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Research Article

## Paradiplomacy and its Impact on EU Foreign Policy

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## Abstract

Cities and regions play an increasingly vital role in international relations, even co-shaping their countries' foreign policy. This phenomenon, usually called 'paradiplomacy', means that cities and regions develop links with foreign actors, both state and non-state. In this way, they contribute to the 'pluralisation' of diplomacy and are changing the shape of contemporary relations on the global stage. This process is also happening with regard to the international activities undertaken by the European Union (EU); yet the paradiplomacy trend is also only partially realised at the EU level. In this context, this article aims to conceptualise the impact that the paradiplomacy of European sub-state actors has on EU foreign policy. So far, it has not been adequately recognised in the academic literature as a potential factor influencing EU foreign affairs. In addition, the article analyses how cities and regions can influence the development of EU foreign policy and how the Union can use this potential for international activity on the part of local actors. The article has two parts. In the first part, we present three ways cities and regions can influence EU foreign policy. By giving specific examples, we show that cities and regions are already using their authority to: i) lobby and create networking communities, ii) use formal powers, and iii) apply direct actions. In the second part, we set out the opportunities and challenges that arise from the paradiplomatic activities of sub-state actors. To elucidate the issues, we consider the case of contemporary relations between the EU and China, which are becoming more intense at local government level but which are not used by Brussels to pursue EU interests.

## Keywords

EU foreign policy; Paradiplomacy; Cities; Regions; Sub-state relations

The 21st century is a time of a significant power shift involving the visible rise of regions and cities as political, economic and social actors, which actively shape the global stage (Tavares 2016). Today some European regions and cities have larger economies than some European Union (EU) member states, for example Paris versus Malta (Statista 2021). Many of these significant cities and regions have wide networks of international contacts and hold positions that enable local leaders to co-shape international policy development on, for example, climate change and migration.

The role of sub-state entities in Europe, particularly regions, has grown over time (Marks, Hooghe and Schakel 2010). Today, central governments and the EU must increasingly accommodate sub-state actors throughout the policy cycle, from policy initiation to decision-making and implementation (Tatham 2018; Pazos-Vidal 2020; Abels and Hogenauer 2020). The decentralisation of some nation states' competencies following their centralisation at the EU level is perceived as the main driver of this trend. An effect of this trend is that it increases policy overlap, especially in areas such as the environment, transport, agriculture, fisheries, regional economic development and spatial planning (Panara and De Becker 2010). To avoid disempowerment, regions have to 'Europeanise' their administration and begin interacting directly with EU institutions (Tatham 2016).

Simultaneously, regions and cities develop links with foreign actors, both state and non-state. This phenomenon is usually called 'paradiplomacy' (Tavares 2016; Kuznetsov 2015), however, some scholars use the term 'constituent diplomacy' (Michelmann and Soldatos 1990) or 'multi-layered diplomacy' (Holmes 2020; Hocking 1993). In the case of cities' foreign affairs, the term 'city diplomacy' has been popularised (Oosterlynck, Beeckmans, Bassens, Derudder et al. 2018; Barber 2014; Acuto 2013). Paradiplomacy is part of a much broader process of 'pluralisation' of diplomacy in which diplomatic practices, institutions and discourses are no longer limited to traditional international diplomacy because of the redistribution of power in the world (Cornago 2013).

Early studies on the involvement of subnational governments in foreign policy date back to the 1970s, but the development of more concerted research in the field began in the 1980s when Duchacek published *The International Dimensions of Self-government* (1984). In this first period of research (1970-80s), paradiplomacy was mainly analysed in studies on federal systems and states. Scholars focused on changes at the domestic level that pushed regions to have a more active international presence. In the 1990s, research in the field took off with numerous studies published that considered paradiplomacy from many different angles. For example, border studies tried to understand the general picture of transborder political, economic and cultural relations (for example Kolossov 2005). Scholarship on the nation-state focused attention on regions in search of autonomy which use paradiplomacy as an instrument for building an international presence and legitimacy for their independence claims (for example Cornago 2018; Aldecoa and Keating 2013). Later, in the 2000s, environmental perspectives further broadened research agendas and academic discourses regarding paradiplomacy (for example Happaerts, Brande and Bruyninckx 2010).

In European studies on paradiplomacy, the concept of multilevel governance (for example Piattoni 2009) became a major theoretical focus, and European integration was a key driver of the increase in foreign engagement activities on the part of regional authorities. By contrast, interestingly, empirical studies on the paradiplomacy of European regions (Blatter, Kreutzer, Rentl and Thiele 2008) concentrated on intra-European activities and not on the relations with third countries.

Nevertheless, paradiplomacy conducted by European subnational entities on their own, with a view of promoting their interests, has recently created an additional European foreign policy level. The concept of multilevel governance (MLG), widely used by scholars to explain the European policymaking process, can also be applied to EU foreign policy; and not only as a two-level game, as proposed by Smith (2004), but rather as a three-

level system with subnational actors often weakly constrained by national governments and almost entirely autonomous from EU institutions. The applicability of the MLG approach varies depending on the given issue within foreign policy. However, in most cases, the role of subnational actors remains marginal in EU policymaking which is dominated by EU member states and EU institutions. Politicians and diplomats who make decisions on EU foreign policy issues tend to limit the role of regions and cities to that of interest groups, one of many that lobby on EU foreign policy. In our understanding, however, in many cases, cities and regions are actors rather than only lobbyists; they are drivers of rationalisation in EU foreign policy and/or one of the “corrosive forces” that undermine the cohesion of EU foreign policy and the EU’s institutional capacity to address external developments (Müller, Pomorska and Tonra 2021).

In this context, the article aims to conceptualise the impact that the paradiplomacy of European regions and cities has on EU foreign policy, and also to propose a new functional taxonomy of sub-state entities mobilisation in the international arena based on the (un)intended consequences of their direct actions in foreign affairs. So far, their activities have not been adequately recognised in the academic literature as a potential factor that may have an impact on EU foreign affairs, defined broadly as all external policies of the EU, such as the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) but also trade, development, investment, or any other policies with a foreign component.

To fill this research gap, we examine the influence of sub-state actions on EU foreign policy. Our approach considers two perspectives. The first focuses on how sub-state actors exert informal and formal influence over EU affairs. The second concentrates on the possible methods of employing the paradiplomatic activities of cities and regions within European foreign policy to realise the latter’s goals more effectively (Kamiński 2019a).

Thus, this research answers two questions:

- How may sub-state actors affect the EU foreign policy?
- What are the opportunities and threats of paradiplomacy, and how may the EU accommodate this challenge?

The article is structured as follows. In the first part, we present ways in which sub-state actors can influence European foreign policy. Our research shows that this is possible through three mechanisms: lobbying in the international arena; using formal power; and taking direct political actions. In the second part, using the case of EU-China relations, we look at paradiplomacy as a challenge for the EU that creates both opportunities and challenges. This section emphasises that the EU foreign policy’s subnational layer may be a source of European strength, bringing additional policy rationalisation and/or enabling EU foreign policy goals. At the same time, however, paradiplomacy can also cause political problems. The famous case of vetoing the EU trade agreement with Canada by the regional parliament in Belgium serves as the best example of what may happen in future contracts with a much more ‘controversial’ partner (Paquin 2021).

The article is written on the basis of in-depth literature research, surveys conducted among European regions and cities (2017-2021), interviews with European Commission officials, and representatives of national foreign ministries and sub-state authorities.

## **HOW MAY SUB-STATE ACTIVITIES AFFECT EU FOREIGN POLICY?**

The influence of regions and cities on EU foreign policy is a result of the rise of regional authority in Europe and the logical consequence of regions’ empowerment (Tatham 2018). Comparative studies have shown that, since the 1950s, Europe has experienced ‘an era of

regionalisation', with reforms in many different countries resulting in greater regional authority (Marks, Hooghe and Schakel 2010). Sub-state actors have gained autonomous decision-making competencies in various policy areas and have become politically relevant actors within their constituencies.

Paradoxically, international relations scholars often ignore sub-state actors, and instead consider nation-states as the default unit of research analysis. Critics have called this approach a form of 'methodological nationalism' (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002; Jeffery and Wincott 2010) that has led political scientists to overlook the role of sub-state governments. The bulk of literature on paradiplomacy (Tavares 2016; Michelmann and Soldatos 1990; Kuznetsov 2015; Duchacek 1984) has been developed to counteract this assumption.

Academic literature on the EU foreign policy has been largely reticent on the sub-state dimension, focusing only on the intra-European context of that issue. Meanwhile, empirically regions are playing an increasingly important role on the international stage. Considering the findings of authors researching multilevel governance (Tatham, 2015; Pazos-Vidal, 2020), regions and cities exert their influence in several different ways. Tatham (2018) indicates that sub-state actors can influence, in particular, the EU through use of three tools: lobbying, formal powers, or veto rights<sup>1</sup>. Our research confirms Tatham's framework by applying it to foreign policy analysis, and supplementing with analysis of direct actions undertaken by regions and cities.

### **Lobbying and Networking**

Firstly, sub-state actors may *lobby* and create *networking groups* through 'intra-state' channels (inside their parent state) or 'extra-state' channels (directly at the EU level). Domestically lobbying depends on the shape of the political system in the particular member state, but the usual targets are chambers of parliament as well as governmental agencies. Often, subnational units organise themselves in the form of networks (such as the Association of Polish Cities or the Association of Netherlands Municipalities) in order to make their voice stronger.

Supranationally, regions and cities often act through staff based in dedicated representative offices in Brussels, through activities in the Committee of the Regions (CoR) or transnational networks of subnational governments. The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) set up in 1951 serves as a good example. The CEMR is the oldest European association of local and regional governments, it acts as an umbrella organisation for national associations of local and regional governments from 41 European countries.

Some transnational networks of local governments focus specifically on climate policy and sustainable development (for example C40 or ICLEI). The aim of these networks is to increase the visibility of cities on the global stage and their role in climate governance (Haupt and Coppola 2019). Such political mobilisation allows cities to articulate their interests and to avoid becoming mere implementers of decisions taken elsewhere.

The political mobilisation of sub-state entities through lobbying can directly impact aspects of EU foreign policy. For example, the EU's success in climate talks depends not only on member states' positions but also on subnational actors that influence those talks autonomously. Leading European cities often set more ambitious climate goals than the EU and its member states, becoming leaders with an aspiration to attract followers and set the tone in polycentric climate governance (Wurzel, Liefferink and Torney, 2019; Kern 2019).

A recent example of city mobilisation on climate policy was the evident in the city of Amsterdam's embrace of the prominent concept of the 'doughnut economy' (Raworth

2017), which emphasises the unsustainability of endless GDP growth; the concept was adapted by city authorities in Amsterdam and then promoted by the C40 group (C40 2020). The EU, which sees recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to intensify efforts to mitigate climate change and promote global sustainable development, could usefully consider closer cooperation with transnational networks because they could facilitate the transfer of European ideas to developing countries by reaching local communities. It is worth noting that the potential value of local authorities in the promotion of EU sustainability goals was recognised in the European Commission's (2013) strategy paper 'Empowering Local Authorities in partner countries for enhanced governance and more effective development outcomes', though the findings of this paper regarding the need for a green recovery would require an updated and more specific strategy (Arnez and Kamiński 2020).

### Formal Power

Secondly, the local authorities can use *formal powers* via the EU institutions or exercise their *veto rights*. In the EU's institutional framework, regional authorities' power is sometimes perceived as limited to the inclusion of regional parliaments via the so-called early warning system for subsidiary control in the EU (Borońska-Hryniewiecka 2020) and the consultative role of the CoR. Tatham (2018) noted that sub-state actors try to increase their official power on EU issues, not only through CoR, but also through inclusion in domestic EU policy-shaping processes in their parent states and through the right to veto certain international treaties, which some regions possess.

Treaty revisions have expanded the role of the CoR over time and added other areas over which this institution has a direct influence on European legislation (Hönnige and Panke 2016). From the Treaty of Maastricht to the Treaty of Lisbon, the role of the CoR in the European institutional setup has been steadily growing. Now the Commission and European Parliament must consult sub-state authorities as early as possible in the legislative process in specific thematic areas. The CoR can question European institutions and call for a second consultation in case of substantial modification of the initial legislative proposal. All this boosts the role of the CoR as the official representative body of subnational authorities (Tatham 2018).

Although it is not widely recognised, many areas that require consultation with CoR are relevant for foreign affairs. For instance, European legislation on the environment, energy, transport or consumer health and safety (among others) greatly impacts other countries, giving the EU unilateral power to regulate global markets. This phenomenon of 'the Brussel Effect' has been recently brilliantly analysed by Anu Bradford (2020). Bradford persuasively claims that regulatory power is a useful tool for the global policies of the EU. The future of the EU's external regulatory power will be partially dependent on the positions of substate authorities engaged in the CoR.

The formal domestic rights of subnational actors on EU issues and their engagement in the national level's decision-making process will have a similar impact. In some states, those rights are legally or even constitutionally guaranteed, which means that their decisions can be binding on national governments. These subnational units, therefore, have assured access to important Commission and Council working groups and essential documents (Tatham 2018).

The most effective type of this formal influence is the *veto right* that some European regions have at the domestic level, affecting the EU policymaking process even in high-political issues such as international trade deals. According to EU law, when trade treaties are limited to issues under the EU's competence, the national and regional parliaments are excluded from the process. By contrast, when an agreement is declared as 'mixed', meaning it covers areas of shared responsibility between the EU and its member states, ratification on the national level is required. In some countries, this means that regional

parliaments (seven in Belgium) or upper chambers, which include strong regional representations (Italian, Spanish, Austrian or German upper chambers), need to consent to sign the agreement. This gives these sub-national entities, in fact, the right to veto the whole treaty.

A spectacular example of the use of this possibility was the case of Wallonia's government holding back the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement between the EU and Canada (CETA). In 2016 the government of this Belgian region voted in favour of preventing the national Belgian government from gaining full powers to sign the CETA. Wallonia's withholding of consent provoked a major political crisis in Europe (Magnette 2016). Probably for the first time in its history, regional authorities conducted direct negotiations with the foreign minister of trade (Chrystia Freeland, Canadian Minister for International Trade) in the presence of the European Commission's chief negotiator, Mauro Pettriccione. Martin Schultz, the President of the European Parliament, was also involved in talks, which shows that small Wallonia had the focused attention of the Brussels establishment (Paquin 2021). After several days of tense negotiations, a 12-page compromise was reached. This did not require a reopening of the CETA agreement, but all parties had to agree that CETA should be accompanied by a legally binding interpretative instrument that clarified certain parts of the document.

An agreement was approved in an extraordinary plenary session of the Walloon region's parliament, thus enabling Belgium to sign it. The earlier revolt had, however, shown that even a small region of 3.6 million inhabitants (0.7 per cent of the EU population) could torpedo the long-term agenda of international cooperation.

A few years after these events, it is clear that the European Commission has had a continuing strategy of ignoring Wallonia's demands. The regional government has alerted the Commission and expressed its grievances long before the negotiations' *finale*. According to Paul Magnette, Prime Minister of Wallonia, the Commission's response to critical comments came after one year and only 23 days before the summit with Canada. By this time it was too late to address regions' concerns about CETA, and Wallonian authorities decided to risk a significant international crisis rather than giving up under political pressure (Paquin 2021). This case shows clearly that substate actors can play an essential role in trade negotiations. They should be included in the process as respected stakeholders and ignored under no circumstances.

Legal rights, described above, however, are unevenly distributed across EU regions. Tatham (2011) proposed a multi-dimensional index of the formal domestic rights of regions on EU issues. According to his study, for a group of 304 regions in EU-27, the index ranged from 0 to 8 but returned a median of 0 and a mean of 1.8. It turned out that over 60 per cent of regions had no formal rights, and only a quarter of regions scored between 3.5 (Finnish Åland Islands) and the maximum of 8 (Belgian regions). The German *Länder* also scored high (7.5), followed by the Italian and Austrian regions (7.5 and 6.5). On the other hand, it is worth noticing that even if numerically few, these regions with relatively high formal rights on EU issues represent over 40 per cent of the EU's population (Tatham 2018).

Considering that international trade and investment agreements are becoming increasingly complex and tend to cover many areas of shared competencies in the EU, one can assume that these regions' legal rights will continue to complicate the process of international negotiations. In the coming time, the EU will therefore have to accommodate its sub-state actors, being responsive to their views earlier and to a greater extent than in the case of CETA.

## Direct Actions

Thirdly, completing the two ways mentioned above in which sub-state actors may affect EU foreign policy, we can add another element: *direct actions*. These actions may be undertaken completely autonomously, based on local or regional authorities' decisions, or initiated by the central government, or by the EU itself. In other words, sub-state actors may act either according to their own agenda or as instruments of European foreign policy.

Parkes (2020) indicated a comparable explanation illustrating examples of cooperation between European cities and selected countries of Eastern Europe and the Middle East. He specified that in the EU's eastern and southern neighbourhoods, EU cities are practicing diplomacy along three strands: as players, as places, and as percolators. Building on this, we created an alternative categorisation pointing to cities' roles in taking up direct activities in the international arena. However, we also find additional roles that local governments can fulfil. According to our research, cities and regions can act as: 'trouble-makers', 'contributors', 'deal brokers', or 'antennas'.

Referring to the first of these roles, the 'trouble-makers', we may present several examples. The first comes from the city of Milan. After retreating under Chinese pressure from plans to give the Dalai Lama honorary citizenship in 2012 (Alpert 2012), the authorities of this Italian city decided to do so four years later. This action provoked a strong reaction from the Chinese government condemning Milan (Barry 2016). Later, Milan's decision resurfaced during talks between the European Commission and China on the 'EU-China Tourism Year 2018' initiative; as a result the Italian city had to be excluded from the list of places officially engaged in this venture<sup>2</sup>.

A similar case, but without repercussions at the European level, occurred in 2017, when the German city of Weimar awarded a human rights prize to Ilham Tohti, an Uyghur dissident. China protested to Berlin through diplomatic channels<sup>3</sup>, and later the city of Weimar was attacked by hackers who deleted all news about the award from local news websites (China Change 2017).

These two cases demonstrate that subnational government's autonomous political actions can have unintended consequences for EU foreign policy. The local decisions of Italian or German cities resonated on the diplomatic level, notwithstanding the fact that European diplomats had not been engaged in taking them. The cities of Milan and Weimar thus became, from an EU perspective, 'trouble-makers'.

Considering the second possible role, cities may also act as 'contributors' to European foreign policy goals. This is evident in the operating mechanisms of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Through the ENP EU is an external catalyst for change in 16 of its Eastern and Southern neighbours (Cianciara 2020). Subnational authorities play a crucial role in the implementation phase of the ENP, contributing to the programme objectives (Oikonomou 2018). Local and regional authorities from both EU and neighbouring countries have the opportunity to actively participate in the ENP through institutions provided by the CoR. The CoR has created two major institutional forums for political dialogue in ENP frames: the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP) and the Assembly of Local and Regional elected Representatives from the EU and its Mediterranean partners (ARLEM).

There is evidence that cooperation within CORLEAP and ARLEM works well. European regions and cities develop subnational cooperation and thereby bring partner countries closer to the EU, foster internal reforms and support capacity building at the local and regional level. For instance, in Ukraine, local EU authorities since 2015 have helped redraw administrative boundaries and facilitated a cautious decentralisation of power. European diplomats see this decentralisation and defusing of territorial tensions as a measure to, for



example, protect minorities by granting them language rights and/or proper access to healthcare, thus increasing democratisation tendencies (Committee of the Regions n.d.).

The engagement of subnational actors in the ENP shows how cities and regions can act as 'contributors' to European foreign policy. Motivated by the will to cooperate or to mobilise for the financial gains that come from participation in EU-funded cross-border projects (Oikonomou 2018), cities and regions increasingly serve as a European foreign policy tool.

European regions' engagement in the international development cooperation might serve as another example of contribution to the European foreign policy. Around 70 European regions have institutional structures for development cooperation, supporting various purposes in the sustainable development agenda (Reinsberg and Dellepiane 2021). Sustainable development is a core principle of the Treaty on European Union and a priority objective for the Union's external policies. Subnational aid strategies formulated in the sustainable development context directly support European policy goals.

Thirdly, cities may also play as 'deal brokers'. The example of paradiplomatic relations with Libya in recent years illustrates this role. Since the defeat of the loyalist forces in 2011, Libya has been divided between numerous rival armed forces linked to various regions, cities and tribes, while the government in Tripoli has been too weak to rule the country effectively. Throughout the years, EU diplomats have sought cooperation opportunities at the highest level, involving representatives of the United Nations (Parkes 2020) with little effect. Meanwhile, European cities, acting via the CoR, have developed close political and, gradually more, beneficial relationships with Libyan cities. European cities have, for example, invited feuding officials from major Libyan cities to Brussels, thus animating the reconciliation process and fostered cooperation between them.

Since January 2016, CoR, through the 'Nicosia Initiative', has been mobilising partnerships for Libya's local authorities by matching Libyan cities' requests with offers of expertise from EU cities and regions. The purpose of the initiative is to improve ordinary Libyans' lives by helping municipalities provide better services in areas ranging from primary health care to waste management (Committee of the Regions 2019). Implemented through city diplomacy, the Nicosia Initiative has been a bottom-up contribution to the stabilisation of Libya, which is vital for the EU's security. In this case, European cities acted both as 'contributors' and as 'deal-brokers'. This form of activity of local authorities is unusual but not unique. The Chinese province of Yunnan played a similar role in mediation between feuding warlords from Myanmar (Mierzejewski 2021).

Finally, cities can play the role of 'antennas', collecting information from the local level. Regional authorities are sometimes more sensitive to their foreign partners' needs and have ears open to political ideas that EU diplomats cannot hear. The case of Belarus is a good example illustrating this process. Since 2017 the EU's project 'Strengthening the Covenant of Mayors Movement in Belarus' has been realised, enabling close cooperation between EU cities' and Belarusian cities' mayors. These cities' representatives hold training events and conferences to expand their knowledge about energy efficiency or adaptation to climate change. This eco-partnership provides consultations to the cities on their sustainable development and climate action plans. As Belarusian mayors are often also at the forefront of public services' digitalisation, they observe the social moods. Therefore, the nationwide protests in Belarus, during which demonstrators demanded President Alexander Lukashenko's resignation, come as no surprise to them. Moreover, Belarusian local leaders also informed the mayors of EU cities as part of the Covenant of Mayors (European Council 2020) on that issue. If the knowledge and experience of city authorities were used, the EU would probably be better prepared for the outbreak of many months of strikes and would not be as rattled in its decisions regarding the Minsk regime.

The example of cooperation with local actors in Belarus shows that representatives of European cities and regions may serve as a sort of 'antennas' that receive social and

political signals sent from cities outside the EU. Parkes (2020) notes that because they are aware of mistakes and problems in the European backyard, they are better able to see similar challenges in other parts of the world. The EU needs proper communication channels with subnational actors to receive and decode signals from 'antennas' to use them for foreign policymaking.

## **WHAT ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS OF PARADIPLOMACY?**

The subnational relations of individual regions and cities, evident in recent decades, show that paradiplomacy can constitute a significant challenge for the foreign policy pursued by the European Union and its member states. This challenge can be understood in both positive and negative ways.

### **Opportunities**

Paradiplomacy may be seen as an opportunity to develop the EU's international relations for several reasons. Firstly, it may bring additional rationalisation to the decision-making process, thus influencing the state and international policies. According to Kuznetsov (2015), rationalisation of national foreign policies reflects the principle of subsidiarity, which means that the central government should delegate to the subnational level all tasks that can be effectively performed at that lower level. Indeed, multilevel international relations are much better thought out and conceptualised because they tend to be controlled on several levels, thoroughly studied, and credited, while considering the requests and demands of citizens, thus fulfilling the need for subsidiarity of European policy.

Secondly, paradiplomacy may create an alternative political communication channel with foreign partners, reaching out to non-state actors in third countries. With the spread of paradiplomacy and the growing awareness of the opportunities available to cities and regions, it is clear that in recent years representatives of European cities have acted as 'antennas', sensitive to social needs, including outside the EU.

Thirdly, paradiplomacy may encourage the implementation of some EU policy goals. As part of its foreign policy, the EU may use cities and regions to implement its foreign policy strategies. Subnational actors can even be better equipped in this regard than nation states or the EU, as they are closer to citizens and sense their problems, struggles and needs.

An excellent example of using the varied opportunities of paradiplomacy is the relations between the EU and China. Today EU-China relations take place on several levels (EU and China, member states and China, regions and cities of the EU and Chinese provinces and cities), but it is evident that the potential of sub-state China-EU relations has been growing in recent years, although it is often not realised in Brussels. Chinese data showed that in 2015 there were already 525 partnerships between European and Chinese cities/regions (中国国际友好城市总表 (1973~2015) 2020). Our studies on European regions (Kamiński, 2019a) and recently conducted (September 2020-June 2021) survey among 743 European cities confirmed that partnerships with China on the subnational level are now quite common but the awareness of their existence at the EU level is low, notwithstanding that these partnerships could be applied politically, economically and socially. A great example to use could be the document entitled 'Elements for a new EU strategy on China' from 2016, which, however, almost completely ignores the possibility of using paradiplomatic relations (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2016).

The basis for EU-China relations is predominantly economic cooperation. Both actors are crucial partners in terms of economic exchange, and in December 2020 they concluded the

negotiations for a 'Comprehensive Agreement on Investment' (CAI) (European Commission 2020). Nevertheless, their close cooperation in trade is often connected with other aspects of collaboration. For instance, the exchange of experiences regarding urbanisation processes or environmental protection and academic exchange. These relations mostly focus on pragmatic cooperation in low-political areas, where cities and regions may play a vital role. Issues such as the organisation of urban transport, waste management or tourism promotion are common for all cities and regions globally and enable the exchange of experiences, even despite the problems in relations at the highest political level. Promoting and maintaining relations at the sub-state level may be a perfect solution in times of difficult political relations.

In the EU-China relationship, sub-state activities can be an important instrument in creating norms and principles that are vital from the European perspective, such as human and labour rights or environmental standards (Fulda 2019). Therefore, the EU could use cities and regions as 'transmission belts' to promote its values, which would also mean applying foreign policy tools in cooperation with local and regional authorities.

Nevertheless, the 2016 'Elements for a new EU strategy on China' (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2016), as mentioned, does not stress the importance of sub-national actors' activities to achieve EU's goals in the international arena; this is a remarkable omission. Still, the EU could use the three above mentioned opportunities arising from paradiplomacy in all four areas described in the strategy, namely:

1. Peace and security: as the EU aspire to promote a more open, sustainable and inclusive growth model in China, contacts on the sub-state level could enable the direct transfer of knowledge and best practices where they are needed, to local communities. In bypassing highly politicised dialogues on the state level, cities and regions could offer more channels for influencing Chinese society (Montesano 2019) and would often be independent of the turbulence between the political leaders.
2. Prosperity: while the EU aims to attract 'productive Chinese investment in Europe', the regional authorities could play a crucial role in negotiating Foreign Direct Investments deals. In fact, great Chinese investments are often accompanied by political agreements between local or regional authorities. Even establishing train connections that facilitate and promote bilateral trade are politicised and engage regional authorities on both sides (Kamiński 2019b; Bartosiewicz and Sztterlik 2019). Local governments' knowledge and experience positively contribute to a more conscious use of opportunities for bilateral cooperation.
3. Academic cooperation: because the EU wants to strengthen cooperation with China on research and innovation, the universities already collaborate closely with regions in their activities with the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC). As a result, the EU's science diplomacy should acknowledge sub-state authorities as important stakeholders and partners (Ciesielska-Klikowska 2020). Using the vast knowledge (i.e. language, knowledge of the political system, law or economic specificity) that scholars from local academic centres have would undoubtedly increase the awareness of mutual needs and opportunities and constitute an additional strengthening of the rationalisation in the decision-making process.
4. People-to-people links: since the EU hopes to strengthen interpersonal contacts by attracting more Chinese students and tourists, the development of sub-national links could create a network necessary to implement this policy goal (Zhu, Cai and François 2017). Importantly, cultural and educational exchange, as well as tourism promotion, are on the list of priorities in regions' relations with Chinese partners. This should lay a good foundation for closer cooperation with China, just as the

community of interest between the EU and sub-state actors is also quite evident in this regard.

The sub-state level would be appropriate for tackling many important problems presented in the 'Elements for a new EU strategy on China' and could play a crucial role in reaching some EU objectives. Moreover, interconnections between regions and cities could create new channels of political communication with China. Even today, it is possible to imagine the foundation of a mechanism that would enable the exchange of information between cities/regions and the EU on subnational cooperation with the PRC. As our research demonstrates, so far, no such possibility has been introduced. Furthermore, virtually none of the EU's member states, even less the EU itself, conducts activities monitoring the form and advancing sub-state activities. As shown in the table below, most surveyed cities point out that they do not coordinate their mutual collaboration with any institution. These findings have already been indicated by the EU diplomats themselves - the awareness of the need to create a coordination mechanism, therefore, exists<sup>4</sup>.

**Table 1. Does your city coordinate policy towards Chinese partners with other institutions? (scale from 0 – not at all, to 4 – fully coordinated)**

Coordination with:	Number of cities answering: Not at all (0)	The number of all responses (from 0 to 4):	Average score
European Union	133	190	1,51
National Government	100	195	2,04

Source: own calculation based on a survey conducted (September 2020 - May 2021) by authors among officials responsible for foreign relations from all 743 cities in the EU, with a population above 50,000 citizens. We received back 392 surveys (53% response rate), 213 from cities that cooperate with Chinese partners.

This example shows a considerable gap that could be filled relatively quickly, bringing benefits to local governments and the entire European Community. Hypothetically, cities and regions could erode the monopoly of the EU and national member state government in respect to the implementation of international policy – yet they could also complement it perfectly. For this to happen, the EU would need to offer mayors' space to experiment and grant them some freedom of action and trust in the political steps. After all, the authorities of cities and regions are the politicians closest to voters and who best sense social and political emotions which are often difficult to perceive in distant Brussels. Thus, cities and regions' paradiplomacy may be an attractive alternative to the somewhat programmatic activities of the European Council. However, the EU should not give up its ability to monitor and support these sub-state relations. Some signal for an upcoming change may already be seen in the provisions introduced in the resolution of the European Parliament on the adoption of the new text of the EU-China strategy from September 2021. The resolution highlights the importance of coordination of the EU policy with regional and local actors that develop and maintain links with China (European Parliament 2021).

## Threats

On the other hand, it should be remembered that paradiplomatic actions of cities and regions may also bring some negative aspects. Primarily, the creation of multi-tier EU diplomacy means its increased complexity and simultaneous weakening - without enhanced coordination, as mentioned above, coherence in foreign policy actions. Consequently, if cities and regions soon become essential in the international arena, it may mean there is a need to involve them as additional players or even rivals. This would make the execution of foreign policy even more comprehensive, much more labour-intensive, and time-consuming. As the example of Wallonia blocking the CETA deal shows, trade

agreements with other countries would also have to be agreed with the regions. The newest Comprehensive Agreement on Investment agreement between the EU and China, the provisions of which will now be ratified in member states, could be torpedoed by regional authorities. Thus, individual regions or cities may weaken the EU's cohesion, extend the decision-making process, or block decisions.

Secondly, it is not difficult to imagine that the third countries will try to use the interests of individual regions or cities in the future to shape the policies implemented by the EU. China is already doing this at the level of nation states. In June 2017, a coalition of EU member states which have close investment relations with China (Greece, the Czech Republic, Portugal, Malta and Sweden) sought to prevent the introduction of stricter EU controls on foreign direct investment in Europe. In the same month, Greece prevented developing a common EU position on human rights violations in China (Müller, 2018).

This possibility of lobbying for particular actions can also be used at the level of local authorities. China and other third countries may influence local elections or put political pressure on local leaders. Third countries may use politicians favourable to them to shape international relations conducted by a given region or city. Examples of such pro-China politicians can be seen, for example, in Hungary and the Czech Republic (Karásková et al. 2018). Considering that the costs of running an election campaign are quite high on the scale of individual politicians (Petithomme 2012), one can imagine that third countries (even though their state-owned or dependent companies) will support politicians by subsidising their campaigns or affecting municipally-owned enterprises to lobby for a specific candidate (Bergh, Erlingsson, Gustafsson and Wittberg 2019).

Thirdly, which is related to the above, cities and regions can also unintentionally become agents of foreign interests. Therefore, they should be aware of possible threats from their foreign partners, which would allow them to react appropriately and thus contribute to increasing state security (Emmott 2017). In particular, those cities that intensively seek foreign investors must be aware that they may become a natural target of hostile actions, the aim of which may be to deliberately destabilise the political situation in a given city or region (for example by announcing an investment and creating jobs or abandoning the idea unexpectedly). With the increase in globalisation and international interactions, this form of political mistreatment may become more prominent, although it is still a relatively poorly described topic in the relevant literature.

Fourthly, it can also be assumed that international cooperation of regions may become an axis of contention in relations within national states or even the entire EU. Already mentioned examples of Milan or Weimar show that autonomous actions may bring unintended consequences for the EU. A more recent example comes from Prague, where liberal mayor Zdenek Hrib withdrew the city from a sister cities agreement that explicitly recognised the 'one China policy', under which the PRC claims sovereignty over Taiwan. It provoked a major political crisis in the Czech Republic's relations with China (Kowalski 2020).

One can also imagine a situation whereby anti-European forces came to power in the region and oppose EU integration concepts. Alternatively, pro-European self-governments may become an alternative to anti-EU central authorities. An increasingly evident example of this is the relationship between the EU, Poland and Hungary, where the level of tension has been very high recently. Simultaneously, the centre-liberal mayors of Warsaw and Budapest, who represent a political vision utterly different from the right-wing national authorities, lobby in Europe for solutions that they believe are beneficial (Reuters 2020). Therefore, city or regional authorities can drive European cooperation, despite the Eurosceptical approach of central authorities.

Taking account of all the arguments so far discussed, the following matrix of tools, related opportunities and threats can be presented:

**Table 2. Opportunities and threats for EU foreign policy resulted from paradiplomatic activities of regions and cities**

Channel of influence	Chances	Threats
Lobbing and networking	Facilitation of the transfer of European ideas to other (i.e. developing) countries by reaching local communities.	Becoming agents of foreign interests - regions/cities becoming targets of third states to weaken the EU's cohesion.
	Rationalisation of the decision-making process in EU foreign policy.	
Formal powers	The better conceptualisation of EU foreign policy and enlargement of "the Brussels Effect".	Accommodation of regional interests results in a more complex decision-making process.
		Becoming agents of foreign interests - regions/cities extending the decision-making process or even blocking decisions.
Direct actions	Creation of an alternative political channel of communication with foreign partners - important, especially in the case of the deterioration of relations at the highest level.	Autonomous actions bringing unintended consequences for the EU.
	Contribution to the implementation of EU foreign policy goals.	
	Enabling access to knowledge and information from the grassroots level (use of local authorities' experiences).	

Source: own elaboration

## CONCLUSIONS

Concluding the points and examples shown above, it should be stated that, despite the many changes and opportunities that paradiplomacy may bring to the EU, the community is not well prepared for the challenge posed by the growing role of regions and cities. Today, there is neither adequate understanding of this topic in the structures of the EU nor recognition of the international connections of cities and regions, making it difficult for these to be used instrumentally to solve EU foreign policy problems.

The failure to use paradiplomacy as a multi-dimensional tool in the implementation of foreign policy by the EU is due to several factors:

- i. There is a lack of officials who are familiar with the subject of paradiplomacy and/or with time available to devote to stimulating cooperation between European and non-European regions.
- ii. There is no information exchange system on foreign cooperation of individual cities and regions and no formal possibilities of coordinating activities with regions; moreover, there is a lack of formal or informal political mechanisms for the EU to use paradiplomacy.

- iii. Regardless of the functioning of the Committee of the Regions and two institutional cooperation forums (CORLEAP and ARLEM), international cooperation between local governments/cities/regions still depends, primarily, on the policies pursued by individual nation-states. Hence, regional relations are left to the competence of state authorities and political systems of individual EU member states responsible for (potentially) animating them.

The possibilities of paradiplomacy only to a small extent may be considered a mistake and a research opportunity. Analysing cases around the world, including the most visible ones (i.e., Wallonia, Libya, Belarus or China), it is evident that subregional contacts may cause (intentionally or not) serious problems but also be a great alternative to relations at the interstate level and can constitute a new communication channel, also in the event of a crisis within the EU itself. Already today, relations between regions and cities influence the shaping of states and the EU's foreign policy through formal and informal channels, via lobbying, formal influence and direct actions undertaken with or without the agreement of the governments of EU member states or EU institutions. The potential utility of sub-state actors is therefore rarely used because it is often unrealised. In order to change the present situation, it would be necessary to mobilise available resources and, at least, monitor the activities of regions and cities.

Although nation-states and international organisations are crucial actors on the global stage, cities and regions are starting to play an increasingly important role. There is evidently some tension between the idea of globalisation versus regionalisation, which emphasises the growing importance of paradiplomacy. This being so, sub-state relations could be the hidden capacity of the EU for its international actions, *if* steps were taken to foster and utilise them.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Tatham (2018) concentrates on regions only; however, in our opinion, some of methods described (for example lobbying) apply to cities as well.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with European External Action Service officer, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with German diplomat, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with the European Commission official from DG REGIO, 2017; Interview with European External Action Service officer, 2017; Interview with the European Commission official from DG ENER, 2018.

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