

# City Diplomacy Practices Towards China and the United States in the Western Balkans. Examples from Croatian and Slovenian Cities<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Cities are becoming more important actors in the international arena because they have competencies that enable them to conduct foreign activities. This phenomenon is the result of far-reaching processes of globalisation and the pluralisation of actors in international relations. This study presents a map of partnerships between six Croatian and two Slovenian cities and their Chinese and American partners, as well as a description of the thematic areas of such cooperation. Moreover, based on the results of our survey, we indicate similarities and differences in the patterns of cooperation between the cities of the Western Balkans and their foreign partners, referring to the multi-level governance theory.

## Keywords

paradiplomacy, city diplomacy, China, United States, Croatia, Slovenia

## Introduction

In the current public perception, the relations between European countries and the People's Republic of China (PRC, hereafter referred to as China) and the United States of America (US) primarily focus on high-profile political meetings involving presidents, prime ministers, or ministers. While this state-centric perspective captures the attention of journalists and scholars who wish to analyse these interactions at the national level, it only represents one layer of international relations. We contend that another significant layer exists – the realm of subnational international cooperation, particularly transborder partnerships among cities and regions. We aim to address the paucity of research concerning these subnational connections by examining the case of partnerships between cities in Croatia and Slovenia and their counterparts in China and the US, highlighting their thematic areas and distinctive features. The primary research question guiding this inquiry is how cities in Croatia and Slovenia collaborate with Chinese and American partners.

We argue that international relations should be perceived in a multi-level (Hooghe, Marks & Schakel, 2020, p. 197), networked (Hocking, 1993, p. 2), or even heterarchical (Cerny, 2023, p. 20) manner. According to the multi-level governance approach (MLG), foreign policy is not limited to relations with other partners conducted only at the national level; instead, the MLG approach emphasises the increasingly frequent and complex interactions between different governmental or non-governmental entities on different levels of government: central, regional, and local (Piattoni, 2010; Daniell & Kay, 2017; Allain-Dupré, 2020). According to our perspective, international relations could be perceived not only through a state-centred prism, as cities are also active actors on the global political scene (Barber, 2013; Tavares, 2016; Schiavon, 2019; Grandi, 2020; Marchetti,

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2021; Tubilewicz & Omond, 2021). Moreover, when political decisions are made simultaneously on national and subnational levels, conflicts may arise, which is described by the heterarchy of world politics theory (Cerny, 2023, p. 3).

Following this perspective, three different phenomena characterise the modern international system. First, there is the deepening process of globalisation (Baylis & Smith, 2001; Lachapelle & Paquin, 2005, p. 7). Then, there is increasing pluralism among international relations actors (Cornago, 2010). Finally, there is growing fragmentation and disintegration at the state level (Michelmann & Soldatos, 1990, p. 28; Tatham, 2018). These co-occurring trends significantly affect the creation of links between international participants and the development of new patterns of international cooperation. Therefore, the contemporary international system extends beyond interactions between states and international organisations, encompassing non-state actors, including sub-state entities like cities and regional authorities (Duchacek, 1986; Aldecoa and Keating, 1999; Acuto, 2013; Raś, 2016; Amiri and Sevin, 2020).

Thanks to globalisation, understood as integration and cooperation among actors across the globe, the discourse limiting international relations to geographical barriers can be used only in theory but not necessarily in practice. Currently, the competencies of entities involved in IR are often blurred and interpenetrated (Koehn & Rosenau, 2002, p. 107). States are no longer solely responsible for determining the world order on the 'global chessboard', which is connected with the second phenomenon – pluralisation.

The concept of pluralisation emerged within the liberal international relations theory (Keohane & Nye, 1973) to refer to the multi-level and multi-sectoral relations of entities participating in global political relations (e.g., GOs, NGOs, TNCs, cities, regions). These entities operate internationally, gradually assuming the vast area of the sovereign competencies of states and exerting an increasing influence on global political, social, legal, and economic relations (Kuznetsov, 2015, p. 69).

Due to fragmentation and state disintegration, regionalisation and localism gained importance, and the traditional role of nation-states, though still dominant, lost its value (Duchacek, 1986; Duchacek, Latouche & Stevenson, 1988). Even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Schumpeter (1960) paid attention to the vital importance of cities in generating capital and attracting investments to nation-states. Since then, the role of sub-state entities has evolved, and their significance is growing (Acuto, 2013; Kamiński, 2021; Ciesielska-Klikowska & Kamiński, 2022; Leffel, 2022).

Local and regional governments are becoming increasingly more involved in international relations by opening foreign trade and cultural missions, joining global networks of cities (Acuto & Leffel, 2021), and signing treaties and agreements with partners from other states (Tavares, 2016). Maintaining this position, it is worth noting that cities are progressively becoming more willing to participate and engage in international relations, transferring the management of issues typical of the global agenda to the local level while simultaneously emulating states in their policies (Alejo, 2022, p. 139). In the evolving landscape of global affairs, the dynamics of multilayered diplomacy have undergone a slow but radical transformation, marked by the co-existing realms of traditional national diplomacy and the flourishing sphere of paradiplomacy, which refers to the international activities maintained by subnational actors (Aldecoa & Keating, 1999, pp. 1–3). For example, a 2013 Internet post by former New York City mayor Mike Bloomberg during the G40 summit had a significant global impact with the statement "while nations talk, cities act" (Bloomberg, 2013). In simple terms, this means that nation states usually deliberate on important issues, such as environmental protection, but cities are responsible for implementing these provisions in practice (Acuto et al. 2024). An example to support this is the regular summits of the international city network C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, focused on the implementation of advanced solutions in the fight against climate change (C40 2022).

City authorities are generally responsible for 'low politics'. The areas of low politics are not as crucial from the perspective of vital state interests or, to some extent, public opinion and the media (Michelmann & Soldatos, 1990, p. 2). Within the scope of low politics lies promoting the economy and national and cultural interests, attracting investments, promoting exports of national, regional, or local products, attracting tourists, establishing trade missions, or providing incentives for investors. Most of these issues — if not all of them — fall within the strict interest of sub-state entities, making them highly motivated to carry out the related tasks effectively (van der Pluijm & Melissen,

2007). For instance, these could include enhancing prestige, gaining national recognition, improving investment balances, or increasing local awareness of the importance of international affairs, as well as exchanging experiences with other subnational partners or collectively addressing issues (Fantoni & Avellaneda, 2022, p. 6). Cities are unique as international actors because interdependencies exist among entities grouped within them, such as businesses, universities, communities, diasporas, unions, and religious groups (Balbim, 2021, p. 30), all of whose interests should be reconciled. Of course, such interdependent lobby groups exist in the states as well. However, in the case of cities, the „transmission belt” between them and the executive power is much shorter, making their interactions more vivid.

As sub-state entities, cities engage in various international activities within the concept of city diplomacy. According to Curtis and Acuto (2018), this phenomenon can be defined as the formal strategy of a city in dealing with other governmental and non-governmental actors on the international stage. City diplomacy is also characterised by having instruments, features, means, and attributes distinct from those used by national governments (Balbim, 2021, p. 28). However, in some ways, cities are imitating states in their international activities. City authorities also participate in foreign delegations, open offices in foreign cities, or organise business missions. However, as van der Pluijm and Melissen (2007, p. 6) argue, city diplomacy is a process, not a concretised activity. Within this framework, city authorities engage in short or long-term relationships with other international entities to represent themselves and their interests. In our understanding, city diplomacy is a flexible strategy aligned with the needs of the local community or state administration and aimed at articulating needs and achieving intended goals on the international stage. Throughout the rest of this article, when using the term ‘city diplomacy’, this is the definition that is being employed.

## Research framework and methodology

European cities commonly collaborate with partners from the People’s PRC and the US.<sup>2</sup> Through their international activities, Western Balkan cities from Croatia and Slovenia,<sup>3</sup> as the EU’s part of Europe, are part of this process. Cooperation of sub-state units within the EU itself is a common phenomenon, as evidenced by the cooperation of the regions of Poland and Croatia (Modzelewski, 2020). However, we are currently observing increased sub-state activities in Eastern Europe due to the multi-sectoral rivalry between China and the US. States, regions, and cities in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), including the Western Balkans, have cooperated with China under the 14+1 (originally 16+1) initiative. In 2012, the Chinese created a forum addressed to the 16 CEE states to counter the EU’s integration and economic influences. (Castrillón-Kerrigan, 2022). While Greece joined this initiative in 2019, Lithuania withdrew from it in 2021, along with Estonia and Latvia in 2022 (Andrijauskas, 2021). Currently, CEE-Chinese relations are declining under the 14+1 initiative as a result of China’s strategic partnership with Russia and both countries undermining the key role of the US and NATO in maintaining European security (Przychodniak, 2023). Thus, the unprovoked Russian aggression on Ukraine in 2022 forced CEE states to cooperate more closely with their transatlantic partner. In this case, cities, as actors in the multi-levelled structure of international relations, are also part of such changes that occur at the national and supranational levels (Hocking, 1993).

Theoretical considerations and data obtained from empirical research indicate that cities from Croatia and Slovenia commonly cooperate with partners from China and the US. Thus, relations between these states at the central level do not translate into the existence of city-to-city cooperation, which continues despite political tensions. Following the multi-level governance approach, international relations should be analysed not only at the supranational and national levels. In recent decades, MLG has become a primary theoretical focus on sub-state activities in, among

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<sup>2</sup> Between May 2020 and May 2021, we conducted a survey among 750 EU cities, encompassing over 50,000 residents, regarding their cooperation with China. Those efforts encouraged 395 cities from 25 states to complete the study. Of those 395 cities, 213 (53.92%) maintained some form of relations with China, resulting in 383 established partnerships. Currently, we are conducting similar research, but on collaborations with the US. Preliminary results show similar degrees of involvement of European cities in such forms of cooperation.

<sup>3</sup> In the context of this study, we use ‘Western Balkan’ as a synonym for ‘Croatian and Slovenian’.

others, the EU (Hooghe & Marks, 2001). We see that the concept of multi-level governance could be successfully used to understand the phenomenon of contemporary sub-state actors on the international landscape. Therefore, the aim of this article is to analyse city-to-city relations in Croatia and Slovenia with China and the US. From this point of view, this article intends to:

1. Present a map of the partnerships between Croatian and Slovenian cities as a part of the Western Balkan states belonging to the EU with Chinese and American partners.
2. Examine the thematic areas on which these city-to-city cooperations focus, identifying the similarities and differences in the cooperation patterns between Croatian and Slovenian cities with China and the US.

By presenting maps of these partnerships and their characteristics, it will be possible to compare the cooperation patterns between them. Thus, the primary question motivating this research is how cities in Croatia and Slovenia cooperate with Chinese and American partners. We contribute to the discourse by determining city diplomacy practices towards China and the US in the Western Balkans, especially considering the fact that the level of subnational relations between these countries has never before been the subject of research. This study complements the relationships already examined at the supranational and national levels, thus working to complete the picture of multi-level politics.

The analysis presented in this article is based on an in-depth literature review and a survey of all Croatian and Slovenian cities with a population exceeding 50,000. We identified two such cities in Slovenia and six in Croatia. The survey was conducted between September 2020 and May 2022,<sup>4</sup> with electronic versions of the questionnaire being distributed to representatives of city authorities (the units responsible for international cooperation). We identified those specific officials by searching cities' websites and following up with direct phone or e-mail contact with municipal authorities, if necessary. The list of cities was created based on data from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report 'Cities in Europe' (Dijkstra & Poelman, 2012). Later, the number of inhabitants was updated using the Eurostat data 'Population on 1 January by age groups and sex - cities and greater cities' (2020).

The questionnaire was administered in English and comprised 22 questions for cities that cooperate with China and the US and seven questions for those that do not. After sending the questionnaires, officials were contacted through e-mail, telephone calls, and formal letters. In the case of cooperation with China, we received answers from all Slovenian cities (100% response rate) and four from Croatian cities (66.67% response rate). In the case of cooperation with the US, two received answers from Slovenia (100% response rate) and two from Croatian cities (33.33% response rate).

The article is structured as follows. The first part presents the characteristics of cooperation between the cities of Croatia, Slovenia, and China, followed by those with the US. Finally, we describe the similarities and differences in the patterns of city-to-city cooperation among Croatian and Slovenian cities toward their partners from China and the US. The article concludes by arguing that IR analysis should not be limited to studying the activities carried out by states and international organisations in the era of intense international engagement at the urban level.

## Mapping the links between Croatian and Slovenian cities and their Chinese and US partners

Cooperation with Chinese partners at the sub-state level is common among Croatian cities. We collected answers from Rijeka, Zadar, Zagreb, and Slavonski Brod.<sup>5</sup> Of these cities, only Slavonski Brod does not cooperate with China. All Slovenian cities with over 50,000 citizens cooperate with China, meaning Ljubljana and Maribor.

<sup>4</sup> The study on cooperation with China and the United States was conducted in different time frames because it initially concerned two different research projects. In this article, we combined them to show and compare the involvement of these powers in the Western Balkans at the city level.

<sup>5</sup> Osijek and Split did not answer the survey despite attempts to contact these cities by e-mail, phone, and a formal letter.

The Croatian city of Zadar is the smallest city cooperating with China, with a population of around 75,000. The Slovenian city of Maribor has approximately 111,000 citizens, and the Croatian city of Rijeka has about 118,000 citizens. The capital of Slovenia, Ljubljana, has around 288,000 citizens, while the Croatian capital of Zagreb has around 804,000 citizens, making it the largest city cooperating with China. As evidenced by the range of populations, the size of the city is not an essential factor determining cooperation between Croatian, Slovenian, and Chinese partners. This is particularly noteworthy because previous research on the cooperation between Polish cities and China (Kamiński & Gzik, 2021) found that the size of the city in terms of the number of inhabitants significantly impacts the existence of partnerships, as well as other literature on city diplomacy factors (Hocking, 1993; van der Pluijm & Melissen, 2007). This is potentially due to the number of resources at the city's disposal, which is often closely related to its size. However, as can be seen in the case of Croatia and Slovenia, the number of residents did not determine the quantity of relations with China. Moreover, the relatively more minor (in terms of population) Slovenian city of Maribor had only one less Chinese partner than the biggest city, Zagreb (Table 1).

Table 1. Cooperation with Chinese partners among Croatian and Slovenian cities

City name	Chinese partner	Start of cooperation	Partnership agreement	Active partnership
Rijeka	Qingdao	1998	YES	YES
Rijeka	Dalian	2006	YES	YES
Rijeka	Ningbo	2010	YES	YES
Zadar	Shaoxing	2015	NO	NO
Zadar	Chongqing	2015	NO	NO
Zadar	Zhoushan	2015	NO	NO
Zagreb	Shanghai	1980	YES	YES
Zagreb	Beijing	1995	YES	YES
Zagreb	Nanjing	2010	NO	NO
Zagreb	Xiamen	2013	NO	NO
Zagreb	Chongqing	2014	YES	YES
Zagreb	Shenzhen	2014	NO	NO
Zagreb	Hangzhou	2015	NO	NO
Zagreb	Hubei	2016	NO	NO
Zagreb	Hunan	2016	NO	NO
Zagreb	Xiangyang	2017	YES	YES
Ljubljana	Chengdu	1981	YES	YES
Maribor	Hangzhou	2014	YES	YES
Maribor	Chongqing	2017	YES	YES
Maribor	Huai'an	2014	YES	YES
Maribor	Ningbo	2014	YES	YES
Maribor	Wuxi	2015	YES	YES
Maribor	Nanchang	2015	YES	YES
Maribor	Wuhan	2016	YES	YES
Maribor	Shanghai	2017	YES	YES
Maribor	Jinan	2019	YES	YES

Source: Own elaboration based on the survey (September–October 2020).

The study identified 26 partnerships with China between four Croatian and two Slovenian cities. The vast scale of cooperation in these two states is therefore evident. However, it is affected by as many as ten partnerships with China established by Zagreb and nine by Maribor. The oldest



partnership dates back to 1980 and was set between Zagreb and Shanghai. Ljubljana's partnership with Chengdu, established in 1981, is not much younger. These two partnerships are the oldest in EU member states of Central and Eastern Europe. A relationship breakthrough was in 2012 when the Chinese 16+1 initiative was created, linking states from the CEE. A year later, Xi Jinping announced the creation of the Belt and Road Initiative, which was a signal to Chinese cities and provinces, encouraging them to intensify international cooperation. In Croatia and Slovenia, 19 out of 26 partnerships were established between 2012 and 2019 at the municipal level. Thus, intense diplomatic relations at the central level influence intensifying local contacts.

Moving on to the cooperation between Croatian and Slovenian cities and the US, as a part of the introduction to this section of the study, we presented some information based on data triangulation, including internet research, which partially complements the picture based on the questionnaires. Of the six Croatian cities addressed in the survey, half included information on their official websites concerning international cooperation. Rijeka had 18 partner cities, though none of them were from the US, Zadar had nine partner cities, including one from the US (Milwaukee), and Zagreb had 50 partner cities but no American cities. Among the two Slovenian cities surveyed, Maribor informed on its website about partnerships with 14 foreign cities, including one US city, Pueblo, New Mexico. On their websites, three Croatian cities (Osijek, Slavonski Brod, and Split) had no information about international cooperation with other cities. However, on the archived version of Split's website from 2013, there was information about Split being a partner city with Los Angeles (Grad Split, 2013). Ljubljana also did not share data about its international partners on its official webpage, but the archival version of the city website from 2016 mentioned Cleveland, Ohio, as a partner city for the Slovenian capital (Ljubljana City, 2016), which was confirmed by the questionnaire returned. It is also worth noting that after the research, Kranj became a sister city of Colorado Springs (Colorado Springs, 2022). Still following the adopted methodology, we based our analysis only on the survey results.

Table 2. Cooperation with American partners among Croatian and Slovenian cities

City name	American partner (city, state)	Start of cooperation	Partnership agreement	Active partnership
Zadar	Milwaukee, Wisconsin	2014*	YES	NO
Ljubljana	Cleveland, Ohio	1975	YES	NO
Maribor	Pueblo, Colorado	2011**	YES	YES

\* This is the date provided by the city official in the questionnaire. The date shown on the official website of Zadar was 2015: <https://www.grad-zadar.hr/povelje-o-prijateljstvu-436/>.

\*\* This is the date provided by the city official in the questionnaire. The date shown on the official website of Maribor is 2006: <https://maribor.si/mestna-obcina/zupan/kabinet-zupana/mednarodno-in-medmestno-sodelovanje/prijateljska-in-partnerska-mesta/>.

Source: Own elaboration based on the survey (February–April 2022).

Thus, according to data from the returned questionnaires, the only Croatian city (with a population above 50,000 citizens) with an official partnership with an American city was Zadar, the smallest (i.e., least populated) city included in this study. On the other hand, despite its long list of international partnerships, Zagreb, the largest city included in this study, had no American partners. For Slovenia, both cities we researched had a partner city in the US. The capital of Slovenia signed the partnership agreement with Cleveland back in the days of Josip Broz Tito's Yugoslavia. Maribor's cooperation with Pueblo was established more recently after the independent republic of Slovenia was established (Table 2). Unlike Ljubljana's, Maribor's partnership is still active.

## Characteristics of cooperation between cities of Croatia and Slovenia with China

Out of the 26 partnerships with China, as many as 17 were based on a signed partnership agreement<sup>6</sup>, indicating that cities strive to formalise their partnerships and translate these into closer and more intensified cooperation. The small number of inactive partnerships is also worth noting. In this case, for as many as 17 partnerships in the two years preceding the research, some joint initiatives were undertaken with the Chinese (e.g., official visits, mutual projects, etc.). One can also see that the lack of a partnership agreement determined the lack of activity in cooperation with China (Table 1).

In all the cases of relations with China, cooperation was initiated by local or provincial Chinese authorities (Table 3). City authorities in Zagreb, Ljubljana, and Maribor also played a significant role in establishing cooperation with China. Moreover, in the case of Zagreb, cultural and business institutions were involved in such a process. In the case of the Slovenian city of Maribor, local sport-related institutions helped establish cooperation with China.

Table 3. Entities initiating cooperation with China among Croatian and Slovenian cities

Cooperation initiator:	Number of responses (n=5):
Chinese local/regional authorities	5
My city authorities	3
Local business	2
Cultural institutions	2
Sport institutions	1
Higher education institutions	0
Schools	0
Other	0

Source: Own elaboration based on the survey (September–October 2020).

All Croatian and Slovenian cities cooperating with China conducted their activities through mutual official visits (Table 4). Participation in economic fairs and forums and business missions were slightly less frequently chosen forms of cooperation. Thus, it appears that cooperation with China is focused on promoting local businesses, which may translate into bilateral investments that are beneficial for cities in the Western Balkans. Only the cities of Rijeka and Maribor operated as part of government delegations. At the same time, Ljubljana cooperated with a partner from China by participating in the international network of cities. None of the Western Balkan cities examined had a permanent representative office in the city of their Chinese partner. Similarly, Chinese partners did not have established representations in the cities of the Western Balkans. This fact may result from the high costs of maintaining such institutions, particularly paying for the premises and salaries of officials. Moreover, if city-to-city cooperation is only occasional and does not occur daily, having a permanent office would not seem entirely necessary.

In many cities, relations with Chinese partners were based on cultural and economic collaboration (Table 5). The economy was indicated right after sport and tourism as a vital area of cooperation with China from the city's point of view. This is particularly noteworthy because Maribor was the only city in which sports institutions helped start a partnership with China. Nevertheless, cooperation in sports was also common in the rest of the cities in Croatia and Slovenia. However, it is worth paying attention to the importance of tourism because Western Balkan states are trying to attract tourists from China, thus bringing profits to their cities. The benefits of tourism promotion were the most cited reason by city officials for establishing relations with their Chinese partners (Table 6). Only Slovenian cities cooperated with their Chinese partners in environmental protection.

<sup>6</sup> Signed partnership agreement means formal document signed by the subnational authorities on both sides.

Additionally, despite being widely practised in other European states, cooperation with partners from China was not based on academic cooperation at all, including student exchange.<sup>7</sup>

Table 4. Forms of cooperation with Chinese partners among Croatian and Slovenian cities

Forms of cooperation:	Number of responses (n=5):
Official visits	5
Participation in fairs and economic forums	4
Business missions	4
Working within official central government delegations	2
International networks of cities	1
Permanent Chinese office in the Western Balkan city	0
Permanent office in China	0
Other	0

Source: own elaboration based on a survey (September 2020-October 2020)

Table 5. Areas of urban cooperation with China among Croatian and Slovenian cities

Areas of cooperation:	Number of responses (n=5):
Sport and tourism	5
Economy	4
Culture	4
Environment	2
Education	2
Health and social policy	2
Urban planning/management	1
Academic cooperation	0
Other	0

Source: Own elaboration based on the survey (September–October 2020).

Apart from the general statement regarding the ‘exchange of experiences’, officials frequently indicated that tourism promotion was the primary reason for their relations with Chinese partners. Cultural promotion was also cited as being particularly significant. Therefore, cooperation with China in terms of tourism and culture is seen as a profitable venture among Croatian and Slovenian cities (Table 6). In Table 6, tourism and cultural promotion were identified as the 2nd and 3rd most cited benefits. This is significant because attracting Chinese interest can directly translate into economic gains, such as increased tourism and cultural events. According to some researchers (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2022, p. 242), issues related to the promotion of culture are crucial when it comes to promoting a city’s image. However, it is challenging for Croatian and Slovenian entrepreneurs to break into the Chinese market, which is relatively closed to the activities of foreign companies (Leahy, 2024).

When analysing the main difficulties facing city-to-city cooperation, it should be noted that all cities indicated distance and high costs as the two biggest obstacles in building and maintaining relations with their Chinese partners (Table 7). These two phenomena are related as higher costs generally result from increased geographical distance. As seen, despite globalisation, distance is still a problem. However, it can be assumed that communication difficulties related to the COVID-19 pandemic facilitated bilateral meetings using software for online meetings. Remote contact was

<sup>7</sup> In the separate research project “The role of cities in the European Union’s policy towards China”, financed by the Polish National Science Center, authors indicated that out of 213 cities in 25 EU member states, 99 of them are cooperating with Chinese partners in the form of academic cooperation.



the only way to connect with the Chinese. Other research shows that during the pandemic, many partnerships entered a 'dormant' state (Kamiński, Ciesielska-Klikowska & Gzik, 2024, p. 11).

Table 6. Benefits of urban cooperation with China among Croatian and Slovenian cities

Benefits of cooperation:	Number of responses (n=5):
Exchange of experiences	5
Tourism promotion	5
Cultural promotion	4
Educational exchange	2
Attracting Chinese investments in the region	2
Better position of local companies doing business in China	2
Other	0

Source: Own elaboration based on the survey (September–October 2020).

Table 7. Obstacles to cooperation with China among Croatian and Slovenian cities

Obstacles to cooperation:	Number of responses (n=5):
Distance	5
High costs	3
Differences in political systems	2
Cultural differences	1
Low commitment of Chinese partner	1
Other	1
Language barriers	0
Low commitment of local partners in the region	0
Political tensions between central governments	0

Source: Own elaboration based on the survey (September–October 2020).

On the other hand, a positive finding is that, to a large extent, people who did not have issues with linguistic or cultural barriers were responsible for contact with Chinese partners. Therefore, officials seem to be well prepared to cooperate with China.

Regarding Croatia's and Slovenia's membership in the EU, their policies towards China are implemented on three levels: EU, national, and subnational. In an ideal unitary state model, international cooperation with another country should be coordinated at all political and administrative levels to bring the most significant benefits to the state (Allain-Dupré 2020). However, in most cases in Croatia and Slovenia, urban policies are left to the cities themselves and are in no way coordinated by higher levels of government or with other cities.

In the survey, we asked officials to assess the level of urban policy coordination towards China at the regional, national, EU, and other city levels on a scale from 1 to 5. An answer of 1 meant 'no coordination at all', while an answer of 5 meant 'full coordination'. Out of the five cities cooperating with China, Zagreb, Ljubljana, and Maribor did not coordinate their activities with the central government and regional authorities. Only Rijeka coordinated it fully across all levels. The city of Zadar answered '4' (Table 8).

Perhaps this indicates that the ministries of foreign affairs do not take visible initiatives to coordinate multi-level relations with China, and support for local authorities is, therefore, incidental rather than systemic. Moreover, none of the five cities coordinated their policies towards China with other cities within a particular state (all cities answered '1' for this question). It may be concluded that cities compete with each other rather than share knowledge and experiences. Coordination of urban policies toward China also did not exist at the EU level – all five cities did not coordinate their policies toward China within this international organisation (all cities answered '1').

Table 8. Multi-level policy coordination towards China with the national government

City	Policy coordination with the national government (scale 1-5)
Maribor	1
Ljubljana	1
Rijeka	5
Zadar	4
Zagreb	1

Source: Own elaboration based on the survey (February–April 2022).

### Characteristics of cooperation between cities of Croatia and Slovenia with the United States

The characteristic feature of the Croatian and Slovenian cities' cooperation with American partners is the role of the diaspora in establishing these relationships. For instance, Zadar indicated the Croatian diaspora in Milwaukee as the sole initiators of the city-to-city partnership. Maribor pointed out two initiators: its authorities and the diaspora. In the case of Ljubljana, the relatively sizable Slovenian diaspora in Cleveland has also been cited as a vital factor (Encyclopaedia of Cleveland History, 2022), though this was not indicated in the returned questionnaire. There were no bottom-up initiatives in any of these Western Balkan cities (e.g., from business, cultural, or academic circles) for their relationships with American partners (Table 9). Additionally, none of these partnerships was established through official American initiatives.

Table 9. Entities initiating cooperation with the US among Croatian and Slovenian cities

Cooperation initiator:	Number of responses (n=2):
American diaspora	2
Local city authorities	1
Academic partners	0
American local/regional authorities	0
Cultural institutions	0
Schools	0
Sports institutions	0
Local business partners	0
Other	0

Source: Own elaboration based on the survey (February–April 2022).

The lack of activities among other entities – besides city authorities and the diaspora – in establishing relationships with US cities continued after the partnership agreements were signed. The only form of cooperation was official visits (Table 10). This finding may indicate a very shallow form of partnership. Similar research among Polish cities has shown that tangible projects resulting from international cooperation emerged only when multiple actors, beyond just the metropolitan authorities, were involved (Frenkel, 2021). It is difficult to imagine effective academic, business, or cultural exchange without the engagement of representatives in these areas. In our opinion, even international cooperation solely between city officials requires support from local partners (e.g., from businesses or academia), as demonstrated in the example of the Łódzkie region in Poland and its cooperation with the city of Chengdu (Kamiński, 2019).

Table 10. Forms of cooperation with American partners among Croatian and Slovenian cities

Forms of cooperation:	Number of responses (n=2):
Official visits	2
Business missions	0
Permanent office in the USA	0
Permanent American office in the Western Balkan city	0
International networks of cities	0
Participation in fairs and economic forums	0
Working within official central government delegations	0
Online meetings	0
Other	0

Source: Own elaboration based on the survey (February–April 2022).

In our research, Croatian and Slovenian cities were also asked about significant areas of cooperation with their American partners. Maribor pointed out the economy as the only area of cooperation. In contrast, Zadar indicated a much more comprehensive range of cooperation, including the economy, academia, culture, sports, and tourism (Table 11). The actual effectiveness of the cooperation in this latter case raises some doubts since, according to the data presented in Table 10, it is based only on official visits.

Table 11. Areas of urban cooperation with the US among Croatian and Slovenian cities

Areas of cooperation:	Number of responses (n=2):
Economy	2
Academic cooperation	1
Culture	1
Sports and tourism	1
Urban planning/management	0
Education	0
Health and social policy	0
Environment	0
Other	0

Source: Own elaboration based on the survey (February–April 2022).

The data concerning the benefits of urban cooperation with the US supports our thesis regarding the relatively shallow nature of this process. Two cities (Zadar and Maribor) indicated that the exchange of experience and tourism promotion were significant benefits of their cooperation. The Croatian city also highlighted business benefits, culture promotion, and educational exchange (Table 12). Most of these indicators (such as 'promotion' and 'exchange') are quite general and somewhat intangible in terms of measurable results. This superficiality of cooperation is even more evident in the final part of our questionnaire, where we asked for examples of successful joint projects. None of the cities were able to identify any specific project.

In terms of the number of partnerships, it is apparent that American cities were far less involved in cooperation with Croatian and Slovenian partners compared to Chinese cities. Geographical distance and related high costs of cooperation were indicated as the main obstacles (Table 13). However, this does not explain why there were more partnerships in Western Balkan cities with Chinese partners than with American ones since the distance from Croatia and Slovenia to China and the US is comparable. One potential explanation was provided by the city of Maribor, which added to the above factors one more point – 'low commitments of the American side'. The cost barriers of substantial geographical distance might be overcome when both partners are highly

engaged. As we know from the above analyses and other research carried out among European cities, China's cities tend to be much more committed to urban cooperation in Europe than American cities (Ciesielska-Klikowska, 2021; Frenkel, 2021; Kamiński & Gzik, 2021).

Table 12. Benefits of urban cooperation with the US among Croatian and Slovenian cities

Benefits of cooperation:	Number of responses (n=2):
Exchange of experiences	2
Tourism promotion	2
Attracting American investments in the region	1
Better position of local companies doing business in the USA	1
Culture promotion	1
Educational exchange	1
Other	0

Source: Own elaboration based on the survey (February–April 2022)

Table 13. The main obstacles to cooperation with the US in Croatia and Slovenia

Obstacles to cooperation:	Number of responses (n=2):
Distance	2
High costs	1
Low commitment of American partner	1
COVID-19 pandemic	1
Cultural differences	0
Low commitment of local partners in the region	0
Differences in political systems	0
Political tensions between central governments	0
Language barriers	0
Other	0

Source: Own elaboration based on the survey (February–April 2022).

Our final question in the survey referred to the coordination of the city's foreign activities. Croatian and Slovenian cities generally do not coordinate their foreign policy with other institutions (like regional authorities or the national government) and cities in their country. Zadar answered '2' for coordination with regional authorities and other cities and '4' for coordination with the national government ('1' means no coordination at all, and '5' means full coordination). Maribor indicated '1' for coordination with the national government and other cities and '2' for regional authorities. Based on these results, it appears that these cities act like lone wolves: they are not interested in sharing the advantages of establishing relations.

### **Similarities and differences in the patterns of city-to-city cooperation among Croatian and Slovenian cities toward the partners from China and the United States**

There were some similarities in the cooperation patterns among Croatian and Slovenian cities with their partners from China and the US. In both cases, official visits were the primary form of realising the partnership, and the exchange of experiences was its basic aim. However, in the case of Western Balkan-Chinese cooperation between cities, other forms of cooperation were observed, such as participation in fairs, economic forums, and business missions. In contrast, Western Balkan-American cooperation between cities was limited only to official visits. Additionally, the list of areas

of cooperation was longer in the case of Croatian and Slovenian cities' cooperation with Chinese partners. The returned questionnaires indicated 'sport and tourism', 'economy', and 'culture' as the most popular areas of joint initiatives. In the case of cooperation with American partners, the only area indicated more than once was 'economy' (reported by two cities).

Consequently, the broader the range of forms and areas of cooperation, the longer the list of benefits gained by cities partnering with China. The lack of coordination in the case of Slovenia and the deficient level of coordination in Croatia regarding their cities' foreign activities with other authorities (regional or national) was their common denominator. Allain-Dupré (2020) wrote that politics requires effective coordination across levels of government to manage shared responsibilities, mutual dependence, and common challenges. In the case of Croatia and Slovenia, it is evident that the lack of coordination between the various administrative centres limits the full potential that could be brought by partnerships with China and the US at the local level. This potential, we argue, is comprised of increased economic ties, cultural or academic exchanges, and knowledge transfer (exchange of experiences or good practices in, for example, city management, including health and climate issues). Another similarity was the lack of official, permanent representatives from the cities in China and the US. In both directions of Balkan cities' foreign relations, geographical distance and related costs were pointed out as significant obstacles to further cooperation. However, as indicated above, the involvement of Chinese officials makes these barriers easier for Croatian and Slovenian city authorities to overcome.

The differences between these two patterns of cooperation are no less visible. The most striking divergence is the scale of Chinese and American cooperation with the Western Balkan cities included in this study. All Slovenian and most Croatian cities we examined had an active partnership with Chinese cities. Only one Slovenian and one Croatian city maintained such cooperation with the American side. What is also noteworthy is that every Croatian city and the Slovenian city of Maribor cooperated with more than one Chinese partner city. Each city cooperating with the US had only one American partner.

Furthermore, there was a significant difference regarding the initiator of the cooperation. In the partnerships with China, Chinese officials served as the initiators, whereas in partnerships with American cities, the initiative in establishing the city-to-city partnerships always came from the Balkan side (either from city officials or the diaspora). This means that city-to-city diplomacy between Croatian and Slovenian cities on one side and Chinese cities on the other is part of a planned and conscious policy of Chinese involvement in Central and Eastern Europe. The American presence at this level of non-state relations seems somewhat accidental. The justification can be found in the functioning of the 16+1 format and the Belt and Road Initiative (Song, 2019; Mierzejewski, 2021). Although the Chinese strategy for the Central and Eastern Europe region, including the Western Balkans, does not meet the expectations of countries in the region (Turcsányi, 2020; Liu, 2013; Jaklič & Sverličič, 2019), it cannot be accused of lacking Chinese initiatives in this area (Pavličević, 2014). As this study indicates, cities also benefited from the revival of European-Chinese policy at the state level. Thus, the US has still not developed a suitable alternative to Chinese initiatives in the CEE region.

Based on the findings of this study, it can be argued that Croatian and Slovenian cooperation with the US at the city level lags behind the intensity of these relations at the state level. According to official statements from the US Department of State, both Slovenia and Croatia play significant roles in American policy towards Southeast Europe. Croatia, for instance, is treated as a stabilising factor in the region and a successful model of democratic and economic transformation for its neighbours (US Department of State, 2021). Similarly, Slovenia is perceived as an essential partner 'promoting peace and security in the neighbouring Western Balkans region' (US Department of State, 2021).

US-Croatian cooperation at the state level includes spheres such as the economy (e.g., trade agreements, double tax avoidance agreements, and direct aid), military (e.g., supplies of equipment), security (e.g., cybercrime cooperation), and education (e.g., scholarships and grants) (US Embassy in Croatia, 2023), as well as energy and climate issues (e.g., energy diversification,



decarbonisation, and tackling climate change)<sup>8</sup> (US Department of State, 2022). Slovenia, on the other hand, is a partner in strategic dialogue (a structured, ongoing communication process that includes official meetings regularly) with the US (US Embassy in Slovenia, 2023). Another example of a relationship at the state level is a partnership between Slovenia and the Colorado National Guard. This partnership was established in 1993 and is part of a program coordinated by the US Department of Defence, which aims to pair 'National Guard units from states and territories with partner countries worldwide' (Colorado National, 2022). Taking into account the examples mentioned above of cooperation and political declarations, one should also be aware that the dynamics of the political situation in the Balkans have conditioned the importance of Slovenia and Croatia in American policy. As Tina Čok (2021) points out, during the turbulent 1990s, Slovenia, as a regional leader in the political transformation, attracted much more attention from American politicians than it has since 2004, when Ljubljana began to be treated as one of the entities in relations with the EU. A similar pattern can be observed in the case of Croatia, which joined the EU in 2013.

A few more factors should be noted in the case of relations between the US, Croatia, and Slovenia. At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, the US government favoured keeping Yugoslavia united, contrary to Ljubljana's and Zagreb's aspirations for independence. Moreover, as the former US ambassador to Croatia, Thomas P. Melady, indicated, many American politicians and diplomats represented a pro-Serbian bias. As a result, Washington recognised the independence of Croatia four months later than the European Community (Melady 2008). Finally, in the first decade of Croatian independence, one of the primary issues in relations with the US was Belgrade's insufficient cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the case of Croatian army officers accused of war crimes (Melady, 2008). However, all these above elements were consistent with American interests in stabilising the Balkan region. Due to internal reforms, Slovenia and Croatia became closer to Euro-Atlantic structures. So, their relations with the US gradually improved, finally leading to membership of both countries in the EU and NATO. These earlier tensions (particularly in the case of Zagreb) might be one of the factors responsible for the low level of US-Croatia and US-Slovenia city partnerships.

## Summary

This study challenges the traditional state-centric approach to international relations by offering a contemporary perspective drawing on concepts like multi-level governance (MLG), pluralism, and state fragmentation. Within this perspective, the global landscape is portrayed as a complex network of actors beyond nation-states, where sub-state entities, particularly cities and regions, play increasingly influential roles. A prime example of this phenomenon is the engagement of cities and regions (including those in the West Balkans) in the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative after 2012 (Mierzejewski and Chatys, 2018, pp. 14–18). Pluralism among international actors, including sub-state governments, has led to blurred competencies and a redefinition of power dynamics, in which cities and regions actively participate in international affairs, contributing to global networks, signing treaties, and shaping diplomatic practices. This process does not always indicate rising autonomy of local authorities from the central governments; rather, it is a state of ever-changing 'multi-level and multi-nodal policymaking' where initiatives and decisions are sometimes made by substate actors and sometimes by state actors – similar to how Cerny defines the heterarchical order of international relations (Cerny, 2022, p. 4). Although on the Chinese side, we can still see the strong position of the central government in initiating international cooperation, it appears to be much less coordinated on the West Balkans side. Identifying patterns of cooperation between Croatian and Slovenian cities with China and the US allowed us to identify both similarities and differences. Official visits served as the primary mode of partnership realisation, with a focus on exchanging experiences. In the collaborations between Western Balkan and Chinese cities, diverse forms of

<sup>8</sup> Croatia takes part in the Partnership for Transatlantic Energy and Climate Cooperation (P-TECC), a multi-lateral initiative of public and private industry leaders, led by the US Department of Energy. The main aim is the decarbonisation of 'Central and Eastern European economies, strengthening energy security in the region, creating business connections with US companies, and fostering cooperation' (Atlantic Council, 2023).

partnership, such as participation in fairs and economic forums, were noted, unlike the limited scope of Western Balkan-American cooperation. The areas of cooperation were more extensive in the case of Croatian and Slovenian cities with Chinese partners, covering sport and tourism, the economy, and culture.

Despite these commonalities, the lack of multi-level policy coordination in Slovenia and Croatia towards foreign partners at the city level hinders the full potential of partnerships with China and the US. Nonetheless, notable differences emerged, primarily in the scale of cooperation. Most Slovenian and Croatian cities actively partnered with Chinese cities, while only half of the Slovenian and one of the six Croatian cities we examined engaged with the American side. Chinese officials typically initiate partnerships, whereas American partnerships are initiated by Balkan cities, suggesting a conscious Chinese policy in Central and Eastern Europe compared to the more accidental American presence.

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