

CITY DIPLOMACY AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE: Towards a Municipalism of Blocs?

Agustí Fernández de Losada, senior researcher and director of CIDOB's Global Cities programme



In a situation of acute polarisation on a global scale, the war in Ukraine has placed international municipalism at risk of confrontation among blocs that could lead to rupture. This would not only disable its potential in the area of reconciliation but could also make it irrelevant in the international community as a contributor of solutions to the many crises which, in addition to that of Ukraine, confront the world.

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Ever since the first international organisation of local authorities (the International Union of Local Authorities) was founded in 1913, a few months before the outbreak of the First World War, international municipalism has established peace and pacifism among its mainstays. After the Second World War, the twinning of French and German cities showed the way to reconciliation and, during the years of the Cold War, the World Federation of United Cities (WFUC) became a meeting place for western and Soviet local authorities. Moreover, Mayors for Peace, an organisation initiated by the mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, had also begun to campaign for the abolition of nuclear weapons. Today, international municipalism has taken the form of a rich, wide-ranging ecosystem of networks and platforms in which cities from all around the world coexist in delicate equilibrium. This balance has so far allowed municipalism to transcend the tensions inherent in a global order that is once again being shaped into power blocs.

Now, however, the ability of mayors around the world to create spaces of dialogue that have hitherto been relatively immune to the conflicts involving states could be at risk because of the war that began with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Scrutiny of the blocs shows that western cities have taken a strong stand against the invasion and have supported national governments and the sanctions imposed against Russia while also building bridges of solidarity with their counterparts in Ukraine. At the other end of the spectrum, Russian local authorities are standing by the Kremlin, while those of China and many other countries of the global South have refrained from denouncing the conflict and have adopted a position of tense equidistance that is making their western partners uneasy.

Since the Russian troops entered Ukraine, thousands of cities in Europe, the United States, Canada, Japan, Australia, and Latin America have emphatically denounced what they see as unacceptable aggression, unequivocally adopting positions in favour of peace and against the war, supporting sanctions, and endorsing the expulsion of Russia from multilateral spaces. They have turned to symbolism, lighting up iconic buildings with the Ukrainian flag, have organised demonstrations with thousands of citizens gathering in front of the city halls of the main cities, and have endorsed political declarations like that led by the mayors of Mariupol and Gdansk and signed by more than a hundred others, calling on European states and institutions to intensify their efforts to stop the war.

In a highly polarised situation on the global scale, the war in Ukraine has placed international municipalism in a situation of having to face the risk of a confrontation between blocks that could lead to rupture, which would not only mean going backwards on a path that has taken more than a century to travel but would also render inoperative the potential for contributing to towards reconciliation which cities have shown since the Second World War.

In recent months, the diplomatic activity of cities, especially in Europe and the United States, has been frenetic. In March, the mayor of Rotterdam sent a letter denouncing the invasion to his counterpart in the twinned city of St Petersburg, with which Rotterdam was also linked by the destruction the two metropolises suffered during the Second World War. Other cities, including Glasgow, Karlsruhe, Chicago, and Tokyo, have cancelled activities jointly planned with their Russian counterparts, and networks like Cities Coalition for Digital Rights have suspended the membership of Russian cities. The Pact of Free Cities, led by Prague, Warsaw, Budapest, and Bratislava, is working to support the coordinated reception of millions of refugees fleeing the war, and hundreds of cities are mobilising resources and offering support to Ukrainian cities. Meanwhile, others in neighbouring states are overwhelmed with the arrival of refugees. Barcelona, for example, has made an official announcement calling for tenders with the specific aim of funding the activity of humanitarian organisations operating in the conflict zone, while Mannheim has approved the allocation of a million euros in aid to its partner cities in Ukraine, Poland, and Moldova.

Nevertheless, the position in Russia and other countries like China, Iran, India, Pakistan, South Africa, and Senegal is totally different. Russian municipalism, starting with the country's two main metropolises, Moscow and St Petersburg, is fully aligned with Vladimir Putin and his government.

So too are Chinese cities and many big cities of Iran, India, South Africa, and other African and Southeast Asian countries which, for years, have benefitted from Russian aid. Like their national governments, they call for peace but are opposed to sanctions, while pointing out that NATO and the west are also to blame for this conflict of such uncertain consequences. They express solidarity with the refugees but also draw attention to the hypocrisy of Europeans and Americans who, while they are supporting Ukrainians, ignore the conditions of great hardship of other people who have been displaced in conflicts that are caused by western powers, or considered to be of secondary importance.

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Difficult though it may be, it is necessary to explore forms of dialogue that will contribute towards reducing tensions and preparing the ground for reconstruction. International municipalism does not have the power to influence the war, but it must call for peace, receive and protect refugees, and provide channels for renewed rapprochement. This can only be done from a position of unity and building bridges. A municipalism that is broken up into blocs would no longer be relevant for the international community and would run the risk of ceasing to be part of the solution to the host of problems with which, quite apart from the war in Ukraine, the world is presently confronted.