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On the Frontline of Solidarity

How Polish Cities Supported Ukraine

Report
Warsaw 2025



PARADIPLMACY LAB
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ON PARADIPLMACY
AND CITY DIPLOMACY

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Foreword

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine fundamentally altered Europe's sense of security. For communities both local and regional – and for central and territorial authorities across many countries – it became a powerful test of solidarity and capacity to act. Poland's largest cities rose to the occasion, offering unprecedented humanitarian aid to refugees at home and direct support to Ukrainian municipalities.

This report explores how Polish cities responded and what kind of help they extended to their Ukrainian partners. This report was purpose-designed to capture detailed insights into how Polish cities directly engaged in meeting the actual and urgent needs of Ukrainian cities. Through surveys and interviews, the authors concentrated on questions and issues tied to one-on-one, city-to-city assistance. In this context, the Union of Polish Metropolises (“UMP”) mainly acted as a facilitator, complementing and reinforcing direct initiatives undertaken by individual municipalities. Drawing on its earlier cooperation experience, the UMP quickly stepped in to **support information-sharing and aid logistics**, helping its member cities respond swiftly and effectively to the sudden needs triggered by the war.

From the very beginning of the invasion, the UMP relied on existing cooperation formats that had been regularly practiced since 2020. Frequent virtual meetings between city mayors allowed for rapid sharing of information and lessons learned. When the war escalated, there was no need to establish new working groups, as teams such as the Migration and Integration Task Force had already been in place at the UMP, ready to act. This allowed the organization to react quickly and bring together competent experts from cities across the union.

The UMP, however, was not in a position to directly engage in the collection or shipment of material aid. Instead, it focused on facilitating rapid information exchange between cities and developing needs-driven solutions. Polish cities had forged strong working ties with their Ukrainian counterparts before. Therefore, the UMP was able to back these efforts and **supply key data – including refugee numbers and settlement locations** – that proved crucial not only for local governments, but also for national and international actors.¹

Working closely with many cities, the UMP actively contributed to the development of legal frameworks concerning the reception of refugees. It was able to quickly pinpoint what municipalities needed, making it possible to push forward effective legislative proposals. Although often less visible than efforts related to the collection and delivery of humanitarian aid, these actions were instrumental to ensuring the stability and effectiveness of the support provided by Polish cities.

As the crisis unfolded, the UMP continued its efforts by engaging in a range of projects. Its cooperation with the Mayor of Mariupol under the Mariupol Reborn project culminated in a conference focused on ideas for rebuilding the city. In 2024, the UMP became the operator of a grant provided by the Taipei Representative Office in Poland. It was intended for non-governmental organisations carrying out projects for Ukrainian nationals residing in the country.

These efforts – known as municipal diplomacy – centred on one-to-one partnerships between cities and drew the UMP's attention. For this reason, we considered it important and worthwhile to document the contributions of Polish cities to supporting Ukraine and what they brought to the broader aid effort. **Our goal was to demonstrate how territorial governments can cooperate effectively in times of crisis and to show that Polish cities and the UMP are credible and capable partners when crises arise.**

The insights gathered in this report provide evidence that **city-to-city cooperation during emergencies is not merely feasible, but absolutely essential.** The UMP remains a key player in linking up and supporting Ukraine-related assistance efforts. At every phrase outlined in this report, and thanks to the experience it has built, the UMP lays solid groundwork for sustained support going forward.

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¹ Urban Hospitality: Unprecedented Growth, Challenges and Opportunities. A Report on Ukrainian Refugees in the Largest Polish cities, Research and Analysis Centre, Paweł Adamowicz Union of Polish Metropolises, 2022, https://metropolie.pl/fileadmin/news/2022/10/UMP_raport_Ukraina_20220429_final.pdf (28.04.2025); Urban Hospitality: Estimation of the number of Ukrainian nationals in UMP cities, March, April, May 2022, Research and Analysis Centre, Paweł Adamowicz Union of Polish Metropolises, 2022, https://metropolie.pl/fileadmin/news/2022/07/Miejska_goscinnosc_aktualizacja.pdf (28.04.2025).

Introduction

This report offers an examination of the international dimension of assistance, with a particular focus on the relationships between Polish and Ukrainian cities. Its main aim is to show how Poland's largest cities provided support for Ukraine – the tools they used, the obstacles they faced, and the long-term impact their actions may leave behind, whether institutional, political, or relational. The spotlight is on UMP cities, since they – and their metropolitan areas – accepted the greatest number of refugees and other individuals fleeing the war.

This report is grounded in an analysis of data collected from UMP² member cities, offering insight into the scope and nature of support extended to Ukrainian partners. This initial analysis was subsequently deepened through further findings obtained during eleven interviews with local government officials responsible for managing assistance efforts. The interviews were conducted between January and March 2024.

This report has four sections. The first section examines **the international cooperation networks that Polish cities are part of**, addressing the question of which cross-border linkages were triggered in response to the war and which proved most effective in organising assistance. The second section outlines three **core roles that Polish cities played in supporting Ukraine**: donors, humanitarian hubs, and go-betweens. The analysis also covers the types of aid and assistance activities undertaken, as well as their intensity over time. Section three focuses on what drove the assistance efforts, how it was managed, and what **obstacles and challenges** Polish cities had to overcome. The final section reflects on the staying power of the relationships and structures built during the crisis and points to **new opportunities for continued international collaboration**, including the role that Polish cities may play in Ukraine's reconstruction.

The report closes with a series of recommendations designed to help both local and national authorities strengthen international cooperation frameworks, making them more resilient, responsive, and proactive. These suggestions apply not only to emergency response, but also to the wider engagement of local government units in delivering international support.

² The authors did not manage to obtain any material for analysis from the city of Szczecin.





Polish Cities in International City Networks

Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, all Polish cities belonging to the UMP actively engaged in assistance efforts directed toward Ukrainian municipalities, the scale of which had not been seen before. The support came quickly, in many forms — some of them strikingly innovative, given the previous standards municipal practice. The effectiveness, but also limitations, of this support was largely hinged on the specific **networks of relationships** that municipalities were able to rely on. Four key types of relationships can be identified: partnerships with Ukrainian municipalities and other international allies; participation in international city networks; relationships with Poland’s central government; and formal or informal ties between Polish cities themselves.

These connections, whether existing before or forged during the crisis, ultimately determined the effectiveness of response to the needs of Ukrainian counterparts.

Networks of Partner Cities

Apparently, the most robust and most effective relationship was the network of partner cities – long-standing alliances formed both with Ukrainian municipalities and with other cities abroad. Much of the early support in the first days of the war was made possible thanks to direct contacts, communication lines, and trust built earlier through formal partnerships. In the cases examined for the report, these partnerships were the main conduit for delivering humanitarian aid as well as technical, material, or financial assistance.

Pre-existing city-to-city partnerships and ties proved the most effective in organising and coordinating assistance efforts.

In most of the surveyed cities, team members overseeing Ukraine-related aid pointed to **existing partner-city ties as the key to getting support efforts off the ground quickly.** Lublin, Warszawa, Wrocław, or Poznań relied on earlier relationships that allowed for fast communication and coordination. As our interviewee from Lublin reported, “When the full-scale war started, Lublin had seven partner cities in Ukraine, plus a number of friendly cities, and dozens of joint projects, either completed or still running.” Long-standing city-level relationships were thus immediately taken to another practical level.

Direct contacts between municipal leaders also proved to be of critical importance, as was the case of Warsaw, where the mayor had had long-standing relationships and collaborative experience with his vis-à-vis from Kyiv and Lviv. These personal connections enabled smoother cooperation and facilitated the organization of humanitarian aid for the two Ukrainian municipalities. Similarly, **long-term personal ties among municipal officials played a vital role,** as shown by the cooperation between Poznań and Kharkiv. The presence of direct contacts, mutual trust, and prior joint project experience allowed for the effective and well-coordinated delivery of aid to that Ukrainian city.

Importantly, city partnerships did not operate solely in the direction of Ukraine. The engagement of partner cities from other countries – mainly in Western Europe – was no less important. **German partner cities, including Münster, Leipzig, and Hanover, played a key role** by channelling financial or material support to Ukraine through their Polish partners and helping Polish municipalities host and integrate refugees. In some cases, they even exploited Polish connections to establish their own alliances with Ukrainian counterparts.

International City Networks

Despite the formal membership of numerous Polish metropolitan actors in European and global city networks (such as Eurocities, METREX, or UCLG), their contribution to supporting Ukrainian municipalities proved rather moderate. While these platforms were encouraged to express solidarity with Ukraine and to condemn Russia's aggression, their involvement in the organisation of measurable aid remained marginal. Wrocław, for example, reported that it had attempted to use its affiliation with METREX to support its Ukrainian partner. Indeed, thanks to this initiative, Kyiv joined the network as honorary member, established contacts with foreign partners, and gained wider access to training and knowledge in municipal management and development.

Once the military conflict erupted, the Union of the Baltic Cities (UBC), Gdańsk being one of its members, assumed an active role in solidarity and aid initiatives. It established a dedicated Task Force on Ukraine to offer room for dialogue and knowledge-sharing between European cities and Ukrainian local governments. While geographically Ukraine is far from close to the Baltic region, its cities were admitted to the network as associate members, thus gaining access to expert support, technical know-how, and development projects.³

Another noteworthy initiative is the Sustainable Rebuilding of Ukrainian Cities project.⁴ It was launched by the Eurocities network in partnership with the Union of Ukrainian Cities (Асоціація міст України). It represents a strategic commitment of European, including Polish, local governments to Ukraine's post-war recovery. With expert input from cities like Białystok, Bydgoszcz, Gdańsk, and Wrocław, among the project deliverables, there was a collection of best practices from across Europe to be utilised by Ukrainian municipalities in their reconstruction process.⁵

Overall, **international city networks did not serve as effective channels for mobilising material support for Ukraine.** The limited effectiveness of these structures stemmed primarily from the nature of their operations. They had been designed mainly to support long-term urban policies and sustainable development and not to handle emergency situations.

Cooperation with the Polish Government

Municipalities shared varied opinions on their cooperation with central authorities when it came to supporting Ukraine. Only a few managed to maintain regular and effective contact with the Government Strategic Reserves Agency or central government officials. Rzeszów was one of the few cities where, as a surveyed city official put it, the city-governor relationship was marked by “full support, understanding, and cooperation.”

But for most municipalities, especially in the early weeks of the war, the picture looked very different: there were no clear guidelines nor coordination, and communication with the central government was limited. In many interviews, cities referred to “being on their own.” They were forced to establish their own procedures, deploy legal workarounds, and find ways to bypass bureaucracy that stood in the way of fast and effective action.

In the absence of clear guidelines from the central government and procedures in place, municipalities were compelled to act independently and seek out their own solutions to provide effective assistance.

³ The UBC even published a manual on how to engage in cooperation with Ukrainian cities: *Strengthening partnerships. A Guide for Meaningful Collaboration with Ukrainian Associated Cities*, https://ubc.net/wpfd_file/ubc-guide-on-ukr-cities-integration/ (29.04.2025).

⁴ <https://eurocities.eu/projects/sustainable-rebuilding-of-ukrainian-cities/> (29.04.2025).

⁵ Sustainable rebuilding of Ukrainian cities. Good practices from cities across Europe, Eurocities, 2024, https://monitor.eurocities.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/EurocitiesToolkit_Ukraine_final.pdf (29.04.2025).

City-to-City Cooperation at the National Level

It was not until later that attempts were made to build a more structured and coordinated way of working with municipalities. An example of this was the establishment, in 2024, of the Council for Cooperation with Ukraine at the Chancellery of the Prime Minister. It aimed to streamline the coordination of assistance efforts, including collaboration with Polish local governments in this domain. From the cities' point of view, though, the creation of this body felt somewhat overdue, not only because it came two years after the invasion began, but also because, by that time, most municipalities had already invented and tested their own collaboration models, grounded in partner city networks and direct relationships. These solutions proved to be more effective, more flexible, and better aligned with the needs and capacities of both the Ukrainian partners and the Polish municipalities.

For many cities, cooperation with the central government proved disappointing. It was rarely perceived as helpful – sometimes because no clear mechanisms for cooperation had been developed, and sometimes because of political frictions. Support for Ukraine unfolded amid an intense political conflict and deep polarisation in Poland.

When it came to helping Ukraine, domestic city unions and associations, just to mention the Union of Polish Metropolises (UMP) and the Association of Polish Cities, did not play a central role in coordinating aid and assistance for Ukrainian cities. Instead, they served as channels for dialogue and information-sharing, as well as assisting Polish cities in joining Ukraine reconstruction efforts, such as through the Mariupol Reborn project, which brought together UMP and a number of other Polish urban centres).⁶

City networks did provide a space for coordinating crisis response and refugee care, but **direct cooperation between Polish cities on helping their Ukrainian partners was fairly limited.** The research did not bring to light any broader mechanisms for mutual consultation, best aid practice-sharing, or joint design of support strategies. This was likely due to the fact that, from the perspective of cities and city networks, refugee care and assistance, but also social integration, were more urgent to address at the time.

Based on the interviews, it is evident that the lack of ready-made (especially legal) solutions and frameworks hindered cities' ability to overcome emerging obstacles to delivering aid, which they had to handle on their own.

One notable exception was Gdańsk, which, through the Gdańsk Foundation which was being engaged in assistance for Ukrainian municipalities, established cooperation with several other cities. In addition to Gdynia and Słupsk from the region of Pomerania, the Gdańsk Foundation also partnered up with Katowice, Lublin, Poznań, and Warsaw within an informal network of cooperation. This was, however, a bottom-up initiative outside the formal city networks.

⁶ <https://metropolie.pl/artykul/mariupol-reborn-koncepcja-modelu-gospodarczego-mariupola> (29.04.2025).

How UMP Cities Are Connected Internationally

The scale and reach of support that the eleven UMP cities extended to Ukraine were truly impressive. Based on the data gathered for the report, various forms of assistance reached 74 Ukrainian cities, both major metropolitan areas and smaller, often less known local municipalities. While most cooperation relied on pre-existing municipal partnerships, many Ukrainian cities also reached out to Polish urban centres on their own. They would send direct requests to local authorities or would seek assistance from Ukrainian NGOs or the Ukrainian community already living in Poland to approach Polish cities for help. Polish local government associations allied with some UMP member cities also played a supporting role. A wide range of actors was involved in assistance efforts: from major ones like the Polish Humanitarian Action and the Polish Centre for International Aid, to smaller organisations, such as the WINDOW TO THE EAST Foundation, and local initiatives, among them the Society of Friends of Bydgoszcz.

Assistance coordinated by UMP cities reached 74 Ukrainian towns and cities.

Ukrainian cities that received assistance coordinated by UMP cities



Source: own elaboration

Most aid travelled to Lviv and Kyiv – ten out of the eleven surveyed Polish cities supported Lviv, and nine supported Kyiv. This was due not only to existing partnerships but also to the fact that both cities had served as major humanitarian hubs in Ukraine since the outset of the full-scale war. Other large cities, among them Khmelnytskyi, Odesa, Kharkiv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Kryvyi Rih, and Rivne, also received significant help, each from four or five Polish cities. The pattern suggests that support was focused on Ukraine’s largest and most strategically vital urban centres – regional capitals and key aid concentration points. Still, also targeted acts of solidarity with smaller cities were not uncommon. An example of a metropolitan hub organising such targeted aid is Rzeszów. Our interviewees from the city noted, “Lviv generally receives a great deal of aid, so we try to transfer our support further east, deeper into Ukraine, to ensure a more balanced distribution.”

Aid was directed to cities located both in western Ukraine and in the country’s eastern and southern regions. In other words, the support was not geographically limited. Polish cities supported both relatively safe areas and those troubled by shelling and occupation. In terms of administrative division of the country, the largest share of aid was shipped to Lviv Oblast (fourteen cities), Kyiv Oblast (eight cities), and Dnipropetrovsk Oblast (seven cities).

The largest volume of assistance through UMP cities went to the regions of Lviv, Kyiv, and Dnipropetrovsk.

International city-to-city partnerships also played a key role. Among all cities abroad collaborating with UMP members, German municipalities were especially eager to help – thirteen of them provided aid through their Polish partners, demonstrating how strong the ties between Polish and German local governments had become. Cities from France (ten) and the United Kingdom (five) were also actively engaged.

In total, fifty cities from eighteen countries worldwide were providing assistance through Polish metropolises. Although assistance came from all over the globe: Canada (Toronto, Windsor), the USA (Cincinnati, Rochester), Japan (Takasaki), China (Fangchenggang), Taiwan (Taipei), and Turkey (Istanbul), still, it was Western European cities that led the way in international cooperation. And at the same time, cooperation with cities from Central and Eastern Europe was almost absent. This can be attributed to the fact that many cities in CEE (like those in Lithuania) were already busy helping Ukraine, relying on prior, long-standing bilateral ties and often working independently of their Polish partners.

Fifty cities from eighteen countries were actively assisting Ukraine through UMP cities. Germany, France, and the UK led the way.

Much of the aid provided by Polish cities was ad hoc and spontaneous in nature, and driven by a deep sense of solidarity. While the scale of support was substantial, it rarely led to formalised cooperation. Indeed, humanitarian aid **does not necessarily translate into official partnerships.** New alliances emerged only where the two parties recognised the potential for long-term cooperation and where humanitarian aid evolved into something more: a deeper exchange and a shared vision for the future.

After 2022 seven new Polish-Ukrainian partnerships were established: Katowice with Lviv, Wrocław with Kyiv, Lublin with Kharkiv and Kryvyi Rih, Rzeszów with Konotop, Kherson and Chernihiv. Notably, Lublin and Rzeszów are the only two UMP cities whose representatives openly voiced a desire to take a greater role in Ukraine’s reconstruction.

After 2022 UMP members established seven new partnerships with Ukrainian cities.

Foreign cities cooperating with UMP members and involved in providing assistance



Source: own elaboration.

2 Roles of Cities and Types of Support

Cities as Donors

All eleven cities covered by this report took direct action to support Ukrainian municipalities with different forms of aid and assistance. In many cases, they would overstep their official mandates. However, they demonstrated that in a time of crisis they could respond quickly, efficiently, and in solidarity, even in the absence of clear legal frameworks to guide them.

The role of donor was the most direct and evident expression of their engagement. As our interviewee from Rzeszów reported, **“We were giving away everything that was at hand and was considered necessary and useful.”** A defining feature of cities’ aid efforts was their flexibility and ability to adapt to specific needs. Working closely with Ukrainian municipalities, and often with local businesses, helped pinpoint exactly what was needed and how to transfer it to the destination. Some cities teamed up with Polish or Ukrainian NGOs to manage logistics. The strategies varied: sometimes the cities arranged or paid for shipments themselves (as Białystok did), other times it was NGOs or businesses.

Cities as Humanitarian Hubs

In practice, nearly every city studied in this report turned into a humanitarian hub. Aid collection campaigns were launched everywhere. Foodstuffs, hygiene items, and medications were brought in. At first, the items were delivered to municipal offices, but it soon became obvious that larger storage spaces were needed. As a surveyed official from Łódź put it, “A lot of stuff was dropped off at the town hall, but after two days it was clear we just did not have enough floor space.” Therefore, the municipalities-hubs resorted to city-owned sites or warehouses or sought alternative spaces to store gifted items before forwarding them to their Ukrainian partners.

In the early days of the war, Polish cities also submitted formal appeals to their foreign partners, detailing the urgent needs arising after the refugee influx and the options for channelling aid to Ukraine. Many cities responded right away, with German municipalities showing particularly keen support. Some foreign municipalities responded actively to the appeals, and some were the first to make contact to make arrangements for humanitarian assistance (e.g. beds, hygiene products, foodstuffs) or financial support (for example, Mannheim transferred EUR 250,000 to Bydgoszcz).

In some cities, Kraków being a notable example, local governments managed to enlist support not only from its partner cities but also from a variety of other international partners, including Polish diaspora groups.⁷

Additionally, many of these cities did not reach out directly to Ukrainian municipalities, instead they offered assistance through their partner municipalities in Poland. **This led to the emergence of a tri-party support chain** in which the Polish metropolises served as aid hubs. They would receive aid from Western partners and would forward it to Ukrainian municipalities. As our interviewee from Gdańsk recalled, “It was a great manifestation of what partner cities are in a real-life situation.” Out of the 11 studied cities, only two – Łódź and Białystok – did not forward aid from Western partner cities to Ukrainian local governments.

UMP cities formed a vital link in the tri-lateral aid operation, acting as logistics and coordination hubs that funnelled aid from cities across the globe to their Ukrainian counterparts.

⁷ Miasta zagraniczne Ukrainie, Kraków otwarty na świat, 14.02.2023, https://krakow.pl/otwarty_na_swiat/258944,artykul.miasta_zagraniczne_ukrainie_.html (29.04.2025).

Cities as Intermediaries

Poland's metropolitan cities often stepped in as intermediaries, linking other cities, businesses, and NGOs with their Ukrainian partners. Most often, they assisted in bringing humanitarian aid where it was needed. Local companies offered to take care of shipments of gifts, and municipal authorities managed the paperwork, so the aid lorries could legally cross the border and reach those in need.

UMP cities acted as go-betweens in establishing contacts between Ukrainian cities and companies, NGOs, and territorial governments from around the world.

At the same time, Ukrainian cities and institutions also approached Polish municipal offices directly to register various needs. That is how Polish metropolises knew exactly what the needs were and what kind of support the Ukrainian side expected. "We matched different companies and NGOs," said one official from Łódź to confirm that. Many municipalities were well aware of what different local organisations were doing and who could offer more effective assistance than the municipality itself. Also, as an interviewee from Łódź explained, "sometimes it was just easier to connect people with an NGO, especially if its mission involved humanitarian aid, rather than have the municipality take on tasks that technically fall outside its mandate."

Other cities, meanwhile, actively supported (and they continue to do so) efforts to forge ties between local entrepreneurs from Poland and Ukraine. This was the case of Rzeszów, as an official from the local municipality reported, "Our idea is to bring companies together, and we are doing better and better...It seems to work really fine." In 2024 Rzeszów hosted a business conference in Truskavets, Ukraine. The participants were dozens of small and medium-sized enterprises from the Rzeszów Economic Zone and from Rzeszów's partner cities in Ukraine.

The initiative proved successful, as one interviewee put it, "when local governments work with business, it guarantees safe cooperation for both sides." Companies are endorsed by local administration, which creates a sense of credibility in the eyes of Ukrainian partners.

Another dimension of being a "go-between" was helping establish new city-to-city partnerships. One example is Wrocław. Its partner city, Breda, expressed a strong interest in becoming more involved in supporting Ukrainian municipalities. With this end in view, a trilateral meeting was arranged between Breda, Wrocław, and Lviv, culminating in the signature of a trilateral memorandum of cooperation. Lublin, for its part, facilitated a new partnership between cities in Ukraine and Germany: Münster signed a formal agreement with Vinnytsia. Besides, the three cities established a trilateral partnership. It is particularly valuable because, as a Lublin official noted, **"through such trilateral projects, Ukrainian cities ultimately become lead partners in projects funded by the European Union."**

Forms and Value of Assistance

Polish metropolises extended support both to their long-time Ukrainian partners and to municipalities that they had not worked with before. They were guided by the desire to respond to specific needs, often communicated directly via email, in telephone conversations, or through various NGOs. Although all UMP cities provided assistance, its scope and intensity varied.

The assistance provided by Polish cities included in-kind resources and financial support, the latter being funds paid directly from municipal budgets, donations from residents and local businesses, as well as cash transferred by partner cities from abroad. Humanitarian aid was the most frequent and the fastest to be deployed.

It included:

- ✓ foodstuffs and drinking water;
- ✓ clothing, cleaning supplies, and personal hygiene products;
- ✓ medical and emergency equipment, including hospital beds, disinfectants, medications, and dressings;
- ✓ public transport vehicles, including buses; critical infrastructure equipment, including power generators, power generators, equipment for removing the effects of missile attacks.

Rzeszów stands out as a compelling example of humanitarian support. Working with local partners from the city and the region, it managed to deliver specialised medical dressings directly to military units stationed on the front line instead of to its Ukrainian partner cities.

Some cities, tapping into their own budgets or relying on support from international partners, also contributed financially – either by transferring funds directly or by purchasing equipment and supplies, like for the Unbroken rehabilitation centre. Because of formal hurdles related to cross-border donations, cities often sought workarounds, for example, by directing financial support to local communities rather than directly to municipal institutions, to sidestep bureaucratic obstacles.

An additional, non-tangible form of assistance – one that is still being rendered – was technical support (e.g. Gdańsk helped develop a strategy for Mariupol) and knowledge transfer (e.g. study visits of Ukrainian local government officials to Poland). This assistance includes advice on implementing EU-aligned regulations and exchanging experience and proven solutions in city governance. Actually, knowledge has been flowing both ways ever since. As several interviewees pointed out, Ukrainian partners also have a lot to share, especially in the area of crisis management.

In the spirit of mutual learning, representatives of UMP cities were also able to draw on Ukrainian know-how, especially in how to manage crises.

Given the diversity of cities' approaches to how and what kind of assistance was provided, **it is virtually impossible to put a precise figure on the total value of aid transferred from Polish cities to Ukraine.** There are several reasons for this. First, cities measured their contributions using various accounting methods. For example, some aid funds were not disbursed from city budgets directly but were sourced from municipal-owned companies. What is more, the value of gifted items, such as retired vehicles, was not always assessed. As a result, funds allocated from municipal budgets represent only a portion of the overall support, as the value of donations collected among the public through fundraisers organised by residents, NGOs, or local businesses can hardly be quantified.

Even so, figures reported by the surveyed cities suggest that direct municipal budget spending on support for Ukrainian local governments ranged from several hundred thousand to more than 10 million PLN. In total, UMP cities expended over PLN 21.5 million for this purpose.

Financial assistance transferred to Ukrainian partners directly from the budgets of the surveyed cities (funds disbursed from municipal companies and other hard-to-estimate financial support are not included)

City	Transferred amount (in PLN thou.)
Bydgoszcz	200
Gdańsk	1099
Lublin	1809
Poznań	275
Rzeszów	13 280
Warszawa	1600
Wrocław	2780

Source: data shared by municipalities.



Changes in Time

The support for Ukrainian municipalities changed considerably over time, both in terms of nature and intensity. Based on the study, three main phases of assistance can be distinguished:



Over time, most cities gradually reduced direct shipments of aid to Ukraine and redirected their efforts toward helping refugees in Poland and integrating them into local community life.⁸ Still, half of the surveyed cities remain actively engaged in assistance: Rzeszów, Lublin, Bydgoszcz, Gdańsk, Wrocław, and Warsaw. However, the nature of this aid has clearly evolved.

Although cities occasionally still send supplies, like medicaments or power generators, efforts have now moved toward other kinds of assistance, for instance, supporting Ukrainian institutions caring for war veterans and those permanently injured by Russian assaults. Sharing expertise, whether through study visits or institutional partnerships, has also been playing an ever more prominent role.

⁸ Cities reach for financial resources from abroad to run projects in this domain, for example, under the grant-award procedure, Polish Cities for Ukraine: Taiwan Grant Fund, held by the UMP with the financial support of the Taipei Representative Office in Warsaw: <https://metropolie.pl/grant> (30.04.2025).

3 Factors and Barriers in Providing Assistance

Motivations behind Cities' Support for Ukraine

Interviews with city officials point to the multi-faced nature of motivations to help Ukraine. The prevailing factor was a desire to help “a neighbour in need,” yet more strategic and political drivers can also be identified.

The strongest and immediate instinct was a deep need to **provide assistance, fuelled by empathy, solidarity, and a sense of shared fate** with the neighbour. That powerful response sparked immediate action, well before any top-down solutions were even on the table. As our interviewee from Rzeszów reported, “The help came straight from the heart...it was a spur-of-the-moment decision, no one gave it much thought or waited for council meetings to decide.”

The strongest and immediate instinct was a deep need to provide assistance, rooted in empathy, solidarity, and a sense of shared fate.

Across many cities, **local governments came under strong public pressure** to assume responsibility and take the lead in managing the wave of civic mobilisation that erupted after 24 February 2022. Residents looked to their city officials to take action: to establish support systems, make use of international contacts, and give form to and steer bottom-up initiatives. An official from the municipality of Łódź reported, “We could sense that people were expecting us, the local government, to step up, even though, let’s face it, there were no solid legal frameworks or clear instructions on what to do or how to work it the early days of the war.”

In many instances, the support was motivated by the wish to uphold and deepen long-standing ties with Ukrainian partner cities. Many municipalities approached their assistance as the obvious thing to do, a moral duty rooted not only in formal partnerships but also in personal bonds. As our interviewee from Bydgoszcz recalled, “We have two partner cities in Ukraine. Right away, we started to call the mayors to ask how they were doing and what the plan was?” Ties between city leaders went beyond official protocols – they relied on trust, dedication, and shared responsibility, all of which took a concrete and practical shape when the war erupted.

For many local governments, it was also about making **a clear and firm statement against the Russian invasion**, especially in front of international partners from outside Ukraine. For cities collaborating with partners from countries that took a more ambiguous line on the war, like China or Serbia, sending a clear message carried extra weight. An interviewee from Bydgoszcz observed, “We wasted no time contacting all our partner cities, especially to make our stance clear. Since we are partnered with cities in China and Serbia... We wanted to make it clear: we stand firmly with Ukraine.” Such a stance demonstrates that support for Ukraine was viewed not only as a pragmatic move but also as a values-based policy and a gesture of international solidarity, its consequences extending beyond the region.

For some cities, providing assistance also became a tool for bolstering their international image of an active and engaged partner. Cooperation with other municipalities and international organisations was regarded as a long-term investment in symbolic and political capital.

Organizational Structure of Assistance

Cities naturally had different capacities when it came to international engagement. Most relied on long-standing ties with partner cities in Western Europe, while formal city networks played only a minor role. Warsaw clearly stood out, boosting its international profile not only through the Pact of Free Cities⁹ but also by actively engaging with diplomats stationed in or visiting the capital city. One of the interviewees noted, “Whenever the mayor travelled abroad for international meetings, he went there as someone who had taken in refugees, was actively helping them, and was able to share first-hand experience... Warsaw was a source of knowledge on not only the situation of refugees beyond Ukraine but also helped understand the country itself and its cities.” Seen in this light, helping Ukraine was more than an act of solidarity – it became a way for cities to plot their global narrative and entrench their standing on the international stage.

The outbreak of war in Ukraine in February 2022 took Polish cities by surprise with the sheer scale of the needs and the urgency of action required.

In the face of emergency, Polish local governments rapidly put together different models of support, often relying on pre-existing ties, available resources, and local partnerships. The structure of support evolved over time – from bottom-up, spontaneous responses to more formalised institutional mechanisms.

In the early days, mobilisation was largely improvised. **In the first days of aid efforts, it was the spontaneous mobilisation of city officials, civic society groups, and residents that made the difference.**

In many cities, personnel from departments in charge of international affairs, social services, or crisis response took the lead well before any official procedures were put in place.

Lublin is perhaps the most telling example: just hours after the war began, a Lublin Social Committee to Aid Ukraine was convened.

An official from the municipality of Lublin said, “Five hours after the first bombs fell in Ukraine, Lublin set up the Lublin Social Committee to Aid

Ukraine. It was a joint initiative of the city authorities and NGOs... The committee had no legal personality, no bank account, no chairperson; it first met at a free desk in the office.”

Over time, **many cities established formal or semi-formal working groups** responsible for coordinating aid efforts. Few days into the war, Katowice established a special task force, “Already on 28 February, the mayor ordered that an internal team be set up, made up of several subgroups in charge of logistics, education, and humanitarian aid.” The teams typically worked under the mayor’s office or within departments handling crisis response or international affairs. In Warsaw, assistance was “coordinated by the mayor’s office. All communication was forwarded there, and they requested municipal units and companies to share anything useful.”

⁹ The Pact of Free Cities originated as a cooperation agreement entered into in 2019 by the mayors of Warsaw, Budapest, Prague, i Bratislava. It aims to promote democratic values, rule of law, and municipal self-governance. It also advocates for a greater role of cities in accessing EU funds and shaping EU’s policies: <https://europa-swiat.um.warszawa.pl/pakt-wolnych-miast/> (30.04.2025).

At the outset, everything hinged on the rapid mobilisation of civil servants, civil society organisations, and local communities. Over time, cities began setting up formal and informal teams tasked with supporting their Ukrainian counterparts.

In all of the surveyed cities, interviewees highlighted the role of local partners in delivering support. It was not the municipal office alone but the broader local ecosystem, including NGOs, businesses, cultural institutions, and municipal companies, that was doing the key work. Cities often acted as coordinators or lent institutional legitimacy to the activities led by their partners. In some cases, the coordination model relied on pre-existing relationships and crisis response experience, as in Gdańsk, where, according to a surveyed city official,

“When the war in Ukraine started, we already had a model in place that had proved useful during the pandemic (the Gdańsk Helps initiative). It was a coordination platform that brought together NGOs, local government, and businesses.”

What began as an improvised model, driven by community spirit and rapid response, eventually evolved into a more institutional structure that brought together different sectors under coordinated management.

Notably, many cities succeeded in building effective aid systems on their own, despite the absence of national guidelines. They may prospectively inspire future crisis response efforts.

Problems and Challenges

In the early months of 2022, much of the aid provided by Polish cities was spontaneous and often encountered legal and bureaucratic roadblocks. Faced with vague or inadequate regulations, municipalities frequently had to act intuitively or rely on makeshift solutions. Delivering both financial and in-kind support demanded resourcefulness, risk-taking, and close cooperation with third parties.

When asked about the main hurdles in delivering assistance to Ukrainian municipalities, city officials most frequently pointed to inconsistent legal regulations, administrative constraints, poor logistics, and a shift in public engagement and perception of the importance of aiding Ukraine. What surfaces in their reports is that local governments were operating in a climate of legal and organisational uncertainty.

Cities encountered significant difficulties stemming from the lack of clear legal footing – whether for the organization of public fundraising, the transfer of municipal property, and the coordination of aid deliveries. Budgetary constraints and the vague rules surrounding the financing of municipal activities beyond national borders also proved an issue.

Technically, cities were allowed to transfer money to their Ukrainian partners under council resolutions, but in practice, only some were able to design a workable legal formula to make it possible. As our interviewee from Gdańsk recalled, “The municipality may transfer funds to other local government units, even abroad. Certainly, it took a long time and needed the endorsement of the City Council and the Budgetary Committee.”

Several cities disbursed financial aid on resolutions of their city councils. Still, some officials from other cities emphasized that they had not been aware that such a mechanism for transferring aid was legally permissible. As an official from Łódź explained, “There is simply no legal framework that would allow a city to raise money and send it abroad... Transferring funds to another city – let alone to a different country – is not among the statutory tasks of local governments.” It shows that Polish municipalities were largely unprepared to deliver international aid, and that there was a serious communication gap between local and national authorities.

The absence of nation-wide procedures forced cities to improvise. In the early weeks of the war, Poland’s major cities were left without clear instructions from the central government on how to support Poland’s troubled neighbour. With little prior experience to rely on, they would often act intuitively, exploit local networks, and navigate the legal grey zones. In many cases, cities were not authorised to run fundraising campaigns or organise aid convoys themselves, or they simply did not know how to do it. Partnering with NGOs, which were able to work faster and without the legal and bureaucratic burden, proved to be the workaround. In Białystok, for example, “donated items collected by the city were formally distributed through the Polska Foundation and the WINDOW To THE EAST Foundation.”

Given the numerous formal and legal barriers, cooperation between UMP cities and NGOs proved instrumental in providing aid to Ukraine.

Cities were also confronted with logistical headaches: collecting, storing, and delivering aid. Early on, enough warehouse space, personnel, or trusted distribution networks were simply not there. “We had to sort everything through and check it because, let’s face it, people would bring all kinds of stuff, not always useful or necessary,” an official from Łódź recalled. Fuel shortages, formal issues, and trouble verifying aid recipients on the Ukrainian side added to the complications. This is what happened in Katowice, “Ukrainian lorries would arrive to pick up aid, but they had no way to get back because they were running low on fuel. We had to get it for them somehow.”

Over time, local authorities began to notice that the initial wave of public enthusiasm was wearing off, prompting the prior model of operation to be reviewed. Too many partnerships and fundraising initiatives, and difficulty in keeping people engaged led cities to take a more focused and strategic route toward providing assistance.

4 The Legacy of Cities' Assistance

While most cities limited their support for Ukraine to urgent humanitarian aid, a few – especially Lublin and Rzeszów – started looking further ahead and design more ambitious plans to participate in Ukraine's post-war reconstruction. Such attitudes mark the first step toward a longer-term commitment. These cities never saw helping Ukraine as a one-time effort – from day one, they approached it as a long-term process. As they sit close to the national border, they quickly became logistical lifelines for the assaulted country and began to join specific Ukraine-led projects.

The local administration of Lublin, Rzeszów, and Gdańsk are already eyeing involvement in rebuilding some key sectors, such as education, healthcare, or municipal services. They stay closely connected with their Ukrainian counterparts and continue to express readiness to offer technical know-how and expert assistance. Attempts to secure external funding (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, EU, international institutions) to secure participation in reconstruction projects are also noteworthy. Lublin managed to do so.

UMP cities are ready and keep the door open for developing cooperation with Ukrainian cities around the recovery of specific sectors of the state.

At the same time, many cities register their interest in taking cooperation with Ukrainian counterparts to the next level. Gdańsk, for instance, is “looking to build a closer relationship with Odesa as a seaport,” with “the Port of Gdańsk is expressing strong interest in it.” Still, most Polish metropolises have not yet moved beyond the drawing board with their action plans, and their ideas, if any, remain just that. Moreover, cities highlight that without a solid legal foundation and adequate resources, their aspirations to contribute to Ukraine's rebuilding efforts remain difficult to realise. **Looking ahead, cities mostly see their role as sharing know-how and offering expert advice**, with less emphasis placed on getting local businesses involved in Ukraine-related efforts.

The aid efforts undertaken after 24 February 2022 reshaped how many Polish cities engage with their Ukrainian partners. In some cases, partnerships that had once been largely symbolic transformed into practical, day-to-day collaborations. In Katowice, for example, this shift was marked by a greater institutionalisation of relations with Lviv. As a surveyed city official noted, “we still have a liaison for Lviv, who serves as a direct link between their local government and ours.”

It is also noteworthy that, amid the war, several cities forged **new ties with Ukrainian local governments** beyond their pre-existing partnerships.

This development reflects a broader trend toward expanding the network of international municipal cooperation with Ukraine, a tendency already documented in earlier studies. Remarkably, nearly two-thirds of the surveyed Ukrainian cities reported establishing new foreign partnerships in the years 2022-2023.¹⁰

Although the initial phase of the war was marked by an impressive level of engagement and operational effectiveness, the majority of the surveyed cities **have yet to establish durable frameworks – be they institutional structures, procedurals, or strategies** – that could be mobilised in response to future international crises. The aid efforts were predominantly improvised, relying on the initiative of individual staff members and organisational flexibility. Nonetheless, even in the absence of structures, procedures, or strategies, these experiences have contributed to the accumulation of institutional knowledge and may serve as a reference point for a future crisis response model.

Certainly, the extent to which cities will engage in the future reconstruction of Ukraine is closely tied to both the resources they allocate to international cooperation and the political weight they assign to this process. Among the studied cities, there are clear differences. Most notably, there are striking disparities in the size of teams responsible for foreign relations. For instance, Lublin employs seventeen staff in this area, whereas Bydgoszcz has only three. Second, city authorities attach varying degrees of importance to relations with Ukraine. While cities like Lublin and Rzeszów continue to treat international engagement as a priority, for others this strand of municipal diplomacy holds less strategic weight.

¹⁰ Matiaszczyk N., 2024, *City Diplomacy as a Mechanism of Multi-Level Solidarity and Support for Ukraine: A Study of the Changes Following the 2022 Russian Invasion*, „Journal of Eurasian Studies”, vol. 16, iss. 1; *Analiza: duże wsparcie ze strony europejskich samorządów dla miast w Ukrainie*, Serwis Samorządowy PAP, 26.03.2023, <https://samorzad.pap.pl/kategoria/aktualnosci/analiza-duze-wsparcie-ze-strony-europejskich-samorzadow-dla-miast-w-ukrainie> [accessed 20 February 2025].

Conclusion

A study of the actions undertaken by Polish cities affiliated with the Union of Polish Metropolises in the aftermath of 24 February 2022 reveals the remarkable extent of their solidarity, operational capacity, and commitment to assisting Ukrainian municipalities. Far beyond serving as reception points for refugees, these urban centres emerged as key actors in orchestrating aid for troubled Ukraine, assuming frontline responsibilities in the face of the war.

The magnitude and nature of the response from Polish local governments represented an unparalleled chapter in their institutional history. Faced with a host of legal, logistical, and organisational hurdles, officials in all the studied cities rose to the occasion and navigated these obstacles successfully. The interviews underscored the profound dedication of municipal officials, many of whom not only stepped far beyond their comfort zones but also their official roles. In the face of crisis, municipal personnel became logisticians, warehouse workers, intermediaries, mobilizers, humanitarian responders, and stewards of community solidarity—demonstrating remarkable flexibility and resolve. They were logisticians in international transport, warehousemen, intermediaries, solicitors, humanitarian workers, and public fundraisers. Extraordinary times call for extraordinary people. The crisis revealed that many such dedicated and resilient people serve within the ranks of Polish local governments.

While the cities' response to the war in Ukraine showcased remarkable flexibility, responsiveness, and institutional agency, these strengths do not deny the need for broader structural changes. Enhancing the systemic capacity of municipalities to deliver humanitarian and development aid is imperative, both in view of ongoing support to Ukraine and in anticipation of future transnational crises.

Drawing on insights shared by city officials during the interviews, particularly regarding the challenges they faced and the solutions they identified, a set of recommendations has been formulated for both central and local government bodies. They aim to consolidate best practices, remove barriers, and strengthen cities' preparedness for future transnational aid operations. Rather than being a definitive list, the recommendations listed below serve as an entry point for further dialogue, highlighting priority trajectories for improvement. The development of a more complete set of proposals should follow a participatory process involving civil servants with first-hand experience in aiding Ukraine.



Recommendations

1. To strengthen and formalise aid management structures within municipal administrations

The case of assistance provided to Ukraine demonstrated that, while the success of numerous aid initiatives hinged on local initiative and institutional agility, these actions frequently unfolded in an ambience of legal and structural uncertainty. In light of these experiences, local governments are encouraged to carry out a systematic review of past aid initiatives and, based on the lessons learned, draw up and adopt local plans and protocols for supporting foreign municipalities in crisis. Such reinforcement of local aid architecture could serve as a lasting institutional asset arising from Polish cities' involvement in supporting Ukraine.

2. To develop a transparent legal framework governing international assistance provided by municipalities

Legal and formal constraints emerged as one of the principal obstacles to delivering aid. Accordingly, coordinated efforts with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are needed to enable Polish local governments to more effectively deliver financial and in-kind aid directly to local authorities abroad when an emergency response is needed. It would be highly beneficial to develop overarching guidelines to support cities in effectively managing international aid at the local government level. In the course of drafting such a document, any necessary amendments to the law might be pinpointed that would enable cities to act more efficiently in this domain.

3. To develop enhanced communication channels and knowledge exchange mechanisms among cities

The research highlighted a notable gap in effective communication and knowledge-sharing mechanisms among Polish cities with regard to the implementation of aid efforts. It is therefore advisable to establish more effective communication mechanisms among municipal officials to facilitate timely exchange of experience and collaborative problem-solving. City networks, such as the Union of Polish Metropolises, serve as a natural institutional platform for such initiatives. They could take the lead in formalising dialogue and cooperation, for instance, through dedicated working groups composed of civil servants delegated by individual Polish municipalities.

The response of Polish cities after 24 February 2022 was without precedent – not only in terms of scale but also depth of engagement. Acting often in a more agile manner than national or international institutions, local governments developed grassroots aid systems that extended aid to hundreds of thousands of people and connected dozens of cities across the Polish-Ukrainian border. They exhibited adaptability, courage, and a profound ability to collaborate. What began as an extraordinary surge of compassion also became a demanding organisational test – one that Polish cities took successfully.

The title of the report, *On the Frontline of Solidarity*, is not accidental – it draws on the lexicon of military conflict. It was the cities, rather than central authorities, that stood closest to the unfolding tragedy, demonstrating that they were not merely administrative bodies but full-time actors on the stage of international politics. The humanitarian, symbolic, and political significance of their actions was immense.

It is imperative that these hard-won experiences are neither forgotten nor left unused. The challenges of Ukraine's reconstruction, future global crises, and Poland's expanding role in development cooperation require the knowledge gained and partnerships built be transformed into enduring institutional capacities and protocols.

Polish cities proved themselves in this hour of trial. The challenge now is to convert this spirit of solidarity into a lasting, institutional capacity for effective action should another crisis arrive.

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