

СЕКЦИЯ 1. ПОБРАТИМСКИЕ ПРАКТИКИ ГОРОДОВ: ЗАПАДНЫЙ И РОССИЙСКИЙ ОПЫТ

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CITY RELATIONS BETWEEN HAMBURG AND SAINT PETERSBURG: A STATE OF PLAY

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Аннотация. Современный мир имеет динамичный характер. Международные отношения, находящиеся в таких условиях, демонстрируют тенденцию к быстрым изменениям. Среди множества сдвигов, вызванных глобализацией и продолжающейся повсеместной дигитализацией обществ, наиболее отчетливо проявляется тенденция децентрализации государственной власти. Последняя выражается в виде усиления субнационального уровня, возрастания роли негосударственных субъектов в мировых процессах. Наиболее отчетливо это отражается в контексте городских отношений и городской дипломатии. Данная статья, высвечивая обозначенные аспекты, фокусирует внимание на побратимских отношениях, сложившихся между Гамбургом и Санкт-Петербургом, их развитию во время продолжающейся пандемии COVID-19 и до ее распространения.

Ключевые слова: городская дипломатия, парадипломатия, Гамбург, Санкт-Петербург.

Abstract. The world is changing at an unseen pace and so is the state of global affairs. One of the most important changes, among the many shifts caused by globalisation and the ongoing digitalisation of societies across the globe, is the tendency of decentralisation of state power from national to sub-national levels as well as the increasing role of non-state actors in international affairs. This is well-reflected within the context of city relations and city diplomacy. Through a case study of the relations between the cities of Hamburg and Saint Petersburg, this essay sheds a light on the development of city relations before and during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: City Diplomacy, Para-diplomacy, Hamburg, Saint Petersburg.

Introduction

“The 19th century was the age of empires, the 20th century the age of states. The 21st becomes the ages of cities”¹ [8]

The world is changing at an unseen pace and so is the state of global affairs. Among the many shifts caused by phenomena such as globalisation and the seemingly unstoppable digitalisation of societies and economies across the globe, as shown in the abstract, is the tendency of decentralisation of state power from national to sub-national levels as well as the growing role of non-state actors in the processes traditionally dominated by state actors, such as diplomacy. Beata Surmacz offers a theory to explain this trend: “The national state is losing its functionality, its efficiency is falling in the majority of important issues of the contemporary society. On the one hand it is too small to cope with the changes, but on the other hand it is too big to deal with the need of an increasing individualised and diversified communities” [8]. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the understanding of diplomacy as solely involving “the representation of [national] interests at the international level” [4] has shifted towards a more “inclusive” definition that takes into account a variety of actors. As formulated by Jan Melissen, diplomacy of the new age can be understood as “the mechanism of representation, communication and negotiation through which states and other international actors conduct their business” [3]. These trends are well-reflected in the context of contemporary city relations as cities and city actors, through various means and in a range of forms (for instance, through city networks), have become increasingly important actors in international affairs wherein they play a significant role in tackling global challenges ranging from the fight against terrorism to climate change.

This essay is based on a paper presented at the Online International Conference “City Relations: State of Play, Opportunities, Challenges and Priorities” (23-24 April 2021, Moscow-Tyumen) that was organised under the auspices of the Russian Association of Political Science. It provides a report on the relations between the cities of Hamburg and Saint Petersburg and aims to shed a light on the development of city relations before and during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The essay is structured as follows. The first part provides a short contextual background of Russian-German relations and an introduction on the notion city relations and diplomacy. The second part builds upon this background and examines the history and current development of city relations between Hamburg and Saint Petersburg.

¹ *Author's note:* Quote from Wellington Webb (1941), the former mayor of Denver.

PART I. Background

A Retrospect of German-Russian Relations

German-Russian relations have a complex history marked by both traumatic experiences as well as a longstanding cooperation on different levels. Since Russia is Germany's second largest trade partner [1], and the vast Russian-speaking diaspora is very present, the importance of Russia to German society and economy (and vice versa) should not be underestimated. Although German-Russian relations progressed relatively well in the first two decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union [9], the last decade has been marked by frosty relations, a reflection of the wider political crisis which characterises EU²-Russia relations since the outbreak of the ongoing Ukrainian crisis and which has resulted in the imposition of political and economic sanctions on Russia of which the German government has been an ardent supporter. In addition to this wider political crisis, a range of scandals have aggravated German-Russian relations. The alleged poisoning of opposition leader Alexei Navalny and his subsequent treatment in a Berlin-hospital earlier this year is only the most recent incident which has resulted in another tit-for-tat expulsion of diplomats.

While diplomatic discord has led to continuous German critiques on the Russian Government, this is not sufficient to understand the full complexity of the German-Russian relationship. Due to the actual economic interests and lobbyists' thorough networking, it can be said, that in the times of crisis, the German-Russian relationship has remained surprisingly stable, as demonstrated, for instance, by the ongoing, and controversial North Stream-II project. This in-between is further reflected in various forms of dialogue which have nevertheless took place on many levels, internationally (for instance, in the context of the OSCE³), nationally and even sub-nationally. This essay will mainly focus on this last category, including activities of both state as well as non-state actors in the socio-economic, educational and / or cultural sphere. Such encounters often take place in the context of city relations which build upon a long tradition and contribute extraordinarily to the current German-Russian relationship.

City Relations and City Diplomacy

Structured and organised contacts between cities date back to Ancient Greece, were well-developed in the Middle Ages (most notably in the context of the Hanseatic cooperation), and are, according to some scholars, flourishing under the influence of globalisation [11]. Scholarship has approached city diplomacy from a variety of angles, for instance, through the lens para-diplomacy, defined by Der-Yuan Wu as "the involvement of the constituent units of national states in

² EU – European Union.

³ OSCE – Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

international affairs” [11]. Among the many definitions of city diplomacy, Pluim’s understanding has become quintessential, describing it as “the institutions and processes by which cities engage in relations with actors on an international political stage with the aim of representing themselves and their interest to one another” [10].

Expressed in various ways, there are many motives for city relations and city diplomacy, such as conflict resolution, image-building, or economic interest. Arguably through the rise of the internet, and, as a consequence of the processes of globalisation and decentralisation of national state power, the importance of cities as actors in international affairs has become ubiquitous both in the form of traditional partnerships, often invested in the fostering of dialogues and peace building efforts, as well as within the context of larger global city networks such as C40⁴, U20⁵ and Strong Cities, that have been addressing global issues and challenges ranging from the fight against terrorism to the abolition of poverty and climate change. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic only seems to have confirmed this trend as major cities have taken various initiatives to respond to this crisis which has a particular impact on urban environments and their populations. Although it has been argued that the pandemic is “rendering cities essential players on the global stage” [2], others have pointed to the (legal) limits of cities to find solutions to such challenges: “Yet as cities have attempted to insert an urban voice into the traditional multilateral system on global challenges, they have struggled to influence global policy-making” [5].

Part II. City Relations between Hamburg and Saint Petersburg

City relations are historically well-developed in Germany, a fact which cannot be disconnected from the Second World War, and more particularly, from the efforts to build bridges and “heal wounds” following its end. One of the many success stories in this perspective is the city of Hamburg which has currently city relations with Dar es Salaam, Marseille, Dresden, Chicago, Leon, Osaka, Marseille, Prague, Shanghai and Saint Petersburg.

As one of its oldest city partnerships, Hamburg’s relation with Saint Petersburg dates back to the late fifties, in the midst of the Cold War, when Saint Petersburg was still named Leningrad. Against the political tide of the time, representatives of both cities explored the possibility of cooperation, an effort which resulted in a cooperation agreement in 1957. While the agreement demonstrated political courage, economic interests played a fundamental part, as Axel Schildt explains: “an improvement of the relations with the Soviet Union was intended to generally foster the economic détente between the blocs on the one hand, and to

⁴ *Author's note:* C40 is a global group, which brings together a network of cities around the world.

⁵ *Author's note:* U20 is a city diplomacy initiative “Urban20”.

directly promote the trade with the Soviet Union, on the other”⁶ [6]. Its first tangible results, however, would only become visible during the seventies when the first student exchange from Hamburg to Leningrad (1977) took place and when, consecutively, “Leningrad days” and “Hamburg days” were organised in the respective countries. During the eighties, a period marked by an increasing liberalisation in the Soviet Union, this tendency would culminate in the first student exchanges from the Soviet Union to Germany (1987) as well as economic missions. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the economic crisis which hit the Soviet Union in the early nineties, the city relations remained in place and financial packages were offered by Hamburg to (then) Saint Petersburg and several projects were organised with the aim of knowledge and experience exchange. In 1992, the relationship between the cities was also officially reinstated by its official representatives.

Since then, the relations between Hamburg and Saint Petersburg have further developed into a unique partnership which was confirmed in 2015 and in 2017 which lasts until 2021. Throughout the years, a range of officially supported projects and initiatives have marked the partnership in times when friendly relations are not politically encouraged, and even deemed as harmful to their image and reputation. This cooperation has been manifested in various ways, ranging from the attendance of city delegations at commemorations on the end of the Second World War to the exchange of knowledge and resources. For instance, the cleaning service of Hamburg cooperated with its Saint Petersburg counterparts in the area of ecologic trash sorting. While the relation has been provided with tremendous support and structure by official institutions as well as umbrella organisations, such as the German-Russian Forum (Deutsch-Russisches Forum e.V.), it has been thriving on citizen initiatives as well as economic incentives. A range of non-governmental organisations exist in both cities which are facilitating and organising activities that aim at civil society, and particularly the youths. The themes which recur and are promoted in this context vary from advocacy for minorities and LGBT-matters, to the battle against poverty and ecumenic dialogue. An interesting example is the introduction of a night bus -initiative taking place in both cities to battle against homelessness or the organisation of an “International Women Conference” in 2019.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic many activities have been postponed or taken online such as a virtual conference on food saving which took place last year. In line with the tradition, activities aimed at the younger generation play a crucial role in the current relation between the two cities and, as exemplified in various youth exchange activities such as “Energize Your City,” an event focussing on both common history as well as contemporary urban development, or “Wind and Waves,” a sailing competition. Of particular interest is the dominance of the ecologic and humanitarian focus in many of these activities

⁶ *Author's note:* [Eine Verbesserung der Beziehungen zur Sowjetunion sollte zum einen allgemein einer wirtschaftsförderlichen politischen Entspannung zwischen den Blöcken dienen, zum anderen auch den Handel mit der Sowjetunion direkt fördern]. *Translation of the author.*

which can be explained as as a pragmatic choice to attract the younger generation to be involved in city relations. Cooperation among young people also takes place in the context of academic dialogue and exchange. An example is the partnership between journalism students of HAW Hamburg and the School of journalism and mass communication of Saint Petersburg University.

Last, but not least, are the vivid contacts which exist and persist in the context of trade and business. Not surprisingly, the role of the port of Hamburg plays a very important role in this sphere, particularly in relation to container port traffic. Furthermore, over 100 companies located in the respective cities engage in various forms of business, notably, but not limited, in the sphere of trade, logistics and transport [7]. One thing we cannot neglect is the important role of the Chamber of Commerce of Hamburg which organises and funds exchange programmes for young Russian professionals and co-organised a course on “International Trade Law” together with the Institute of Economic Law at the University of Hamburg, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the legal faculty of Saint Petersburg State University, targeting young legal specialists and business people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is possible to say that the relations between Hamburg and Saint Petersburg have remained resilient in times of crisis. Although they are affected by political and economic crises which have hit the broader Russian-German relationship, they are characterised by a positive and civil-society-oriented dynamic which would hardly be imagined without the existence of umbrella organisations and the general framework provided by their respective city councils. While shared historical memories remain an important aspect, it seems to have been replaced by a focus on humanitarian projects, a tendency arguably linked to the necessity to include the younger generation, which does not longer share a vivid memory to a shared common past with their counterparts. While this points out a fundamental challenge, namely the future of city relations in a post-pandemic world, efforts to digitalise city relations have increased during the last year and offer some hope in this perspective. However, it should be noted that such digital encounters will not likely be enough to keep the relations sustainable, as the very concept of city relations and city diplomacy has demonstrated that they stand or fall with the personal engagement of individuals, and of civil society more broadly.

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