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Chapter 30

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PARADIPLOMACY IN GERMANY*

Joanna Ciesielska-Klikowska

Introduction

Paradiplomacy in Germany has developed into an essential dimension of the country's foreign relations, with its subnational governments, particularly the federal states and the municipalities, playing an active role in international engagement. With its deep-rooted tradition of decentralization, the federal system has enabled an active interaction between national and subnational actors in international relations. The growing complexity of global governance and the increasing role of cities and regions on the world stage have further expanded the scope of paradiplomatic activities in Germany.

This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms, challenges, and future trends of paradiplomacy in Germany. It seeks to examine how subnational governments steer their international activities within the legal and institutional constraints of the federal system. The research addresses several key questions: How has paradiplomacy evolved in Germany in recent decades? How does federalism shape the scope and nature of paradiplomatic engagements? Finally, what are the main drivers and constraints influencing the foreign relations of regions and municipalities?

This chapter is structured into several sections. First, it presents an overview of the state of paradiplomacy studies in Germany. Second, it examines the legal and institutional framework that defines the scope of subnational engagement in international affairs, highlighting the constitutional provisions and agreements that regulate paradiplomatic activities. Third, it explores the historical evolution of German paradiplomacy, tracing its development from the post-World War II period to the present. Fourth, the chapter discusses city diplomacy, focusing on the growing role of German municipalities in urban international cooperation. Finally, it evaluates the challenges that hinder the effective implementation of paradiplomacy and assesses likely future trends, including areas where paradiplomatic activities are expected to expand or decline.

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Conceptualizing Paradiplomacy in Germany

The German scholarly discourse on the international engagement of local and regional governments has introduced a variety of terminologies to describe this phenomenon. Although the term “paradiplomacy” itself is not commonly found in German literature, scholars have analyzed cross-border activities of municipal and regional authorities under different conceptual frameworks. Ernst-Andreas Ziegler employs terms such as “municipal and regional foreign policy” (Germ. *kommunale und regionale Außenpolitik*), “foreign policy of the Länder conducted alongside governmental policy” (Germ. *Nebenaußenpolitik der Länder*), and even “bypass for the foreign policy of the federal government” (Germ. *By-Passing der Außenpolitik*) (Ziegler, 1992), while Albert Statz and Charlotte Wohlfahrt refer to municipal activities as “city diplomacy” (Germ. *Städtediplomatie*) (Statz & Wohlfahrt, 2010). These descriptions highlight how subnational actors maneuver within and sometimes beyond the constraints imposed by the federal government to shape their international engagements and agreements.

The academic debate on German paradiplomacy has led to diverse theoretical approaches explaining its scope and implications. One of the earliest comparative studies of regional international engagement was conducted by Hans J. Michelmann and Panayotis Soldatos, who examined the role of regions in democratic federal states, including Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and the United States. Their work assessed the impact of paradiplomatic activities on national foreign policies (Michelmann & Soldatos, 1991). More recently, Rainer J. Schweizer and Stephan C. Brunner have compared the competencies of states in Germany and Austria, examining their functions within the framework of the European Union (Schweizer & Brunner, 1998). Additionally, Rudolf Hrbek has explored the role of German regions and the upper chamber of parliament – *Bundesrat* – in shaping the country’s foreign policy (Hrbek, 2017), while Christian Athenstaedt has examined the complex distribution of competences between different levels of government in international cooperation (Athenstaedt, 2011). Meanwhile, Albert Statz and Charlotte Wohlfahrt, as well as Andreas Langenohl, have contributed to discussions on town twinning initiatives, emphasizing their evolution from personal exchanges to strategic instruments of international cooperation (Langenohl, 2015; Statz & Wohlfahrt, 2010).

As noted by Michelmann, one of the defining characteristics of Germany’s paradiplomatic activities is their complementary nature. Rather than seeking to replace or challenge the federal government’s prerogatives in foreign policy, regional and local actors function within a cooperative framework, reinforcing national objectives while pursuing their own interests (Michelmann, 1988). This collaborative dynamic aligns with Soldatos’ classification of federal states, wherein Germany exemplifies a cooperative-coordinated model of paradiplomacy (Soldatos, 1990). In this model, regional governments actively participate in international relations within a structure that maintains formal or informal coordination with the national government. Also, Jorge Schiavon describes Germany within a model of inclusive federalism, where the states actively engage in international relations while maintaining alignment with national objectives (Schiavon, 2018).

Germany’s inclusivity in allowing subnational units to engage in international affairs distinguishes it as a federal system that embraces paradiplomacy as an extension of its governance model. The states and municipalities not only engage in cross-border cooperation but also contribute to shaping Germany’s broader diplomatic strategies. Consequently, German paradiplomacy has had predominantly positive effects, enhancing the country’s international standing, fostering regional development, and democratizing foreign policymaking by incorporating diverse perspectives from subnational actors (Leonardy, 1999; Panara, 2010; Jeffery & Yates, 1992).

Legal Framework for Bundesländer Activities

The Federal Republic is composed of 16 federal states (Germ.: *Bundesländer*, short: *Länder*). Three of these - Berlin, Bremen, and Hamburg - are designated as city-states (Germ.: *Stadtstaaten*), holding both municipal and state status. At the same time, the remaining 13 are referred to as area states (Germ. *Flächenländer*). Each state operates under its own constitution, which defines its governmental structure, establishes the powers and responsibilities of its institutions, and reflects the region's distinct political and cultural identity. Together, these states form a unified federal system (Germ. *Bund*), where the overarching statehood is derived from the collective sovereignty of its constituent *Länder* (Sturm, 2001).

Germany's federal structure grants its states considerable autonomy, which is rooted in the Basic Law. The federal constitution establishes the states as sovereign entities within their areas of competence. However, the tasks between the federation and the *Länder* are divided into those exclusive to the *Länder* (i.e. education and culture, media and broadcasting regulation, health policy, trade and industry oversight), and those shared with the federation (i.e. higher education policy and universities, civil law and criminal law enforcement, social welfare and public health, economic law and labor market regulation). Federalism is enshrined in Articles 20–37, ensuring that the *Länder* maintain influence over both domestic and international affairs. The Basic Law's provisions reflect the constitutional commitment to a decentralized political system, embedding federalism within the “eternity clause,” making it an irreversible feature of the governance structure.

A pivotal moment in defining the *Länder*'s international prerogatives was marked by the Lindau Agreement of 1957, which formalized the relationship between the federal government and the states in treaty-making processes (Abkommen, 1957). This agreement clarified that while the federal government would conduct international negotiations, the *Länder* retained the right to approve treaties affecting their legislative competencies. In practice, this meant that international agreements, particularly those concerning cultural, educational, and environmental matters, required explicit consent from the states.

Another milestone in the legal evolution of the *Länder*'s international role occurred in 1992 with the amendment of Article 23 (the “Europe Article”). This amendment facilitated the transfer of certain sovereign rights to transnational institutions, allowing direct regional participation in European Union (EU) affairs. The ruling of the Federal Constitutional Court in the same year reinforced this right, enabling *Länder* to engage directly with their European counterparts and participate in transfrontier cooperation initiatives (Leonardy, 1999). This decision was crucial in the lead-up to the Maastricht Treaty (in force since 1993), which expanded the institutional mechanisms for regional influence within the EU framework (Jeffery & Yates, 1992).

The *Länder*'s engagement in international affairs has been particularly pronounced within the European integration process. Since the implementation of the Single European Act in 1987 and the launch of the European Communities (EC) internal market program, the *Länder* sought greater participation in EC policymaking. Between 1985 and 1989, all regions established offices in Brussels to engage directly with European institutions, monitor legislative developments, and advocate for regional interests (Nagel, 2010).

To institutionalize their influence, the *Länder* formed mechanisms such as the Joint Committee of the *Länder* on European Union Affairs (Germ. *Europaministerkonferenz*), which has been operating since 1992 and coordinates their position on EU matters. The Maastricht Treaty also led to the creation of the Committee of the Regions (CoR), granting

regional governments a formal advisory role in EU policymaking. The *Länder* collectively hold 24 seats in this assembly, allowing them to contribute to legislative deliberations that impact regional competencies. Furthermore, the *Bundesrat*, the chamber representing regional governments, has secured expanded rights to influence Germany's stance on EU policies. Through the Treaty of Lisbon (in force since 2009), the *Bundesrat* obtained the authority to challenge EU legislation that violates the subsidiarity principle, ensuring that *Länder* interests remain safeguarded at the European level (Bundesverfassungsgericht, 2009; Méndez, 2013).

Over the past decades, German regions have adapted to deepening European integration. European ministers, dedicated EU units within state governments, and permanent representatives in Brussels ensure that the *Länder* remain active players in shaping European policies (Hrbek, 2017). The position of the Observer of the *Länder* for the European Union (Germ. *Beobachter der Länder bei der Europäischen Union*) has been established to assist the regions in fulfilling their responsibilities within EU affairs, ensuring that their interests are adequately represented (Hrbek, 2000; Jeffery, 2007).

Despite their expanding international role, the *Länder* have had to fight challenges arising from deeper European integration. The transfer of competences to the EU has led to a partial erosion of their influence over policy areas such as education, cultural policy, and regional economic promotion. In response, they have intensified efforts to counterbalance these developments through increased participation in federal and European decision-making processes. Many *Länder* have created specialized departments or units within their administrations to oversee EU policies, further strengthening their ability to influence European legislation (Hrbek, 2017).

Development of Paradiplomacy in Germany

Paradiplomatic activities in Germany can be traced back to the era of the Second German Reich (1871–1918), when states such as Bavaria and Baden leveraged cultural diplomacy and religious connections to extend their influence internationally, particularly by cultivating ties with Catholic regions in Austria, France, and Italy (Gunlicks, 2003). However, modern cross-border cooperation gained significant momentum only during the European integration process in the second half of the 20th century. The strategic geographical position of the Federal Republic of Germany, founded in 1949 as a democratic State within the western zones of formerly Allied-occupied Germany, that shared borders with several EC member states, significantly shaped the development of subnational diplomacy, particularly in economically and socially constrained border *Länder*.¹ These regions sought practical solutions, leading to the creation of institutionalized cooperation mechanisms such as Euroregions. The first of these, the EUREGIO, was established on the German-Dutch border in 1958 and later became a model for similar initiatives along West Germany's borders with other EC countries (Richard-Molard, 2017; Roose, 2010). Today, Germany is a member of 24 out of all 158 Euroregions, reflecting its central location in Europe and its historical role in fostering European integration (Durà et al., 2018).

West Germany and France developed one of the most significant cross-border partnerships. The signing of the Élysée Treaty in 1963 marked a turning point, setting a framework for long-term cooperation in education, labor mobility, and regional development. Over time, this partnership led to cross-border metropolitan regions, such as the Trinational Metropolisregion Oberrhein, which became a vital hub for economic and political cooperation (Interreg, 2019).

The Treaty of Aachen, signed in 2019, further institutionalized Franco-German regional cooperation by establishing the Franco-German Cross-Border Cooperation Committee to address legal and administrative barriers and coordinate joint cross-border initiatives (Auswärtiges Amt, 2024). This framework has facilitated the emergence of Eurodistricts, a new form of cross-border administrative cooperation characterized by shared institutions and joint governance structures. Examples include Strasbourg-Ortenau, SaarMoselle, and Regio Pamina, which focus on integrating public transport systems, managing environmental resources, and enhancing labor mobility. Additionally, the Greater Region, encompassing Germany, France, Luxembourg, and Belgium, operates as a polycentric cross-border governance model, promoting economic, cultural, and academic cooperation through structures like the Interregional Parliamentary Council and the Economic and Social Committee (Peyrony et al., 2022).

The end of the Cold War further expanded Germany's paradiplomatic engagement, particularly with Central and Eastern Europe. Regional cooperation also intensified after Poland's and the Czech Republic's expected accession to the European Union. The establishment of Euroregions such as Nisse-Nisa-Nysa, Pro Europa Viadrina, and Spree-Neiße-Bober facilitated cross-border economic, cultural, and environmental collaboration. These initiatives benefited from EU programs, including INTERREG and PHARE, which provided financial and institutional support for fostering interregional partnerships (Gorzela et al., 2005).

In the context of Polish-German cooperation, the Treaty on Good Neighborhood and Friendly Cooperation of 1991 created a formal framework for cross-border projects, establishing the Polish-German Intergovernmental Commission for Regional and Border Cooperation. This commission oversees cross-border collaboration in spatial planning, economic development, and education, emphasizing the significance of border regions such as Frankfurt (Oder)-Stubice, Guben-Gubin, and Görlitz-Zgorzelec (Opilowska, 2019). Since 2004, INTERREG funding has enabled extensive joint projects in areas such as infrastructure development, environmental protection, and cultural exchange (Solarz, 2009).

In addition to its eastern and western borders, Germany has also established extensive cross-border cooperation frameworks with Austria and the Netherlands. With Austria, Germany participates in eight Euroregions, including the Bavarian Forest, Inn-Salzach, and Zugspitze-Wetterstein-Karwendel Euroregions, which support joint initiatives in environmental protection, nature preservation, research, and economic development. Similarly, German-Dutch cooperation is structured around five Euroregions: the Ems Dollart Region, Euregio Rhine-Waal, and Euregio Rhine-Meuse-North. These regions coordinate projects in sustainable water management, transport connectivity, and economic development, often leveraging INTERREG funding to support joint infrastructure and environmental initiatives (Durà et al., 2018).

Beyond Europe, *Länder* have actively engaged in global paradiplomatic efforts, forming bilateral partnerships with countries such as Israel. Cooperation began in the early 1960s, before establishing diplomatic relations between West Germany and Israel in 1965. Scientific collaboration marked the initial phase, with partnerships commencing in 1961. Over time, these interactions expanded to include various sectors such as trade, education, culture, and scientific research, reflecting a deepening relationship at both federal and state levels (Giordano, 2012). The second important direction of cooperation for the German states is with the provinces in China. Since the start of this cooperation in 1982, 27 partnership agreements have been signed, focusing primarily on economic collaboration, environmental and

climate protection, academic and research exchanges, technological innovation, cultural initiatives, and energy efficiency (Goette & Gao, 2018).

The 1990s, after the German reunification, marked a turning point for regional international engagement. During this decade, the *Länder* took proactive steps in foreign relations, opening international offices and focusing on economic promotion abroad. By the close of the decade, German subnational entities had established 130 foreign offices dedicated to investment promotion, tourism, and trade facilitation (Nagel, 2010). This number has since expanded, with almost 150 offices now operating globally. Bavaria stands out as the most active German state in paradiplomacy, maintaining 27 representative offices worldwide, including three in China.

City Diplomacy

The historical experiences of international engagement have profoundly shaped the current role of German municipalities in global governance, drawing from centuries of economic, cultural, and political exchange. In previous centuries, cities such as Hamburg, a powerful member of the Hanseatic League, solidified their international connections through maritime trade, establishing consulates and trading offices across Europe and beyond. Frankfurt am Main, a major financial hub, hosted international fairs that attracted merchants from across the continent, laying the groundwork for contemporary economic diplomacy. Meanwhile, Bremen developed extensive shipping routes and foreign trade connections, particularly with the United States, fostering networks that persist to this day. These historical precedents, combined with Germany's decentralized federal structure, provide contemporary German cities with a unique foundation to act as semi-autonomous actors in international cooperation, engaging in transnational networks and cross-border initiatives (Ude, 2011).

Article 28 of the Basic Law guarantees the right to local self-government, granting bigger and smaller municipalities the authority to oversee their affairs, including urban planning, economic development, and public services. This provision supports the active engagement of German cities and towns in international relations, enabling them to form transnational partnerships, engage in city diplomacy, and contribute to global policymaking. The *Länder* play here a facilitating role by representing municipal interests at the national level via the *Bundesrat* and supporting international engagements through institutions like the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, ICLEI, and Eurocities, where German cities have also become active members (Kern, 2001).

A key actor in Germany's city diplomacy is the German Association of Cities (Germ. *Deutscher Städtetag*), which serves as an intermediary between municipalities and the federal government. Established in 1905, it represents around 3,200 municipalities, encompassing 54 million citizens. It ensures that cities' perspectives are considered in international affairs, particularly in collaboration with the Federal Foreign Office and the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. This cooperation enables cities and towns to engage in global governance and influence policy decisions related to climate change, trade, and sustainable development (Heimann et al., 2022).

City diplomacy in Germany has gained increasing recognition in recent years. The federal government acknowledges the growing importance of municipalities in global affairs, as reflected in the 2015 policy guidelines "Partners in a World of Cities", which promote the international engagement of urban areas. One of the most prominent programs supporting city diplomacy is the Urban Diplomacy Exchange, developed in partnership between the

government agency “Engagement Global” and the Federal Foreign Office. This initiative funds German cities and towns to establish diplomatic relations with counterparts in the United States and the United Kingdom, facilitating knowledge-sharing and best practices in sustainable urban development (Urban Diplomacy Exchange, 2022).

German cities are also key contributors to the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in the areas of sustainable cities (SDG 11), strong institutions (SDG 16), and partnerships (SDG 17). Cities have become proactive in tackling issues such as climate change, social inclusion, and digital innovation. The *Deutscher Städtetag* highlights that cities’ climate policies often surpass national efforts, demonstrating their ability to shape global solutions from the local level.

Despite these advancements, challenges persist in ensuring seamless cooperation between local, federal, and EU institutions. While German cities benefit from a strong legal framework that supports international engagement, they remain secondary actors within the broader foreign policy landscape. Cities are frequently categorized under “cultural and educational policy,” which does not fully recognize their political influence in global governance. The German Association of Cities has called for stronger integration of municipal perspectives in foreign policy formulation, emphasizing the importance of cities as democratically legitimate actors distinct from civil society organizations (Deutscher Städtetag, 2023).

Legal and institutional constraints also limit cities’ capacity to act autonomously in international affairs. Federal and state-level regulations can impose bureaucratic hurdles, restricting cities’ ability to negotiate agreements or access funding for international cooperation. Additionally, while municipal administrations possess expertise in urban diplomacy, their involvement in foreign policymaking is often limited to advisory roles rather than decision-making processes.

Challenges and Future Trends in German Paradiplomacy

Despite Germany’s well-established federal system and the active participation of its subnational entities in international relations, several challenges hinder the effective implementation of paradiplomacy. Legal and institutional constraints remain a significant issue, as the Basic Law requires *Länder* to obtain federal consent for international treaties, limiting their independent maneuverability. The 1957 Lindau Agreement further delineates these boundaries, often resulting in bureaucratic hurdles that slow down subnational international agreements. Coordination between different levels of government also poses difficulties, as discrepancies between federal priorities and *Länder* diplomatic initiatives can create friction, particularly in areas such as economic relations. Additionally, financial constraints impact the effectiveness of paradiplomatic initiatives, as wealthier states such as Bavaria and North Rhine-Westphalia maintain extensive international offices. At the same time, smaller or less economically developed regions struggle to sustain a global presence. Furthermore, Germany’s participation in the European Union adds another layer of complexity, as EU regulations governing regional cooperation require administrative expertise that not all German states and municipalities possess. Political uncertainty and shifting international dynamics, including protectionist policies and geopolitical tensions, also influence Germany’s paradiplomatic engagements, making long-term international partnerships more uncertain (Eppler et al., 2024).

Looking ahead, climate diplomacy is expected to play an increasingly prominent role in German paradiplomacy. Cities and *Länder* are actively engaging in international climate initiatives, and this trend is likely to expand (Otto et al., 2021). Additionally, EU regional and

cross-border cooperation will remain a strong component of German paradiplomacy, particularly along borders with France, Poland, Austria, and the Benelux countries. As technological advancements shape governance, German cities will likely increase their participation in digital diplomacy and smart city cooperation, focusing on city-to-city partnerships in innovation and cybersecurity (Kraus et al., 2015). However, economic diplomacy with certain partners, particularly China, may decline due to growing national security concerns and efforts to reduce economic dependence. Similarly, economic engagement with Russia has already been significantly curtailed due to the ongoing geopolitical crisis. On the other hand, humanitarian and migration-related initiatives are expected to grow, with German cities continuing to play a leading role in refugee resettlement, asylum support, and integration policies (Vanella et al., 2022).

Conclusions

The findings suggest that Germany's subnational governments have leveraged their constitutional autonomy to establish international partnerships, influence European policymaking, and foster sustainable development. Despite these successes, several challenges remain, including legal constraints, financial disparities among regions, and the need for better coordination between the federal government and subnational entities. Additionally, the increasing complexity of global governance and geopolitical tensions may impact the scope and effectiveness of paradiplomatic activities in the coming years.

German paradiplomacy is likely to continue evolving, with specific areas experiencing significant expansion. Climate diplomacy, cross-border cooperation within the EU, and digital city diplomacy are expected to intensify, reflecting global priorities and the strategic interests of German municipalities and regions. At the same time, economic partnerships with certain geopolitical actors may be reassessed, particularly in response to shifts in national and European foreign policy priorities.

Overall, the German paradiplomacy model illustrates the benefits of decentralized governance in enhancing international cooperation. By balancing federal oversight and regional autonomy, Germany has created a system in which subnational actors contribute meaningfully to global governance while aligning with national objectives. As international challenges become more interconnected, the role of subnational governments will only grow in importance, reinforcing the need for sustained institutional support and strategic coordination between different levels of government.

Notes

- 1 In the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), paradiplomacy as understood today did not exist. All foreign relations were tightly controlled by the central government, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Trade orchestrating international contacts under the strict supervision of the Socialist Unity Party. Regional governments had no autonomy in conducting international relations independently. However, the GDR did facilitate some international exchanges through State-controlled organizations like the League of Nations Friendship (Germ. *Liga für Völkerfreundschaft*), which maintained international contacts as part of the State's propaganda efforts (Kasper & Köcher, 2003). Additionally, certain cities in East Germany established symbolic twin city partnerships, such as Potsdam with Bobigny in France and Dresden with Coventry in the UK (Knitter, 2020). Still, these initiatives were centrally planned and reinforced the State's ideological narratives.

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