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PARTICIPATION OF SWEDISH CITIES IN THE CONDUCT OF SWEDEN'S FOREIGN POLICY

A b s t r a c t

This paper examines and evaluates the influence of Sweden's three largest cities (Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö) on the state's foreign policy. To achieve this goal, the following research questions need answers: can cities—and if yes, then how—influence the state's foreign policy as exemplified by Sweden? Do cities conduct their foreign policy or diplomacy? If so, how and which sector of the state's policy is influenced most? If and if so—to what extent Stockholm dominates in this aspect compared to the other two Swedish cities? The main conclusions include: Swedish cities influence Sweden's foreign policy mainly through city networks, by lobbying EU policies that affect Sweden, and by participation in international conferences. Foreign affairs are the domain of the central government of Sweden, and cities conduct activities in this area only to the extent permitted by national law and practice.

Key words: Swedish cities, Stockholm, Malmö, Gothenburg, foreign policy, city diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

The role of cities in international relations is growing, a process which sometimes is even called ‘the renaissance of city politics’.¹ Numerous cities have offices of international affairs or international cooperation, adopt their own international relations strategies, and sometimes even bypass their nation-states.² Some cities coordinate their foreign policy with their nation-states, and some conduct relatively independent policy, even—as mentioned—to the point of bypassing a nation-state. Here, American and British cities may serve as an example. When then former (and now current) US President Donald Trump announced his country’s withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement and, as a justification, claimed that he was ‘elected to represent the citizens of Pittsburgh, not Paris’—the mayor Bill Peduto promised that Pittsburgh would respect and implement the Paris Agreement as this is the best course for the future of the city’s economy and its inhabitants.³ In the United Kingdom, while the state as a rule opposed the Human Rights Act, the city of York implemented the European Convention of Human Rights and used international human rights as a framework for its local policies. The city also chose to mitigate the growing severity of national migration policies by welcoming refugees.⁴

There are a few reasons why cities play such an essential role in international relations, including in multi-level governance: they are home to 55 per cent of the global population and in 2050 this ratio will reach 68 per cent.⁵ Additionally, local authorities are the level of government closest to the citizens, one where the decisions affecting

¹ ‘City Diplomacy Index: A Methodology to Analyze the Achievements of City Diplomacy’, Equilibrium Institute, September 2021, p. 6, <https://egyensulyintezet.hu/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/CDI2021.pdf>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 15 March 2024.)

² See *Stockholm International Strategy*, City of Stockholm, 2021, <https://start.stockholm/globalassets/aktuellt/stockholms-stads-internationella-strategi-1.pdf> (access: 25 November 2023); *Barcelona International Relations Master Plan 2020–2023*, City of Barcelona, 2020, https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/relacionsinternacionalsicooperacio/sites/default/files/bcn_ir_master_plan.pdf (access: 25 November 2023).

³ Anthea Roberts, *Beyond the Globalism/Nationalism Divide: The Rise of Cities and Corporations Seeking International Obligations*, 2017, <http://opiniojuris.org/2017/06/03/beyond-globalismnationalism-divide-rise-cities-corporations-seeking-international-obligations/>; Benjamin Leffel, ‘Principles of Modern City Diplomacy and the Expanding Role of Cities in Foreign Policy’, *Columbia SIPA. Journal of International Affairs*, 2022, <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/principles-modern-city-diplomacy-and-expanding-role-cities-foreign-policy> (accessed: 20 May 2024).

⁴ Jolene Lin, *Governing Climate Change. Global Cities and Transnational Lawmaking* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 48.

⁵ ‘City Diplomacy Index’, p. 6.

everyday life are made. Finally, cities have become aware of their rising role, for example in the field of migration or combating climate change and their bilateral and multilateral cooperation has been developing extensively. Next to the traditional instrument of sister cities (bilateral diplomacy), cities began to create city networks at various levels—national, regional and global (multilateral diplomacy). Such city networks provide a viable alternative to state diplomacy, while the latter sometimes finds itself at an impasse. There are even predictions that in the near future ‘city diplomacy will be the fastest developing field of international relations’.⁶ In this context, it is important to stress that ‘cities’ foreign policy relies more heavily on network power and far less on sovereign power, meaning that they exercise their power by driving coalitions of actors towards the desired governance outcome.⁷ Against this intersection or rather a juxtaposition of the sovereignty of nation-states and the pragmatic attitude of cities, Lorenzo K. Grandi adds that city diplomacy embraces ‘an extensive set of municipality-led bilateral and multilateral interactions with foreign actors—mainly other cities, city networks, and international organizations—to advance an international agenda inspired by local values and interests’.⁸

The literature in international relations and political science, including works by Michele Acuto,⁹ Simon Curtis,¹⁰ Peter Taylor,¹¹ Mark Amen,¹² Diane Davis and Nora de Duren,¹³ and Chadwick F. Alger,¹⁴ explores the significant impact of global cities on world politics. Acuto’s¹⁵ monograph emphasizes global cities’ diplomatic connections and pervasive agency. City diplomacy is considered a tool for peace and sustainable development.¹⁶ Sohaela Amiri and Efe

⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

⁷ Ibid., p. 7.

⁸ Kihlgren Grandi Lorenzo, *City Diplomacy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 2.

⁹ Michele Acuto, *Global Cities, Governance, and Diplomacy. The Urban Link* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁰ Simon Curtis, ed., *The Power of Cities in International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2014); idem, *Global Cities and the Transformation of the International System* (Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest, 2014); idem, *Global Cities and Global Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹¹ Peter J. Taylor et al., *Cities in Globalization. Practices, Policies and Theories* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

¹² Mark Amen et al., eds, *Cities and Global Governance. New Sites for International Relations* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

¹³ Diane E. Davis and Nora de Duren, eds, *Cities and Sovereignty. Identity Politics in Urban Spaces* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011).

¹⁴ Chadwick F. Alger, *The UN System and Cities in Global Governance* (Cham: Springer, 2014).

¹⁵ Acuto, *Global Cities*.

¹⁶ Grandi, *City Diplomacy*.

Sevin¹⁷ focus on city diplomacy as a tool cities use to make themselves important players in global politics. Curtis¹⁸ views the rise of global cities as part of a broader transformation in the international political order. The literature also addresses the relations between states and cities, suggesting a potential need to redefine international relations/society to include cities as influential actors.

In light of this brief literature review, this article concentrates on the theoretical problem of cities' participation in international relations and their impact on their states' foreign policy. The research aim of this paper is to examine and evaluate the influence of Sweden's three largest cities (Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö) on the state's foreign policy. To achieve this goal, the following research questions need answers: can cities—and if yes, then how—influence the state's foreign policy as exemplified by Sweden? Do cities conduct their foreign policy or diplomacy? If so, how and which sector of the state's policy is influenced most? If and if so—to what extent Stockholm dominates in this aspect compared to the other two Swedish cities? Which of the non-capital cities, Malmö or Gothenburg, has greater influence on the foreign policy of Sweden and why? How important—if at all—are cities in Sweden's foreign policy?

The research methods include a case study model supported by comparative analysis. Comparative case studies involve gathering and analysing both qualitative and quantitative data; however, due to the nature of the collected data, only qualitative analysis is possible in this case. Strategic documents adopted by the three selected cities—Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö—are subject to qualitative content analysis that allows indicating the elements that may bear the characteristics of foreign policy. The documents are the following: *Stockholm's International Strategy*,¹⁹ *Stockholms Stads EU-policy*,²⁰ *Policy and Guidelines for International Cooperation in the City of Gothenburg*,²¹ *Malmö's Program for Strategic External*

¹⁷ Sohaela Amiri and Efe Sevin, eds, *City Diplomacy. Current Trends and Future Prospects* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

¹⁸ Curtis, *Global Cities and Global Order*.

¹⁹ 'Stockholm International Strategy', 2021 (received via e-mail for the City of Stockholm), <https://start.stockholm/globalassets/aktuellt/stockholms-stads-international-strategi-1.pdf> (accessed: 25 November 2023).

²⁰ 'Stockholms Stads EU-Policy', 2022, (received via e-mail for the City of Stockholm), <https://start.stockholm/globalassets/start/om-stockholms-stad/politik-och-demokrati/styrdokument/eu-policy-stockholms-stad.pdf>, p. 8.

²¹ 'Policy och riktlinjer för internationellt samarbete i Göteborgs Stad', 2014 (H 2014 nr 79, P 2014-06-05, § 27, Dnr 1325/11), https://goteborg.se/wps/PA_Pabologshandlingar/file?id=21658.

Work,²² *Policy for the City of Malmö's International Work*,²³ and *Strategies for the City of Malmö's Work with Agenda 2030*.²⁴ Despite the extensive literature (though only highlighting key works), it is necessary to explore the international relations strategies of cities as a distinct category of municipal documents with a noticeable external aspect. As far as the author knows, this article is the first to examine and compare these documents. Comparative analysis of the plans and actions undertaken in the three cities allows indicating the similarities and differences in their approach to the possibility of cities conducting foreign policy. The authors analyse such examples of cities' activities as cooperation in the framework of city networks and sister-city partnerships, visits by politicians, or cities' own budgets for foreign affairs.

Apart from the documents indicated above and relevant literature, data was obtained via e-mail questionnaire sent to the international relations/cooperation officers in the three respective cities with the following questions:

1. Can cities—and if yes, how—influence the foreign policy of the state on the example of Sweden?
2. Assuming that cities conduct their own city diplomacy, how and which sector of state's policy is influenced most in the case of Stockholm/Göteborg/ Malmö?
3. If and if so—to what extent Stockholm dominates in this aspect compared to the other two (Malmö and Göteborg) Swedish cities?
4. How important—if at all—are cities in Sweden's foreign policy?
5. Does the city have political representation in Brussels?
6. How many high-level international meetings did the mayor attend? How many high-level international meetings did the deputy mayor(s) attend?
7. What is the city's budget for foreign affairs/international cooperation?

Stockholm and Göteborg replied to the above questionnaire while Malmö did not.

²² *Program för strategiskt omvärldsarbete i Malmö stad*, Malmö, 2016, <https://malmo.se/download/18.693435e1616fea8abdbd4ff/1519291528326/Program%20%C3%B6r%20strategiskt%20omv%C3%A4rldsarbete%20i%20Malm%C3%B6%20stad%202016-11-06%20Platina.pdf>.

²³ *Policy för Malmö stads internationella arbete*, Malmö, 2015, <https://malmo.se/download/18.3c0b3b6f15965118c0e7874/1491299876934/internationell%20policy.pdf>.

²⁴ *Malmö stads långsiktiga arbete med Agenda 2030*, Malmö, 2018, <https://malmo.se/download/18.708924eb178fd76a14cd859/1623244068865/Strategi%202018%20Agenda%202030.pdf>.

The article develops the theoretical framework of institutional liberalism stressing the importance and position in international relations not only of states, but also non-state actors (such as international organizations, non-governmental organizations, transnational corporations, natural persons and cities). This approach opens up discourse to include non-state participants in international relations, and stresses the interdependence of state interests, the plurality of international actors, the democratization of international life and an increase in international interdependence. It aligns well with the concept of global multi-level governance, which refers to the distribution of power among states and other actors like cities.

STOCKHOLM

Stockholm, the capital of Sweden, is a city with a population of almost 1 million.²⁵ It is the biggest city of Scandinavia. In 2021 Stockholm issued an International Strategy that outlines the city's priorities, principles and organs competent to undertake international activities. Such instruments facilitate cities' more effective and deeper participation in international decision-making processes. *Stockholm's International Strategy*²⁶ is based on the principle that the city 'does not conduct any form of foreign policy since foreign policy is a national responsibility'. *The Strategy's Main Goal*²⁷ is 'to ensure that all of the City's operations have a joint platform for international activities'.

Several specific rules have been developed which regulate international activities in all areas. These rules include:

- Although the city of Stockholm maintains strong relationships with other capital cities, particularly those in the Nordic region, it will not establish any official twin city partnerships.
- Cooperation agreements should pertain to a specific exchange within a clearly defined thematic area, with a set start and end date, and should result in tangible mutual benefits for all participants.
- Stockholm may sign memorandums of understanding with international organizations and networks, as well as participate in

²⁵ 'Stockholm 2023', https://citypopulation.de/en/sweden/admin/stockholm/0180__stockholm/.

²⁶ 'Stockholm International Strategy', 2021 (received via e-mail for the City of Stockholm), <https://start.stockholm/globalassets/aktuellt/stockholms-stads-internationella-strategi-1.pdf>, p. 5 (access: 25 November 2023).

²⁷ Ibid., p. 2.

relevant international initiatives. These agreements will be regularly reviewed for relevance and added value.

- The city can commit to development assistance projects only if the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency guarantees all necessary financing.

- Stockholm will not issue written invitations to guest delegations unless a specific visit is deemed crucial to achieving strategic goals by a department, administration, or company.

- The city's international representation will aim for moderation, including transportation, meals, and gifts for guest delegations.²⁸

According to the *Stockholm Strategy*, global events and political decisions made at the international level can have a direct or indirect effect on Stockholm's development. As a result, the city must be involved in such decisions that could influence its interests.²⁹ In the same vein, Stockholm's strategy also notices that 'the City needs to influence decisions and other initiatives at the international level when this is in the City's interest'.³⁰ There is a clarifying remark added, namely that 'Stockholm is affected to a very large extent by decisions taken at European level'. Hence, in order to effectively influence EU decisions, the City Council adopted a separate EU policy. The policy explains the city's general attitude to European cooperation via a number of guiding principles which should serve, on the one hand, as a basis of the Stockholm's advocacy activities at the EU level and, on the other hand, as a basis for the preparation of municipal stance on individual EU matters. Moreover, Stockholm's EU policy outlines methods of work, due to which the opinions of the city will be taken into account and will have an impact.³¹ This is particularly important when one takes into account the fact that on average, 60 percent of the cases dealt with by Stockholm's City Council are directly or indirectly affected by EU decisions.³²

In the context of European legislative process, some possibilities of influencing it are indicated in the EU policy. It is the European Commission that has the right to propose new legislation. However, before it enters into force, it needs to be consulted with key players, reviewed by the governments of the member states and the Swedish Parliament (Riksdag), and approved by both the European Parliament

²⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 4.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.; 'Stockholms Stands EU-Policy', 2022, p. 4.

³² Ibid.

and the Council of Ministers, who have the right to resend a draft law. The EU's legislative process can be seen as long and complex, but its inclusive model provides good opportunities for influence. According to EU policy, the city's influence efforts must be focused on EU proposals, primarily legislative ones, which may act as limiting or enabling for the city's development, as well as the thematic policy areas that are of particular interest to Stockholm or where the city has a different opinion from the rest of the country.³³ Hence, one formal way to influence EU decisions is to issue consultation responses that are considered in the European Commission's open consultation before new legislative proposals. Many municipalities jointly issue referral responses to the consultation via the overarching Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner).³⁴ The most formal way of influencing EU decisions is through the EU Committee of the Regions (CoR). The CoR is a body providing institutional representation for all the EU regions, cities and municipalities.³⁵ It enables regional and local authorities to participate in the European decision-making process. Essentially, CoR makes it possible for Stockholm (and other EU cities in general) to directly affect the EU legislative process—'directly' meaning without the intermediary of the Swedish government.³⁶ Still, Stockholm is not very active in the CoR, and it acts mainly through the already mentioned Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. The city has an office in Brussels, but no purely political representation. There is no specific budget allocated for international cooperation.³⁷

In line with that, Stockholm's advocacy work must use the available channels to present the city's position in prioritised thematic areas. These channels also include participation in city networks and making strategic use of EU projects as well as seminars, conferences and media. Stockholm must actively work for increased dialogue with the national government. It is important that the government, to an

³³ Ibid., p. 8.

³⁴ Arash Moosavian, 'Kommunal utrikespolitik En utredning av de rättsliga förutsättningarna för svenska kommuner att bedriva utrikespolitik' (Municipal foreign policy An investigation of the legal conditions for Swedish municipalities to conduct foreign policy), 2019, <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1321360/FULLTEXT01.pdf>, pp. 45–46.

³⁵ European Union Committee of the Regions, Mission Statement, 2009, https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2009/5/20/12b5c770-984f-4b36-8154-e3709a14170f/publishable_en.pdf.

³⁶ Moosavian, 'Kommunal utrikespolitik'.

³⁷ An e-mail from Kristoffer Bengtsson, International Affairs Officer, City of Stockholm, Executive Office, 28 November 2022.

increased extent, anchors EU work with municipalities in order to, among other things, gain a greater understanding of the operational consequences that the various EU decisions can entail. Through active cooperation with key actors, the city has a more significant opportunity to exert influence on the EU's policy processes in these areas.³⁸ When asked about the city's foreign affairs, an official from Stockholm answered, 'Our strategy states that the City does not conduct any form of foreign policy since foreign policy is a national responsibility'. The answer about Stockholm's city diplomacy was that 'We lobby European policies that could affect the City'.³⁹ In this way, Stockholm may influence Swedish national policies and legislation as the latter should be coherent with the EU legislation.

In this context, assuming that migration policy may be regarded as connected to foreign policy, sometimes a clash between local and national policies may arise. For example, due to the 2015 sharp increase in the number of migrants reaching Sweden, in 2016 the government changed the law and prevented rejected asylum-seekers not removed from the country from accessing welfare benefits. Even though Stockholm issued new guidelines, they offered merely fragmented and partial support to only some categories of such asylum seekers (families with children) but the same regulations were introduced at the national level. In general, the city of Stockholm accepted national regulations and did not position itself against the Swedish government, even though Swedish cities have the mandate to provide social services to all the people residing in them.⁴⁰

Another important channel for influencing national and international policies and decision-making processes is participation in city networks. Stockholm is a member of about 80 international city networks, *inter alia*: Eurocities, POLIS Network, ICORN (International Cities of Refuge Network), Strong Cities Network, C40, ICLEI—Local Governments for Sustainability, Nordic Safe Cities and EFUS (European Forum for Urban Security). Stockholm's EU policy emphasises that participation in such city networks offers a possibility of influencing EU decisions. For example, Eurocities gathers over 130 of Europe's largest cities. Active participation in this network provides the opportunity for experience exchange, project collaboration and

³⁸ 'Stockholms Stands EU-Policy', 2022, p. 8.

³⁹ An e-mail from Kristoffer Bengtsson.

⁴⁰ Ilker Ataç, Theresa Schütze and Victoria Reitter, 'Local Responses in Restrictive National Policy Contexts: Welfare Provisions for Non-removed Rejected Asylum Seekers in Amsterdam, Stockholm and Vienna', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43: 16, 2020, pp. 115–34.

the possibility of influencing EU decisions. The same can be stated e.g. about POLIS that brings together municipalities, regions and organisations in Europe that work in the field of transport, mobility and road safety.⁴¹ Stockholm usually lobbies European policies through city networks (90 per cent of lobbying is done through this channel), and they issue joint declarations,⁴² in this way strengthening the voice of individual cities. *Stockholm's International Strategy*⁴³ also stressed that through participation in international city networks, the city may contribute to international progress in some important issues (one could add, for example, migration or climate change). Stockholm sends, for example, Voluntary Local Reviews to the UN on the realisation of Sustainable Developments Goals (SDGs) in the realm of climate change by 2040.⁴⁴ This is also a means to mobilise other cities and show that cities can do it. Nevertheless, this measure may also impact state's activities and mobilise it to implement SDGs as well. Participation in city networks is also a way of gaining access to useful expertise and international connections.

While Stockholm is active in city networks, which are tools of multilateral city diplomacy, the same cannot be said about sister cities. Until very recently Stockholm did not have any, as it rather focuses on concrete projects. The city collaborates intensely with Nordic and Baltic capitals.⁴⁵ But remarkably, in April 2022 Stockholm expressed its desire to become a twin city of Kyiv and provide expertise in various fields such as education, democratic governance, sewage and water management, urban planning, electricity, and information technology.⁴⁶ In a letter from Anna König Jerlmyr, Mayor City of Stockholm to Mayor of Kiev Vitaliy Klitschko dated 1 April 2022 it was stated that

As capital cities, Kyiv and Stockholm, are by nature sister cities. And as such, the City of Stockholm would like to propose an agreement. Yesterday, our City Board unanimously adopted a statement expressing solidarity with the residents of Kyiv and a promise to assist the City of Kyiv in the rebuilding

⁴¹ 'Stockholms Stands EU-Policy', 2022, p. 10.

⁴² An interview with Kristoffer Bengtsson, International Affairs Officer, City of Stockholm, Executive Office, 7 June 2022.

⁴³ 'Stockholm International Strategy', 2021, p. 4.

⁴⁴ An interview with Kristoffer Bengtsson.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Tetiana Anakina, Paulina Spalek-Lipcean and Halyna Kovalchuk, 'Challenges and Opportunities of LRA's Involvement in the Reconstruction of Ukraine' (report for EU CoR), 2022, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/fl63f3a8-395b-11ed-9c68-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF>, p. 18.

of your great city in the aftermath of the war. We offer you our expertise in regards to for example, urban planning, water and waste, electricity and more.⁴⁷

Stockholm also actively participates in international conferences and meetings, and in this way may take part in shaping global order, also by mobilising Sweden and other states to act. By way of example, in June 2022—50 years after the 1972 UN Conference on human environment held in Stockholm—Stockholm again welcomed the UN conference *Stockholm+50*. Even though it was a meeting of states co-hosted by Sweden and Kenya, there was a parallel city summit gathering 100 delegates from various cities. As a Stockholm city official said, cities are leading the fight against climate change and Stockholm wants to be a part of that.⁴⁸ According to *Stockholm Annual Report for 2019* (the only one accessible online the authors were able to find) in 2019 a Stockholm representative participated in the Eurocities Mayors' Forum in Brussels, Forum for Future Cities: Urban Intelligence in Boston, Nordic Capital Conference in Oslo, EU Capital Mayors Meeting in London, and C40 World Mayors' Summit in Copenhagen. As a rotational president of Eurocities, Stockholm had an opportunity to strengthen the advocacy work at the EU level.⁴⁹

Overall, according to the information obtained via e-mail from Stockholm's International Affairs Officer, the mayor and vice mayors attended 72 international meetings during 2021–22 (both physical and virtual).⁵⁰

GOTHENBURG

The City of Gothenburg (Göteborgs Stad) is the second largest city in the Kingdom of Sweden and the fifth largest in the Nordic countries, with a population of 587,500 in the urban area and approximately 1 million inhabitants in the metropolitan area. It is also the largest port in Scandinavia. The city is strategically located between Oslo and Copenhagen and is the heart of the Gothenburg Region and Västra Götaland. The year 2021 marked the 400th anniversary of the city

⁴⁷ The letter obtained via e-mail from Kristoffer Bengtsson, International Affairs Officer, City of Stockholm, Executive Office, 11 April 2022.

⁴⁸ An interview with Kristoffer Bengtsson.

⁴⁹ 'Stockholm Annual Report 2019', 2020, https://issuu.com/blomquist/docs/bq_sled115_ar19_eng_issuu, pp. 33, 34.

⁵⁰ An e-mail from Kristoffer Bengtsson.

of Gothenburg. One of the key elements of the celebrations was an international conference on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁵¹

Concerning its participation in international relations, the city has an approach very similar to Stockholm. According to this approach, municipalities do not work or 'interfere' with the national foreign policy—it is conducted on the national level. However, municipalities answer referrals sent out from the national level in varying areas on a regular basis. Therefore it can be perceived as a tool by which cities are able to influence many (national) matters.⁵²

Despite such an approach, in 2014, the city of Gothenburg adopted *Policy and Guidelines for International Cooperation in the City of Gothenburg*.⁵³ The policy guidelines indicate that the city of Gothenburg is an international city, it is open to the world, and international cooperation is an integral part of the city's work. The city strives to secure its position in regionalised Europe through active international cooperation. The city's work *vis-à-vis* and within the EU is an integral part of Gothenburg's operations. Still, the Policy underlines that the city's international cooperation is based on and follows the Swedish government's foreign policy. The policy also refers to city's cooperation with partner cities and twin cities and indicates the Municipal Board as a deciding and coordinating institution in the event of such cooperation. It also mentions cooperation with international organisations and networks where the Municipal Board coordinates the cooperation with the help of the city's Management Office's international department.

Like many other European cities, Gothenburg has a Brussels office run by city officials. The office gives the city the opportunity to submit views on EU initiatives through various channels. Gothenburg often uses the European Commission's referral system, also called 'open consultations', to impact drafting legislative proposals. The city also has representatives in the European Parliament. In the current mandate period (2019–24), several Members of the EP (originally from Gothenburg) represent Sweden in the European Union Parliament.

⁵¹ 'City of Gothenburg Annual Report', 2021, <https://goteborg.se/wps/wcm/connect/2c3e3692-e7d4-4f77-86e2-53b3fdbf0d31/City+of+Gothenburg+Annual+Report+2021.pdf?MOD=AJPERES>.

⁵² An e-mail from Gunilla Bökmark, Director of International Relations, City of Gothenburg, 6 April 2023.

⁵³ 'Policy och riktlinjer för internationellt samarbete i Göteborgs Stad', 2014 (H 2014 nr 79, P 2014-06-05, § 27, Dnr 1325/11), https://goteborg.se/wps/PA_Pabolagshandlingar/file?id=21658.

Additionally, the mayor and deputy mayors attended some high-level international meetings in 2022 (there were fewer than 5 such meetings, mainly because it was an election year, which probably affected this matter). The lack of many direct activities in the international arena and the rare participation of the city's representatives in international meetings is primarily due to the policy that reserves these competencies to the central authorities and the fact that the city does not have a specific budget for foreign affairs/international cooperation.⁵⁴

However, it is worth looking at the actions Gothenburg takes indirectly. Gothenburg systematically invests in sustainability and aims for positive change. Its approach to sustainability has gained international recognition through the years. For six consecutive years, the city was a leader in the Global Destination Sustainability Index (2016–22) and was the European Capital of Smart Tourism in 2020. It was also named the world's Best Sustainable City Stay 2021 by Lonely Planet. In April 2022, Gothenburg became one of the European Union's 100 climate-neutral and smart cities—forerunner cities on a mission towards climate neutrality in 2030. Gothenburg is also a European Capitals of Inclusion and Diversity Awards winner.

Similarly to Stockholm, Gothenburg is an active member of many city networks, which can be regarded as another non-obvious but essential channel for influencing national and international policies and decision-making processes. Gothenburg is a member of more than 50 networks and organisations, *inter alia*: Eurocities, POLIS Network (President 2020–21), ICLEI—Local Governments for Sustainability, Mayors of Peace, Nordic Safe Cities, International Cities of Refuge Network—ICORN (Gothenburg was the first Swedish city to become a City of Refuge—a safe place for persecuted), European Innovation Partnership Smart Cities and Communities—EIP-SCC, European Regions Research and Innovation Network—ERRIN International Water Association (Gothenburg is one of the Water-Wise Cities), Lighting Urban Community International—LUCI, UNESCO Creative Cities Network (as a Creative City of Literature), International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions—IFLA, European Cities Marketing (ECM), WHO Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities, Cities4Children, Climate-KIC (European largest public-private innovation partnership for climate change). Membership in these networks and organisations is an excellent opportunity for the

⁵⁴ An e-mail from Gunilla Bökmark.

city to exchange experiences and actively participate in international projects.

Also noteworthy is the fact that Gothenburg was one of the seven small-to-medium size cities (Buenos Aires, Argentina; Cape Town, South Africa; Gothenburg and Malmö, Sweden; Kisumu, Kenya; and Sheffield, UK) participating in the project run from mid-2017 to the end of 2019 and dedicated to supporting the understanding, engagement and implementation of two global agendas at the city level: the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals and the New Urban Agenda—NUA. The project was a continuation of the 2015 pilot project intended to test and draft targets and indicators of what became SDG 11—‘Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’.⁵⁵

The second largest city of Sweden also has numerous sister cities, including strategic partner cities: Lyon (France) and Nelson Mandela Bay (South Africa); partner cities: Chicago (USA), Kiel (Germany), Cracow (Poland), Newcastle (UK), Rostock (Germany), Tallin (Estonia), as well as twin towns: Aarhus (Denmark), Bergen (Norway), and Turku (Finland). All over the world, town twinning (Swedish: *vänort*) is perceived as a tool for establishing durable links to local communities in other countries and developing relationships across the globe. It is worth noting that several Swedish cities have used this tool to express their position on the international stage.⁵⁶

In 2020 as a sign of deteriorating relations with China, four Swedish cities: Gothenburg, Linköping, Luleå and Västerås, which had had long-standing twinning or partnership agreements with Chinese cities—Shanghai (one of three Gothenburg’s strategic partner cities), Guangzhou, Xian and Jinan respectively—allowed the agreements to lapse in 2020. These actions undertaken by Swedish cities were dictated by the unacceptable Chinese hostility towards the Swedish government and took place in parallel with the activities of the Swedish government, which, among others, included closing all Confucius Institutes in Sweden.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Sandra C. Valencia, *Localisation of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals in Gothenburg, Sweden*, 2019, <https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/Gothenburg%20%282019%29.pdf>.

⁵⁶ ‘Gothenburg 2021. Opportunities on the Way to Gothenburg’s 400th Anniversary. Proposed Work Plan’, 2021, https://www.goteborg2023.com/uploads/2016/10/Proposed-work-plan-goteborg2021_120530-1.pdf.

⁵⁷ Rachel Wong, *Gothenburg Axes Twin City Agreement with Shanghai as Swede Closes all Confucius Institutes*, 2020, <https://hongkongfp.com/2020/04/24/gothenburg-axes-twin-city-agreement-with-shanghai-as-sweden-closes-all-confucius-institutes/>.

A similar situation occurred in 2022 after the start of the war in Ukraine. From 1963, Gothenburg cooperated with one of its partner cities, Saint Petersburg. Although it was a purely symbolic act, as the agreement had been dormant for years, the city officially broke off cooperation as a sign of solidarity with the people of Ukraine and communicated its decision through official channels. However, city officials kept emphasising that foreign policy was not one of the main tasks of the city; by breaking the ties, they wanted to express their opposition to the policy of the Russian Federation.⁵⁸

MALMÖ

Malmö (Malmö kommun) is the third largest city in the Kingdom of Sweden. It has more than 350,000 citizens.⁵⁹ Malmö as the capital of Skåne forms an agglomeration with the Danish capital Copenhagen, and their closer cooperation truly began in 2000.⁶⁰ These two cities are connected by a bridge over the Øresund. According to Copenhagen, Malmö is its most important partner.⁶¹ Cooperation with Copenhagen is based on supporting the common market, the attraction of their joint agglomeration, infrastructure issues, stimuli to business in their region and lobbying in their respective countries to influence governmental legislation to achieve their goals in the Øresund region.⁶² One of the prominent examples of this process was the case from 1993 when Malmö lobbied the Swedish government to construct a bridge over the Øresund.

The capital of Skåne has two major documents about its foreign policy (in Sweden named 'external work'): first named *Program for Strategic External Work* and the second entitled *Policy for the City of Malmö's International Work*. And the third minor document adopted by Malmö's City Council, *Strategies for the City of Malmö's Work with Agenda 2030*, also includes elements of the city's foreign policy.

In *Program for Strategic External Work* the City Council pointed out that the most important international partnership for Malmö is

⁵⁸ Jan Sprangers, *Göteborg säger upp partnerskap med Sankt Petersburg*, 2022, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/vast/goteborg-sager-upp-partnerskapet-med-sankt-petersburg>.

⁵⁹ 'Befolkning', n.d., <https://malmo.se/Fakta-och-statistik/Befolkning.html>.

⁶⁰ 'Øresundssamarbetet', 2021, <https://malmo.se/Sa-arbetar-vi-med.../Omvarld/Nationellt-och-regionalt-samarbete/Oresundssamarbetet.html>.

⁶¹ Mårten Ahlstrand, *Kommunal utrikespolitik? Hur utvecklingen av paradiplomati påverkas av lokaliseringssprincipen (student thesis)* (Gothenburg, 2013), p. 38.

⁶² 'Øresundssamarbetet', 2021.

Copenhagen. The guiding idea of the document is that '[t]he city of Malmö prioritises, mobilises and works strategically in collaboration with other actors on the regional, national and international level'. Malmö aims to achieve the greatest possible impact from metropolitan cooperation, inter-municipal collaboration and the European network organisations. The city wants to achieve it through 'offensive actions'. This program sets goals for how the city of Malmö should operate globally and provides a framework for 'external work' in the form of governance and organisation. However, Malmö's policy is planned to be in line with the Swedish foreign policy. The most important part of the city's foreign policy is environmental politics. Malmö is trying to conduct its environmental policy on three levels: local, national and international. In the section about the environmental policy, it is pointed out that Malmö is an organisation of the commune, the city and the region, so when acting for the benefit of society, Malmö must remember that it represents several entities. Moreover, Malmö should create its own positive and recognisable image and increase the city's profile. Malmö must achieve it by acting locally, nationally and internationally and making the image of Malmö as a balanced organisation. Migration and social policies are other important policies but less so than environmental policies. *Program for Strategic External Work* expressly indicates that the most essential tools in Malmö's foreign policy are international partnerships (especially with Copenhagen) and environmental politics.⁶³

In the second document, *Policy for the City of Malmö's International Work*, Malmö's 'international work' (meaning international activities or foreign policy) is treated as a tool to achieve business development. Malmö's 'international work' focuses mainly on the EU and China. The city wants to pursue these international activities in cooperation with other Swedish agglomerations. Another key point for the capital of Skåne is working towards stimulation business development in the city by using international cooperation. Malmö justifies its foreign policy by indicating that world events affect Malmö, and internal events in Malmö also affect the world; hence the city must cooperate with other European cities and international networks where Malmö is a member and conduct its own international policy relating to

⁶³ *Program för strategiskt omvärldsarbete i Malmö stad*, Malmö, 2016, <https://malmo.se/download/18.693435e1616fea8abdbd4ff/1519291528326/Program%20f%C3%B6r%20strategiskt%20omv%C3%A4rldsarbete%20i%20Malm%C3%B6%20stad%202016-11-06%20Platina.pdf>.

the matters most important for the city. Malmö is lobbying in the European Union (using the city networks) and in other institutions where Malmö is represented and where it can influence politics in the areas most important for the municipality. For example, Malmö has its own representation in Brussels, which is responsible for city affairs. Malmö city representatives in its Brussels bureau are responsible for: 1) monitoring UE funds and programmes, 2) making and developing contacts with other cities and institutions, 3) assisting with project applications, 4) developing project ideas in collaboration with Malmö's administration, 5) carrying out lobbying activities and monitoring policy issues, 6) the interests of the city of Malmö and their local market.⁶⁴ In its foreign policy, Malmö focuses strongly on economic cooperation and development, mainly to attract foreign investors by showing its successes in the field of economic development during events and meetings. The city influences business development in the region, and cooperates with other cities within the city networks in EU institutions. It also creates its own PR and participates in international events and meetings with representatives from other cities. Here again Malmö is working in line with Swedish government's foreign policy.⁶⁵

The third document, *Strategies for the City of Malmö's Work with Agenda 2030*, which implements the United Nations 2030 Agenda containing 17 Sustainable Development Goals, is about external partnerships. In 2018 Malmö adopted *Strategies* to introduce this UN Agenda. In the case of the 2030 Agenda Malmö will try to achieve a better international position because 'Malmö is a global city with over 180 nationalities. Events in the world affect Malmö and events in Malmö affect the world'.⁶⁶ The most important fields of Malmö's international actions mentioned in this document are environmental politics and innovative city networks, but overall the *Strategies* are also in line with Swedish national-level policies.⁶⁷

Currently, Malmö is doing all to conform to the Swedish government's foreign policy; however, historically Malmö made their foreign policy, different than the one of the national government. For example,

⁶⁴ *Malmö stads kontor i Bryssel*, 2021, <https://malmo.se/Sa-arbetar-vi-med.../Omvarld/EU-samarbetet/Malmo-stads-kontor-i-Bryssel.html>.

⁶⁵ *Program för strategiskt omvärldsarbete i Malmö stad*, 2016.

⁶⁶ 'Agenda 2030 i Malmö', 2022, <https://malmo.se/Sa-arbetar-vi-med.../Agenda-2030-i-Malmo.html>.

⁶⁷ *Malmö stads långsiktiga arbete med Agenda 2030*, Malmö, 2018, <https://malmo.se/download/18.708924eb178fd76a14cd859/1623244068865/Strategi%202018%20Agenda%202030.pdf>.

Malmö exceeded its competencies when it sent an official letter in 2012 to a British company G4S about the situation of human rights in Palestine territories.⁶⁸ In the letter, Malmö requested clarification regarding the company's activities in the territory occupied by Israel in Palestine. The issue regarded the support of Israel through the sale of observation equipment specifically to Israel. In short, Malmö did not want to continue developing its cooperation with companies that support Israel in occupying and controlling the West Bank.⁶⁹

The decision to send the letter was appealed to the Swedish Administrative Court regarding its foreign policy character because in Sweden only the government can make national foreign policy. The Administrative Court had to rule on the possibility of a city exceeding its competencies, but the Court was satisfied with the argument that if any international matter affects Malmö's interests, the city must be able to ask foreign entities questions. In this case, Malmö made its own foreign policy which did not follow Swedish foreign policy.⁷⁰

In another example, Malmö influenced Swedish foreign policy in 1993 and called for building a bridge over the Øresund which would connect Malmö and Copenhagen. The Swedish city ran its own campaign regarding that bridge, and it was lobbying the Swedish internal and external policy officials to cooperate with Denmark to build the bridge and influence public opinion in this matter. Swedish government considered Malmö to have exceeded its competence in this matter. However, this was one of the examples of Malmö's influence on Swedish foreign policy.⁷¹

The capital of Skåne is associated with many city networks, such as Strong Cities Network, European Coalition of Cities Against Racism and International Cities of Refuge Network. Malmö is also a member of networks and organisations in the Baltic Sea region, like the Union of the Baltic Cities and BaltMet but these city networks are interested rather in economic and social issues. Malmö often cooperates with Gothenburg and Stockholm to influence governmental policy for example, in the area of environmental matters.⁷²

⁶⁸ G4S stannar inte kvar på Västbanken, 2012, <https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/5351518>; Moosavian, 'Kommunal utrikespolitik', pp. 11–12.

⁶⁹ Fria Tidningen, *Bevakningsföretaget G4S i strålkastarljuset*, 2012, https://www.fria.nu/artikel/94506?fbclid=IwAR1V8c31hEcnZuqFjtxO-VN0QzbIg6M-5QbZTw1DeFkUFyvD_oIOkQraoc.

⁷⁰ Moosavian, 'Kommunal utrikespolitik', p. 11.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 8.

⁷² Ibid., p. 47.

Malmö has its own migration policy and asylum system; it also declared itself a human rights city.⁷³ Malmö is also similar to other major cities in the Nordic region like Oslo and Copenhagen. One of the most critical declarative features of its external policy is encouraging migrants to come to the city.⁷⁴

Of direct relevance to Malmö's external policy is Malmö's participation in the Finnish Administrative Area, because as part thereof, the city has assumed a greater responsibility to protect and promote the Finnish language and the Swedish-Finnish culture. In this case, Malmö can exert its influence by using the Area to improve its international image among the Swedish-Finnish and Finnish people. Malmö is responsible for its Finnish minority, and in this vein, Malmö organises meetings with the Finnish minority and Finnish Swedish people about issues that are important to them. These affairs can have local as well as international impact.⁷⁵

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Today, to a more or less extent, cities play a noteworthy role in contributing to their state's foreign policy objectives. In the case of Sweden, while national foreign policy is typically formulated at the state level, cities in Sweden actively engage in diplomatic and international activities, demonstrating a decentralized approach to global affairs. Through various channels, cities like Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö contribute to Sweden's international relations. They engage in city diplomacy, foster cultural exchanges, and participate in transnational networks to address global challenges. This decentralized engagement reflects the growing recognition of cities as influential actors in the international arena. Their participation enhances Sweden's diplomatic presence and underscores the interconnectedness of local and global dynamics in shaping foreign policy outcomes.

Swedish cities influence Sweden's foreign policy mainly through city networks, by lobbying EU policies and legislation that affect Sweden, and by participation in international meetings and conferences where

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 48–49.

⁷⁴ Mårten Ahlstrand, *Kommunal utrikespolitik? Hur utvecklingen av paradiplomati påverkas av lokaliseringssprincipen* (student thesis), Gothenburg 2013, p. 44.

⁷⁵ 'Finskt förvaltningsområde', 2023, <https://malmo.se/Om-Malmo-stad/Politik-beslut-och-paverkan/Finskt-forvaltningsomrade.htm> (access: 25 November 2023).

cities' position is expressed in declarations issued at the end of such events. Lobbying the EU policies is connected with city networks as the latter are the main tool for such lobbying, which may influence Sweden's foreign policy as national policies and legislation have to be coherent with the EU legislation. In the same vein, Stockholm indicated that various declarations issued by cities in the framework of city networks influence decision-making, for example, in the European Union.⁷⁶ Such statements confirm that city networks act as force multipliers, allowing cities to make their voice heard and be considered.

Each of the three Swedish cities examined has a document that can be called an international relations strategy that outlines the rules of cities' participation in such relations, and as a consequence the possibilities of participating in or influencing Swedish foreign policy. Most of all, both in the statements of city representatives and in the strategies for international cooperation, it is emphasised that foreign affairs are the domain of the central government of Sweden, and cities conduct activities in this area only to the extent permitted by national law and practice. The cities examined also implement the assumptions of organisations such as the United Nations (for example, SDGs) and the European Union. The examples presented in the article confirm that municipal authorities use such a position in practice. So far, the most significant exceptions to the rule that foreign policy is the competence of national government—exemptions that emphasised the position of Swedish cities in the international arena—were Malmö's mentioned decision about going against the line of Swedish foreign policy in the 2012 case of Palestine, and its declaration to become a human rights city, open to all migrants. Hence, Malmö can influence Swedish foreign policy in matters that are important to the city, like human rights in Palestine and the infrastructure related to the city's functioning (the 1993 case regarding the Øresund bridge—through cooperation with Copenhagen it was also able to influence the entire Øresund region). The city may try to go beyond its competencies and conduct its own foreign policy, but still the most important conclusion is that Malmö's foreign policy conforms to national foreign policy, with some exceptions mentioned above. Moreover, Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö's participation in building international relations is particularly evident in relations

⁷⁶ An interview with Kristoffer Bengtsson.

with cities from neighbouring countries (e.g. Denmark, Finland and Sweden), which is not surprising due to geographical proximity.

Another example of independent actions of Swedish cities was Gothenburg's failure to extend partnership agreements with Chinese cities and the closure of Confucian Institutes in reaction to the hostile attitude of China to the Swedish government as well as breaking the agreement with Saint Petersburg after the outbreak of Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. Still, these actions were less revolutionary than in the case of Malmö as they aligned with the decisions the central government took. Nevertheless, they prove that ending sister cities agreements can be used as a type of sanction and manifestation of negative reaction to, for example, violations of international law and universally recognised rules.

The above conclusions answer the research questions regarding whether and how cities influence the state's foreign policy (with Swedish cities as case studies) and whether they conduct their own foreign policy or practise diplomacy. As to the remaining research questions, there are two sectors of national foreign policy the investigated cities influenced most—environmental policy (which is also connected with the implementation of SDGs) and, possibly, migration policy. As to the question of Stockholm's dominance in this aspect, it turns out that compared to the other two Swedish cities Malmö was the one that took steps different than its nation-state—in other words, there is no Stockholm dominance. The answer from the Stockholm's representative confirms that—Kristoffer Bengtsson, International Affairs Officer replied that he sees no difference in this respect.⁷⁷ Actually, Stockholm's international activities follow Sweden's foreign policy. As mentioned, all three cities strive to implement their foreign policy in line with that of Sweden. As to Malmö and Gothenburg, their influence on Sweden's foreign policy is similar; generally speaking, with regard to the three cities examined, it is rather average, so as not to say minor. This proves that Swedish cities cooperate rather than compete with the national government, hence, there is no backlash from the state; moreover, the principles and values pursued in international activities are shared by both the government of Sweden and Swedish cities.

The conducted analysis shows that Stockholm and the state cooperate and coordinate foreign actions across various spheres. The

⁷⁷ An e-mail from Kristoffer Bengtsson.

city government both stimulates and influences Sweden's foreign policy, and conversely, the state stimulates and influences Stockholm's policy. However, this occurs only within the legally permissible framework for Stockholm. Additionally, Stockholm collaborates with the entire state apparatus, which impacts foreign policy, namely with the government and its agencies. In matters related to Stockholm's permissible international activities, both entities, the city and the state, engage in dialogue and coordinate their actions. Most importantly, Sweden also consults and conducts a coordinated foreign policy that involves Stockholm and other cities analyzed in the paper. This is a significant element influencing Sweden's foreign policy by the city, and vice versa, in a mutually interdependent manner.⁷⁸

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⁷⁸ Jan Björkengren, *Svenska kommuner och paradiplomati En kvalitativ fallstudie av Helsingborgs och Stockholms internationella arbeten* (Swedish municipalities and paradiplomacy A qualitative case study of the international relations of Helsingborg and Stockholm), 2023, pp. 23–24, <https://kau.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1791245/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

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