

CHAPTER 8

PARADIPLOMATIC RELATIONS AND SISTER CITY APPLICATIONS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND THE EXAMPLE OF TOKAT PROVINCE*

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1. Introduction

As international communication intensifies and becomes increasingly interactive, central and local governments converge on issues such as economics, social affairs, politics, volunteerism, and humanitarian aid. These convergences, which transcend local and national borders, have rapidly spread across the globe, resulting in the emergence of global policies that also prevail at the local level. As a natural consequence of globalization, the increase in cross-border administrative and financial cooperation has led local governments to take on more active roles in foreign relations and to ensure integration with central government policies through these relations. Thus, foreign contacts that began at the local level have brought a new foreign policy process to the agenda, outside the traditional understanding of diplomacy.

Along with the globalization process, the absolute determinism of the state in international relations has been increasingly questioned, and governance has evolved into a multi-actor structure. The theoretical foundations of this transformation can be explained to a significant extent by James N. Rosenau's (2009) conceptualizations of "sub-national" and "trans-national" governance. Rosenau (2009) argues that the traditional spheres of state sovereignty are eroding; in contrast, cities, micro-regions, and civil society organizations are becoming more visible in global decision-making processes. This situation goes beyond the classical understanding that foreign policy is conducted solely by central governments, enabling local governments to become active and effective actors in foreign relations. Therefore, the concept of *paradiplomacy* has entered the literature to describe this development.

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As stated by Duchacek (1990, p. 32), the prefix “para” added to the concept of “diplomacy” is used to describe the foreign relations of sub-state units that may be parallel, coordinated, or complementary to the international policies of the central government, but may also conflict with these policies.

In this context, this study examines the increasingly important roles of local governments in international relations and how these roles are shaped within the framework of the concept of paradiplomacy. Given the differences in the structural organization of states, how local units establish foreign relations also differs in unitary or federal systems; these relations are sometimes kept under strict control, while at other times they are conducted based on a model of controlled freedom. Interactions that partially exclude the central government are considered national security issues in countries with a dominant national structure. In contrast, such interactions are viewed more favorably in federal systems with local state structures that determine their own policies. International contacts, which are accelerating and becoming easier due to the impact of international integration, have created an alternative situation by integrating local governments into the classic foreign policies pursued by the central government.

Paradiplomatic activities also bring with them practices that can be defined as citizen diplomacy. In this sense, citizen diplomacy stands out as an alternative form of diplomacy in which non-state individuals, institutions, and especially local governments play an active role in international relations, deriving their legitimacy from social support. This form of diplomacy reflects a multi-level governance approach not limited to official representatives but somewhat shaped by the direct or indirect influence of civil actors.

Drawing strength from their own social bases, local governments have become institutional carriers of citizen diplomacy. Diplomatic interactions conducted locally through various means, such as sister city relationships, cultural collaborations, environmental policies, or humanitarian aid activities, are not merely symbolic; they can also yield economic, social, and political outcomes.

Today, cities and local governments are not limited to providing local public services but are also actively participating in internationalization processes through citizen diplomacy. Citizen diplomacy is defined as a multi-actor and multi-level form of diplomacy that includes not only political institutions in the process of policymaking in international relations shaped through individual initiatives, civil society activities, and transnational local interactions, but also the entire public, private sector, and local governments. (McDonald, 1991; Sharp, 2009; Heine, 2013; Anton & Moise, 2021, as cited in Lee, 2019, pp. 127-147).

Theoretical approaches to paradiplomacy and citizen diplomacy in the international literature are increasingly diversifying and deepening. However,

discussions of these concepts through concrete examples in the Turkish context remain limited. In particular, the scarcity of application-oriented studies narrows the knowledge base in this field and prevents theoretical developments from sufficiently converging with practice. This study aims to address this gap by presenting an assessment that combines international governance theories and local governance practices in Türkiye. The existing literature on paradiplomacy focuses on metropolitan municipalities. These studies, which center on metropolises such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir (Akman & Akman, 2017; Aktulun, 2015), do not sufficiently highlight the position of medium-sized cities in international relations. However, these cities also play an increasingly important role in cross-border cooperation. From this perspective, analyzing the paradiplomacy experience of a medium-sized city like Tokat offers an opportunity to address the scale imbalance in the literature and to present a new perspective.

Studies on paradiplomacy and sister city applications have become a notable area of research in recent years, both in international relations literature and in local government studies. In this context:

Prasittisopin et al. (2024) state that there are 90 sister city agreements from 38 provinces in Thailand, but these agreements cannot be fully implemented despite being signed. The reason for this is the lack of harmony between the parties, which manifests in inadequate regulations, unclear planning, inappropriate alliances, frequent leadership changes, resistance to change, resource constraints, and a lack of evaluation mechanisms.

Atanga et al. (2024) evaluate the outcomes of sister city agreements made by cities in Ghana and Tanzania, particularly with cities in Europe and North America. The study also argues that there is a lack of literature on North-South paradiplomacy involving developing cities, as academic research on this topic is heavily skewed in favor of large and megacities. By comparing sister city partnerships with sustainable development, the study adds an environmental dimension to the existing theoretical stance, which typically considers only the cultural, social, and economic dimensions of sister city partnerships.

Noormansyah et al. (2024) analyze the sister city cooperation between Magelang City and Tula City within the framework of paradiplomacy. The study emphasizes that the relevant regional offices did not implement the cooperation beyond the agreement stage.

Erdem (2023) conducted the most comprehensive quantitative study in this field, using a large dataset covering 2,051 sister city protocols in Türkiye. The research reveals that the matches were shaped based on population size, geographical proximity, and historical-cultural ties, clearly revealing the rational dynamics of intercity relations. Furthermore, Ankara's equivalence-focused

strategy with capital cities is a notable example.

Akman and Akman (2017), in their study conducted on four metropolitan cities, showed that despite the numerical increase in sister city relationships, they lacked strategic depth. The study emphasizes that the practices largely remained symbolic, failed to transform into functional collaborations, and created a sustainability problem.

Ergün et al. (2020) examined the sister city protocol between Erzurum and Urumiye, focusing on how cultural, economic, and bureaucratic interactions took shape. The originality of the study lies in the fact that it is one of the first examples focusing on sister city practices with Iran and analyzes issues related to comparative administrative structures. The clash between the flexibility of local governments in Türkiye and the centralist structure in Iran leads to significant differences in practice.

Gezici and Kocaoğlu (2018) have approached sister city relations as local manifestations of globalization. The study argues that these relationships are not merely symbolic: when conducted through strategic planning, they can become tools that contribute to local development and international peace. It draws attention by emphasizing the “qualitative” dimension, which is often overlooked in the literature.

The report *Marmara’s Local Diplomacy Analysis: Local Governments’ Global Connections* (Demirtaş, 2024) reveals the Marmara Region’s experience of regional analysis, where sister city applications are carried out in the form of project-based and concrete collaborations rather than symbolic protocols. This study stands out for assessing the level of institutionalization of local diplomacy through institutional capacity, financing, and network memberships.

Studies on paradiplomacy mainly focus on large cities. In Türkiye, studies are primarily conducted on large cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. This situation has led to the invisibility of the internationalization practices of medium-sized cities. The present study also aims to fill this gap by using the example of Tokat province. Tokat is not a metropolitan city; therefore, its experience in international relations is important in showing that paradiplomacy is not limited to large cities. Thus, the research highlights the role of medium-sized cities in paradiplomacy and brings a new perspective to the scale-based imbalance in the existing literature.

Qualitative data analysis was chosen as the method for this study. The international relations, sister city protocols, and international memberships of municipalities operating in the province of Tokat were evaluated using document review and comparative analysis techniques. In this context, the study hypothesizes that although the paradiplomatic activities carried out by local governments in

Tokat province are limited in scope compared to metropolitan municipalities, they show an orientation that coincides with national foreign policy objectives in some thematic areas (cultural cooperation, sister city protocols, international organization memberships) and that these relations support export volume.

The study presents conceptual discussions on paradiplomacy as a theoretical background, explains the administrative structure in the Turkish context, and evaluates the current status of sister city practices using the example of Tokat province. Subsequent sections address the legal framework and forms of implementation in this area by local governments in Türkiye. Applications specific to Tokat were analyzed using information obtained from legislative documents, statistical data, and secondary sources. Export data published by the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce (İTO) were also used in this process. In the final section, a general assessment is made in light of the findings, and recommendations for policies that can be developed at the local level are presented. In this context, the study questions how paradiplomacy operates at the local level through the sister city practices of local governments in Tokat, what tools are used to implement it, and what limitations it has. While the literature on paradiplomacy in Türkiye focuses mainly on metropolitan municipalities, this study offers a unique contribution at the provincial level through the case of Tokat.

The study's main contribution is that it focuses on the search for conceptual clarity and structures sister city applications as the most functional tool of paradiplomacy. In this respect, the study provides a basis for classifying theoretical uncertainties. Furthermore, the findings have the potential to provide concrete data for policy development at the local level for implementing institutions and aim to develop recommendations that are applicable at the local level for decision-makers.

2. The Concept and Development of Paradiplomacy

According to the Turkish Language Association (TDK), diplomacy is “the whole set of agreements regulating international treaties, the task and art of representing one’s country in a foreign country and at international meetings, and the skill and dexterity displayed during a difficult negotiation.” Another definition states that diplomacy is the peaceful activity of states in international relations through direct or indirect negotiation (Berridge, 2010, p. 1).

The term *paradiplomacy*, derived from the Latin prefix *para-*, refers to the formal cross-border relations between local and regional administrations (Karvounis, 2023). The Greek prefix “para” adds meanings such as “alongside,” “in addition,” “instead of,” or “supportive” to the word it is attached to. Therefore, the concept of paradiplomacy also refers to a form of practice that supports, complements, corrects, repeats, or falls outside the scope of the diplomatic activities of nation-

states, and even occasionally opposes them (Erdoğan, 2020, p. 498).

Paradiplomacy is a concept used in the literature to describe the activities carried out by subnational actors, such as regional administrations, municipalities, or other local authorities, in areas falling within their remit and sphere of interest, in fields such as international relations, political science, and public administration (Erdoğan & Atar, 2023, p. 430).

When it first emerged, paradiplomacy was defined primarily in terms of the representation of federated structures in foreign relations. However, over time, it has come to define a multi-actor, multi-level form of foreign relations that is not limited to official diplomatic missions. This transformation has brought with it not only a conceptual but also a normative expansion. For example, Neves (2010) positions paradiplomacy as an expression of soft power, while Duchacek (1990) and Soldatos (as cited in Ünal, 2025) focus more on the potential of sub-state structures to shape foreign policy. Within this framework, paradiplomacy has begun to be evaluated not only in terms of foreign trade and cultural interaction but also as a challenge to the central state's monopoly on foreign policy.

This approach has also given rise to different lines of literature. On the one hand, the “cooperative” perspective defines paradiplomacy as a complement to the state and part of global governance. On the other hand, more critical, even confrontational approaches have developed, particularly in the context of separatist tendencies, combined with the concept of “proto-diplomacy” (Lecours, 2008; Fathun, 2022). Proto-diplomacy describes diplomatic contacts conducted by ethnic or regional movements aiming to secede from the nation-state. At the same time, the concept of paradiplomacy is broader, encompassing activities often conducted in coordination with the center.

For example, Hong Kong's direct trade agreements since the 1950s and Quebec's cultural cooperation with France have demonstrated that paradiplomacy can create tension with the central government (Neves, 2010). On the other hand, waste management practices implemented in the Bantaeng region of Indonesia, which resulted in an award-winning partnership with India, emphasize the aspect of paradiplomacy that can yield tangible benefits at the local level (Çelebi & Alkan, 2022). These examples show that normative assessments of the function of paradiplomacy vary depending on the context.

The concepts of “multi-level governance,” “globalization,” and “internationalization,” which are often mentioned in conjunction with paradiplomacy, are frequently used interchangeably in the literature; however, the boundaries between them often remain blurred. Multi-level governance refers to the institutional pluralism that makes paradiplomacy possible, while globalization describes the structural transformations that give rise to this multi-actor structure.

On the other hand, internationalization refers more to processes of opening up to the outside world at the institutional level, and paradiplomacy can be considered a type of this. In this context, although paradiplomacy draws on these three concepts, it is a field of application that encompasses and transcends them.

Kuznetsov (2015) emphasize that paradiplomacy is not only a foreign policy tool but also an indicator explaining the transformation of the nation-state. According to this view, paradiplomacy is linked to multi-layered objectives such as the global actorization of cities, efforts to create competitive advantages, and identity construction. Thus, paradiplomacy produces not only economic but also political and cultural autonomy.

However, the institutional framework of paradiplomacy varies according to the form of government of each country. In federal systems (e.g., Belgium, Germany, Canada), constitutional power sharing grants sub-state units the ability to conduct official foreign policy. For example, in Belgium, under the principle of *in foro interno, in foro externo*, federated structures can enter international agreements in areas such as energy and the environment (Criekemans, 2010). In contrast, the legal basis for paradiplomacy is much more uncertain in unitary systems, particularly in countries such as Türkiye. This situation makes the concept's applicability controversial at both the technical and political levels.

In conclusion, the debates surrounding the concept of paradiplomacy are based not only on differences in practice but also on normative, legal, and ideological distinctions. Elaborating on these debates clarifies the conceptual boundaries of paradiplomacy and its relationship with other approaches. The role that medium-sized cities such as Tokat play in this context will be understood through local capacities and their responses to these global debates.

2.1. Paradiplomacy and the Development Process of Local Government Cooperation

Türkiye joined the partnership, which emerged with institutional changes aimed at economic development and ultimately political union through practices such as economic development, the common market, and the customs union, and which proposed regulations in the areas of governance, law, human rights, and democracy, and which eventually became known as the European Union, with the Ankara Agreement of September 12, 1963.

With Article 2 of the Ankara Agreement, which established Türkiye's partnership with Europe, "taking into account the need to ensure the rapid development of its economy and the improvement of the employment level and living conditions of the Turkish people, the parties shall encourage the continuous and balanced strengthening of commercial and economic relations between them," the legal foundation for relations was established.

With the entry into force of the Additional Protocol, which was considered a transition period in relations between Türkiye and the European Economic Community (EEC) in the 1970s, the completion of the Customs Union was targeted through the free movement of industrial products, agricultural products, and persons. However, following the military coup of September 12, 1980, Türkiye-EEC relations were frozen. This process began to revive with the reestablishment of civilian rule and Türkiye's adoption of an outward-looking strategy, abandoning its import-substitution industrial policies starting in 1984. In this context, Türkiye-European Union relations gained momentum; Türkiye officially began accession negotiations with the European Union at the Intergovernmental Conference held in Luxembourg on October 3, 2005.

The European Union membership process has brought about economic and political integration. During this process, local administrations at the village, district, and provincial levels, which operate in areas directly affecting citizens' lives, have been able to establish contact with their counterparts in other member countries; a process of mutual interaction has developed in many areas, primarily financial support mechanisms and cooperation projects. In parallel with globalization and European Union integration, various regulations have been introduced in legislation concerning local governments, and the internationalization potential of these institutions has been incorporated into the legal framework.

In this context, Article 127 of the 1982 Constitution defines local governments as "public legal entities established to meet the local common needs of the people of a province, municipality, or village, whose founding principles are specified by law and whose decision-making bodies are formed by election by voters, as specified by law." In line with this provision, local governments in Türkiye consist of provincial special administrations, municipalities, and villages, and have become important actors in both domestic governance and international cooperation.

An examination of the legislation governing the relevant units reveals that provisions concerning the establishment of international relations by local governments are regulated under the heading of "foreign relations." The foreign relations of provincial special administrations, which occupy an important place within the Turkish local government system, are regulated in Article 62 of the 5302 Law on Special Provincial Administration (2005), adopted on February 22, 2005, as follows:

"The provincial special administration may become a founding member or member of international organizations and bodies operating in areas related to its field of activity, subject to the decision of the provincial general assembly. The provincial special administration may conduct joint activities and service projects with these organizations and institutions. Activities to be carried out per

the first and second paragraphs must be conducted in line with foreign policy and international agreements, and prior permission from the Ministry of Interior must be obtained.”

The first paragraph of Article 10 of the relevant law, which regulates the duties and powers of the provincial general assembly, states that “deciding on cooperation with local administrations and local administration unions within and outside the country” is also among the duties and powers of this assembly. Although the necessary legal provisions have been made, it is noteworthy that, in practice, provincial special administrations do not establish as intensive relations with international organizations as municipalities do.

The international relations that municipalities can establish are regulated in Article 74 of the 5393 Law on Municipalities (2005), adopted on July 3, 2005, under the heading “Foreign Relations,” as follows:

“The municipality may become a founding member or member of international associations and organizations operating in areas related to its field of activity, subject to the decision of the municipal council. The municipality may conduct joint activities and service projects with these associations, organizations, and foreign local administrations, or establish sister city relationships.⁴ Activities to be carried out per the first and second paragraphs must be conducted in line with foreign policy and international agreements, and prior permission must be obtained from the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization. Pursuant to this article, municipalities may also establish international relations with organizations operating abroad, subject to the decision of their decision-making bodies, the municipal councils, and the permission of the relevant ministry in the central administration.”

In paragraph (p) of the first clause of Article 18 of the aforementioned law, which regulates the duties and authorities of the municipal council:

“Establishing cooperation with municipalities and local administrative unions within the country and, with the permission of the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization, abroad; establishing sister city relationships, carrying out activities and projects in areas such as culture, arts, and sports to develop economic and social relations; deciding to build, have built, rent, or allocate land, buildings, and similar facilities within this framework”

are among the duties and powers of the municipal council. Both articles state that municipalities can establish multifaceted relations with municipalities abroad, particularly through sister city programs.

In accordance with the mandatory provisions of the 1173 Law on the Execution

⁴ The relevant ministry was formerly the Ministry of Interior, but was changed to the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change by Article 28 (28/23) of Law No. 7153 dated November 29, 2018.

and Coordination of International Relations (1969), all public institutions and organizations, including local government units, must inform the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the contacts they establish and the collaborations they undertake at the international level.

2.2. Local Authorities and Sister City Programs on the Path to Internationalization

According to the *United Nations World Urbanization Prospects 2018 Revision* report, the world's total population and urbanization rate were 34% in 1960, while data for 2023 show that the world's total population and urbanization rate are 57% (World Bank, n.d.). "The report focuses on current and future population trends in cities around the world, using population estimates and projections" (Ökten, 2022, p.189).

The rapid urbanization process has led to significant changes that profoundly affect the structures of cities, their economic and financial functions, population densities, and social and cultural fabrics. Increasing population and urbanization boost economic and social mobility in cities but also encourage cities to move beyond being merely local service providers and engage in global cooperation with international organizations on issues such as migration, climate change, sustainability, and human rights (Creutz, 2023, pp. 3-5).

In this context, the transformation in the roles and responsibilities of cities has highlighted the need for local governments and communities to adapt to and interact with global dynamics. From a socio-economic and cultural perspective, the transformation in cities presents various opportunities and challenges, forcing local communities and governments to redefine themselves and adapt to changing conditions.

Population growth and intensified urbanization have exposed cities to influences beyond national borders. This situation has made cities important actors at the local and global levels, drawing the attention of city administrators and researchers in various disciplines to ensure the visibility of cities in the international community.

Ökten (2022) describes this situation as follows:

"Along with industrialization, globalization and technological and economic developments have also led to rapid growth in city populations... Such a situation has resulted in intense mobility in cities and intensified cooperation in the global arena. In response to this situation, it has been observed that cities' roles, capabilities, and responsibilities, especially at the local level, have gone beyond the traditional order and necessitated a transformation in their spheres of influence, along with different opportunities in both the socio-economic and cultural fields.

Population growth and intensified urbanization in cities have begun to have transnational effects.”

The international activities of local governments emerge in different dimensions based on internationalization. While interacting with similar examples worldwide while firmly adhering to the goal of preserving local structures is “internationalization,” contact with similar examples without preserving local structures is “globalization.” In this context, local foreign policy contributes to multi-actor and multifaceted international diplomacy and significantly affects the relationships of local governments with other units around the world. “Large cities around the world can be more populous than some states and have greater budgetary and spending power than some states. This situation makes local governments one of the important actors in diplomacy.” (Tavares, 2016, as cited in Çelebi Zengin & Alkan, 2022, p. 440)

Local governments must implement policies consistent with national policies and public diplomacy, as they carry out policies that reflect economic, social, health, tourism, culture/arts, education, political, and public diplomacy under the umbrella of national security, which has transnational implications.

Although Türkiye’s centralized administrative system was modeled after the French system, it has failed to effectively solve the problems of rapid, disorderly, and unplanned urbanization. One of the fundamental characteristics of this system, centralization, has limited the authority and resources of local governments, preventing them from meeting the financial, administrative, and political burdens brought about by urbanization. The management of large cities, in particular, has been left to municipalities lacking sufficient financial and administrative power, causing severe disruptions in the urbanization process. As a result, it has become clear that the current management model is inadequate to solve these problems, and new approaches have been sought to create a more effective local government structure (Sezer & Torlak, 2005, p. 522).

With the establishment of metropolitan municipalities, local government units, whose influence grew stronger, began to play an active role locally and internationally, and it is known that they started to establish cooperation protocols, primarily in Istanbul, as of 1960.

3. The Concept of Sister Cities and Its Origins

The historical origins of the sister city practice are based on the cooperation between Paderborn in Germany and Le Mans in France in 836. However, it is known that the first modern agreement related to this practice was signed in 1920 between Keighley in the United Kingdom and Poix-du-Nord in France. It is noted that sister cities in the modern sense began to be established after World War II and gained momentum with the globalization process (Çelebi Zengin &

Alkan, 2022, p. 455).

UNESCO, known as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, acts according to the principle adopted in its founding charter that “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed.” According to UNESCO, peace “must be founded on the moral and intellectual solidarity of mankind.” As defined in the founding document that came into force in 1946, the mission of creating the conditions for coexistence in international peace involves working on a new worldview based on a revised vision of humanity and spreading that vision through global cooperation (UNESCO, 2024).

Free market-oriented economic policies have increased their influence worldwide since the 1980s, and the global pressures that these policies have brought with them have led to a marked weakening of nation-state structures and a downsizing of the state’s organizational framework. This situation has led to new forms of nationalism that are less tied to traditional state-building and more concerned with creating collective action capacity in government and civil society in the face of the global market. The free movement of capital and the rise of multinational corporations have eroded the capacity of states to manage national economies, making it even more difficult to speak of national economies. Furthermore, the dominance of a global culture has weakened national cultures and the role of states in supporting and protecting them. As a result of these developments, development coalitions have emerged in some regions, striving to manage their regions’ integration into the global market on the one hand, and to control the socially divisive effects of this market. In this context, cities have become a key factor in the relationship between society and the global market, creating political arenas for debate and systems for collective action (Keating, 2013, pp. 1-3).

“The reestablishment of peace in cities has gradually led to the development of economic and cultural dialogues between cities. As the scope of relations between cities in different countries has broadened, the types of relationships established and the structures of actors have also begun to change. Relations between cities have evolved into a multi-actor structure at the local level.” (Erdem & Ersavaş Kavanoz, 2021, as cited in Ökten, 2022, p. 190).

This multi-actor relationship between sister cities, districts, or states has manifested itself as a partnership based on a mutually agreed protocol prepared in advance by the parties, covering activities and projects in thematic areas such as broad-based, long-term art-culture, commercial-economic, social development, socially oriented, youth and education, disaster management, conflict resolution, knowledge and experience sharing, and competition between two municipalities/ city administrations in two countries.

Sister city relationships began to increase through the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), established in Paris in 1951 with the participation of 39 countries, particularly after World War II, to reorganize democracy and ensure integration in fragmented European cities.

One example contributing to institutionalizing these multi-level and thematically focused relationships is Sister Cities International, based in the United States. Founded in 1956 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Sister Cities International is known to be a neutral, non-profit organization serving as a national membership organization for sister cities, counties, and states in the United States, bringing together tens of thousands of citizen diplomats and volunteers in over 300 member communities with more than 2,000 partnerships in over 140 countries (Sister Cities International, n.d.).

Due to the growing desire in Türkiye to establish contacts with other countries in foreign policy, many initiatives have been undertaken, primarily at the municipal level. It is known that Türkiye's first sister city relationship was established in 1964 when Bergama Municipality, affiliated with Izmir, signed a sister city agreement with Böblingen Municipality in Germany. Twin city practices in Türkiye initially followed a somewhat limited course; however, they gained significant momentum with the adoption of the Metropolitan Municipality Law in 1984 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Following these developments, sister city agreements began to be signed intensively between Turkish municipalities and many municipalities in the former Soviet Union, particularly in the Balkans (Bay & Çalışkan, 2020, p. 75).

On the other hand, Türkiye's first sister city agreement in terms of terminology, which was carried out with the approval of the relevant ministry in the legal process regulating sister city relations, was made between Izmir and Melbourne, Australia, in 1992 (Ökten, 2022, p. 217).

3.1. An Overview of Sister City Applications as an Example of Paradiplomacy in Municipalities and Examples from Türkiye

In the context of international contacts evolving into a multi-actor structure at the local level, the cooperation relationships titled *sister city* carried out by municipalities responsible for urban service delivery have been given a legal framework under the heading "Foreign Relations" within the scope of Article 74 of the 5393 Law on Municipalities (2005), adopted on July 3, 2005, as follows:

"The municipality may become a founding member or member of international associations and organizations operating in areas related to its field of activity, subject to the decision of the municipal council. The municipality may conduct joint activities and service projects with these associations, organizations, and foreign local administrations, or establish sister city relationships. Activities to

be carried out per the first and second paragraphs must be conducted in line with foreign policy and international agreements, and prior permission must be obtained from the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization. Pursuant to this article, municipalities may also establish international relations with organizations operating abroad, subject to the decision of their decision-making bodies, the municipal councils, and the permission of the relevant ministry in the central administration.”

The Ministry of Interior was changed to the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change with Article 28 (28/23) of Law No. 7153 dated November 29, 2018. Furthermore, pursuant to paragraph (p) of the first clause of Article 18 of this law, which regulates the duties and powers of the municipal council, the duties and powers of the municipal council are listed as follows:

“To establish cooperation with municipalities and local administrative unions within the country and, with the permission of the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization, abroad; to establish sister city relationships, to carry out activities and projects in areas such as culture, arts, and sports to develop economic and social relations; and to decide on the construction, commissioning, leasing, or allocation of land, buildings, and similar facilities within this framework.”

As emphasized in both legal regulations, municipalities can establish cooperative relationships with counterpart institutions abroad, including sister city programs. Indeed, it is observed that sister city relationships established by municipalities today are much more widespread and intensive than memberships in international organizations.

When evaluating the relevant articles of the law from the perspective of Türkiye, it is seen that both the local government legislation in the country and the EU harmonization process requiring local government reform, as well as international developments and regulations such as the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the European Urban Charter, aim to enable local governments to establish paradiplomatic relations and maintain these relations in the long term.

In order to better understand the structure and scope of local governments' institutionalized relations in the international arena, examining statistical data on the membership of municipalities and local government associations in international organizations is an important requirement for analyzing current trends and assessing the continuity and impact of these relations. The following section examines the nature and prevalence of these relationships in light of statistical data on the international organizations to which local governments from Türkiye and around the world belong.

3.2. Statistical Data on Municipalities' and Local Administration Unions' Memberships in International Organizations

While the internationalization process is making the participation of local governments in global governance networks increasingly visible, it is observed that metropolitan municipalities and municipalities in Türkiye have achieved membership in various international institutions and organizations. In this context, the institutional memberships of municipalities across the country at the international level were statistically evaluated; subsequently, municipalities within the borders of Tokat province that have secured membership were examined in detail based on data published on the website of the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change's General Directorate of Local Governments. However, no examples were found of provincial special administrations, which are local government units, having membership in international institutions and organizations within the framework of the current legislation.

In this context, an important development that stands out is taking shape within the framework of World Metropolitan Day, which has been celebrated since 1985 in collaboration with Metropolis and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat). This global campaign, which aims to build more equitable, sustainable, and prosperous metropolises, highlights the role and responsibility of local governments at the international level. For Türkiye, the integration of local governments into international networks at the institutional level gained concrete form in 1995, when the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality became a member of the World Association of Major Metropolises (Metropolis). This membership is considered an important milestone in the field of local diplomacy in Türkiye and symbolizes the opening of municipalities to international platforms.

Official documents titled *Statistical Data on Municipal Memberships in International Organizations* published by the General Directorate of Local Administration of the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change also reveal the development of this process with concrete data.

The statistical data table on municipalities' memberships in international organizations shows the international relations established by metropolitan municipalities, municipalities, and municipal unions. In this regard:

Table 1.

Memberships of Municipalities and Local Government Unions in International Organizations – 2023

No	Province	Municipality	Organization	Ministry Approval Date
1	Amasya	Merzifon	Local Governments for Sustainability	24.03.2023
2	Amasya	Merzifon	Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy	16.06.2023
3	Antalya	Finike	Cittaslow – The Network of Good Living Cities	6.03.2023
4	Balıkesir	Bandırma	Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy	11.01.2023
5	Denizli	Çameli	FAI Hang Gliding and Paragliding Commission	11.05.2023
6	Eskişehir	Metropolitan	Local Governments for Sustainability	11.05.2023
7	Gaziantep	Metropolitan	Asia Pacific Network of Science and Technology Centers	24.01.2023
8	İstanbul	Beşiktaş	European Network of Innovation for Inclusion	19.04.2023
9	İstanbul	Metropolitan	International Committee of Historic House Museums	06.03.2023
10	İstanbul	Metropolitan	Asian Mayors Forum	12.04.2023
11	İstanbul	Kadıköy	European Construction Technology Platform	06.04.2023
12	İstanbul	Metropolitan	Global Sustainable Tourism Council	10.04.2023

13	İstanbul	Kadıköy	European Institute of Innovation and Technology	11.01.2023
14	İzmir	Metropolitan	Global Sustainable Tourism Council	01.06.2023
15	Konya	Metropolitan	Metropolis: World Association of Major Metropolises	24.05.2023
16	Marmara Municipalities Union	Union	Global Water Operators' Partnerships Alliance	11.05.2023
17	Mersin	Mezitli	Local Governments for Sustainability	24.03.2023
18	Mersin	Mezitli	UN Global Compact	24.03.2023
19	Mersin	Mezitli	Milan Urban Food Policy Pact	24.03.2023
20	Mersin	Yenişehir	Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy	06.03.2023
21	Muğla	Bodrum	Union for the Mediterranean	24.01.2023

Note. Data from Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change, General Directorate of Local Administrations (n.d.).

According to data published on the website of the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change, General Directorate of Local Administration, and accessed on June 28, 2024, various municipalities in Türkiye continue to hold memberships in international organizations around different themes. Considering the approval dates for 2023, it is noteworthy that local governments have focused on specific thematic areas in their outreach processes.

As shown in the table, municipalities and associations in Türkiye have joined various international networks throughout 2023. These memberships mainly focus on sustainability, climate, energy, tourism, and cultural heritage. Metropolitan municipalities, especially Istanbul, Izmir, and Konya, have become more visible actors in international organizations. The networks they join are generally at the

global governance level and focus on themes such as tourism, water, climate, and metropolitan management. District municipalities have mostly joined thematic and focused networks.

As of 2023, the international organization memberships of municipalities in Türkiye have gone beyond symbolic participation and gained thematic and strategic depth. These memberships reflect the willingness of local governments to actively integrate into global governance processes; at the same time, they empower municipalities to strengthen their institutional capacities and produce local solutions to global-scale problems.

4. International Sister City Relations and Memberships in International Organizations Among Municipalities in Tokat Province

4.1. Sister City Relations of Tokat Municipality on an International Scale

The area of Tokat province is 10,072 square kilometers, and its population is 612,674 according to 2024 data (www.tuik.gov.tr), with an average elevation of 623 meters. Due to its location on the historical Silk Road, featuring inns, caravanserais, well-maintained roads, and bridges that once hosted major caravans, Tokat has been particularly notable in trade and economic history (www.tokatto.org.tr).

With a history dating back to 5500 BC, Tokat, where 14 states and 5 principalities lived and ruled, is located in the inner east of the Central Black Sea region of the Black Sea Region and has been known throughout history as Comano Pontika, Komana, Evdoksia, Dokia, Dokat, Kah-Cun, Sobaru, Darün-Nusret, and Darün-Nasr (Tokat Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, n.d.).

Data filtered from the statistics section of the website of the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change, General Directorate of Local Administration, show that Niksar Municipality, located within the borders of Tokat, was included in the World Association of Historic Towns with the approval of the Ministry (Ministry of Interior) dated March 16, 2021, and the World Association of Fortified Cities on February 18, 2008, with the approval of the Ministry (Ministry of Interior).

It is observed that municipalities in Türkiye attach greater importance to international inter-city relations than to those at the national level. According to Bay and Çalışkan (2021, p. 125), when examining the numerical distribution of sister city agreements signed by municipalities, it was found that there were 1,651 sister city relationships at the international level, compared to 1,391 at the national level. This situation can be interpreted as indicating that municipalities have a stronger tendency towards international cooperation. In the same study,

when the data for Tokat province as of 2018 were examined, it was stated that the municipalities established in Tokat province had a total of fifteen sister city relationships, including six international and nine national ones (Bay & Çalışkan, 2021, pp. 125-249). Recently, Tokat Central Municipality has been seen to be taking serious steps to develop sister city relations and has reached the protocol stage with the city of Mosul (Tokat Haber 60, 2025).

Based on data obtained from municipal officials in 2025 and utilizing information from the previous study, the final data showing the international paradiplomatic relations of Tokat province are presented in the table below.

Table 2.

International Sister City Agreements of Municipalities in Tokat Province

No	Municipality	Sister City	Country	Year
1	Tokat Municipality	Simferopol	Ukrayna	2002
		Guemcheon-Gu	Güney Kore	2020
		Komrat	Moldova	2020
2	Erbaa Municipality	Bahçeşehir	Ukrayna	2002
3	Niksar Municipality	Sovyetsky	Ukrayna	2012
		Foça-Ustikolina	Bosna Hersek	2016
4	Zile Municipality	Canköy	Ukrayna	2022
		Mamuşa	Kosova	-

Note. The information was obtained through face-to-face interviews with staff of the Social and Cultural Affairs Directorate, Tokat Municipality, and recompiled using relevant sections of Türkiye's Sister Cities (Bay & Çalışkan, 2021).

Table 2 examines the sister city relationships established by municipalities affiliated with the province of Tokat, revealing that these relationships exhibit geographical and historical diversity. In particular, the Municipality of Tokat has signed sister city protocols with three countries (Ukraine, South Korea, and Moldova), demonstrating that this municipality has a more active paradiplomatic local government profile internationally. When evaluated in light of the existing data in Table 2 mentioned earlier, it is seen that Tokat's membership strategies are based more on cultural heritage-based organizations (European Association of Historic Towns, Association of Walled Cities). This situation shows that,

unlike the themes of climate, energy, and sustainability that are predominantly highlighted in the table, Tokat prefers to internationalize through its historical identity and cultural diplomacy. At the same time, large cities such as Istanbul and Izmir participate in policymaking by being part of global networks, while medium-sized cities such as Tokat structure their memberships around preserving and promoting cultural heritage.

The sister city relationships established by the municipalities of Erbaa, Niksar, and Zile with countries with large populations of Turkish descent reveal the efforts of local administrations in Tokat province to establish cultural and social cooperation at the international level. In this context, it is noteworthy that Ukraine is the country with which the most frequent relationships are established. The fact that multiple municipalities have developed partnerships with different cities in Ukraine is noteworthy regarding the intensity of historical, ethnic and strategic ties at the regional level.

When the dates of the establishment of sister city relationships are evaluated chronologically, it is understood that the paradiplomacy of municipalities in the province of Tokat began to become more visible from the early 2000s. It has been observed that these relations have continued and diversified in the post-2020 period. This situation shows that local administrations are increasingly involved in global diplomacy and are striving for internationalization through cultural interaction.

Membership in associations formed by cities with historical and cultural heritage coming together at the international level constitutes an important dimension of the internationalization strategies of some municipalities in Türkiye. Membership in organizations such as the World Association of Fortified Cities (now known as the European Association of Fortified Cities- EWT) and the European Association of Historic Towns and Regions (EAHTR) reflects efforts to integrate into multilateral platforms that aim to develop cultural cooperation at the European level by highlighting the historical identities of cities. It is evident that through such associations, local governments not only strengthen their external relations but also gain opportunities to develop joint projects in areas such as preserving historical environments, promoting cultural heritage, and sustainable urban planning.

The European Association of Castles (EWT) has shaped its vision and mission to develop cultural cooperation between countries and cities. The association's main objective is to preserve, support, and promote the castle structures in Europe's historic cities as cultural heritage at an international level (Akman, 2017, pp. 485–510). In this context, activities such as encouraging friendly relations between cities with castles, preparing and supporting joint projects with various sources, primarily European Union funds, and organizing regular symposiums in

member cities are carried out. In addition, the union's priorities include developing common strategies for planning and preserving historical areas, ensuring the sharing of knowledge and experience among member cities, and expanding the network structure.

The visibility of local governments in international relations has increased, especially since the 2000s; after 2020, these relations have further developed in terms of thematic diversity and institutionalization. This process has not been limited to bilateral sister city agreements; it has evolved into multilateral cooperation models through participation in international associations active in cultural heritage, environment, sustainability, and governance. Thus, the interest of local governments in paradiplomatic contacts and initiatives at the global level has increased significantly.

In this regard, it has been observed that cities with historical castle structures have become more visible in international cultural heritage networks. The fact that local governments such as Tokat Niksar Municipality, Zonguldak Karadeniz Ereğli Municipality, Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality, Bursa Metropolitan Municipality, and Antalya Alanya Municipality have become members of international associations to preserve and promote their historical identities demonstrates the institutionalization of multilateral cooperation on cultural heritage. These memberships are also a concrete expression of local governments' efforts to bring historical values to international platforms.

One of the prominent international organizations in this context is the Association of Historic Towns and Regions of Europe (EAHTR), established in 1987. Also known to the public as the "European Historic Towns Union," this structure aims to support the multidimensional development of historic towns and cities in Europe. EAHTR's primary objectives include the following (European Association of Historic Towns and Regions, n.d.)

Developing international cooperation: Encouraging multi-level and institutional interaction between historic towns and cultural heritage institutions.

Sharing knowledge and experience: Ensuring the mutual transfer of best practices and managerial experience among member settlements.

Sustainable city management: Supporting holistic approaches based on the livability, economic dynamism, and environmental sustainability of historic settlements.

In addition, the association develops policy recommendations for protecting, restoring, and transmitting cultural heritage to future generations and contributes to disseminating best practices.

Table 3*Turkish Cities that are Members of the World Association of Walled Towns*

	Province	Municipality	The Union of Historical Towns	Membership Date
1	Antalya	Alanya	The Union of Historical Towns	23.02.2011
2	Bursa	Büyükşehir	The Union of Historical Towns	26.02.2010
3	Diyarbakır	Büyükşehir	The Union of Historical Towns	19.10.2011
4	Tokat	Niksar	The Union of Historical Towns	18.02.2008
5	Zonguldak	Karadeniz Ereğli		5.11.2010

Note. Compiled from data published on the official website of the Directorate General of Local Authorities under the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change.

Table 3 shows the membership of some municipalities in Türkiye in the World Fortified Cities Association (now known as the European Fortified Cities Association- EWT) in historical order and concretizes the participation of local governments in international cultural collaborations through this association. It can be seen that the Municipality of Niksar achieved the first membership in the province of Tokat on February 18, 2008. This early membership indicates Niksar's pioneering efforts to promote and protect its historical heritage internationally. Subsequent memberships were achieved in 2010 and 2011 by the Bursa Metropolitan Municipality, Zonguldak Karadeniz Ereğli Municipality, Antalya Alanya Municipality, and Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality, respectively.

The common feature of these municipalities is the presence of historical castle structures within their city limits and local government visions for preserving this cultural heritage. Thanks to these memberships in the World Association of Fortified Cities, municipalities not only promote their own historical identities at the international level but also gain the opportunity to share knowledge and experience with other European cities with similar structural features.

In this context, the interest of local governments in Türkiye in international associations based on cultural heritage increased significantly between 2008 and 2011, based on their membership dates. This trend shows that internationalization efforts at the local level in Türkiye have diversified through participation in cultural heritage-focused networks and that global interaction capacity has developed. However, it has not provided sufficient development at the national level.

When the international sister city relationships established by municipalities within the borders of Tokat province are evaluated in terms of promoting mutual economic mobility, one of the thematic objectives of sister city protocols, examining these relationships through the export values of the relevant municipalities, provides a meaningful framework. In this context, considering that sister city protocols have the potential to increase cultural and social interaction and develop economic cooperation, this study attempts to analyze the possible interactions between the export performance of municipalities in Tokat province and these international relationships.

4.2. Method, Findings, and Evaluation

In this study, a qualitative data analysis method was adopted to evaluate the change in the export performance of Tokat Province to the countries with which it has established sister city relations over time. The analysis covers 22 years from 2002 to 2023 (data for 2010 could not be obtained). The data set was obtained from the foreign trade statistics of the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce. The export data, compiled annually, are in US dollars (USD) and classified by country.

The research is limited to the province of Tokat and certain municipalities. The sister city relationships and foreign trade data examined cover 2002 to 2024. Ministry-approved official internet sources, the Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT-TÜİK), the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization, and İTO data were used as the basis for the municipalities' international organization memberships and sister city relationships. The research is limited to paradiplomacy, sister city relationships, and the impact of these relationships on exports.

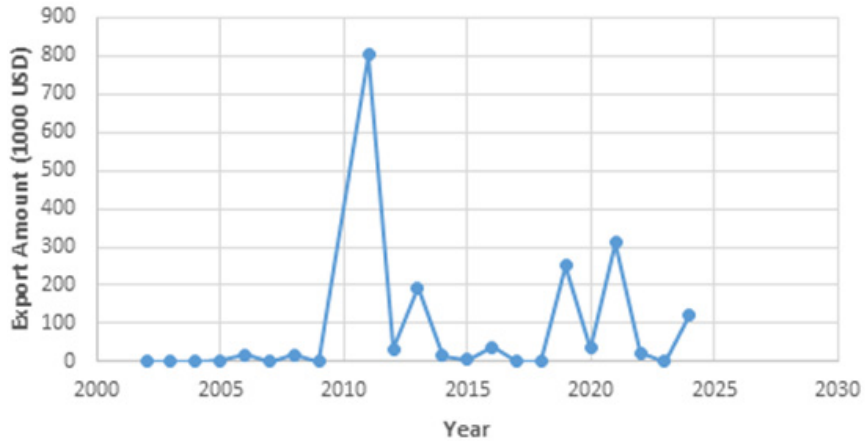
5. Export Data Within the Scope of Sister City Applications

The export performance of Tokat province to the countries with which it has established sister city relations is as follows.

Table 4

Annual Exports from Tokat to Ukraine (2002-2024) (Thousand US Dollars)

Year	Export Value	Year	Export Value	Year	Export Value	Year	Export Value
2002	0	2008	17	2015	4	2021	311
2003	0	2009	0	2016	37	2022	22
2004	0	2011	802	2017	0	2023	0
2005	2	2012	32	2018	0	2024	124
2006	19	2013	194	2019	251		
2007	0	2014	15	2020	35	Total	1.865

Figure 1*Annual Export Timeline from Tokat to Ukraine*

In order to evaluate the economic impact of paradiplomatic relations, especially sister city relations, on local trade, the export performance of Tokat province to Ukraine was analyzed over 22 years between 2002 and 2024 (excluding 2010, for which data were unavailable). Tokat's total export volume to Ukraine amounted to 1,865 thousand US dollars during this period. Exports remained at zero from 2002 to 2004, slightly increased in 2005 (USD 2 thousand), and reached a short-term peak in 2006 (USD 19 thousand). The lack of data for 2010 makes it difficult to determine the continuity trends for that year. A significant increase was observed in 2011, reaching USD 802 thousand, the highest annual export figure in the entire data set. A sharp decline followed this increase, but moderate export activity continued until 2015. This situation signals the beginning of more structured economic ties, influenced by diplomatic or institutional developments. Export volumes were inconsistent between 2016 and 2020. Significant fluctuations were recorded, with exports peaking at USD 251 thousand in 2019 but falling to USD 35 thousand in 2020. Another significant increase occurred in 2021, with exports reaching USD 311 thousand, followed by a significant drop to USD 22 thousand in 2022 and a complete halt in 2023. A moderate recovery was seen in 2024, with exports reaching USD 124 thousand. The data show that Tokat's economic relations with Ukraine remained limited in the early 2000s but showed signs of growth following institutional developments such as sister city agreements. The peak in exports in 2011 coincides with the general increase in Turkish municipalities' efforts to establish paradiplomatic relations during the same period. Subsequent fluctuations can be interpreted as evidence of fragile but developing trade relations, aided by paradiplomatic ties.

While the irregularity of trade volume may increase the visibility and intent of paradiplomacy, it does not always translate into stable or steadily growing economic outcomes. It has been observed that the sister city relationships established by municipalities in Tokat province with Ukraine have been accompanied by increases in exports in some periods, with particularly noticeable leaps in the first few years after the establishment of the relationship. However, these increases are generally not sustainable but rather volatile and susceptible to external factors (e.g., political crises, economic sanctions, war, epidemics, etc.).

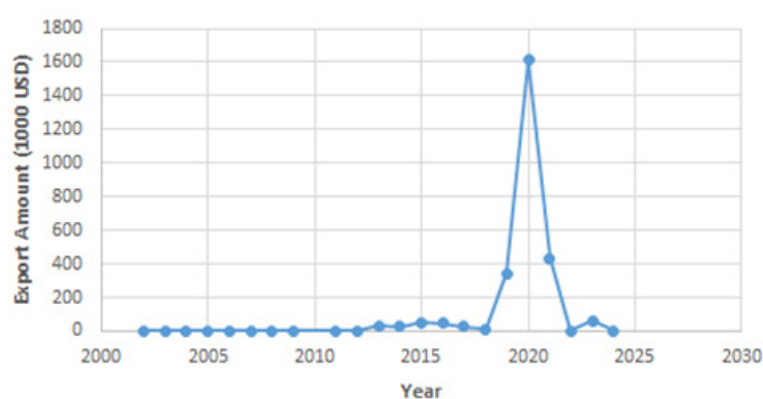
When examining the total export volume, the timeline of Tokat's exports to Ukraine shows distinct peaks associated with increased local international participation periods. These results support the idea that sister city relationships and other paradiplomatic forms can contribute to increased trade activity, even in a complex environment affected by external variables.

Tokat province's foreign trade relations with South Korea followed a somewhat limited course between 2002 and 2019, with exports remaining at zero or low levels in most years. In particular, there was no export activity between 2002 and 2007. A slight increase, starting with USD 31 thousand in 2013, followed a fluctuating but upward trend between 2015 and 2019. However, a clear transformation was observed in 2020 following the signing of the protocol with Gueumcheon-Gu (Mynet, 2019). In 2020, exports reached their highest level at USD 1,610 thousand. The zero exports in 2022 can be attributed to possible external factors (the impact of the pandemic, economic fluctuations, sectoral changes, etc.). This is noteworthy as it is the year the sister city relationship was established. However, the fact that exports fell to zero again in 2022 and 2024 shows that the institutionalization of this relationship has not yet achieved a stable structure.

Table 5

Annual Exports from Tokat to South Korea (2002-2024) (Thousand US Dollars)

Year	Export Value	Year	Export Value	Year	Export Value	Year	Export Value
2002	0	2008	0	2015	51	2021	432
2003	0	2009	0	2016	45	2022	0
2004	0	2011	0	2017	25	2023	63
2005	0	2012	0	2018	12	2024	0
2006	0	2013	31	2019	342		
2007	0	2014	29	2020	1.610	Total	2.640

Figure 2*Annual Export Timeline from Tokat to South Korea*

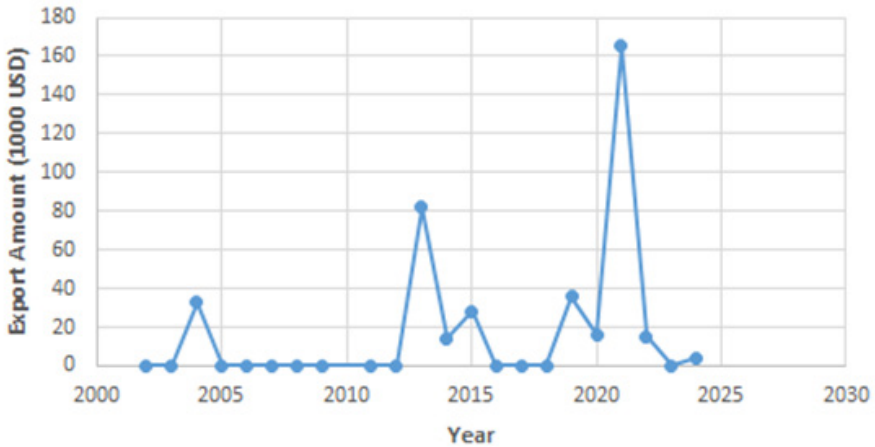
Tokat province's export relations with Moldova were limited between 2002 and 2019. However, following the signing of the sister city protocol with Comrat in 2020, there was a notable increase in export volume. This trend may offer meaningful clues about the economic effects of paradiplomacy. In 2020, when the sister city relationship was established, exports rose to USD 16 thousand. A remarkable export increase has been observed since 2020, when the sister city protocol was established between Tokat and Comrat. In particular, exports peaked at USD 165 thousand in 2021. This increase suggests that sister city relations contribute to economic interaction. Although a decline was observed in 2022 and subsequent years, this can be attributed to factors such as the effects of the pandemic, regional economic fluctuations, or foreign policy developments.

Table 6*Annual Exports from Tokat to Moldova (2002-2024) (Thousand US Dollars)*

Year	Export Value	Year	Export Value	Year	Export Value	Year	Export Value
2002	0	2008	0	2015	28	2021	165
2003	0	2009	0	2016	0	2022	15
2004	33	2011	0	2017	0	2023	0
2005	0	2012	0	2018	3.5	2024	4
2006	0	2013	82	2019	36		
2007	0	2014	14	2020	16	Toplam	316,9

Figure 3

Annual Export Timeline from Tokat to Moldova



The trade dynamics between Tokat and Bosnia and Herzegovina reveal a distinct evolutionary pattern that closely corresponds to the development of paradiplomatic relations. The pre-protocol period (2002–2015) was marked by extremely limited and sporadic export activity. Apart from modest export peaks of USD 110 thousand in 2007, 155 thousand in 2008, and 270 thousand in 2011, the majority of years recorded zero trade flows, demonstrating the absence of a consistent or sustainable commercial relationship prior to formal cooperation.

A significant inflection point emerged in 2016, coinciding with the signing of the sister city protocol, when exports sharply increased to USD 375 thousand—the highest level observed throughout the entire 2002–2024 period. This temporal concurrence strongly suggests that the paradiplomatic initiative acted as a direct catalyst for enhanced economic interaction between Tokat and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The post-protocol period (2016–2024) exhibits a more structured yet fluctuating pattern of trade. While exports slightly declined to USD 250 thousand in 2017 and 235 thousand in 2018, they remained well above pre-protocol averages, indicating a more resilient baseline of commercial engagement. After a brief interruption in 2019, exports resumed with USD 120 thousand in 2020, followed by USD 200 thousand in 2021, 150 thousand in 2022, a temporary decline to zero in 2023, and a moderate recovery to USD 140 thousand in 2024.

Despite ongoing volatility, the overall trend in the post-2016 period demonstrates continuity and stabilization rather than the intermittent, negligible activity characteristic of earlier years. The isolated zero-export year in 2023 can

thus be interpreted as a short-term fluctuation rather than a structural regression.

In conclusion, the empirical data substantiate the view that the sister city protocol has had a transformative impact on Tokat's trade relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina. While total export volumes (amounting to USD 2.365 million over 2002–2024) remain variable, the shift from inactivity to consistent engagement underscores the role of paradiplomacy as a mechanism for fostering enduring subnational economic ties.

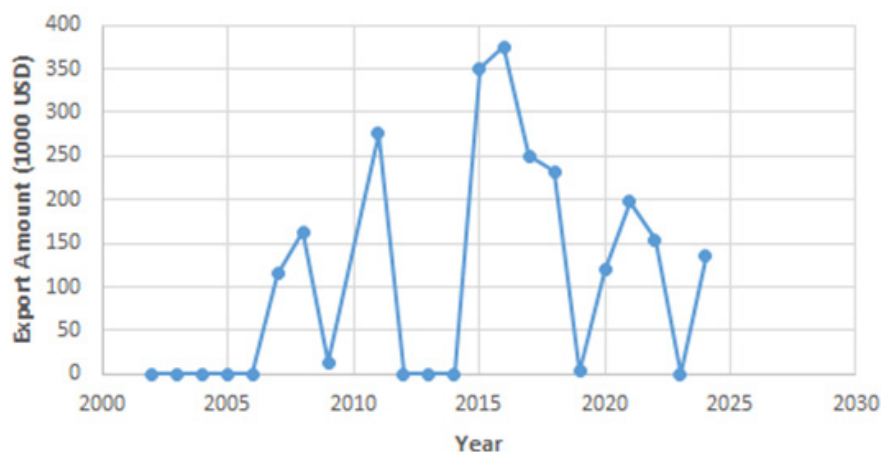
Table 7

Annual Exports from Tokat to Bosnia and Herzegovina (2002-2024) (Thousand US Dollars)

Year	Export Value	Year	Export Value	Year	Export Value	Year	Export Value
2002	0	2008	155	2015	350	2021	200
2003	0	2009	10	2016	375	2022	150
2004	0	2011	270	2017	250	2023	0
2005	0	2012	0	2018	235	2024	140
2006	0	2013	0	2019	0		
2007	110	2014	0	2020	120	Total	2.365

Figure 4

Annual Export Timeline from Tokat to Bosnia and Herzegovina



Since no specific date was indicated for the sister city protocol with Kosovo, all years were considered. Trade relations with Kosovo began to increase significantly in 2013. The period between 2013 and 2020 saw the highest total exports from Tokat province to Kosovo. After 2021, exports began to decline significantly. This may be related to weakening local relations, regional conditions, or foreign trade policies.

Table 8

Annual Exports from Tokat to Kosovo (2002-2024) (Thousand US Dollars)

Year	Export Value	Year	Export Value	Year	Export Value	Year	Export Value
2002	0	2008	0	2015	266	2021	143
2003	0	2009	5	2016	345	2022	21
2004	0	2011	4	2017	283	2023	76
2005	21	2012	5	2018	493	2024	21
2006	0	2013	341	2019	165		
2007	0	2014	277	2020	289	Toplam	2.750

Figure 5

Annual Export Timeline from Tokat to Kosovo

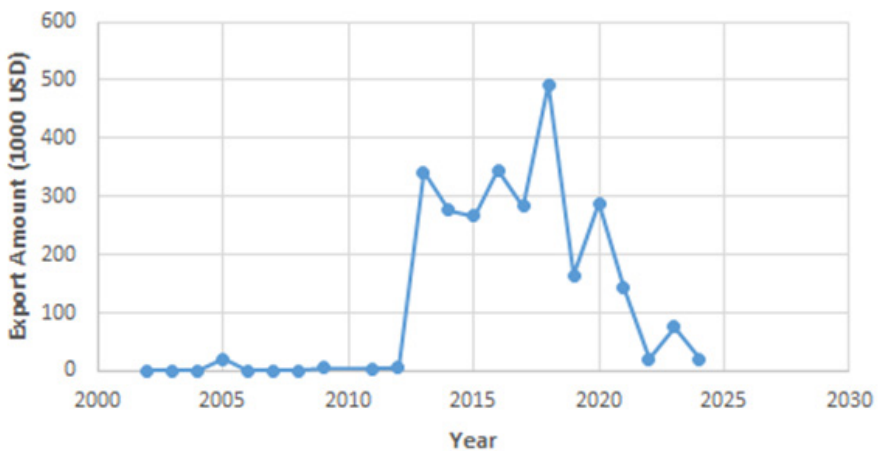


Table 9 evaluates the average export performance over the three years following the signing of the sister city protocol compared to the previous period. The analysis aims to reveal whether these relationships create lasting momentum in foreign trade. The example of Moldova is noteworthy, with an approximately 187% increase in exports recorded in the post-protocol period. This situation shows that paradiplomatic initiatives can positively affect economic interaction in the short term. On the other hand, despite relatively high export levels before the protocol with South Korea and Ukraine, significant declines were experienced in the following three years; this suggests that sister city relations alone may not provide lasting commercial benefits. These sharp declines show that sister city agreements alone may be insufficient to ensure economic growth and that external factors (global crises, war, political uncertainty, pandemic) can be decisive for export performance. In the case of Ukraine in particular, it is clear that regional security issues and war have narrowed export channels. Similarly, although high exports were achieved in the first year of the relationship established with Bosnia and Herzegovina, there was an average 60% decrease in export volume in subsequent years. This situation reveals that paradiplomacy is not the sole determinant of economic performance, despite cultural proximity and historical ties. The findings show that, in some cases, sister city relationships contributed to short-term increases in exports, but this effect was mostly limited to a short period.

Table 9*Continuity of the Sister City Effect*

Country	Impact Year	Previous Year Exports (Thousand USD)	3-Year Average (Thousand USD)	Difference	Percentage Change
South Korea	2020	1.610	123,75	↓ -1.486	-92,31%
Moldova	2020	16	46,00	↑ +30	+187,5%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2016	375	151,50	↓ -223	-59,60%
Ukraine	2011	802	61,25	↓ -740	-92,36%

Note. Kosovo was not included as no specific date for a sister city protocol could be identified.

The study's findings indicate that the economic contribution of paradiplomacy is limited in the province of Tokat and that external factors mainly influence

fluctuations in export data. However, paradiplomacy plays a noteworthy role in terms of international visibility and the participation of local governments in global networks. Therefore, the fundamental strength of paradiplomacy lies not so much in economic outputs as in the symbolic and institutional contributions it makes to the internationalization processes of cities.

6. Conclusion

This study examined paradiplomacy activities in the province of Tokat through sister city relationships and international organization memberships and revealed how these relationships intersect with export data. The findings show that, as seen in Table 9, exports were positively affected by relations with Moldova, while a decline was observed in cases such as South Korea and Ukraine. This situation reveals that the economic impact of paradiplomacy is not felt directly and intensely, but that it provides symbolic and institutional contributions in terms of international visibility, cultural cooperation, and the internationalization of local governments.

This analysis, explicitly conducted for Tokat, complements the metropolitan-focused trend in the literature. The study removes paradiplomacy from being a form of diplomacy conducted only by large-scale municipalities and shows how medium-sized cities can also be included in global cooperation processes. In this respect, the study fills the scale-based gap in the literature and offers a new perspective on how paradiplomacy works in different city typologies. The analysis is limited to export data; other areas such as tourism, education, cultural diplomacy, and investment attractiveness are excluded. Furthermore, the impact of external factors such as global crises, pandemics, wars, and regional trade agreements on exports has been disregarded. These limitations remind us that the results achieved are interpreted solely through specific indicators.

The findings obtained throughout the study reveal that while sister city protocols hold potential in terms of economic cooperation, this potential can only be realized through structural institutionalization, appropriate sectoral matching, and the implementation of complementary local-international strategies. In other words, to achieve lasting benefits in foreign trade through paradiplomacy, local governments must plan this process beyond mere representative relations, aligning it with economic objectives.

Although Tokat province is not a metropolitan city, it offers a unique example of paradiplomacy with its geographical location and historical-cultural identity. The sister city protocols established by Tokat Municipality with Ukraine, South Korea, and Moldova demonstrate that a medium-sized city can participate in international networks and that paradiplomacy is not limited to metropolitan areas. Continuing its paradiplomatic activities, Tokat Municipality recently launched a sister city

project with Mosul Municipality. The study reveals that international relations established at the local level can contribute to local development, particularly when strategically designed in the field of trade. However, for this contribution to be sustainable, sister city relations must be actively monitored, mutual projects developed, sector-based collaborations established, and coordination with the central administration maintained.

Overall, it has been found that there has been significant commercial activity with certain countries (such as Moldova and South Korea) following sister city protocols. This demonstrates that a medium-sized city can participate in economic and cultural interactions through paradiplomacy. It is understood that sister city and paradiplomatic relations can directly and immediately affect exports. Still, this effect must be reinforced with institutional support, strategic planning, and multi-actor collaborations for sustainability. In light of these findings, the hypothesis presented in the study, that sister city relations support export volume, has been confirmed. However, sister city relations should not be limited to cultural and diplomatic gains; they should be designed to support economic development at the local level, thereby making strategic contributions to the paradiplomatic processes of local governments. In this context, the sister city practices carried out in the province of Tokat can be restructured in line with a more holistic development vision in the future and used more effectively as a local foreign policy tool.

In summary, paradiplomacy and sister city programs are essential for establishing partnerships to create sustainable cities and societies. The continuous growth of the world's population makes the need to create livable spaces for everyone increasingly urgent. In this regard, constructing modern, environmentally sustainable, socially inclusive, and economically accessible cities is one of the fundamental conditions for achieving sustainable development goals. Innovative and holistic urban planning is needed to ensure that everyone can access safe, resilient, culturally enriching, and inspiring living spaces. In this context, and in line with the 11th Sustainable Development Goal, "Sustainable Cities and Communities," paradiplomacy and sister city initiatives are among the essential tools contributing to this transformation process by strengthening global cooperation among local governments. Such international local relations spread sustainable urbanization from the local to the global level through knowledge sharing, the transfer of best practices, and cultural interaction.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations can be developed:

- Sister city relationships should not be limited to symbolic protocols; they should be supported by strategic plans with concrete objectives. Municipal international relations departments should play an active role in directing these collaborations according to sectoral needs.

- Countries or cities with which sister city relationships are to be established should have sectors compatible with the export capacity of Tokat province. For example, cooperation opportunities can be developed in areas where Tokat is strong, such as agriculture, food, or textiles.
- Performance indicators should be defined to monitor and evaluate the concrete outcomes of signed sister city protocols; regular reporting should be conducted. This will enable the economic contribution of these relationships to be measured with concrete data.
- Municipalities should be encouraged to participate not only in bilateral protocols but also in thematic international networks. This will enable the development of broader projects in areas such as cultural heritage, sustainable urbanism, and the environment.
- For sister city relations to be maintained more effectively and efficiently, municipalities must first clearly define their objectives, expectations, and the parties with whom they will cooperate. In this process, the residents of the town or city should be sufficiently informed, and their active participation in the cooperation should be ensured. Municipalities should make existing best practices more visible and prioritize increasing the resources allocated from the budget to strengthen these relationships. Undoubtedly, mayors and municipal employees should be sensitive in directing the allocated funds to planned areas that serve the public interest rather than for personal gain. In addition, a council of technical experts should be established to support sister city activities, and the activities carried out should be shared with the public in digital environments. Local control mechanisms should be used more effectively regarding the success of the established sisterhood relationships, controls should be tightened, and existing legal deficiencies should be addressed. In this process, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should also take on a more selective, guiding, and supportive role (Zeren & Aktulun, 2018, pp. 12-13).

Future research should extend beyond the effects of paradiplomacy on exports to examine different dimensions such as job creation, tourism revenues, investment attractiveness, and cultural diplomacy outputs. In other words, future studies aiming to increase the economic impact of paradiplomacy should evaluate economic indicators alongside cultural, tourism, and education-focused outputs. Furthermore, collecting qualitative data through field research and interviews, rather than relying solely on numerical data, will significantly contribute to understanding how paradiplomacy is perceived and implemented locally.

In this study, the paradiplomatic activities of local administrations in Tokat province, particularly sister city agreements and international memberships, were

correlated with export data. However, when evaluating the findings, it should be noted that changes in export volume cannot be explained solely by sister city protocols. External factors such as global economic crises, regional trade agreements, war, and pandemics directly affect export performance. Therefore, the links between sister city practices and economic data have been treated only as a supporting indicator; establishing a causal relationship has been avoided. This is among the methodological limitations of the study.

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