

# **Crisis City Diplomacy: Polish Metropolises in Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine**

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 fundamentally disrupted European territorial governance and exposed cities as frontline actors in managing war-related crises. Within hours of the invasion, Polish metropolitan governments began organising refugee reception, mobilising humanitarian assistance, repurposing infrastructure, and activating transnational networks of solidarity. Acting often ahead of national coordination mechanisms and without formal humanitarian mandates, cities assumed responsibilities traditionally associated with states or specialised relief organisations. These practices were not exceptional add-ons to municipal governance but emerged directly from cities' everyday administrative capacities and embeddedness in international networks.

This paper examines how Polish metropolitan cities responded to the war in Ukraine and what their actions reveal about the evolving role of local governments in multilevel crisis governance. It addresses three interrelated research questions:

- (1) What roles cities assume in responding to the consequences of large-scale armed conflict?;
- (2) How these roles are shaped, combined, and adapted over time under conditions of legal, organisational, and political constraint?
- (3) what these practices reveal about the scope and limits of city diplomacy in wartime?

To answer these questions, the article advances a three-role framework conceptualising cities as donors, hubs, and brokers. It enables a systematic analysis of how cities mobilise resources, organise logistics, and mediate between local, national, and transnational actors, thereby highlighting the adaptive capacity and strategic agency of local governments in wartime contexts.

As donors, cities provide direct material, financial, and technical assistance to affected municipalities. This includes in-kind donations, transfers of equipment, budgetary reallocations, and knowledge exchange.

As hubs, cities aggregate, coordinate, and redistribute aid from domestic and international actors, functioning as logistical and organisational nodes within transnational assistance chains.

As brokers, cities connect actors across governance levels and sectors, facilitating new partnerships, mediating between municipal and national authorities, and expanding institutional pathways of cooperation.

Theoretically, the paper situates this framework at the intersection of paradiplomacy, decentralised development cooperation (DDC), and humanitarian governance. While paradiplomacy literature has extensively documented cities' international engagement in areas such as climate policy, economic promotion, and reconciliation, it typically assumes relatively stable political environments and routinised cooperation. Similarly, DDC frameworks rely on long-term planning horizons and institutionalised partnerships. Armed conflict disrupts these assumptions. It produces urgency, legal ambiguity, coordination gaps, and overlapping humanitarian and governance responsibilities.

The paper introduces the concept of crisis-driven city diplomacy, understood as a distinct mode of urban international agency shaped by urgency, proximity, improvisation, and multilevel entanglement. War does not suspend city diplomacy; rather, it accelerates and transforms it.

Empirically, the article draws on original material collected for the report "On the Frontline of Solidarity: How Polish Cities Supported Ukraine" (Kamiński & Matiaszczyk, 2025), which documents the international activities of cities associated with the Union of Polish Metropolises.

Poland constitutes a particularly revealing case for analysing city-level responses to war-related crises due to its geographical proximity to Ukraine, its role as a frontline state of reception, and the scale of decentralised mobilisation that unfolded after February 2022. Polish cities were among the first to confront the combined pressures of mass displacement, humanitarian assistance, and direct support to Ukrainian local governments, often acting in the absence of clear national coordination or predefined legal frameworks. This positioning makes them a critical site for examining how urban governments exercise agency under extreme conditions.

The analysis draws on original empirical material collected between January and March 2025. This includes:

- Survey data from all eleven metropolitan cities, capturing forms of assistance, financial value over time, Ukrainian recipient municipalities, and foreign cities channelling aid through Poland;
- Eleven semi-structured interviews with municipal officials responsible for organising assistance;
- Supplementary document analysis (municipal resolutions, partnership agreements, public reports).

This mixed qualitative design enables a fine-grained reconstruction of practices, coordination mechanisms, temporal evolution, and variation across cities. The findings demonstrate that Polish metropolitan cities simultaneously performed donor, hub, and broker roles.

As donors, all analysed cities mobilised immediate humanitarian assistance. They organised collection points, repurposed sports halls and community centres, and dispatched essential goods including medical supplies, generators, vehicles, and specialised infrastructure

equipment. Assistance reached 74 Ukrainian cities across multiple oblasts, including heavily affected eastern regions. Over time, support expanded beyond emergency relief to include financial contributions to rehabilitation facilities, reconstruction projects, and capacity-building initiatives. Knowledge-sharing emerged as a particularly important dimension, with Polish cities providing expertise in urban planning, digital governance, and decentralisation.

As hubs, metropolitan cities functioned as territorial nodes within transnational aid networks. Fifty cities from eighteen countries provided assistance routed through Polish metropolises. Western European partners—particularly German and French cities—were especially active. Polish cities aggregated donations, ensured due diligence, matched supplies to identified needs, and redirected aid to Ukrainian municipalities. In doing so, they established tri-party support chains linking Western European donors, Polish metropolitan hubs, and Ukrainian recipients. This role required the rapid development of internal coordination mechanisms, including dedicated task units, mayoral oversight structures, and logistical verification systems.

As brokers, cities facilitated new city-to-city and multilateral partnerships. They connected Western European municipalities with Ukrainian local governments, often enabling trilateral arrangements. Wrocław, for example, played a bridging role between Dutch and Ukrainian cities and facilitated the creation of new municipal partnerships. Brokerage extended beyond formal partnerships to include linking NGOs, businesses, and governmental actors. Cities acted as translators of institutional expectations and as mediators across governance scales.

Beyond functional roles, the analysis highlights motivations, constraints, and institutional effects.

Initial engagement was driven primarily by moral solidarity, proximity, and political leadership. Over time, more strategic considerations emerged, including economic opportunities linked to reconstruction and demographic benefits associated with refugee integration.

At the same time, significant barriers shaped municipal action. Polish legislation initially provided limited clarity regarding subnational cross-border transfers, forcing cities to rely on creative legal interpretations. Bureaucratic rigidity on both Polish and Ukrainian sides delayed shipments. Logistical challenges, coordination failures between municipal and national authorities, fiscal constraints, and declining public support over time complicated sustained engagement. These constraints exposed structural tensions within Poland's multilevel governance system during external crises.

The legacy of wartime engagement has been multifaceted. Humanitarian assistance enhanced the international visibility and symbolic capital of Polish cities. Several received formal recognition from Ukrainian authorities. Wartime mobilisation strengthened long-standing partnerships and generated new ones, sometimes extending beyond Ukraine. In certain cases, cities began to position themselves strategically for post-war reconstruction initiatives.

However, the study also identifies structural limitations. Much assistance relied on informal and trust-based arrangements effective in emergencies but difficult to institutionalise. Municipal autonomy expanded de facto, yet cities remained dependent on national legal and financial frameworks. The crisis thus revealed a persistent asymmetry in multilevel governance: cities were often the fastest and most flexible responders, but operated within institutional environments that neither fully recognise nor systematically support their expanding international roles.

The paper concludes that city responses to armed conflict cannot be adequately captured through decentralised development cooperation or humanitarian paradigms alone. War generates hybrid and overlapping forms of urban international engagement. The donor–hub–broker framework provides a structured lens to capture this functional diversity and simultaneity.

More broadly, the findings suggest that war acts as a catalyst for paradiplomatic innovation and institutional reconfiguration within urban systems. Cities emerge not merely as local arenas affected by conflict, but as strategic actors shaping the governance of solidarity, territorial coordination, and transnational responsibility. In an era of geopolitical instability and overlapping crises, integrating cities more systematically into regional and multilevel governance frameworks becomes essential for building resilient territorial responses.