

City Diplomacy in a Fragmented World: Navigating Geopolitical Tensions and the Crisis of Multilateralism

20th June 2025, 10:00-16:00

CIDOB, Sala Maragall. Elisabets 12, 08001 Barcelona

Organized by: CIDOB

City diplomacy is currently navigating a landscape that is markedly more complex than only a few decades ago. This may be appreciated by analysing multiple dimensions of the international activism of cities and its embeddedness in global governance. First, the ongoing institutionalization of city networks is leading their secretariats to gain centrality vis-à-vis their members, while the private sector is playing a growing role in the funding of these organizations. Second, intermunicipal relations are increasingly affected by the interests of nation-states fuelling geopolitical tensions and the deepening crisis of multilateralism. Third, city governments in the global South are amplifying their international outreach as part of a broader process questioning the Western-dominated world order.

The CIDOB's Monograph "The evolution of city diplomacy amidst geopolitical tensions, the crisis of multilateralism, and the rising global South", to be published in December 2025, addresses all the aforementioned issues, advancing the knowledge of the increasingly complex intersection of cities and global governance. In this context, CIDOB organizes an in-person international seminar to present the preliminary results of the research conducted. The closed-door event will aim to boost a fruitful dialogue between representatives from subnational governments and city network secretariats, scholars, experts, and partners. Bridging policy and academia, the seminar will further allow the participants to discuss possible future synergies, particularly with regards to the analysis of how city diplomacy interacts with the evolving landscape of geopolitical tensions, the crisis of multilateralism, and the rising global South.

Programme

10:00 – 10:05 **Welcome remarks**

10:05 – 11:35 **City diplomacy amidst geopolitical tensions and the crisis of multilateralism**

Amid rising geopolitical tensions and a deepening crisis of multilateralism, the space for local governments and their associations to engage in global governance is undergoing significant change. Once seen as complementary to national foreign policy, city diplomacy has emerged as a proactive force in global advocacy, sustainable development, and peacebuilding. However, the growing polarization of the international system—particularly within the United Nations—has introduced new constraints and challenges. This session will explore how current global dynamics are reshaping the diplomatic practices of cities and their networks. It will examine how local governments are adapting their strategies in the face of a fragmented multilateral landscape, the limitations they face in UN-related advocacy, and their responses to heightened geopolitical risks. The discussion will also assess the potential of

city diplomacy to help mitigate global tensions and foster cooperation in critical areas such as climate action, migration, and digitalisation, and consider what institutional innovations are needed to sustain local influence on the global stage.

Daniel Pejic, Research Fellow, Melbourne Centre for Cities, University of Melbourne

Hannah Abdullah, Senior Fellow, German Marshall Fund

Andras Szorenyi, Senior Policy Advisor, Global Cities Hub

Pablo Fernández, Assistant Secretary-General for Partnerships, UCLG

Lorenzo Kihlgren Grandi, Director, City Diplomacy Lab

Chair: **Marta Galceran**, Senior Research Fellow, Global Cities Research Coordinator, CIDOB

11:35 – 12:00 **Coffee break**

12:00 – 13:30 **City diplomacy and the rising global south**

This session will examine the evolving landscape of city diplomacy across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, with a focus on the expanding international engagement of cities in the Global South and its implications for global governance. Through speaker presentations and an open discussion with participants, the session will explore several key questions: How is the ongoing shift in global economic power toward the Global South shaping the agenda, structure, and strategies of international municipalist networks? What role are cities playing in advancing the South-South cooperation agenda, including their engagement in broader geopolitical platforms such as BRICS and the G20? To what extent can city diplomacy serve as a meaningful mechanism for localizing the Global South's broader pursuit of justice, equity, and sovereignty? Are the international practices of cities in the Global South contributing to a reconfiguration of global norms and challenging the foundations of the Western liberal order? What is the evolving role of city diplomacy in complementing national and supranational (e.g., EU) foreign policy, particularly in today's complex and multipolar geopolitical environment?

Fritz Nganje, Associate Professor of International Relations, University of Johannesburg

Melinda Martinus, Lead Researcher, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute

Jordi Vaquer, Secretary General, Metropolis

Michał Gzik, Member of Paradiplomacy Lab, University of Lodz

Jolie Guzmán, Chief editor, Paradiplomacia.org

Chair: **Ricardo Martinez**, Senior Research Fellow in Global Cities, CIDOB

13:30 – 14:20 **Networking lunch**

14:20 – 15:50 **The impact of global processes within city networks: financing, institutionalization and agendas**

Building on the discussions from the previous roundtables, this session will examine how global political and economic processes are reshaping the internal dynamics of city networks—particularly with regard to their financing, institutional structures, and thematic agendas. In a context marked by intensified geopolitical competition, a fragmented multilateral system, and the growing influence of the Global South, city networks face mounting pressure to adapt both structurally and strategically. This roundtable will offer a critical assessment of the evolving institutional architecture of city networks—how they are financed, governed, and guided in response to shifting global dynamics. Key questions to be explored include: What financing mechanisms currently support international municipalism, and how do they influence the autonomy and strategic priorities of city networks? To what extent are city agendas shaped by the interests of donor states, multilateral institutions, or emerging powers? How do city networks reconcile their role as platforms for local empowerment with the broader geopolitical objectives of national or supranational actors? And what risks do city networks face in terms of co-optation or instrumentalization within global power dynamics—and how can they build greater institutional resilience and accountability?

Ricardo Martinez, Senior Research Fellow in Global Cities, CIDOB

Marielle Papin, Assistant Professor, MacEwan University

Federica Bordelot, Director of Policy and Impact, CEMR

Representative from Barcelona City Council (tbc)

Chair: **Marta Galceran**, Senior Research Fellow, Global Cities Research Coordinator, CIDOB

15:50 – 16:00 **Concluding remarks and next steps**

Marta Galceran, Senior Research Fellow, Global Cities Research Coordinator, CIDOB