



International City Networks - Help or Hassle?

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A session of representatives of the City Directors of International Affairs Network (CDIA) of the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) was held on 22 April 2021.

The GMF is a cross-party organization based on the idea that the United States of America and Europe will be stronger by working together. The main values supported by GMF are democracy, human rights and international cooperation.

CDIA's thematic sessions focus on specific issues in the area of inter-national cooperation that are relevant to cities' development strategies and priorities. One such topic is cities' membership in various international networks. Is such membership a form of support or an obstacle for cities these days? Among the participants of the online discussion were directors responsible for foreign relations of Athens, Barcelona, Bristol, Bucharest, Denver, Dortmund, Dublin, Frankfurt am Main, Lisbon, Los Angeles, Mexico City, Montreal, Prague, San Francisco, Stockholm, Toronto, Turin, Vienna, and Vilnius. Kraków was represented by Beata Sabatowicz, Deputy Director of the Mayor's Office responsible for international affairs.

The starting point for the discussion was to point to an example which confirms the legitimacy of a city's belonging to an international network. In the case of Kraków there are many such examples, but the most recognisable is certainly Kraków's presidency in the World Heritage Cities Organisation (OWHC). During the OWHC World Congress held in Kraków in June 2019, our city was elected to the 9-member OWHC Board of Directors, representing over 300 cities from all over the world. The Mayor of Kraków, Jacek Majchrowski, was in turn elected president of this organization for the next two years. Due to the pandemic and the impossibility to convene this year's OWHC General Assembly, the presidency was extended for another year.

What are the benefits of participation in international networks for the cities? Is it worth to become member? As with all urban policies, there are of course pros and cons to such decisions. Among the most frequently indicated advantages of belonging to a network of cities is the possibility of exchanging experience and good practices, presentation of cities' interests on the international forum, the possibility of influencing legal regulations prepared by state and EU agencies, etc. Also important is the status connected with belonging to organisations regarded as important and opinion-making. However, taking into account the number of such organizations (more than 100), the question arises whether or not such an excessive number might result in overlapping and dispersion of goals?

In order to avoid this, the decision to join new networks should be preceded by an analysis of the goals the city wants to achieve through membership, taking into account already existing relations and involvement in other international associations. The key issue is the character of a given city and its most important assets. This is why - as Beata Sabatowicz stressed in her speech - Kraków tends to belong to organisations which bring together historic cities with rich cultural, tourist and academic backgrounds. When deciding on membership, however, one should not overlook other important issues such as combating climate change or the development of green spaces.



Beata Sabatowicz also drew attention to another, equally important issue. Due to the increasing involvement of citizens in city affairs, there is also a need to change the statutes of some traditional organizations in which the main representative of the city has so far been a representative of the administration. The development of civil society requires that other stakeholders - representatives of non-governmental organizations, academia and associations with city residents - also be involved in the work of those bodies.

It is also important to remember about the possibility of the city's involvement in the activities of international networks which have an ad hoc and temporary character and focus on the most urgent issues of the time. These include, for example, all threats to democracy, such as xenophobia, excessive populism, and lack of respect for the idea of equality. In this respect Kraków also rises to the challenge.

The analysis of all the pros and cons during the conference showed the advantage of belonging to international networks. Of course, it has to be a well-thought-out membership, which will not be limited to the payment of dues and the possibility of showing off the business card of a given organisation, which, even if it is beneficial for the PR of the city, definitely does not serve the interests of its inhabitants.

The analysis of all the pros and cons during the conference showed the advantage of belonging to international networks. Of course, it has to be a well-thought-out membership, which will not be limited to paying fees and showcasing the organization's logo which, while beneficial for the city's PR, hardly serves the interests of its residents.