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Cities and transnational migration policymaking: assessing the factors that shape transnational engagement

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Abstract: Municipalities have been found to become increasingly active in migration policymaking, both at a local level and in transnational venues. However, we know little about the factors that shape the transnational engagement of municipalities. This paper combines the factors identified by former studies as shaping *local* migration policy (in)activity with literature on *transnational* municipal engagement, deriving expectations regarding the influence of different factors on transnational engagement. Secondly, we use empirical data on municipal networks on migration in Europe in order to illustrate and further develop the conceptual approach that can be used to enable theory-building on transnational municipal engagement in migration policymaking.

Keywords: migration policy, cities, transnational networks, lobbying, EU

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Contents

1. Introduction

Literature on a local turn in migration policymaking assumes that municipalities not only become active at the local level in order to govern migration and migration-related diversity, but also at higher levels of governance (Caponio and Borkert 2010; Oomen 2020; Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, and Scholten 2017). These findings contradict methodological nationalism, which had dominated research agendas for a long time (cf. Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). At the same time, given the deadlock between nation states regarding refugee reception, the local level receives increasing attention by political actors. For instance, the International Organisation for Migration has been postulating «new partnerships» (IOM 2015) with cities to manage mobility, and the European Commission has been promoting an «Urban Agenda» to foster livable cities and innovations. In addition to such top-down processes, local governments actively aim to shape European policies and engage in transnational exchange with other municipalities (Huggins 2018b; van Bever, Reynaert, and Steyvers 2011; Shawarbeh et al. 2017). The most vivid example of an increasingly strong local level consists of a number of cities across Europe that openly oppose national migration policies and form networks to engage in scaling up (i.e., trying to promote their interests vis-à-vis higher political levels) and scaling out (i.e., exchanging information and expertise with other municipalities) (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019; Heimann et al. 2019; Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, and Scholten 2017).

Nonetheless, systematic studies that would allow for the development of a comprehensive framework and enable theory-building on municipal engagement in the multi-level governance of migration are rare. While we know that not all municipalities[1] become active to the same extent (cf. Huggins 2018b), we know little about the characteristics of municipalities that become active on a transnational level and the contextual conditions of their transnational engagement.

On the way towards a conceptual approach that enables theory-building on the matter, we therefore make use of literature on municipal (in)activity in the field of migration and migration-related diversity. We will, firstly, combine the factors identified by former studies as shaping *local* migration policy (in)activity with literature on *transnational* municipal engagement. In doing so, we will assess the applicability of those factors to activities in the transnational policy arena and derive expectations regarding the influence of different factors on transnational engagement. Secondly, in order to illustrate and further develop the conceptual approach, we will use empirical data on municipal networks on migration in Europe. We will draw on interviews with different stakeholders in this policy arena, comprising representatives of active cities, European institutions as well as transnational networks. This data is triangulated with participatory observations in transnational events and meetings in order to gauge the factors that incite an active role of local governments in EU level politics of migration. Concluding, we suggest a conceptual approach that builds the bridge between municipal policy (in)activity at the local and the transnational level.

1 | The terms *municipalities* and *cities* refer to local authorities within this contribution, even if we do not seek to imply that a city should be conceptualized as a homogeneous actor with unequivocal (spatial) boundaries (cf. Glasze and Pott 2014).

2. Analytical framework: the factors that make and unmake municipal engagement

Many studies have analyzed local-level migration policymaking, often focusing on single aspects or particular regions or cities (e.g., Bazurli 2019; Coleman 2012; Graauw, Gleeson, and Bada 2020; Martínez-Ariño et al. 2019). In these studies, a number of factors re-occur frequently as influencing local migration policymaking. They have been categorized by Schammann et al. (2021) into four groups of factors: *institutional framework, structural conditions, discourses and actors* (resulting in the «ISDA framework of local migration policymaking»). Their approach provides a starting point towards theorizing municipal (in)activity also at the transnational level. Yet, there is need to critically discuss the theoretical assumptions regarding the transnational engagement of municipalities and to empirically assess whether the (adapted) framework helps to conceptualize the factors that influence municipal (in)activity at higher levels.

The first group of factors refers to the *institutional framework* within which actors engage. Accordingly, decentralization of tasks as well as discretion shape the scope of action in local migration policymaking (Schammann et al. 2021). Likewise, *transnational* engagement is expected to differ according to domestic institutional factors, which have been shown to influence the engagement of municipalities at EU level (Tatham and Thau 2014). For example, a competitive local policy arena seems to foster transnational engagement (Huggins 2018a: 1267–1268; see also Guderjan 2015). This supports the application of the «venue shopping» thesis (Guiraudon 2000) – which posits that political actors turn to policy venues where they face less (judicial) constraints, less opposition and expect additional support – to municipal engagement. Municipalities are hence viewed as rational actors that seek to improve their respective positions by transnational action. It is assumed that the EU level provides new opportunities for advocacy in migration policy due to its relative «insulation» from electoral politics (Geddes 2000).

Institutional opportunities are likely to differ between transnational venues. We can distinguish lobbying by individual municipalities and bilateral relations from collective transnational action, with the latter generally promising greater impact (Huggins 2018a; Pflieger 2014). Collective transnational bodies comprise, firstly, formal umbrella associations such as the Committee of the Regions (CoR) or the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR). They are characterized by formal membership of (elected) representatives and rather hierarchical structures (Heinelt and Niederhafner 2008). Secondly, transnational municipal networks (TMNs), such as the Eurocities network, differ from these bodies due to their voluntary nature (Kern and Bulkeley 2009: 309–310). They focus on joint activities in a particular set of common policy objectives (Heinelt and Niederhafner 2008: 181).

Moreover, engagement differs between municipalities in centralist and federal states, with the former being more constrained by the institutional framework (Huggins 2018a). At the same time, municipalities in centralized states face higher potential benefits of participation in networks, which can be used to «bypass a centralized state» (Oikonomou 2016). Consequently, the influence of the national institutional framework on transnational engagement is difficult to pin down: while higher institutional capacity, i.e., a larger local public administration with more competences, seems to be conducive to transnational engagement, incentives could also arise from a more constraining institutional environment. National polity thus seems to be an ambiguous factor whose influence on transnational engagement depends on its interaction with other factors of the framework. The transnational level adds an additional layer to the multilevel governance in which municipalities act, i.e., the political opportunities for municipalities arising from different venues need to be analyzed.

The second category of the framework, *structural conditions*, comprises the 'urban-rural' divide, but also population development and financial resources. Consequently, larger cities are expected to take a more active stance in migration policymaking than rural municipalities (Schammann et al. 2021). While limited financial means can con-

strain *local* (migration) policymaking (Huang and Liu 2018; Marrow 2011; Scholten 2013), restricted local budgets and economic difficulties are cited in literature as an incentive for *transnational* action (Huggins 2018a: 1267–1268; see also Guderjan 2015). A third structural factor regards the number or share of immigrants (Walker and Leitner 2011; Wong 2012). Even so, evidence on this effect on migration policymaking is mixed (Schammann et al. 2021). Consequently, we assume larger cities to be more likely to engage in transnational bodies, whereas the role of financial resources is disputed, as a lack of financial means could be either a constraint for active policymaking or an incentive for transnational action. Similarly, the influence of the share of migrant population is not yet clear.

The third group of factors regards the role of *discourses*, which are understood as shaping the perceptions of actors regarding, e.g., local capacity to act, thereby converting institutional and structural conditions into local knowledge that triggers or prevents active migration policymaking (Schammann et al. 2021). Relatedly, local discourses need to take up the opportunities afforded by transnational action in order for these incentives to influence the engagement of local actors (Barbehön 2015: 141). Potential benefits can be ascribed to the political impact of lobbying, to economic benefits arising from resource pooling and project acquisition (Kern and Bulkeley 2009) as well as to policy learning and uncertainty reduction through institutionalized knowledge exchange (Kemmerzell 2017: 256–257). Moreover, engagement at the transnational level can be understood as helpful for preserving former local policies or values, or to openly demonstrate opposition to the national government (Oomen and Baumgärtel 2018; see also Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas 2012; Spencer and Delvino 2019). Local discourses accordingly influence the orientation of local actors towards transnational action. This orientation partly depends on prior experience with transnational cooperation (Mocca 2018). As a consequence, we expect municipalities with discourses that recognize transnational venues as an opportunity for pursuing local interests or values as being particularly prone to engaging at EU level.

The fourth group of factors concerns the role of local key *actors* (Schammann et al. 2021). Individual political agency has also been confirmed as an important factor for the *transnational* engagement of municipalities (Mocca 2018). However, the scope for local leadership is constrained by an actor's institutional position (Bäck 2005). Consequently, mayors are found to play an important role in local migration policymaking (Boos-Krüger 2005). Nonetheless, the influence of individuals is also shaped by individual characteristics, as shown by literature on policy entrepreneurship (Mintrom 2019). For mayors and high-level bureaucrats, multilateral cooperation and membership in transnational bodies on migration can provide opportunities for self-positioning as human rights actors and engaging in city diplomacy (Kihlgren Grandi 2020: 142).

In contrast to the influence of local coalitions of political

Table 1: Expectations of the factors that potentially shape transnational municipal engagement in the field of migration

	Institutional framework	Structural conditions	Discourses	Local key actors
Factors indicating activity	Privileged participation opportunities for collective municipal action	Urbanity	Perception of transnational venues as a chance Positive prior experience with transnational venues	Strong political leadership (particularly by the mayor and high-level administrative staff) Diverging policy preferences between local and national levels
Factors indicating inactivity		Rurality	Negative prior experience with transnational venues	Lack of political leadership and willingness to engage at higher levels of policymaking
Factors with ambiguous or indifferent indication	Federal vs. centralist structures	Financial resources (Change in) migrant population		Political parties

Adapted from Schammann et al. 2021

leaders and administrative staff, the role of political parties is less clear (Schammann et al. 2021). It seems to depend on contextual factors such as the migrant groups and policies in question (Natter, Czaika, and Haas 2020) as well as the political system (Manatschal 2013; Martínez-Ariño et al. 2019; Myrberg 2017; Hepburn 2014). Finally, local migration policymaking is affected by conflicts between actors at different levels of government as well as within the same level (cf. Baumgärtel and Oomen 2019; Castles 2004: 866–867; Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas 2012; Spencer and Delvino 2019). Such conflicts could be an additional incentive for engaging transnationally to garner support (Kihlgren Grandi 2020: 141–142). Consequently, the influence of local key actors seems to vary. In line with literature on local policymaking, we assume mayors to be particularly important. Evidence on the relevance of political parties is mixed. We thus assume the transnational engagement of municipalities to be rather independent of the party composition of local governments, even if conflicts between local and national governments could be an incentive for transnational action.

Taken together, the collection of factors suggests a higher probability of larger cities for becoming active. The role of financial resources so far remains unclear, even if there are indications that economically less well-off municipalities are likely to become active at the transnational level in order to improve their position. In terms of the institutional framework, local autonomy also seems to be an ambiguous factor: while discretion to act generally increases activity, incentives for transnational action might be higher for municipalities that are more strongly constrained by their (centralist) state. For them, the transnational level could provide an opportunity for bypassing the national level, in particular if policy preferences differ between them (cf. Oikonomou 2016) or conflicts prevail. Local discourses need to recognize the opportunities and potential benefits arising from transnational engagement. Local knowledge and values, which are part of these discourses, influence the action orientation of local actors. Lastly, local political leadership is expected to foster transnational engagement, whereas the role of party politics for transnational activity is less clear.

3. Methodology

In order to illustrate and further conceptualize the relevance of the factors identified above for transnational municipal engagement, this paper will assess the characteristics of selected cities that become active at the European level in the field of migration. It builds on fieldwork from the research project When Mayors Make Migration Policy.[2] The project analyzed the activities of metropolises in European municipal networks. It is therefore important to note that the case selection of this project is restricted to large and transnationally active cities.

This paper draws on interviews with different actors. Firstly, five interviews with experts from three European cities have been conducted to gain insights into the city-level perspective of engaged municipalities: Amsterdam has been included as a highly active city in a centralized state that chairs the Working Group on Migration and Integration of the Eurocities network. Munich and Vienna are cities from federal states that actively participate in the networks, whereby Vienna as a city that is also a federal state has a different institutional position than Munich. Secondly, we have conducted seven interviews with representatives of the European Commission (COM) and members of the European Parliament (MEP) to obtain the perspective of the institutions that are the target groups of municipal lobbying activities. They serve as a proxy for identifying the characteristics of cities that are visible and being heard at EU level. Thirdly, two interviews with representatives of the Committee of the Regions (CoR) as a formalized representation of the subnational level in the EU, as well as one interview each with representatives of Eurocities as a voluntary transnational network and the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) as a broad umbrella organization of national associations have been conducted. These interviewees have an overview of the characteristics of their members and can provide insights into which cities are more likely to become active at the EU level and how this engagement is put into practice. Fourthly, interviews with NGOs, both at the local level (Posen) and internationally (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, ECRE) supplement this data from a civil society perspective. A full list of the interviews including their respective abbreviations used as references can be found at the end of this paper.

These data have been complemented by participant observations in a variety of venues on EU level, such as meetings and events of the Eurocities Working Group on Migration and Integration, meetings of the EU Urban Partnership on Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees, and events of the CoR as well as the European Commission that foster the exchange with local actors on migration and integration. They have been drawn on to gain insights into the practical engagement of municipalities in different political venues on EU level.

The corpus of data was analyzed by qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2014) to assess the characteristics of municipalities that become active at EU level based on the perspectives of different actors. The analysis focused on the four broad categories of factors outlined above, while remaining open for unexpected findings. Analytical conclusions were validated in focus group discussions with our interview partners.

The interviews with the very different stakeholders and the participant observations allowed us to get impressions on city engagement well beyond the activities of the three cities interviewed directly. The results can illustrate or contradict expectations derived from the literature, even if it cannot provide a comprehensive empirical basis for theory-building.

2 | The project has analyzed the influence of transnational city networks on EU migration policy. It was funded by Stiftung Mercator (April 2018 – October 2021). For more information see https://www.uni-hildesheim.de/en/fb1/institute/institut-fuer-sozialwissenschaften/politikwissenschaft/forschung/migration-policy-research-group/research/when-mayors-make-migration-policy/ (last accessed: 04/03/2024).

4. Examining the factors that shape transnational political activity

We find different levels of cities' engagement at EU level. There are highly active and internationally present municipalities, whose mayors are featured prominently in the media and who openly oppose national migration policies, as well as rather passive members of formal and informal networks. An overarching observation is that the highly active «pioneers» (Hakelberg 2014) are by no means the majority of European cities. In contrast, they are outstanding examples where a number of factors interact to incite a high degree of activity, as we will show in the following sections.

4.1 Institutional framework: contraints and incentives

The institutional framework constituted an important point of reference for interviewees of different backgrounds and was perceived as a crucial factor shaping the transnational engagement of municipalities. First of all, interview partners of European institutions underlined the relevance of municipalities for migration policymaking in general (COM_1+2; MEP_2) and stated that their responsibility to implement higher-level migration policies generated an interest in transnational policymaking:

> *«[…] and really, it can be observed that for one or two years the endeavors of municipalities to engage in the topic of migration, to become active both directly at European level and in contact with the members of Parliament have intensified, because all policies… or most policies that are made in the field of asylum and migration ultimately have to be implemented locally, in the municipalities and regions»* (MEP_2, own translation).

Some cities understood their own role as even more crucial:

> *«And migration policy for me also means actively designing at the local level and not just acting, reacting somehow – but to become active oneself and to proactively design things»* (MUC, own translation).

The local experience in migration policymaking and implementation was also valued by actors within EU institutions, who seek to introduce this experience into their legislative activities (MEP_2):

> *«I think their expertise is the key issue. I mean I think we need to find a way to hear their voices much more in terms of stakeholder consultation, in terms of learning from their practice, and try to make their practice into the legislation»* (MEP_3).

This expertise was also underlined by the Eurocities representative and cited as a reason for municipal involvement in particular in fields such as integration – where municipalities are perceived as key actors – rather than in more nationally dominated fields such as labor migration or relocation (COM_1+2; COM_4; CoR_2). Consequently, the distribution of competences was mentioned as an influential factor for transnational engagement, which also depends on general state structures:

> *«Reasons why the cities and regions don't get involved at the EU level […] are the reverse of some of the reasons why they do get engaged, it is because it depends from country to country how much power local authorities have»* (CoR_1).

In general, cities in federal states were perceived as having more autonomy and consequently being more active at EU level (CEMR). This might be reinforced by the fact that the federal structure implies a strong role of the subnational level, e.g., in the CoR. According to our interview partners, those cities that are a federated state at the same time – such as Vienna, Berlin and Hamburg – thus have a distinct advantage by disposing of significantly more competences and autonomy:

> *«Well, Vienna has a special role, not only as a municipality but also as a federated state, which makes a big difference, because we also pass legislation and we are*

a very different kind of player in Austria compared to a small municipality» (VIE, own translation).

At the same time, federalized systems can be a constraint if competences are not clearly allocated, i.e., if structures resemble the «joint decision trap» (Scharpf 1988) in which each level depends on the others in executing its tasks.

Strong central governments, in contrast, can make municipal engagement more difficult, even if this did not fully preclude active engagement at EU level:

«*We do have states, I don't even want to go into extreme situations, but of course there are states that are organized in a very centralized way, where that [engagement of the local level; authors' note] has a less strong tradition. But even there, awareness is slowly growing that you cannot organize everything at a central level*» (MEP_2, own translation).

«*And then you have countries that are very centralized, such as France and the UK, where the politicians engage, but they don't have the same institutional weight behind them*» (CoR_1).

Nonetheless, if cities felt that they were disregarded by their national governments in decision-making, this was an additional incentive for turning to actors at the EU level and engaging in transnational bodies:

«*Every delegation has its own specific reasons, but you know, it is an opportunity for cities and regions to have a say and to escape as it were the national constraints, it is also a way of working, finding out what others are doing and forging some kind of consensus*» (CoR_1).

«*[…] sometimes they are not heard at the national level, so they go one step higher to see if they can be heard there […]*» (COM_1+2).

According to interviewees from all groups, collective representation of cities' interests was helpful in gaining access to European bodies and exerting influence, compared to individual engagement (COM_1+2; COM_4; MEP_3; EuC; NGO_2; AMS_3). However, the different networks and bodies are structured in different ways, which leads to distinct (dis)advantages. The more homogeneous networks such as Eurocities can more easily adopt clear common positions – at the cost of being rather exclusive bodies consisting of a limited number of mainly large cities. In contrast, more heterogeneous and in consequence more representative bodies such as the CoR or CEMR have more difficulties to forge consensus (CoR_1; CoR_2):

«*With which in the end the positions are rather positions of the lowest common denominator, less ambitious in some subjects and more institutionalist in the approach […]*» (CEMR, own translation).

Apart from the heterogeneity of its members, the function and capacities of each body and network also vary. CoR has a particular role in lobbying, because its consultation by EU legislators is mandatory on some topics. In contrast, it does not dispose of financial resources for funding projects, as does the Eurocities network, which was seen as limiting its appeal in terms of funding (CoR_1; CoR_2). Consequently, the motivations to engage depend also on the respective network or body in question (VIE). The number and heterogeneity of networks and bodies representing the interests of municipalities leads to certain fragmentation and lack of coordination in the perception of EU actors (COM_1+2; MEP_1; MEP_2; CoR_2): «*So, there are a range of networks at the European level, each with a different raison d'être.*» (CoR_1) This is aggravated by the individual engagement of some highly active cities (AMS_3) that seem to try and override collective endeavors:

«*I know there are networks, coalitions and they try to work together, but sometimes it's like each city trying to push its own magical solution. I know that Eurocities is trying to bring them together, other coalitions are bringing them together, but I wonder how effective it is […]*» (MEP_1).

In addition to the vertical institutional framework, horizontal (i.e., local-level) institutions shape engagement on EU level. In particular, horizontal complexity was expected to decrease the ability to engage:

«*It also depends a bit on the city. Like here in Brussels, we have very complicated city structures, you know? So, for them, it's very difficult to make their voice heard. For big cities under central command, like Paris, or London, it's easier*» (MEP_1).

This assumption was confirmed by our interviewees from Vienna and Munich, who stated that general complexity was exacerbated by migration being a cross-cutting issue. The involvement of different departments can imply that cities «*may lose the focus*» (EuC), which was stated to obstruct effective engagement and lobbying.

In sum, both the institutional framework of the respective state and the city, and of the transnational venue matter for (in)activity at the EU level. Firstly, centralized states generally constrain local activity more than federal ones, even if cities in centralized states might seek to improve their position by transnational engagement. The national institutional framework is hence an important, but no determining factor for municipal engagement. Secondly, the institutional setup and position of the respective European venues and bodies influence the potential benefits of transnational engagement. Thirdly, horizontal complexity interacts with the vertical structures: those local administrations that depend on a variety of local stakeholders find participation in EU venues more difficult.

4.2 Structural conditions: resourcefulness as an advantage

Several interview partners cited the relevance of migration as a policy issue at the local level as a main motivation for engaging at EU level:

> *«[…] local authorities of course engage at the EU level, especially in this field migration, asylum, integration policies, because […] cities are the ones that are actually taking and having on their shoulders all the burden that came from the recent crisis […]»* (EuC).

In the perception of our interviewees, the rising (refugee) immigration in 2015/16 constituted a clear incentive for an increasing engagement at EU level due to newly arising local challenges (COM_1+2). Southern European cities in particular were perceived as being concerned with the arrival and reception of migrants, which led to calls for solidarity at EU level (VIE).

Other structural conditions can constrain municipal engagement: Many of our interview partners referred to assets such as financial resources and human resources as an important requirement for cities to actively take part in European networks and agencies:

> *«And of course, certain cities in a, let's say, more favorable position and there are some that could be more active, but unfortunately cannot, of course for budget reason, for lack of staff or capacity and everything»* (EuC).

The amount of resources required depends on the degree of engagement, with mere participation in networks not being as costly – in terms of both, time and money – as taking up a leadership role:

> *«[…] exactly, we have now got a new chair [of the Eurocities Working Group on Migration, authors' note], Amsterdam. […] It probably was not that easy, to find someone for this. Because it is once more a lot of extra work, to do that»* (VIE, own translation).

> *«In principle, what you do is you make sure you are there and make sure that you are there with some preparation if possible. There will be some issues identified and an agenda... and then you need to prepare if you want to do a pitch, or tell about your work or a particular project, it takes a bit of preparation time of course. And if you do enter into agreements during working sessions, then you have to follow that up of course!»* (AMS_2).

For most persons taking part in transnational networks or consultative meetings, this is a side-job they have to take up in addition to their regular tasks (VIE; AMS_3; CoR_2).

> *«And you need resources for doing this. We are all running at full stretch, because we are doing all we can in that regard, there is a lot of extra work involved, and you can only do that if you are very very committed»* (MUC, own translation).

Apart from general capacity in terms of staff, engagement at transnational level also requires English language skills:

> *«In parts, the English language also plays a role. Who is fit and can keep up, so to say; Yes, that is definitely a barrier time and again, this working language, English, which should not be underestimated»* (VIE, own translation).

The complex practices of access to EU funding and lobbying opportunities furthermore imply that local staff need to be knowledgeable and experienced in order to successfully engage at EU level (COM_1+2; EuC; AMS_3).

> *«And then you have the thing that for many cities in the new member states in Central and Eastern European countries, I think the whole EU game, I mean there is very fast learning. Then, cities like Amsterdam have always understood how you can get EU funding, how you can influence things in Brussels and so on»* (MEP_1).

In general, interviewees from EU bodies assumed that the human resource constraints were more pertinent for small and medium-sized municipalities (COM_1+2) whereas larger cities had more experience and resources. In addition, the human resources of representatives depend also on their institutional position. In heterogeneous agencies such as the CoR, these preconditions differ widely between its members, depending on the national delegation rules (CoR_2).

Even so, engagement in transnational networks and agencies in itself can help to mitigate the constraints arising from a lack of resources. Firstly, engagement can improve access to information and expertise, either by information provided by the networks (CoR_2; EuC; VIE), or by learning through exchange with other cities, which was mentioned as an incentive for transnational engagement by different interview partners (EuC; AMS_2; AMS_3; COM_1+2; COM_3; CEMR; NGO_1): *«You don't always need more funding; it is also good to have more ideas»* (MUC, own translation). Nonetheless, the heterogeneity of municipalities made learning from one another and applying ideas developed elsewhere partly difficult (VIE).

Secondly, the EU level is providing financial support, e.g., for project funding. According to our interviewees from the European Commission as well as the European Parliament, this was an important incentive (COM_1+2; MEP_2; CoR_1), in particular for cities where little national funding was available (COM_3). This appraisal was confirmed by some city representatives, who underlined that funding could also be an additional argument to legitimize

EU engagement vis-à-vis other local actors:

> «*In the former years, two, three years ago more or less, we had always the discussion: 'Why do you go to Brussels for a meeting?' […] And now they see this network and even because we get from AMIF more and more money they see: 'Wow, hey, it's working, we did invest in this network and now things are coming back, even money for Amsterdam projects'*» (AMS_1).

Access to these funds is particularly important in countries that do not fund local integration programs themselves (MEP_2). However, many EU funds are currently filtered by the national level, which thus acts as a «*gatekeeper*» (CEMR). To enhance the autonomy of cities, both EU actors and city representatives therefore aim to expand the possibilities for funding that goes directly to the cities (COM_1+2; MEP_3; MUC).

These findings differ slightly from the expectations drawn from the literature and add new factors to the structural dimension: Financial means are a far more important requirement for transnational engagement of municipalities than for local policymaking. Human resources in terms of time, knowledge and language capacities are equally needed, which partly interacts with the fiscal position of a city. Due to the significant resources needed, transnational engagement seems to be easier for cities that are relatively well-off, partly coinciding with the size of the municipality. Even so, this group of factors is not determinant, since the funding and expertise provided through engagement at EU level can be an incentive and support for less well-equipped municipalities. In addition, a high number of migrants was cited as an incentive for becoming active – interestingly, though, a high number of immigrants received by *other* municipalities was mentioned as a reason for engaging and seeking to assist them, which indicates a linkage between structural factors and narratives of mutual support between cities.

4.3 Discourses: positive perceptions and shared values as drivers

When talking to stakeholders of different organizations, we found some shared perceptions and narratives. An example of a shared narrative was that of solidarity, which featured prominently in our interviews with cities as a rationale for EU-level engagement (for a conceptual approach to analyze solidarity discourses, cf. Kneuer et al. 2021):

> «*[…] the motivation really was related to the difficult and often inhumane and unacceptable conditions in Greece and Italy. And the total lack of solidarity at European level. And we wanted to show from our city perspective a more, another European approach to this. Based on solidarity*» (AMS_2).

This narrative of solidarity was partly combined with calls for tangible solidary action, e.g., Amsterdam mentioned its wish to demonstrate solidarity as a motivation for its initiative to relocate persons from Southern Europe.

> «*And we didn't want to just give ourselves a label, but also wanted to demonstrate a mindset with it and then preferably collaborate with the other Solidarity cities and develop this idea further*» (MUC, own translation).

Even so, interviewees from EU institutions suspected that the narrative of solidarity was mainly a symbolic figure. The low expectations of concrete outcomes were attributed either to a lack of competences (COM_1+2) or to doubts regarding the political priorities in cities (CoR_2).

Despite these skeptical voices, interviewees from EU institutions (COM_1+2, CoR_1), Eurocities and cities (AMS_3) mentioned the perception of achieving positive practical outcomes as an incentive for municipal engagement. This was assumed to work both ways, with voluntary engagement being ended if these hopes were not fulfilled (stated similarly by COM_1+2):

> «*I mean if you find that at some point you don't get out of it what you wanted to get out of it for certain reasons, related to factors that constrain your engagement, voilà. […] I mean […] no one is obliging you to engage in this!*» (AMS_2).

One example where a lack of concrete outcomes has apparently led to the discontinuation of a network was Solidarity Cities. It had been created in the context of difficulties with the national relocation mechanism in order to foster solidarity among EU cities. However, member cities became demotivated by the lack of action within the network, so they met only few times and have not been active for years now. Discontent with EU networks in general also arose from other factors that were perceived as limiting the benefits to be gained from engagement, such as a lack of preparation of participants (AMS_1), low possibilities to participate in projects due to high workloads (MUC), or a lack of communication and exchange (AMS_3; VIE). So far, though, cities that are engaged in municipal networks share a narrative of transnational engagement as valuable, in terms of obtaining knowledge and information, resources or political influence (AMS_3; VIE; MUC).

Another example of a shared narrative was that of a divide between urban and rural areas that was assumed to correlate with different positions towards migration, i.e., urban municipalities were expected to be more progressive than rural ones. For example, interviewees from the European Commission stated that integration was «embedded in the fabric of the [big] city, but in small and medium size it's not so obvious» (COM_1+2). Nonetheless, «*[w]e should*

also not paint cities as the ideal place, it's not like that at all» (MEP_1).

In the statements of our interviewees from cities, local positions towards migration were connected to particular local experiences, such as having a profound historical experience with migration (AMS_3) or a long tradition of policies for early integration (MUC). These narratives were used to legitimize an open and welcoming position today and were cited as a reason for engaging at the EU level, for promoting one's experience and good practices. These activities can yield symbolic benefits, e.g., for cities that take pride in assisting other municipalities (AMS_1).

Consequently, cities that share one of these narratives or that have made positive experiences with EU level engagement were more likely to engage. Especially municipalities fostering a narrative of solidarity can derive (mainly symbolic) benefits from engaging in EU-level networks. Other local narratives, such as being a pioneer in certain migration policy areas, can also sustain engagement on EU level.

4.4 Local key actors: individual leadership and party politics

A factor that was underlined by interviewees from all groups of actors was the important role of individual mayors. Some of them are extremely visible on EU level, being described as «essentially international diplomats» (CoR_1) that lobby for their city's interests. Interview partners from the European Parliament, the CoR, Eurocities, CEMR and cities (MUC, AMS_1) referred to the mayors of certain cities such as Athens or Barcelona as particularly visible local representatives showing strong political leadership, partly in opposition to their national governments. Besides their engagement for relocation, they lobbied for an increase in financial resources and more structural involvement of local authorities in migration policymaking at both European and national levels. Some of these pioneers seemingly rely on their own lobbying and visibility (EuC) or formed networks of mini-multilateralism to engage with European institutions such as the European Parliament (MEP_3), rather than becoming members of transnational networks.

Those highly visible mayors bear some resemblance with policy entrepreneurs, who define policy problems, lead by example, invest resources and collaborate with others in order to achieve policy change (cf. Mintrom 2019). They seem to be rather rare examples of strong local agency at the international level, though, since the overall engagement and relevance of local authorities on EU level was perceived as relatively low by the interviewed members of the European Parliament and the European Commission. In addition, mayors are usually elected politicians which implies that electoral cycles can discontinue engagement (MUC, AMS_1, EuC):

> *«Be it on the level of the mayor, that something new and different arises. Often, completely different priorities are set, and against different backgrounds»* (VIE, own translation).

The continuity among administrative staff of cities is usually higher, and active individuals from the public administration can also be a strong element of a municipality's engagement (VIE). They can make the difference between rather passive participation in meetings and taking a leadership role at the transnational level (AMS_2). Even so, administrative staff has less power internally and thus highlighted internal support as a requirement for their engagement:

> *«Well you need, I guess, a commitment from your hierarchy and if possible a commitment also from your responsible mayor or deputy mayor to be able to do this – that's what you need for sure, it is a precondition»* (AMS_2).

The relevance of local backing was confirmed by an interviewee from the Committee of the Regions, who expected difficulties in convincing some local authorities of participating in transnational venues (CoR_1). This seemed to be a problem particularly in cities where an additional mandate by the municipal council is required for certain initiatives (MUC), which refers back to the horizontal complexity mentioned before.

An additional incentive for engagement apparently arises from a mismatch of political preferences between the local and national levels, with many cities being perceived as being more progressive and innovative in the field of migration than their national governments (COM_1+2, MEP_1, CoR_2, EuC). In cases of political divergence, engagement in transnational networks can be used as a *«symbolic act»* (MUC, own translation) to publicly state opposition to (exclusionary or restrictive) national policies, even if chances for real policy change are rare.

> *«Gdansk for example was one – or some Polish cities were showing solidarity beyond the nation state structure, saying, yes, we would be willing to receive people»* (VIE, own translation).

Another example mentioned by several interview partners was Barcelona (see also Agustín and Jørgensen 2019; Bazurli 2019). Even if its initiative to take over 100 refugees from Athens was blocked by the central government (MUC), and the city was generally perceived as struggling to defend its diverging policy positions (AMS_1), the city was very visible at EU level.

The «backlash» by national governments after 2015 has also been perceived as an incentive for cities to *«speak up, organize, make their voices heard»* (MEP_1). Support provided by the EU level for progressive positions of cities can reinforce this incentive (MEP_3). An MEP even uttered the hope that supporting cities might help to overcome blocka-

des at the national level and in the EU Council:

> «*And if, possibly, you would talk more to the local level, in particular regarding the question of distribution [of asylum seekers, authors' note]: Is distribution REALLY a problem for the municipalities? And if it is a problem: Why is that so? […] Insofar a stronger participation of municipalities could possibly unclench a bit the blockade, in particular regarding Dublin*» (MEP_2, own translation).

In contrast to this, members of the European Commission felt that the involvement of cities could further complicate highly politicized issues:

> «*But for me it's, I mean, already the discussion on relocation is super difficult, if you looked into it you know the problem. Then mixing cities in that, is in fact for me a very very complicated issue*» (COM_1+2).

In addition, policy divergence between the local and national levels can also tie up energies and capacities that are then lacking for transnational engagement:

> «*[…] for quite a long while the perspective of Amsterdam or the ambition or the goals of Amsterdam were totally not in line with how on national level decisions have been taken on integration. So quite a lot of energy went to that bilateral cooperation between ministries and our city*» (AMS_2).

Congruence between local values and the normative positions of EU venues can promote transnational activities. An example for a clear normative position is a statement by an interviewee from the CoR, who declared that they «*always try to put it [the topic of integration, authors' note] in a positive way*» (CoR_2). Such proclamations probably make transnational venues more appealing to local authorities with a similar view, since engagement in the field of migration was assumed to depend on the question whether local actors «can capitalize on it at their countries» (CoR_2), or «*whether people knowing that you come to Brussels is actually going to cost you votes or win you votes*» (CoR_1).

Apparently, the transnational setting is more appealing to cities advancing liberal positions, which take leadership in the transnational sphere, whereas those critical to immigration are less prominent:

> «*[…] I think those that […] are less active, are those that are probably more reactionary with regards to this topic. […] And you have, I think, many more municipalities who would be against it and who are not in favor of this type of dynamics, but they don't lead and they don't raise their voices on this topic*» (CEMR, own translation).

Likewise, interviewees from the European Commission underlined that those local authorities taking a more critical stance towards migration were not the ones seeking dialogue with them (COM_1+2). This was confirmed by a member of the European Parliament who stated that critical positions were rather voiced by stakeholders on the ground during visits to municipalities, while they were less prominent in transnational debates (MEP_2). It was suspected that more right-wing MEPs might have contacts to more critical municipalities, even if those were hardly visible in transnational fora (MEP_3). Consequently, while former studies have so far produced mixed results regarding the influence of party politics on local migration policymaking, our data indicate a different finding. Apparently, party-political positions play a stronger role for transnational engagement in the field of migration than for local policymaking activities.

In sum, the role of local political leadership, particularly by mayors, seems to be even more important than expected, although motivated administrative staff can also become crucial for the degree of engagement at the transnational level. Our findings on party politics point towards an over-representation of municipalities with left-wing or liberal governments. This finding might be due to the normative stance taken by the transnational bodies under study here. Taken together, the interviews support the venue shopping thesis, which expects that political actors seek to shift policies to those venues where they expect their political resources to be strongest (cf. Guiraudon 2000). At EU level, this seems to be particularly the case for municipalities that pursue progressive migration policies, which are mainly – though not only – larger cities. This effect is apparently reinforced in cases where the national government takes a more restrictive position.

5. Conclusion: a framework for transnational municipal engagement?

The aim of this paper was to combine literature on the factors that shape migration policymaking at the local level with literature and empirical research on transnational engagement in order to gain a more encompassing picture of the factors that lead to municipal (in)activity in transnational contexts. While our data does not allow for a quantification of the influence of different (groups of) factors, our findings allow for some preliminary assumptions that adapt and further develop the framework of Schammann et al. (2021) for transnational city engagement.

Table 2: Adapted framework of the factors that shape EU level municipal engagement in the field of migration

	Institutional framework	Structural conditions	Discourses	Local key actors
Factors indicating activity	Privileged participation opportunities for collective municipal action Federalized state structures and decentralization of tasks	Urbanity Financial resources Human resources English language skills (Change in) migrant population	Perception of transnational venues as a chance Positive prior experience with transnational venues Narrative of solidarity Narrative of local pioneering role	Strong political leadership (particularly by the mayor and high-level administrative staff) Diverging policy preferences between local and national levels Congruence between local and EU level preferences Left-wing and liberal political parties
Factors indicating inactivity	Centralization of tasks on higher levels Horizontal complexity	Rurality Lack of human resources (capacities, knowledge) Lack of English language skills	Negative prior experience with transnational venues	Lack of political leadership and willingness to engage at higher levels of policymaking Right-wing political parties
Factors with ambiguous or indifferent indication	Characteristics of EU venues			

Own results, based on the ISDA framework by Schammann et al. 2021

According to our findings for the European context, the *institutional framework* can represent either a constraining or an enabling factor for municipalities. While the more independent cities in federal states have more leeway to engage on EU level than cities in centralized states (cf. Huggins 2018a), this factor does not determine an active or passive role. Rather, a lack of formal competences represents an obstacle for becoming active that can be overcome, e.g., if policy preferences between the local and national levels diverge and if there is a strong local leader who fosters transnational engagement. Consequently, an activating constellation of factors in the categories of discourses (i.e., a positive perception of benefits to be gained from engagement) and key actors (a strong mayor, in particular) can override the constraining influence of the institutional framework. Even so, our empirical assessment added horizontal complexity as an additional constraint. In addition, the institutional framework of the transnational venues themselves seems to be a factor that potentially influences engagement. The interactions between factors at the local level and engagement in either more formal, hierarchical agencies or voluntary networks should therefore be explicitly analyzed in ensuing research (cf. Heinelt and Niederhafner 2008; Kern and Bulkeley 2009).

Structural conditions can also enable or constrain EU level engagement. Financial resources in particular are a requirement for taking up an active role (see also Scholten 2013). The human resources of the local public administration have also been cited as an important condition for municipal activities on EU level. This regards both the number of staff and their abilities, e.g., regarding English language skills and knowledge. Those structural conditions that are conducive to transnational engagement mainly coincide in larger, economically well-off cities. Structural constraints thus contribute to a self-selection bias, i.e., the most visible entities come from a rather homogeneous and non-representative group of cities. Nonetheless, cities in less prosperous European regions can also become highly engaged, for example when migration is perceived as a pertinent local policy issue while support from the national level is rather low. This mismatch between local challenges and national policies seems to increase the inclination to become active, which is connected to the resources to be obtained – or the perceptions of potential benefits – from engaging at EU level. Those benefits differ between transnational venues, with some venues being sought out particularly for obtaining financial means or acquiring knowledge, whereas others such as the CoR are rather praised for their strength in lobbying (see also Huggins 2018a; Pflieger 2014).

Discourses also influence the degree of transnational activities. We found shared narratives that seemed to foster transnational engagement. In particular, a narrative of solidarity featured prominently in our data on European venues in the field of migration (cf. Agustín and Jørgensen 2019; Heimann et al. 2019; Roth and Russell 2018). This narrative was partly linked to calls for tangible action. While this could be understood as a promising way to achieve collaboration and 'burden-sharing' in times where national initiatives at relocation fail, these hopes are subdued by two facts: Firstly, municipal efforts at relocation are usually dependent on national agreement, which will most probably be denied by many states (i.e., concrete outcomes can be hindered by constraints arising from the institutional framework). Secondly, cities know about these limitations very well, which is why calls for solidarity could be interpreted as symbolic acts rather than ground-breaking policy proposals. Particular local narratives such as references to a local pioneering role also became visible alongside this shared discourse.

Political leadership by local key *actors* was a salient feature in all of our interviews. A few prominent examples were repeatedly mentioned as key figures regarding the involvement of cities in EU migration policymaking. Apparently, engaged mayors are an essential factor for transnational activities of municipalities (cf. Bendel et al. 2020; Boos-Krüger 2005; Mocca 2018; Shawarbeh et al. 2017). Mayors use the international arena to promote their ideas, represent their municipalities as city diplomats and lobby for support. They engage in different venues that they perceive as conducive to their interests and resourcefully fit emerging problem streams at the international level to local policy solutions (cf. Kingdon 1984). While transnational policy entrepreneurship is generally open to local leaders from all political parties, European agencies in the field of migration seem to be particularly attractive to left-leaning local governments, as stated by our interview partners. Again, the interaction between characteristics of the transnational venues (in terms of values, policies and structures) and local factors needs to be taken into account. The effect arising from the convergence between local and transnational policy preferences was reinforced in those cases where preferences between the local and national level diverged.

Yet, we are still far from providing a theory on the transnational engagement of municipalities based on exhaustive empirical material. The generalizations on city engagement remain conceptual and will have to be empirically assessed in a wider range of municipalities, since the findings of our research are necessarily limited in several ways. Firstly, our data stems from networks and activities of highly active larger cities, i.e., the influence of the different factors on *passivity* needs to be tested. Secondly, by relying predominantly on interview data, our findings are limited to perceptions by our interviewees. Consequently, future studies should explicitly include structural data, e.g., regarding the financial situation of different municipalities, as well as additional data on institutional conditions. Thirdly, our analysis aimed at a first exploration of the factors that shape transnational municipal engagement. Our findings point to-

wards some interactions between different factors that have been sketched above. However, the relative importance of different (groups of) factors as well as interactions between them need to be refined by further research. Fourthly, our findings are based on European venues. Studies on transnational municipal engagement in other regions, such as the United Cities and Local Governments of Africa (UCLG Africa), should assess whether the framework proposed here contains explanatory potential for those contexts, as well.

These research gaps demonstrate that we still have a long road ahead before we fully understand transnational municipal engagement in different institutional and political contexts. Nonetheless, this contribution has shown that bringing together literature on local migration policymaking and transnational networks can provide fruitful insights and point out ways ahead. As a next step, researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds should join forces more frequently to develop and test hypotheses on the factors that shape municipal transnational (in)activity and to go beyond single and small-n case studies. The framework suggested here can provide a starting point for such systematic future studies that test and refine our results.

6. References

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7. Annexe: list of interviews

Cities:

- AMS_1: Amsterdam (1)
- AMS_2: Amsterdam (2)
- AMS_3: Amsterdam (3)
- MUC: Munich
- VIE: Vienna

EU bodies

- COM_1+2: European Commission (Representative of DG Home, Directorate General Migration and Home Affairs; together with representative of the Urban Agenda on Inclusion)
- COM_3: European Commission
- COM_4: European Commission (Joint Research Center)
- COM_5: European Commission (Joint Research Center)
- MEP_1: European Parliament
- MEP_2: European Parliament
- MEP_3: European Parliament
- CoR_1: Committee of the Regions
- CoR_2: Committee of the Regions, CIVEX commission

Transnational bodies

- EuC: Eurocities
- CEMR: Council of European Municipalities and Regions

NGOs

- NGO_1: Posen
- NGO_2: European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE)

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