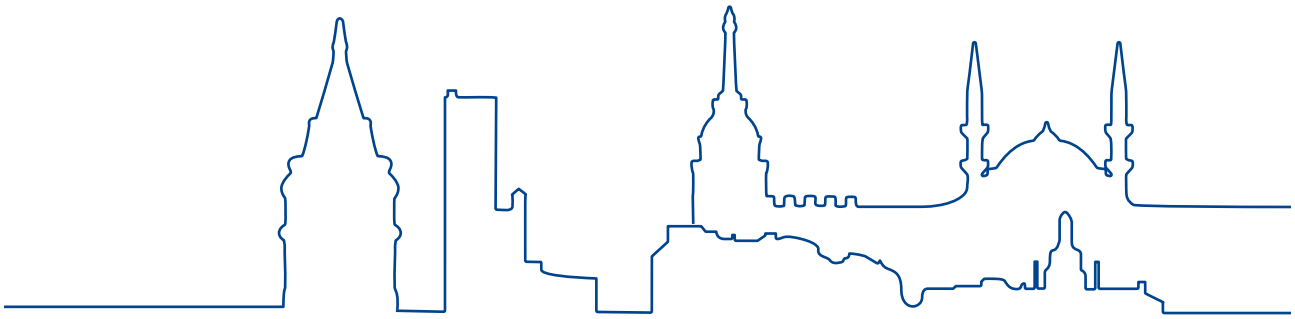


IPC–MERCATOR ANALYSIS July 2025

URBAN ALLIANCES BEYOND BORDERS: ISTANBUL–BERLIN CITY DIPLOMACY

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Executive Summary

In the age of globalization, cities are increasingly behaving as semi-autonomous actors tackling global challenges through diplomatic action. This analysis explores city diplomacy between Istanbul and Berlin, highlighting how these cities maintain and deepen transnational cooperation despite national tensions. The Istanbul–Berlin partnership functions not merely as a diplomatic backchannel but as a laboratory for innovative, value-driven urban governance, demonstrating how cities can advance sustainable development while challenging national limitations. Istanbul's approach to city diplomacy is strategic and multilayered, utilizing global networks and bilateral partnerships. Berlin's diplomacy, benefiting from Germany's federal system, blends technical cooperation with normative agendas. Supported by third-party actors, the partnership demonstrates how city diplomacy can function as a channel of international engagement even when national frameworks falter, providing a compelling model of urban resilience and agency.

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1. Introduction

In the age of globalization, cities increasingly transcend their limited administrative roles within nation-states.[1] They now stand as semi-autonomous actors in international politics, tackling global challenges like climate change, inequality, migration, and democratic backsliding through innovative transnational cooperation. This evolution has given rise to city diplomacy—a practice through which cities establish international relationships, articulate their interests abroad, and collaborate on shared problems.[2] City diplomacy encompasses communication and engagement strategies that enable cities to operate as global players in their own right, surpassing national frameworks.

With more than half the world's population now living in urban areas,[3] city diplomacy is becoming increasingly significant and multi-dimensional—diversifying participants, issue areas, and institutional formats.[4] Cities forge alliances through formal networks, bilateral partnerships, and informal exchanges—sometimes aligning with national agendas and other times deliberately diverging from them.

This analysis examines the approaches of Istanbul and Berlin to city diplomacy—two metropolitan centers engaging internationally from distinctly different political contexts. Against a backdrop of state-level transactionalism, Turkey's stalled EU accession process, and broader democratic regression, the Istanbul–Berlin partnership demonstrates how municipal actors can maintain and even deepen transnational cooperation despite national tensions. Based on elite interviews with municipal officials in both cities and representatives from international institutions like Eurocities and GMF Cities (conducted between November 2024 and March 2025), we argue that this relationship functions not merely as a diplomatic backchannel but as a laboratory for innovative, value-driven urban governance. Through peer learning, mutual support, and symbolic alignment, Istanbul and Berlin show how city diplomacy can advance sustainable urban development while simultaneously challenging or compensating for the limitations imposed by national politics.

2. Istanbul's City Diplomacy: Strategic Engagement and Relational Capital

As a historically significant metropolis bridging continents, Istanbul has long been positioned within international political and cultural networks. Over the past two decades, the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (*İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi*, IBB) has progressively expanded its external relations capacity, evolving from occasional sister-city activities to a more structured and strategic model of city diplomacy.[5] Since the early 2000s, particularly under Mayor Kadir Topbaş (2004–2017), IBB's international engagement primarily emphasized business relations and the attraction of foreign investment,[6] aligning with the central government's focus on rapid urbanization and infrastructural development.

This trajectory shifted markedly in 2019 with a change in political leadership, placing new emphasis on institution-building, value-based governance, and transnational cooperation.[7] Under this new administration, IBB's Foreign Relations Department underwent significant enhancement, reflecting the municipality's growing ambitions for city diplomacy as a means to tackle global issues and to manage an increasingly complex national-international interface. Under Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, the municipality's approach

reflects a broader institutional commitment to proactive, multilayered diplomacy. As municipal officials emphasized in interviews, IBB's vision is "not only West-facing, but regionally inclusive," encompassing dialogue with cities across the Middle East, Asia, the Balkans, and Europe.

Today, IBB actively participates in key global city networks such as the Climate Leadership Group (C40), the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy (GCoM), Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI), and Eurocities, using these platforms to exchange best practices on climate adaptation, mobility, and participatory governance. In 2023, it convened the Megacities Summit—bringing together large urban centers to advocate for greater representation in global forums[8]—and spearheaded the establishment of the B40 Network, aimed at fostering solidarity and policy exchange among Balkan cities.[9] While most of these partnerships focus on technical cooperation, such as providing feedback on the IBB's decarbonization strategy,[10] the Eurocities network, for instance, has also provided İmamoğlu with political support in the face of prison sentences on corruption charges.[11]

Beyond multilateralism, IBB maintains an extensive network of bilateral partnerships, with 41 formal sister cities as of 2023,[12] including Berlin and Cologne. When including Istanbul's 39 district municipalities, the number of sister cities amounts to 286 connections in 74 countries.[13] While some of these relationships remain largely symbolic, others have generated tangible cooperation, often supported by European civil society organizations or technical agencies that help implement projects.[14] As part of its international commitments, Istanbul also engages in crisis diplomacy and, for instance, has provided humanitarian assistance to its Ukrainian sister city, Odessa.[15]

Crucially, IBB's approach to city diplomacy is shaped by both normative commitments and pragmatic considerations. According to municipal officials, external partnerships offer important opportunities to engage with shared urban challenges, exchange expertise, and access complementary resources—particularly in areas where local governments may face administrative or financial limitations. In this context, international visibility and participation in transnational networks are seen as valuable assets that help strengthen institutional capacity, broaden technical collaboration, and support long-term governance goals.

While mayoral leadership has facilitated this strategic opening, the growing influence of professionalized municipal staff; planning institutions like the Istanbul Planning Agency (IPA); the establishment of new platforms like foreign policy advisor positions to the mayor, which complement the existing Foreign Affairs Department; and the development of long-term strategic frameworks, all indicate that the IBB's approach to city diplomacy is becoming increasingly institutionalized. Its focus on participatory, inclusive, and resilient urban governance positions it as a distinctive actor within European and global urban networks—not merely as a partner, but as a policy entrepreneur in its own right.

3. Berlin: Continuity, Inclusion, and Federated Advantage

In contrast to Istanbul's constrained political landscape, Berlin benefits from the enabling structures of Germany's federal system, which grants municipalities considerable autonomy in international cooperation.[16] As both a city-state and national capital, Berlin occupies a unique position that combines symbolic visibility with

institutional continuity. Its historical legacy—as a formerly divided city and a hub of democratic reconstruction—continues to shape its outward-facing urban identity.

According to officials interviewed, Berlin's city diplomacy operates through a multi-layered structure comprising expert-level exchanges on urban policy challenges led by Senate departments and their international units; a civil society dimension driven by people-to-people initiatives, with the Senate Chancellery offering limited support; and a political layer involving strategic mayoral engagement, where the Chancellery functions as Berlin's de facto foreign ministry, managing high-level external relations.

Berlin can be regarded as the (multi-)cultural and political center of Germany, making it a pioneering actor in city diplomacy on many levels. Berlin's approach to city diplomacy is simultaneously technocratic and normative. On one hand, it pursues knowledge exchange and technical cooperation in key policy areas such as sustainable transportation, climate justice, digital governance, and administrative modernization. On the other hand, Berlin's "City of Freedom" narrative plays a central role in its international positioning, drawing on the symbolic legacy of the Berlin Wall and the notion that freedom must be actively defended, while also reflecting the city's contemporary identity as an exceptionally liberal and culturally vibrant metropolis—home to a thriving arts scene, subcultural diversity, and a significant community of exiled human rights defenders and political dissidents who reinforce its global image as a refuge for freedom. Berlin actively promotes rights-based agendas as part of humanitarian diplomacy, including the integration of migrants and LGBTQ+ communities. Berlin's reception model for LGBTQ+ refugees, developed in coordination with civil society and municipal social services, is widely regarded as a benchmark among European cities.

Currently, Berlin has 18 sister cities[17] and participates in a variety of international city networks, among them Eurocities, ICLEI, and C40.[18] Officials emphasized the city's active engagement in bilateral partnerships, especially those that foster mutual learning and democratic innovation.[19]

Berlin's recent city-level cooperation programs include digital roundtables on developing participatory structures in local administrations and smart city workshops on data governance.[20] Many of these initiatives have been facilitated by German civil society organizations and semi-public institutions such as Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), which have helped to sustain communication channels during times of political volatility at the national level. Additional third-party actors, such as universities and business associations, are occasionally involved as project partners and providers of expertise.

Berlin's capacity to speak with both technical credibility and normative clarity, backed by a federated political system and stable institutional infrastructure, has established it as a model of metropolitan diplomacy in Europe.

4. Istanbul–Berlin Cooperation: Anchored Interests and Urban Diplomacy in Action

Cooperation between Istanbul and Berlin stands out among inter-municipal partnerships due to its strategic depth, multi-level structure, and continuity across shifting political landscapes. While grounded in a formal sister-city relationship established in 1989, the partnership has gained

renewed significance in recent years, driven by a convergence of institutional interests, shared urban challenges, and complementary capacities. Interviews with municipal officials in both cities highlight that this cooperation has evolved into a channel for joint learning and symbolic alignment—particularly valuable in the context of limited intergovernmental dialogue between Turkey and the EU.

According to interviews in Berlin, the 2019 local elections, which brought the Republican People's Party (CHP) candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu to power in Istanbul, were widely seen as a key opportunity to revive and deepen the partnership, leveraging the already strong civil society connections between the two cities. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic hindered early efforts to re-establish political dialogue, primarily due to the lack of in-person mayoral meetings—an element regarded as vital for effective high-level cooperation. This dynamic began to shift recently, and meetings between the mayors in June and November 2024 laid the groundwork for organizing a bilateral summit, signaling renewed political commitment and a strengthening of institutional ties.

For the IBB, Berlin represents a priority partner for three main reasons: the large and politically engaged Turkish diaspora living in the city, Berlin's influence within EU political and municipal networks, and its role as a norm-setter in partnerships with Germany. IBB officials emphasized that this relationship is viewed not only as a strategic link to European municipal diplomacy but also as a valuable source of peer learning, especially in areas related to governance, innovation, and inclusive policymaking.

What sets apart Berlin's engagement with Istanbul is its multi-layered diplomatic environment, cultivated by Berlin officials connected to Turkey, and the proximity of Turkey-related civil society organizations contributing to a strengthened partnership. Ahead of Turkey's 2024 local elections, several Berlin officials voiced their support for continued cooperation with Istanbul and implicitly suggested that a change in municipal leadership could jeopardize the progress achieved. Following Mayor İmamoğlu's re-election, Aydın and Aksoy noted that "the opportunity to deepen and intensify German–Turkish cooperation at the municipal level is favorable"—indicating a desire to strengthen ties despite the uncertainties posed by broader diplomatic tensions.[21] Similar arguments were raised by a Berlin city officer as a reference to role of the leadership in fostering relations.

From Berlin's perspective, the Istanbul partnership offers an impactful example of multifaceted international cooperation. Berlin's municipal authorities have facilitated and supported the partnership both at the citywide and district level. As of 2025, three Berlin districts have formalized sister-city agreements with their Istanbul counterparts, with a fourth currently under negotiation. Officials noted that these decentral ties often provide a more stable and pragmatic foundation for cooperation than high-level national channels, particularly when national relations are strained.

On the operational side, Istanbul and Berlin have engaged in smart city exchanges, including collaboration on data governance frameworks. However, while the Berlin–Istanbul partnership holds significant potential, expert-level collaboration remains limited and is described as "underdeveloped" by Berlin officials. Previous exchanges—such as those on smart city initiatives and open data—were initially promising but lacked continuity. Although there has been interest in sharing experiences on migration, particularly regarding Ukrainian refugees, structural differences and public sensi-

tivities have made this a difficult area for Istanbul to engage in. Economy remains a modest area of cooperation, while ecology and sustainability are emerging as future fields of interest.

Past challenges in Berlin–Istanbul relations centered on the difficulty of establishing working contacts within Istanbul's administration. This situation has significantly improved, with both sides now enjoying trustful, productive dialogue. However, a potential future challenge lies in the imbalance of institutional capacity. Istanbul's international affairs team is larger and more resourceful than Berlin's, raising concerns about Berlin's ability to reciprocate initiatives at the same scale—particularly in organizing high-profile events like summits. This asymmetry may complicate future cooperation if not addressed proactively. On the other hand, combative relations vis-à-vis the central government severely affect the capacities of oppositional municipalities in Turkey and create an environment of uncertainty (not only) with regard to international cooperation.

These developments reflect a pragmatic and multi-scalar partnership, built not only on shared interests but also on active institutional engagement. Third-party actors such as GIZ and the Mercator Foundation have played a facilitative role in many joint projects, reinforcing the technical and dialogic foundations of the cooperation. The partnership is thus sustained by both political will and administrative capacity on both sides, demonstrating how city diplomacy can function as a stable channel of international engagement even when national-level frameworks falter. In addition, the Istanbul-Berlin partnership—though asymmetrical in resources and institutional context—demonstrates how city diplomacy can persist and even flourish across different regime types when built on shared urban challenges, mutual respect, and long-term engagement.

5. Conclusion

The evolving partnership between Istanbul and Berlin illustrates how city diplomacy can function as both a strategic mechanism and a normative signal in an increasingly fragmented geopolitical environment. Despite significant asymmetries in institutional freedom, political context, and access to resources, the two municipalities have developed a functional, multi-layered relationship that reflects the growing importance of cities as international actors.

In Istanbul's case, city diplomacy emerges not only as a tool for policy innovation and global visibility but also as a strategic instrument for functioning amid restricted political conditions. Through international networks and targeted partnerships—most notably with Berlin—IBB has sought to secure international financial support, gain technical expertise, and enhance its legitimacy by fostering a governance narrative grounded in democratic participation and inclusive urban development. For Berlin, the partnership affirms its long-standing commitment to horizontal diplomacy, decentralized cooperation, and engagement beyond the EU's institutional core. Its willingness to sustain and even politicize the relationship during critical moments underscores the city's normative stance in supporting peer municipalities facing democratic challenges.

Crucially, this cooperation has transcended ceremonial exchanges. It has produced concrete, ongoing collaborations—from smart city dialogues and diaspora engagement platforms to district-level agreements and cultural exchange programs—that are embedded within institutional frameworks. Participation in transnational city networks provides both cities with access to joint learning platforms, project-based funding opportunities, and venues for global advocacy.

Networks such as Eurocities and GMF Cities play a crucial mediating role in bilateral city relationships by structuring dialogue, enabling knowledge exchange, and promoting collaborative action. The involvement of intermediary actors, such as planning agencies and civil society organizations, further reinforces the durability of the bilateral relationship beyond electoral cycles or national-level turbulence.

As national politics grow increasingly volatile, the Istanbul–Berlin case provides a compelling model of urban resilience and agency. It demonstrates that municipal actors can build and sustain meaningful international partnerships grounded in shared policy priorities, mutual respect, and adaptive institutional design. In contexts where national diplomacy is ineffective in fostering cooperation on common issues, city diplomacy offers an alternative pathway—one that is locally anchored, globally aware, and increasingly consequential for international relations.

Note: *This study was completed in March 2025. Following the political developments since March 2025, including the legal proceedings involving Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, it has yet to be seen whether the Berlin-Istanbul relationship can be sustained, despite the discontinuation of municipality personnel, through institutionalized forms of cooperation.*

Notes

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4 | Emma Lecavalier and David J. Gordon, "Beyond networking? The agency of city network secretariats in the realm of city diplomacy," in *City Diplomacy: Current Trends and Future Prospects*, ed. Sohaela Amiri and Efe Sevin (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2020), 16.

5 | Salih Batal and Volkan Topcu, "Yerel Yönetimlerde Uluslararası İlişkiler Faaliyetleri: Istanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi Üzerine Bir İnceleme," *Avrasya Uluslararası Araştırmalar Dergisi* 7, no. 19 (2019): 341.

6 | Burcu Gultekin Punsmann, "City Diplomacy and Istanbul," *Turkish Review* 1 (2013): 390 f.

7 | Birgül Demirtaş, "Analysis of City Diplomacy in De-Democratizing States: The Case of Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality," In *Reclaiming Democracy in Cities*, ed. Coşkun, İnal-Çekiç and Tombuş (Routledge, 2024): 238-240.

8 | "Co-Chairs' Statement," Mega Cities Summit, accessed May 21, 2025, https://megacities-summit.org/

9 | Next to cultural ties, the network aims to strengthen collaboration between Balkan cities in areas such as climate action, smart cities, digital transformation, urban democracy, migration, and economic cooperation through goodwill protocols. See: "About B40," B40, https://b40network.org/v2/about-b40/; "Istanbul," B40, https://b40network.org/v2/portfolio-item/istanbul/, both accessed May 21, 2025.

10 | "Building climate neutral cities: Neutralpath Capacity Building Programme," Eurocities, accessed May 21, 2025, https://eurocities.eu/latest/building-climate-neutral-cities-neutralpath-capacity-building-programme/.

11 | Visible in issued statements and symbolic gatherings in Istanbul; "Democratic values at stake in Istanbul," Eurocities, accessed May 21, 2025, https://eurocities.eu/latest/democratic-values-at-stake-in-istanbul/; "Cities gather in Istanbul for democracy," Eurocities, accessed May 21, 2025, https://eurocities.eu/latest/cities-gather-in-istanbul-for-democracy/.

12 | Berna Aksoy Özcan, "The City Diplomacy and Istanbul's Capacity for City Diplomacy," *Kent Akademisi* 16 no. 3 (2023): 1942, https://doi.org/10.35674/kent.1321910.

13 | Arda Bay and Vedat Çalışkan, "National and international sister city relationships of İstanbul: Determinative factors and characteristics of spatial distribution," in *1st Istanbul International Geography Congress Proceedings Book*, ed. Gönençgil, Ertek, Akova and Elbaşı (Istanbul University Press, 2019): 104, https://doi.org/10.26650/PB/PS12.2019.002.011.

14 | For instance, the RESLOG (Resilience in Local Governance) project in Turkey (2018–2021) aimed to strengthen the migration management capacity of local governments in Istanbul

and Turkey. See: Bürge Elvan Erginli and Itır Akdoğan, "Belediyelerde Göç Veri Yönetimi Ve Veriye Dayalı Karar Alma Politika Raporu," RESLOG (2024): 13, accessed May 21, 2025, https://www.tesev.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/rapor_belediyelerde_goc_veri_yonetimi.pdf. At the district level, the municipality of Sisli stands out through its cooperation with various European NGOs in the area of protection for marginalized groups. See Seda Rass-Turgut, *Policy Change im lokalen Migrationsregime der Türkei* (Nomos, 2024), 250.

15 | "In a significant gesture of solidarity, #Istanbul has donated 10 buses to #Odessa to support their public transport system amid ongoing conflict," @imamoglu_int, accessed May 21, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/C-LBdaOTGeA/?img_index=4.

16 | United Nations Human Settlements Programme, *World Cities Report 2024: Cities and Climate Action* (UN-Habitat, 2024), 191, accessed May 21, 2025, https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2024/11/wcr2024_-_full_report.pdf#page=191.

17 | "City Diplomacy," The Governing Mayor - Senate Chancellery, https://www.berlin.de/rbmskzl/en/international-relations/city-partnerships/.

18 | "Networks," Senate Department for Urban Mobility, Transport, Climate Action and the Environment, accessed May 21, 2025, https://www.berlin.de/sen/uvk/ueber-uns/eu-und-internationales/netzwerke/.

19 | See also: "Strategies and Goals," The Governing Mayor - Senate Chancellery, accessed May 21, 2025, https://www.berlin.de/rbmskzl/en/international-relations/strategies-and-goals/.

20 | "Schriftliche Anfrage des Abgeordneten Orkan Özdemir (SPD)," Berlin House of Representatives, accessed May 21, 2025, https://pardok.parlament-berlin.de/starweb/adis/citat/VT/19/SchrAnfr/S19-19104.pdf#page=8

21 | Hürcan Aslı Aksoy and Yaşar Aydın, "Kommunalwahlen in der Türkei: Neue Freiräume und deutsch-türkische Kooperationsfelder," *SWP-Aktuell,* no. 25 (2024): 8, author's own translation, accessed May 21, 2025, https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2024A25/.

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The Istanbul Policy Center–Sabancı University–Stiftung Mercator Initiative aims to strengthen the academic, political, and social ties between Turkey and Germany as well as Turkey and Europe. The Initiative is based on the premise that the acquisition of knowledge and the exchange of people and ideas are preconditions for meeting the challenges of an increasingly globalized world in the 21st century. The Initiative focuses on two areas of cooperation, EU/German-Turkish relations and climate change, which are of essential importance for the future of Turkey and Germany within a larger European and global context.

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