



**The ILA study group on the Role of
Cities in International Law
City Report: Prague**

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Cities of hope in stormy times: municipal resistance against the authoritarian drift, the example of the City of Prague

Abstract: In December 2019, the mayors of Budapest, Prague, Warsaw, and Bratislava signed the Pact of Free Cities pledging to stand together against populism, advocate sustainable development, the rule of law, human rights and direct cooperation between the cities and the European Union. This city report assesses the Pact of Free Cities, its genesis, and evolution by focusing in particular on Prague's involvement therein. This assessment turns to the city's specific autonomy within the domestic framework, its international relations with other cities, and institutions, including its fallouts with the Chinese and Russian government over foreign affairs. The report shows that Prague's particular history, its citizens' composition, strategic partnership, and the current administration all contributed to the city's advocacy for the Pact of Free Cities and human rights and the rule of law beyond this agreement.

'Populism is striving for hegemony, but it cannot win over cities. Cities can be the bridgeheads starting from which all the current crises of democracy can be repaired'. Gergely Karácsony, the mayor of Budapest, highlighted this role of cities in the fight against populist tendencies during the signing ceremony of the *Pact of Free Cities* (the Pact) in December 2019.

The mayors of Budapest, Prague, Warsaw, and Bratislava, who are either independents or from opposition parties to their respective national governments, introduced the Pact to show unity in fighting rising populism in the Višegrad states and promote the protection of human rights. The 'Pact', which is a rather general policy statement pledging to stand united for an open society based on 'common values of freedom, human dignity, democracy, sustainability, equality, the rule of law, social justice, tolerance, and cultural diversity.' The one-and-a-half-page long document, published online, does neither refer to concrete measures, nor to legal instruments as a basis for their targets. However, it refers inter alia to the concept of 'sovereignty' and "an open society based on [...] common values of freedom, human dignity, democracy, sustainability, equality, the rule of law, social justice, tolerance, and cultural diversity."¹

In concrete terms, they advocated for what they call 'grassroots democracy', measures to reduce carbon dioxide, more direct funding from the European Union to cities, and to stand

¹ *Pact of Free Cities*, signed on 16 December 2019, available at: https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_how_grassroots_democracy_can_cure_the_ills_of_central_europe.

by each other. In doing so, the cities aim at bypassing the national level and direct cooperation with the EU.

The four cities want to constitute a counter-movement against their government's anti-immigration, ultra-conservative, authoritarian tendencies in recent years and to highlight the four local communities' commitment to human rights. Zdeněk Hřib, mayor of Prague, highlighted the Pact's symbolic value explaining that it 'sends a message that we [the V4 cities] share the same values and that there are voices in our countries that do not identify with populist and nationalist politics. Together we want to give these voices strength'. He further highlighted that in his view, the joint effort will be more effective and that in the foreseeable future [they] will find a number of functional solutions that [...] effectively prevent the rise of another wave of populism. Populism offers easy and attractive ways, but it has been destructive in the long term'.²

The Pact is an example of a joint partnership for human rights, the rule of law, and city-to-city cooperation, which explicitly refers and relies on the language of international law. The Pact makes reference to particular rights and the rule of law as the basis for this cooperation. When it comes to the City of Prague, this Pact is only one of several examples in the current mayor's fight against the rise of populism and for human rights.

This city report will show Prague's role when it comes to acting and cooperating on an international level, implementing sustainable development goals, protecting human rights, and advocating for closer and direct cooperation with EU institutions. In doing so, the report takes the *Pact of Free Cities* and the City of Prague's involvement therein as a starting point to show its various measures to implement regional and international cooperation and human rights protection. Furthermore, the report will offer multiple reasons for Prague's active role in advocating for and adopting the *Pact of Free Cities* and pursuing its subsequent implementation. These explanations cover particular historical developments, current domestic and international political tendencies, individual actors, and their values and ties with like-minded politicians as well as Prague's population composition.

Publicly available material and sources on Prague's practices concerning international law are scarce, and media reports available are often politically prejudiced in a certain way depending on its authorship. To provide a more holistic picture of Prague's practices in this regard as well as of the *Pact of Free Cities*, its background, its reception by citizens, media, and other actors and its practical implementation after December 2019, interviews with 'insiders' were indispensable.

² Statement by Zdeněk Hřib, mayor of the City of Prague in a Facebook post on the signing of the Pact of Free Cities, quoted in: Dimitrova, Aseniya *Mayors of Bratislava, Budapest, Prague and Warsaw sign Free Cities Pact* The Mayor, 17 December 2019, available at: <https://www.themayor.eu/hu/mayors-of-bratislava-budapest-prague-and-warsaw-sign-free-cities-pact>.

Sofie Bouteligier highlights in her book *Cities, Networks, and Global Environmental Governance* the indispensability of relying on interviews to explain cities' network functioning. She argues that 'interviews were an absolute necessity for developing insights into the day-to-day reality [...] Theoretical assumptions only give an abstract and simplistic reflection'.³

For this report, Martin Churavý, Head of International Relations and Protocol Unit of the Prague City Hall, offered these insights in a personal interview conducted in March 2020. Marek Polach, the representative of the Delegation of Prague to the EU, provided additional insight, in particular concerning the relationship between the City of Prague and the European Union in a personal interview conducted in April 2020. Marek Polach further provided valuable sources shedding light on the EU's response to Prague's advocacy for more direct cooperation by sharing letters from Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, and David Maria Sassoli, President of the European Parliament about these issues with the author. These interviews provide for a more holistic understanding of the City of Prague's practice concerning international law. It is, of course, in the nature of things that these interviews may offer a one-sided or politically tinged picture on these questions.

Nevertheless, both interviews also revealed the limitations, difficulties, and realities of Prague's practice concerning international law. As Marek Polach put it poignantly, human rights, international obligations, and closer ties with EU institutions are highly relevant for the city.

The City of Prague serves as an interesting case study of a capital city that does advocate for a counter-movement against populist governments, human rights, and sustainable development. As Prague does not fall under the category of 'megacity' and is further not part of the major international city networks, very little attention has been paid to its role concerning international law. This report will thus highlight that not only the 'big players' like Paris, San Francisco or Hong Kong contribute to international law, but also smaller cities do so if their local Council is invested in these issues and its citizens share those values.

1. The origins of the Pact of Free Cities and the City of Prague's role

The publicly available *Pact of Free Cities* titled 'A new "Pact of Free Cities" is launching to combat populism, promote transparency, and tackle the climate crisis' is rather short (737 words, 1 ½ pages), on point and relies on general terms. How the Pact between the four mayors of Budapest, Prague, Warsaw, and Bratislava came about and why at the specific point in time (December 2019) remains unknown to the public. Fortunately, Martin Churavý, Head of International Relations and Protocol Unit of the Prague City Hall, who actively accompanied the emergence of the Pact and now also the implementation thereof, provided these insights. According to him, one driving force behind the Pact was the geographical proximity of the

³ Bouteligier, Sofie *Cities, Networks, and Global Environmental Governance: Spaces of Innovation, Places of Leadership* (Taylor & Francis Group 2012), p. 71.

four cities, the mayor's political opposition to the ruling government, the fact that all V4 cities face similar issues and challenges and share common values. To make a clear statement against populist tendencies, Churavý explains, the Pact of Free Cities was symbolically signed on the premises of the Central European University in Budapest, which moved to Vienna in 2019 as it was forced out by Victor Orbán's government⁴.

The transfer of know-how and the fostering of synergies between the cities was another driver behind the Pact. Furthermore, Churavý highlighted that the newly elected mayor of Budapest, Gergely Karácsony, had the initial idea for the Pact, which was then rapidly drafted and signed within two to three weeks.⁵ Asked about the reasons for the timing of the signing of the Pact, Churavý highlighted that the exceptional political circumstances in the four countries, the mayor's advocacy for human rights, together with the global trend for cities to 'self-emancipation' and to act on an international level triggered the decision to establish the *Pact of Free Cities*. Since the signing of the Pact, the City of Prague undertook first concrete implementation measures such as planning student exchanges, regular virtual meetings between the mayors every two weeks. Churavý sees the Pact as a starting point for a more extended conversation between the four cities and beyond, which will lead to a closer city-to-city cooperation. The fact that mayors of other cities like Istanbul, London, Vienna, and Amsterdam approached the V4 mayors and expressed interest in joining the *Pact of Free Cities* supports this positive assessment.

Interestingly, the Pact itself gained relatively little attention amongst the citizens of Prague. This is also reflected in the fact that local media paid little tribute to the signing.⁶ However, international media, other cities and EU institutions paid immediate and significant attention to this event.⁷ This increased attention is little surprising when taking into account the prominence cities gained as players on an international level. Moritz Baumgärtel and Barbara Oomen highlight in this regard that the

'increased self-confidence with which local authorities have come to respond to global challenges in recent years. With nation-states often in crisis or political deadlock, local authorities have increasingly asserted themselves as an alternative with greater legitimacy and more hands-on impact, and they are recognized as such by policymakers, scholars and international and regional organizations alike

⁴ Walker, Shaun *Classes move to Vienna as Hungary makes rare decision to oust university* The Guardian, 16 November 2019, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/16/ceu-classes-move-to-vienna-orban-hungary-ousts-university>.

⁵ Interview with Martin Churavý, 6 March 2020.

⁶ Some exceptions are: Kenety, Brian *V4: Prague to sign "Free Cities Pact" with Budapest, Bratislava, Warsaw* Radio Prague International, 12 December 2019, available at: <https://english.radio.cz/v4-prague-sign-free-cities-pact-budapest-bratislava-warsaw-8113394> (the article very briefly addresses the signing in four short paragraphs), See also: PražskýDEN *Praha se připojila k Paktu svobodných měst. Cílem je spolupráce a hájení lidských práv* Prazskyden, 17 December 2019, available at: <https://www.prazskyden.cz/praha-se-pripojila-k-paktu-svobodnych-mest-cilem-je-spoluprace-a-hajeni-lidskych-prav/>.

⁷ Interview with Martin Churavý, 6 March 2020.

[...] Increasingly, cities – large and small – are not only symbolically ratifying treaties but also explicitly enforcing them, positioning themselves as human rights cities and invoking international human rights law locally vis-à-vis national governments and in international fora and networks.⁸

As the following sections will show, the City of Prague exemplifies a local authority that asserted itself as an alternative to the Czech government's policy in certain aspects. The city is also an example for a local actor being active outside its domestic or regional sphere, concluding agreements, promoting human rights, and sustainable development. The *Pact of Free Cities* is just one of several concrete measures exemplifying this development. As will be shown in the following, the City of Prague's interest in joining the *Pact of Free Cities* at this particular point in time is little surprising given its history, the majority of citizens shared values, the current administration, its international positioning and the overall trend of rising relevance cities to act outside its regional sphere.⁹

2. The City of Prague in the country's domestic framework

Reasons for the city's elevated role on an international and domestic level, as exemplified in the *Pact of Free Cities*, are its size, status as the country's capital, its constitutionally guaranteed autonomy, relative prosperity, and particular population composition.

The City of Prague is the capital of the Czech Republic and its largest city in the number of citizens (1.3 million) and size (298 km²). As of 2020, the current growth rate is at 0.56% since 2015. The size of the city's population grew continuously since the 1950s, from about 934k citizens to about 1.3 million in 2020. Only between 1990 and 2000 did the population decrease temporarily. Estimates foresee a growth of the city's population to 1.34 million people by 2030.¹⁰

Polach highlights that the composition of the citizens of Prague also contributes to the values it represents.¹¹ Prague traditionally attracts intellectuals, artists (including writers such as Franz Kafka, Jaroslav Hašek, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Daniela Hodrová) academics, and liberals. Most recent census data publicly available (from 2014) reveals the composition of the city's population, which supports Polach's statement.¹² The census revealed that over 46% of participants of the poll indicate they do not belong to any religion (in comparison to 34.5% on

⁸ Baumgärtel, Moritz and Oomen, Barbara *Frontier Cities: The Rise of Local Authorities as an Opportunity for International Human Rights Law* European Journal of International Law, (2018), Vol. 29, No. 2, p. 608.

⁹ Martin Churavý and Marek Polach agreed on these factors as being influential for Prague's signing of the Pact of Free Cities and its current role as opponent of authoritarian tendencies.

¹⁰ World Population Review *Prague Population 2020* available at: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/prague-population/>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The Czech Statistical Office provides census data, available here: <https://vdb.czso.cz/vdbvo2/faces/en/index.jsf?page=home>.

the country's level). Further, it showed that an increasing number of foreigners permanently moved to the city, the number of people with university degrees in the city rises continuously, and the number of marriages declined while the relative number of divorces increased in the past decade.¹³ These trends were also reflected on the country level, however to a smaller extend.¹⁴ Thus, this census data supports Polach's statement on the particular composition and values of Prague citizens, compared to the rest of the country.

Prague is a popular tourist attraction as it not only included in the UNESCO World Heritage Sites list as a historical point of interest, but the city also shows for numerous museums, historical sites, and landmarks. The fact that 14% of Prague's citizens are foreigners indicates that the city is not only attractive for visitors but also for people that want to settle in the city.¹⁵

Article 13 of the Czech Constitution of 1993, with its subsequent Amendments, establishes Prague as the country's capital. The Constitution further lays down in Chapter VII the principle of municipalities' territorial self-governance. Article 99 Czech Constitution clarifies that the state is 'subdivided into municipalities (obec), which are the basic territorial self-governing units, and into regions (kraje), which are the higher self-governing units.' Article 101 (4) Czech Constitution highlights municipalities' autonomy stressing that the state may interfere in its issues only in exceptional circumstances.

The City of Prague's autonomy vis-à-vis the country's government has recently gained particular attention and significance. As discussed in more detail below, in 2019, the sister-city agreement between Prague and Beijing was terminated due to opposing views on the status of Taiwan. In this context, the Chinese government attempted to put pressure on the Czech government, demanding more restraint by the City of Prague when it comes to criticizing Chinese foreign policy. The Czech government rejected this claim pointing to the city's vast-ranging autonomy in political questions.¹⁶ The same is true regarding the most recent fallout between the Russian government and the Mayor of Prague Zdeněk Hřib and his two colleagues, Ondřej Kolář and Pavel Novotný, both Prague district mayors in spring of 2020. As discussed in more detail below, the renaming of a street in Prague and the removal of a statute of general Ivan Konev in the sixth district of Prague led to a public protest by the Russian government and the Russian request to the Czech government to restrict the City of Prague in the area of foreign policy. The Czech government rejected this request in a fierce protest note with reference to the city's autonomy in these matters.¹⁷

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Eckert, Manuel and Turcsányi, Richard *Prague vs. Beijing: Estranged Sister Cities Is the severing of sister city ties between Prague and Beijing a case of Chinese punishment or Czech politics?* The Diplomat, 8 October 2019, available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/prague-vs-beijing-estranged-sister-cities/>.

¹⁷ Verseck, Keno *Russische Drohungen gegen Prager Bürgermeister: Der "Pirátor" unter Polizeischutz* Deutsche Welle Europa, 28 April 2020, available at: <https://www.dw.com/de/russische-drohungen-gegen-prager-b%C3%BCrgermeister-der-pir%C3%A1tor-unter-polizeischutz/a-53268670>.

The Czech Republic counts 6,258 municipalities. The largest municipality is Prague. Every city (statutární město), town (město) or market town (městys) is a municipality. Cities can have self-governing subdivisions. They are called city districts (městská část) or city circuits (městský obvod).¹⁸ Prague consists of ten districts, Prague 1 to 10, which are all administered by a district mayor. The character of the ten districts varies immensely from historic to modern, and from touristic to intensely traditional.¹⁹ The city is known as a cultural hot spot and hosts many international (cultural) events.²⁰

Each Czech municipality is governed by the Municipal Council (zastupitelstvo obce). Citizens elect their members in a direct election for a four-year term. The Municipal Council, in turn, appoints the mayor of the respective city and the members of the Municipal Committee (rada obce), the executive body of the city. The head of this Council is the elected mayor. She/He also leads the city administration and functions as the head representative of the municipalities. The elected mayor and vice-mayor also form part of the Municipal Committee. The Committee can establish different thematic working groups called commissions that deal with topics such as finance, culture, municipal police, water supply, or minorities.

As Marek Polach explains, another reason for Prague's self-confidence when it comes to domestic and international political and social issues lies in the city's prosperity and the composition of its citizens.²¹ Prague, together with Warsaw, Bucharest, and Bratislava, have significant disparities compared to all other regions in the respective countries and are even richer than the average Western European region.²² Prague hosts many regional and international businesses, which led to the fact that the city accounts for 25% of the country's GDP. 80% of the city's business activities occur in the service-oriented sector, such as hospitality, finance, and commercial services. Industry based businesses make up the other 20%.²³ Prague also hosts several international and regional organizations. These include non-governmental organizations dedicated to the protection of human rights such as the *Association for Democracy Assistance and Human Rights* (DEMAS), which is Czech based but

¹⁸ Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) *European section of United Cities and Local Governments Czech Republic* available at: <https://www.ccre.org/pays/view/35>.

¹⁹ World Population Review *Prague Population 2020* available at: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/prague-population/>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Interview with author on 20 April 2020.

²² Willy, Craig *Eurostat: regional disparities remain very pronounced across the European Union* Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) *European section of United Cities and Local Governments*, 10 March 2020, available at: <https://www.ccre.org/en/actualites/view/3988>.

²³ World Population Review *Prague Population 2020* available at: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/prague-population/>.

operates internationally.²⁴ International NGOs such as *Amnesty International*²⁵, *Médecins sans Frontiers*²⁶, *Caritas*²⁷, or *Transparency International*²⁸ have branch offices in Prague.

Until 2006, the headquarters of the *World Federation of Trade Unions* were equally based in Prague.²⁹

Nevertheless, Polach warns in this regard to take such numbers on Prague's prosperity as the single yardstick to determine the distribution of financial contributions by the European Union to the regions. He explains that these numbers do not necessarily reflect the prosperity of the average Prague citizen, but are instead a result of the numerous companies and institutions situated in the country's capital.³⁰ Therefore, he explains, it is one of the City of Prague and the Prague's representation in Brussels priorities to advocate for taking such factors into account when determining the distribution of funds and pushing for direct payment of the funds to the city instead of the government.³¹

Naturally, in a functioning democracy, a municipality's policies and values are driven by its citizens' needs, demands, and objectives as they most likely vote for candidates that best represent these interests and aims. Considering Polach's assessment of Prague and the city's statistics, this seems to be true when it comes to the link between the city's values and its population composition.

3. Changing mayors, changing approaches: Prague's changing attitudes towards human rights

Interestingly, citizens do not directly elect Czech mayors but vote for a specific party that previously decides on an individual candidate.

Hřib, who is a member of the Czech Pirate Party, became mayor of Prague by leading a three-party coalition administration. The Pirate Party that pursues liberal values and has roots in civil society came in second in October 2018's municipal elections with 17 percent of the votes. The Czech Pirate Party, which also gained massive popularity in Czech parliamentary elections and European Parliament elections in 2019, stand for

²⁴ DEMAS is an independent platform of Czech NGOs that also operate internationally. It was established in 2008. The founding membership comprises 11 NGOs. For more information on DEMAS see: <https://www.demas.cz/en>.

²⁵ For more information on Amnesty International in Prague, see: <https://www.amnesty.cz/>.

²⁶ The MFS office in the Czech Republic was first established in 2006 in Prague. For more information on Médecins sans Frontières in Prague, see: <https://www.lekari-bez-hranic.cz/msf-czech-republic>.

²⁷ Caritas of the Archdiocese of Prague is a church-based organization founded by the Archdiocese of Prague. It is a part of Caritas Internationalis, global network and one of the largest providers of social services in Prague. For more information, see here: <https://praha.charita.cz/en/>.

²⁸ TI operates in Prague since 1998 working towards an effective and responsible state administration. For more information see: <https://www.transparency.cz/>.

²⁹ In 2006, the headquarter was moved to Athens, Greece. For more information on the organization see: <http://www.wftucentral.org/>.

³⁰ Interview with author on 20 April 2020.

³¹ Ibid.

human rights, direct democracy, transparency and freedom of information as well as social security policies.³²

Mayor Hřib embodies these values and openly advocated for these values since his elections visible in several small and big measures. One minute, but a significant step that exemplifies the recent shift in the City of Prague's politics on taking a public stance on human rights issues and matters of international law, was the restoration of the practice of flying the Tibetan flag from Prague's town hall in March 2019. This tradition had previously been established in the era of former Czech president Václav Havel.³³

Both interview partners stressed Havel's influence in today's local politics in Prague as well as Prague's historical events, in particular the Prague Spring of 1968, that still shape the values of the city today.³⁴

The previous City of Prague administration under Adriana Krnáčová (a member of the populist party ANO 2011 of then-president Babiš), had suspended this practice.³⁵ Martin Churavý explains in this regard that the restoration of this tradition under the current administration led to immediate reactions by the Chinese delegation in Prague, which personally invited him several times to 'tea and a personal chat' to express their displeasure.³⁶

The previous administration did not only abandon the tradition of flying the Tibetan flag at the Prague town hall but had also initiated the partnership agreement with Beijing in 2016. The establishment of close relations at the time was following the Czech government's pro-China policy aiming at strengthening ties between the two countries.³⁷

As mentioned above, in the spring of 2020, the relations between the Russian government and the city of Prague representatives reached a low point. The termination of the partnership cooperation agreements with Moscow and Saint Petersburg in 2014

³² Mortkowitz, Siegfried *Czech Pirates, ahoy! Anti-establishment party is now third-largest in national parliament and has high hopes for Brussels*. POLITICO, 25 January 2019, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/czech-pirate-party-anti-establishment-ivan-bartos-ahoy/>.

³³ Jiří Pehe (director of New York University in Prague) explained in this regard that '[e]veryone in this country knows that when you support Taiwan and Tibet, you're saying exactly what Havel used to say [...] [t]his was intentional on the part of the Pirate party as soon as he took over Prague. They are saying that the Czech Republic has a special history of fighting against communism and you should respect it.' See: Tait, Robert *Zdeněk Hřib: the Czech mayor who defied China* The Guardian, 3 July 2019.

³⁴ Interview with Martin Churavý and Marek Polach with author.

³⁵ Tait, Robert *Zdeněk Hřib: the Czech mayor who defied China* The Guardian, 3 July 2019, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/jul/03/zdenek-hrib-the-czech-mayor-who-defied-china-taiwan>.

³⁶ Interview with Martin Churavý, 6 March 2020.

³⁷ Eckert, Manuel and Turcsányi, Richard *Prague vs. Beijing: Estranged Sister Cities Is the severing of sister city ties between Prague and Beijing a case of Chinese punishment or Czech politics?* The Diplomat, 8 October 2019, available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/prague-vs-beijing-estranged-sister-cities/>.

in response to Russia's 'aggression towards Ukraine' as then-mayor of Prague Tomáš Hudeček named it,³⁸ was the first breaking-point in the Prague-Russia relations.

Six years later, this tense relationship deteriorated further after Russia moved its embassy in response to Prague's renaming of the street in which the premise was situated, in Boris Nemtsov Square. Nemtsov, a former Russian vice prime minister who had published reports on corruption under President Vladimir Putin and advocated for fair elections and democracy, was assassinated in Moscow bridge in 2015. The Russian government publicly protested the renaming of the street and ultimately moved its seat.³⁹ At around the same time, the removal of the statute of general Ivan Konev in the sixth district of Prague led to a public protest by the Russian government and the Russian request to the Czech government to restrict the City of Prague's power. General Ivan Konev led the Red Army, which entered Prague in 1945. The controversy surrounding his person started after the end of communism in the Czech Republic, because of his significant role in quelling the 1956 Hungarian uprising and support in building the Berlin Wall in 1961.⁴⁰ Others see Konev as a Soviet war hero and liberator and the statute's removal as a disparagement of his role.⁴¹ The removal of the statue did not only lead to protests by the Russian government, but also the opening of a criminal case against the city's representatives under a newly established law penalizing the 'public desecration of symbols of Russia's military glory'.⁴² In the same month, Zdeněk Hřib and his district colleagues who were responsible for the statute's removal were put under police protection for several weeks there as there were reports on the Russian government's attempt to assassinate the mayors⁴³. One magazine claims the mayors were made out to be poisoning targets by the Russian government.⁴⁴ No Czech authority confirmed

³⁸ Czech News Agency *Prague suspends partnership with Russian cities* 2 September 2014, available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140912121824/http://praguepost.com/prague-news/41312-prague-suspends-partnership-with-russian-cities>.

³⁹ CTK *Russian Embassy in Prague moves its seat from Boris Nemtsov Square* 18 April 2020, available at: <https://news.expats.cz/weekly-czech-news/russian-embassy-in-prague-moves-its-seat-from-boris-nemtsov-square/>.

⁴⁰ REUTERS *Prague to remove statue of Soviet marshal who led Red Army forces* 12 September 2020, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-czech-russia-monument/prague-to-remove-statue-of-soviet-marshal-who-led-red-army-forces-idUSKCN1VX2FI>.

⁴¹ REUTERS in Moscow *Russia opens criminal case after Czech officials remove Soviet statue* 10 April 2020, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/10/russia-opens-criminal-case-after-czech-officials-remove-soviet-statue>.

⁴² Reuters in Moscow *Russia opens criminal case after Czech officials remove Soviet statue* The Guardian, 10 April 2020, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/10/russia-opens-criminal-case-after-czech-officials-remove-soviet-statue>.

⁴³ Roth, Andrew *Prague mayor under police protection amid reports of Russian plot* The Guardian, 27 April 2020, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/27/prague-mayor-under-police-protection-amid-reports-russian-plot-zdenek-hrib>.

⁴⁴ Kundra, Ondřej *Muž s ricinem* RESPEKT, 26 April 2020, available at: <https://www.respekt.cz/tydenik/2020/18/muz-s-ricinem>.

these detailed allegations but acknowledged that the mayors were followed and in danger.⁴⁵ The Russian government denied any of these allegations.⁴⁶

Both interview partners, Martin Churavý and Marek Polach agree on the particular role mayor Hřib as a person plays when it comes to the city's actions on an international level and its clear-cut standpoint regarding international relations, international law, and human rights.⁴⁷

4. The V4 city partnership

The close cooperation between the four Viségrad cities is not surprising given the traditional close ties between the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia (V4) on a domestic level. These close relations on a domestic and city level can be traced back to the end of the communist regimes and a joint effort to promote common interests and integration into the European Union.⁴⁸ On May 1st, 2004, all four states became EU members. As Martin Churavý explains, the four states share cultural, traditional, religious values, shared interests, and roots which their cooperation aims to strengthen and promote.⁴⁹

The cornerstone of the close collaboration between the four states was the adoption of the *Visegrád Declaration* on February 15th, 1991, by representatives of all four countries. The wording and tone of the *Pact of Free Cities* of 2020 resemble this declaration very much as the signatories to both documents pledge to protect human rights, promote sustainable development and advocate for close cooperation with the European Union. This earlier 1991 Declaration also arguably contributed to today's close collaboration between the capitals of the four cities as it mentions as one goal the support for 'mutually beneficial cooperation of interested local self-governments of their countries and establishment of sub-regional contacts'.

On the domestic level, the Foreign Ministers of Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia emphasized the close relations between their states and their commitment to supporting their East European neighbors in April 2020. Given the ongoing global pandemic in the spring of 2020, they also adopted the *V4 Joint Statement*, confirming their efforts to face the Covid-19 crisis. Further, the statement stresses the four states' vision of the Eastern Partnership as an ambitious and robust policy based on the principles and values established in the 2009 *Prague*

⁴⁵ Roth, Andrew Prague mayor under police protection amid reports of Russian plot The Guardian, 27 April 2020, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/27/prague-mayor-under-police-protection-amid-reports-russian-plot-zdenek-hrib>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Interview with the author.

⁴⁸ Visegrad Group *About the Visegrad Group* official webpage, available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/about>.

⁴⁹ Interview with author on 6 March 2020.

*Declaration*⁵⁰ and on international law. Interestingly, in addressing current and future obstacles, policies, and goals related to this endeavor, the *V4 Joint Statement* relies intensely and throughout the text⁵¹ on the terminology of international law and international instruments, including the *UN Charter* and the *Helsinki Final Act*⁵². For example, it highlighted that

'Future policy must be credible, dynamic and attractive to our Partners, while reflecting shared values as fundamentals of the Eastern Partnership: rules-based *international order* and *international law*, democratic practices, the *rule of law* and independent judiciary and media, protection of *human rights* and the rights of persons belonging to minorities, good governance, sustainable development and market economy [emphasis added].'⁵³

In June 2020, the four states plan to approve a new vision for the EU Neighbourhood Policy⁵⁴ for which the *V4 Joint Statement* constituted an initial step.⁵⁵

5. Prague and its Partner Cities

Before signing the 'Pact of Free Cities', Prague had already established close ties with the participating cities Warsaw, Budapest, and Bratislava. The current mayors of these four cities share a common understanding of how cities can engage with human rights as reflected in the Pact. This particular approach is not only reflected in Prague's signing of the Pact, but also in recent policy changes by the city government regarding linking partnership agreements with human rights issues.

Prague holds numerous relationships with cities around the globe. As of April 2020, Prague is the partner of sixteen cities⁵⁶ around the world that formalized its partnership with a signed

⁵⁰ The Visegrad Group *Joint Statement on the Future of the Eastern Partnership* 8 April 2020, hereafter: *V4 Joint Statement*, available at:

https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/en/issues_and_press/press_releases/x2020_04_08_v4_foreign_ministers_discussed_the_ea_p.html

⁵¹ See for examples *V4 Joint Statement* paras: 1, 3, 5, 10, 11.

⁵² *V4 Joint Statement*, para. 11.

⁵³ *V4 Joint Statement*, para. 3.

⁵⁴ For more information on the European Neighbourhood Policy see: European Union External Action, *European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)* available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/european-neighbourhood-policy-enp_en.

⁵⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic *Press Release V4 Foreign Ministers Discussed the Future of the Eastern Partnership* 8 April 2020, available at: https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/en/issues_and_press/press_releases/x2020_04_08_v4_foreign_ministers_discussed_the_ea_p.html.

⁵⁶ These are: Brussels, Taipei, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Paris, Tbilisi, Kyoto, Seoul, Hamburg, Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, Nuremberg, Chicago, Miami-Dade, Phoenix and Vienna.

agreement between 1990 and 2016.⁵⁷ These partnerships range from sister-city agreements, Declarations of Partnerships, Joint Declarations to mark special events to Memorandum of Cooperation. Besides that, Prague and eight additional cities have established partner city agreements without a formal contract.⁵⁸ Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and Beijing used to be sister-cities of Prague as well. The City of Prague suspended any bilateral cooperation with Moscow and Saint Petersburg on September 2nd, 2014, in connection with the Russian annexation of Crimea and the situation in the eastern regions of Ukraine. In October 2019, the sister-city agreement between Prague and Beijing was equally terminated over disputes over China's insistence on a one-China policy and Prague's open criticism thereof. Certain media portrayed the City of Prague and mayor Hřib in particular, as the leading figure behind the termination of the agreement⁵⁹, which was vehemently denied by Marek Polach, representative of the Delegation of Prague to the EU.⁶⁰

Either way, the termination of the sister-city agreement with Beijing, once again exemplifies Prague's stance on a government's foreign policy, rather than political issues on a city-level led to the cancellation of a sister agreement.

Only three months after the termination of the sister-city agreement with Beijing and to highlight the City of Prague's stand on this issue, Prague Mayor Zdenek Hřib and Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je signed a formal partnership agreement in January 2020.⁶¹ Hřib, who publicly opposed and criticized Czech president Miloš Zeman's pro-China approach,⁶² referred to 'democratic values, respect for fundamental human rights and cultural freedoms' which unify both cities.⁶³ In doing so, Prague mayor Hřib publicly positioned the City of Prague in defiance

⁵⁷ For a list of Prague's sister-cities see Prague House *Foreign Activities* available at:

http://www.praha.eu/jnp/en/about_praque/city_administration/city_hall/foreign_activities/city_od_praque_partner_cities.html.

⁵⁸ These eight cities are: Jerusalem, Vilnius, Riga, Luxembourg, Budapest, Vienna, Bratislava, Kyiv.

⁵⁹ See for example: Financial Times *Prague mayor fights to put distance between Prague and Beijing* 2 January 2020, available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/3f89c6ae-1ce1-11ea-9186-7348c2f183af>, also: Chan, Holmes *Prague ditches Beijing for Taipei in new sister city deal Hongkong Free Press*, 5 December 2019, available at:

<https://hongkongfp.com/2019/12/05/prague-ditches-beijing-taipei-new-sister-city-deal/>,

⁶⁰ Marek Polach confirmed this twice to the author, first in a personal interview on 20 April 2020 and second in an e-mail to the author on 24 April 2020 stating that 'There was much discussion and media attention on the fact that the city of Prague wanted to take out the sentence on the one China principle out of the twinning agreement between Beijing and Prague. As for any agreement that is dealing with international cooperation, it is the city assembly that needs to vote on it. The City Assembly usually meets once per month on Thursday, the Chinese announced that they have withdrawn from the treaty on Monday, prior that date. Thus, this means that it is the Chinese Who have effectively abolished the twinning treaty.'

⁶¹ Japan Times *Prague and Taipei ink sister deal in snub to Beijing* 14 January 2020, available at:

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/01/14/asia-pacific/politics-diplomacy-asia-pacific/prague-taipei-ink-sister-deal-snub-beijing/>.

⁶² Financial Times *Prague mayor fights to put distance between Prague and Beijing* 2 January 2020, available at:

<https://www.ft.com/content/3f89c6ae-1ce1-11ea-9186-7348c2f183af>.

⁶³ Japan Times *Prague and Taipei ink sister deal in snub to Beijing* 14 January 2020, available at:

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/01/14/asia-pacific/politics-diplomacy-asia-pacific/prague-taipei-ink-sister-deal-snub-beijing/>.

of the Czech government's promotion of closer ties with China.⁶⁴ This act occurred at least in opposition to President Milos Zeman, who is said to follow his own foreign policy goals outside the government's official standpoints.⁶⁵ At the same time, Prime Minister Andrej Babis is said to be unwilling to undermine Zeman's pro-China policy approach contrary to his convictions due to his political dependency on the president.⁶⁶ Thus, in publicly confronting the pro-China policies of the government and the City of Prague's previous administration, mayor Hřib arguably followed another foreign policy approach contrary to the President and the Prime Minister.

The City of Prague is not the only municipality in this regard. The mayor of Prague's largest municipal district, Prague 6, Ondřej Kolář removed an army statute of Soviet General Ivan Konev in April 2020. The removal infuriated the Russian government, prompted its official protest, including threats of economic sanctions and the opening of a criminal case.⁶⁷

Prague signed its latest partnership agreement in March 2020 with Vienna establishing what the Austrian side calls a *Bezirkspartnerschat'* (District partnership).⁶⁸ The deal sets a five-year cooperation framework covering thirteen areas ranging from transportation, culture, waste management, information systems to security. Regular visits and exchange of experience between the mayors of both cities are part of the agreement.⁶⁹ According to mayor Hřib, one of Prague's reasons for the establishment of this partnership with Vienna, and considerations to establish further agreements with Dresden and Munich in Germany is that these cities struggle with comparable challenges such as the impacts of climate change and a housing crisis.⁷⁰ As Marek Polach explains, the signing of the partnership agreement is of particular significance for Prague and exemplifies the close ties between the two cities, not only historically but also in the recent past, including close cooperation between the two cities representations to the EU in Brussels. Polach mentions in this regard that Prague followed in Vienna's footsteps when opening the Prague House in Brussels to have its representation close

⁶⁴ Tait, Robert *Zdeněk Hřib: the Czech mayor who defied China* The Guardian, 3 July 2019, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/jul/03/zdenek-hrib-the-czech-mayor-who-defied-china-taiwan>.

⁶⁵ Gosling, Tim *Czech-China love affair hits the rocks: Relations are souring as the country's government and president pursue diverging foreign policies*. Al Jazeera, 30 October 2019, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/czech-china-love-affair-hits-rocks-191029175837969.html>.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Deutsche Welle *Prague removes statue of Soviet General Konev* Deutsche Welle News, 3 April 2020, available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/prague-removes-statue-of-soviet-general-konev/a-53010658>. Also: Reuters in Moscow *Russia opens criminal case after Czech officials remove Soviet statue* The Guardian, 10 April 2020, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/10/russia-opens-criminal-case-after-czech-officials-remove-soviet-statue>.

⁶⁸ Stadt Wien *Bezirkspartnerschaften* available at: <https://www.wien.gv.at/politik/international/netzwerke/staedtekooperationen.html#bezirke>.

⁶⁹ Expat CZ *Prague to sign partnership agreement with Vienna* Expat CZ News 4 February 2020, available at: <https://news.expats.cz/weekly-czech-news/prague-to-sign-partnership-agreement-with-vienna/>.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

to EU institutions. He sees the City of Vienna's foreign policy approach as an inspiration for Prague in many aspects.⁷¹

This cooperation between the two cities on issues such as urban development, city planning, waste management, energy, and sustainable development is not entirely novel. Instead, it constitutes a refreshing of old ties of cooperation in these areas. Already in 1992 did the two cities, jointly with the cities of Berlin, Budapest, and Warsaw, establish cooperation in these matters during the *Mitteleuropa- und Metropolenkonferenz* (Central Europe and Metropolis Conference).⁷² Both cities also concluded a bilateral agreement in 1995. The core of this agreement was to establish economic cooperation, find solutions for environmental matters, and to transfer know-how. For example, Vienna supported Prague in the construction of landfills, the remediation of contaminated sites, and the preparation of an overall concept for the separate collection of waste materials, including the necessary public relations work.⁷³

The City of Prague is not only active when it comes to city-to-city cooperation, but also when it comes to advocating for close relations with international and regional institutions, in particular the EU. The *Pact of Free Cities* exemplifies these efforts.

6. The City of Prague, the Pact of Free Cities and the European Union

As elaborated above, one of the main aims of the four mayors behind the *Pact of Free Cities* is to receive more direct funding from the European Union and, in doing so, to bypass the state level. Martin Churavý added in this regard that the City of Prague sees the Pact as a two-way street in which not only the cities' interests receive greater attention in Brussels, but also in which European ideas are more robustly implemented in the four cities. In his view, this implementation of European values is particularly important as many citizens feel alienated from the European Union.⁷⁴

The *Pact of Free Cities* was not the cradle of the idea of fostering and promoting Prague's interests directly in Brussels. Already in 2002, the city established a permanent representation of the *Delegation of Prague to the EU* in the *Prague House* in Brussels to strengthen direct cooperation between the city and EU institutions. The Prague House is strategically situated in the *European Quartier* in close vicinity of various EU institutions to *inter alia* 'defend and presenting the interests of the capital city of Prague'.⁷⁵ The house not only hosts the delegation

⁷¹ Interview with Marek Polach on 20 April 2020.

⁷² Amt der Wiener Landesregierung *Wien in der EU* Vertretung der Europäischen Kommission in Österreich, available at: <http://aei.pitt.edu/34782/1/A824.pdf>, p. 23.

⁷³ Chen, Ina; Kaertner, Jean-Frederic; Schneider, Martin and Wollinger, Olivia *Kooperation und Konkurrenz zwischen Wien und anderen Metropolen Die Situation Wiens in der europäischen Städtehierarchie mit Schwerpunkt auf die Bereiche: Infrastruktur, Technologietransfer, Wissenschaft und Forschung* Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien 1996, available at: <http://www-sre.wu-wien.ac.at/SEMINAR.WS95/ende.html>.

⁷⁴ Churavý, Martin Interview on 6 March 2020.

⁷⁵ Prague House Official Webpage, available at: <http://www.prague-house.eu/en/prague-house/mission-and-representational-activities/>.

but also offers numerous cultural events such as exhibitions and theater plays for the public throughout the year as well as panel discussions and receptions. The Delegation of Prague to the EU pursues three main aims:

'firstly to continue *increasing awareness about Prague* and its interests amongst the representatives of European institutions and other relevant organisations. Secondly, to *report on the official and unofficial events within the EU*, along with providing feedback to Prague's political representatives and administrative leaders. Thirdly, the delegation aims to *improve communication about European issues and possibilities* that the EU offers for other Prague institutions, associations and citizens of *the city*. In all its activities the staff of the delegation focuses on the important role of networking for *the benefit of the city* [emphasis added].⁷⁶

Another measure to promote close, direct, and long-term cooperation between the city and the EU, the City of Prague, has co-organized and patronaged the annual *PRAGUE European Summit* since 2015. The City of Prague, together with the *Czech Republic Representation of the European Commission*, the *EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy*⁷⁷, and the *Institute of International Relations*,⁷⁸ hosted the three-day international conference. The summit aims at triggering with

'a strategic and open debate on the future of the European Union among high-level political representatives, government officials, business representatives, academicians and journalists from the Czech Republic, EU countries, V4 countries and other.'⁷⁹

Thus, these efforts by the government of Prague in cooperation with several other European cities show their eagerness for closer direct collaboration with the EU. Two recent written responses by Ursula von der Leyen, *President of the European Commission* and David Maria Sasso, *President of the European Parliament* to joint letters by mayors of European Cities demanding more direct cooperation, show a rather cautious answer by the EU to such requests. Marek Polach made the letters sent *inter alia* to the mayor of Prague, available to the author.

Ursula von der Leyen responded in April 2020 to a letter of the V4 mayors regarding the city's support for the European Green Deal. The message is drafted in rather careful and diplomatic

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration. It operates in the Czech Republic and beyond. The think-tank *inter alia* formulates ideas and opinions to the EU and Czech policy makers. For more information on the institute see: <https://www.europeum.org/>.

⁷⁸ The Institute of International Relations, Prague (IIR) is an independent public research institution which conducts academic research in the larger field of international relations including European studies. It was established in 1957 in Prague. For more information see: <https://www.iir.cz/static/who-we-are>.

⁷⁹ PRAGUE European Summit Official Webpage, the summit was first hosted in Prague in 2015. For more information on past and future events, speakers and the summit's vision, see: <https://www.praguesummit.eu/>.

terms such as when she highlights that she took 'note of [the mayors] views that the next generation of programmes in the areas of research and innovation, [...] should include measures to advance green policies in cities.'⁸⁰ She also mentions that she

'recognise[s] the importance of the regulatory framework in the realisation of the European Green Deal and in the provision of means for local authorities to act. In this context, I would like to mention the substantial work delivered in the frame of the Urban Agenda for the EU that intends to better involve cities in the design and implementation of policies at the EU and national levels.'⁸¹

As Marek Polach mentions, Sassoli, in contrast, who responded to a similar letter with more cities involved⁸², relied on less general and vague terminology.⁸³ Sassoli stresses the European Parliament's strong support for the mayors' involvement and highlights cities' significant role as 'active partners' in realizing the goals of the European Green Deal. The President of the EU Parliament even calls for direct involvement of cities when it comes to discussions on the implementation of mobility policies on the EU level. He highlights in this regard that '[i]n order to be successful, the ecological transition must involve [...] first and foremost, European cities and local governments. And further states that 'the European Parliament will work as to ensure that European Cities will play an important role in this process [of building networks to advance environmental protection]'.⁸⁴ However, despite the more positive tone and the promise to see cities as an active partner in the battle against climate change, Sassoli's answer does not yet wholly satisfy the City of Prague's goal of direct cooperation and funding from the EU to the city level.⁸⁵

The EU is also represented in Prague. The only EU institution based in Prague is the *European Global Navigation Satellite Systems Agency* (European GNSS Agency). The agency, which was established in 2004, is based in Prague since 2012. The European GNSS Agency is a European Union agency responsible for any matters on satellite radio-navigation programs⁸⁶.

Furthermore, the *European Commission's Representation*, as established in all of its member states, is situated in the heart of the city of Prague.⁸⁷

⁸⁰ Response-letter by Ursula von der Leyen to the Mayor of Budapest, Gergely Karácsony and the V4 city mayors (co-signers of the initial letter), 7 April 2020, Ref. Ares(2020)1970909 - 07/04/2020, made available by Marek Polach.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² The initial letter from 11 February 2020 was sent to him by the mayors of the cities of Bratislava, Budapest, Warsaw, Prague, Berlin, Vienna, The Hague, Athens, Riga, Vilnius, Tallinn, Frankfurt, Kosice, Milan and Strasbourg who expressed their support for the European Green Deal.

⁸³ Response letter by David Maria Sassoli D 302990, 24 February 2020.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Interview with Marek Polach, 20 April 2020.

⁸⁶ For more information see: European GSA Official website, available at: <https://www.gsa.europa.eu/>.

⁸⁷ For more information on the EU Commission's Representation in Prague see: https://ec.europa.eu/czech-republic/home_cs.

7. The City of Prague within the global network of cities

Given its international alignment, it is little surprising that the City of Prague also cooperates with like-minded cities in regional and global city networks. These are, for example, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR)⁸⁸, EUROCITIES, connecting over 140 of Europe's largest cities and over 45 partner cities in 39 states.⁸⁹ In 2019, Prague even hosted the EUROCITIES annual conference under the heading 'Cities at a Crossroad'.⁹⁰ Furthermore, Prague's international activities include, but are not limited to, cooperation with UN-Habitat, UNICEF, the European Social Network, the Historic Cities Network, the Covenant of Mayors.⁹¹ However, as Martin Churavý highlights, the main focus of the city's government is the close cooperation with its partner cities and its active role in the EUROCITIES network.⁹²

However, Prague is not a member of the *C40 Cities* association in which 94 city mayors participate dedicated to climate change governance.⁹³ Out of the four V4 cities, only Warsaw is part of the C40 network.

8. Conclusion and final remarks

In December 2019, the mayors of Budapest, Prague, Warsaw, and Bratislava signed the '*Pact of Free Cities*' pledging to stand together against populism, advocate sustainable development, the rule of law, human rights and direct cooperation between the cities and the European Union. This city report assesses the Pact, its genesis, and evolution by focusing in particular on Prague's involvement therein. In doing so, it demonstrates that also smaller cities contribute to international law and the adherence to human rights if their local Council is invested in these issues and its citizens share those values.

The Pact, a one-and-a-half-page long policy statement, published online, does neither refer to concrete measures, nor to legal instruments as a basis for their targets. However, it highlights the mayors' advocacy for an open society based on freedom, human dignity, democracy, sustainability, equality, the rule of law, social justice, tolerance, and cultural diversity. Concretely, the Pact advocates for 'grassroots democracy', measures to reduce carbon dioxide, more direct funding from the European Union to cities, and to stand by each

⁸⁸ For more information see official website of CEMR/CCRE, available at: <https://www.ccre.org/>.

⁸⁹ For more information see the official website of EUROCITIES, available at: http://www.eurocities.eu/eurocities/about_us.

⁹⁰ For more information on the 2019 EUROCITIES annual conference in Prague, see: http://www.eurocities.eu/eurocities/calendar/events_list/EUROCITIES-2019-Prague-Cities-at-a-crossroads-WSP0-AZMCMZ.

⁹¹ Martin Churavý, interview with author on 6 March 2020.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ C40 connects cities world-wide with the aim of taking joint climate action and establish sustainable approaches to city planning. For more information see: <https://www.c40.org/about>. For a detailed analysis on the role of the C40 association in relation to international law see: Acuto, Michele *Global Cities, Governance and Diplomacy: The Urban Link* (Routledge 2013). Critically

other. In doing so, the cities aim at bypassing the national level and aim at direct cooperation with the EU.

What unites the four signing mayors is that they want to constitute a countermovement against their government's anti-immigration, ultra-conservative, authoritarian tendencies in recent years and to highlight the four local communities' commitment to human rights. The geographical proximity of the four cities, the mayors' common vision, the fact that all V4 cities face similar issues and challenges as well as their common values and historical ties together with the aim to create synergies were the main drivers behind the Pact.

Prague's confident role in these issues partially stems from its specific, constitutionally guaranteed autonomy within the domestic framework, its size, status as the country's capital, relative prosperity, historical coinage and particular population composition. Furthermore, current mayor Hřib, who publicly addresses his clear-cut standpoint regarding international relations, international law, and human rights builds on these factors to advocate for Prague's outspokenness on human rights issues.

This standpoint is also visible in the city's foreign relations approach. Prague is a very active player when it comes to cooperation with other entities such as other cities as well as international and regional institutions, in particular the EU. The Pact exemplifies these efforts. Particularly Prague's city-to-city cooperation policy reflects the administration's values on human rights. The termination of the sister-city agreements with Moscow, Saint Petersburg and Beijing in the recent past, exemplified Prague's stance on a foreign government's policy – even in opposition to the Czech government.

Prague's advocacy for closer ties with regional and international institutions seemed to be crowned with success as the European Union Parliament expressed strong support for the mayors' involvement and cities' role as active partners in realizing goals on a regional level.

As this report has shown, international law and particularly human rights do in practice play a significant role for the City of Prague on many levels. Nevertheless, one ought to keep in mind that these issues are only 'the cherry on top', as a city hall representative explains. The two interview partners, on whose input many points are based on in this report, agreed that the City of Prague's day to day business lies somewhere else, namely in local agendas, and not in international law. It is thus little surprise that the average citizen of Prague pays little attention to the municipal administration's advocacy in this regard, including the signing of the *Pact of Free Cities*.

At the same time, one should also be aware to only perceive a city's motives behind its engagement for human rights and international law as an 'altruistic' act to promote (international) law and human rights as Helmut Aust warns.⁹⁴ Aust stresses that '[w]indow

⁹⁴ Aust, Helmut *Shining Cities on the Hill? The Global City, Climate Change, and International Law* European Journal of International Law, (2015), Vol. 26, No. 1, p. 266.

dressings, catering for liberal and left-leaning constituencies in big cities or simply the need to attract the much sought after professionals for the high-end service, banking and legal industries with a green image' may equally constitute reasons a city's choice to promote such values.⁹⁵ Even if such motives are at play regarding Prague's signing of the *Pact of Free Cities* and its advocacy for the rule of law and human rights, the current administration's fierce stance on such values make the city a credible and visible actor and promotor thereof. Given the above described policies and circumstances, it seems very likely that the city of Prague will also on the long term play a significant role, not only on the domestic and regional level, but also on an international level when it comes to advocating such values.

⁹⁵ Ibid.