Cities in International Decision-Making: The Impact of European Cities on International Law and Relations by Agnieszka Szpak, Robert Gawłowski, Joanna Modrzyńska, Paweł Modrzyński & Michał Dahl — Edward Elgar, publishing 2025, 196 pp.

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The rise of subnational actors and their growing role in many different policy areas of international governance has been one of the more exciting new developments in international relations. While a great deal of attention has centered on the important role of specific cities and city networks in a range of issues (i.e. climate, migration, human rights, development, SDGs, etc.) much less attention has been given to the specific role of cities in decision-making in international law.

This concise book makes an important contribution by looking precisely at the role of cities in the decision-making process in Europe. The authors make the case that Europe remains the leading jurisdiction for successful examples of multi-level governance. In addition to serving as the main jurisdiction for many city networks, Europe hosts a large number of cities which are actively involved in proposing legal norms and developing effective mechanisms for international cooperation, the exchange of best practices and sharing information.

Both the size and structure of the book are its strong points: the book is compact but focused, and draws on an extensive review of material, relevant examples, and interviews with leading city executives and specialists. It also provides a useful list of city networks which highlight the array of cities and issues at the center of the current global agenda.

Szpak et al. examine the roles played by cities in international institutions such as the United Nations, European Union, Council of Europe, and several transnational city networks. Despite many examples of city leadership in global issues, the authors conclude that the power and influence of cities remain limited. This book argues in favor of greater recognition of cities in international law-making and law enforcement, in an effort not to bypass states but rather to complement them.

Cities often show greater nimbleness and innovation ahead of their own states on some issues, while remaining as secondary players. Many readers will agree that cities are better suited to deal locally with current global issues and thus warrant a role in the discussion and negotiation of effective solutions to shared global challenges. The authors dive into the issue of cities as subjects and whether they are more successful at respecting legal obligations by being closer to their constituents and possibly more concerned with their economic well-being while states focus more on security aspects.

With specific chapters on the UN, the EU and the Council of Europe the book illustrates how institutional design shapes city involvement in global issues. The authors highlight the difference between “soft law” – developed by cities to create and diffuse norms through transnational municipal networks -- and “hard (or real) law” – developed by states.

Cities today may be viewed as norm-shapers in international law but remain legally dependent on states and face issues of legitimacy and accountability. The authors stress the conflicting reality of how cities currently shape international law while the legal community continues to debate whether cities are or should be subjects of international law. Going forward, the authors suggest that any increase in the formal legal role of cities will require careful institutional design to solve issues of legitimacy, coordination, and capacity problems.

The book is largely based on the experience of European cities and institutions with little to say about cities in other locations, especially in the Global South, home to a majority of the world population. Notwithstanding the current absence of formal legitimacy, the process of "urbanization" of international law will, most certainly, continue given the speed of urbanization around the world. With more and more people living in cities, the relevance of international law can be supported by its integration into municipal policies and adoption by city leaders. This book makes an additional contribution by looking inside several European organizations to highlight and contrast some of the successes and challenges of this issue.

This book will be of interest to everyone engaged in city diplomacy, from undergraduate students beginning to explore this topic from a global governance perspective to graduate students, faculty, and policymakers focused on learning more about effective participation of cities and subnational actors in international organizations, especially in Europe. The authors argue that the European Union sets an example by recognizing the relevance of cities to international cooperation and development by respecting the concepts of subsidiarity and proportionality. This book contributes to our understanding of how European cities highlight the way forward in shaping the role of subnational actors in the global decision-making process.