

Bypassing the Fidesz-led Central Government? The City Diplomacy Activities of Budapest in Favour of Ukraine

by Brucker Bála^zs

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Résumé:

Cette étude analyse la politique étrangère de la Hongrie et la diplomatie subnationale de Budapest dans le contexte de la guerre russo-ukrainienne, en mettant l'accent sur l'interaction entre la gouvernance centralisée et l'action municipale. Depuis 2010, le gouvernement de Viktor Orbán adopte une approche pragmatique envers la Russie, guidée par la dépendance énergétique, les intérêts économiques et les considérations géopolitiques, tout en s'écartant sélectivement du consensus de l'UE. La position prudente de la Hongrie vis-à-vis de l'Ukraine reflète à la fois des contraintes structurelles et des impératifs politiques internes, notamment concernant les droits des minorités et les symboles nationaux. En revanche, le gouvernement municipal de Budapest, sous la direction du maire Gergely Karácsony, exerce une diplomatie indépendante, s'engageant dans l'aide humanitaire, la coopération entre villes jumelées et les gestes symboliques en soutien à l'Ukraine. Les initiatives de la capitale, notamment le programme Budapest Helps! et la participation au Pacte des Villes Libres, illustrent les dimensions normatives et symboliques de la diplomatie urbaine et soulignent la capacité des acteurs subnationaux à poursuivre des objectifs de politique étrangère même dans un système politique illibéral. Ce cas révèle à la fois les limites imposées par l'autorité centralisée et les opportunités offertes par les réseaux paradiplomatiques, fournissant un éclairage sur la gouvernance multinationale et la diplomatie urbaine en Europe centrale.

Mots-clés: Gouvernance multinationale, paradiplomatie, diplomatie urbaine, Europe centrale, Hongrie,

Resumen:

Este estudio analiza la política exterior de Hungría y la diplomacia subnacional de Budapest en el contexto de la guerra entre Rusia y Ucrania, centrándose en la interacción entre la gobernanza centralizada y la acción municipal. Desde 2010, el gobierno de Viktor Orbán ha adoptado un enfoque pragmático hacia Rusia, impulsado por la dependencia energética, intereses económicos y consideraciones geopolíticas, mientras se desvía selectivamente del consenso de la UE. La posición cautelosa de Hungría frente a Ucrania refleja tanto limitaciones estructurales como imperativos políticos internos, especialmente en relación con los derechos de las minorías y la simbología nacional. En contraste, el gobierno municipal de Budapest, bajo el alcalde Gergely Karácsony, ha ejercido agencia diplomática independiente, participando en asistencia humanitaria, cooperación entre ciudades hermanas y gestos simbólicos en apoyo a Ucrania. Las iniciativas de la capital, incluyendo el programa Budapest Helps! y la participación en el Pacto de Ciudades Libres, ilustran las dimensiones normativas y simbólicas de la diplomacia urbana y muestran la capacidad de los actores subnacionales para perseguir objetivos de política exterior incluso dentro de un sistema político illiberal. Este caso revela tanto los límites impuestos por la autoridad central como las oportunidades que ofrecen las redes paradiplomáticas, proporcionando perspectivas sobre la gobernanza multinivel y la diplomacia urbana en Europa Central.

Palabras clave: Gobernanza multinivel, paradiplomacia, diplomacia urbana, Europa Central, Hungría

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Abstract

This study examines Hungary's foreign policy and subnational diplomacy of Budapest in the context of the Russia–Ukraine war, focusing on the interplay between centralised governance and municipal agency. Since 2010, the Viktor Orbán government has pursued a pragmatic approach toward Russia, driven by energy dependence, economic interests, and geopolitical considerations, while selectively diverging from the EU consensus. Hungary's cautious stance toward Ukraine reflects both structural constraints and domestic political imperatives, particularly regarding minority rights and national symbolism. In contrast, Budapest's municipal government, under Mayor Gergely Karácsony, has exercised independent diplomatic agency, engaging in humanitarian assistance, sister-city cooperation, and symbolic gestures in support of Ukraine. The capital's initiatives, including the Budapest Helps! program and participation in the Pact of Free Cities, illustrate the normative and symbolic dimensions of city diplomacy and highlight the capacity of subnational actors to pursue foreign policy objectives even within an illiberal political system. This case reveals both the limits imposed by centralized authority and the opportunities afforded by paradiplomatic networks, offering insights into the evolving dynamics of multilevel governance and urban diplomacy in Central Europe. It demonstrates that municipalities can act as political and humanitarian agents, complementing or counterbalancing national policies while advancing values-based international engagement.

Keywords: Multilevel governance, paradiplomacy, city diplomacy, Central Europe, Hungary

Introduction

In recent decades, subnational actors have become increasingly visible participants in international relations, challenging the traditional state-centric understanding of diplomacy. Cities in particular have emerged as relevant actors, engaging in transnational cooperation, advocacy, and symbolic political action.

This development is especially significant in politically contentious environments, where tensions between central and local governments may lead municipalities to pursue distinct international strategies. Scholarly research has documented subnational actors bypassing central governments in international affairs, for instance in U.S. cities' climate initiatives (Basseches et al., 2022; Lenferna, 2018) and networks of Central European mayors pursuing transnational cooperation (Aksztejn et al., 2024; Buzogány & Spöri, 2024; Matthes, 2023; Szpak et al., 2023). However, the dynamics of municipal actors navigating crises like the

Russia–Ukraine war remain underexplored, highlighting the interplay between subnational autonomy and national governance in highly politicized contexts.

Such divergence is particularly visible in Hungary, where the opposition-led Municipality of Budapest operates in a context of ongoing conflict with the central government. The Russian–Ukrainian war has further intensified these tensions. While the right-wing populist Hungarian government has adopted an often Russia-leaning position, Budapest led by a left-wing, environmentalist mayor has actively engaged in supporting Ukrainian cities, signalling a normative and political divergence at the municipal level.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines Budapest as a case of city diplomacy in a contentious environment, bridging theory and empirical observation. This paper examines Budapest's subnational diplomatic activism during

the war, highlighting how the city's actions complement and challenge national policy and serve as a form of political differentiation and symbolic resistance. By situating Budapest within broader paradigms of paradiplomacy and city diplomacy, this study explores how a municipal actor can exercise agency under constrained conditions.

The analysis is guided by three main hypotheses: (H1) Municipal governments can exercise a measurable degree of autonomy even within a centralised, illiberal political system, despite legal and financial constraints. (H2) Budapest's engagement with Ukrainian municipalities demonstrates that city diplomacy can perform significant symbolic and normative functions beyond material cooperation. (H3) The Budapest case suggests that paradiplomacy in hybrid political systems is simultaneously enabled and constrained, reflecting both expanding opportunities and persistent structural limits.

Methodologically, the study combines document analysis of official communications, media analysis of Hungarian and international press coverage (2022–2026), and semi-structured interviews with municipal officials of Budapest. This mixed-method approach enables triangulation of evidence to capture both normative and practical dimensions of subnational diplomacy.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section introduces the theoretical framework of city diplomacy in contexts of conflict between central and subnational actors. The second section situates Hungary within its political context and delineates the origins and main features of the conflict between the central government and the Budapest Municipality. The subsequent section examines the Hungarian government's stance on the Russia–Ukraine war, with particular attention to the geopolitical factors influencing policy decisions. The fourth section analyses Budapest's city diplomacy initiatives in response to the Russia–Ukraine conflict. Finally, the study concludes by drawing insights on the extent to which an opposition-led municipal government can advance its own interests and normative commitments, distinct from those of the central government, within Hungary's hybrid political system.

Theoretical Background: City Diplomacy in a Contentious Environment

The expansion of multi-level governance (MLG) has challenged the traditional view of diplomacy as the exclusive prerogative of nation-states. Over recent decades, a diverse set of subnational actors – including regional governments and municipalities – has emerged as active participants in international affairs, a phenomenon known as paradiplomacy (Cornago, 2010; Tavares, 2016). While these activities can complement national foreign policy, they may also diverge from it, expressing alternative political orientations and value-based commitments (Crikemans, 2010; Lecours, 2008), yet it can produce tensions or reveal divergent priorities.

Subnational actors – namely municipal and territorial governments – may develop strategies that partially or wholly depart from the central government's foreign policy line when persistent conflict exists between national and subnational levels (Gzik et al., 2025; Katz & Nowak, 2018; Mérey, 2011). In such contexts, local political elites seek to articulate their own values, political identities, or development priorities within the international sphere. This dynamic is especially pronounced when the central government's foreign policy priorities contradict the economic interests, normative commitments, or long-term visions of local communities (K.J. personal communication, April 10, 2024). The phenomenon is not only political but also institutional: constitutional arrangements, the degree of decentralization, and the international legal environment all shape the scope for subnational action. This divergence creates an opportunity to examine how cities navigate conflicts with central governments while maintaining international engagement.

A salient form of conflictual subnational diplomacy is the international activity of intermediate-level governments – provinces, regions, or autonomous territories – pursuing independence or broader autonomy. In cases such as Quebec, Catalonia, the Basque Country, Corsica, or Scotland, international engagement serves not merely cultural representation or investment promotion but forms part of a long-term strategy for political self-determination. (Paquin, 2018; 2022) External relations of these regions often aim to enhance international legitimacy, cultivate foreign partners

and allies, and raise awareness within international public opinion. To analyse such initiatives, the literature employs the concept of “protodiplomacy”. Protodiplomacy refers to informal or limited-capacity foreign policy activities conducted by non-sovereign, sub-state actors to lay diplomatic and institutional foundations for potential future statehood. Its toolkit includes establishing foreign representations, engaging with international organizations, strategic communication, and maintaining a deliberate presence in international media (Paquin, 2018).

Cities, especially capital cities and larger cities, may also challenge central government policy on specific issues. In the United States, cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago reaffirmed their commitment to climate goals following the federal withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, engaging directly with international networks to implement autonomous environmental initiatives (Basseches et al., 2022; Lenferna, 2018). In Europe, Warsaw (before the parliamentary elections in 2023) has leveraged city diplomacy to assert commitment to EU fundamental values and judicial independence, subtly diverging from national government policies while securing partnerships and resources (Aksztejn et al., 2024; Buzogány & Spöri, 2024).

A central government–city conflict can also be illustrated by the case of Budapest and the Fidesz-led government, particularly in relation to the Russian–Ukrainian war. Compared to the cases presented, the specificity of the example lies in the fact that war is a domain in which sovereign states retain near-absolute prerogatives: arms transfers, sanctions policy, the provision of security guarantees, and peace negotiations are categorically beyond the reach of municipal governments, regardless of their political will or normative commitments. As a result, municipal engagement in such a context is necessarily displaced toward symbolic, normative, and humanitarian forms of action rather than direct foreign policy intervention. This, in turn, highlights tensions between national-level foreign policy positions and municipal political stances within a unitary state.



Hungary's political context and the tensions between the central government and the Municipality of Budapest

Hungary's democratic landscape serves as the political backdrop to Budapest's international assertiveness. Since 2010, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party have carried out a wide-ranging transformation of Hungary's political institutions. The government has redrafted the constitution, reorganized the electoral system, and concentrated control over key public institutions, including the judiciary, the media, and the education sector. These reforms have strengthened executive power and reshaped the system of checks and balances, creating what critics label an “illiberal democracy”. Supporters, however, maintain that these changes have restored stability after years of political fragmentation and have bolstered national sovereignty against perceived external pressures (Gomez & Leunig, 2022).

Furthermore, the Hungarian territorial governance system was completely transformed after 2010. The newly elected parliament, with the two-thirds majority of the right-wing Fidesz–KDNP coalition, passed a new constitution establishing a strong, centralized state, weakening both public autonomies and civil society. The new law on local governments (2011) moved towards a centrally more controlled model, leading to a drastic streamlining of the competences and functions of municipalities. Most basic public service institutions (including schools, hospitals, elderly care homes, and cultural and social institutions) were nationalized (Pálné Kovács, 2014). At the same time, the continued centralization of revenues, the reduction or withdrawal of subsidies, and recurring constraints on funding for essential public services – particularly public transport – have placed Budapest under sustained fiscal pressure. These trends have weakened the city's financial stability and reinforced concerns that resource distribution has become increasingly politicized.

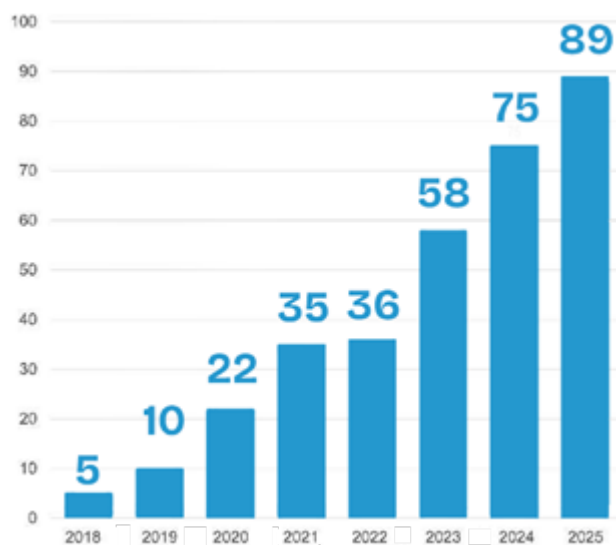
At the same time, government parties primarily supported by the rural population have consistently prioritized rural areas and their populations, while the interests of the capital – dominated by more left-leaning and liberal voters – have generally been considered secondary under a conservative populist leadership (Szabó & Reiff, 2025), even though the

city was governed between 2010 and 2019 by István Tarlós who officially ran as an independent but had the backing of Fidesz.

Since the electoral success of opposition and independent political actors in the 2019 local elections, politically motivated discrimination by the central government has increased markedly (see also Aksztejn et al., 2024; Council of Europe 2020; Ladner et al. 2019). With regard to the capital, the election of Gergely Karácsony – a key candidate with prime ministerial ambitions at the 2018 and 2022 national elections – in 2019 marked a turning point, as Budapest came under opposition leadership while national power remained firmly in the hands of Fidesz. As a result, relations between the capital and the Fidesz-led national government entered a new and markedly strained phase.

A central dimension of this conflict is fiscal. The government has curtailed the city’s financial autonomy through special taxes, the reallocation of municipal revenues, and the reduction of state subsidies – measures that have, at times, pushed Budapest to the edge of solvency. A particularly salient instrument in this regard is the so-called “solidarity contribution”, a central fiscal mechanism requiring wealthier municipalities to transfer resources to the state. While formally redistributive, its rapid escalation has imposed a disproportionate burden on the capital. In 2019, Budapest paid approximately 5 billion HUF under this scheme; by 2025, this amount had risen dramatically to roughly 89 billion HUF (Aradi-Hankó, 2025). This nearly eighteen-fold increase illustrates the extent to which fiscal tools are deployed not only for economic redistribution but also for political leverage, constraining an opposition-led city and reinforcing central control. The government’s measures have involved cutting Budapest’s revenue sources and cancelling previously planned, typically social development projects, as well. Alongside the reduction in budget revenues, the shifting of expenditure burdens onto the city has pushed Budapest to the brink of bankruptcy (Aksztejn et al., 2024).

Figure 1: Amount of the solidarity contribution withdrawn by the government from the capital city, 2018–2025



(Source: Municipality of Budapest: <https://archiv.budapest.hu/Lapok/2023/igyvette-el-a-kormany-a-fovaros-megtakaritasait.aspx>)

At the institutional level, this dynamic reflects a broader pattern of vertical power asymmetry. Although Hungary remains a unitary state with formally recognized municipal competencies, the erosion of fiscal autonomy significantly limits the capacity of local governments to act independently. Budapest thus exemplifies how centralization can be achieved not only through legal reforms but also through financial dependency.

The tension is not only institutional but also deeply ideological. Budapest presents itself as a green, progressive, and pro-European metropolis committed to sustainability, pluralism, and democratic governance. By contrast, the national government’s agenda emphasizes sovereignty, centralization, and cultural conservatism. The result is a profound divergence in values – one that increasingly extends into the sphere of international relations, where Budapest engages with transnational municipal networks and European partners in ways that sometimes counterbalance national policy.

These competing value systems manifest clearly in differing policy priorities. With regard to the European Union, the government has adopted an increasingly Eurosceptic stance, frequently framing EU institutions as constraints on national sovereignty (Hargitai, 2020). In contrast, Budapest’s leadership



is explicitly pro-European, actively aligning the city with EU norms, funding frameworks, and cooperative initiatives.

A similarly sharp divide is visible in the domain of LGBTQ+ rights. The government has pursued restrictive policies, often justified under the rubric of “child protection”, including attempts to limit public events such as Pride. By contrast, Budapest emphasizes the protection of human rights and civil liberties as core governance principles. This divergence became particularly evident in 2025, when the city organized a Pride event as an official municipal initiative, thereby asserting its normative autonomy in opposition to national-level restrictions.

Climate policy constitutes a further axis of conflict. For the national government, environmental considerations often remain secondary to industrial and economic priorities, as illustrated by its support for battery manufacturing investments. Conversely, under Karácsony’s leadership, Budapest has elevated climate change mitigation and sustainability to a central policy objective, pursuing green urban development strategies and aligning with broader European climate goals (J.B. personal communication, April 10, 2024).

Taken together, these dynamics illustrate a deepening cleavage between central and local governance in Hungary. The Budapest–government relationship has moved beyond routine political disagreement to embody a structural and ideational conflict. It reflects broader tensions between centralization and local autonomy, divergent democratic norms, and competing visions of Hungary’s place within Europe. In this sense, Budapest functions not merely as a municipal authority but as a countervailing political and normative pole within the Hungarian political system.

At the same time, one of the most pronounced points of conflict between the central government and the capital can be observed in their differing interpretations of the Russia–Ukraine war and in their responses to the challenges arising from it.

Geopolitical Drivers and the Hungarian Government’s Stance on the Russia–Ukraine Conflict

To understand the controversial position of the Hungarian government led by Viktor Orbán regarding the Russia–Ukraine war, it is necessary to examine the geopolitical drivers behind it.

Geopolitical Determinants of the Hungarian Government’s Stance

Hungary’s policy toward Russia under Orbán has been characterized by pragmatic cooperation, selective alignment, and frequent divergence from the Euro-Atlantic consensus, shaped by geopolitical considerations, economic interests, and energy dependence.

Earlier in his career, Orbán held strongly anti-Russian views, criticizing policies he saw as overly accommodating toward Moscow, especially those of former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány. He argued that Russia and China, despite capitalist economies, remained authoritarian and required cautious engagement (Index, 2007). This perspective shifted after the 2008 global financial crisis, as Orbán interpreted declining U.S. dominance and emphasized a multipolar world in which Russia and China would play larger roles (Direkt36, 2018).

A key turning point was the “Eastern Opening” strategy after 2010, aiming to diversify Hungary’s external relations beyond Western alliances by strengthening ties with Russia and China. In this framework, Russia became a strategic partner rather than an adversary. In a 2014 speech in Băile Tușnad, Orbán announced plans to establish an “illiberal democracy”, citing Russia, China, Turkey, and others as non-Western models of successful governance (Rácz, 2025). This led to intensified political and economic cooperation, including regular meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

A structural driver of this policy is Hungary’s heavy dependence on Russian energy. In 2021, 62% of oil imports came from Russia, rising to 92% by 2025 (Bucsky, 2025). While other Central European countries diversified post-2014, Hungary increased reliance on Russian crude for financial advantages (Rácz, 2025). Similarly, by 2025,

about 70% of Hungary's gas came from Russia, mainly via TurkStream (24.hu, 2025), and the country relies entirely on Russian nuclear fuel for its Paks plant, with two additional reactors financed through Rosatom credit finalized after Russia's full-scale invasion (Göransson, 2026; Rácz, 2025). Historical infrastructure, long-term Gazprom contracts, and pipeline networks such as Druzhba underpin this dependence.

Map: Pipeline routes supplying Russian crude oil and natural gas to Hungary



(Source: own elaboration)

Note: TurkStream/Balkan Stream is a pipeline system running through the Black Sea, through which Russia supplies natural gas to Türkiye and onward to several other European countries, including Hungary.

Hungarian-Ukrainian relations have been tense since 2014, rooted in minority rights, identity politics, and symbolism. Disputes over language and cultural heritage, especially Ukrainian education reforms, were viewed by Hungary as violating the rights of ethnic Hungarians in Transcarpathia and contravening international norms and the 1991 Hungarian–Ukrainian Treaty (Rácz, 2025).

Symbolic incidents, such as the 2022 removal of the Turul statue at Mukachevo, reinforced narratives of Ukrainian insensitivity to Hungarian minorities and hardened Hungary's diplomatic stance (HVG, 2022). These issues, combined with broader geopolitical tensions, explain the government's cautious and critical approach toward Ukraine, framing EU measures such as expanded sanctions, no-fly zones, or arms transfers as potential threats to Hungarian interests (Göransson, 2026).

The Hungarian Government's Stance on the Russia–Ukraine Conflict

Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has followed a foreign policy that often differs from the European Union's common position on Ukraine and sometimes takes Russian interests into account. While Budapest did not initially refrain from condemning Russia's aggression (Index, 2022), Orbán's government quickly began to emphasise the primacy of Hungarian energy security and economic considerations over broader EU strategic objectives, which in turn shaped his government's approach to sanctions, financial aid to Ukraine, and integration policies. By framing his position as a defence of Hungarian national interests – especially in the energy sphere – Orbán slowly built a narrative that implicitly questioned much of the mainstream EU consensus on support for Ukraine and alignment against Moscow.

Orbán's use of veto powers within the European Union has been one of the most tangible expressions of this stance. Throughout 2025 and into 2026, Hungary repeatedly blocked or threatened to block key EU initiatives designed to support Ukraine's economy and further isolate Russia. Among the most contentious of these was the Hungarian veto of a €90 billion EU financial loan package meant to cover Ukraine's budgetary and defence needs (Harmash, 2026). In February 2026, Hungary announced it would block the loan until Russian oil shipments resumed via the Druzhba pipeline, which delivers Russian crude through Ukraine to Hungary and Slovakia and was interrupted after damage from a reported Russian drone attack (Reuters, 2026). Hungarian officials portrayed the stoppage as a politically motivated decision (a claim Kyiv strongly denies) (Komuves & Hovet, 2026), and used it to justify blocking not only the loan but also subsequent sanction packages, a stance that drew sharp criticism from other EU leaders who saw such actions as undermining collective support for Ukraine's defence and economic resilience.

Energy reliance has political consequences. Orbán repeatedly framed cooperation with Russia as essential for national stability rather than ideological alignment (HVG, 2025b). Though formally supporting sanctions, Hungary opposed measures affecting energy imports, arguing that they would harm the economy and energy security (Reuters,

2025). The Druzhba pipeline dispute further illustrates the geopolitical leverage Orbán has wielded in service of his interpretive frame of the war. Rather than unequivocally blaming Russia for the pipeline's damage and the resultant halt in oil transit, Hungarian political rhetoric suggested that Ukraine, EU leaders, and Hungarian domestic opposition forces were colluding politically to harm Hungary's energy interests. This narrative turned a dispute over energy security into a broader justification for blocking EU aid for Ukraine, mixing foreign policy with domestic politics ahead of Hungary's 2026 parliamentary elections.

A similar ambiguity can be observed regarding how Hungary's largest governing party has approached Ukraine's EU membership. In early 2022, shortly after the Russian invasion, Hungary signalled support for Ukraine's closer ties with the European Union, seeing it as a step toward stability and peace (Herczeg, 2025; Ryder, 2022). However, by 2025–2026, Orbán's position had shifted decisively: he openly opposed Ukraine's EU accession, framed it as contrary to Hungarian national interests, and used Hungary's veto power to block progress (Nagy, 2025).

For a notably long period, Orbán did not visit Kyiv in any formal capacity after the outbreak of the war – a fact that Ukrainian and European observers interpreted as symbolic of his diplomatic distance from Kyiv. The Hungarian prime minister's first official visit to Ukraine since the invasion occurred on 2 July 2024, when he travelled to Kyiv to meet President Volodymyr Zelenskyy shortly after Hungary

assumed the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union. On that visit, Orbán proposed a limited ceasefire as a way to accelerate peace negotiations (BBC News, 2024), a suggestion that contrasted with the positions of Kyiv and many other EU capitals, who maintained that peace must be based on Russian withdrawal rather than negotiated ceasefires without conditions. This nearly two and a half year gap before Orbán's first Kyiv trip underscored the longstanding tensions in bilateral relations and signalled how cautious the Hungarian government had been in engaging with Ukraine diplomatically.

Orbán did not initially issue a clear condemnation of the Bucha massacre, instead stressing the need for evidence and investigation; however, following criticism from Jarosław Kaczyński, he later expressed a clearer condemnation of the events (Euronews, 2022; Népszava, 2022).

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has repeatedly questioned Ukraine's sovereignty, claiming that the country could cease to exist without EU financial support and casting doubt on its ability to govern itself (HVG, 2025a). Initially, Orbán clearly held Russia responsible for the war, but during the 2026 election campaign, he increasingly used anti-Ukrainian rhetoric. On his official website, he claimed that the main opposition party, the Tisza Party, was financed from Ukraine (miniszterelnok.hu, 2026). During the election campaign, the country was flooded with Fidesz election posters, which read: 'Let's not allow Zelensky to have the last laugh' (Inkei, 2026). Moreover, he expressed uncertainty about the roles of aggressor and victim in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, questioning who attacked whom (Kolozsi, 2025). This combination of questioning Ukraine's sovereignty and adopting anti-Ukrainian statements during the campaign demonstrates how domestic political considerations have shaped Orbán's discourse on the war.

Despite maintaining an often politically ambivalent stance toward Ukraine's government and the broader conflict, the Hungarian government has consistently provided substantial support to Ukrainian refugees since the outbreak of the Russian invasion. Hungary opened its borders to over one million refugees and provided them with medical care, food, accommodation, education, and free travel across the country (The Budapest Times, 2024; Hungary Today, 2023; 2025). The state also coordinated with the Hungary Helps Program and NGOs such as the Hungarian Orthodox Aid

Service and the Hungarian Red Cross to deliver humanitarian aid in Ukraine and along the border, while issuing temporary residence permits that allow refugees to live, work, and access health and schooling services in Hungary (Hungary Today, 2025; UNHCR, 2024). Government officials publicly framed this assistance as a historic act of solidarity that should not be affected by political disputes with Kyiv, emphasizing that people fleeing violence deserve support regardless of diplomatic tensions (Hungary Today, 2026).

From 2022 to early 2026, these developments show that Orbán's foreign policy has often gone against the EU's main approach to Ukraine. By using veto powers, engaging with Kyiv selectively, and framing EU support as harmful to Hungary, he has slowed EU action for Ukraine and made Hungary a key, sometimes obstructive, player in the Union. This shows the ongoing tension between Hungary's domestic politics and the EU's goal of united support for Ukraine's sovereignty and integration into Europe.

In contrast to the government's interest-based approach, the Budapest Municipality prioritized different considerations in its international engagement concerning Ukraine.

Subnational Diplomacy in Action: Budapest's Independent Response to the Russian–Ukrainian War

Since 2019, Budapest has moved beyond the largely symbolic and protocol-based international engagements that characterized the period under the previous, Fidesz-aligned municipal leadership between 2010 and 2019. As a senior official of the mayor's office emphasized, the personality of the new mayor, Gergely Karácsony, also played a defining role in shaping Budapest's city diplomacy. In contrast to his predecessor, István Tarlós – an engineer by training, who “did not understand the importance of international relations for the city” – Karácsony, a political scientist and sociologist, early on recognized both the diplomatic potential of Budapest and the challenges of globalization and climate change that most directly impact cities, requiring proactive measures (Sz.P. personal communication, March 6, 2026), thereby driving the shift toward a more proactive international engagement.

This recognition proved particularly important in a context of conflictual relations with the national government. At the same time, the city faced financial pressures resulting from punitive actions by the central government, which could only be offset through direct access to European Union funds – a goal facilitated by the launch of the Pact of Free Cities in 2019, initiated by Mayor Gergely Karácsony together with the mayors of Bratislava, Prague, and Warsaw (J.B. personal communication, April 10, 2024; K.J. personal communication, April 10, 2024). Beyond securing resources, this more assertive international engagement has allowed Budapest to articulate its values and policy positions on key global issues, including expressing a clear stance on the Russian–Ukrainian war, demonstrating how subnational diplomacy can serve both pragmatic and principled purposes.

Even prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Budapest had established ties with Ukrainian local actors: Berehove, a town in western Ukraine with a significant Hungarian minority population, has had a formal twinning agreement with Budapest since 2017, encompassing cultural, youth, and sports cooperation. In 2019, then-mayor István Tarlós inaugurated a playground in Berehove signalling the potential for cultural and social cooperation (KISZÓ, 2019). The establishment of this sister-city partnership highlighted that, for the mayor elected with Fidesz support at the time, maintaining connections with Hungarian communities living in territories lost after World War I under the Treaty of Trianon (so-called Hungarian–Hungarian relations, i.e. relationships between Hungary and ethnic Hungarian communities living in neighbouring countries) was a particularly important priority, aligning with the Fidesz-led central government's broader foreign policy agenda (Sz.P. personal communication, March 6, 2026). Between 2017 and 2022, the sister-city relationship, had already involved four visits prior to the outbreak of the war, during which Budapest allocated a total of HUF 27,500,000 to support cultural programmes, as well as the construction of a playground and a sports field, and the renovation of a castle (K.J. personal communication, April 17, 2026).

Following the outbreak of the war in February 2022, these relations intensified and expanded beyond settlements inhabited by the Hungarian-speaking minority, encompassing both solidarity-driven and humanitarian initiatives. The Russian–Ukrainian war further highlighted Budapest's capacity for independent action. While the

national government adopted an ambivalent, sometimes pro-Russian tone, the city leadership took a clear humanitarian stance. According to the Head of the City Diplomacy Unit of Budapest, the decisions taken by the national government vis-à-vis Ukraine and the Ukrainian people, as well as its rhetoric concerning the war, are incompatible with the value-based policy of the city leadership. This is particularly evident in the differences observed in the condemnation of Russian aggression and in the expression of solidarity with Ukraine, as well as with refugees and Ukrainian communities (K.J. personal communication, April 17, 2026).

Beyond ideological differences, one concrete area through which the practical consequences of the conflictual relationship between the national government and the Municipality of Budapest can be observed is the provision of assistance to refugees arriving in Hungary. According to the Head of the City Diplomacy unit of Budapest, the shortcomings of this provision can be traced, among other factors, to the government's generally anti-refugee measures, increasing centralization, and the resulting lack of coordination. As a consequence, a significant share of the responsibility for providing assistance has fallen on local governments and civil society organizations (Feischmidt et al., 2024). In part as a result of these challenges, the Budapest Helps! information and community centre was established through the cooperation of the Municipality of Budapest, UNHCR, and International Organization for Migration (IOM) (K.J. personal communication, April 17, 2026).

Budapest provided accommodation and targeted support for Ukrainian refugees, including ethnic Hungarians from Transcarpathia, thereby complementing and, at times, compensating for the limitations of national relief mechanisms. A key instrument of humanitarian engagement has been the Budapest Helps! initiative. The program provides unconditional cash assistance to refugee families from Ukraine, offering a one-off payment for each child or pregnant household member to help cover basic needs such as food, clothing, hygiene items, education, and health-related expenses, with many households reporting spending most of the funds on essential items within weeks of receipt (UNICEF, 2024; Budapest Helps, n.d.). In addition to cash support, Budapest Helps! offers information and accommodation services, including temporary shelter placements in municipal facilities and access to public transport free of charge for refugees, facilitating mobility and stability for families arriving

in the city (Budapest Helps, n.d.).

The Head of the City Diplomacy Unit of Budapest emphasized also that, since 2019, in part as a result of government policies and the withdrawal of funding, the Municipality of Budapest has been in a severely constrained financial position. Consequently, the city's capacity to allocate resources for charitable purposes has been significantly limited. Although Budapest seeks to provide financial and material assistance in line with local needs, these efforts cannot always be fully realised due to these financial constraints (K.J. personal communication, April 17, 2026). This clearly demonstrates how difficult it is to provide humanitarian assistance in a context of conflict between the two levels of governance.

Beyond the aforementioned provision of assistance, bilateral meetings with the Ukrainian side also carried symbolic significance. In September 2022, Karácsony met with Vitali Klitschko in Prague, and in November, Budapest delivered humanitarian aid to Kyiv (Őri, 2022). In December 2022, Kyiv formally joined the Pact of Free Cities, strengthening the multilateral cooperation framework that Budapest had helped to initiate.

A symbolic moment came on 11 January 2023, when Mayor Gergely Karácsony and his counterparts Rafał Trzaskowski (Warsaw), Matúš Vallo (Bratislava), and Zdeněk Hřib (Prague) – the founding mayors of the Pact of Free Cities – visited Kyiv to meet with Mayor Vitali Klitschko (Brucker, 2023). Karácsony's public message drew a sharp contrast with Budapest's national government:

Budapest stands with Ukraine. The Hungarian government is not the same as Hungary. While the government speaks of peace, it omits what is self-evident – that peace is only possible if Ukraine's war efforts succeed, if its territorial sovereignty is restored, and if Russian troops leave Ukrainian soil (Index, 2023).

In his critique, the mayor emphasized also that the Hungarian government often acts in accordance with the interests of the war's aggressor, President Vladimir Putin. This visit was particularly notable because, since the outbreak of the war, Karácsony was the first high-ranking Hungarian political figure to pay a visit to Kyiv, highlighting the capital's proactive city diplomacy.

The delegation also visited Bucha as part of this visit, reinforcing Budapest's moral and political solidarity with Ukraine and illustrating how subnational actors can engage independently in diplomacy and humanitarian action (Index, 2023).

Although Karácsony faced criticism from ruling party politicians for visiting Kyiv instead of predominantly Hungarian-populated towns early in his term (Magyar Nemzet, 2023), the mayor soon travelled to Budapest's sister city of Berehove as well. In early February 2023, at the invitation of Berehove's mayor Zoltán Babják, he delivered Budapest's municipal aid – including HUF 20 million in rapid assistance, technical equipment, and durable food supplies requested by the local partner – to support the city's humanitarian needs (Szurovecz, 2023). In July 2023, Karácsony visited Berehove again and presented the mayor of the town, Babják with a rivet from Budapest's Chain Bridge as a personal gift expressing solidarity between the two cities. During this visit, he also announced that the city would auction 14 of the Chain Bridge's old lamp columns and use the proceeds to support Berehove, framing the sold artefacts as continuing to “serve as a bridge between Hungarians in the motherland and those in Transcarpathia, as well as between Hungarians and Ukrainians” (Iván-Nagy, 2023). Following this, Karácsony continued to make visits to Ukraine, and the capital also provided assistance to Ukraine on multiple occasions during the war.

In total, Mayor Karácsony and/or representatives of the municipal administration carried out three additional visits to Berehove, bringing the total number of visits to five, primarily for the delivery of donations and participation in events expressing solidarity. Following the large-scale Russian aggression, Budapest provided financial assistance amounting to HUF 33,250,000 to Berehove as emergency aid, as well as for hospital renovations and the implementation of cultural programmes. Material donations were also delivered, including power generators, water transport vehicles, buses, a cherry picker truck, drying and washing machines, and lighting equipment (K.J. personal communication, April 17, 2026). These developments, compared to the 2017–2022 period, indicate that the sister-city relationship intensified following the outbreak of the war, with both the scale and nature of financial and material support adapting to changing local needs. This demonstrates the important role that sister-city relationships can play in humanitarian assistance. The Budapest–Berehove

partnership has thus evolved from a primarily symbolic and cultural form of cooperation to a stage involving tangible, concrete support, including financial and material aid.

The Head of the City Diplomacy Department emphasized that: “The Embassy of Ukraine in Hungary, as well as the Consulate General of Hungary in Berehove, readily provided assistance in delivering the donations to Ukrainian municipalities. No coordination took place with the government in this matter.” (K.J. personal communication, April 17, 2026). The lack of coordination between the central government and the city is likely also explained by the fact that since 2019, inquiries from City Hall have only rarely received responses from the central government (J.B. personal communication, April 10, 2024).

District-level city diplomacy also played a role: Ferencváros, a district of Budapest under opposition leadership concluded a twinning agreement with Bucha in December 2022, shortly after the Bucha massacre. The selection of Bucha as a partner city was a deliberate act of solidarity, reflecting the opposition-led district's commitment to humanitarian support and critique of the national government's ambiguous Ukraine policy. The visit provided an opportunity for Bucha's mayor to articulate implicit criticism of the Hungarian government's Ukraine policy, while expressing gratitude for the support of the capital and its residents (Nagy, 2022).

The most significant expression of support for Ukraine came on 22 February 2026, when Gergely Karácsony spoke at a commemoration marking the fourth anniversary of the outbreak of the war, held in the presence of Sándor Fegyir, Ukraine's ambassador to Budapest of Hungarian minority background. On this occasion, Karácsony issued a public apology to Ukraine for the Hungarian government's anti-Ukrainian stance, stating:

It is very important that we stand by our Ukrainian friends, who are not only fighting for their own freedom, but also for the possibility of a just peace in Europe. This is a fundamental national interest. Fidesz is running a propaganda campaign on an issue that affects all of Europe and Hungary – this is a disgrace (Kiss, 2026).

In addition, the capital marked the anniversary by illuminating the Chain Bridge in the colours of the Ukrainian flag.

The case of Budapest thus illustrates that cities in international politics are not merely economic or technical actors, but can also function as active political and humanitarian agents. Through its solidarity with Ukraine, its network of sister-city and district-level partnerships, and the support provided via the Budapest Helps! program, the capital integrates humanitarian assistance, political signalling, and symbolic diplomatic gestures. In doing so, Budapest has emerged as a representative example of the autonomous and proactive role of subnational actors in international relations.

Conclusion

The analysis of Budapest's international engagement during the Russian–Ukrainian war illustrates that municipal governments can exercise a notable degree of independent diplomatic agency, even in a highly centralized and illiberal political environment. Despite systematic fiscal constraints, legal limitations, and ideological opposition from the national government, Budapest has leveraged its subnational autonomy, EU funding mechanisms, and international networks to act on humanitarian, normative, and political fronts. This suggests that, while centralization restricts formal authority and financial autonomy, municipalities can still pursue parallel or complementary foreign policy objectives. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that the mayor's personal openness to and engagement with international issues has been a decisive factor: without such a proactive leadership approach, it is highly unlikely that the city would have developed such a pronounced and visible international role. (H1)

Budapest's engagement with Ukrainian municipalities highlights the normative and symbolic dimensions of subnational diplomacy. Through sister-city partnerships, district-level twinning agreements, and the Budapest Helps! program, the capital city combined direct humanitarian assistance with public demonstrations of solidarity, moral support, and political messaging. Symbolic actions – such as presenting rivets from the Chain Bridge, publicly apologizing for national government rhetoric, and illuminating landmarks in the colours of the Ukrainian flag – reinforced the city's normative stance and signalled a commitment to democracy, human rights, and European integration. At the same time, this form of symbolic agency should not be conflated with

structural agency: while it can shape narratives, express values, and influence international perceptions, it does not substitute for the material resources, formal competences, and decision-making authority required for sustained policy impact. These initiatives therefore illustrate how cities can deploy both practical and symbolic tools to project values, even when their structural capacity remains constrained by domestic political opposition. (H2)

Finally, the Budapest case reveals both the limits and opportunities of paradiplomacy in hybrid political systems. Although legal constraints and financial dependence restrict municipal action, the city's experience demonstrates that local governments can still exercise a degree of autonomy through international networks, municipal partnerships, and symbolic diplomacy. Budapest's active engagement suggests that city diplomacy can go beyond merely complementing national foreign policy by shaping international agendas, promoting values, and responding to urgent humanitarian needs. At the same time, these efforts remain contingent on leadership, external partnerships, and the management of domestic political pressures. In this context, the illiberal political environment, despite its constraining nature, can also act as a catalyst, prompting Budapest to assume a more pronounced international role. However, such initiatives remain limited in scope and sustainability, as financial constraints hinder the city's ability to provide consistent material support at a level that would fully meet local needs. (H3)

In sum, Budapest exemplifies the growing strategic significance of cities in a multipolar and interconnected world. Its independent actions during the Russian–Ukrainian war reveal that municipal governments, even under illiberal central authorities, can advance humanitarian, normative, and political objectives, acting in ways that influence both local and international governance.

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