

‘When Mayors Make Migration Policy’: The future of city diplomacy

BACKGROUND: CITIES ARE INDISPENSABLE FOR EU MIGRATION AND INTEGRATION POLICIES

As migrants and refugees often settle in cities, highly salient political questions on migration and integration become inherently linked with urban policymaking. Since the arrival of increased numbers of refugees in 2015, EU multilevel governance benefits even more from dialogue and coordination with local governments. Many cities have become integration experts, not only implementing national policies but also piloting local innovation and feeding their experience back to higher levels of governance. These efforts of local actors are supported by city networks, EU institutions and platforms. City diplomacy – both between cities and between cities and EU institutions – is gaining significant relevance in migration and integration policy.¹

The interdependency of local, national and EU policies

The local level is increasingly affected by national or international policy issues, such as migration. This *glocal* interplay between local and global challenges and actions raises the need to take the local level into account when designing EU-wide policies. Simultaneously, due to limited legal competences and financial resources, European cities depend on political decisions and budgets provided by the federal, national and EU levels. EU venues that address questions of migration and integration must be available so that cities can receive information on legal regulations, political decisions and funding opportunities. In addition, transferring information on local realities to political decision-makers at higher government levels improves policy design, especially in a field that requires multilevel governance cooperation.

Transferring local interests to the EU level

Networks and institutions representing local and regional governments facilitate and pool the competences and efforts of their members and provide channels for local-to-EU dialogues. As such, they can serve as effective catalysts directly representing local interests at higher government levels. Particularly active on questions of migration and integration are EURO CITIES, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, the European Committee of the Regions and the Urban Partnership on Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees. The rising number, variety and specialisation of city networks in the past decades indicate cities’ and EU institutions’ appreciation of network facilitation in this policy field.²

Adding value to agenda-setting and policy development

Whether through network intermediaries (e.g. EURO CITIES) or direct exchange with EU institutions (e.g. Urban Partnership), cities provide valuable insights into local needs and integration potential. They flag new developments and offer EU institutions reality checks regarding the feasibility, local fit and effects of EU policies on the ground. The 2021–27 Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion depicts cities as the key stakeholders and indispensable partners in the complex multilevel agenda-setting, development and implementation processes of integration policies.³

Fostering normative debates on sensitive issues

Cities and their networks also engage in policy issues beyond their immediate local responsibilities, such as transnational refugee reception and relocation. In sharp contrast to the solidarity crisis experienced in

Christiane Heimann

Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Migration Policy Research Group, University of Hildesheim

Janina Stürner

Research Fellow, Migration, Displacement and Integration, Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg

Petra Bendel

Professor of Political Science, Head of Research on Migration, Displacement and Integration, Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg

Hannes Schammann

Professor of Migration Policy Analysis, Migration Policy Research Group, University of Hildesheim

the Common European Asylum System, many cities and networks have proclaimed their willingness to receive asylum seekers from other member states (e.g. the Solidarity Cities network). Cities' calls for reception and solidarity push national governments to address humanitarian issues, driving normative discussions that member states often neglect at the EU level.⁴

STATE OF PLAY: THE FEATS OF CITY DIPLOMACY ARE AT THREAT

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, policy priorities, cities' budgets and perspectives on managing migration and integration have shifted in the EU. Established work methods of city diplomacy have become impossible due to travel bans and social distancing regulations. These developments are alarming, given that many refugees and migrants are vulnerable to aggravating health, economic and social conditions. Rather than fall to the wayside, integration policies should actually *gain* importance, as inclusive approaches are crucial for both short-term crisis management and long-term recovery strategies.⁵

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Limits to the established work methods

City diplomacy profits from direct exchange, such as study visits to inspire peer learning. However, the pandemic has put an abrupt halt to these forms of cooperation. Before the crisis, they presented an important step in the development of local pilot projects and (trans)national advocacy positions. Nevertheless, they tended to be selective and exclusive, as they required relatively high travel costs.

Diminishing resources

Due to the pandemic, political priorities at all government levels are shifting towards healthcare, economic stabilisation, digitalisation, and so on. Meanwhile, resources for integration are diminishing as respective local and national budgets are shortened, and local administrative staff is reduced or reassigned. Cities are struggling to establish or maintain cooperation at the EU level, which could provide relevant resources.

Changing narratives

What is more, right-wing parties are fuelling discriminatory narratives and conspiracy myths. Disinformation is being disseminated via social

media, scapegoating immigrants as spreading the coronavirus.⁶ As the economic situation of all member states deteriorates, support for immigrants is vanishing, and structural discrimination increasing.⁷ To counter these developments, effective city diplomacy regarding migration and integration policies must be bolstered by political and societal legitimation and implemented by public institutions and civil society.

Vulnerability of immigrants during the pandemic

Due to COVID-19 and shifting priorities, many immigrants and particularly refugees have become even more vulnerable. They tend to live more often in cramped places, have less access to basic services, and work in sectors most affected by the economic impact of the pandemic.⁸ Given that the crisis strongly impacts European cities and increased the vulnerability of migrants and refugees, city diplomacy is indispensable to address migration-related policy issues.

PROSPECTS: SEIZE WINDOWS FOR INCLUSIVE WORK METHODS AND POLICY DESIGN

Despite all the obstacles caused or exacerbated by the pandemic, the new reality has also created a window of opportunity to introduce innovation proactively. The time has come to leverage efficient and inclusive digital working methods and establish new alliances. In addition, the situation offers the opportunity to address pending and aggravated issues and break up thematic policy silos.

1. Leverage efficient and inclusive digital working methods

Expand inclusive virtual city networking

While in-person meetings had to be cancelled during the pandemic, city network representatives report a steep learning curve regarding virtual working methods. EURO CITIES implemented online learning events, expanded its website, and introduced virtual city visits. Pre-pandemic, transnational city diplomacy required significant amounts of financial and human resources and time. As such, mainly major and capital cities pursued diplomatic strategies. The shift to virtual meetings and events lowered access barriers and offered smaller and Eastern European cities easier access to city-to-city and city-to-EU dialogues and networking.

- ▶ City diplomacy should offer hybrid events as the future standard to strengthen the variety of cities represented at the EU level. Virtual participation in city networks and in-person meetings should remain available.
- ▶ City diplomacy should also emphasise an inclusive and noncoercive discourse between online and offline participants.

Strengthen city diplomacy's everyday dimension

Virtual collaboration offers new options for establishing city diplomacy on a permanent basis. Before the pandemic, active members of city networks flagged the issue of

staccato cooperation: high interaction during meetings, lower exchange in between. Meanwhile, the parallel occurrence of growing needs and virtual opportunities for flexible and swift knowledge exchange on migration-sensitive COVID-19 crisis management enabled city administrations to include transnational dialogue into their daily work routines. Such virtual interaction proved fruitful for maintaining relations with established contacts but less suitable for establishing new partnerships. Thus, there are particular trade-offs for city diplomacy, as personal contacts and trust-building continue to play important roles.

- ▶ Both virtual and in-person meetings should be incorporated into city administrations' daily work routines to exploit the full range of advantages and promote continuous and effective city diplomacy.

Foster EU institutions' virtual accessibility

Virtual working methods have proven beneficial for strengthening the collaboration capacities and outreach of not only cities but also EU institutions. City network representatives report that EU staff, including high-level decision-makers, have actually become easier to reach thanks to travel restrictions. As the European Commission's Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion highlights cities as key stakeholders, EU institutions must continue improving their accessibility and interaction with local governments. Offering simultaneous interpretation in meetings could additionally lower access barriers for local representatives.

- ▶ To this end, all EU conferences open to local actors should be organised as hybrid events in which they can participate virtually (i.e. beyond passive observation). The conferences should ensure that smaller cities/cities with fewer resources have options to co-shape EU agendas and defend their interests at the EU level.
- ▶ Finally, these events should expand simultaneous interpretation for more inclusive participation.
- ▶ Representatives of the European Commission's DG HOME, DG REGIO and DG EMPL, and the European Parliament's LIBE Committee should include exchanges with city representatives into their daily work routines. For instance, they could offer continuous online service to schedule bi- and/or multilateral videocalls.

Promote cross-regional city diplomacy

While worldwide connectivity accelerates the spread of the pandemic, it is this same global interdependency that makes city diplomacy such a valuable element in cross-regional cooperation. Since early 2020, city networks like EURO CITIES or the Mediterranean City-to-City Migration (MC2CM) project – funded by the EU and coordinated by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the International Centre for Migration Policy Development and UN-Habitat – brought together cities from different world regions to provide peer support. This enabled cities to strive for local, migration-sensitive COVID-19 strategies.⁹ However, most EU-funded city-to-city cooperation in migration and integration is focused on intra-EU exchange so far (e.g. Integrating Cities, URBACT).

- ▶ To reach beyond the Union's frontiers, the EU's URBACT programme should expand its geographic focus to include Eastern European and Southern Mediterranean cities.
- ▶ The MC2CM project should broaden its membership base, offering active participation to Sub-Saharan African cities.
- ▶ Finally, the European Asylum Support Office and DG DEVCO should support cooperation between city networks that address migration, displacement and urban development in Africa, the Middle East, and Western, Central and Eastern Europe. Such support could be included in programmes under the European Neighbourhood Policy and the new EU/Africa-Caribbean-Pacific Partnership Agreement.

2. Address pending and aggravated policy issues comprehensively

Break up 'silos' of interdependent policy fields

The pandemic has revealed the risks of addressing interdependent policy issues – housing, healthcare, social inequality, migration – in thematic silos. The high urgency for comprehensive approaches which ensure the well-being of (urban) populations has inspired city governments and city networks to align their thinking across different policy fields. For instance, EURO CITIES strengthened the dialogue between its different thematic working groups to work holistically towards capacity-building and advocacy for inclusive recovery strategies.

The pandemic has increased the urgency of overcoming 'silo approaches', as they can still be found in European national vaccination strategies that often provide major barriers to migrants and persons with a short-term or unclear status.¹⁰

- ▶ Inclusive healthcare strategies should build on cooperation between different policy fields at all levels of governance. To achieve this objective, cities and their networks should foster cooperation between interdependent policy fields to pool their competences for local action, city-to-city exchange and advocacy at the EU level.
- ▶ EU institutions should support such cross-sectorial cooperation with adequate and easily accessible funding streams.

Normalise non-discriminatory access to basic services

Building on the advocacy for non-discriminatory access to basic services in the Global Compact for Migration negotiations, city representatives and networks have picked up and spread the message reiterated by UN institutions and the European Commission that "no one is safe until everyone is safe."¹¹ The action imperative to find inclusive solutions creates a window for pragmatic approaches that build on collaboration between different governance levels. For instance, Berlin has launched multilingual communication informing undocumented

residents about the possibility to register for vaccination anonymously and non-bureaucratically. In New York City, persons without legal status could access municipal services during the pandemic using the city's identification card. European cities like Barcelona or Zurich are discussing similar ideas.

- ▶ To enhance such inclusive solutions, EU institutions and local authorities should jointly seize the opportunity to expand non-discriminatory access to basic services at the local level and advocacy for these issues at the national and EU levels.
- ▶ City networks should also partner with the Commission to offer cities opportunities to collaborate on pilot actions for municipal identification cards.

Promote inclusive narratives, incubate community solidarity networks

In times of COVID-19, narratives on migrants and refugees have been stretched towards extremes. While some scapegoated mobile populations as carriers of the virus, others highlighted their crucial contributions as essential workers. At the same time, many city and city network representatives observed that the pandemic inspires solidarity. The idea that public health can only be protected via inclusive approaches has fostered solidarity between urban residents. Networks like UCLG seized the opportunity to strengthen their advocacy for *urban citizenship*, arguing that cities are responsible for the well-being of all urban residents, irrespective of their legal status.¹²

- ▶ The Commission and city networks should offer cities opportunities to reflect on the lessons learned on community solidarity in times of crisis.
- ▶ They should also provide incubation workshops to make these (short-lived) local support networks more sustainable.

Link ad hoc COVID-19 practices to general integration strategies

Municipalities are at the forefront of applying disaster control measures to counterbalance health risks, guaranteeing access to housing, education and work. While these instruments did often address the most pressing needs that have emerged from the crisis, decisions have mostly been taken on an ad hoc basis. They still have to be integrated into existing innovative approaches designed over the last five years and ultimately into a coherent and cohesive migrant-sensitive strategy.¹³

- ▶ This is where city networks, member states and the Commission can support city activity. They should ensure that ad hoc practices can be linked to pre-COVID-19 integration measures.

- ▶ The latter should be continually financed and included in sustainable, accessible and transparent whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches.

The pandemic poses significant threats to still fragile city-to-city and city-to-EU cooperation in the field of migration and diversity. And yet, cities, municipal networks and EU institutions have gathered valuable experiences that provide opportunities for city diplomacy to emerge from this crisis even stronger. They should particularly seize the options to expand their (virtual) work methods and incorporate city diplomacy into their daily routines, reaching out inclusively to like-minded cities in Europe and beyond. Regarding policy issues, COVID-19 opens a window of opportunity to promote inclusive urban societies that build on solidarity among all residents to address pre-existent challenges. However, such windows may close again if they are addressed inadequately. Cities, networks and EU institutions must act now; years of building fruitful and successful collaboration are at stake.

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