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DISPUTES BETWEEN CITIES OVER TRANSNATIONAL INTER-CITY AGREEMENTS

Abstract

This article examines disputes arising from the implementation or interpretation of transnational inter-city agreements, such as sister city or partnership accords. Although these agreements lack binding legal force under international law, they often employ legalistic language and include provisions for resolving disputes through consultation and negotiation. Through legal analysis and case studies, the article highlights that conflicts – frequently tied to historical memory, human rights, or foreign policy – are resolved politically rather than legally, often via unilateral action by local governments. While framed as tools for cultural cooperation, these agreements may become symbols of political alignment. The study addresses a gap in the literature by determining how cities resolve disputes arising from the interpretation or implementation of transnational inter-city (sister/twin) agreements and whether such conflicts exhibit characteristics of legal or purely political resolution. The manuscript is aimed at filling a research gap, by highlighting the underdeveloped area of disputes in sister cities agreements between the municipalities.

K e y w o r d s: sister city, twin city, disputes, inter-city agreements

INTRODUCTION

City-to-city ‘sister’ or ‘twinning’ agreements are not treaties and carry no binding force under international law. However, some scholars argue that they are binding only for the cities that concluded them (Al-Gifari, Kusumo & Rahayu 2024; Wnorowski, 2024: 217–19¹). Moreover, municipalities increasingly get involved in practices reminiscent of international law, employing legalistic language and entering into formalized arrangements or issuing declarations that, in the light of international law, function as instruments of soft law. The intention of this formulation is to highlight that, although formally the sister-city agreements do not qualify as treaties under international law, in practice they often adopt a legal style and structure. Consequently, they create shared expectations, signal commitments, and guide behavior between the parties, in spite of the absence of formally binding obligations or enforceable mechanisms. As defined by Vaughan Lowe, soft law encompasses norms that, although lacking formal legal force, play a significant role in shaping the broader normative context and establishing expectations regarding appropriate conduct in international relations (Wheatley 2009: 220; Snyder 2023: 10). While this concept has traditionally been applied to states and international organizations, its applicability can be extended on both the cities and the agreements which they form. In fact, these city-level instruments – whether declarations, covenants, action plans, or policy commitments – mirror the structure and language of international legal texts. They are generally rooted in the parties’ consent, typically endorsed by high-ranking municipal representatives such as mayors, and are formally deposited with an overseeing body. These agreements often include provisions for follow-up, such as self-monitoring and reporting. However, they commonly lack robust enforcement mechanisms, paralleling the enforcement challenges in much of public international law, where compliance is often pursued through reputational pressure rather than coercive means (Swiney, 2020: 265). Nevertheless, some transnational inter-

¹ K. Wnorowski argues that cities, due to the obligation bond, create inter-city agreements of an international character (Wnorowski, 2024: 217). Intercity agreements between cities establish mutual commitments yet occupy a unique legal space. They function as *sui generis* or soft law instruments within the international framework, often carrying normative weight, while remaining outside conventional sources of international law (Wnorowski, 2024: 218–219, 235).

-city frameworks, such as the European Charter for the Safeguarding of Human Rights in the City (2000), incorporate explicit provisions for implementation and follow-up, signalling a move towards more structured normative commitments at the city level.

Overall, all inter-city agreements, whether multilateral or bilateral, such as twin-city agreements, are implemented by mayors or city councils, acting on behalf of their municipalities (not national governments) and typically cover cultural, educational, or economic exchanges, rather than state-level obligations. Regarding dispute resolution, many sister city agreements include clauses requiring disputes to be resolved ‘amicably through consultation or negotiation’. However, in none of these examples did the author mention resorting to courts or arbitration. For example, a sister city pact between Chennai (India) and Chongqing (China) from 2015 specifies that termination of the contract would only be possible after written notice. Furthermore, calls for any ‘dispute arising out of interpretation’ to be settled by consultation or negotiation between the parties (Art. 6 of the Agreement on the Establishment of Sister..., 2015). Sister Cities International [SCI] (2017: 2) similarly recommends that a municipality wishing to end a relationship shall simply notify both the other party and the coordinating organization in writing. In practice, however, no international or national court or arbitration body governs these pacts, so resolution usually falls to the involved city governments.

The original idea of this article was to examine the resolution of international disputes which arise between some cities and are based on transnational inter-city agreements, particularly through judicial decisions. However, no such examples were found during the research, at least to the best of the author’s current knowledge. Hence, the research subject had to be extended in order to include various disputes motivated by politics, human rights, and international violations that were resolved extrajudicially. The author defines a dispute as a contestation between municipalities, arising from the interpretation, implementation, performance, suspension, or termination of a transnational inter-city agreement, in which at least one party alleges that the other one has acted inconsistently with the expressed terms, expectations, or accepted practices of the partnership. Disputes include both substantive disagreements (e.g. alleged breach of the agreed activities) and political/ideological conflicts (e.g. contestation over commemorative acts, human-rights positions, or foreign-policy symbolism). They are resolved through

political, administrative, or informal channels rather than by binding judicial adjudication in the cases considered here. The article focuses on the suspension and termination of such agreements, as these were also the primary measures used to settle the dispute or react to it. Termination of an inter-city agreement is rarely found to be a successful measure.

The cases examined in this study were selected through a purposive qualitative sampling strategy designed to capture variation in the design and practice of inter-city agreements rather than to produce a statistically representative dataset. The initial pool of potential cases was identified through publicly available municipal databases, city diplomacy networks, and documented sister-city agreements referenced in academic and policy literature. From this broader pool, cases were screened using three inclusion criteria.

First, the full text of the agreement had to be accessible through official or verified municipal sources in order to allow legal-textual analysis. Second, the agreement needed to contain explicit or implicit provisions addressing dispute management (for example, references to ‘amicable settlement,’ ‘consultation,’ or ‘negotiation’), enabling examination of how cities formally frame conflict resolution. Third, the sample aimed to capture geographical and political diversity by including cases from different regions and governance contexts. The final selection, therefore, includes examples from Europe, Asia, and North America, reflecting a range of legal traditions, political environments, and approaches to city diplomacy.

This sampling strategy prioritizes analytical diversity over statistical representativeness. The goal is to identify recurring patterns in how disputes under inter-city agreements are addressed and to explore whether these practices resemble legal dispute settlement mechanisms or primarily political forms of conflict management. While the sample cannot represent the full universe of sister-city agreements globally, it provides a structured cross-regional comparison that allows for cautious analytical generalization about the soft-law character of such arrangements.

Sister-city agreements were chosen not because they are more important than all other paradiplomatic agreements, but because they are a clearly identifiable, widely used, and publicly documented subset of inter-city practice that contains comparable dispute clauses.

Accordingly, the research goal of this article is to determine how cities resolve disputes arising from the interpretation or

implementation of transnational inter-city (sister/twin) agreements and whether such conflicts exhibit characteristics of legal or purely political resolution. Accordingly, the central research question is: To what extent do cities rely on legal mechanisms, as opposed to political or administrative ones, to resolve disputes under transnational inter-city agreements? This question guides the inquiry into whether sister-city relations function within a framework analogous to international soft law, and how municipal actors operationalize principles of peaceful dispute settlement in practice. Sister city agreements are defined as ‘a broad-based, long-term partnership between two communities in two countries. A relationship is officially recognized after the highest elected or appointed official from both communities signs off on an agreement to become sister cities’ (SCI, 2025).

To ensure the reliability and validity of findings, the research applied data triangulation, combining three complementary sources of evidence. First, a legal-textual analysis was conducted on selected sister-city agreements in order to examine language, structure, and presence of dispute-resolution clauses. Second, documentary and media sources – including official city communications, news reports, and municipal statements – were analyzed in order to capture real-world cases of suspension or termination of agreements. Third, selected academic literature on city diplomacy and twin-city agreements provided contextual and theoretical grounding. Cross-referencing these sources enabled the identification of patterns between formal provisions and actual municipal practice, strengthening the credibility of the conclusions and minimizing the risk of single-source bias.

The article is structured into six main parts. The examples of dispute-resolution clauses in city partnership agreements follow a short literature review. This section provides an outline of dispute-resolution clauses from various international inter-city agreements, emphasizing the frequent use of amicable negotiation clauses and the general exclusion of formal judicial mechanisms. The section on implementation/interpretation disputes and their motivations, resolution, and outcomes analyzes specific case studies of terminated or contested sister-city agreements, which were triggered by political disagreements, human rights issues, or historical memory. Section 5 constitutes a comparative analysis of the dispute resolution clauses and the disputes themselves examined in the article, indicating generalizable similarities and differences between them. In the conclusions, the author reflects on the limitations and fragility of

city partnerships when exposed to political or ideological tensions, underscoring the dominance of political over legal mechanisms in resolving inter-city disputes.

LITERATURE REVIEW – A NEED TO RESEARCH TRANSNATIONAL INTER-CITY DISPUTES

It is essential to note that there is currently no specialized scholarship focusing on dispute-resolution clauses in sister-city agreements. Only Baumgärtel (2021) in his chapter on dispute settlement examined the issue of disputes involving cities, but not based on international municipal agreements, but mainly disputes between states affecting cities or where municipalities attempted to sue their own states.

Studies of paradiplomacy and city diplomacy (e.g., Harrison and Huang, 2022; Leffel and Amiri, 2018) discuss sister-city ties in terms of cooperation and influence, but do not analyze their dispute resolution clauses. Similarly, Karvounis (2025: 24–25, 51–61) and Szpak, Gawłowski, Modrzyńska, Modrzyński, and Dahl (2022: 59–66) examine bilateral agreements, including sister city agreements, as tools of city diplomacy, without focusing on dispute resolution. Karvounis (2025: 25) notes that twin city agreements have evolved from primarily focusing on the promotion of friendship and cultural exchange to encompassing trade and economic relations. Some publications present case studies of the sister cities (Joenniemi, 2014; Ehlers, 2017) while others analyze this phenomenon in more general terms, concentrating on its geographical reach. Among them may be mentioned Anischenko and Sergunin (2012) examining ‘twin city’ movement as a form of cross-border cooperation in the Baltic region; Joenniemi and Sergunin (2011 and 2012) focusing on twin cities in Northern Europe or Europe more broadly (Langenohl, 2015) or on twin cities in the context of cross border cooperation such as Mikhailova (2013), Jańczak (2017 and 2019), Nugent (2012).

Sister Cities International’s toolkit emphasizes partnership goals and cultural exchange, mentioning procedures for establishing relations but providing little information about formal dispute mechanisms (SCI, 2017). In effect, city-twinning agreements are often viewed as non-binding frameworks for collaboration. Such cooperation is motivated by shared objectives and undertaken when participating municipalities anticipate mutual benefit, constituting a ‘win-win’

scenario. The prevailing view is that these agreements are typically informal and non-binding, lacking formal enforcement mechanisms through legal channels, and can be unilaterally terminated at any time. Their primary value is thus symbolic and communicative (Karvounis, 2025: 25). Nonetheless, the present author is convinced that such inter-city agreements influence the behavior of city parties. Despite lacking a formally binding force, they have some normative value, depending to a great extent on the goodwill and political will of the cities concerned.

Regarding disputes arising from the implementation or interpretation of transnational inter-city agreements, such as sister city and dispute settlement clauses, the literature offers little evaluation beyond noting that these clauses are commonly found in numerous twinning agreements. What is clear, is that inter-city agreements deliberately echo the principle of peaceful, consultative resolution common in diplomacy, and commentators generally take these clauses as a given rather than a subject of debate. Hence, there is a research gap in the literature which the manuscript aims to fill by highlighting the underdeveloped area of disputes in sister cities agreements between the municipalities. The main contribution is expected to advance research on international municipal relationships.

DISPUTE-RESOLUTION CLAUSES IN CITY PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENTS

As mentioned, many sister city and twin city agreements explicitly require that disputes be handled amicably by consultation rather than litigation. In practice, city agreements around the world – whether labeled ‘sister city’ or ‘twinning’ agreements – include similar language. The dispute resolution clauses often appear at the end of the agreement and mirror standard treaty practice of peaceful settlement. They frequently couple an amicable-settlement clause with a non-binding intent (e.g. ‘this Agreement does not create binding obligations’ – Art. 2 of the Agreement on the establishment of Sister..., 2013). Some agreements explicitly state that the parties may denounce the agreement without giving any reasons (Art. 3 of the Agreement on Friendship..., 2003). Below, some representative sister city agreements from various geographical regions will be presented.

For example, Art. 6 of the Kolkata (India) Kunming (China) sister city agreement (2013) provides: 'Any dispute arising out of the interpretation, application or implementation of any provision of this Agreement shall be settled amicably through consultation or negotiation between the Parties' (Agreement on the Establishment..., 2013). Likewise, a Mexican-U.S. city-partnership (San Mateo Atenco, Mexico-Laredo, Texas) states that any difference arising from the interpretation or execution of this Agreement shall be resolved by common agreement of the Parties (Art. XII Acuerdo de hermanamiento entre..., 2021).

Other examples follow the same pattern. An agreement between Apodaca (Nuevo León, Mexico) and McAllen (Texas, USA) in Art. XIV states that any differences arising from the interpretation or application of the agreement 'shall be resolved by both Parties by mutual agreement' (Sister City Agreement..., 2022). A similar provision may be found in the sister city agreements between Victoria (Tamaulipas, Mexico) and McAllen (Texas, USA) (Art. XV of Acuerdo de hermanamiento entre..., 2008), Art. XIII of the sister city agreement between San Luis Potosí (Mexico) and Laredo (Texas, USA) (Acuerdo de hermanamiento entre..., 2014), Art. XIV of the twinning agreement between Guadalajara (Jalisco, Mexico) and San Salvador (El Salvador) (Acuerdo de hermanamiento entre..., 2012).

The Polish city of Toruń stipulates in part of the sister city agreements, that in face of any misunderstandings regarding the interpretation or application of specific paragraphs or provisions of this agreement, the Parties shall resolve them through mutual negotiations and consultations (Art. 5 of the Partnership Agreement..., 2003; Art. 6 of the Partnership Agreement..., 2009; Art. 6 of the Agreement on the Establishment..., 2010; Art. 6 of the Agreement on Inter-city Partnership..., 2016).

In Nashua (New Hampshire, USA)-Mysore (Karnataka, India) twinning agreement provides a more developed clause that 'any dispute, controversy or claim arising out of the agreement or the breach, termination or invalidity thereof which could not be settled through direct negotiations would be amicably settled through conciliation and discussions' (Agreement on the Establishment of Friendship..., 2016). This means parties must first negotiate directly and then use conciliation if needed. A dispute resolution clause in Art. XII of a sister city agreement between Oaxaca de Juárez (Oaxaca,

Mexico) and Leskovac (Serbia) explicitly excludes resort to judicial or administrative means of dispute settlement when stating that

[t]aking into consideration that this agreement is an act of goodwill, the parties shall carry out all necessary actions for its proper implementation, and any differences arising from the interpretation or application of this legal instrument, or matters not expressly provided for herein, shall be resolved by “the Parties” by mutual agreement and in writing, without the involvement of any administrative or legal authority, and with the prior involvement of the departments and public officials designated in this instrument (*Acuerdo de hermanamiento entre...*, 2023).

Thus, the two cities agree to resolve disputes internally and cooperatively, while also emphasizing the non-binding and non-judicial nature of the agreement.

The texts of city-to-city agreements consistently require that ‘any dispute’ be ‘settled amicably’ by negotiation or consultation between the cities. These clauses either explicitly bar resort to courts or arbitration and instead mandate friendly negotiation or a ‘common agreement’ as the dispute-settlement method, or do not mention such a resort.

IMPLEMENTATION/INTERPRETATION DISPUTES – MOTIVATIONS, RESOLUTION, AND OUTCOMES

Some disagreements arise over how partnerships are implemented. For instance, in 2013, Glendale (California) and its Japanese sister city Higashiosaka clashed after Glendale erected a ‘comfort women’ memorial. The term ‘comfort women’ is a euphemistic designation referring to women of non-Japanese origin who were coerced into sexual servitude within military brothels operated by the Japanese army during the Second World War. Efforts to publicly address or commemorate this historical injustice are frequently perceived as confronting Japan’s post-war pacifist self-image, eliciting strong reactions from Japanese authorities seeking to defend national historical narratives (Šimalčík & Kalivoda, 2020). Higashiosaka’s mayor protested that Glendale had unilaterally misrepresented their consent and funding for the statue, calling it ‘truly regrettable’ and warning that it could lead to the termination of their twinning agreement (Kyodo News International, 2013). Glendale’s authorities later faced a lawsuit to remove the statue, which a U.S. court

ultimately dismissed as a permissible local expression of opinion. Judge Kim McLane Wardlaw of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals stated that Glendale installed a memorial expressing opposition to human rights abuses. This action falls within the scope of what local governments are permitted to do (Mikailian, 2016). The plaintiff in this case was Michiko Gingery, a Glendale resident; therefore, this was not strictly an intermunicipal dispute (for more details, see Yamaguchi, 2020). The Higashiosaka-Glendale episode shows several implications. The dispute demonstrates that municipal symbolic acts can have transnational political effects and alter inter-city ties. It also highlighted the limitations of legal recourse and the primacy of politics. Although private litigation was attempted (the U.S. case to remove the statue), the main inter-municipal reaction remained political (threats of termination). The litigation route did not supplant inter-city political resolution, underscoring the finding that disputes are often resolved administratively or politically rather than through binding adjudication. The case illustrates how municipal controversies intersect with national memory politics (Japanese narratives about 'comfort women'), resulting in pressure on local partners to respond in ways that mirror national diplomacy.

The most prominent example is the case involving the cities of Osaka and San Francisco. In October 2018, following six decades of sister-city partnership, Osaka unilaterally ended the relationship in response to the installation of a monument in San Francisco commemorating 'comfort women'. Despite multiple formal requests by Japanese officials for the statue's removal, the mayor of Osaka ultimately chose to sever the partnership, citing an irreconcilable divergence over historical memory and values (Šimalčík & Kalivoda, 2020; McCurry, 2018; Thompson, 2018; Carey, 2019).

Similarly, a 2019–2020 incident in Prague demonstrated how interpretation can become politicized: in early 2020, diplomatic tensions arose when Prague formalized a sister-city agreement with Taipei, prompting Shanghai to terminate its partnership with the Czech capital, a relationship that had been established in 2017. This development followed an earlier dispute with Beijing in 2019, stemming from Prague's refusal to uphold a clause in its sister city agreement recognizing the 'One China' policy. That clause, introduced under a previous mayoral administration in 2016, stated that Prague acknowledged Taiwan as part of China. Once a new city leadership under Mayor Zdeněk Hřib sought to remove the political

clause, arguing it was inappropriate for inter-city agreements, Beijing unilaterally ended the partnership in October 2019. Prague swiftly deepened ties with Taipei in response, officially establishing sister city relations in January 2020. The day after the Taipei agreement was signed, Shanghai also severed its ties with Prague, denouncing the Czech city's position on Taiwan as a violation of Chinese sovereignty (Šimalčík & Kalivoda, 2020).

Sometimes disputes concern human rights violations. In July 2020, the Dutch city of Nieuwegein unanimously ended its twinning with Puławy (Poland), after Puławy's authorities declared their town an 'LGBT-free zone' (banning LGBT events). The city council cited concerns about discrimination in voting to cancel the agreement. In the same year, the French municipality of Nogent-sur-Oise suspended its twin city agreement with the Polish municipality of Kraśnik (Boffey, 2020; Ambroziak, 2020; for more details on 'LGBT-free zones' in Polish municipalities, see Szpak, 2025).

Similarly, Turkish Antalya cancelled its 1997 partnership with Bat Yam (Israel) in March 2024 as a protest against Israel's military actions in Gaza (Turkish Minute, 2024). In Europe, Barcelona's former mayor (Ada Colau) suspended the Barcelona - Tel Aviv link in early 2023, citing the alleged 'apartheid' and flagrant human rights violations by Israel in Palestine (Hajdenberg, 2023). On 30 May 2025, the Barcelona City Council decided to break the Agreement of Friendship and Collaboration that regulates the relationship with the city of Tel Aviv (Barcelona Ciutat Global, 2025). This move followed Barcelona's earlier suspension of its twinning arrangement with St. Petersburg, a step taken in response to Russia's military aggression against Ukraine and intended as a gesture of political condemnation (Hajdenberg, 2023).

Barcelona's act is just one among many such across Europe and North America, where dozens of city twinings were suspended or terminated in 2022–23 due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. For example, Doncaster (UK) officially 'cut all formal ties' with its twin Ozyorsk, Russia (Torr, 2022), Tromsø (Norway) unanimously voted in October 2022 to terminate sister city agreements with Arkhangelsk, Murmansk, and Nadym, citing the 'atrocities' of war (High Northern News, 2022). In the U.S., cities such as Albany, Buffalo, Charlotte, Chicago, Colorado Springs, Dallas, Des Moines, Eugene, Louisville, Norfolk, and Tallahassee have terminated ties with Russian cities (Frenkel, 2023: 198–201). These acts prove the indirect role of cities in

enforcing international law. In other words, cities are participating in enforcing international standards by severing ties with Russian cities and breaking other forms of cooperation with them. Such measures may be regarded as specific sanctions imposed against Russia through severing ties with the Russian cities.

A further case involves the former partnership between Istanbul and Rotterdam, which lasted from 2005 until its end in 2017. Turkish authorities initiated the dissolution of this sister city relationship after Dutch officials prohibited Turkish ministers from organizing political gatherings aimed at expatriates in Rotterdam. These events were planned ahead of a contentious referendum on constitutional reforms in Turkey. President Erdogan played a decisive role in this development, allegedly instructing the Prime Minister to direct Istanbul's mayor to cut ties with Rotterdam (Demir, 2017) formally.

As the above examples indicate, most disputes are resolved not through legal adjudication but by political decision-making. Municipal councils or mayors vote to suspend or revoke the agreement and notify their partner city. In domestic law, courts have generally deferred to local authorities. When opponents sued to remove Glendale's 'comfort women' statue because it interfered with foreign policy, a U.S. appellate court rejected that challenge, upholding the city's right to erect the memorial as a matter of local conscience. No examples were found of disputes being submitted to any transnational arbitration; instead, resolutions have been political or administrative (e.g. council votes, statements).

However, some city partnerships become inactive, and this lack of implementation causes no dispute. Inactive city partnerships refer to formal agreements between cities for collaboration that are no longer in active operation or yielding meaningful results. These partnerships may have become inactive due to various reasons, such as changes in leadership, shifting priorities, or a lack of resources, which hinder the intended benefits of cooperation. In such cases, many cities simply work 'on the principle of 'reciprocity' and sustainability – a city partnership is a mutual form of cooperation, and both sides need to show interest in the exchange and give their contribution to the partnership' (Meridian International Center, 2025).

GENERALISABLE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE DISPUTE-RESOLUTION CLAUSES AND THE DISPUTES EXAMINED

Across the examined agreements, a clear pattern of generalizable similarities emerges. Almost all sister-city agreements – regardless of their geographical origin – include a non-binding, amicable dispute-resolution clause, typically stipulating that ‘any disputes shall be settled amicably through consultation or negotiation between the parties’. Moreover, these clauses are consistently positioned towards the end of the agreements and are accompanied by provisions that emphasize the goodwill and voluntary character of cooperation, confirming their soft-law nature. In this sense, both the language and structure of these clauses are remarkably uniform across diverse legal and cultural contexts, suggesting a shared understanding of inter-city diplomacy as a domain governed by consensus and reciprocity rather than enforcement.

Nevertheless, some differences are observable. Certain agreements – such as the Nashua-Mysore or Oaxaca-Leskovac examples – contain more elaborate procedural detail, introducing conciliation or requiring written communication, while others, like the Swindon Toruń or Kolkata Kunming agreements, remain minimalist and purely declarative. Another distinction lies in the explicit exclusion of legal or administrative authority in some cases, which again signals the voluntary character of the agreements. Overall, the comparative analysis confirms that while the form is globally standardized, the degree of procedural specificity and the extent of legal formalism vary according to regional political culture and the level of maturity in municipal diplomacy. Although the current evidence shows variation in clause form, it is insufficient to demonstrate a causal effect on dispute outcomes.

The disputes analyzed in Section 3 reveal recurring similarities in motivation and resolution. In all the examined cases, they arise not from technical or administrative issues, but from political, ideological, or human-rights controversies, such as the interpretation of historical events (‘comfort women’ memorials), positions on sovereignty (the ‘One China’ policy), or values-based conflicts (LGBT-free zones, wars, or human-rights violations). Despite these diverse causes, the resolution mechanisms are very similar: cities almost invariably rely on political

or administrative decisions, such as council votes, mayoral decrees, or public statements, rather than judicial or arbitral settlement. This consistency reflects the non-binding and consensual character of the clauses described earlier, confirming that, in practice, amicable settlement is often interpreted as a matter of unilateral political discretion rather than a negotiated compromise.

However, differences appear in the intensity and symbolic framing of these disputes. In Asia (Osaka-San Francisco, Prague-Shanghai), disputes often reflect foreign policy sensitivities and national identity politics. In contrast, in Europe (Nieuwegein-Puławy, Barcelona-Tel Aviv, Tromsø-Arkhangelsk), they are primarily driven by values, invoking human rights or humanitarian arguments. The result of escalating disputes also differs: some of them culminate in formal termination of agreements, while others lead only to temporary suspension or political condemnation. Additionally, North American and European cities justify their actions explicitly referencing human rights law. In contrast, Asian cases are more closely tied to state-centric foreign policy tensions.

Accordingly, termination-related disputes between the cities reveal two distinct patterns based on the geographical reach (those patterns may or may not hold true if the sample were expanded):

1. National-level political decisions often underlie cases driven by sovereignty or geopolitical concerns. Examples include the Prague-Shanghai dispute (reflecting the One China policy) and Istanbul-Rotterdam, where national leaders' actions prompted municipal termination. Similarly, waves of suspensions in 2022–2023 in response to the Russia-Ukraine war were politically coordinated at the national or regional level.

2. Local-level issues predominate in disputes rooted in historical memory, human rights, or administrative change. The Glendale-Higashiosaka and Osaka-San Francisco cases originate from local commemorative projects and civil society activism. Human-rights-related disputes such as Nieuwegein-Puławy and Barcelona-St. Petersburg also reflect municipal or community-level values rather than central-state policy. Administrative or leadership changes similarly generate local disengagement without state involvement.

CONCLUSIONS

International inter-city disputes erupt when one city believes an agreement has been improperly implemented and the other party reacts, often by questioning the agreement's validity or opting out. Town-twinning primarily aims to foster international cooperation and mutual learning between cities, promoting shared development and cultural exchange. This concept aims to transcend political divisions, focusing instead on fostering constructive, non-partisan relationships across borders. However, as the above examples show, some sister city agreements are politicized, which finally results in their termination. Laucht and Allbeson (2023) likewise observe that the Russian war on Ukraine 'demonstrates how questions of town twinning and inter-municipal cooperation take on heightened significance in times of conflict'.

Although sister city agreements promote cross-border cooperation, they can become flashpoints when city officials or communities clash over historical memory, human rights, or geopolitical issues. In recent years, there has been a surge of terminations and suspensions (across Europe, Asia, and North America) whenever national conflicts or ideological controversies intersected municipal diplomacy. Handling these disputes typically relies on local government action (often guided by 'amicable settlement' clauses) rather than formal litigation. In some cases, cities suspended or terminated partnership agreements to uphold the legal and moral standards, such as human rights or the prohibition of aggression against another state.

The research aimed to assess whether cities resolve disputes arising from their transnational agreements through judicial means. This study suggests that at least some disputes arising from transnational inter-city agreements are resolved almost exclusively through political and administrative means, rather than by recourse to binding judicial or arbitral procedures. In none of the examined cases did cities invoke enforceable legal mechanisms. There is no evidence showing domestic legal enforcement of the agreements themselves; the author shows political implementation and, in one related case, domestic litigation about a municipal act adjacent to the agreement. The Glendale case shows domestic litigation over a related memorial, and the court treated it as a local expression, but that is not the same as enforcing the sister-city agreement through domestic law.

Instead, municipal authorities relied on unilateral suspension or termination in order to express disapproval, redefine partnership terms, or signal alignment with national or ethical positions. This fact may be connected to the sometimes underlined goodwill character of the sister city agreements and their cooperative nature, meaning that the lack of implementation or violations of such agreements do not result in any material or economic harm. Such outcomes reveal the essentially soft-law nature of sister-city relations – normatively charged yet legally non-binding – where authority operates through persuasion, public symbolism, and reputational effects rather than coercive enforcement. Although sister-city agreements borrow legal vocabulary, they function primarily as political and diplomatic documents that structure expectations, signal alignment, and frame cooperation rather than create enforceable legal obligations. While the soft-law character of sister-city agreements has already been recognized in the literature, the present study contributes by examining how such disputes are managed in practice despite the absence of binding enforcement mechanisms. Rather than focusing solely on the legal status of inter-city agreements, the article analyses the practical consequences of their informality for dispute settlement, political escalation, and the durability of municipal cooperation. The examined cases suggest that even legally non-binding arrangements may shape political expectations, structure channels of communication, and influence the behavior of local authorities during periods of political tension. In this sense, the significance of sister-city agreements lies not primarily in their formal legal enforceability, but in their capacity to facilitate symbolic, diplomatic, and administrative forms of governance beyond the state.

Across the sample, termination-related disputes follow recurring patterns. Some are driven by national-level political pressures, including sovereignty or geopolitical considerations (e.g. Prague-Shanghai, Istanbul-Rotterdam, and the coordinated suspensions following the 2022–2023 Russia-Ukraine war). Others stem from local-level value conflicts or civic initiatives, such as disputes over historical memory (Glendale-Higashiosaka; Osaka-San Francisco) or human-rights concerns (Nieuwegein-Puławy; Barcelona-Tel Aviv). Still others arise from administrative or leadership change, leading to quiet lapses rather than overt conflict. This typology highlights that the binding force of such agreements is primarily political and symbolic, relying on the expectations and legitimacy recognized by

local communities rather than on formal legal commitments. National governments do not appear to mediate these disputes. Instead, the cases show that national politics often shape or trigger the conflict, while the municipal level resolves it. For example, Prague-Shanghai and Istanbul-Rotterdam were driven by state-level political tensions, and the Russia-Ukraine cases were tied to broader national conflict contexts. Hence, the evidence points to national pressure, not national mediation.

Moreover, this approach to resolving disputes reinforces the predominantly political and symbolic character of sister city agreements. It helps explain why subsequent disputes were managed through diplomatic pressure, political declarations, suspension of cooperation, or unilateral termination rather than through legal proceedings. In fact, any such agreement may be unilaterally suspended or terminated, even if it does not envisage such a possibility. The absence of binding procedural obligations illustrates both the flexibility and fragility of soft-law instruments within transnational municipal relations.

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