

Individual metropolises now global political players

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By providing the infrastructure that connects global flows and financial systems, major cities have increased their political power alongside the nation-states. In some cases, they are pursuing their own foreign policy in several areas. In her PhD thesis Kristin Ljungkvist, at Uppsala University, has studied the effects of this development and argues that certain risks should be heeded.

For more than 350 years the city, as a political, economic and social organisation, has been subordinated to the nation-state. Local governments have had little say in the realm of global politics, and foreign and [security policy](#) has been more or less monopolised by the nation-state. A sweeping change now seems to be under way.

Today, more than half the world's inhabitants live in urban areas. Ongoing, escalating urbanisation is contributing to power-balance shifts. The big global cities contain massive concentrations of economic resources and are hubs for global flows and financial systems.

'In some ways, cities represent the critical infrastructure that makes a globalised world possible. In the wake of globalisation, we see that mayors and other local stakeholders have come to play an increasingly active part in [global politics](#). They pursue what actually, in many respects, looks like an independent foreign and security policy,' says Kristin Ljungkvist.

Through transnational city networks as well as their own diplomatic

activities, cities are getting involved in matters like counterterrorism, climate change, global poverty, pandemics and transnational crime. Issues that used to be the exclusive domain of nation-states have now become matters of local politics. What are the actual implications of this development for the international political order, the division of responsibilities, scope for accountability, and democracy itself?

This type of 'local global policy' concerns issues such as for example climate change and terrorism. While the world's nations were still debating the Kyoto Protocol, Toronto in Canada was the first in the world to ever adopt an emission target. Other cities and [local governments](#) all over the world have followed its example. In the US, for example, hundreds of city councils and many states have defied the Federal Government by ratifying the Kyoto Protocol. And alongside the global fight against terrorism since '9/11', many cities have started developing their own security strategies. Today, the New York police have a metropolitan security service that is larger than that of many countries and includes, for example, a separate local intelligence organisation with staff stationed permanently in Asia, the Middle East and Europe.

'What's more, the local police possess such powerful weapons that they can shoot down small aircraft. So New York, essentially, now has its own anti-aircraft defence system,' says Ljungkvist.

In her thesis, she has examined the global city's growing involvement in international politics through a case study of New York, in particular. This shows that local representatives, when they get involved in global issues such as climate change, do it primarily to ensure continued strong economic development for the metropolitan area.

There is now an expanding body of literature arguing that while the nation-states are helpless in face of many of the world's most daunting

global problems such as climate change, poverty, terrorism and transnational organized crime cities and mayors can offer solutions that are both more pragmatic and democratic.

'But, as my study shows, there are risks too. When the local government of New York City developed policy strategies for counterterrorism and [climate change](#) mitigation, not only civil control and institutional mechanisms for overview and accountability, but also democratic influence, were lacking. So the risk is that a democratic deficit will actually arise,' says Ljungkvist.

More information: "[The Global City 2.0 : An International Political Actor Beyond Economism?](#)" Ljungkvist, Kristin.

Provided by Uppsala University

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