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## Hamburg–Saint Petersburg, Saint Petersburg–Nice: Scenarios for the stability of twinning under stress

**Abstract:** Against the background of the global COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing geopolitical tensions between the Russian Federation and the West, this chapter engages with the dynamics of European–Russia city diplomacy in times of crisis. By means of two representative case studies of existing twinning cities, namely Hamburg–Saint Petersburg on the one hand, and Nice–Saint Petersburg on the other, this chapter explores the evolution of twinning relations during the politically sensitive times. While paying attention to the legal bases and the historic evolution of selected cases of city cooperation, the authors identify major tendencies as well as opportunities in the field of city twinning and engage with the so-called digital turn in city diplomacy which has manifested itself since the start of the global health crisis in early 2020.

**Key words:** twin cities, Saint Petersburg, Hamburg, Nice, stability of city diplomacy

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In early 2020, a global pandemic hit the world. As the so-called COVID-19 global health crisis impacted life on an individual as well as a global scale, it similarly redefined the outlook and reality of the global economy as well as of international politics. While the latter has been an obvious focus of discussion in media and debates, the former was similarly noticed by experts across the globe.

It is acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic poses many threats and challenges to the system of international relations (we can think about mass unemployment, but similarly disinformation on a global scale). However, the opportunities as well as the strengths which both state and non-state actors have shown in relation to combatting the ongoing health crisis have also been pointed out. Among those positive trends is the organic flourishing of international cooperation and dialogue, as Volker Perthes writes: “The crisis has also underscored the need for effective global cooperation, so inconsistent and contradictory developments are likely. Even nationalist leaders accept the relevance of the WHO and the importance of cooperation on information exchange and vaccine research” (Perthes, 2020).

Another trend noticed is the further decentralisation of acting power from state levels to sub-national levels in the process of diplomacy as well as the increasingly important role of non-state actors and citizens in finding answers to global issues. Of particular interest to the global research community as well as the international media has been the cooperation among and the role of cities in leveraging the ongoing pandemic (Hachigian, Pipa, 2020). Particularly hard hit by the crisis (Walfmaier, 2020), and building upon

a long history of successful cooperation across cultural, social and political borders, cities and city actors prove to be a crucial element in combatting global challenges ranging from climate change and terrorism to global health crises.

This article looks further into this phenomenon and asks what the impact of the ongoing pandemic is on city diplomacy, and whether city relations reflect the above-mentioned shifts in the system of international relations. To do so, this article examines the relations between Saint Petersburg and its partner cities Hamburg and Nice. This case study is of particular interest for several reasons. Although the phenomenon of city diplomacy and city relations has become the focus of attention in both the scholarly as well as practitioner communities, it is still relatively unexplored territory. This is particularly true with respect to the post-Soviet space as few studies dealing with the topic exist. In addition, this article looks at city relations in an extraordinary context marked by various crises, namely the ongoing political crisis between Russia and the West following the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis on the one hand, and the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic on the other.

This article is structured as follows. First, an introduction on the chosen methodology is presented. Second, this article introduces the city of Hamburg, Saint Petersburg and Nice in a comparative context as actors of city diplomacy. Third, a critical comparison is presented of the city relations between Saint Petersburg on the one hand, and respectively Hamburg and Nice on the other. Finally, we present some concluding thoughts on the future of city relations between Russia and Europe based on our case study.

### **Empirical base and methods**

The purpose of the article is to shed a light on the state of affairs of twinning before and during crisis situations by comparing two case studies, namely, Saint Petersburg and Hamburg as well as Saint Petersburg and Nice.

The research is based on a review of websites and a study of normative acts. The web-examination took place in three steps. At the preliminary stage, the search engines “Google” and “Yandex” were selected for giving the most relevant results. The time period for collecting the data was set between March–April 2021. Other criteria for the establishing of our dataset were the time of publication of the content (2000–2021), the search language (Russian, German, French, English) and key terms and phrases (“Hamburg,” “Nice,” “Saint Petersburg,” “twinning cities Hamburg and Saint Petersburg,” “twinning cities Saint Petersburg and Nice,” “cooperation between Hamburg and Saint Petersburg,” “cooperation between Saint Petersburg and Nice”). During the search stage, analytics of the sites was carried out for updating and reliability of information using following servers: <https://be1.ru> and <https://a.pr-cy.ru>. Sixty websites containing information of official, statistical, news and/or informational nature were selected. Within the framework of the formalised stage, a scientific assessment of the content was made. In addition, in order to better understand the research problem, a set of regulations was worked on. Priority was given to documents such as the German Constitution, the French Constitution and the Russian Constitution. The list is supplemented by the Hamburg Constitution, Charter of Saint Petersburg, Arrêté préfet Statuts Nica, as well as coopera-

tion agreements and twinning programs. As the main elements of the legal system, they constitute the foundation for ensuring the international activities of cities.

### **Hamburg, Saint Petersburg, Nice: Some comparison**

Hamburg, Saint Petersburg and Nice all belong to the category of big port cities. Taking into account their differences in terms of urban planning, historical and functional uniqueness as well as distinct practices of local identity construction, each of them has reached the level of a global city.

On a national scale, the cities are district-level centers. Hamburg is Germany's second largest city after Berlin (DeStatis, 2020). The same is true for Saint Petersburg which follows Moscow in terms of size (Forum, 2021). Nice occupies the fifth place in the hierarchy of French cities (Bourse des Voyages, 2020).

On the basis of the development of this triad of agglomerations are legal regulators which establish their legal identities and streamline relations with the center. Moreover, Hamburg and Nice have a broader range of authorities in terms of international activities than Saint Petersburg. The reasons lie both in the paradigm of decentralisation which is promoted by the European Union as well as in the patterns of Western politics. In contrast to the Russian imperial unity, it originates in the differentiation of government structures with an emphasis on democratisation.

In this logic, Hamburg retains the historically acquired status of a free and Hanseatic city, securing in its Constitution its legal status as a federal state, a municipality and a city-state. Hence the declaration of the indivisibility of the state and municipal activity (Constitution, 1952). A significant number of competencies is guaranteed to Hamburg and the norm of the Basic Law of the country states that the implementation of state powers belongs to the German states (German Bundestag, 1949). Hamburg is endowed with significant rights in the area of external relations, including the initiation and ratification of treaties and the coordination of positions with foreign authorities.

In the case of Nice, which is currently known as "Métropole Nice Côte d'Azur," the city is a self-governing collectivity. On its territory, the principle of "government by the people, through the people and for the people," proclaimed in the Fundamental Law of the Fifth Republic, is embodied in the organisation of life (Conseil Constitutionnel, 1958). The institutional evolution has contributed to the expansion of self-government in local affairs and the stimulation of internalisation efforts. According to the 2018 "Arrêté Portant Modification des Status de la Metropole Nice Cote d'Azur" this instruction is endowed with "... moral personality and financial independence." The document similarly provides for the promotion of the territory and economic activities abroad, integration into structures of cross-border partnerships and participation in "Habitat" programs (Nice Cote d'Azur, 2018).

With respect to the legal personality of Saint Petersburg, its specificity is given by the model of the political order supported by the power vertical. According to the Russian Constitution, Saint Petersburg is a city of federal significance (RF State Duma, 1993), and, therefore, its strategy in the field of international relations is subject to the imperative of the 1999 law. This legal act establishes the limitation of the sovereignty of the

regions with the domination of the center in designated issues. In particular, subnational actors are given the right to develop international ties within the powers determined by federal legislation, as well as agreements on the delimitation of jurisdictions. In addition, they are allowed to take part in the activities of international organisations within the framework of structures specially created for these purposes. With the approval of the Russian government, it is allowed to establish contacts with the authorities of foreign states (Base.garant.ru, 1998).

The variability demonstrated by Hamburg, Saint Petersburg and Nice in terms of the capital intensity of the material and symbolic resources at their disposal is indicative. Therefore, it is not difficult to notice that Hamburg is the richest of the selected metropolises. Its biennial budget is 14 billion euros (Haushaltsplan, 2019–2020), and its *per capita* income 25,000 euros (Statistica, 2020). The agency of the city is connected to its localisation at the intersection of transport routes and the flow of goods, as well as to the presence of financial, industrial and tourism potentials. On its territory are concentrated industries related to the construction and repair of ships and aircraft, mechanical engineering, processing, food industry and the production of semiconductors (Hamburg Invest, 2020). The city is a leader in the generation of digital and medical technologies (Olympus, 2020).

Its competitive advantage is environmental friendliness, parks and botanical gardens. The formula of its image uniqueness is complemented by a combination of objects and monuments representing medieval architecture, contemporary art and industrial culture. The Hamburg brand is semiotically marked by terms and names such as “City of Bridges and Canals,” “City of Fair Trade” (FTS, 2020), “Gateway to the world” (NDR, 2020).

In terms of characteristics, Hamburg can be compared to Saint Petersburg. Although the per capita income is inferior to its foreign competitors, 293 euros (Administration of SPb, 2020), the city budget of Saint Petersburg is comparable to the European level, namely 7 billion euros (Docs.cntd.ru, 2020).

Due to the picturesque architecture, numerous palaces, squares, fountains, bridges, artistic treasures, the quintessence of the metropolis’ brand is tied to culture. However, its exclusivity lies in its multi-sectoral scope. Saint Petersburg is a global transport, trade and logistics hub, as well as a large financial, business and scientific center with a high level of innovation promotion (Forum, 2021). A key role in its industrial cluster relates to shipbuilding, mechanical engineering and instrument making, the production of machine tools, electrical engineering and products for the military-industrial complex. In addition, non-ferrous metallurgy, chemical and light industries are also being successfully developed (Navigator, 2021).

Events of global significance, such as the “Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum” or the “Scarlet Sails Project” occupy an important place in the city’s self-identification (Izvestia, 2021). As a result, the stereotypical image of Saint Petersburg unfolds in various metaphors such as “Congress Center,” “Cultural Capital,” “Venice of the North” (Forum, 2021).

Unlike Hamburg and Saint Petersburg, the dynamics of development of Nice is congruent with the specifics of a seaside resort. The structure of the economy is dominated by the tourism business, healthcare services and “clean” technologies. Business incubators and innovation centers operate to maintain the growth (Bnppre.fr, 2020). An indi-

cator of the relative well-being of the local community is the household income which does not exceed 2,000 euro (SalaireMoyen.com, 2020) and an annual city budget of 720 million euros (Budget, 2020).

The attraction of Nice comes from the mild climate, the clear sea and beaches, the exotic gardens, fountains, castles and villas. An integral part of this unique place are the numerous museums, squares, historical sites such as the Cimieux Monastery, Saint-Reparat Cathedral, and the Lascaris Palace. The attractiveness is well-captured at the level of marketing which defines the city's value as the "Pearl of the French Riviera," "City Park" or "Smart City" (Bnppre.fr, 2020).

### **Twinning of Hamburg and Saint Petersburg**

While city relations between Hamburg and Saint Petersburg date back to the 17<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> century, they only started to properly develop in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Germany, following the disastrous Second World War, utilised city relations to reopen towards the world. In 1957, an official cooperation agreement between Hamburg and Leningrad was signed, a move motivated by economic interests, though not to be underestimated from a political perspective during the Cold War (Shildt, 2017). During the decades to follow both cities grew towards each other through mutual student exchanges and economic missions, interactions which would eventually culminate in the confirmation of their relationship in the early nineties, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the renaming of Leningrad to Saint Petersburg.

In the next two decades, the relationship experienced as many "ups" as "downs," which cannot be disconnected from fluctuating national and international politics as well as a declining sense of urgency to maintain relations in relatively peaceful times. Nevertheless, the relationship has been renewed since then twice, in 2015 and, most recently, in 2017 (lasting until 2021) which marked the 60-year anniversary. From a legal perspective, the relationship is organised in a thorough manner and guided by a so-called road map which sets out goals in the area of cultural and heritage management, bilateral tourism and knowledge exchange. As part of the agreement, official city delegations regularly visit each other's counterparts in order to exchange best practices and strengthen contacts (Administration of SPb, 2020). Such documents are complemented by the efforts of personalities from both sides, such as the mayor of Hamburg and governor of Saint Petersburg, as well as larger organisations, such as the *Deutsch-Russisches Forum* (German-Russian Forum, 2021), which have been and remain quintessential in the maintenance of the relations.

From an official perspective, the twinning cooperation between Hamburg and Saint Petersburg is characterised by a range of activities and exchanges in various spheres, not in the least in the area of culture, (shared) history and/or sports. On a regular basis, events such as the "German week" or the "Russian week" are organised in the respective cities and representatives from the city authorities in such contexts often take part in commemoration ceremonies of the victims of the Second World War. However, it is particularly through organisational and financial support to commercial, academic or citizen's initiatives, that city relations take shape. In this process, several significant actors

can be distinguished. As far as commercial and professional interests and contacts are concerned, for instance, the Hamburg Chamber of Commerce (Handelskammer Hamburg), which has its own representation in Saint Petersburg, is a major actor in connecting youths from both cities through professional exchange programs. An example can be found in a course on international trade law which the Handelskammer Hamburg organises in cooperation with faculties from the University of Hamburg, Saint Petersburg State University and the DAAD.

Valuable initiatives marking the city cooperation between Hamburg and Saint Petersburg are coming from various other actors such as NGOs and citizen platforms to commercial organisations and small businesses. With limited (or without) governmental and/or municipal support, they represent the ubiquitous citizen diplomacy behind the scenes of twinning and can be considered fundamental in the maintenance of city relations in challenging times. Several non-governmental organisations co-exist in both cities and cooperate on socially relevant themes with the purpose of strengthening of civil society and the tackling of social problems (from poverty to climate change). These activities however often carry a political tone as they advocate for liberalisation and Western-style democracy. Not surprisingly, and despite the risk of reputational damage and political pressure, close contacts similarly take place in trade and business. While the port of Hamburg plays a key role in this area, numerous companies located in Hamburg or Saint Petersburg engage in business areas, such as trade, logistics and transport (HK Hamburg, 2020).

While culture and shared history/memory appears to be a continuous platform to bridge cities, this could not be imaginable without the clear focus on youths, a trend which echoes the historic roots of the city relations between Hamburg and Saint Petersburg. Despite the politically adverse climate, youth exchanges such as “Energize Your City,” dealing with common history and urban development, or “Wind and Waves,” a sailing competition, have been particularly successful. Particularly interesting is the popularity of the “green theme” connecting urban development with ecological themes. Such activities seem to target the younger generations which continue to play a major role in city relations. This can be explained as “a pragmatic choice to attract the younger generation to be involved in city relations” (Vlaeminck, 2021, p. 12). Self-evidently, educational and academic exchange belongs to this form of interaction as through joint courses (for instance, between the journalism courses of HAW Hamburg and Saint Petersburg University) (Fink.Hamburg, 2017) and scholarly exchange on different levels, youths from both cities have received opportunities to explore common history as well as shared challenges.

Since 2020, as the global pandemic hit the world and cities were particularly affected, the relations between Hamburg and Saint Petersburg have been put under a new form of pressure as it became impossible to continue “business as usual” on a socio-cultural, economic as well as political level. Reflecting a wider tendency taking place across the globe, many of the activities which would normally have taken place in person were organised virtually. An example can be found in a conference on food saving which took place last year and gathered audience from both cities (German-Russian Forum, 2020). Most interestingly, official contacts have similarly been taken virtual. Exemplary of this trend was a virtual meeting between city officials of Hamburg and Saint Petersburg,

aiming at exchanging experiences on home office practices of civil servants (Spb-hh.de, 2020). However, the global health crisis appears not to be immune to geopolitical tensions as demonstrated by an overt decline of COVID-support offered by Hamburg officials to their Russian counterparts (Novaya Gazeta, 2020).

Although the digital turn in city relations seems to be there to stay, it is expected that real life interactions will resume as both countries regain control over the ongoing pandemic. This is demonstrated by the jubilee activities on German-Russian city relations which took place in June 2021. All in all, despite the political pressure and reflection of crisis tendencies in Russian-German relations, city relations between Hamburg and St Petersburg have remained relatively stable over the last years. Although the global COVID-19 pandemic presents a major challenge to its existence, it appears that city relations can be conducted virtually to a certain degree. While this indicates a rather positive trend which reflects agility and flexibility on the part of the city actors, it should not be underestimated how soaring political relations might interfere in constructive forms of dialogue in the future, virtually or in person.

### **Twinning of Saint Petersburg and Nice**

Formally, the twinning of Saint Petersburg and Nice dates back to the moment both sides signed a Memorandum of Understanding (IFR, 1997). The prerequisites for the legalisation took shape during the two-century evolution of French-Russian relations starting with the choice for Nice as a privileged resort by members of the Russian imperial family, the establishment of a consulate in the city by Catherine II, and the deployment of a naval base in Villefranche harbor (Delanoë, 2012). Currently, the Russian diaspora living on the Cote d'Azur reach a number of more than 10 thousand people (Insee.fr, 2018).

The social ties which were built over a long period and the constructed identities responding to mutual collective interests demonstrate the stability in the current situation of intergovernmental mistrust and disagreement. Furthermore, they appear to act as a stabiliser through which opportunities arise to facilitate political dialogue at the highest level. The growth and deepening of contacts have similarly been facilitated by Russia-friendly politicians coming to power in the Metropolis (RF Federation Council, 2018).

The current partnership between the cities is based on several legal documents. First of all, the Agreement on the cooperation between the territorial entities (RF MID, 2011) and regularly approved programs linked to cross-border cooperation years between Russia and France (The Year Russia-France, 2010). In accordance with these regulators, meetings between politicians, public figures and representatives of business circles are organised alongside academic and cultural exchanges as well as initiatives aimed at bringing youths together and projects in the field of innovation, healthcare, tourism, ecology, education and science.

A unique field of interaction is culture which entails the potential to find common ground in other areas. The first events following the official twinning of cities date back to 1999–early 2000s. Afterwards, among the events of the “Russian Year in Nice,” the festival of military music and the annual Christmas market “Russian Winter” became

famous. They have become part of the symbolic politics. In addition, the assignment of Nice as the host for the festival of Russian art resonated favorably (Regnum, 2004).

Gradually the list of recurring projects has been expanded with other innovations. In this way, in 2009, the annually organised project “Children’s Petersburg” consisting of two parts was launched. The first part includes an exhibition of children’s drawings and the second part includes musical, plays and master classes (The Committee for Culture of SPb, 2020). Since 2012, the International Book Festival has been held regularly. The Saint Petersburg-stand is being exhibited at the fair in the Metropolis. In turn, the printed products of Nice are offered to visitors of the Saint Petersburg International Book Salon (RFI, 2012). In 2016, a festival of Russian cinema was organised which included both films from the State Film Fund as well as new Russian films (RBC, 2015). Ballet plays an important role in the development of twinning relations as well. We can particularly think about tour of the Saint Petersburg Ballet Festival to Nice in 2015–2021 (Gazeta, 2020) and the seasons of the Mediterranean Ballet of Nice in Saint Petersburg (Ville de Nice, 2013).

One of the least politically sensitive spheres is education. Collaboration takes place through the Higher School of Economics, the University of Nice Sophia-Antipolis and the Higher School of Digital Innovation “Epitech” (HSE, 2021). Ties are being strengthened through mutual teaching and student exchanges, scientific conferences and internships. The development in communication is facilitated by the practice of double degrees (RF MID, 2015). The basis for long-term joint cooperation is the membership of University ITMO and the University of Nice in the French-Russian University Network (RFU, 2021).

The tourism industry demonstrates prospects for growth and development. The organisation of the permanent route “Russian Cote d’Azur” dates back to the early 2000s. Over the last few years, efforts were made to stimulate business and the flow of holidaymakers. Attention is being paid to mutual positioning and new urban brands. For instance, a bus painted in the colours of Nice has been driving in Saint Petersburg since 2018 (Métropole Nice Côte d’Azur, 2018). On the other hand, habitants of Saint Petersburg have developed a project to promote gastronomy that combines the traditions of French and Russian cuisine. The dishes were presented at the “Christmas Magic Fair” in Nice. Its popularisation was further strengthened by the creation of a Saint Petersburg tourist portal and a video clip designed to serve as a gastronomic navigation tool for potential customers, including residents of Nice (Administration of SPb, 2019).

Since 2020, due to the spread of COVID-19, direct interaction between Nice and Saint Petersburg has been suspended. This has accelerated the turn towards the remote model of interaction. For example, in 2020, the opening ceremony of the Cross-Year of Interregional Cooperation was held in the format of a videoconference with the participation of the leadership of Saint Petersburg and the mayor of Nice. The issue of strengthening mutual understanding between the French and Russian people was put on the agenda (RF MID, 2021). The main topic of discussion at the official online meeting in 2021 was the exchange of experience in the fight against the coronavirus (The Committee on External Relations of SPb, 2021).

In addition to interagency contacts, other connections are also formed in the light of the changes. The focus is on the use of opportunities of both real and virtual spaces.



Indicative in this respect is the broadcast of the Petrovsky Fire Festival “Christmas Star” (Cites-unies-france.org, 2021) which kicked off the Decentralised Cooperation Program 2021. Other activities include the involvement of Saint Petersburg in the economic project “French Tech,” the participation in the Urban Forum and the Youth Forum at the site of the French-Russian University in Nice. In addition, communication is planned within the framework of expert groups and festive meetings during the “Flower Parade” and “Golden Autumn Festival” in Saint Petersburg and Christmas in Nice where the ceremonial closing of the Cross-Cooperation Year is expected to be held (France MID, 2021).

### Conclusion

Following our research on the above-mentioned case studies, it becomes obvious that the phenomenon of twinning has prospects for development in a new reality. In reaction to crisis-related challenges, the selected case studies demonstrate the ability of twin cities to adapt through the use of all possible methods and mechanisms. The ambiguity of the presented scenarios is determined by various factors such as the differences in the historical, political and legal contexts of the establishment of agreements, but also by production and sectoral specifics as well as the resource self-sufficiency of the cities. Other factors that stand out are the scale of diversification of the ways that meet the mutual interests of the parties and the manifestation of their distinct socio-cultural mutual orientation. It is not difficult to notice that the twinning of Saint Petersburg and Nice, due to the tourist and resort profile of the Metropolis, is inferior to the Hamburg – Saint Petersburg case in terms of the variety of ties and the coverage of partnership areas. However, it wins from the point of view of the connecting of societies, which contributes to the deepening and strengthening of cross-border relations.

At the same time, a pragmatic approach toward communication practices is noticeable in both cases. Inclusive processes have been spreading to a greater extent in areas that seamlessly can ensure legitimate interactions and functioning therefore as a way to balance the benefits and mitigate escalating tensions in intergovernmental transactions. In a situation which entails the deterrent and stressful impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has limited the possibility of direct contact, flexibility in terms of communication possibilities has been manifested. The formula of prudent strategies resonates well with the hybrid (virtual/in-person) form of living in a modern society.

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## **Hamburg–Sankt Petersburg, Sankt Petersburg–Nicea. Scenariusze stabilności połączeń bliźniaczych pod wpływem naprężeń**

### **Streszczenie**

Na tle globalnej pandemii COVID-19 i trwających napięć geopolitycznych między Federacją Rosyjską a Zachodem, niniejszy tekst zajmuje się dynamiką europejsko-rosyjskiej dyplomacji miast w czasach kryzysu. Na podstawie dwóch reprezentatywnych studiów przypadków istniejących miast partnerskich, a mianowicie Hamburg–Sankt Petersburg z jednej strony oraz Nicea–Sankt Petersburg z drugiej, rozdział ten bada ewolucję relacji partnerskich w politycznie wrażliwych czasach. Zwracając uwagę na podstawy prawne i historyczną ewolucję wybranych przypadków współpracy miast, autorzy identyfikują główne tendencje, jak również możliwości w dziedzinie partnerstwa miast i angażują się w tak zwany zwrot cyfrowy w dyplomacji miejskiej, który przejawia się od początku globalnego kryzysu zdrowotnego na początku 2020 roku.

**Słowa kluczowe:** miasta bliźniacze, Sankt Petersburg, Hamburg, Nicea, stabilność dyplomacji miejskiej

