

City Diplomacy as a Mechanism of Multi-Level Solidarity and Support for Ukraine: A Study of the Changes Following the 2022 Russian Invasion

Natalia Matiaszczyk¹

Abstract

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 changed the situation in Europe, impacting various aspects, such as politics, security, and international relations. It also underscored the significance of local authorities, particularly cities, in responding to and addressing the consequences of the crisis. The paper answers the questions on the impact of the Russian invasion on the international partnerships of Ukrainian cities, the role of city diplomacy in promoting solidarity and support for Ukraine, and the dynamics of multi-level cooperation in supporting Ukraine during the war. This research was based on a survey sent to 56 Ukrainian cities, of which 70% of them responded. The findings indicate that almost 90% of Ukrainian cities receive diverse forms of support from foreign partners, and two-thirds of them engage in forging new partnerships. Moreover, through many multi-level initiatives, they contribute significantly to the dynamic interplay between local, national, and international levels of governments. These results highlight the noteworthy role of cities in international relations as actors in times of war.

Keywords

Cities, Ukraine, Russian invasion, war, city diplomacy

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Introduction

Traditionally, city cooperation encompasses many areas, such as culture, economy, science, sports, and tourism (see e.g. Amiri & Sevin, 2020; Curtis & Acuto, 2018; Grandi, 2020; Tavares, 2016). However, after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine launched on February 24, 2022, in the context of Ukrainian local governments and their partners, the focus has primarily shifted towards providing assistance, which takes various forms (Amiri, 2022). Responding to major crises and challenges as war involves different levels of government – international, national, regional, and local – each playing an important role and intertwining and complementing each other. Ukrainian cities have emerged as the epicentres of the ongoing crisis (Trofimov, 2022). Despite this, they have assumed an active

role as actors in international relations. This dynamic showcased the multi-level governance of the crisis of war. Moreover, it offered a unique opportunity to examine the functionality of city diplomacy within the context of armed conflict.

Cities can establish and develop international partnerships with foreign counterparts through partner-city or

¹Faculty of International and Political Studies, Paradiplomacy Lab, University of Lodz, Poland

Corresponding author:

Natalia Matiaszczyk, Faculty of International and Political Studies, Paradiplomacy Lab, University of Lodz, Skłodowa 43 Street, Lodz 90-127, Poland.



sister-city agreements. Cultural, educational, or economic cooperation are among the objectives of these partnerships. Cities cooperation, as a part of broader city diplomacy, has become instrumental in navigating the complexities of the situation, fostering solidarity, and mobilising resources to support affected communities. City diplomacy, as a concept, refers to the engagement of cities in international activities that transcend traditional state-centric diplomacy. It is a part of the much larger phenomenon of the paradiplomacy (Aldecoa & Keating, 2013; Kuznetsov, 2015; Schiavon, 2019; Tavares, 2016), understood as international relations conducted by subnational governments on their own to promote their interests. City diplomacy involves forging partnerships, sharing best practices, or collaborating with other cities and entities to address common challenges and promote global objectives (Acuto, 2013; Leffel, 2022; C40, 2021).

Cities are the main areas where crises of various types (e.g. humanitarian, ecological, or refugee) occur. During wars, they become prime targets of attacks (Piquard & Grindsted, 2009). Such circumstances require a proactive and effective crisis response. The role of actors involved in managing these crises extends beyond national governments and international organisations. Cities themselves can also emerge as crucial actors actively engaging in crisis management and response (Roepstorff, 2020).

The research goal of this paper is to conduct a thorough examination of the multi-level solidarity and support implemented in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Additionally, it aims also to present new typology of assistance, enabling a structured understanding and analysis of the varied dimensions of support crucial for effective crisis response. Taking a multi-level perspective, this research specifically highlights the crucial role played by cities in the aftermath of the conflict. Thus, I answer the questions: what impact did the Russian full-scale invasion have on the number of international partnerships of Ukrainian cities? What was the role of city diplomacy in fostering solidarity and assistance for Ukraine? How did cities pursue their own international humanitarian agenda, even against the approach taken by national governments? Which specific forms of city-level and multi-level support for Ukraine emerged following the 2022 Russian invasion?

To explore the various forms of assistance and support provided by cities and investigate the mechanisms through which this cooperation is facilitated, I conducted survey research in over 56 Ukrainian cities between January and March 2023. A detailed description of the methodology is presented in a separate section. Most of the information was collected from the survey responses from Ukrainian cities. Some of them were additionally expanded by information from the websites of the respective city councils, as well as phone calls. Part of the data was obtained through the websites of the city networks and international initiatives

associating cities, like Cities4Cities or European Alliance of Cities and Regions for the Reconstruction of Ukraine.

Throughout the research process, I discovered that a significant majority of Ukrainian cities received support from their partner cities during war. Moreover, an impressive two-thirds of Ukrainian cities forged new international partnerships following the Russian full-scale invasion. This paper delves into the multi-level perspective of cities engagement during wartime, particularly focussing on Ukrainian cities amidst the Russian invasion. Therefore, it fills a gap in existing literature (more in the section below), which lacks comprehensive analysis of cities functioning as donors of humanitarian assistance during armed conflicts. It is also the first study of Ukrainian city diplomacy during the war, as, to the best of my knowledge, no scholarly works based on surveys conducted within cities' offices currently exist.

Moreover, using the multi-level governance (MLG) concept, I present a new typology of comprehensive support for cities during the crisis, dividing them into city-level and multi-level, as well as material and political (non-physical dimension). By scrutinising those aspects within the context of the war in Ukraine, the paper presents a novel contribution to the discourse on cities' engagement in international relations and multi-level governance, shedding light on previously underexplored issues.

The paper is divided into seven parts. After the introduction, the second part focuses on the theoretical aspects of the cities' role as actors in humanitarian responses. The third part presents methodology and data collection. The fourth part examines changes in the diplomacy of Ukrainian cities. The next two parts concern support for Ukrainian cities: one on the city level, and the second one focuses on multi-level dimension. By employing this division, a more comprehensive presentation of the multifaceted nature of support extended to Ukraine following the Russian invasion could be achieved. The paper ends with conclusions.

Cities as actors in humanitarian responses

In recent decades, there has been evolving nature of governance structures, where decision-making and policy implementation are no longer confined to the national level (Grandi, 2020; Hocking, 1993; Marchetti, 2021). When considering the involvement of cities in international affairs, it is important to note the emergence of the concept of multi-level governance MLG. The 'multi-level' refers to the division of power between the following levels: local (cities and municipalities), regional (regions, provinces, etc.), national, and supranational (Behnke et al., 2016; Hooghe & Marks, 2001). Thus, MLG allows the capture of various configurations of political decision-making and policy-making processes (Bache & Flinders, 2004). Some scholars also emphasise the importance of the participation

of non-governmental actors in multi-level governance policymaking processes (Mendie 2021; Piattoni, 2010).

However, in the context of humanitarian crises, the aspect of cooperation between government entities is more important, as the multi-level governance facilitates in this case coordination and collaboration among international organisations, national governments, and local authorities. This approach ensures effective resource allocation, timely decision-making, and streamlined implementation of relief efforts. Additionally, in the realm of crisis management, multi-level governance enables a coordinated response by leveraging the expertise and resources of different levels of government, promoting information sharing, and facilitating joint decision-making processes (see e.g. Bryant, 2019; IIED, 2016; United Nations IASC, 2021), and also, as presented below in this paper, creates new international initiatives.

According to Acuto et al. (2022), city can assume three primary roles: be a place, an issue, and an actor. Being a 'place' means that the city is described as a place that presents challenges to be addressed, or where proposed actions can be implemented. The role of an 'issue' refers to cases where city-related issues are acknowledged, discussed, and resolved. As 'actor', city can be seen as an autonomous entity that possesses the capacity to perform and execute various activities. When referring to cities as actors, I mean city authorities that possess the legitimacy and capabilities to govern and act on behalf of their respective cities.

Cities function as places where the challenges arising from conflict can be addressed. They become spaces where humanitarian operations are needed, planned, coordinated, and implemented (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2022), as well as where various types of support are provided, including the symbolic one. The impacts of the conflict are acknowledged, discussed, and resolved within urban settings, which means cities are issues too. The destruction of infrastructure, displacement of residents, and socio-economic disruptions become prominent issues that demand attention and resolution (Moser & McIlwaine, 2014, pp. 337–342, de Boer, 2015, pp. 1–7). In the case of Ukrainian cities, this mainly concerns the planning of post-war reconstruction. And as actors, cities possess the autonomy and capacity to undertake various activities aimed at supporting affected populations and addressing humanitarian needs, as well as resistance to any kind of crisis (Larsen et al., 2016).

The capabilities of cities as actors in humanitarian responses are especially significant. Cities can establish emergency response mechanisms, allocate financial and material resources, and engage local stakeholders to ensure an effective and comprehensive humanitarian response. By taking on the role of an actor, cities demonstrate their ability to contribute proactively to the well-being and resilience of

their communities, facilitating timely and targeted interventions to alleviate the challenges faced during times of crisis (Roepstorff, 2020, pp. 284–301). Cities engage in the process of advocating important issues both for the cities themselves and for the broader global society, thereby raising awareness about them on a global scale (Swiney, 2020, pp. 227–278). However, cities not only act within their own capacities but also foster collaboration and receive support from cities from abroad, or they can also be a donor of aid for other cities that are currently in crisis (Matiaszczyk, 2022, pp. 108–112). They also actively engage in networks and partnerships, leveraging their relationships with partner cities, or within the city networks. Through these connections, cities can access additional resources, expertise, and funding to enhance their humanitarian response capabilities (Amiri, 2022). The involvement of cities in international relations facilitates knowledge exchange, best practice sharing, and mutual support in addressing the challenges posed by a crisis or conflict. Such collaboration not only strengthens local responses but also promotes global solidarity, underscoring the importance of cities as significant actors in the broader humanitarian landscape.

Drawing on research and analyses of multi-level support extended to Ukrainian cities amid the war, it becomes feasible to create a typology of support for cities during crises. Given the paper's focus on cities, a distinction can be made in support between city-level involvement, exclusively comprising cities, and multi-level engagement, incorporating cities, national authorities, international organisations, and initiatives. Regarding the nature of assistance, it can be categorised into material support (e.g. medical equipment, financial assistance, and food) and non-material support, encompassing symbolic and political gestures or advocacy, which I collectively named as political support. While all types have been examined in existing literature, no such classification has been established. Therefore, I introduce a comprehensive typology of support for cities during crises, creating the framework for further analyses. This typology aims to organise and clarify the multifaceted nature of assistance, facilitating an assessment of the diverse dimensions of support (Table 1).

Methodology

In the paper I present the results of a survey conducted from January to March 2023 in 56 Ukrainian cities, each with a population exceeding 50,000 residents. The selection of these cities was based on data obtained from the State Statistics Service of Ukraine, which presents on its website the estimation of the Ukrainian population as of January 1, 2022 (State Statistics Service of Ukraine, 2022). According to the available data, there were a total of 85 cities fitting the specified criteria. However, due to the ongoing conflict

since 2014 and the inability to conduct research in some cities, a selection was made. Initially, all cities located in Crimea, as well as in the so-called ‘DPR’ and ‘LPR’ regions, were excluded from consideration. This decision was made based on the fact that the authorities in Kyiv have effectively lost control over these areas since the first Russian aggression against Ukraine. In total, 16 cities fell under this category.

Additionally, cities that remained under Russian occupation after February 24, 2022, and were still under such control as of January 1, 2023 (a total of seven cities), were also excluded from the research group. Kherson, despite being liberated at the end of November 2022, was not included because of its distinct functioning compared with other cities under Ukrainian control during the survey period. Moreover, the survey was not distributed to the following cities: Bakhmut, Kramatorsk, Sloviansk, Kostiantynivka, and Druzhkivka. These cities were situated on or in close proximity to the frontline, resulting in significant depopulation and disrupted functioning of the local authorities.

Consequently, the survey questionnaires were distributed to a total of 56 cities. A notable response rate of 70% was achieved with 39 cities providing feedback. The distribution of the survey response rates based on city size is presented in Table 2.

As for the territorial division, the 56 cities to which the surveys were sent are located in 22 oblasts¹ of Ukraine. Notably, a complete response rate of 100% was achieved in 10 oblasts. In contrast, the Odessa Oblast exhibited the lowest response rate of 33%. No responses were received from any city within the Donetsk, Ternopil, Zaporizhzhia, and Kharkiv Oblasts, constituting a total of four oblasts with a lack of participation.² Therefore, it is not possible to analyse cities located in eastern and southeastern Ukraine.³ However, there were only five cities in these four oblasts, so

the incomplete regional representation is not too significant in achieving the primary goal of the paper.

The first step of the research process was creating a contact database for the city councils. Survey questionnaires were distributed to them via electronic mail. The questionnaire encompassed six questions about the number of partner cities before the Russian full-scale invasion, received aid, new partnerships, initiators of their establishment, and areas of new cooperation. After six weeks, I repeated the e-mails with the questionnaire to cities that had not responded.

To analyse the compiled survey data, two statistical methodologies were employed: descriptive analysis and frequency distribution. The data were also verified and extended through triangulation, achieved by cross-referencing with information available on the official websites of individual cities. Some additional information was also obtained during telephone conversations with city officials, as well as e-mail correspondence with representatives of the U-LEAD with Europe in the form of a structured written survey.⁴

Changes in diplomacy of Ukrainian cities

In the face of the ongoing war, Ukrainian cities have demonstrated resilience and adaptability in their diplomatic activities. The conflict did not stop the diplomacy of Ukrainian cities but acted as a catalyst for its development. Out of 39 cities that responded, 26 of them signed at least one new partnership agreement with a foreign city after February 24, 2022. This means that as many as 67% of the cities, despite the ongoing war, developed their international cooperation, which resulted in the conclusion of agreements. In total, they concluded 62 new partnerships, 22 more were planned (Table 3).

The new partner cities of Ukrainian cities were from 21 countries. Among these, 53 cities, accounting for 85% of the total, are located within Europe, with 50 cities representing member states of the European Union (EU). These results highlight a notable trend of deepened collaboration between Ukraine and the EU after the Russian full-scale invasion. The establishment of new partner cities from various European countries underscores active engagement and collaboration between Ukrainian cities and their

Table 1. Typology.

City-level material support	City-level political support
Multi-level material support	Multi-level political support

Source: own study.

Table 2. Response rate by city size.

The size of cities	Number of cities	Number of cities that responded	Response rate, %
50,000–100,000	28	16	57
100,000–500,00	21	18	86
500,000–1,000,000	4	3	75
More than 1,000,000	3	2	67

Source: own study.

counterparts in the EU. The remaining nine partner cities originate from four other countries, including six from the United States, and one each from Canada, Mexico, and Japan (Table 4).

Germany emerged as the country with the highest number of new partner cities, totalling 14, representing over 20% of all the new partnerships established. France and Poland shared the same rank, as Ukrainian cities successfully forged eight new partnerships in each respective country. These three nations hold significant importance within the EU due to their substantial contributions to Ukraine across multiple dimensions, including political, humanitarian, financial, and military support (Kiel Institute, 2023; OSW, 2023). Furthermore, they express a strong commitment to actively engage in the reconstruction process of Ukraine following the aftermath of the war (Borek, 2023; Interfax, 2023; Louis, 2022). The survey results demonstrate that this trend extends beyond the national level, encompassing local communities as well. These partnerships hold the potential to facilitate future engagement in post-war reconstruction initiatives. Following Germany, France, and Poland, the United States emerged as the subsequent leading contributor in terms of the number of

new partner cities. Lithuania closely followed with five cities, whereas Spain and the Czech Republic each contributed to three new partner cities. Additionally, Ukrainian cities have established two new partnerships with cities from Latvia. Furthermore, 12 countries were represented by a single new partner city, showcasing the diverse range of international collaborations pursued by Ukrainian cities.

From the perspective of Ukrainian cities, Kyiv emerged as the primary beneficiary, acquiring the highest number of new partner cities following Russian invasion. It established partnerships with nine cities in seven different countries. Being the capital and the largest city in Ukraine, Kyiv possesses inherent advantages in establishing new collaborations. Notably, prior to the Russian full-scale invasion, Ukrainian capital city already had 56 partner cities, signifying a 16% increase in the number of partnerships within a year.

However, it is worth noting that city size alone does not dictate the success of forging relationships with foreign entities. Following Kyiv, Zhytomyr was the second in terms of the highest number of partnerships, despite ranking only 15th in population among the surveyed cities and 22nd overall in Ukraine. The capital of Zhytomyr Oblast

Table 3. Changes in diplomacy of Ukrainian cities.

The size of cities	No of cities with foreign partner cities before February 24, 2022	No of cities with at least one new foreign partner city after February 24, 2022	Total number of new partnerships
50,000–100,000	16	10	17
100,000–500,000	16	12	30
500,000–1,000,000	3	2	3
More than 1,000,000	2	2	12

Source: own study.

Table 4. New partnerships of Ukrainian cities established in the period from February 2022 to March 2023, by country.

Country	Number of new partner cities	Country	Number of new partner cities
Germany	14	Finland	1
France	8	Italy	1
Poland	8	Ireland	1
United States	6	Luxembourg	1
Lithuania	5	Norway	1
Spain	3	United Kingdom	1
Czech Republic	3	Bosnia and Herzegovina	1
Latvia	2	Canada	1
Slovenia	1	Japan	1
Portugal	1	Mexico	1
Bulgaria	1		

Source: own study.

established six new partnerships, exhibiting a remarkable increase of 67% when considering its nine pre-existing partner cities. Rivne and Mykolaiv tied to the third position, with each city forming four new partnerships. This represents a growth of 36% and 29% in the number of partner cities, respectively. This indicates a significant shift in the number of new partnerships, suggesting that Russian invasion acted as a catalyst for these changes.

It is worth exploring cities that had either one or no partner cities prior to February 24, 2022. The survey revealed that only four cities fall into this category: Kropyvnytskyi, Nikopol, Konotop, and Pavlohrad. Among these, Konotop, located in Sumy Oblast, previously had a single partner city from Bulgaria, with which an agreement was established in 2012. According to the response provided by the city representative, Konotop formed a new partnership with the Lithuanian city of Panevėžys (Konotop City Official, 2023). However, after the completion of the survey, the city signed another partnership agreement –with Rzeszów from Poland (Konieczny, 2023). On the other hand, the remaining three cities have not yet established any new partnerships.

Prior to the Russian full-scale invasion, the inclination for cooperation between Ukrainian cities and those in Western countries primarily originated from Ukrainian side (Teise, 2022). However, the dynamics have undergone a notable transformation since invasion. Within the survey, I asked who were responsible for initiating new partnerships. Out of the twenty-six cities included in the analysis, a noteworthy eight cities reported that foreign cities took the initial step in proposing cooperation. Eight other cities disclosed that the initiatives were from foreign or Ukrainian cities. Such an answer was declared by most cities that established several new partnerships. In addition, only four cities indicated that they acted solely as initiators in establishing new partnerships. These findings highlight the changing landscape of collaboration, with an increasing number of foreign cities displaying active interest in forging connections with their Ukrainian counterparts (Table 5).

Consequently, it can be observed that 16 Ukrainian cities acquired at least one new partnership due to the proactive engagement of foreign cities. An interesting example is the previously mentioned Zhytomyr: all six new partnerships were initiated by foreign cities (Zhytomyr City Official, 2023). This clearly shows that there is an increasing interest of Western cities in cooperation with Ukrainian counterparts. Numerous factors may contribute to this phenomenon, potentially including a genuine aspiration to offer assistance, a vested interest in cultivating a positive image through active involvement in humanitarian endeavours, as well as the potential for securing new investment opportunities.

In the case of the two cities, a partnership was established in a different way. Stryi gained a partner through the active

Table 5. Initiators of establishing a partnership.

Initiators of establishing a partnership	Number of cities
Foreign cities	8
Ukrainian cities	4
Foreign or Ukrainian cities	8
Other	2
Not specified	4

Source: own study.

engagement of Ukrainian organisations operating abroad (Stryi City Official, 2023), while Kovel established a new partnership through the efforts of a Brazilian volunteer who arrived in the city following the Russian invasion, alongside their Ukrainian acquaintances (Kovel City Official, 2023).

Upon examining the areas of cooperation within the new partnerships, it becomes evident that they encompass a broad spectrum of issues. These partnerships extend beyond emergency assistance for Ukraine. Among the identified areas of cooperation, education emerged as the most frequently declared domain, cited by a noteworthy 23 out of the 26 cities. Culture ranked second. They are usually the most popular areas of international cooperation between cities, due to the fact that local governments generally have the greatest competence in those fields (see e.g. Clerc, 2020; Kamiński and Gzik 2021). Humanitarian assistance as well as economic and business cooperation was on the third position. Humanitarian assistance may not be the most typical element of city cooperation, as solidarity-inspired initiatives frequently encounter criticism from the local opposition, who view such actions as financially wasteful and prioritisation the welfare of foreign cities over that of their own (Grandi, 2020, p. 59). However, given the ongoing war and the broad cross-party and social support for Ukraine in many countries, its inclusion appears to be both fitting and inherent. The areas of cooperation show that the recently established partnerships are characterised by a long-term vision, extending well beyond temporary collaboration, especially for the post-war period (Table 6).

A noteworthy aspect revealed by the survey results is that over half of the newly formed partnerships also encompass plans for the post-war reconstruction of Ukrainian cities. This would indicate that cities are not only the ‘issues’ of significant planning in this regard but also actively aspire to assume crucial roles as actors in the reconstruction process.

City-level support for Ukrainian cities

Regarding the assistance provided by partner cities to Ukrainian cities, a crucial aspect is who offered such aid. Among the 39 cities that responded to the survey, nearly 60% indicated that the majority of their partner cities had offered assistance following February 24, 2022. Four cities

Table 6. Areas of cooperation of new partnerships.

Areas of cooperation	Number of cities ($n = 26$)
Education	23
Culture	22
Humanitarian assistance for Ukrainian city	20
Economic and business cooperation	20
Tourism	18
Healthcare	17
Environmental protection	16
Sport	15
Post-war reconstruction	14
Energy	13
Transport	12
Urban and spatial planning	11
Housing construction	11

Source: own study.

reported that ‘all partner cities’ provided aid. These cities encompass Kovel (nine partner cities, including six from Poland), Chervonohrad (four partner cities, including three from Poland), Pryluky (two partner cities, both from Poland), and Konotop (only one partner city from Bulgaria). Additionally, seven cities affirmed that they had received aid from some partner cities. However, two cities, Nikopol, with one partner city from Canada, and Horishni Plavni, which previously had two partners from Belarus and Moldova, did not receive any assistance from their respective partners. Furthermore, Kropyvnytskyi and Pavlohrad lacked foreign partner cities. The data presented provide evidence that nearly 90% of the surveyed cities received assistance from their foreign partner cities following the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Table 7).

Among the 39 cities surveyed, nine specifically highlighted the significance of support from Polish cities. This observation aligns with the findings of Transparent Cities,⁵ an organisation that conducted research on the aid provided by foreign cities to their 25 Ukrainian partners (the leading cities in the Transparency Ranking) during the initial 50 days of the war. The analysis revealed that Polish partner cities contributed to 71.7% of the overall aid provided to Ukrainian cities (Transparent Cities, 2022). City-level support, according to the typology presented earlier, has been categorised into material and political ones.

Material support

Each surveyed city that acknowledged assistance from foreign partners received humanitarian aid from them. The essential items mentioned by cities included medicines, clothing, medical equipment, generators and power units, and ambulances. Furthermore, financial aid was provided, with funds for Ukrainian partners originating from local

Table 7. Support for Ukrainian cities from their foreign partner cities.

Assistance from partner cities	Number of Ukrainian cities
All partner cities	4
The majority of partner cities	23
Some partner cities	7
No help from partner cities	2
No partner cities	2
No data	1

Source: own study.

budgets and collections organised among citizens. Moreover, some cities received equipment intended for the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the Territorial Defense Forces. Although cities face limitations in this regard due to the nature of countries’ systems and competencies related to military equipment procurement, there were examples of inter-city support in this area as well. Examples include the provision of reconnaissance drones, night-vision devices, and soldier equipment such as helmets, as demonstrated by Khmelnytskyi and Chernivtsi, who received such assistance from their Polish partners, namely, Ciechanów and Konin, respectively (Oworuszko, 2022; Smahina, 2022).

In the context of assisting Ukraine, Hungary emerged as an outlier among the Central and Eastern European countries within the EU. While the Hungarian government expressed the condemnation of Russian aggression against Ukraine, it displayed a notable reluctance to engage actively in providing assistance. This was evident through their obstruction of decisions regarding support at the EU level and the occasional public articulation of contentious positions that could be interpreted as anti-Ukrainian (Natrass, 2022, TVN24, 2024). Nonetheless, a distinct contrast

emerges when examining the local level. Numerous Hungarian cities demonstrated proactive engagement in supporting Ukraine right from the beginning of the Russian invasion. Two Hungarian cities, Celldömök and Dabas, began to support Mukachevo in helping internally displaced people. Beyond direct material assistance to Ukraine, Budapest played a significant role in helping Ukrainian refugees by establishing assistance centres within the city. In early 2023, the mayor of Budapest, accompanied by the mayors of Warsaw, Prague, and Bratislava, visited Kyiv. The four representatives of the Pact of Free Cities⁶ spoke with Kyiv's mayor about the inter-city cooperation in humanitarian aid, supporting refugees, and the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine (Pact of Free Cities, 2023).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine revealed that numerous cities were willing to offer support to Ukrainian local governments, even in the absence of a specific cooperative framework. Such support is especially important for smaller cities, which may face challenges in reaching out for help on an international scale. For instance, Konotop, with only one partner city in Bulgaria, received assistance from six cities in Poland, including the capital Warsaw, as well as from two cities from the Czech Republic and Lithuania (Konotop City Official, 2023). Notably, this aid often served as a catalyst for discussions on formalising partnerships. An illustrative case is Alexandria, which began receiving support from Bath in the United Kingdom, including the provision of electricity generators. Subsequently, talks were initiated to formalise a cooperation agreement between the two cities (Alexandria City Official, 2023). Similarly, Würzburg from Germany extended support to Lviv from the initial stages of the war, offering a total of EUR 210,000 in financial aid. Shortly before the first anniversary of the full-scale Russian invasion, the two cities officially signed a partnership agreement (Decentralizacia, 2023a).

Interestingly, Hungarian cities without existing partnerships in Ukraine also actively participated in providing assistance to Ukraine. For instance, the city of Székesfehérvár dispatched humanitarian aid to its Polish partner city, Opole, which was subsequently sent to Ivano-Frankivsk (Association of Cities of Ukraine, 2022). This particular case holds significance, as the mayor of Székesfehérvár represents Fidesz, the same governing party in Hungary. This demonstrates the divergence between local and national authorities in their approaches to international matters, leading to distinct paths of action being pursued. However, determining the exact reasons for this is challenging, as motivations could vary widely – from a sense of moral obligation to political aspirations.

Furthermore, the partner cities of Ukrainian cities actively engaged in identifying other cities capable of providing assistance to Ukrainians. Through the efforts of Opole (Poland), its German partner, Ingolstadt, became actively involved in dispatching humanitarian aid to

Ivano-Frankivsk (Ivano-Frankivsk City Official, 2023). Fort Wayne and Tyler from the United States initiated fundraising campaigns for Ukraine, ultimately donating over USD 100,000 to their respective partner cities in Poland, namely, Płock and Jelenia Góra. These funds were then utilised to help Ukrainian refugees in Poland and support partner cities in Ukraine (Fort Wayne, 2022; Tyler City, 2022). Similarly, Owensboro (Kentucky) in the United States established a dedicated fund for Ukraine, which was transferred to the Czech city of Olomouc, which finances humanitarian aid for Chernivtsi (Owensboro, 2022).

Political support

The primary aspect of political support lied in actively participating or mediating in the formation of new partnerships between cities, as it subsequently extends to various dimensions of support, encompassing material assistance among others. The previously mentioned Opole, apart from seeking humanitarian aid for its own partner cities in Ukraine, played a crucial role in fostering new relations between Ingolstadt and Ivano-Frankivsk (Ivano-Frankivsk City Official, 2023).

An unconventional trilateral partnership was also forged between Vinnytsia (Ukraine), Lublin (Poland), and Münster (Germany). According to the information obtained from an official from the Vinnytsia City Council, the initiator of such an idea was Lublin, which encouraged Vinnytsia, and together they convinced the German city to do so. Ukrainian and German cities have been Lublin partners since 2013 and 1991, respectively. In March 2023, at a trilateral meeting in Germany, two documents were signed: a declaration of cooperation between the authorities of Lublin and Münster in the field of assistance to the Ukrainian city (and, more broadly, to Ukraine) and an agreement on cooperation between the authorities of Münster and Vinnytsia (Misto Nad Buhom, 2023).

Another form of support that held significance for Ukrainian cities was the widespread termination of partnership agreements between European and American cities with their Russian counterparts and, to a lesser extent, Belarusian ones. While such decisions may hold primarily symbolic value, they also serve as political statements, indicating that the cities unequivocally condemn the actions of the Russian military in Ukraine and are in solidarity with the victims of aggression. By the end of May 2022, a considerable number of cities, totalling 150 across more than 20 countries, had severed ties with over 160 Russian cities (Andreikovets, 2022).

The city councils of diverse global cities through the formulation and passage of distinct resolutions denouncing the aggressive actions undertaken by Russia against Ukraine were manifesting their conscientious response to that geopolitical crisis. Simultaneously, these resolutions

articulate unequivocal expressions of support for the Ukrainian populace at large. Notably, in instances where relevant and applicable to the prevailing circumstances, these councils have extended specific words of solidarity and encouragement towards their respective partner cities in Ukraine.⁷

Additional symbolic manifestations of city-level support could be observed, such as illuminating iconic buildings with the Ukrainian flag or organising demonstrations where thousands of citizens gather in front of city halls or main city squares (Brukbacher, 2022; Daily Sabah, 2022; Szpak et al., 2023). In the case of rallies, cities assume dual roles as both actors, who organise such events, and places where grassroots demonstrations are initiated by non-governmental organisations or citizens.

Multi-level support for Ukrainian cities

Multi-level support exhibits various forms and involves numerous actors, encompassing city networks, national authorities across different countries and government agencies, international organisations and their institutions, as well as new international initiatives for local governments. Furthermore, this support can exhibit both domestic and international characteristics with interdependencies existing between the two realms.

Material support

After the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the importance of the U-LEAD with Europe initiative increased. It was established in 2016 to support the establishment of a multi-level governance that is transparent, accountable, and responsive to the needs of the population of Ukraine. It cooperates with cities and municipalities with less than 100,000 inhabitants, as well as with cities of regional significance (nearly all the cities surveyed fall into this category). Through this program, six EU member states, that finance the activities of the initiative,⁸ delivered humanitarian packages to 333 war-affected local governments in Ukraine. There were three types of packages: (1) shelter kits comprised essentials such as tents, camp beds and mats, blankets, and medical and hygiene products, to help municipalities to provide better conditions for accommodating internally displaced persons; (2) repair kits contained i.a. generators, cut-off machines, and chain saws to help the affected municipalities to remove debris, clear streets, and restore their critical infrastructure; (3) lighting kits comprised generators and light poles allowing the municipalities to conduct restoration works at night time (U-LEAD with Europe Official 2023). Thus, the U-LEAD demonstrated the effective cooperation of many levels of governance, contributing to humanitarian efforts and facilitating international cooperation amidst the war.

Another transnational and multi-level support for Ukraine was the launch of a new initiative – the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for the Reconstruction of Ukraine. The European Committee of the Regions at its 150th plenary session, together with associations of local and regional authorities from the EU and Ukraine, officially launched this project. The alliance was launched seven days after Ukraine received EU candidate-country status. Its goals include humanitarian assistance, coordinating support for the effective and sustainable reconstruction of Ukrainian cities, and further European integration and access for Ukraine's local and regional authorities to European networks (European Committee of the Regions, 2022).

Political support

The activities of Eurocities, a network of over 200 European cities, exemplified an international and multi-level character after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The president of the network and mayor of Florence, Dario Nardella, initiated the #CitiesWithUkraine campaign. On March 12, 2022, rallies denouncing Russia's actions and expressing solidarity with Ukraine were held across many European cities including Amsterdam, Brussels, Edinburgh, Frankfurt, Milan, Paris, Rome, Seville, Stockholm, and Tirana. About 35,000 people gathered in Piazza del Santa Croce in Florence to hear President Volodymyr Zelensky's speech. Moreover, Zelensky's message resonated with a much larger audience, as at least 177 other cities participated in the initiative (Eurocities, 2022b).

Local governments also endorsed the joint political declarations. In March 2022, on the initiative of the mayors of Gdańsk and Mariupol, 100 mayors of European cities issued a joint appeal to their governments to save human lives, secure the receiving of Ukrainian refugees, and intensify their efforts to stop the war (Council of European Municipalities and Regions, 2022).

The role of cities in decision-making and implementation processes linked to migrant groups is usually limited. Nonetheless, cities are often policy actors, and spaces for refugee and immigrant reception (Grandi, 2020; Stümer-Siovitz, 2022; Taran et al., 2016). It was no different after February 24, 2022. The essential role that cities play on the frontline of migration emergencies has clearly emerged after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Cities have also become homes to hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees. The largest influx of refugees in Europe since World War II, especially in the first few weeks after the start of the Russian invasion, became a challenge for many local governments, with cities and regions situated near the Ukrainian border being heavily impacted. In the joint statement titled 'Cities need more support for Ukrainian refugees' issued in May 2022, 170 representatives from cities affiliated with Eurocities highlighted the imperative

for cities to actively engage in EU and national initiatives related to the reception of refugees. They also emphasised the necessity for EU funding, bolstering local social services, and fostering coordinated societal responses to accommodate incoming refugees effectively (Eurocities, 2022a).

It was also Eurocities that played a noteworthy role in supporting Ukraine and its cities. In addition to the previously mentioned #CitiesWithUkraine campaign and calls for local governments' involvement in crisis management, this city network has actively fostered dialogues and initiatives that connect the local, national, and international dimensions. In August 2022, a delegation from Eurocities visited Kyiv, engaging in discussions with President Zelensky on collaborative efforts between network members and Ukrainian cities for post-war reconstruction. A memorandum of cooperation was signed between the representatives of Eurocities and Ukrainian authorities, establishing a joint task force led by the President of Ukraine, which includes participants from Eurocities and the Ukrainian Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. Regular meetings of this task force will facilitate refinement of the cooperation framework and oversee ongoing collaborative endeavours (Eurocities, 2022c). This exemplifies how diverse levels of authority intertwine, and how their collaboration can generate multi-level engagement and support.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine was an impulse to establish a new transnational initiative connecting cities. At the end of March 2022, on the initiative of the Mayor of Sindelfingen, Bernd Vöhringer, who is also the President of the Chamber of Local Authorities of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, the creation of Cities4Cities was announced (Council Of Europe, 2022a). This is an online platform, the purpose of which is to facilitate Ukrainian cities in obtaining the necessary assistance of various types, as well as establishing ad hoc or permanent partnerships between Ukrainian cities and cities from other countries belonging to the Council of Europe. More than 100 cities and municipalities from Ukraine are registered at the site. Based on the statements provided by the cities and the information available on the Cities4Cities website, out of the 39 cities that participated in the survey, only 9 cities registered on the platform. Although this represents a relatively small proportion, it is noteworthy to observe that the majority of registered cities on the platform have populations below 50,000 residents, as indicated on the website (Cities4Cities, 2023b).

Other aspect of support of the multiple levels character that Ukrainian cities benefited from is exemplified by the case of Odessa. It began with the initiation of a partnership agreement by Venice, followed by Italian city's assistance in advocating for Odessa's inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List (Odessa City, 2022). Odessa's city centre had

been nominated for inclusion on the list over a decade ago, but it was the Russian full-scale invasion that brought the goal closer to realisation. In collaboration with the Ukrainian government, the city authorities actively engaged in the lobbying process. In October 2022, the Ukrainian authorities officially submitted an application to UNESCO, and on January 25, 2023, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee inscribed Odessa's historic centre on the World Heritage List (VisitUkraine, 2023). The centre has also been inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger, which gives the city access to reinforced technical and financial international assistance, which Ukraine may request to ensure the protection of the property and, if necessary, assist in its rehabilitation (UNESCO, 2023). The partnership between Odessa and Venice serves as an exemplary demonstration of how intercity cooperation during crises can effectively influence the preservation of monuments and heritage sites. This case of support further highlights the multi-level nature of assistance and collaboration. The process of achieving inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List necessitated the engagement of local and national authorities alongside favourable decisions from this international organisation.

The involvement of Ukrainian national authorities in providing multi-level support to Ukrainian cities was evident. During the Local and Regional Authorities Congress in July 2022, the Prime Minister of Ukraine Denys Shmyhal emphasised the pivotal role that foreign cities, as well as regions, can assume. He urged Ukrainian cities to engage in proactive dialogue with their foreign counterparts, seek assistance, and foster collaborative initiatives aimed at post-war reconstruction (Ukraine Government Portal, 2022). In April 2023, the International Summit of Cities and Regions was held in Kyiv. The event was organised by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities under the President of Ukraine, together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine. The summit was attended by delegates representing local governments, not only from Ukraine but also from more than 50 other countries, both physically and through online participation. President Zelensky delivered a speech during the event, where he appealed to the representatives of foreign local governments to establish partnerships with their Ukrainian counterparts and extend assistance in reconstruction efforts (Decentralizacia, 2023b).

Ukrainian cities could rely on other form of assistance provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Following the events of February 24, 2022, several cities reached to the Ministry, seeking support in identifying potential new partner cities. Kryvyi Rih sent to the MFA lists regarding help in establishing partnership relations with cities in 21 European countries (Kryvyi Rih City Official, 2023). With the assistance provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Consulate General of Ukraine in Düsseldorf,

Table 8. Dimensions and types of multi-level solidarity and support for cities.

	Material support	Political support
City-level support	Humanitarian assistance; financial assistance; sending equipment for the military; reception and assistance for refugees.	Help in establishing new partnerships; termination of partnerships with cities of the aggressor state; city councils' resolutions; lighting up iconic buildings with the flag of country in crisis; demonstrations and rallies of support.
Multi-level support	Humanitarian assistance; support through international state-funded programs; establishment of the initiative and for cities to increase humanitarian assistance; creation of new international initiative focused on reconstruction for local governments.	Support rallies; joint political declarations; creation of joint task force; launching initiatives aimed at establishing new partnerships between cities; inclusion of the city in the UNESCO World Heritage List; international events for local governments; MFA's assistance in finding new partner cities; guidelines for cities on the establishment of international partnerships.

Source: own study.

Kalush successfully established a new partnership with the German city of Lippstadt (Kalush City Official, 2023).

In 2022, a document with recommendations for Ukrainian local governments regarding international partnerships was published. At the request of the Ministry of Communities, Territories, and Infrastructure Development of Ukraine, the Council of Europe prepared these recommendations within the framework of the Program 'Decentralisation and reform of public administration in Ukraine' (Decentralizacia, 2022). This 100+ page guide includes information such as ways of finding potential partners, procedures for establishing and maintaining contacts with international partners, and registration of various types of aid that foreign partners provide. Programs and projects that support cooperation between Ukrainian and foreign municipalities have also been listed and described. Seven organisations and programs have been identified as being best suited to provide those kind of help for Ukrainian cities: Council of Europe, Solidarity Fund Poland, SKEW – Engagement Global, U-LEAD with Europe, USAID 'DOBRE', Swedish-Ukrainian project 'Supporting Decentralisation in Ukraine', and Transparent Cities⁹ (Council of Europe, 2022b). As a result, it will be easier for Ukrainian cities to undertake international activities, thereby eliciting support from diverse actors at multiple levels.

Conclusion

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has changed the situation in Europe, impacting various aspects,

such as politics, security, and international relations. It has underscored the significance of cities in contemporary international relations. Cities have shown that they can act quickly and efficiently in the face of a crisis. They are not just places for national governments actions but also actors. As this paper reveals, city-to-city cooperation encompasses diverse dimensions of assistance – material support, including humanitarian and financial assistance, or equipment for the military, as well as political and symbolic forms of support such as rallies and demonstrating solidarity, help in establishing new partnerships, or severing ties with cities in Russia and Belarus. Two-thirds of the Ukrainian cities gained also at least one foreign partner city after February 2022.

Pre-war cities partnerships became the basis for a quick involvement in helping Ukrainian cities. Out of 37 cities that had partner cities, only 2 of them did not receive any help from them. Foreign cities without existing partnerships in Ukraine sought ways to support Ukrainian cities, either through their partner cities in other countries, which served as intermediaries for assistance, or by actively seeking to establish new direct contacts. Thus, all of this showed that city diplomacy is of great importance in providing support to Ukraine. And through this, the paper fills the gap in the academic literature concerning the role of cities as humanitarian assistance donors and how they pursue their own international humanitarian agenda. Moreover, as showed in the Hungarian case, cities may diverge from the approaches endorsed by their respective national governments. However, a comprehensive investigation into the motivations driving cities to oppose national government policies necessitates separate research.

The research results show the importance of multi-level involvement, and the cooperation between local authorities, national governments, and international organisations in supporting Ukraine. When it comes to multi-level support, there tends to be a higher number of initiatives within the political support compared to material one, primarily influenced by the capacities of cities. Nevertheless, both forms hold significance, especially considering that some types of political support also have the potential to evolve into material support in the future.

All cases of support and assistance provided to Ukrainian cities, as discussed and analysed, have been categorised according to the typology introduced in this paper. A comprehensive summary of these cases can be found in [Table 8](#).

In this context, it should be emphasised that due to the involvement of Ukrainian cities in ongoing activities during the war, it becomes challenging to establish a closed catalogue of support types. Moreover, it touches only on the topic of war and the problems associated with it, so it does not generalise to all types of crises. This collection is not exhaustive and may expand in the future to encompass additional dimensions of support. Nonetheless, this is a novel typology that may serve as a foundation for further research, not only in relation to the ongoing war in Ukraine but also regarding other future armed conflicts and the role played by cities within them. Research on cities during wartime in various regions of the world will make it possible to comprehensively and inclusively test and possibly improve this typology. Additionally, in prospective research, the examination of cities and the multi-level support for them should extend beyond armed conflicts to encompass other categories of crises, notably disasters and climate change.

Ukrainian cities actively engage in forging new partnerships, receive diverse forms of support from foreign partners, and contribute significantly to the dynamic interplay between multiple levels of governance. The demonstration of international support has underscored that cities serve not only as places where crises happen but also as active actors in international relations, engaging in cooperation and exerting influence on national authorities. Simultaneously, the multi-level dimension of support has revealed how the collaboration among local authorities, national governments, international organisations, and initiatives effectively bolsters such support. All of this highlights the noteworthy growing role of cities in international relations.

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Notes

1. Oblast is the first-level administrative division of Ukraine.
2. In the context of cities located in the Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kharkiv oblasts, the prevalent cause is likely the close proximity to ongoing military operations. In a city situated within the Ternopil Oblast, situated in western Ukraine, the absence of a response can be attributed to time constraints in providing feedback. This can be rationalised by the active engagement in mitigating the repercussions of Russian aggression, among other pressing commitments.
3. And Ternopil Oblast of western Ukraine with one city of over 50,000 inhabitants is an exception here.
4. The full name is Ukraine – Local Empowerment, Accountability and Development Programme. This is a multi-donor program of the EU and its six member states (Germany, Sweden, Poland, Denmark, Estonia, and Slovenia) to support the establishment of a multi-level governance that is transparent, accountable, and responsive to the needs of the population of Ukraine. It was established in 2016. See more: <https://u-lead.org.ua/en/our-mission>.
5. Transparent Cities is a branch of Transparency International that promotes transparency, local authority control, and anti-corruption in Ukraine. The research was conducted on open data, and the cases of assistance were counted.
6. The Pact of Free Cities was founded by the Mayors of the Visegrad Four capitals (Warsaw, Prague, Bratislava, and Budapest) in 2019 and according to the website ‘is global network of cities determined to stand up for progressive values and fight against nationalistic populism’. As of June 15, 2023, 33 cities are members. Kyiv became it in 2022, after the Russian full-scale invasion. See more: <https://www.pactoffreecities.com/>.
7. See, for instance, the positions of Warsaw (<https://um.warszawa.pl/waw/radawarszawy/-/stanowiskoradymstwarszawy>), Białystok (<https://www.bialystok.pl/pl/wiadomosci/aktualnosci/stanowiskoradnych-w-sprawie-ukrainy.html>), or San Antonio (<https://www.ukrainiansanantonio.com/events/resolution-by-the-city-council-on-holodomor-and-current-events-in-ukraine>).
8. Germany, Sweden, Poland, Denmark, Estonia, and Slovenia.
9. In addition to those previously described, Solidarity Fund Poland is a foundation of the State Treasury and is managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. SKEW – Engagement Global is a centre for communal development policy in Germany and on behalf of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development it offers advisory services to local councils. USAID ‘DOBRE’ is a long-term program, the purpose of which is to support and strengthen governance at the local level in Ukraine. Swedish-Ukrainian project ‘Supporting Decentralisation in Ukraine’ aims to assist in the implementation of the decentralisation reform in Ukraine.

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