

## Urban Studies Journal – Special Issue

### Cities as Global Actors in International Politics: Patterns, Processes, and Impacts

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#### Rationale

Globalization, increasing geopolitical contestation, and the proliferation of complex transnational crises have elevated the role of cities in international politics. While traditionally seen as administrative entities governed by national frameworks, cities are emerging as strategic actors in global governance, actively shaping policy agendas on climate change, migration, public health, and international law. This shift reflects not only their functional capacities and policy innovation but also their evolving position within multilevel governance structures and shifting global power geometries.

Cities now navigate a dual position: they are simultaneously embedded in national frameworks—subject to the constraints of sovereignty and centralized authority—and positioned as agile, networked actors in international arenas. This duality enables cities to forge novel alliances, exercise soft power, and engage in forms of paradiplomacy that challenge traditional state-centric logics of international relations. Yet, this position is also precarious, as rising geopolitical tensions, populist nationalism, and global fragmentation constrain transnational urban cooperation and threaten subnational agency in world politics.

Despite these developments, the role of cities in international politics remains undertheorized and empirically fragmented across disciplines. Urban studies has emphasized cities' spatial and economic entanglements in globalization, while international relations (IR) has only recently begun to address cities as international actors. The literatures rarely intersect, and little comparative work systematically examines the emergence, variation, and implications of cities' global actorness across contexts and issue areas.

This Special Issue addresses this gap by fostering interdisciplinary dialogue between IR and urban studies to examine how cities act, are recognized, and exert influence in global politics. It advances recent calls (e.g., Le Galès 2024) for comparative research on cities' global actorness and develops a shared conceptual framework around relationality. We understand relationality as the idea that cities' roles and capacities as global actors emerge through their interactions with other actors, institutions, and networks—both vertically (local-national-global) and horizontally (across transnational spaces).

These relationships generate patterns of recognition, authority, and opportunity that shape how cities act, are empowered, and impact governance beyond the nation-state.

The Special Issue contributes novel perspectives on four central dimensions of cities' global actorness:

1. **Patterns** – What types of relationships and interdependencies shape cities' international positioning?
2. **Processes** – Through what mechanisms (recognition, authority, competency, opportunity) do cities enact agency on the international stage?
3. **Impacts** – How do cities influence governance structures, norms, and institutions?
4. **Variations** – How do these dynamics differ by city type, issue area, or geopolitical context?

#### Reference

Le Galès P (2024) The Rise and Fall of the Sociology of the Global City. *Annual Review of Sociology* 50: 647-669.