

Competition between host cities

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

Geneva has no monopoly on hosting international organisations. New York, Vienna, Nairobi, Bonn, Paris, The Hague, Rome, Copenhagen and other cities house headquarters and offices of the United Nations and other organisations. Cities in emerging countries seek to attract organisations by offering lower costs and generous support.

The cost of living in Geneva, among the highest in the world, is its principal handicap. Organisations under budgetary pressure relocate certain functions to cheaper cities, in particular administrative and support functions.¹ Housing difficulties, the taxation of locally recruited staff and immigration constraints add to this handicap.

Geneva retains its assets: the concentration of organisations, which creates synergies; the presence of the permanent missions of almost every State; the quality of its conference infrastructure; Swiss neutrality; security; tradition. The host State policy seeks to preserve these assets and to compensate for the handicaps.

Competition between host cities resembles competition between financial centres, which Part A analysed through the example of Lyon and Geneva in the fifteenth century. The same levers operate: costs, legal certainty, infrastructure, networks, reputation and the sovereign decisions of the major actors. A city that hosts foreign institutions depends on choices it does not control, so that it must constantly justify its position.

Asset or handicap of Geneva as a host city	Effect
Concentration of organisations and missions	synergies, attractiveness for new institutions
Neutrality, security, tradition	confidence of States and organisations

Competition between host cities

Asset or handicap of Geneva as a host city	Effect
Conference infrastructure and host State policy	hosting capacity, financial support
Cost of living and housing	relocation of functions, recruitment difficulties
Dependence on the contributions of the great powers	vulnerability to crises of multilateralism

1 Notes

1. UNHCR, press release of 13 June 2007 (unhcr.org, Central Europe): relocation of 132 posts (41 international, 91 local) from Geneva to Budapest between January and June 2008, covering personnel administration and payroll, recruitment, finance, treasury and supply management; Budapest chosen for its transition costs, accessibility, time zone, available languages, privileges and immunities and the support of the Hungarian government, which provides premises free of charge. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/geneva-competition-between-host-cities