



Municipal Twinning as Paradiplomatic Practice: The Bulgarian–Hungarian Experience

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Extended abstract

Abstract

Paradiplomacy, understood as the international activities of sub-national governmental actors, has gained increasing scholarly attention in recent decades; however, the role of municipal twinning relations as instruments of paradiplomacy in Central and Eastern Europe remains relatively underexplored. This study examines the Bulgarian–Hungarian twinning network, focusing particularly on partnerships shaped by shared historical and horticultural traditions. The research aims to explore how municipal twinning relations function as mechanisms of sub-national diplomacy, how historical migration and diaspora networks influence their development, and how these partnerships contribute to sustainable local cooperation and identity preservation.

The empirical research is based on two primary data sources. First, a comprehensive database compiled by the Hungarian National Association of Local Authorities (TÖOSZ) in 2018 was analysed to identify existing twinning relations involving Hungarian municipalities. The results were subsequently validated through cross-referencing with the database of the National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria (NSORB). Second, qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of municipalities, minority self-governments, and relevant stakeholders engaged in twinning activities.

The analysis identifies structural characteristics of the Bulgarian–Hungarian twinning network and presents four case studies demonstrating best practices in municipal paradiplomacy: Halásztelek–Polikraishte, Szentes–Sevlievo, Budapest XIV district (Zugló)–Veliko Tarnovo,

and Szigetszentmiklós–Gorna Oryahovitsa. These partnerships share a common historical foundation in Bulgarian horticultural migration to Hungary during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The findings indicate that twinning relations grounded in diaspora heritage and historical economic interactions tend to exhibit greater sustainability, institutional depth, and community involvement than partnerships formed solely for administrative or symbolic purposes.

The study concludes that Bulgarian–Hungarian twinning relations represent a distinctive model of heritage-based paradiplomacy in which local governments transform historical migration and cultural memory into contemporary frameworks of international cooperation. These partnerships contribute to community building, intercultural dialogue, and the strengthening of transnational municipal networks within Europe.

Objective and Research Context

In the context of accelerating global urbanisation, cities increasingly act as independent actors within international relations and global governance structures. Urban centres are no longer perceived solely as passive administrative units but as dynamic agents capable of shaping economic, social, and political processes beyond national borders. The emergence of inter-municipal networks and city diplomacy reflects this transformation, enabling local governments to establish international cooperation through cultural, economic, and social initiatives.

One of the most widespread forms of inter-urban cooperation is municipal twinning, which refers to formal or informal partnerships between local governments designed to promote cultural exchange, economic collaboration, and knowledge transfer. Twinning relations expanded significantly in Europe during the second half of the twentieth century, particularly as instruments of reconciliation and cross-border cooperation after the Second World War. In Central and Eastern Europe, however, voluntary municipal twinning relations developed more dynamically following the collapse of the socialist regimes and the dissolution of the Iron Curtain in 1989.

The Bulgarian–Hungarian twinning network represents a particularly intriguing case within the broader field of city diplomacy. Historical migration processes, especially the movement of Bulgarian horticultural workers to Hungary during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, established long-lasting cultural and economic ties between specific settlements. These historical connections have provided a foundation for contemporary municipal partnerships, demonstrating how migration heritage and diaspora communities can shape international relations at the local level.

The main objective of this research is to examine the structure, functioning, and sustainability of Bulgarian–Hungarian twinning relations within the framework of municipal paradiplomacy. The study addresses three central research questions: first, how do twinning relations between Bulgarian and Hungarian municipalities operate as forms of sub-national diplomacy? Second, what historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors influence their establishment and persistence? Third, how do these partnerships contribute to community building, cultural identity preservation, and sustainable local governance?

By analysing both quantitative network data and qualitative case studies, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of heritage-based twinning relations in contemporary European municipal cooperation.

Theoretical Background: Border Regions, Institutionalization, and Municipal Diplomacy

The concept of paradiplomacy refers to the involvement of sub-national governmental actors, particularly regional and municipal authorities, in international relations. Traditionally, diplomacy has been considered the exclusive domain of national governments; however, globalisation, decentralisation, and the growing importance of local governance have expanded the scope of diplomatic engagement to include cities and regions (Acuto, 2013; Curtis, 2016). Municipal diplomacy, or city diplomacy, encompasses bilateral or multilateral cooperation between cities, often institutionalised through twinning agreements, international networks, and thematic partnerships.

City twinning represents one of the most prominent instruments of municipal diplomacy. These partnerships enable cities to exchange knowledge, promote cultural understanding, and foster economic cooperation while strengthening local governance capacities. Scholars emphasise that twinning relations contribute to urban development by facilitating policy transfer and sharing best practices in fields such as climate governance, social inclusion, and sustainable infrastructure (Acuto et al., 2018; Karvounis, 2024). Furthermore, twinning relations function as mechanisms of soft power, allowing cities to enhance their international reputation and attract investment through cultural diplomacy (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2022).

The development of twinning relations has historically been shaped by geopolitical and ideological contexts. During the Cold War, city partnerships often reflected political alliances and diplomatic strategies of socialist and Western blocs (Erdem, 2023). In post-socialist Europe, however, municipal cooperation increasingly emerged from local initiatives and grassroots cultural networks. Diaspora communities and ethnic minority groups frequently play a crucial role in facilitating such relations by maintaining transnational social and cultural connections with kinstates (Liu & Hu, 2018).

In the case of Bulgarian–Hungarian relations, the historical presence of Bulgarian gardeners in Hungary represents a distinctive example of diaspora-driven paradiplomacy. Migration waves from northern Bulgaria to Hungary created durable social networks that extended beyond economic cooperation and contributed to cultural identity formation among diaspora communities. These historical ties continue to influence contemporary municipal cooperation, demonstrating how collective memory, heritage preservation, and ethnic identity can shape international urban relations. Consequently, the Bulgarian–Hungarian twinning network provides an opportunity to examine the intersection of migration history, cultural heritage, and municipal diplomacy within the broader theoretical framework of paradiplomacy.

Data and Methodology

The study employs a mixed-method research design combining quantitative database analysis with qualitative case study methodology. The quantitative component is based on the examination of two official databases documenting municipal twinning relations. The primary dataset originates from the Hungarian National Association of Local Authorities (TÖOSZ), compiled through a nationwide survey in 2018, which provides detailed information on Hungarian municipalities and their international partnerships. The findings were validated through cross-referencing with the database of the National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria (NSORB), ensuring data reliability and comparative consistency.

The qualitative component consists of semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of local governments, minority self-governments, and municipal experts involved in twinning cooperation. Interviews were carried out between June and November 2025 using online and telephone communication. Based on database analysis and interview accessibility, four Bulgarian–Hungarian twinning partnerships were selected as case studies. These cases were examined to explore the historical origins, institutional characteristics, and practical functioning of heritage-based municipal paradiplomacy.

Empirical Findings

The empirical analysis reveals several structural characteristics of the Bulgarian–Hungarian twinning network. According to the NSORB database, Bulgarian municipalities maintain more than 1,100 twinning partnerships, with the majority located within Europe. Hungary ranks among Bulgaria’s significant European partners, although the total number of partnerships between the two countries remains relatively limited compared to Bulgaria’s relations with neighbouring states. Conversely, Hungary maintains a considerably larger network of twinning agreements, with more than 3,700 partnerships worldwide. Within this network, Bulgarian partnerships constitute a relatively small proportion, reflecting both geographical distance and limited historical political cooperation between the two states.

Despite their numerical modesty, Bulgarian–Hungarian twinning relations demonstrate strong qualitative characteristics. The analysis indicates that many partnerships are rooted in historical migration networks, particularly those associated with Bulgarian horticultural communities established in Hungary during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These diaspora connections, often initiated by minority local governments, provide a cultural and historical foundation that enhances the sustainability and intensity of municipal cooperation.

The four selected case studies illustrate different dimensions of heritage-based paradiplomacy. The Halásztelek–Polikraishte partnership exemplifies how migration history can evolve into institutionalised municipal cooperation. Bulgarian gardeners who settled in Halásztelek introduced advanced irrigation techniques and vegetable cultivation methods that transformed local agricultural production. The twinning agreement established in 2004 symbolically reconnects descendants of migrant families with their ancestral homeland through cultural festivals, educational exchanges, and heritage events.

Similarly, the Szigetszentmiklós–Gorna Oryahovitsa partnership demonstrates the role of community-based heritage preservation in sustaining municipal relations. The partnership includes annual cultural exchanges, agricultural competitions, youth programmes, and joint European Union project applications. These activities illustrate how twinning relations can extend beyond administrative cooperation to involve broad community participation and local identity reinforcement.

The Szentes–Sevlievo partnership represents a more recent example of twinning cooperation initiated through diaspora advocacy. Cultural events, such as local festivals and heritage commemorations, form the core of cooperation, while both municipalities express intentions to expand collaboration into economic and developmental projects. This case highlights the continuing relevance of historical memory and diaspora networks in initiating new municipal partnerships.

The partnership between Budapest's XIV district (Zugló) and Veliko Tarnovo demonstrates a more diversified model of city diplomacy. Initiated by the Bulgarian minority community in Zugló, the cooperation includes cultural exchanges, sports events, tourism initiatives, and educational programmes. The sustainability of this partnership contrasts with earlier, discontinued relations between Veliko Tarnovo and other Hungarian municipalities, emphasising the importance of community involvement and institutional continuity.

Overall, the empirical findings suggest that Bulgarian–Hungarian twinning relations function as multidimensional platforms for cultural diplomacy, social networking, and knowledge exchange. Partnerships rooted in shared historical heritage and diaspora involvement tend to exhibit higher levels of activity, resilience, and social embeddedness than those based solely on administrative cooperation. However, the research also identifies challenges, including limited financial resources, dependence on individual actors, and fluctuations in political support, which may affect the long-term sustainability of municipal partnerships.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that Bulgarian–Hungarian twinning relations represent a distinctive form of heritage-based municipal paradiplomacy. Although numerically limited, these partnerships illustrate how historical migration, diaspora networks, and cultural memory can generate durable frameworks for international municipal cooperation. The case studies confirm that twinning relations grounded in shared horticultural heritage tend to foster strong community engagement, intercultural dialogue, and sustainable local partnerships.

The findings contribute to broader discussions on city diplomacy by highlighting the importance of historical and cultural factors in shaping sub-national international relations. Bulgarian–Hungarian twinning partnerships illustrate how municipalities can transform migration heritage into contemporary cooperation strategies that support cultural preservation and local development. Despite challenges related to financial and institutional limitations, these partnerships demonstrate the potential of municipal paradiplomacy to strengthen transnational networks and promote European integration at the local level.

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