



## **Strong Cities Ensure Stability in Foreign Policy**

*The new German government must involve cities more extensively in the context of international affairs. The economic and geopolitical challenges are too great to work in silos – especially with respect to the transatlantic relations.*

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### **By Martin van der Pütten**

Donald Trump’s second term in office does not promise any good for multilateralism – the renewed withdrawal of the U.S. from the Paris Climate Agreement is a case in point. Bilateral cooperation between countries such as Germany and the Trump administration is also likely to be based less on trust and more on deals. Cities therefore have a central role to play in the Trump era. City administrations have enormous expertise and practical experience, even beyond their own city area. It is crucial not only to maintain existing transatlantic cooperation, but also to deepen and expand it. The example of the City of Dortmund shows how this can be achieved even in difficult geopolitical phases – and has already been successful for years.

### **City partnerships as a cement for the transatlantic relations**

Dortmund is an international city: People from over 180 nations live here. Building on this foundation, Dortmund is to be positioned and further developed as a “European city” in Europe and worldwide. Urban diplomacy plays a central role in this. Its aim is to drive innovation on a global level and to secure prosperity, the rule of law, democracy and peace – also in the U.S.

Buffalo and Pittsburgh, as cities in the former Rust Belt, as well as Oklahoma City play a special role for Dortmund. Since 1978, Dortmund and Buffalo maintain an official city partnership. To date, the focus has been on youth exchanges, which take place annually in both directions. Following Donald Trump’s first election as President of the U.S., a delegation traveled to Buffalo in spring 2018. Also in December 2024, one month after Donald Trump’s re-election, representatives of the City of Dortmund visited Buffalo to initiate joint projects and expand cooperation at the municipal level. Among other measures, more young people from low-income families are to be financially supported in future, so that they can spend time in the U.S. or Germany – a direct contribution to international understanding. The expert exchange trip was supported through the “Urban Diplomacy Exchange” project funded by the German Federal Foreign Office.

Dortmund and Pittsburgh can also look back on decades of cooperation. Both cities are linked by their post-industrial history – an exchange of expertise on structural change is therefore highly relevant. Networks such as the Urban Transitions Alliance offer opportunities for this. In 2021, the two cities signed an innovation partnership, primarily for cooperation on climate protection. This was followed by intensive cooperation between the local authorities, for example on the use of hydrogen and the food transition from a municipal perspective. The universities are also cooperating.

Dortmund also works specifically with a Republican-led Oklahoma City – Republican Mayors have been elected here since the 1980s. The “Music Embassy” initiative promotes cultural exchange by enabling young bands from Germany and the U.S. to perform in the other country, record music, gain market knowledge and network.

In 2026, the U.S. will celebrate the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary since signing the Declaration of Independence. To mark this occasion, a Year of America is being planned in cooperation with TU Dortmund University, offering cultural highlights and events with a focus on democracy and mutual understanding. It is intended to serve as a symbol of German-American friendship and solidarity and to involve numerous stakeholders in Dortmund, as an overarching initiative.

Many small examples, taken together, show that if the transatlantic relations are to remain on a firm footing, global urban diplomacy must play a greater role in both American and German foreign policy. In doing so, the governments of both countries can rely on resilient structures. Dortmund is just one example of many. There are over 200 city partnerships between Germany and the U.S. – they can and must be a strong bulwark against anti-democratic developments. In addition to annual forums and meetings, this requires above all a continuous exchange at the municipal level.

### **Advancing climate protection at municipal level**

Cities responded to the withdrawal of the U.S. from the Paris Climate Agreement during Trump’s first term in office with their own climate initiatives. One example is the U.S.-Germany Climate and Energy Summit, which was last held in Pittsburgh in 2022. At that time, Dortmund was the only German municipality with environmental experts on site. Such formats need to be revived and expanded. In this context, long-term funding is also a task of the federal government.

Germany does not necessarily need new working groups and structures – too much time passes before these are established. It is more important to keep thinking along and exchange municipal expertise daily at federal, state and local level.

### **Urban dialogue around the globe – multi-level system is alive and well**

Security and geopolitical issues are no longer just challenges for the national level or companies. Nevertheless, cities have been included too rarely in the past. At formats

such as the World Climate Conference, the Munich Security Conference or the World Economic Forum, the voice of cities must be much more prominent in future. In its Global Risks Report 2025, the World Economic Forum defined disinformation as one of the biggest global risks for the next two years. The various levels of government should therefore also work together more closely on this topic in future. The City of Dortmund has already established a working group to tackle disinformation.

Urban dialogues within the multi-level system with the direct involvement of mayors in decision-making processes must be established and strengthened (such as the UNECE Forum of Mayors, U7, U20).

In addition, there needs to be more exchange between cities and the Foreign Office to promote mutual understanding and create synergies. Work-shadowing and reciprocal secondments, as have already been introduced between some U.S. city administrations and the U.S. Department of State, could be helpful.

Urban diplomacy must be prioritized by the new German federal government as a meaningful addition to foreign policy. In the coalition agreement of the “traffic-light coalition” government, “urban diplomacy” was mentioned under “foreign cultural and education policy”. Although cultural exchange continues to play an important role in international understanding, urban diplomacy must be understood and anchored as part of foreign policy in the new coalition agreement. The structures must also be adapted, for example by creating a separate department for subnational diplomacy and appointing a special representative.

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