

‘When Mayors make Migration Policy’: What role for cities in EU migration and integration policymaking?

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EU institutions and a growing number of member states are starting to recognise municipal actors as important players in integration governance. However, moving away from *ad hoc* exchanges on integration towards more structural forms of cooperation, and opening up migration policy debates to local input remains challenging. Building on an analysis of the benefits of proactive cooperation between local authorities and EU institutions, this Policy Brief presents recommendations to (i) strengthen the local impact on supranational policymaking; (ii) link migration and integration policies through the inclusion of municipalities; and (iii) mitigate the urban-rural divide.

BACKGROUND – MUNICIPALITIES ARE AT THE FOREFRONT OF RECEPTION AND INTEGRATION

European municipalities are central actors in the reception and integration of migrants and refugees. Historically, metropolises such as Berlin, Birmingham, Vienna and Zurich played pioneering roles in developing local integration strategies long before their respective nation states did. This was not unique to large urban centres, however: many middle-sized European municipalities also have longstanding experience. Although the majority of small towns and rural municipalities in Europe still takes a rather passive stance on migration issues, since 2015, a growing number has started developing strategic approaches towards integration. Some even try to prevent onward migration and foster ‘rural staying’ to cope with their own demographic decline.

Across the EU, some European municipalities reject the reception of migrants and refugees, while others have not only developed innovative integration strategies but are also sharing good practices and city-to-city support

via urban networks on a national or transnational level.¹ Based on their growing experience and awareness of local expertise, an increasing number of local authorities no longer consider themselves to be mere implementing actors of European or national reception and integration policies and instead are demanding their voices to be heard in policymaking processes.²

Moreover, through lobbying and advocacy work, cities such as Athens, Barcelona, Bristol and Milan are also starting to address broader migration issues, such as relocation or humanitarian reception. For example, in 2016 the city of Barcelona offered to take in refugees from Athens through direct city-to-city relocation.

STATE OF PLAY – MUNICIPALITIES AND THE EU: A WIN-WIN COOPERATION?

The municipal perspective: Gaining new allies, inspiration and legitimacy

From a municipal point of view, engaging with the EU level – via city networks or directly with institutions like the European Commission or the European Committee of the Regions – can open up a wide range of opportunities. These include acquiring resources and funding, finding inspiration in and exchanging of good practices, gaining legitimacy, securing support and impacting policymaking more strongly.

Acquiring resources and funding

Local authorities can acquire funding for integration measures on the ground through EU funds such as the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and

the European Social Fund (ESF), as well as specific programmes like Urban Innovative Actions (UIA). However, narrow target-group definitions as well as co-funding requirements sometimes limit the ability of local authorities to exploit existing funding opportunities effectively.

Therefore, within the framework of the ‘[Urban Partnership on Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees](#)’ – a cooperation between EU institutions, and national and local representatives – the network EUROCIITIES has developed clear demands and recommendations on improving municipal access to EU integration funding.³ In the context of the negotiations on the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the European Parliament [voted on a report](#) which included several of the Partnership’s recommendations – in particular increasing earmarking, strengthening the cooperation between national and local governments and granting local authorities direct access to emergency funding.

Finding inspiration and gaining legitimacy

Local authorities can showcase good practices and increase the legitimacy of their actions by directly exchanging with other municipalities and EU actors like the European Commission. Relying on transnational and European support can be especially helpful when surrounding municipalities and/or national or subnational levels have contrasting views on migration or integration.

Securing support

If the national level is neither able nor willing to support local capacity building and integration strategies, EU-sponsored city-to-city knowledge exchanges or mentoring can be greatly advantageous for local authorities. A case in point is EUROCIITIES’ latest project [VALUES](#) (Volunteering Activities to Leverage Urban and European Social integration of migrants), which connects city authorities with volunteer organisations through four ‘communities of practice’. Within each community, four cities and their respective local volunteer organisations cooperate to identify and implement best practices on integration through targeted workshops, staff exchange, sight visits, training and action planning.

Impacting policymaking

Cities are increasingly realising that instead of supporting national and EU-level policymakers in mending existing policies that do not fit local challenges and potential, it would be preferable to introduce local expertise at an earlier stage of the policymaking process. Therefore, more structural, multi-level cooperation is highly valued by municipal actors, as is the case in the Urban Partnership.⁴

In this sense, municipalities are lobbying the EU to create binding standards for the ‘Partnership Principle’, which demands national managing authorities to include local actors in the development and evaluation of national calls for EU integration funding. However, the Partnership Principle has so far only been loosely defined in the context of the AMIF.

Finally, some municipalities and city networks attempt to draw attention to the gaps between integration and migration policies. Based on the argument that migration management heavily influences the success (or failure) of future integration, they urge local authorities to be given a greater role in [matters of relocation or resettlement](#).

The perspective of EU institutions: Increasing legitimacy through reality checks

As EU institutions are looking to strengthen their legitimacy and engage in integration issues, the European Commission and the European Investment Bank Group (EIB Group) benefit from cooperating directly with municipalities and city networks in a variety of ways. It is interesting to note that the European Parliament is less active than the Commission when it comes to cooperation with networks of local authorities.

Finally, there is little to no exchange between cities or city networks and the Council. One reason may be that cities are more likely to attempt to address their respective national governments directly than through this EU institution.

Undergoing reality checks

Interaction between EU institutions, local authorities and city networks can generate ‘reality checks’ for EU actors to examine the fit of existing EU policies on the ground and gain inspiration for new policy proposals and, possibly, funding designs. For example, under the framework of the Urban Partnership on Inclusion, the EIB Group responded to municipal criticism of narrow-target group definitions and co-financing requirements of the AMIF by developing a concept for financial blending facilities. These facilities would allow local authorities to blend AMIF funding with EIB loans to implement comprehensive local strategies which foster social cohesion and community building.⁵

So far, the European Parliament, and in particular the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, is engaging with the European Committee of the Regions. Furthermore, many Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) follow migration and integration developments within their constituency, although the information on municipal activities is usually limited to their own election district. While the Parliament is actively collaborating with a wide range of civil society actors, exchange and cooperation with city networks that are active on integration matters remain rather *ad hoc* so far.

Gaining legitimacy

Migration and integration are highly politicised issues and member states are struggling to find solutions based on European solidarity. In this context, it can prove helpful to the Commission to work with city networks. These networks showcase the importance of solidarity through city exchanges, vertical cooperation and local activities. Such a practical implementation of European solidarity is befitting of the latest Commission proposals to reform EU migration and asylum policies based on the principle of responsibility sharing. When the Commission can

demonstrate that a growing number of cities are actually cooperating on a transnational level to find solidarity-based integration solutions, it may become more difficult for EU members that are critical of migration and/or integration to simply reject Commission proposals by arguing that there is no local support for these kinds of policies ‘back home’.

Engaging in integration

While the EU has the competencies to propose policies for ‘pre-integration’ areas (e.g. regular migration, asylum, reception), the supranational scope of action regarding integration is more limited. Nevertheless, supporting transnational and local municipal activities through funding and coordination allows European actors to promote integration on the ground. EU institutions can strengthen the multilevel dimension of integration coherently through close cooperation with national actors (e.g. the European Integration Network).

PROSPECTS – MOVING FROM *AD HOC* EXCHANGES TO STRUCTURAL COOPERATION

There is broad recognition among municipalities, EU institutions and many member states that integration and (although to a lesser extent) migration governance should include the local level. To move from *ad hoc* consultation and exchanges to more structural forms of cooperation, local authorities, member states and EU institutions should focus on (i) strengthening local impact on supranational policy development; (ii) improving coherence between migration and integration policies by including municipal authorities; and (iii) mitigating the urban-rural divide.

1. How to strengthen the local impact on supranational policy development?

Enhancing the impact of municipal input and expertise on supranational policymaking should involve the following action points:

- ▶ **Pooling expertise.** Shared expertise on integration and migration is a precondition for constructive cooperation between politicians, practitioners, migrants, refugees and researchers. Therefore, the Urban Partnership on Inclusion – designed to promote multilevel governance cooperation – could act as a platform and multiplier that distributes relevant information about European, national and local activities to interested stakeholders via a moderated mailing list.
- ▶ **Forming advocacy alliances.** Local authorities are becoming increasingly important allies of civil society organisations in their efforts to develop advocacy vis-à-vis the national government. However, at the EU level, similar joint advocacy strategies need to be strengthened and developed further. Joint efforts of democratically elected local governments and actors like the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) or the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM) could increase the legitimacy of local positions, strengthen the local

impact on EU agenda-setting and introduce local positions into policy debates *before* political decisions are taken.

- ▶ **Providing targeted policy advice.** Besides advocacy, municipal policy advice to EU level actors should also be pursued proactively. In this regard, the Urban Partnership on Inclusion has managed to define central areas for strengthening multilevel integration governance and has developed recommendations for the EU and its member states. The Urban Partnership on Inclusion should, therefore, continue to play a proactive advisory role and offer spaces and resources to develop pilot projects that can inspire future policy development.
- ▶ **Working with national actors.** National actors are currently almost absent from cross-level cooperation between the EU and local levels. For effective multilevel cooperation, member states should develop a common approach to collaborating with cities and civil society – beyond the cooperation they maintain with their own constituencies. Closer relationships between city networks and the European Parliament would, for example, open up new options as local authorities gain strategic allies among the MEPs.
- ▶ **Promoting transnational municipal standards.** European institutions need to pay greater attention to the potential of transnational municipal standard setting. City networks can draw on their successful experience in standard setting in climate and energy policies to develop municipal transnational commitments to rights-based integration. The EU should support the formulation and implementation of transnational municipal integration standards, such as the [‘Integrating Cities Charter’](#).
- ▶ **Changing narratives.** The European Commission’s Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs as well as the European Committee of the Regions strive to [promote inclusive narratives](#) on migration and integration. On the local level, municipalities could particularly benefit from expert and peer-to-peer communication training as well as financial support for locally planned awareness campaigns and activities, which bring together citizens with diverse backgrounds.
- ▶ **Ensuring funding, capacity building and data collection.** Municipalities should receive more funding from the national and European levels for efforts in community building. To implement integration measures and deal with migration on the local level effectively, they also need more technical assistance. Urban assessments could provide a data-driven foundation for local policymakers to make informed and evidence-based decisions on integration strategies.

2. From integration to migration: What role for local authorities?

There currently seems to be a gap in the development and implementation of migration policies on the one hand and integration strategies on the other. While

the EU and its member states govern humanitarian admission as well as relocation and resettlement, municipalities and civil society are major actors in shaping integration on the ground. However, migration governance does have an important impact on subsequent integration. Therefore, the challenge is to find ways of including interested local authorities in national and European migration governance. Three action points are of particular significance:

- ▶ **Establishing joint planning processes.** Municipalities that are open to relocate or resettle asylum seekers should be included in national planning processes.⁶ This could be achieved through national-local dialogues that are conducted throughout the development of resettlement and alternative pathway programmes (e.g. family reunification, work and study programmes, humanitarian admission) as well as the joint creation of national dispersal systems for asylum seekers, which take into account local integration knowledge and potential.
- ▶ **Channelling funding into the local level.** Within the framework of EU resettlement programmes, member states received lump sums for each resettled refugee. However, there are no common and clear criteria on the subsequent use of this funding. City networks declare that financial support does not always trickle down to municipalities. Future EU resettlement programmes should, therefore, consider giving part of the funding directly to the local level.
- ▶ **Strengthening the Partnership Principle.** Defining clear standards for the implementation of the Partnership Principle in the future AMF and the ESF+ would enable local authorities to influence national calls and ensure that sensitive topics such as support for rejected asylum seekers who cannot return to their countries of origin are placed on the agenda.

3. How to mitigate the urban-rural divide?

Rural municipalities face challenges that are different from the urban. Their inhabitants and administrative units are often times not familiar with migration-related diversity due to a historical absence of migrant communities; migrants are forced to travel far to reach state services while not always having access to adequate public transport.

On the European level, these challenges are hardly addressed strategically. Therefore, recent efforts by the European Commission to include small towns and rural areas in debates on migration (e.g. the [Go Local Conference](#)) are of great importance. There is, however, still a need for institutionalised exchange between EU bodies and small and rural municipalities to ensure that EU funds address the right challenges and mitigate the urban-rural divide successfully. Three action points might be helpful:

- ▶ **Including rural and small municipalities.** The Commission should continue and intensify their efforts to include small and rural municipalities in existing activities (e.g. inviting representatives of rural regions to European events and covering their travel expenses).
- ▶ **Establishing specific platforms.** Small municipalities often feel neglected within existing fora or even intimidated by the ‘big cities’. As such, the Commission should facilitate the establishment of separate fora for rural areas. This could encompass support for new networks on different levels as well as a ‘Rural Partnership on Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees’.
- ▶ **Creating national contact points.** National contact points should be established to provide the EU level with information on the status quo of integration in their respective rural areas. Moreover, the national contact points could also be in charge of capacity building activities to strengthen the participation of rural regions in EU activities.

Municipal engagement in multilevel policymaking holds great potential for the design of vertically coherent migration and integration policies and programmes. EU institutions, member states and local authorities should jointly ensure that policies are relevant to local realities in order to tailor implementation to specific challenges on the ground. However, to take real effect, such cooperation must move from *ad hoc* exchanges towards more structural forms of collaboration. Achieving this ultimate aim will strongly depend on enhancing the impact of local authorities on supranational policy development, strengthening coherence between migration and integration policymaking, and mitigating the urban-rural divide.

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¹ Heimann, Christiane; Sandra Müller; Hannes Schammann and Janina Stürmer (2019), “Challenging the Nation-State from within: The Emergence of Transmunicipal Solidarity in the Course of the EU Refugee Controversy”, *Social Inclusion*, Volume 7, Number 2, pp.208-218.

² Bendel, Petra; Hannes Schammann; Christiane Heimann and Janina Stürmer (2019), “A Local Turn for European Refugee Politics: Recommendations for Strengthening Municipalities and Local Communities in refugee and asylum policy of the EU”, Berlin: Heinrich Böll Foundation.

³ Urban Partnership on Inclusion (2018), “Recommendations for improving cities’ use of and access to EU funds for integration of migrants and refugees in the new programming period”.

⁴ Heimann, Christiane and Janina Stürmer (2020), *Evaluation Report: Urban Partnership on the Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees*.

⁵ Urban Partnership on Inclusion (2017), “Action Plan: Partnership on Inclusion of migrants and refugees”.

⁶ Stürmer, Janina (2019): “Tailored to whom? – Envisaging refugees and host municipalities as central actors for sustainable resettlement”, *Migration Policy Practice*, Volume 10, Number 3, pp. 9-13.