

The Paradiplomacy of the City of Košice

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Abstract

This article examines the paradiplomatic activities of Košice, Slovakia's second-largest city, in the context of Europe's changing geopolitical architecture after 2022. It draws on paradigms of paradiplomacy and multi-level diplomacy to show how a regional city with limited resources balances local development priorities with external security, economic and normative pressures. The study uses a qualitative case study design and document analysis of municipal resolutions, partnership agreements, project documentation and strategic papers, complemented by secondary literature. Empirically, it focuses on the evolution and geopolitical reorientation of Košice's partner-city network, its participation in transnational municipal and EU initiatives, its response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and its engagement with the EU's climate and innovation agendas. The article argues that Košice has shifted from symbolic, protocol-oriented external action to a more strategic paradiplomatic profile linking urban development, security perceptions and European integration, shaped mainly by institutional capacity, leadership change and opportunities created by EU multi-level governance.

Keywords: *paradiplomacy; city diplomacy; Košice; multi-level governance; municipal networks.*

Introduction

International relations have undergone a fundamental transformation in recent decades. The traditional Westphalian model, in which nation-states alone held a monopoly on foreign policy, is giving way to an environment characterised by multi-actorism. It is an environment in which sub-state entities, regions and cities are actively entering the international arena. This phenomenon, academically conceptualised as paradiplomacy, encompasses diverse forms of international engagement by local authorities. This engagement ranges from bilateral city partnerships, through participation in transnational networks, to direct humanitarian interventions in the context of armed conflicts. It is precisely the cities of Central Europe, situated on the geopolitically exposed periphery of the European Union, that offer analytically interesting cases of paradiplomacy, as their international activity reflects not only economic and cultural ambitions, but also security challenges and shifts in power structures across the continent.

This article analyses the paradiplomatic activities of the city of Košice, Slovakia's second-largest city, in the context of Europe's changing geopolitical architecture following the watershed year of 2022. Košice serves as a case study that allows us to observe how a regional city with limited

capacities navigates between local interests and global pressures. Based on an analysis of the city's partnerships, involvement in transnational networks, reactions to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and participation in EU climate and innovation initiatives, we argue that Košice has developed a relatively sophisticated paradiplomatic profile that exceeds the conventional expectations placed on Central European cities of a similar size. The study combines an analysis of the city's primary documents (council resolutions, project documentation, partnership agreements) with secondary literature and employs a qualitative case study design in line with *Kuznetsov's* explanatory framework for paradiplomacy research (Kuznetsov 2015b).

1 Literature review

The term 'paradiplomacy' was introduced into academic discourse by *Panayotis Soldatos* and *Ivo Duchacek* in the late 1980s. *Soldatos* defined paradiplomacy as "*direct and, in various instances, autonomous involvement [of federated states] in external-relations activities*" (Kuznetsov 2015a, 37). On the other hand, *Duchacek* originally favoured the term 'microdiplomacy', but later accepted the semantically more neutral concept with the prefix 'para-' (Duchacek 2015, 32). The terminological debate, which is mapped in detail by *Aguirre*, for example, revealed a deeper conceptual problem. The prefix "para" implies an activity that takes place "alongside" or "beside", but also, for example, an activity that occurs "in spite of" and "against" national diplomacy (Aguirre 1999). According to critics, this introduces a normative assumption of conflict between the central and sub-state levels into the concept. *Alexander Kuznetsov* characterised paradiplomacy as "*a form of political communication for reaching economic, cultural, political or any other types of benefits, the core of which consists in self-sustained actions of regional governments with foreign governmental and non-governmental actors*" (Kuznetsov 2015a, 30–31). This approach reflects the complexity of the phenomenon and its multidimensional nature.

In the context of urban paradiplomacy, the analytical perspective differs somewhat. *Van der Pluijm* and *Melissen* characterised city diplomacy as "*a professional, pragmatic and upcoming diplomatic activity on the international political stage, which is changing and will continue to change current diplomatic processes*" (Pluijm and Melissen 2007, 6). Their research, based on interviews with city diplomats, showed that a city's size need not be a determining factor. They conclude that even smaller cities can exhibit a high level of diplomatic activity if they possess adequate institutional capacity and motivation. *Acuto*, *Morissette* and *Tsouros* analysed the growing institutionalisation of city networks and noted that formal network structures are increasingly present in processes on the international stage. In doing so, they highlighted the need for a more strategic approach to networking on the part of cities. They emphasised that many cities are part of dozens of networks simultaneously, which raises the question of 'natural selection' between the options for engaging with available networks and the need for a systematic approach to multilateral engagement (Acuto et al. 2017, 21). *Tavares* placed this shift empirically within a broader context when he noted that "*against*

conventional views, the international activism of substate governments is now neither exclusive to federal countries nor to firmly established democracies" (Tavares 2016, 14). This thesis is particularly relevant to the municipal paradiplomacy of Košice – the unitary character of the Slovak Republic does not a priori preclude robust foreign activity by local self-government. Tavares also pointed out that although thousands of sub-state governments around the world engage in some form of foreign relations, the nature and quality of these activities vary significantly. According to him, the decisive differentiating factor is not the formal constitutional position of the sub-state actor, but rather a combination of institutional infrastructure, the personal commitment of political leaders and available resources. He particularly emphasised that, with the exception of a few large cities and regions, the foreign policy apparatus of sub-state governments is *"embryonic and sensitive to the ambition and dedication – or lack of – of some leaders"* (Tavares 2016, 42). This argument offers an analytical key to understanding the changes in Košice's international activity, where the succession of mayors and shifting political priorities determined the scope and intensity of its paradiplomatic engagement.

Recent scholarship on paradiplomacy increasingly emphasizes that sub-state foreign engagement should no longer be understood as an exceptional or marginal phenomenon, but rather as a structurally embedded feature of contemporary international relations. Rather than constituting a deviation from state diplomacy, paradiplomacy is now widely interpreted as a functional component of multi-level governance systems, in which cities and regions act as intermediaries between global processes and local policy needs. This literature further highlights that paradiplomatic activity is driven by both external structural conditions – such as globalization, European integration, and the expansion of transnational governance regimes – and internal factors including institutional capacity, leadership agency, and strategic policy entrepreneurship at the municipal level. In this perspective, paradiplomacy is increasingly conceptualized not only as a tool for economic and cultural projection, but also as an instrument of policy innovation and soft power accumulation, particularly in knowledge-intensive and innovation-driven urban regions (Lachytová and Lehotay Pandová 2025).

Population ageing has become one of the key structural challenges of contemporary European social policy, driven by rising life expectancy and changing demographic structures. Across EU member states, the increasing share of older persons is placing growing pressure on pension systems and long-term care provision. At the same time, substantial cross-country differences persist in the organisation and financing of care, reflecting diverse welfare state models and governance arrangements. While EU-level frameworks promote coordination and minimum standards, responsibility for long-term care remains primarily at the national level, resulting in unequal access and varying levels of service provision across Europe (Lachytová and Demčaková Mihaľová 2026).

In the Central European context, *Brian Hocking's* concept is of particular significance; he preferred the term 'multilayered diplomacy' to the concept of paradiplomacy. By using this term, he emphasised that sub-state actors need not act in opposition to the central government, but are an

integral part of the diplomatic system. Hocking argued that diplomacy should not be viewed as a segmented process involving separate actors within the state, but rather as a system in which different levels of governance are interconnected (Hocking 1993). This approach proves to be appropriate when analysing the Slovak centralised administrative model, in which cities do not possess explicit foreign policy competences, yet nevertheless develop an international agenda through partnerships, project cooperation and membership of supranational organisations. *Vilém Řehák* applied this approach to the case of Prague and confirmed that paradiplomatic activity is conditioned by three supranational factors: economic globalisation, regional and global political regimes, and transnational networks, particularly those anchored in the EU (Řehák 2013).

Noé Cornago has broadened the analytical scope of paradiplomatic studies beyond the Western world and defined paradiplomacy as “*non-central governments' involvement in international relations, through the establishment of formal and informal, permanent or ad hoc contacts, with foreign public or private entities, with the aim to promote socioeconomic or political issues, as well as any other foreign dimension of their own constitutional competences*” (Cornago 2000, 1–2). *Cornago* noted that paradiplomacy is not exclusively a matter for federal states or established democracies, which legitimises its examination in the post-socialist Central European context as well. *Ciesielska-Klikowska* and *Kamiński* applied a paradiplomatic perspective to cities' relations with the EU and identified three channels through which sub-state actors influence the Union's foreign policy: lobbying and the creation of network communities, the use of formal powers, and the implementation of direct actions (Ciesielska-Klikowska and Kamiński 2022).

For the analytical purposes of this study, we introduce the concept of *infrastructural paradiplomacy*, which denotes situations in which a sub-state actor – without a direct negotiating mandate – provides the material and symbolic framework for multilateral diplomacy conducted by actors at higher levels of governance. The concept builds on *Hocking's* (1993) argument regarding the integral role of sub-state actors in the diplomatic system, extending it to incorporate a spatial dimension: the city functions not merely as an actor, but as an arena upon which the diplomatic activity of others unfolds. Analytically, infrastructural paradiplomacy is distinguished from classical paradiplomacy in that the primary paradiplomatic signal is not the city's own foreign policy message, but rather the very selection of the locality by higher-level actors – a choice that reflexively constructs the city's geopolitical relevance.

Our analysis draws on an integrative approach combining *Kuznetsov's* explanatory framework with *Hocking's* concept of multi-level diplomacy – a theoretical combination that best corresponds to the specific institutional position of Košice within the Slovak governance environment (Kuznetsov 2015a; Hocking 1993). Building on this framework, we introduce the working concept of *peripheral paradiplomacy*, which designates a specific type of sub-state foreign activity characteristic of cities situated on the geopolitical periphery of supranational structures. It diverges from *Cornago's* (2000) models in that geopolitical marginality is not merely a contextual variable, but an active source

of paradiplomatic relevance. From *Tavares's* (2016) capacity–leadership typology it differs through the explicit incorporation of a spatial dimension: the proximity of borders and conflict zones determines not only the content, but also the symbolic value of a city's diplomatic engagement. We analytically distinguish four observable indicators of peripheral paradiplomacy: (1) the transformation of geographical marginality into geopolitical relevance through strategic networking; (2) reactive and proactive engagement in security crises along the EU's external border; (3) the function of a hosting platform for multilateral diplomacy conducted by higher levels of governance; and (4) systematic participation in transnational climate and innovation networks as a compensatory mechanism for limited bilateral capacity. We advance this concept not as a closed analytical category, but as a hypothesis open to comparative verification across further cases of V4 cities or the broader Central European context.

2 Methodology and data

2.1 Research design

The article employs a qualitative single-case study design that examines the paradiplomacy of Košice as a non-capital city on the eastern flank of the EU. Building on Kuznetsov's framework of paradiplomacy and Hocking's multi-level diplomacy, the case is treated as a sub-state foreign policy actor embedded in a broader governance system linking local, national and supranational levels.

The analysis focuses on four dimensions of the city's external action: the evolution of its bilateral partnerships, humanitarian engagement in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, participation in transnational municipal networks, and economic paradiplomacy centred on the Košice IT Valley cluster. This structure reflects the assumption that paradiplomatic profiles are not static, but are gradually redefined in response to geopolitical shocks and opportunities created by EU multi-level governance.

2.2 Data sources

The empirical corpus consists of three main groups of sources. First, primary documents of the City of Košice: resolutions of the City Council between 2013 and 2025 (including the March 2022 decision to terminate partnerships with Saint Petersburg and Vitebsk), partnership agreements, strategic papers such as the Adaptation Plan 2022–2030 and the Concept for the Integration of Foreigners, as well as project documentation for initiatives such as “Cities in the Enlarged European Area” and SAM-SUD.

Second, documents produced by European and international organisations that frame the city's participation in transnational networks: evaluation reports on Košice as European Capital of Culture 2013, profiles within the EU Mission Cities and NetZeroCities initiatives, materials from the European Urban Initiative, and the UNESCO Creative Cities Network profile of Košice. Third, local media reports and municipal press releases that capture the performative dimension of

paradiplomacy, including coverage of humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, entry into ICLEI and UNESCO networks, and the hosting of the B9 and V4 summits.

The dataset for bilateral partnerships was constructed through a systematic review of the municipal archive of agreements, resulting in a list of 21 partnerships concluded between 1980 and 2016, grouped into five geopolitical clusters and two temporal waves. Table 1 presents this systematisation and serves as a basis for the analysis of the geopolitical reorientation of Košice's partnership portfolio after 1991.

2.3 Analytical strategy and limitations

Analytically, the study combines thematic and process-tracing approaches. Drawing on the literature on paradiplomacy and city diplomacy (Cornago, 2000; Acuto et al., 2017; Strachová, 2021), documents were coded into categories such as bilateral partnerships, multilateral networks, humanitarian interventions, economic paradiplomacy and infrastructural paradiplomacy, with additional inductive codes (e.g. “frontline city”, “humanitarian hub”) emerging from the material. The temporal sequencing of key events (waves of partnerships, ECoC 2013, accession to UNESCO and EU Mission Cities, humanitarian projects after 2022, entry into ICLEI) was then used to reconstruct three phases of Košice's paradiplomatic trajectory.

Analytically, the study combines thematic coding and process-tracing. The coding categories — bilateral partnerships, multilateral networks, humanitarian interventions, economic paradiplomacy, and infrastructural paradiplomacy – were deductively derived from the paradiplomacy literature (Cornago 2000; Acuto et al. 2017; Strachová 2021). For each category, we defined a coding protocol: *bilateral partnerships* encompassed all contractually formalised partnership agreements documented in the municipal archive; *multilateral networks* covered memberships in international organisations and networks formalised by a city council resolution or binding document; *humanitarian interventions* were coded on the basis of identifiable expenditure items or formal decisions of the city council; *economic paradiplomacy* included activities with a measurable interface with international economic relations (cluster initiatives, foreign direct investment, international memoranda concluded by economic actors); *infrastructural paradiplomacy* denotes the specific phenomenon in which a city – without a direct negotiating mandate – provides the material and symbolic framework for multilateral diplomacy conducted by higher levels of governance (see also Section 5.1). Cases in which a single document or event corresponded to multiple categories – for instance, the hosting of the B9 summit as simultaneously a *multilateral network* and *infrastructural paradiplomacy* – were resolved through primary assignment to the dominant category, with a note recording secondary relevance. Additional codes emerged inductively from the documentary corpus, notably „frontline city“ and „humanitarian hub“, capturing the functional specificity of Košice in the context of the war in Ukraine. The temporal sequencing of key events – waves of partnerships, ECoC 2013, accession to UNESCO and EU Mission Cities, humanitarian projects after 2022, entry into

ICLEI – was subsequently employed to reconstruct the three phases of Košice's paradiplomatic trajectory.

The approach is subject to several limitations. The analysis relies mainly on publicly available documents and media outputs; internal decision-making processes and informal negotiations remain largely outside the empirical reach, and no systematic set of elite interviews was conducted. The absence of elite interviews is partially compensated by the triangulation of three source layers: primary municipal documents (city council resolutions, partnership agreements, project documentation), documents produced by European and international organisations (evaluation reports, network profile documents), and media outputs capturing the performative dimension of paradiplomacy. Interné rozhodovacie procesy a neformálne rokovania naďalej zostávajú mimo empirického dosahu tejto štúdie; overenie kauzálnych mechanizmov na úrovni vedenia mesta si preto vyžaduje budúci výskum na základe rozhovorov s kľúčovými aktérmi. Moreover, the single-case design does not allow for systematic cross-city comparison within the V4 or the broader Central European region, so the findings should be read primarily as a context-sensitive case that generates hypotheses for future comparative research on peripheral paradiplomacy.

3 The Network of City Partnerships: Historical Origins and Geopolitical Reorientation

Košice has one of the most extensive networks of twin towns in Slovakia. The archive of municipal agreements documents 21 bilateral cross-border partnerships established between 1980 and 2016 (Mesto Košice). The oldest agreement, with the German city of Wuppertal, dates to 1980. This is a remarkable case, as the partnership overcome the Iron Curtain and continued to function even during the Cold War. For a long period, it was the only twin town with a Western connection in the city's portfolio. Wuppertal brought a new dimension to the 'Twin Towns relationships' of the time. Unlike partnerships with socialist states, it prioritised family exchanges for children over pioneer camps and organised the Wuppertal-Košice relay run, which, as a journalist from that period, *Vladimír Mezencev*, recalls, was an almost unbelievable feat by the standards of the time. This partnership continues to this day – active cooperation takes place between *the University of Wuppertal* and *the Technical University of Košice*, and *the Friends of Wuppertal Association* operates in Košice ('Najaktívnejším partnerským mestom Košíc je maďarský Miskolc' 2015).

Table 1: List of Košice's international twin towns, grouped into clusters

Country	City	Date (year)	Geospatial cluster	Time axis
Germany	Wuppertal	1980 (1996)	Western Cluster	pre-diplomatic phase
Finland	Raahe	1987 (1991)	Western Cluster	

Country	City	Date (year)	Geospatial cluster	Time axis
Poland	Rzeszów	1991	Central European Cluster	Phase 1
USA – Alabama	Mobile	1991–1992	Western Cluster	
Germany	Cottbus	1992	Western Cluster	
Italy	Verona	1992	Western Cluster	
Ukraine	Uzhhorod	1993	Eastern Cluster	
Russian Federation	Saint Petersburg	1995	Eastern Cluster	
Hungary	Miskolc	1997 (2009)	Central European Cluster	
Hungary	Budapest	1997	Central European Cluster	
Turkey	Bursa	2000	South-Eastern Cluster	
Bulgaria	Plovdiv	2000	Southeast Cluster	
Republic of Serbia	Niš	2001	Southeast Cluster	
Czech Republic	Ostrava	2001	Central European Cluster	
Hungary	Abaújszántó	2007	Central European Cluster	Phase 2
Poland	Katowice	2009	Central European Cluster	
Poland	Krosno	2009	Central European Cluster	
People's Republic of China	Wuhan	2012	Asian Cluster	
Socialist Republic of Vietnam	Da Nang	2015	Asian Cluster	
Republic of Belarus	Vitebsk	2015	Eastern Cluster	
Socialist Republic of Vietnam	Ho Chi Minh City	2016	Asian Cluster	

Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from City of Košice (Mesto Košice).

The geographical distribution of partnerships reflects Košice's geopolitical orientation and allows for the identification of five geospatial clusters. The Central European cluster includes partnerships with Miskolc (1997), Budapest (1997), Abaújszántó (2007), Ostrava (2001), Katowice (2009), Krosno (2009) and Rzeszów (1991). These links reflect the logic of neighbouring cross-border cooperation and a shared post-industrial identity. The partnership with Miskolc has been identified as the most active of all Košice's partnerships, which corresponds to its geographical proximity (80 km), the shared heritage of Upper Hungary and the Interreg Hungary–Slovakia cross-

border cooperation programmes. The Western cluster (Wuppertal, Cottbus, Raahe, Verona, Mobile) highlights the aspiration to build ties with stable democratic local self-governments. It is interesting to note that these partnerships were established exclusively during the transitional period of 1980–1992. The South-Eastern cluster (Bursa, Plovdiv, Niš) reflects Košice's position on the historical axis linking Central and South-Eastern Europe. The Eastern cluster included partnerships with Uzhhorod (1993), Saint Petersburg (1995) and Vitebsk (2015). The Asian cluster, formed through cooperation with Wuhan (2012), Da Nang (2015) and Ho Chi Minh City (2016), points to an economically motivated diversification of partnership relations, which is typical of a period of intense economic globalisation.

The first wave (1991–2001) reflects post-transition optimism and the building of a new geopolitical identity for the city, combining Euro-Atlantic aspirations with the preservation of an eastern orientation. The second period (2006–2016) was linked to the city's active branding strategy in the context of its bid for and implementation of the European Capital of Culture 2013 project, during which partnerships extending beyond the European area were established. Since 2016, the portfolio of bilateral partnerships has not expanded.¹

We regard 17 March 2022 as a significant turning point in this matter. The Košice City Council approved a councillor's motion to terminate twinning arrangements with St Petersburg in Russia and Vitebsk in Belarus as a direct response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Councillor *Ladislav Strojny* emphasised that *“this is not an act against the citizens of St Petersburg or against the citizens of Vitebsk. This is a signal that neither the government nor the Executive Council of the Republic of Belarus can expect to have partnerships in civilised Europe whilst the governments of these republics are murdering citizens in a neighbouring state.”* (Mestské zastupiteľstvo v Košiciach 2022, 10) Deputy Mayor *Marcel Gibóda* expressed hope that cooperation might one day be resumed and emphasised that the initiative is not directed against *“democratically minded citizens protesting on the streets of Russia or Belarus.”* (Mestské zastupiteľstvo v Košiciach 2022, 11) The wording used by both local politicians suggests a sophisticated distinction between state and civil society actors, reflecting a discourse characteristic of the paradiplomatic practices of cities in liberal democracies.

The cancellation of partnerships can be interpreted as an instance of what *Ciesielska-Klikowska* and *Kamiński* classified as ‘direct actions’ by sub-state actors – i.e. autonomous decisions that send geopolitical signals independently of the central government (Ciesielska-Klikowska and Kamiński 2022, 55–57). In her research on city diplomacy in the context of the Russian invasion,

¹ The partnerships with Wuppertal (1970) and Raahe (1978) represent a specific ‘pre-diplomatic’ phase of late socialism, in which twinning relationships between cities were shaped by the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic's centralised foreign policy and consisted mainly of cultural and symbolic exchanges. For this reason, the analytical division into waves begins only in 1991, when the state system, Slovakia's geopolitical positioning and the institutional framework for local authorities' international activities changed.

Matiaszczyk showed that almost 90% of Ukrainian cities began to receive various forms of support from foreign partners after 2022, and two-thirds of them established new partnerships (*Matiaszczyk* 2025). Košice was among those Central European cities that responded to the war by redefining their partnership portfolio. The partnership with Uzhhorod was not only maintained but deepened, indicating a strategic rearticulation of the eastern vector of Košice's paradiplomacy. This therefore represents a shift from formal 'town twinning' towards operational humanitarian and development cooperation.

4 The humanitarian dimension: Košice as a first-line actor in the context of the Ukrainian crisis

Its geographical proximity to the Ukrainian border (approximately 80 km from Uzhhorod) meant that Košice was destined to play the role of a 'frontline' city in the context of the refugee crisis following February 2022. Five days after the start of the Russian invasion, the city authorities launched *the First Contact Centre* (hereinafter referred to as the FCC) for refugees from Ukraine in Košice, located on the *Červená hviezda* swimming pool near the bus and railway stations. The city's response was very prompt. The city set up ad hoc infrastructure within the leisure facility and mobilised hundreds of volunteers. The centre provided assistance to over 80,000 registered refugees. In March 2022, up to 2,500 people passed through the centre each day. The city's Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid, *Roman Dohovič*, noted that most refugees stayed in Košice for a maximum of three days before continuing westwards (*Hakl* 2023). Košice thus became primarily a transit city. In the terminology of city diplomacy, this function can be described as a 'humanitarian hub'.

Research on public administration responses during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the crucial role of multi-level governance in ensuring the continuity of essential services for vulnerable populations, particularly older adults. The crisis revealed structural weaknesses in social and long-term care systems and demonstrated the importance of coordinated action between central and local authorities. In this context, local governments proved to be key actors in adapting service delivery, strengthening community support mechanisms, and mitigating the social impacts of isolation. These findings are relevant for understanding the growing importance of cities as crisis-response actors in both health-related and humanitarian emergencies (*Lachytová* 2023). This experience strengthened the institutional capacity of cities such as Košice in managing large-scale humanitarian emergencies.

The situation gradually stabilised. Whilst at the start of the invasion it was estimated that around 10% of arrivals would remain in Košice, this proportion later fell to just under 2%. According to estimates, between 6,000 and 7,000 Ukrainians have settled permanently in the city as a result of the war. Many of them found employment in the service, catering and IT sectors. The city provided more than 20,000 overnight stays at the FCC and a further 9,000 in emergency accommodation facilities. The integration of refugees has become a new focus of municipal policy (*TASR* 2023). In

this context, it is important to note that the city of Košice had previously identified the need for systematic planning of the integration of third-country nationals in its *Concept for the Integration of Foreigners* (Kurutzová 2019). The humanitarian and integration role of Košice thus intersects with the broader security dimension of sub-state governance. Security education at Slovak universities in the context of the arrival of Ukrainian students represents one concrete policy response to this type of migratory wave (Antalíková 2026), a conclusion particularly relevant to Košice as a university city with the capacity to absorb part of forced migration into its higher education system.

In parallel, the city provided direct humanitarian aid as part of the cross-border project “*Cities in the Enlarged European Area*” (CEEAA), funded by the EEA Financial Mechanism 2014–2021 (EEAGRANTS). The total eligible costs of the project amounted to €458,504, with 85% of the budget (€389,724) provided by the governments of Norway, Liechtenstein and Iceland, and the remaining 15% (€68,775) coming from the Slovak Republic’s state budget. The city of Košice allocated €88,000 for humanitarian aid to Ukraine. These funds were used to finance several lorries carrying food, hygiene supplies, medical equipment, clothing, generators and other materials to the partner cities of Uzhhorod and Kharkiv. Deputy Mayor *Lucia Gurbáľová* noted that the FCC “*has helped almost 90,000 Ukrainian refugees in the 14 months since it began operating*” (Košice Online).

Alexander Popov, a member of the Kharkiv City Council, emphasised at a press conference in Košice that “*this is the first time since Ukraine declared independence that our city has been able to participate in the process of cross-border cooperation,*” and expressed his conviction that “*together we will be part of one big European family.*” (Poľová 2022) These words suggest that Košice’s humanitarian paradiplomacy generated not only material support but also symbolic capital for the European integration aspirations of Ukrainian cities. In *Tavares’s* terminology, this dynamic can be characterised as an example of paradiplomacy that transcends classical ‘low policy’ and enters the sphere of ‘high policy’, for example in security relations (Tavares 2016, 116). *Mykhaylo Komarnytskyy* argues that, following the Russian invasion, mayors and representatives of regional administrations assumed a key role not only in regulating and supporting local entities, but also in the international arena (Komarnytskyy 2024, 22). Košice confirms this pattern in this specific example.

5 Multilateral paradiplomacy: Engagement in transnational networks

In addition to bilateral partnerships, a significant increase in Košice’s multilateral paradiplomatic activity can also be observed. This can be divided into three phases. The first phase (up to 2013) was characterised mainly by reactive involvement in Interreg cross-border cooperation programmes on the Slovak-Hungarian and Slovak-Polish borders, within which the city joined project consortia primarily as a partner in infrastructure and cultural-social projects. The second phase (2013–2022) was accelerated by the *European Capital of Culture* project and brought a qualitative leap in the city’s international visibility. *The European Commission’s* ex-post evaluation noted that in 2013, 285,494 overnight stays were recorded in Košice, representing an increase of approximately

10% compared to 2012 and 30% compared to 2009. At the same time, it highlights *the “positive impact on the city’s national and international profile”* and the fact that the project led to the creation of longer-term partnerships with the potential to support the creative industries (McAteer, Nick et al. 2015, 26–27). It is precisely this process that is interpreted in the city’s strategic documents and the Košice 2.0 project as a culture-led transformation from an industrial to a post-industrial city with growing creative potential (Portico 2021). In 2017, Košice became the first Slovak city to join *the* prestigious UNESCO Creative Cities Network in the Media Arts cluster. A press release from the city highlighted that Košice was one of 64 newly admitted cities across 44 countries and the only city in Eastern Europe focusing on media arts that year (Šnajdárová 2017). According to *Creative Industry Košice*, the main motivation behind the application was *“to support the creative and cultural sectors, increase the city’s global visibility and create synergies between the cultural and IT sectors”* (‘Košice – UNESCO Creative City of Media Arts’).

The third phase (from 2022) is characterised by Košice’s clear integration into global climate and innovation networks. In 2022, *the European Commission* ranked Košice among the 100 climate-neutral and smart cities as part of the *EU Mission 2030* – alongside major cities such as Paris, Dublin and Warsaw, but also smaller cities such as Liepāja in Latvia. The European Commission selected from 377 applications, indicating relatively high competition. In May 2025, Košice became the first Slovak city to receive the prestigious *EU Mission Label*, which grants access to the *Climate City Capital Hub* and a €2 billion loan package from *the European Investment Bank* (Tokarčík 2025). The city adopted *the Adaptation Plan 2022–2030*, which defines strategic pathways to local climate resilience and decarbonisation, and was successful in the *NetZeroCities* pilot cities programme, where it secured €434,036 for the energy management of municipal buildings (Šteiner et al. 2021).

Another aspect of multilateral engagement is participation in the *International Urban and Regional Cooperation* (IURC) programme, within the *Urban & Regional Renewal and Social Cohesion* thematic cluster, which connects cities and regions in Europe with partners in Asia and Australia. Key activities include thematic webinars, global networking events organised in parallel with *the Smart City Expo World Congress in Barcelona*, and regional workshops at *the World Cities Summit* in Singapore, focusing on urban regeneration, social cohesion and inclusive housing (*International Urban and Regional Cooperation – A Program of the European Union*). In March 2025, *the European Commission* (through the selection of *the European Urban Initiative*) included the SAM-SUD (*Smart Asset Management for Sustainable Urban Development*) project of the city of Košice among the 20 innovative projects approved in the third call for proposals of *the EUI – Innovative Actions*, with funding from *the European Regional Development Fund*. According to the EUI project profile, SAM-SUD focuses on transforming unused public buildings into a network of sustainable and inclusive urban assets through a digital system for smart asset management, which combines AI-powered tools (NextUse AI), a digital twin (AZGARD Digital Twin Platform) and participatory planning (Portico 2026) (European Urban Initiative).

The latest milestone is Košice's accession to the global network *ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability* on 9 February 2026. The network brings together more than 2,500 cities and regions from over 125 countries. *The City's Strategic Development Department* noted that membership opens up opportunities for “a more intensive exchange of experiences with cities both within and outside the European Union” and access to project opportunities and partnerships. This is an investment that builds on the city's long-term strategy to develop professional contacts and gain access to new solutions (Uhríková 2026). In the context of the concept of strategic networking, it can be stated that Košice is systematically building a multilateral paradiplomatic profile through a combination of cultural (UNESCO), climate (EU Mission, NetZeroCities, ICLEI) and innovation (IURC, EUI) platforms. This corresponds to the model that *Nikola Strachová* has termed ‘hybrid multilateralism in urban diplomacy’ (Strachová 2021).

5.1 The Visegrad and Transatlantic Dimensions: V4 and B9 in Košice

A particular dimension of Košice's paradiplomatic position is its role as a host city for meetings of key multilateral formats in Central and Eastern Europe. On 28 February 2019, Košice hosted the summit of the presidents of the *Bucharest Nine* (hereinafter B9). This is a format bringing together nine states from NATO's eastern flank (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia). The meeting was convened by Slovak President *Andrej Kiska*. NATO Secretary General *Jens Stoltenberg* also accepted the invitation, and a public discussion was held with him at Košice's Kulturpark, attended by experts on hybrid threats (TASR 2019). The presidents discussed the security situation in Europe at the time, the spread of disinformation and defence against cyber threats, and adopted a joint declaration marking the 70th anniversary of NATO and the anniversaries of the B9 member states' accession to the Alliance. In this context, *Kiska* pointed out that the armed conflict in Ukraine is taking place just over 100 kilometres east of Košice, thereby highlighting the geopolitical relevance of the summit's location.

Just under four years later, on 24 November 2022, a summit of the heads of government of the *Visegrad Group* (hereinafter referred to as the V4) took place at the Bankov Hotel in Košice as part of the Slovak V4 Presidency. Prime Ministers *Eduard Heger*, *Petr Fiala*, *Viktor Orbán* and *Mateusz Morawiecki* discussed the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis and migration. Czech Prime Minister *Fiala* emphasised that “V4 cooperation has its meaning and a future” and that the Košice meeting had enabled “open dialogue even on issues where differences exist.” (Mandiner 2022) Polish Prime Minister *Morawiecki* stressed that “the V4 is a very important format for regional cooperation” (Mandiner 2022) and, together with *Fiala* and *Heger*, appealed to *Orbán* for Hungary to speed up the ratification of Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO. The summit took place after a hiatus of several months caused by tensions surrounding Hungary's stance on Russia, and its holding in Košice also had a symbolic dimension – the city, situated on the periphery of the EU in

the immediate vicinity of a war zone, became the venue where the fragile Visegrad unity was rearticulated.

From an analytical perspective, these events illustrate a phenomenon that might be described as '*infrastructural paradiplomacy*'. This refers to a situation where, although the city is not a party to the negotiations, it provides a material and symbolic framework for multilateral diplomacy at the highest level. In *Hocking's* terminology, this is an example of multi-level diplomacy, where a sub-state actor functions as an integral part of the diplomatic system without claiming its own foreign policy agenda (Hocking 1993). The choice of Košice as the venue for both summits was no coincidence. Its geographical proximity to Ukraine lent the negotiations on the security of NATO's eastern flank an immediate sense of urgency.

6 Košice IT Valley and economic paradiplomacy

Košice's economic paradiplomacy centres on the *Košice IT Valley* technology cluster, established in 2007. According to data from the UNESCO city profile, the number of jobs in Košice's technology sector rose from approximately 1,000 to more than 10,000, making it the fastest-growing segment of the city's economy (UNESCO). The collaboration between *IT Valley* and *Creative Industry Košice* (hereinafter CIKE) illustrates cross-sectoral synergistic paradiplomacy: the *Creativity for Business* programme, launched in 2011, connects artists, scientists and IT experts with companies in the region. CIKE's Executive Director *Michal Hladký* emphasised that UNESCO membership "*takes cooperation from a European to a global level.*" (Vasil'ová 2020)

Contemporary approaches further extend paradiplomacy beyond its traditional diplomatic and economic framing by emphasizing its role in the formation of so-called "knowledge regions", where sub-state actors function as strategic brokers in global networks of innovation, technology transfer, and soft power projection. In this context, paradiplomacy is not merely reactive but constitutive of globalization itself, as it enables local governments to actively shape transnational flows of knowledge, capital, and institutional practices. Such regions operate through dense network structures that connect local innovation ecosystems with international partners, thereby reinforcing competitiveness while simultaneously embedding local development strategies into global governance frameworks (Lachytová and Horovenko 2024).

From the perspective of paradiplomatic theory, Košice IT Valley represents a variant of what *Cornago* described as the economic motivation for sub-state engagement in international relations (Cornago 2000). In January 2026, the association signed a memorandum of cooperation with the *Prešov Innovation Partnership Centre* with the aim of strengthening the regional innovation ecosystem, with the cooperation focusing on the sharing of data, infrastructure and resources, the organisation of educational events and the joint implementation of projects. The *American Chamber of Commerce in Slovakia* is organising the *Townhall Košice* platform in Košice, which facilitates cross-sectoral dialogue (AmCham Slovakia). The President of the *American Chamber of Commerce*,

Gabriel Galgóci, emphasised that “all stakeholders in eastern Slovakia at the regional, municipal, university and business levels recognise the importance and benefits of innovation for the region's strategic development” (AmCham Slovakia). This position rests on a material foundation provided by European structural funds: more than €360 million from EU funds are being channelled into infrastructure and innovation platforms in the region, which significantly strengthens the city's international competitiveness. From the perspective of logistics infrastructure, the Košice region functions as a node with advanced technological capacities (European Commission 2021).

7 Discussion

How should Košice's paradiplomacy be interpreted within a broader geopolitical context? Based on our analysis, we identify several analytically relevant patterns. Firstly, Košice demonstrates that the paradiplomacy of Central European cities is not determined solely by city's size and economic strength. *Van der Pluijm* and *Melissen* noted that even smaller cities can exhibit high levels of diplomatic activity if they possess adequate motivation and institutional capacity (Pluijm and Melissen 2007). A city with just under a quarter of a million inhabitants has developed a multidimensional multilateral paradiplomatic profile that, in both quantitative and qualitative terms, exceeds the average for Central European cities of a similar size, even though direct comparison with larger metropolitan centres in the region lies beyond the scope of this single-case study. Horizontal comparability can be partially illustrated by the example of Rzeszów. This Polish border city, with just under 200,000 inhabitants and likewise situated on the EU periphery close to the Ukrainian border, has exhibited a similar dynamic of geopolitical activation in the field of humanitarian paradiplomacy since 2022 (Matiaszczyk 2025), suggesting that the pattern identified in Košice is not uniquely city-specific, but may reflect a broader regional trend among peripheral cities on the eastern frontier of the EU. In line with *Řehák's* findings on Prague (Řehák 2013), we confirm that supranational factors, such as European integration, transnational networks and economic globalisation, act as primary determinants of paradiplomatic activity even in the case of a smaller Central European city.

Secondly, the response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has revealed the security dimension of urban paradiplomacy, which has not yet received sufficient attention in the literature. Košice has shown that cities on the EU's external border can play a leading role in crisis management, not only reactively (by establishing a First Contact Centre for refugees and providing tens of thousands of overnight stays), but also proactively (humanitarian convoys to Kharkiv, the termination of partnerships with Russian and Belarusian cities, the reallocation of funds from cross-border projects to humanitarian aid). *Hocking's* concept of multi-level diplomacy was confirmed in this case. The city did not act in opposition to the state, but complemented the central government where it had operational capacity and cross-border relations. As *Matiaszczyk* argues, urban

diplomacy takes on new dimensions in times of war, with cities contributing significantly to dynamic interaction between the local, national and international levels of governance (Matiaszczyk 2025).

Thirdly, the case of Košice suggests that the paradiplomatic activities of Central European cities are increasingly shifting from traditional bilateral partnerships towards multilateral networking. Whilst the portfolio of bilateral partnerships has not expanded since 2016 and two partnerships have been terminated, the multilateral dimension has seen an acceleration – the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (2017), EU Mission Cities (2022), IURC, EUI, NetZeroCities and ICLEI (2026). These findings could indicate a structural shift from the traditional ‘town twinning’ model towards more sophisticated forms of networked paradiplomacy, which *Acuto*, *Morissette* and *Tsouros* have identified at the global level (Acuto et al. 2017) and which *Strachová* has described as a form of hybrid multilateralism in the context of climate governance (Strachová 2021).

Fourthly, the Košice case reveals a so far little-discussed dimension of urban paradiplomacy – the role of the city as a host platform for multilateral diplomacy at the highest level. The fact that Košice hosted both the Bucharest Nine Presidents’ Summit (2019) and the Visegrad Group Heads of Government Summit (2022) suggests that the city’s paradiplomatic capital is not limited to actively sending diplomatic signals but also encompasses a passive yet strategically significant hosting function. In both cases, Košice’s geographical location (proximity to the Ukrainian border, position on NATO’s eastern flank) determined the symbolic framework of the negotiations. This pattern adds a spatial dimension to *Hocking’s* concept of multi-level diplomacy. The city is not merely an actor, but also the floor on which higher-level diplomacy unfolds. The International Visegrad Fund simultaneously illustrates the mechanism through which a multilateral political format (the V4) generates concrete project opportunities at the sub-state level, thereby institutionally reproducing the city’s paradiplomatic capacity.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, the city of Košice has developed a relatively comprehensive paradiplomatic profile, encompassing bilateral city partnerships, multilateral networking within international organisations, humanitarian diplomacy in the context of the war in Ukraine, and economic paradiplomacy through technology and creative clusters. Based on our analysis, we identify four key findings. Firstly, the geopolitical shock of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 significantly accelerated the city’s paradiplomatic activity and brought about a qualitative shift (from a predominantly cultural-economic agenda towards security and humanitarian dimensions). Secondly, multilateral networking through the UNESCO, EU and ICLEI platforms is becoming the dominant form of Košice’s paradiplomacy, whilst traditional bilateral partnerships are undergoing a selective rearticulation conditioned by geopolitical preferences. Thirdly, Košice serves as a host platform for top-level multilateral diplomacy – the B9 (2019) and the V4 summit (2022) demonstrate that the city’s paradiplomatic profile encompasses not only the active transmission of diplomatic

signals but also the provision of symbolic and physical space for inter-state negotiations, thereby extending *Hocking's* concept of multi-level diplomacy to include a spatial dimension. The fourth finding – advanced as a hypothesis with potential for comparative verification – is that the case of Košice illustrates an emergent model of *peripheral paradiplomacy*. Analytically, we operationalise this model through four indicators identified in the course of the analysis: the transformation of geographical marginality into geopolitical relevance; reactive and proactive security engagement along the EU's external border; the function of a hosting platform for multilateral diplomacy conducted by higher levels of governance; and systematic participation in transnational networks as a compensatory mechanism for limited bilateral capacity. These indicators differentiate peripheral paradiplomacy from *Cornago's* (2000) models focused on federal states, as well as from *Tavares's* (2016) capacity–leadership typology, which does not systematically incorporate the spatial dimension. Comparative verification of this model on cases of other V4 cities or within the broader Central European context constitutes a promising agenda for future research.

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