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## Sister Cities and Urban Diplomacy Today

A look back in time reveals a paradoxical situation: In the period before the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, cities, associations of cities or principalities were the main pillars of foreign policy in Europe. Going back to Antiquity, these associations shaped the development and generation of political entities. Since the Peace of Westphalia – the birth of the nation state – the international importance of cities has steadily declined, while nations have solidified their monopoly on foreign policy, reaching one peak with the east-west conflict. But a closer look reveals that cities, municipalities and counties (hereafter collectively referred to as municipalities) have always put out feelers across international boundaries, through business or personal connections between their populations.

One of the greatest peace projects of the twentieth century is the twinning of municipalities. Through such partnerships, people meet, overcome prejudices, and form friendships across borders. There are numerous examples of such enthusiastic activity along these lines in Europe – like the first exchanges between German and French cities in 1948, and the first visits of pupils from Cologne to Israel, which took place ten years after the end of World War II. The increased international integration has also massively boosted the international activities of municipalities, and this trend is likely to continue given the situation as described by London-based scholar Dan Koon-hong Chan:

With globalization come global problems. While we live in a twenty-first-century world of interdependence, we face seventeenth-century Westphalian political institutions with defined boundaries and separated responsibilities of nation-states.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter intends to explore the current state of sister cities in Germany: How they are organised, how many there are in Germany and Europe, how they differ from urban diplomacy, and how they relate to the nation-state. Much data has been generated and many facts have been gleaned through the continuing project work of the Kompetenzteam Europa in the *Auslandsgesellschaft.de e.V.*<sup>2</sup> International relationships between municipalities have been investigated in numerous projects – here, the focus is on North Rhine-Westphalia.

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<sup>1</sup> Chan, “City diplomacy.”

<sup>2</sup> Further information about this research project and its publications is available at <https://staedtepartnerschaftennrw.org/lesetipps/>

## Terminology

Here, the terms “city partnership” and “urban diplomacy” will be defined and differentiated from one another. As can be seen in academic literature and in major international city associations, there is no one definition of the “twinning” of municipalities. The different definitions lead to different results in surveys of city partnerships. The most commonly used definition is that of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), which describes these partnerships as formal, not limited in time or scope, and based on a twinning contract (or charter). To that definition we would add that these partnerships are open to all members of society, unlike the sponsoring relationships prevalent in the early twentieth century. The latter were concluded between cities in different countries in order to strengthen the position of minorities living abroad and thus to boost international relations, as occurred in 1925 with the German minority in the Danish city of Sonderburg, which had a sponsorship relationship with the German city of Kiel.

The term “city partnership” is applied collectively to partnerships of all local authorities, including those between municipalities or districts. Aside from city partnerships, the CEMR includes “friendship” and “contact” as forms of connection between local authorities. A friendship is defined as a connection based on an agreement, limited in time and/or with specific projects connecting the partners. Particularly with partnerships based on specific projects, the term project partnership has become dominant, and will be used below. A contact partnership is described as a connection without any formal consolidation.

Urban diplomacy is the collective term referring to the foreign policy of all local authorities, a policy that has experienced a revival due to globalisation and the emerging challenges facing society. While all sister cities are expressions of urban diplomacy, the latter includes other activities of municipal foreign policy. Sister cities continue to form the heart of cities’s foreign policy, but there are numerous project partnerships and especially cooperations through international associations of cities that have enjoyed a boom over the past ten years.

Many municipalities around the world are facing similar challenges, whether they are related to climate change, digitalisation, the future of mobility, rural exodus in many regions, or even to peaceful coexistence in ever-more heterogeneous cities, their populations impacted by increased migration. Many challenges can only be managed through cooperation between municipalities. Most interesting of all is that international organisations view municipalities as legitimate partners in the implementation of policies and include them in international conferences. Representatives of national foreign policy increasingly reflect the role of urban diplomacy, as then-Minister of State Niels Annen from the German Foreign Office in 2019 in Düsseldorf put it:

. . . the increasing international role and importance of cities and metropolitan regions thus definitely connects with foreign policy:

- International agreements such as the 2030 Agenda, the Paris Climate Agreement or the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction emphasise the central importance of urban spaces for sustainable development.
- None of the 17 sustainability goals (SDGs) listed in the 2030 Agenda can be achieved without sustainable urban development. Two thirds of all the 169 sub-goals of the 2030 Agenda can only be met in and with cities.
- This is one of the main reasons why my home city of Hamburg is applying to become one of the sites for a UN Technology Innovation Lab, where groundbreaking technologies aiming to solve the most urgent problems facing humanity are to be developed.
- Cities bear a large share of the responsibility for global climate change and are also taking on a pioneering role in climate protection.<sup>3</sup>

Within this context, sister cities or urban diplomacy can take very different forms vis-à-vis state foreign policy:<sup>4</sup>

1. Foundation of state foreign policy: Sister cities support and shore up directives of state foreign policy. Examples include the Franco-German sister cities established under the Elysée Treaty, or the agreements established under the German-Polish Friendship Treaty.
2. Pioneering state policy: Anticipating the reconciliation processes of state foreign policy. Examples include the German-French sister cities set up before the Elysée Treaty, the sister cities established as a basis for the accession of countries to the EU, or the sister cities with municipalities from the Soviet Union following the 1969 détente policy of the social-liberal coalition.
3. As a complement to state policy or in a division of responsibilities: While states negotiate foreign policy treaties, such as in environmental policy, parallel conferences are held at the municipal level. A recent example would be the dynamics of sister cities between German and Ukrainian municipalities following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The number of these twinnings skyrocketed from merely around 70 before the war to close to 120 about a year later. While German municipalities were among the first to send humanitarian help and supplies to Ukraine, their continuing initiatives and networking activities were subsequently both applauded and supported at the federal level, visible in the patronage of the newly built sister cities by the German and Ukrainian presidents in October 2022. To some extent, however, this type of cooperation between the state level and local level is merely tolerated. Examples of this are the human rights dialogues between the civil societies of

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<sup>3</sup> Annen, “Städte.”

<sup>4</sup> Pfundheller, *Städtepartnerschaften*, 67.

Germany and China within the framework of a city partnership, and Cologne's parallel contacts with partner cities in Israel and Palestine.

4. At a critical distance from or in clear opposition to state foreign policy: This relates to sister-city agreements concluded between municipalities from countries that have no state-level foreign relations – or only negative relations. Examples include the sometimes-intensive contacts within the framework of German-German sister cities in the era of the Hallstein Doctrine or the sister cities with municipalities in Nicaragua in the 1970s and 1980s, intended to support Sandinista politics.<sup>5</sup>

Currently one could add to these four points that in many respects, the relationship between municipalities in two countries can support continuity in official foreign policy even when it falters as a result of national elections. For example, the many German-American sister cities were key during the term of President Donald Trump, when high-level government contacts were marked by disagreement. This also applies to the current partnerships between cities in Germany and Hungary, Poland and Turkey. These partnerships, too, underscore the special importance of urban diplomacy.

## Sister cities in Germany

According to the last CEMR overall survey, conducted in 2010, there were about 34,000 cross-border municipal partnerships among the 37 member countries. The five countries with the most sister cities in Europe were France (6,776 partnerships), followed by Germany (6,277), then at a considerable distance Poland (3,508) and Italy (2,755) and in fifth place United Kingdom (2,059). By far the most sister cities were between Germany and France, with 2,281, although this total includes contacts and friendships.

Three initiatives in particular set the stage for sister cities in Germany. One began shortly after the end of World War II, when the British, Americans and Canadians invited German municipal representatives to visit them abroad and see how structures between cities function on a democratic basis. This initiative generated several sister cities from 1948 to 1950, such as between Hannover and Bristol or Bonn and Oxford. Also praiseworthy is the post-war initiative by Swiss professors and writers Hans Zbinden, Eugen Wyler and Adolf Gasser: They founded the Inter-

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<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of state reactions to fears of communist infiltration through city partnerships, see the example of the British government at the height of the Cold War: Clarke, "Town Twinning."

national Union of Mayors for Franco-German Understanding (IBU), and the CEMR, into which the IBU was integrated administratively in 1985. The idea was to strengthen the municipality as the core of democracy, in order to prevent another world war. Ultimately, the contacts between French and German mayors during the IBU meeting led in 1950 to the first German-French city partnership: between Montbéliard and Ludwigsburg. The umbrella organisation, CEMR, forms the European section of the World Union of Local Governments (UCLG). The following chart shows the development of sister cities since 1945 in five-year increments (Graph 1):



**Graph 1:** Development of sister cities in Germany since 1945. Source: CEMR data bank: <https://www.regre.de/partnerschaft/online-datenbank>.

As noted, in 1945 the first German sister cities were established with American and British cities as a result of the Allied occupation of Germany. The first such connection with a French city – that between Ludwigsburg and Montbéliard – was followed by many new German-French partnerships; the number of new partnerships reached its first peak in 1965–1979. The Franco-German friendship treaty in particular gave an enormous boost to partnerships between those two countries.

After a brief decline, the number of newly-established partnerships reached an absolute peak. Between 1990 and 1994, 17.4% of all partnerships were established. Two developments played a major role in this growth: German unification, when many former East German municipalities established partnerships with western European cities; and the end of the classic east-west conflict. At this

stage, many partnerships were established between cities in central and eastern Europe, and with Polish cities above all.

After this period, growth dropped again to 8.7% between 2000 and 2004 and to 1.4% in 2015–2019. A satiation effect is recognisable in municipalities. Many prefer project partnerships, or participation in joint European projects with other municipalities without necessarily becoming partner cities. The new countries of focus in the last 15 years turn out to be Turkey and China: the latter mainly for economic reasons, and Turkey mainly due to migration. Here, sister cities help promote integration.<sup>6</sup>

As our investigations show, sister cities in Germany are very seldom terminated. Even if some of them have been inactive for years, there is still a prevailing opinion in municipalities that one should endeavour to keep the partnerships alive, even if there is no money to invest in them. This may also be due to the fact that decisions to disband would have to be made by a city council and might draw negative public attention.

Among the countries that are tied to German cities, France dominates. Approximately 1/3 of all German sister cities are with France, followed by Poland and Great Britain. A more granular look at the rankings reveals very different regional emphases in Germany's states. Both historical and regional connections play a major role. For example, North Rhine-Westphalia has a disproportionately high number of partnerships with municipalities in the Netherlands, Belgium or Luxembourg, simply due to the proximity and close cooperation between that German state and the Benelux countries. And Bavaria has a disproportionately high number of partnerships with municipalities in Austria or Italy. One can safely say that more than 90% of German partnerships are with other European municipalities, followed by cities in America, Asia and the other continents.

Sister cities are organised by civil society and city administrations; their identity and tasks vary from one municipality to the next. Many municipalities have an association for all their partnerships. In addition, they have designated administrative staff; their numbers depend on a given municipality's size, tradition and self-image. Our investigations in North Rhine-Westphalia reveal a roughly three-way division according to the size of the city and the concomitant professionalisation of its city partnership work. The small municipalities with fewer than 50,000 residents usually have many more personal contacts, but the work is less professional, and if any dedicated staff are employed, the number is usually proportionately small. With cities that have populations between 50,000 and 100,000 the work is organised in a more professional manner, with established staff positions within the municipi-

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<sup>6</sup> See Auslandsgesellschaft Deutschland, "Migration und Integration."

pal administration. Finally, in large cities, city partnership work is embedded within local work related to Europe, in other words international networks, project partnerships and/or European projects. The most common organisational form is a team directly under the mayor, although the number of positions varies. We will discuss this topic again in greater detail in the section on urban diplomacy.

Schools are generally very strong players in this partnership work. One limitation is that school partnerships are not always congruent with municipal partnerships, often because there is no comparable school in the partner city or because partnerships with schools abroad are based on previous personal contacts. In addition, schools have varying commitments to international exchange.

The biggest challenge of partnerships, but also their biggest potential benefit, is their dependence on people. Even major commitment in many municipalities falls on the shoulders of very few people who become involved in partnership work – teachers, private individuals, city council members or administrative staff. These dedicated volunteers organise many activities in a partnership, and when they leave the commitment can also decline sharply. In contrast, city employees represent continuity in partnership work.

Our studies have shown that sister cities and activities between cities in Europe have developed greatly in recent years. Alongside the traditional encounters supported by civic engagement (sports, culture, schools), new forms of cooperation related to Europe are emerging, particularly in the thematic and project-related forms of cooperation through city partners or tri- and multilateral city partnerships, “partners of partners,” as well as project- or theme-related networks.

There has been a clear shift in the goals of these forms of cooperation in recent decades, towards using trustful cooperation with partner cities to jointly tackle municipal challenges; indeed, European municipalities face very similar challenges. Examples abound of positive developments in municipalities in Germany and abroad, initiatives that grew out of city partnerships. In addition, there is a major boom in project work in cross-border intermunicipal cooperation, in projects that are limited in time and subject matter. Importantly, the change in funding logic – pure exchanges are not funded, but joint thematic work is – has promoted this shift of motives.<sup>7</sup>

One of the biggest challenges facing sister cities in many municipalities is the ‘aging out’ of dedicated participants – in other words, the very people who initiate and organise inter-city exchange. These partnerships thrive and depend on civic engagement. Clearly, there is a need for new approaches to public relations and

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<sup>7</sup> For further background on civic development policy, see Engagement global, “Handreichung zur kommunalen Entwicklungspolitik.”

digitalisation, with the aim of giving sister cities –sometimes unfairly seen as out-moded – a new look, and thus winning over participants from new target groups.

Against this background, the Coronavirus pandemic hit sister cities particularly hard. These partnerships thrive on in-person meetings, on getting to know each other, and on the many friendships that have developed over the years. Since March 2020, personal meetings have become extremely difficult or even impossible to arrange. According to a recent study of Polish sister city relationships with cities in North Rhine-Westphalia by the Netzwerkstelle Städtepartnerschaften, Polish sister cities are very active, comparatively speaking – it is rare to see digital options replacing in-person events.<sup>8</sup> When asked how their partnership has dealt with the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic, 21.8% answer that they are collaborating digitally for the first time; 7.3% say they were already collaborating digitally before the pandemic and have only increased their use of digital tools; 47.3% are postponing their in-person meetings; and 23.6% have no activities at all. There is no telling if or when this will change. To be sure, the creativity of many partnerships that have switched over to digital contact is impressive. Nevertheless, the statistics make it clear that sister cities – and many other municipal projects – will need a great deal of development work after the pandemic. In particular, municipal administrations will have to reactivate dormant partnerships to serve as anchor points when that time comes.

Sister cities are the mosaic stones of international understanding; this movement creates a global network and for many people, represents their first opportunity to participate in internationalisation. Partnerships have significantly contributed to integration in Europe. Thus, for example, the more than 2,000 sister cities that Germany shares with France form the backbone of this exchange. Within their framework, civil society, politics and administration meet regularly, and there has been a marked improvement in understanding between the two countries. This strength must be used and developed further beyond this example. A major project ahead for sister cities is to focus on developing offers of internationalisation for populations for whom internationalisation is not a given. For example, if one looks more deeply into the Erasmus + statistics, the special challenges facing municipal partnership work clearly stand out. Almost 80% of the €15 billion available for the Erasmus program is currently spent on student exchanges, while only 22% goes to vocational training exchanges – largely due to the relative lack of infrastructure for exchanges at vocational schools as opposed to universities.<sup>9</sup> In short, while vocational exchanges have been on the increase since the 1990s, they

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<sup>8</sup> <https://staedtepartnerschaftennrw.org/>

<sup>9</sup> See “Europaweiter Vergleich.”

remain at a low level compared to student exchanges – in 2019, only around 33,000 students received financial support.<sup>10</sup>

If the European training system is to be strengthened, study abroad for trainees must be the rule rather than the exception. This would boost participants' appreciation for the benefits of a united Europe. Furthermore, it would be a decisive starting point for the future focus of municipal partnerships and European work. The partnerships often lead to contacts with administrations, companies and social organisations that are eligible for admission. Here in particular, municipal cooperation is essential: it helps ensure that each municipality does not need to gather experience on its own, but rather has the opportunity to work with others to develop ways to boost the exchange of trainees within Europe. This improves their own vocational training while strengthening the sense of European community among young participants. Especially in rural areas, there is an exodus of well-trained youth. A stronger vocational exchange program can certainly also help increase the appeal of the training profession locally. An initial point of contact can be the local trainees themselves, who can gain valuable career experience as well as personal experience in partner municipalities. This would also strengthen ties between participating municipal administrations at home and abroad.

## Theses on urban diplomacy

Here we will attempt to condense key aspects of urban diplomacy, which is still a young and volatile field of research, in a generalised and theoretical manner.

1. Within the framework of trends on globalisation and governance, the long-held monopoly of the nation-state in international political relationships has been eroding steadily; in the state's multi-level system, the sub-national levels – in Germany, those are states, regions, municipalities – have developed their own activities and established structures and partnerships. For example, the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia has established a partnership with Ghana.
2. With the increase in urbanisation – according to the United Nations, in 2021 most of the world's population, 56%, lived in cities, and that percentage is expected to grow to more than 66% by 2050 – cities dominate quantitatively in the area of international exchange.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.na-bibb.de/presse/statistik/>

3. Bilateral sister cities continue to be the most important instrument of municipal foreign policy, but there is a clear shift in form and activity, particularly toward tri-lateral and multilateral sister cities and project partnerships.

4. Large cities dominate when it comes to international city alliances and in the number of bilateral partnerships. This is no surprise, given their greater financial and human resources. However, the reduced international attention to the problems facing small and mid-sized cities and communities, as well as those facing rural areas, is an issue that needs to be addressed.

5. The organisational underpinnings of municipalities' international influence have grown over time, together with their self-awareness of their role in this area. For example, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) is a global umbrella organisation with a regional/continental base, and the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) works at the level of the European continent. However, this strengthening has been accompanied by a decrease in transparency, due to the existence of numerous special networks that vary in content, focus and membership numbers. A few examples of such diversity are:

- International Observatory of Mayors on Living Together (a city network that grew out of a 2015 mayors' summit in Montreal, describes itself as a “unique platform for the exchange of experiences, knowledge and innovative practices related to social cohesiveness, inclusion and community safety in cities” and emphasises its city-university partnerships as a standout feature);
- U(rban)20 (a city network that strives to bring a local perspective to the G20, the elite club of major industrialised and emerging economies);
- C40 (a network of major cities founded in 2005 with a focus on climate activism; today it has some 100 member cities;<sup>11</sup>)
- ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability (founded in 1990 in New York at the conclusion of the UN's first World Congress on Local Governments for Sustainable Development, the Bonn-based organisation with representative offices on all continents now has some 1,000 member cities);
- The Hanseatic League of Cities (founded in 1980 in the spirit of the historically powerful Hanseatic League, an alliance of cities in the Middle Ages; it aims to give these relationships a modern form. It has some 200 member cities in 16 countries, but about half of its member cities are in Germany).

6. Seen from a bird's eye perspective, the importance of Urban Diplomacy has increased. What seems most effective is a combination of push factors (see Thesis 4) and pull factors – namely, the growing recognition, particularly on the UN level,

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<sup>11</sup> For an empirical analysis of C40's work, see Acuto, Michele, *Global Cities*.

that most global goals can't be achieved without the active participation of cities (the classic example: 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals – SDGs). Indicative of the growing importance is the increased attention paid to urban diplomacy in policy and academic circles. Recently the term has popped up in Germany, including at the Ambassadors' Meeting of the German Foreign Office (AA); at the Global Policy Lab – a diplomacy think tank supported by the AA and various foundations; and at a video conference of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP): “Urban Diplomacy als Motor deutscher und europäischer Handlungsfähigkeit – Städte als außenpolitische Akteure” (June 2, 2021). Still, empirical studies on the role of urban diplomacy remain scarce.<sup>12</sup>

7. The international scope of action for cities and communities is greatly influenced by their role in national political systems, and thus also by their relationships to the other levels in multi-level national political systems. For example, German municipalities traditionally play an important independent role, but the same is not always true for their international partners – including those within the EU. These asymmetrical positions remain a serious challenge.

8. Relationships between the civic level and other political levels are basically interdependent, but for the most part the influence exerted on the municipalities is more important. Attempts by ‘higher’ levels to exert influence cover the entire range, from enabling/promoting to restricting/preventing. Control objectives (‘financial reins’) can also be connected with funding measures. In an extreme case, the national level can instrumentalise the Urban Diplomacy of municipalities as an element of national foreign policy – an aspect that, especially in the case of authoritarian states, should not be glossed over.

9. The Coronavirus pandemic has, as expected, impacted city partnerships. A survey in North Rhine-Westphalia indicates an intensification of the status of existing partnerships: the health crisis prompted particularly active partnerships to break new ground (such as increasing their use of digital options), while partnerships that were already on the wane saw a clear diminution of activities.

10. From an analytical perspective, in the triangular relationship between civil society/municipal level/state (‘higher’) level, the relationship between the state and civil society has become more open and permeable, like that with the municipal level, with a tendency toward governance. But the relationship is still quite different from one nation to another, shaped as it is by tradition (as can be seen even

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<sup>12</sup> A recent positive exception is an anthology of four case analyses: Amiri and Sevin, *City Diplomacy*; see also the earlier anthology by Amen et al., *Cities and Global Governance*.

through a comparison of Western systems such as those in the USA and Germany). This also impacts the cross-border activities of civil society.

11. The international influence of civil society organisations has clearly grown (especially through lobby groups and globally in the UN system: a classic example is the development of the SDG); the reverse channel of influence – from the international level to national civil society, an influence that has also become stronger – sometimes encounters fierce resistance, especially from national governments (Russia is a particularly memorable example).

12. There is a close relationship between municipal level / sister cities and civil society since vibrant sister cities are usually based on strong involvement of civil society (in various organisational manifestations). This is no surprise, since municipalities – as the administrative level closest to citizens in the state structure – are the level that is most tightly interwoven with civil society. The aging of members and especially of active members is turning out to be a pressing practical problem, and not only in Germany. Special efforts must be made to reach out to youth (where schools and sports associations play important roles) as well as to develop flexible models of participation (such as participating in projects, rather than becoming full members). Such models have already been put into practice, with success.

## Conclusion and outlook

Sister cities are one of the greatest peace projects of the twentieth century; they could become – and to some extent already are – a global peace project of the twenty-first century, beyond Europe. Sister cities have contributed greatly to integration within the European Union and to international understanding around the world. They now have the task of adapting to the twenty-first century, of bringing together traditional approaches with new possibilities. To that end, the tool of urban diplomacy is helpful in many regards. Currently, there are a few general trends to observe. Cities, especially large ones, are exchanging ideas on how to cope with their own problems and adopt innovative ideas from abroad. In addition, foreign policy engagement on the municipal level depends largely on individuals, and does not follow a fixed path; this trend is definitely worth watching. However – as this chapter demonstrates clearly – international relations between municipalities, and their close connection to local civil society, are essential for the networking of the population and for increasing international understanding and responsible global action. Historians will look back 100 years from

now and see exactly what municipalities actually have contributed. But the Paris Climate Change Conference and especially the implementation of its results are good examples of their potential.

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