview Budapest, 2023); c) the Connecting Europe Facility for transportation networks with a budget of €55 billion now being accessible for municipalities and d) the European Regional Development Fund scheme and the Just Transition Fund targeting the needs of cities (Pact of Free Cities, 2022a, p. 5).

With the help of the Budapest Representation, the Pact focused on the content of the National Plans that each country had to submit to the European Commission. The ongoing

lobbying was relevant as the government tried to exclude Budapest from several parts of the budget, which the Commission then prohibited. During the implementation phase, the Representation has continued to act as a watchdog and made the Commission aware of, e.g., clauses in calls that did not only imply a disadvantage for cities but their clear-cut and politically motivated circumvention. The Commission interfered again, forcing the Hungarian government to adapt the National Plan (Interview Budapest, 2023). All in all, the Commission still freezes €27.8 billion for Hungary and €110.8 billion for Poland, amounting to a total of 68% of all EU transfers to Hungary and 77% to Poland, as both countries do not yet meet the set milestones (Freund, 2023).

The Democratic Promise

After passing the EU budget, the Pact prepared other activities concentrating on democracy-related objectives. They initiated conferences to reflect on participatory policymaking and promote the rule of law. In line with certain think tanks, such as the Atlantic Council or the political scientist Benjamin Barber, the Pact initiators see these actions as opportunities for cities to express a “newly-asserted role” in which they operate as “hubs for progressive policies” (Pact of Free Cities, 2022a, p. 2). They consider climate change protection and the improvement of local democracy as intertwined objectives (Interview Warsaw, 2023). Therefore, in Budapest, the mayor established a climate council with ordinary citizens and introduced a budget for which citizens can decide how to spend money on urban development projects (Spöri, 2021). Mayor Vallo in Bratislava developed similar activities.

The first summit of the Pact of Free Cities, in which mayors from across Europe participated, convened in Budapest in September 2021 on the inaugural Budapest Forum – Building Sustainable Democracies. It was organised by the Budapest City Hall, the Political Capital Institute, and the CEU Democracy Institute. Next to mayors, academics, journalists, politicians, think tanks and foundation representatives, and other experts from Europe and beyond participated. The programme focused on two issues, “Building Democratic Resilience” and “Just Climate Transition”, allowing for a thorough discussion of city-related democratic governance and policymaking. Furthermore, 21 more mayors signed the Pact, among them the then-deputy mayor Nina Hachigian of Los Angeles and the mayor of Taipeh (Hudec, 2021). The Association of German Cities (Deutscher Städtetag) supported the Pact as the first municipal umbrella organisation (Billanitsch 2021).

In December 2021, the four Pact initiators received transatlantic attention. They participated in US President Joe Biden’s Summit for Democracy. In advance of that convention, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the US House of Representatives, the Members of the Helsinki Committee and the Pact signed a declaration stressing the role of cities in the protection of democracy, human rights and the rule of law (Keating House, 2021). The Global Parliament of Mayors, the German Marshall Fund Cities and the Pact then set up a Global Declaration of Mayors for Democracy. It emphasises the importance of self-government,

subsidiarity and democratic resilience. Furthermore, it highlights civil rights, political liberties, freedoms, and the willingness of city leaders to ensure participation for residents. It has been further promoted since then, and new members have joined (German Marshall Fund, 2022a; 2022b).

Since 2022, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Pact has engaged in solidarity with Ukrainian cities. They condemned the war in a declaration on February 25, 2022, and offered membership to Kyiv (Pact of Free Cities, 2022b). In May, seven mayors of the Pact met in Warsaw to discuss ways to help Ukrainian cities and those that host many of their citizens (Pact of Free Cities, 2022a, p. 5). Later, the four founding mayors visited Kyiv.

The second summit of the Pact took place in Prague on September 26–27, 2022, when the Czech Republic held the EU Presidency. This conference, organised by the Prague Town Hall, again focused on democratic governance and participatory procedures under the rule of law and offered space for dialogue between EU capitals' mayors and the European Commission. Content-wise, the sessions debated affordable housing, energy saving, preparing for the winter, fostering sustainability in green urban restoration, and the war in Ukraine (Prague Summit of Cities, 2022). Then EU Commissioner Frans Timmermans, Executive Vice-President responsible for the European Green Deal, gave a speech. The summit was again an occasion to see new members joining the Pact, such as Riga, Vilnius, Brussels, Hamburg, Berlin, and Kyiv, and the network grew to 33 members. Eurocities (2022) stressed their support for the Pact and the implementation of the New Green Deal on the city level.

The latest event that concentrated on cities and democracy was the Rule of Law Conference on February 7, 2023. Five Pact members, the three founders except for Bratislava and the mayors of Amsterdam and Brussels, met with several experts, academics and politicians, including EU Commissioner for Justice, Didier Reynders, as well as two MEPs who act as rapporteurs on Poland and Hungary, Gwendoline Delbos-Corfield and Juan Fernando López Aguilar (www.pactoffreecities.com). Mayor Philippe Close from Brussels and Mayor Karácsony had developed the idea, and Commissioner Reynders agreed to support it with a keynote speech. Experts argue that the Pact even became important for the European Commission because the collaboration would allow for learning more about interests and conflicts on the local level (Interview Budapest, 2023). On this occasion, the Pact formulated an open letter to Commissioner Reynders. It recommended that the European Commission's yearly Rule of Law Report should consider cities' legal and economic situation when formulating recommendations to national governments (Pact of Free Cities, 2023).

The City Hall of Warsaw has been preparing for the next summit, a big international conference to take place in June 2023. All signatories of the Pact and Ukrainian cities are welcome to discuss two main themes: “democracy in times of multiple crises” and “help for Ukraine” (Interview Warsaw, 2023).

Resources, Strategies, and Political Environment

The founding mayors created their Pact as a network on purpose. There is no secretariat, membership fees, or headquarters, only a website that provides information on its objectives, members, and activities (www.pactoffreecities.com). In addition, the websites of the city halls in the four capitals, especially the one of Budapest, and the city representation of Prague in Brussels present the Pact's objectives and activities. Members of the Pact are the mayors and not the cities as entities, so when a mayor changes, the membership has to be renewed. The criteria for new members are that the mayors should come from cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants and need a recommendation from all founding members plus one-third of the other members. With their signature, mayors who join the Pact agree to support the common values of "freedom, human dignity, democracy, equality, the rule of law, social justice, tolerance and cultural diversity" and be ready to engage in sharing their knowledge with others (Pact of Free Cities, 2022a, p. 6).

All members can propose initiatives and informal task forces (Pact of Free Cities, 2022a, p. 6), and the mayors from Paris, Amsterdam and Brussels have already become more active. Yet, in general, the four founding cities still take most obligations (Interview Warsaw, Prague 2023). The Budapest representation feels responsible for organising online meetings and collaboration on the "Sherpa"-level (Interview Budapest, 2023). Keeping the informal structure of the Pact is still the wish of the participating mayors despite the organisation of activities getting more demanding (Interviews Budapest, Prague, 2023). Keeping the Pact informal also helps to avoid open, institutional conflicts with national governments. In addition, the mayors provided support to each other on other occasions, during the COVID-19 pandemic or when Mayor Karácsony faced a smear campaign, and Mayor Hřib was placed under police protection after an alleged assignation attempt (Budapest Portal, 2020c, p. 4).

Regarding their involvement in the EU's multi-level system, the cities' different institutional set-up allows them to complement each other in their networking and lobbying: Prague and Budapest have their city representations in Brussels, which Warsaw does not have. Bratislava's office represents the wider region. The Prague House in Brussels has existed since 2002, has a team of five, coordinates the activities of the Czech delegation in the CoR and focuses on cultural activities and is backed by the town hall (Interview Prague, 2023). The Budapest Office opened in 2003 but has become more active since Mayor Karácsony took office in 2019. It has a staff of three; nevertheless, it supported the Pact's lobbying intensively and fed their perspective into the EP's Trilogue position (Interview Budapest, 2023).

In addition to the representation offices, the networking and lobbying in Brussels runs via the CoR but depends on the political party affiliation of the mayors. Mayor Trzaskowski, a long-term member of the CoR and whose party PO has a large share of EPP-affiliated representatives, used his contacts for the Pact's objectives. The CoR shares the goal of climate neutrality by 2050 and appointed Mayor Trzaskowski as rapporteur on the EU Climate Pact. Mayor Vallo is also a member of the CoR and part of the Renew Europe fraction.

However, the Slovak delegation to the CoR is more mixed in terms of party affiliations, like the Czech delegation, where Zdeněk Hřib used to be a member (Interview Prague, 2023). For Hungary, the CoR delegates mainly come from the ruling Fidesz party, which aligns with the European Reformists and Conservatives (ERC), while in the EP, they have been independent since 2021. Hence, the CoR is a less important political hub for Budapest than its city representation.

The political background of the Pact founders used to be more similar in the past. Although their party affiliations were quite diverse, the four mayors shared their opposition to their populist governments (Löwenstein & Zimmermann, 2019). They were all below 50 years old when they were elected, have international experience from studying abroad and share an interest in fighting corruption and engaging in more inclusive, progressive and democratic policymaking on the city level. They either have a background in civil society or have begun to involve their representatives in public offices (Spöri, 2021). Since 2022, the political weight has shifted. Matúš Vallo (non-partisan architect and activist) was re-elected in Bratislava with 60.2% of votes, whereas Zdeněk Hřib (Česká pirátská strana, Piráti) from Prague lost his office in February 2023 to Bohuslav Svoboda from the liberal-conservative ODS who was the mayor of Prague already from 2010 to 2013. Moreover, in the European Parliament, ODS is part of the Eurosceptic ERC, while the Greens and Renew Europe supported measures to protect the rule of law and the New Green Deal Svoboda continues to support the Pact (Interview Prague, 2023).

The networking with EU institutions depends on the topic, timeframe and stage of legislation. Relations with some fractions and MEPs in the European Parliament are very good, yet the European Commission is the key addressee due to its law-making function. Access to the European Council is difficult (Interview Warsaw, 2023). The Pact collaborates with think tanks, NGOs and partners with Eurocities and the CoR, building on Warsaw's long-lasting experience in city diplomacy (Volintiru, 2021, pp. 21–22).

Conclusion

The Pact established a wide network to generate attention for its objectives and find political support among MEPs and the European Commission. It is already an achievement for a loose formation that operates without a secretariat and has to rely on existing resources, mainly in the city halls and the Brussels representations. Moreover, the EU's MFF until 2027 foresees a large share of funding and loans for cities, like the RRF (Volintiru, 2021) and funding for sustainable development was even doubled. However, the Commission still withholds money from Poland and Hungary and does not provide direct funding for cities that bypass national governments.

The cities see their lobbying as a success that relies on networking, using party political and institutional affiliations, while office size and number of staff were less decisive. The Pact observes a change of perspective, an awareness of their situation and a higher resonance on

the side of the European Commission and Parliament. The recent crises, such as COVID-19, climate and the war in Ukraine, raised attention to the huge tasks that cities have to manage. The European Commission understood that it is a problem that, e.g., Warsaw's inhabitants increased by 10%, but the national government provides less money to municipalities, among others, by tax code changes. Hence, despite the change in awareness and rhetoric, the allocation of funds is still an issue (Interview Warsaw, 2023).

In addition to the material achievements of city diplomacy, the democratic promise of the Pact consists in its combination of climate and other progressive policies and the rule of law matters. The Pact's conferences identified ways to improve policymaking by participation of citizens. Its network character opens a political space for equal participation and collective action of mayors. It makes the Pact a unique example of urban experimentalism, which also becomes visible in the plans for the future: to stimulate mutual learning through a mayors' handbook on inclusive democracy and participation, plus a humanitarian matchmaking platform to coordinate the help for Ukrainian cities (Pact of Free Cities, 2022a, pp. 7–8).

The fact that the Pact relies on the personal commitment of mayors brings an individual dimension to the collaboration. The Pact's spirit living from the involvement of mayors sends a strong message to the public and the national governments. However, it also means that dynamics can change when a mayor is no longer in office. It is already the case for the previous mayor of Prague, Zdeněk Hřib. The common feature of the four founding mayors, age, international education and the desire to foster participatory procedures for sustainable, progressive policies, may receive a new turn. In any case, city diplomacy on the European level has become a strong element and fosters the rule of law from below. What the Pact has to show in the future is how the democratic promise will feed back into the cities themselves.

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