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# Fragile ties: exploring city diplomacy in times of crises

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the resilience of city diplomacy versus traditional state diplomacy during crises, focusing on COVID-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine's impact on Polish-Chinese paradiplomatic relations. The hypothesis posits that city diplomacy is less durable in facing external shocks than traditional diplomacy. The article analyses bilateral relations at subnational, national, and supranational levels using a multi-level governance framework. Empirical evidence from surveys and interviews reveals the nuanced dynamics amid crises. Findings indicate a general deterioration of Polish-Chinese city-to-city relationships, highlighting the fragility of the paradiplomatic links. The paper contributes to understanding diplomatic resilience, emphasising the increasing role of local governments in international relations.

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Diplomacy; paradiplomacy; city diplomacy; Polish-Chinese relations; COVID-19; international crises

## 1. Introduction

Only a few months after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, more than 150 cities around the world have severed twinning relations with Russian partners (Andreikovets, 2022). Such a reaction was almost automatic in some European countries (e.g. Poland, Czechia or Lithuania) but very often even in the United States. Frenkel (2024) showed that about 25% of American cities suspended or severed their contacts with their Russian partner cities. Even during the Cold War, when diplomatic relations between the United States and the Soviet Union were chilled, pairs of cities across both countries tried to develop 'sister cities' ties (Gottlieb, 2023; Kasakove, 2022). Currently, such connections are frozen or wholly severed.

At the same time, the traditional diplomatic ties with Russia persisted amid the war. After February 2022, only Ukraine and the Federated States of Micronesia severed diplomatic relations with Russia (Government of the Federated States Of Micronesia, 2022). Russia announced that it may cut diplomatic ties with some of the Western countries if they confiscate Russian assets frozen over the Ukrainian war, but it has not happened yet.

Similarly, during the COVID-19 crisis, there was anecdotal evidence that many substate links had been frozen or ceased. The pandemic's impact on diplomatic ties has been less severe. However, many diplomatic meetings, conferences, and other significant events

have been cancelled, and the accelerated transition towards online meetings has caused difficulties.

The main aim of this paper is to analyse the fragility of substate links by testing the hypothesis that city diplomacy is less resilient to external crises than traditional diplomacy. When writing about 'crisis', we mean an external factor that is or may be potentially destructive. Thus, our main research question is how external shocks influence diplomacy and paradiplomacy, defined here as international relations conducted by subnational governments to promote their interests (Kamiński, 2019).

It is worth mentioning that diplomacy and paradiplomacy are part of multilayered diplomatic relations, which are characteristic of current times (Ciesielska-Klikowska & Kamiński, 2022; Hocking, 1993). As states engage in conventional diplomatic endeavours on the international stage, cities and regions have emerged as influential actors, navigating the complexities of global relations independently, as a prominent part of the global governance system (Acuto, 2013; Szpak et al., 2022). This non-always symbiotic relationship between traditional diplomacy and paradiplomacy is proof of the complex web of interactions shaping contemporary international relations. While national governments demonstrate their authority by conducting foreign policy, cities and regions increasingly engage in global initiatives, making direct international connections and exerting influence on state policy in or beyond traditional diplomatic channels (Tavares, 2016). In other words, by their international activity, cities and regions could support, complement, correct, duplicate, or even challenge the nation-states' diplomacy (Soldatos, 1990).

A valid example of such a diplomatic realm is Polish relations with the People's Republic of China (China or PRC). They are conducted in a multi-level framework, with traditional inter-governmental contacts supplemented by the European Union (EU) policies on the supranational level and subnational engagements of regions and cities. Since launching the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), partnerships between Polish and Chinese cities have become more common. Their number has rapidly grown since 2000, reaching 41 partnerships in 2020 and focusing mainly on culture, education and economy (Kamiński & Gzik, 2021).

Thus, the Polish-China relations will serve as an empirical case that allows the answer to two specific research questions that will test the study hypothesis. First, how has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted Polish relations with the PRC? Second, what was the impact of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 on such ties? It helps us explain the reasons behind the fragility of paradiplomatic links compared to traditional diplomatic relations. However, it should be noted that Russia's invasion of Ukraine occurred when Chinese cities were most engaged in countering the COVID-19 pandemic, which could have distracted them from worldwide twinning relations.

This study explores the complex nature of functioning spheres of traditional and city diplomacy by highlighting synergies and contradictions between them. We contribute to the discourse by addressing two aspects of the evolving international relations landscape: the differences between paradiplomacy and traditional state-level diplomacy and the fragile nature of paradiplomacy exemplified in Poland's relations with China. These bilateral relationships are our basic example because they are well-researched at three levels (subnational, national and supranational) before and after crises. Additionally, we contribute to research on paradiplomacy in times of crisis, of which there are few. Based on the subnational US-China relations, Jaros and Newland (2024) argued that factors such as economic interests, institutionalised relationships, and proactive

engagement by Chinese partners help sustain cooperation despite increasing political and security tensions. However, we assume that we can contribute to the field by indicating the variables that distinguish traditional diplomacy from city diplomacy and determining the fragility of the second one in times of external crises such as war and pandemics.

The article is structured as follows. The first part shows our methodological approach, focusing on multi-level governance as a theoretical framework for analysing Polish relations with China. It also explains why the chosen case gives an excellent base for more general observations about the nature of diplomacy and paradiplomacy. In the second section, we distinguish between diplomacy and paradiplomacy, identifying their differences in seven major categories. The third section uses the multi-level analysis framework to describe Polish relations with China before COVID-19 and the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In the fourth section, we present the impact of the two crises on city levels of Polish relations with China. In the final section, we discuss our empirical results and describe the factors contributing to the fragility of paradiplomatic links in comparison with the more enduring nature of traditional diplomacy.

## 2. Methodology

We conducted an in-depth literature review to examine Polish-Chinese relations at the supranational (within the EU) and national levels. However, to test the hypothesis that city diplomacy is less resilient to external crises than traditional diplomacy, the review of existing literature was supplemented with empirical research.

The empirical part of the study is based on data from two observations that allowed us to identify changes. The first was a survey of all 745 EU cities with a population exceeding 50,000<sup>1</sup> conducted between May 2020 and May 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those efforts encouraged 395 cities from 25 states to complete the study, which is an excellent response rate (53,02%), considering that the average survey response rate is 5–30% (Keeter et al. 2017). Of those 395 cities, 213 (53.92%) maintain some form of relations with China, resulting in 383 established partnerships (Kamiński et al., 2024). Polish-Chinese city-to-city cooperation is one of the best examples of intensifying these relations. In Poland, the survey of all 68 cities was conducted between September and October 2020 (Kamiński & Gzik, 2021). Responses were received from 59 Polish cities (87%), of which 26 cities declared cooperation with Chinese partners, and 25 completed the questionnaire. The survey was distributed in English to the city officials responsible for international cooperation. It comprised 22 questions for cities that cooperate with China and seven questions for those that do not. The sending of questionnaires was followed up by contact with officials through e-mail, telephone calls and formal letters.

The second observation was in the form of phone interviews, sometimes followed by a corresponding e-mail, with officials from all 26 cities that in 2020 declared cooperation with China. Those interviews were conducted two years later, in September and October 2022, so after the most significant European COVID-19 crisis and the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. City officials responsible for international cooperation were asked: 'How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the city's relationship with China?' and 'Has the war in Ukraine influenced the perception of China or the city's relations with Chinese partners?'. Finally, we collected responses from 23 cities, which gives an 88% rate.<sup>2</sup>

The first survey conducted on a sample of European cities allowed for the diagnosis of solid and well-developed city connections between Poland and China. It was influenced by the number of established partnerships, joint projects and the assessment of officials completing surveys of the importance of this cooperation compared to other international cooperations (Kamiński & Gzik, 2021). Therefore, we decided to conduct a second survey by selecting Polish cities to check whether international crises, i.e. the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, impacted the nature and durability of these bilateral relations.

Although this study provides valuable insights into the nature of relations between Polish and Chinese cities during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the influence of the ongoing war in Ukraine, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the research primarily focuses on the quantitative aspects, such as the number of cities that maintained relations, rather than exploring the underlying factors or the decision-making processes that led to particular outcomes. Furthermore, due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, the study refrains from forecasting or speculating about the future trajectory of Polish-Chinese relations in the post-conflict period.

### 3. Theoretical framework

The theory of multi-level governance (MLG) helps to understand not only the dynamics of the decision-making process within the EU but also its integration and daily functioning (Piattoni, 2010, p. 17). In this case, MLG can also be used to analyse foreign policy (Stephenson, 2013, p. 828) between Poland and China. Relations with China are conducted at the supranational level by the EU, at the national level by the Polish government and at the subnational level by cities and regions.

The MLG theory allows for an understanding of how policy can be shaped by many actors at different, often dispersed levels of power (Stephenson, 2013, p. 817). In other words, according to Hooghe et al. (2020, p. 194), multi-level governance is the dispersion of authority within and beyond national states. This power, also understood as competencies, including specific ones to conduct international activities, may be dispersed vertically or horizontally (Allain-Dupré, 2020, p. 804). The first possibility was explained above and assumed, in this case, to be the dispersion of Polish-Chinese relations on three levels: supranational, national, and subnational. However, in the horizontal dispersion of power, at each level, this power is distributed and, therefore, exercised by different actors like authorities or private actors. Other actors (international organisations, states, cities, regions) have different competencies, needs and goals. Only by analysing their policies towards China and simultaneously considering all these variables at various levels will it be possible to obtain a complete picture of such bilateral relations. Therefore, to complete the picture of Polish-Chinese ties, we will analyse all three levels of contact.

By pointing out the differences between state-centric diplomacy and city diplomacy, we want to describe the factors contributing to city diplomacy's fragility compared to the more enduring nature of traditional state diplomacy. Understanding these differences is crucial for analysing the evolving landscape of diplomatic realms. However, the starting point for this analysis will be the definition of state-centric diplomacy and city diplomacy.

Following Nicolson (1939, p. 13), diplomacy has five meanings: synonym for foreign policy, negotiation, the process and machinery of negotiations, a branch of a nation's

foreign service or quality and gift or skill at negotiating. It could be understood as negotiations conducted by the responsible people (diplomats) in the international area or managing international relations through the negotiation process (Faizullaev, 2022, p. 11). However, Jonsson (2002) understands diplomacy as ‘an instrument of foreign policy for the establishment and development of peaceful contacts between the governments of different states, through intermediaries mutually recognised by the respective parties’. This definition exemplifies that only governmental units assigned to a given country can be a part of diplomacy. There is no reference here to the possibility of other entities, like subnational units, participating in diplomacy, which results from the fact that managing foreign policy is the exclusive competence of states and their representatives. The same author draws attention to the fact that diplomacy, in its broader sense, tends to be a synonym for foreign policy (Jonsson, 2002, p. 213).

According to Curtis and Acuto (2018), city diplomacy can be defined as the ‘formal strategy of a city in dealing with other governmental and non-governmental actors on the international stage’. City diplomacy is also characterised by having instruments, features, means, and attributes distinct from those used by national governments (Balbim, 2021, p. 28). In this context, city authorities establish short-term and long-term international relationships with other entities to advocate for their interests. We acknowledge that city diplomacy means a flexible city strategy customised to the requirements of the local community or city administration, intending to articulate needs and accomplish intended objectives on the global stage. This strategy can take various forms – formal or informal, permanent or ad hoc – dictated by the overarching goals. They aim to secure the city’s economic, cultural, or political advantages (Cornago, 2018; Kuznetsov, 2013; Sevin, 2024). As we understand, city diplomacy is one of the forms of paradiplomacy.

The table below shows the differences between traditional state-centric diplomacy and paradiplomacy in seven, the most crucial in our understanding areas (Table 1).

Following Faizullaev (2022, p. 67), from the state perspective, ‘diplomatic actors are sovereign states and other political entities who conduct international or official relations through their official agents (diplomatic envoy)’. However, governments may involve society and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as an element of the state’s new public diplomacy (Ociepka, 2012, p. 132). In the case of city diplomacy, the directions and goals of international activity are imposed by mayors, presidents or other city authorities. However, the content is filled in by people responsible for international

**Table 1.** The main differences between traditional state-centric diplomacy and paradiplomacy.

| Category                               | Traditional diplomacy                                | City diplomacy   |
|--|--|--|
| Actors                                 | National government                                  | City authorities   |
| Decision-making authority              | Autonomous   | Autonomous to the degree depending on the political system |
| Agenda setters                         | Driven by the national interests and interest groups | Local interests and interest-groups                        |
| Institutionalisation                   | High   | Low  |
| Access to financial or human resources | Full access to state resources                       | Limited access   |
| Personal factor                        | Low importance                                       | High importance  |
| Focus area                             | High and low politics                                | Low politics   |

Source: Own elaboration.

cooperation in these substate units. The foreign policy of states always exists and is constantly implemented by national governments – it is an essential part of the existence of every state. The fragility of city diplomacy is indicated by the fact that if a decision-maker in a given city or region does not express the will to engage in international activity, it simply will not exist.

State diplomacy is governed by international law (Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, 1961) and diplomatic protocol, with diplomats enjoying certain privileges and immunities. State constitutions and laws express the state's competencies to conduct foreign policy. Relevant ministries, most often ministries of foreign affairs, set short-, medium – and long-term foreign policy goals consistent with the state's interests and the ruling party or person (Hocking, 1999; Oppermann et al., 2016). State-centric diplomacy often involves a centralised decision-making process in which an MFA's entity formulates and implements foreign policy. This unity of command can facilitate quick and decisive action during external crises. In practical terms, however, it depends on the central authority's efficiency, competence and crisis management skills. Moreover, state-centric diplomacy provides a consistent message to the international community. This consistency can be crucial during crises, as it helps project a stable image and ensures that responses are perceived as coordinated.

However, the decision-making authority in the city diplomacy framework is influenced by the legal position of the city in a particular political system and a degree of autonomy in foreign relations depending on policy coordination in a given state. To better understand it, the typology of Soldatos could be helpful. He divided the coordination of foreign policy activities from the state's point of view (1990, 38), later clarified by Kuznetsov (2013, p. 114). He presents four extreme scenarios of relations between central government and subnational units. The fragile nature of city diplomacy is underlined in the two models, in which city diplomacy is subordinated to the state's foreign policy without the freedom to make independent decisions of substate entities at the international level. It may result from the state, federal or, more often – unitary model or adopted practice (Requejo, 2010, p. 10). The other two models assume that subnational governments could, to some extent, act independently in the international arena.

State diplomacy is fundamentally concerned with advancing and protecting national interests. The shaping of the diplomatic agenda is significantly influenced by the state's concerns, including sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the protection of citizens. Moreover, interest groups at the national level, such as influential industries and lobbying groups, may have substantial influence in shaping diplomatic priorities by advocating for policies aligned with their interests. Paradiplomacy, however, may differ from those of the central government. Sometimes regions and cities might be considered as 'trouble-makers'. Here, we can mention examples of Milan and Weimar, which, by rewarding the Dalai Lama and the Uyghur dissident Ilham Tohti, caused diplomatic tensions between their respective states and Chinese authorities, even affecting EU–China relations. Similarly, Prague's decision to withdraw from an agreement with Beijing and diverge from the 'One China policy' resulted in a diplomatic crisis between the Czech Republic and China (Ciesielska-Klikowska & Kamiński, 2022). The central government may perceive such local government initiatives as acting against the state's interests and then limit or even block them. Thus, city diplomacy functions within a more localised framework, where city authorities focus on addressing their residents' specific needs and



aspirations. Immediate and direct local interests drive the diplomatic agenda of cities and actions taken by the officials.

It is also worth noting that city authorities can organise themselves, for example, in international city networks, to respond to emerging threats more effectively following actual needs. An example is the Pact of Free Cities, established by Warsaw, Budapest, Bratislava and Prague, aimed at cooperation between cities in response to contemporary global challenges such as populism, climate crisis, inequality, housing crisis, ageing society and social stratification. The Pact of Free Cities allows cities to cooperate directly, bypassing state governments ruled at the time by populist parties, which are perceived as ineffective in solving current problems (Szpak et al., 2023).

Cities have diplomatic tools similar to states but cannot access advanced decision-making processes and knowledge available only to the highest power levels. Thus, sub-state entities have a hybrid role in access to financial or human resources. The impermanent nature of city diplomacy may be visible where its implementation may be impossible due to a lack of human resources, political will or financial resources. Central governments primarily finance local governments so that these funds may be limited during a conflict. Such a conflict may occur where the person governing a city or region is in political opposition to the party ruling in the country. However, if subnational city authorities have limited resources, they could be forced to look for new opportunities, such as performing activities internationally. Local governments may, therefore, have economic, political and cultural motives to diversify their political orientations and reduce their dependence on resources the central government provides (Fantoni & Avellaneda, 2022, p. 18).

State diplomacy is firmly institutionalised through a dedicated government unit, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, embassies and consulates. They have access to human resources and funds from the state budget allocated by the central authorities. Diplomacy is also well institutionalised in the intangible dimension of the durability of diplomatic relations. The state's foreign policy is a continuous and ongoing phenomenon that does not change over time. Its inherent feature is struggling with and coping with crises. Diplomacy remains a necessity for states, owing to the higher pressure to maintain international relations due to the numerous interconnections between states. Consequently, diplomatic relations rarely break due to crises if they are well-institutionalised. City diplomacy actions concern essential issues from the point of view of a given city or region and its residents. International involvement will only have an institutional framework if consistent with the decision-maker's goals in subnational entities. So, it is an opportunity and potential avenue for local governments rather than a necessity for their functionality. This also implies that there will be reduced pressure to maintain contacts when crises arise compared to the case of diplomacy.

Different international agendas are also expressed in various forms of diplomacy and city diplomacy. Bilateral and multilateral negotiations between sovereign states, participation in international organisations, and diplomats' conduct of foreign policy can be forms of diplomacy. On the other hand, sister city agreements, trade missions by local or regional governments, and participation in international networks by subnational entities are typical for city diplomacy (Acuto & Leffel, 2021; Tavares, 2016). These activities constitute a component of the institutionalisation of city diplomacy. Moreover, cities may establish dedicated international cooperation departments. However, even in the world's largest metropolises, there is a problem with the lack of qualified staff to



conduct paradiplomacy. As Kosovac et al. (2021, p. 134) proved, from a sample of 47 surveyed cities, 'the majority of cities responding (51%) indicated that no relevant training is formally provided for the international activities of staff, and 4% were unsure. Only 45% indicated that training was available'.

In traditional diplomacy, the emphasis on personal factors in conducting external actions tends to be subdued, often overshadowed by the weight of established institutional frameworks and national interests. Politicians and diplomats act as representatives of their nation's policies, and while personal connections may carry some influence, it is typically secondary to the broader diplomatic objectives. Conversely, in city diplomacy, the personal factor assumes heightened significance. Leaders of subnational entities wield a more direct influence on external engagements. Studies have underscored this shift, as individual leadership was viewed as an essential factor in international city engagement, with 85% of respondents believing that the personal networks of leaders help cities achieve their international objectives. More than half of them (58%) reported significant alterations in their cities' international agendas with leadership changes, underscoring the impact of individual leaders on paradiplomatic actions compared to the more stable continuity observed in traditional diplomacy (Pejic et al., 2022, p. 8).

The focus area in the foreign activities of substate entities is limited to soft policy areas called 'low politics', which may also be the subject of the state's foreign policy. It opposes 'hard politics', reserved only for nation-states or international government organisations. Hard politics refers to security, defence, war, peace and the conclusion of international agreements. The areas covered by low politics are promoting the economy and national and cultural interests, attracting investments, promoting exports, national, regional or local products, attracting tourists, creating trade missions, and incentivising investors. For this reason, substate entities can more effectively implement these tasks (van der Pluijm & Melissen, 2007).

However, cities may also be responsible for 'hard politics' tasks. Regarding security, the example of Croatia and the relocation of 650,000 migrants and refugees highlights the role of cities that provide infrastructure and utilities, such as land, buildings, and services (Larsen et al., 2016). The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 also emphasised the importance of city diplomacy during the war. Many Ukrainian cities received diverse forms of support from foreign partners and engaged in forging new partnerships (Matiaszczyk, 2024). In the matter of supporting global peace, it is worth mentioning the campaign 'Mayors for Peace' established by the mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which are advocates of the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons (Miyazaki, 2021).

## 4. Polish-Chinese relations before the crises

### 4.1. National level

Although there is a long tradition of good relations between Poland and China (Mierzejewski, 2017), at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the former showed little interest in the latter. It changed with Polish accession to the EU in 2004. Membership has raised Poland's profile and enabled this country to participate in fast-developing relations between the EU and the PRC. Poland initially viewed China somewhat sceptically as a

competitor for investments from the longer-established EU Member States and as a massive importer that could threaten domestic business. Apart from requesting anti-dumping and other protectionist measures to protect Polish industries, the government in Poland also opposed human rights abuses in China and showed sympathy towards Taiwan and Tibet (Okraska, 2014). Fox and Godement (2009, p. 5) numbered Poland among 'Assertive Industrialists', one of a group of EU Member States 'willing to stand up to China vigorously on both political and economic issues'.

Poland altered its policy by establishing a strategic partnership with China in 2011 as the last of the 'Big Six' EU Member States. It endorsed the BRI and engaged actively in the creation of the 16 + 1 format. Brussels started to perceive it as a 'slacker' regarding the EU's common policy towards China (European Council on Foreign Relations, n.d. 2012). The Polish government later changed its position again and started cooperating more actively with other European countries. In 2014, Poland, Finland and Germany were named 'leaders' in coordinating EU policy towards China (European Council on Foreign Relations, n.d. 2015).

Nevertheless, all those manoeuvres were rather subtle and complex to notice. In the first decade after it acceded to the EU, we observed Poland trying to find its place in the frameworks of EU policy towards China and attempting to attract Chinese attention to the whole of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). China has become a more important partner for Poland, even though relations with the Asian giant have always occupied a relatively low position among Polish foreign policy priorities. It has been clear from annual addresses by Polish foreign ministers to Parliament and was apparent in the memoirs of Radosław Sikorski, one such minister, who devoted just four pages of 400 to China (Sikorski, 2018).

The new Polish national-conservative government came to power in 2015 and stressed the importance of relations with China from the beginning. President Andrzej Duda chose China as the destination for one of his first foreign trips, and Poland became the only founding member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) from CEE. In public debate, the potential benefits of cooperation with China even started to be discussed as an 'alternative' to EU cohesion funding that will, at some point, run out (Frenkel, 2017; Kaliński, 2016; Maciejasz, 2016; Forsal.pl, n.d.). In 2016, the strategic partnership between Poland and China was upgraded to a 'comprehensive strategic partnership', with a declaration signed in Warsaw, Duda and PRC Chairman Xi Jinping. Poland was again perceived in Scorecard ECFR rankings as a 'slacker' regarding EU policy towards China (European Council on Foreign Relations, n.d. 2016). The Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydło attended a summit organised by China on the 'New Silk Road', which most European leaders decided to avoid (Spisak, 2017).

Since 2017, a more cautious attitude toward China has been observed because Polish decision-makers began to realise that closer political ties with China did not translate into as many tangible, positive outcomes as previously anticipated (Bachulska, 2021). In an unprecedentedly negative way, the defence minister Antoni Macierewicz blocked a significant Chinese investment in the cargo terminal in Łódź in January 2017, calling it a threat to Polish sovereignty (Frąk, 2017). It was all strengthened by the changing geopolitical landscape of US–China relations, resulting in the visible deterioration of relations under the Donald Trump administration. American containment policy also affected Polish strategic considerations, and Warsaw distanced itself from Beijing to stress close

ties with Washington. For instance, the Polish Minister for Internal Affairs, Mariusz Kamiński, said in 2019 that cooperation with China in the field of 5G would be ‘monstrous risk and monstrous irresponsibility’ (Kalwasiński, 2019). Poland flipped its foreign policy again in the first half of 2021, organising high-level meetings and events that suggested the will to reinvigorate its relations with China (Bachulska, 2021). It was caused by less cordial relations with President Joe Biden, whose election was a visible disappointment for the Polish conservative government (Euractiv.com, n.d.).

President Duda’s visit to Beijing for the Winter Olympics’ Opening Ceremony and his meeting with Xi Jinping marked the rapprochement in relations (Lunting & Matusiewicz, 2022). They deteriorated only a moment after Russia invaded Ukraine, which China de facto supported. Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki even published an opinion piece in which he warned against the threat of China taking advantage of the geopolitical passiveness of the West (Morawiecki, 2022).

The analyses above show that Polish political elites are uncertain about China. On the one hand, Poland is China’s largest trading partner in CEE and a crucial logistic hub – 90% of railway cargo exports from China to the EU go through the Polish terminal in Małaszewicze, on the Polish-Belarusian border (Lunting & Matusiewicz, 2022). On the other hand, political relations are vulnerable to external conditions and far from being stable. Nevertheless, on the institutional level, diplomatic ties are resilient to external crises. Diplomatic contacts are conducted typically and are not much affected by pandemics or political tensions and disagreements, contrary to the subnational links.

#### 4.2. Subnational level

Cooperation with Chinese partners is widespread among Polish cities, with as many as 26 declaring it, accounting for nearly 45% of all cities with a population of more than 50,000 (Kamiński & Gzik, 2021, p. 71). Smaller cities collaborate less often. Thus, only six of the 26 Polish cities with 50,000–100,000 residents cooperate with the Chinese. The only city without a Chinese partner among the 11 largest cities (more than 250,000 residents) is Wrocław (Kamiński & Gzik, 2021, p. 70) (Table 2).

Thus, city size crucially impacts collaboration with foreign partners, aligning with prior city diplomacy research (Hocking, 1993; van der Pluijm & Melissen, 2007). Larger cities are more attractive to foreign partners because of their cultural events (exhibitions, festivals), universities, better infrastructure, and global economic connections (the presence of renowned companies). Smaller cities try to overcome this problem. Cooperation between Lublin and Jiading district, Nowy Sącz and Huangdao district and Ostrów Wielkopolski and Qingbaijiang district demonstrates that cities seek partners not only among city or provincial authorities but also among district authorities (respectively: Shanghai,

**Table 2.** Types of Polish cities cooperating with China (by population).

| Population       | Total number of cities | Number of cities that cooperate with China |
|------------------|------------------------|--|
| 50,000–99,999    | 26                     | 6  |
| 100,000–249,999  | 22                     | 10   |
| 250,000–499,999  | 6                      | 6  |
| 500,000 and more | 5                      | 4  |

Source: (Kamiński & Gzik, 2021, p. 71).

Qingdao and Chengdu). Given the asymmetry between Polish and Chinese cities, this is crucial, where partnering with specific city districts helps mitigate the population size difference.

There are 41 partnerships between Polish and Chinese cities. The vast majority are relatively new, having begun within the last decade. Before the year 2000, only three partnerships were established (Table 3).

Cooperation intensified after Poland joined the EU in 2004. Membership has raised Poland's profile and enabled the country to participate in the fast-developing relations between the EU and the PRC. In the same year – 2004 – the visit of Chairman Hu Jintao to Poland took place, during which six strategic agreements were signed in various fields (economic, educational and cultural cooperation). The rise of Poland's position in the international arena and strengthening intergovernmental cooperation with

**Table 3.** Partnerships between Polish and Chinese cities.

| Polish city         | Chinese partner       | Year    | Formal agreement |
|---------------------|-----------------------|---------|------------------|
| Białystok           | Chongzuo              | 2018    | Yes              |
| Bydgoszcz           | Ningbo                | 2005    | Yes              |
| Gdańsk              | Shanghai              | 2004    | Yes              |
| Gdańsk              | Qingdao               | 2017    | Yes              |
| Gdynia              | Haikou                | 2006    | Yes              |
| Gdynia              | Zhuhai                | 2017    | No               |
| Grudziądz           | Nanning               | 2011    | Yes              |
| Jelenia Góra        | Changzhou             | 2011    | Yes              |
| Jelenia Góra        | Huangshan             | 2019    | No               |
| Katowice            | Shenyang              | 2005    | Yes              |
| Kielce              | Taizhou               | 2016    | Yes              |
| Kielce              | Yuyao                 | 2013    | Yes              |
| Konin               | Deyang                | 2015    | Yes              |
| Koszalin            | Fuzhou                | 2007    | Yes              |
| Kraków              | Nanjing               | 2009    | Yes              |
| Kraków              | Suzhou                | 2019    | No               |
| Lublin              | Jiazuo                | 2010    | Yes              |
| Lublin              | Jiading District      | 2012    | Yes              |
| Lublin              | Xiangyang             | 2015    | Yes              |
| Lublin              | Kanton                | No data | No               |
| Łódź                | Tianjin               | 1994    | No               |
| Łódź                | Kanton                | 2014    | Yes              |
| Łódź                | Chengdu               | 2015    | Yes              |
| Nowy Sącz           | Suzhou                | 2005    | Yes              |
| Nowy Sącz           | Huangdao District     | 2012    | No               |
| Olsztyn             | Weifang               | 2016    | Yes              |
| Opole               | Fujian                | 2012    | No               |
| Opole               | Baise                 | 2015    | No               |
| Opole               | Jiaxing               | 2015    | No               |
| Ostrów Wielkopolski | Qingbaijiang District | 2019    | Yes              |
| Płock               | Huaian                | 2010    | Yes              |
| Poznań              | Shenzhen              | 1993    | Yes              |
| Radom               | Huzhou                | 2009    | Yes              |
| Rzeszów             | Fangchenggang         | 2011    | Yes              |
| Stalowa Wola        | Liuzhou               | 2018    | Yes              |
| Szczecin            | Jinan                 | 2010    | Yes              |
| Szczecin            | Harbin                | 1993    | No               |
| Toruń               | Guilin                | 2003    | Yes              |
| Toruń               | Wuhan                 | 2015    | No               |
| Warszawa            | Beijing               | 2010    | No               |
| Zielona Góra        | Wuxi                  | 2008    | Yes              |

Source: (Kamiński & Gzik, 2021, pp. 75–76).

China provided the momentum for developing city-to-city collaboration. As many as 15 partnerships were established between 2004 and 2012.

In 2012, Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao paid a visit to Poland. In the same year, the Chinese created the 16 + 1 initiative, which brings the countries of CEE together and invites them to cooperate on a regional level (Kowalski, 2017; Mierzejewski & Chatys, 2018). Xi Jinping announced the CRI launch a year later, calling Chinese cities and provinces to intensify international cooperation (Mierzejewski, 2021; Miller, 2017; Szczudlik, 2015). As many as 16 city partnerships were established between 2013 and 2019 after the launch of the BRI. In this case, intensified diplomatic relations at the national level result in increased local interactions.

In relations with China, city authorities predominantly initiated cooperation, as observed in 16 of 25 surveyed cities. Notably, the local interest groups – business communities or universities also initiated collaborations, but never cultural institutions or schools, despite being considered essential partners by most local authorities. Płock's collaboration with Huaian was initiated by the Consulate General of Poland in Shanghai, and Ostrów Wielkopolski engaged with the Qingbaijiang district through the personal involvement of the Polish Consul General in Chengdu. However, they represent isolated cases of coordinating paradiplomatic activities through state diplomacy channels (Kamiński & Gzik, 2021, p. 78). Half of the surveyed cities collaborating with Chinese partners lacked policy coordination with the central government, as the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs showed minimal initiative in coordinating multi-level relations (Ksenicz, 2020, p. 240). The absence of coordination and vertical institutional linkages constitutes a significant factor in the fragility of paradiplomatic relations. Enhanced cooperation with higher governmental levels would serve as an additional stabilising element, strengthening international cooperation between cities.

Analysing the most essential local partners for international city cooperation leads to an intriguing conclusion. Cultural institutions, schools, and, to a lesser extent, sports institutions were the most frequently involved in such collaboration. The business partners ranked last (Kamiński & Gzik, 2021, p. 77), which is surprising in light of previous studies of Polish cities, in which the economic sector was identified as the most important in international contacts between city officials (Szewczak et al., 2016, p. 12). 13 of the cities that cooperate with China identified entrepreneurs as essential partners, indicating that the Asian destination is of particular interest to those local governments that collaborate with businesses.

Of 41 Sino-Polish partnerships, 29 exist based on a signed partnership agreement. It demonstrates that the cities strive to institutionalise their relations, which may lead to closer and more intensified cooperation. However, the cooperation is very rarely institutionalised in the form of permanent representative offices. Also notable is that before the COVID-19 pandemic, there were few non-active partnerships. In 29 cases, joint initiatives had been with the Chinese in the two years preceding the survey (e.g. official visits and joint projects). Even if some partnerships were entering a state of 'dormancy', new alliances were emerging in their place, with ongoing activities. Only two cities, among those claiming to cooperate with their Chinese counterparts, had no active agreement before the pandemic (Kamiński & Gzik, 2021, p. 75).

All surveyed cities cooperating with China primarily engaged through official visits, trade fairs, economic forums, and business missions. In connection with traditional

diplomacy channels, only Łódź, Gdynia, and Lublin held meetings between Polish government delegations and Chinese officials, indicating that multi-level cooperation is rare. Along with the general statement of ‘exchange of experience’, officials in charge of developing relations with Chinese cities frequently emphasised the benefits of cultural and academic exchanges. These two factors are correlated, as costs result precisely from a geographical distance.

However, it is worth mentioning that, similarly to the absence of connections between Polish national policies and municipal actions, a lack of coordination exists between the European Union and cities. This phenomenon is part of a broader issue affecting municipalities throughout the EU. The European Union lacks comprehensive knowledge regarding the interactions between cities and China at the local government level (Kamiński et al., 2024, p. 15).

## 5. The impact of crises on Polish-Chinese city relations

The crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which started in 2019, and the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 significantly impacted the previously observed patterns of international cooperation. Not only have the relations between international organisations and states changed, but also cities in their international activity and internal governance (Pejic et al., 2022). This part shows the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian armed attack on Ukraine on city-to-city relations between Poland and China, examining 23 instances of Polish cities cooperating with the PRC.

### 5.1. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

From the responses received, it was possible to distinguish three categories of cities in their relations with China (Table 4). In the first category, there are two cities where the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic did not affect relations with Chinese partners, as these had not been active for some time. In the second category, there are seven Polish cities where the pandemic resulted in the permanent or temporary suspension of relations with China. In the third category, there are 14 cities which have maintained relationships with the Chinese using various remote forms.

Lublin and Radom are cities where the pandemic did not slow down relations with China, as these relations were occasional before. Thus, the last contact in Lublin occurred in 2017, on the occasion of the city’s 700th anniversary and the ‘Night of Culture’ event,

**Table 4.** The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the relations between Polish and Chinese cities.

| Result  | Name of Polish cities   | Amount (n = 23) |
|---|---|-----------------|
| The pandemic did not change much because relations had been occasional before | Lublin, Radom   | 2               |
| The pandemic has suspended or limited cooperation                             | Gdańsk, Konin, Łódź, Rzeszów, Szczecin, Toruń, Zielona Góra   | 7               |
| Continuation of cooperation   | Białystok, Bydgoszcz, Gdynia, Jelenia Góra, Katowice, Kielce, Koszalin, Kraków, Nowy Sącz, Olsztyn, Opole, Ostrów Wielkopolski, Płock, Poznań | 14              |

Source: Own elaboration.

when the Chinese delegation was hosted. The Polish city indicates that it is caused, on the one hand, by geographical distance and, on the other hand, by 'different priorities'. Radom, who declared cooperation with Huzhou in various fields, indicated that the agreements signed in these areas did not result in current initiatives. Admittedly, in November 2021, Radom took part in the Huzhou 'Friendly Cities' online conference, but it was an exception. Generally, in 2022, the cooperation remained inactive.

For seven Polish cities, the pandemic caused a visible slowdown or even a breakdown in relations with Chinese partners. One of the most remarkable deterioration of relationships was noticed in Lodz, which used to be a flagship showcase of subnational contacts with China. Direct cargo railroad connection, regional and city office opening in Sichuan, and declaration of Chinese investment in the city were presented as a success story of the BRI initiative (Kamiński, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic only accelerates the degradation of Lodz's links with Chengdu and Lodzkie region with Sichuan. Lack of substantial Chinese investments in the city, change of regional leaders resulting in weakening political will to cooperate with China, obstruction from the central government in Warsaw and looming tensions between the US and China lower the scale of cooperation (Kowalski, 2020). The pandemic 'killed it almost totally', as two regional and city administration officials admitted in interviews.<sup>3</sup>

In 14 Polish cities, cooperation with China has continued despite the pandemic in possible forms and areas. Although mutual visits have ceased, remote collaboration and joint online initiatives have been maintained. Katowice conducted the promotional campaign of Shenyang on its social media, and the Chinese organised the '5th Conference of Central and Local Leaders of China and Central and Eastern European Countries'. In addition, in the culinary event organised by Katowice in 2021 and 2022, Shenyang took part by sending a video with greetings and recipes, which was presented on a large screen in the city centre. Bydgoszcz continued its relationship with Ningbo, exchanging information about, for instance, concerts that were accessible on the Internet. The situation is similar to that of Opole. The exchange of courtesy and occasional letters is maintained. In addition, the Chinese invited the city to host a joint online conference, which has not happened yet, but the idea was postponed and not shelved for good.

Cultural issues were also an incentive to maintain relationships. In the case of Płock and Huai'an, children from the Polish city participated twice in art competitions organised by a partner from China. It was possible thanks to sending scans of works directly to the Chinese. It was similar in the case of Nowy Sącz, which takes part in art competitions organised by the Chinese side for children and teenagers, as well as Chinese children taking part in competitions organised in Poland. The Chinese invited this city's inhabitants to participate in a photo exhibition organised in the local library.

In the case of Olsztyn, the pandemic even strengthened the cooperation with China. The city of Weifang invited the authorities in Olsztyn to an online scientific-practical conference on crisis management in the pandemic era. The authorities of both cities, the Chinese ambassador to Poland, and representatives of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs attended the conference. It also received comprehensive coverage in China, as it was broadcast by local television. In addition, Weifang is creating a virtual museum of partner cities, and, as promised, Olsztyn will be the first exhibition.

Another form of maintaining cooperation was Chinese mask diplomacy. Polish cities have also become recipients of such aid during the pandemic. In some cases, like in



Toruń, the equipment might be substandard, but it was not a rule. For instance, Weifang, a partner city of Olsztyn, sent, on their initiative, medical transport in the form of masks and coveralls with appropriate certificates. Similar, positive stories were mentioned by officials from Bydgoszcz or Gdynia, which received up to 50,000 masks from Haikou (Table 5).

Sometimes, it was the Chinese side that offered medical materials, and sometimes, it was the Polish side that asked for support itself. However, what is significant for mask diplomacy is that the support sent was later captured by both sides and presented in city news portals and local media to serve the Chinese narrative of providing aid during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a difficult test for the subnational partnerships with China. Fourteen cities reported that they had been trying to maintain relations despite lockdowns and a lack of face-to-face communication, relying on online methods. Seven cities suspended or limited any links, waiting for the end of COVID-19 restrictions. In the case of two cities, the pandemic only revealed that the partnerships with China had already been inactive. Therefore, the impact of COVID-19 was ambiguous – widely negative, but it also encouraged new forms of cooperation between cities. It can also be noted that in some cities, the ‘soft areas’ of cooperation related to culture sustained the relationship during the pandemic. Moreover, it can also be considered that the pandemic period was a ‘transition’ in relations. Officials hoped to strengthen cooperation as soon as China’s pandemic settles down.

### ***The influence of the war in Ukraine on the relations between Polish and Chinese cities***

The respondents were also asked whether the escalation of the war in Ukraine, which took place in February 2022, impacted partnership relations with China. Based on the answers provided, the respondents were again divided into three groups (Table 6). In the case of

**Table 5.** Medical aid from China for Polish cities.

| Medical support from China: | City   | Amount |
|-----------------------------|--|--------|
| Yes                         | Lublin, Radom, Konin, Poznań, Zielona Góra, Łódź, Bydgoszcz, Opole, Gdynia, Kielce, Koszalin, Olsztyn, Toruń | 13     |
| No                          | Rzeszów, Gdańsk, Płock, Nowy Sącz, Ostrów Wielkopolski, Białystok, Katowice, Kraków, Jelenia Góra            | 9      |

Source: Own elaboration.

**Table 6.** The impact of the war in Ukraine on the relations between Polish cities and China.

| Category                         | Name of Polish cities  | Amount (n = 21 <sup>7</sup> ) |
|----------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| Business as usual                | Białystok, Gdańsk, Katowice, Kielce, Konin, Koszalin, Kraków, Lublin, Olsztyn, Nowy Sącz, Ostrów Wielkopolski, Poznań, Radom, Rzeszów, Szczecin, Toruń, Zielona Góra | 17                            |
| Distancing from Chinese partners | Bydgoszcz, Opole, Płock  | 3                             |
| Strengthening the relations      | Jelenia Góra   | 1                             |

Source: Own elaboration.

17 cities (category 'business as usual'), the policy towards China has not changed under the influence of Russian aggression against Ukraine. Three cities distanced themselves from China because of the war. In one case, the war brought the unexpected strengthening of cooperation.

It is essential to mention that the 'business as usual' group encompasses many cities that, during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, had already experienced weakened relations with Chinese cities due to the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. There were a total of eight such cities. A city official from Szczecin presented it as follows:

The city of Szczecin did not change the perception of relations with China regarding the war in Ukraine due to the lack of genuine cooperation with Chinese cities. Also, for this reason, the city's official position on this matter has not been presented to the Chinese.<sup>4</sup>

In some cities like Koszalin, Rzeszów, Białystok, Olsztyn and Ostrów Wielkopolski, the issue of the war in Ukraine was not discussed at all with Chinese partners. Similarly, the Kraków authorities took no position on China's attitude towards Ukraine. The official explained that *there was no necessity or will, especially as cooperation with Chinese partners is occasional*.<sup>5</sup>

Katowice admitted that the war did not translate into relations with the Chinese because *both sides tried not to include big politics in developing our bilateral partnership, focusing on activities at the local level*.<sup>6</sup> The official argued that the *long-term cooperation between Katowice and Shenyang was successful thanks to the mutual commitment and establishment of direct, cordial relationships in the past; it was implemented based on mutual trust*.

After the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, some cities sent messages to all partner cities, including the Chinese, asking for humanitarian support. Poznań admitted that the city expressed its position and strongly opposed Russia's aggression against Ukraine. In March, the city authorities sent letters to all their partner cities, including Shenzhen, asking for financial or material support for refugees from Ukraine. No reply was received from the Chinese.

Some local authorities tried to observe Polish-Chinese relations at the national level and follow governmental policy. An official from Nowy Sącz admitted that the President of the city had a conversation with the Chinese Ambassador in Warsaw and noticed at the same time that the Polish President Andrzej Duda recently had a telephone conversation with Xi Jinping (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, n.d.). An official from Konin expressed it bluntly: *Since Poland maintains relations with China at the central level, we also want to – unless something unexpected happens*.

Three Polish cities, Bydgoszcz, Opole and Płock, admitted that they distanced themselves from cooperation with partners from China. In the case of Bydgoszcz and Płock, at the time of the outbreak of the war, messages were sent to all partner cities, presenting a critical position towards Russian aggression. Additionally, cities officially ask for humanitarian aid to support the growing number of Ukrainian refugees coming to Poland. Bydgoszcz did not receive any response from the Chinese city of Ningbo and an outraged one from a Serbian partner. Płock decided not to invite delegations from China and Serbia to the festival of partner cities – the 'European Picnic', organised under the slogan 'Solidarity with Ukraine'.

In the case of Opole, the city authorities directly addressed the Chinese partners, indicating that cooperation should wait for some time because the city concentrates all resources on helping Ukraine. The war was not directly discussed with the Chinese partners, but they were not included in the message with the request for humanitarian aid directed to all partners. The official explained they wanted to avoid causing tension by broaching the subject.

Jelenia Góra is an isolated case in which the war in Ukraine strengthened relations with the partner city of Changzhou. The Polish city authorities sent a message to all their partner cities asking for humanitarian aid for Ukraine, pointing out that it was caused directly by Russian aggression. To the surprise of the official responsible for international cooperation in the city, in June 2022, the Chinese side positively responded to this request, offering its support. Initially, the offer was not taken seriously in Jelenia Góra until parcels with first aid kits arrived in the city with an explicit request from the Chinese side to hand them over to Ukrainian soldiers. As a result, parcels were sent directly to the warzone via Tarnopol (Telewizja Strimeo, *n.d.*). Interestingly, as in the case of mask diplomacy, the Chinese asked for photographic documentation of the receipt of the parcels for promotional activities.

The impact of full-scale Russian aggression on Ukraine in February 2022 has been much more limited. However, it should be noted that these relations were often weakened before the Russian invasion. Only three cities admitted that Chinese political support for Russia affected their subnational ties negatively. Most cities tried to keep contact with their partners despite political tensions on the governmental level. It could be another proof that paradiplomacy in Poland is detached from the state's foreign policy. Moreover, state diplomacy and paradiplomacy have entirely different goals and

**Table 7.** Impact of crises on Polish-Chinese cities' relationships.

| City                | Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on relationships | Impact of Russian aggression on Ukraine on relationships | The state of relationships after crises compared to the situation before |
|---------------------|--|--|--|
| Gdańsk              | weakening  | Limited  | degraded   |
| Konin               | weakening  | Limited  | degraded   |
| Łódź                | weakening  | Limited  | degraded   |
| Rzeszów             | weakening  | Limited  | degraded   |
| Szczecin            | weakening  | Limited  | degraded   |
| Toruń               | weakening  | Limited  | degraded   |
| Zielona Góra        | weakening  | Limited  | degraded   |
| Białystok           | continuation (but online)                        | Limited  | weaker   |
| Bydgoszcz           | continuation (but online)                        | weakening  | degraded   |
| Gdynia              | continuation (but online)                        | N/A  | N/A  |
| Jelenia Góra        | continuation (but online)                        | improvement  | stronger   |
| Katowice            | continuation (but online)                        | Limited  | weaker   |
| Kielce              | continuation (but online)                        | Limited  | weaker   |
| Koszalin            | continuation (but online)                        | Limited  | weaker   |
| Kraków              | continuation (but online)                        | Limited  | weaker   |
| Nowy Sącz           | continuation (but online)                        | Limited  | weaker   |
| Olsztyn             | continuation (but online)                        | Limited  | weaker   |
| Opole               | continuation (but online)                        | weakening  | degraded   |
| Ostrów Wielkopolski | continuation (but online)                        | Limited  | weaker   |
| Płock               | continuation (but online)                        | weakening  | degraded   |
| Poznań              | continuation (but online)                        | Limited  | weaker   |
| Lublin              | were already weak                                | Limited  | degraded   |
| Radom               | were already weak                                | Limited  | degraded   |

Source: own elaboration.

natures. The case of Jelenia Góra showed that through city diplomacy, it was possible to engage the Chinese partner in delivering support to Ukrainian soldiers, although of minimal scope.

Thus, following both crises, we can categorise Polish-Chinese cities' relations into weaker and degraded ones. 'Weaker' denotes that collaboration persists but remains solely online, failing to revert to the pre-COVID-19 pandemic relationship status. Degraded relations, on the other hand, refer to those in which at least one of the analysed crises has significantly undermined the relationship, leading to a lack of current cooperation (Table 7).

## 6. Conclusions

In the case of our study, the multi-level governance approach provides a comprehensive framework to analyse the complex dynamics of three levels of relations between Poland and China: at the supranational level (engaging the EU institutions), at the national level, but also at the subnational level (between regions and cities). In our understanding, the application MLG could be used not only to analyse the dispersion of power among the EU but also for foreign policy analysis in the context of the actorness of subnational entities (Ciesielska-Klikowska & Kamiński, 2022).

Even though government relations with China have cooled down since 2017, the picture in 2020 showed flourishing city-to-city contacts. As many as 26 cities, more than 40% of all Polish cities with a population above 50,000 inhabitants, collaborated with the Chinese in various forms. Culture was listed as the primary area, followed by education, the economy and academic cooperation. These links developed almost autonomously from the central government with minimal policy coordination, without systematic support or information flow.

Effectively influencing relations at the subnational level requires understanding their nature and accepting that paradiplomacy has completely different features than inter-state relations. Instead of the sectoral nature of ministers' talks, meetings of local politicians are usually much more multi-thematic, comprehensively covering economic, social, environmental, educational and cultural ties (Kamiński & Gzik, 2021, p. 88).

In examining the dynamics of city diplomacy amidst external crises, specifically within the context of cooperation between Polish cities and their Chinese counterparts during the COVID-19 pandemic and after the Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine, this research shows some mechanisms inherent in city diplomacy. The comparative analysis of city-to-city relations between Poland and China unveils distinctive differences between city diplomacy and the more conventional realms of traditional diplomacy.

Central to this contrast is the array of actors involved, wherein traditional diplomacy gravitates around the central government and diplomatic envoys. At the same time, paradiplomacy is marked by representing city and regional authorities alongside entities involved in local international cooperation. This dichotomy extends to decision-making authority and legal status, with traditional diplomacy characterised by centralised governance over foreign policy and paradiplomacy operating within a framework dictated by the central government, albeit with varying degrees of autonomy. This autonomy was visible in the case of Jelenia Góra, as it singularly improved its relations with a Chinese city despite the prevailing weakened state of Polish-Chinese relations at the national level.

At the same time, the involvement of actors shows the vulnerability of paradiplomacy. It is evident when a decision-maker in a city or region lacks the will to participate in international activities, as demonstrated by the example of cities that deliberately omitted Chinese cities in lists regarding Russian aggression against Ukraine. Moreover, it seems that participation in international city networks may positively impact the resilience of cities to external crises (Balbim, 2021). We can mention the 'Urban EU-China' platform operating at Eurocities, which, through participation in a wide range of projects, helps to strengthen ties between European and Chinese cities (Eurocities 2024). However, in our survey of 59 Polish cities, only Płock indicated that it cooperates with Chinese partners through participation in international city networks. Therefore, such a transnational form of cooperation appears to have untapped potential to build resilience to external crises.

This distinction cascades further, encompassing institutionalisation. Before the crises, Polish-Chinese city partnerships were not based on mutual representative offices. Consequently, amidst international travel restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, all interactions were limited to online platforms. That determines how traditional diplomacy adheres to well-established structures within ministries of foreign affairs and embassies, contrasting with paradiplomacy's reliance on ad hoc activities and a low level of institutionalisation.

Traditional diplomacy typically enjoys greater resource allocation, while paradiplomatic activities are limited due to lacking human or financial resources. This issue poses a challenge for cities under ordinary circumstances, as Polish cities indicated even before the COVID-19 pandemic, and its exacerbation becomes more pronounced during crises. The inherent fragility of paradiplomacy is underscored by its vulnerability to resource constraints, particularly evident in periods of heightened uncertainty and enormous challenges.

The findings of this study affirm that subnational entities focus on 'low politics' in their international engagements. Before the crisis was analysed, a collaboration between Polish cities and their Chinese counterparts encompassed economic primarily, cultural, educational, scientific, and tourism issues. However, the COVID-19 pandemic restricted cooperation to online formats, mainly focusing on cultural aspects only. In several instances, that crisis led to suspending or breaking collaboration even in the 'low politics' realm. The subsequent crisis, the war in Ukraine, further prolonged that situation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly impacted the world globally, creating a universal set of challenges – far-reaching effects on mobility, trade, interpersonal exchanges, isolation, strained healthcare systems, and enforced quarantines – affecting Polish and Chinese cities. This impact was particularly evident in China, where certain cities experienced temporary isolation from the rest of the country to contain the virus. Thus, the pandemic posed significant challenges for the ongoing cooperation of Polish and Chinese cities. Seven of 23 cities cooperating with China declared suspension or limitation contacts. Moreover, 14 admit that collaboration was ongoing, but as proved, only via online meetings. It is difficult to call such a situation optimal in bilateral contacts. Two cities admit that the pandemic was an accelerator of breaking already weak relations. Therefore, the consequences of breaking or limiting relationships at the subnational level are much smaller than at the central level.

At the same time, the research findings indicate that the war in Ukraine, despite being an external crisis, in most cases, did not affect the mutual relations between Polish and

Chinese cities. There are two reasons here. Firstly, although the ongoing war was an external crisis, this crisis did not directly affect the Polish, let alone Chinese, cities. Polish cities experienced indirect effects, such as the influx of refugees, while Chinese cities did not feel any impact. Secondly and more importantly, the pandemic first limited Polish-Chinese contacts between cities. When the Russian aggression against Ukraine began, it was still ongoing, which was especially visible in China.

Of 21 cities, only Jelenia Góra has better relations with China than before both crises. Apart from this, all cities surveyed have worsened or weaker relations with their Chinese partners after the COVID-19 pandemic and war in Ukraine. The findings suggest that crises' direct relevance and nature significantly influence the extent to which paradiplomatic engagements endure or falter. At the same time, ties between Poland and China, both at the national level and within the broader context of relations between the European Union and the PRC, have persisted at pre-2020 levels. This confirms that city diplomacy exhibits greater fragility and lower resilience to external crises when compared to traditional diplomacy.

## Notes

1. The sample of the examined cities was selected based on information from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development report that was current for 2012 (Dijkstra & Poelman, 2012). The number of residents of European cities was then verified based on an analysis of Eurostat data "Population on 1 January by age groups and sex – cities and greater cities" (2020). The online survey was conducted as a part of the Polish National Science Centre funded project: *The Role of Cities in the European Union's Policy towards China* (2019/33/B/HS5/01272), funded by the Polish National Science Centre under the OPUS-17 programme.
2. This research was funded by National Science Centre, Poland for the project: *Model of cooperation between cities and regions of CEE and China* (2021/41/N/HS5/01963) under the PRELUDIUM 20 programme.
3. Interview with an official from the Lodzkie Marshall Office, Warsaw, 18.05.2023; interview with an official from Lodz City Hall, Warsaw, 05.12.2023.
4. An e-mail from an official from Szczecin city hall on 14.10.2022.
5. An e-mail from an official from Kraków city hall on 09.27.2022.
6. An e-mail from an official from Katowice city hall on 06.10.2022.
7. Gdynia and Łódź did not answer on this question.

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