

Local authorities, human rights and the reception and integration of forced migrants in Greece and Italy

Tihomir Yonkov Sabchev

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Lokale autoriteiten, mensenrechten en de opvang en integratie van
gedwongen migranten in Griekenland en Italië
(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

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Tihomir Yonkov Sabchev

geboren op 20 mei 1988
te Kazanlak, Bulgarije

Utrecht University
Faculty of Law, Economics and Governance
School of Law
<https://www.uu.nl/>

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Promotor:

Prof. dr. B. M. Oomen

Copromotor:

Dr. M.G.N. Baumgärtel

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

Aim and context of the dissertation

This dissertation yields insights into two rather recent, quickly expanding, and closely related research areas: the role of municipalities in the reception and integration of forced migrants, and the rise and proliferation of human rights cities. It comprises of five stand-alone and at the same time interrelated treatises that highlight the way local authorities in Greece and Italy contributed to the protection and fulfilment of forced migrants' fundamental rights in the last decade, and in particular amidst and after 2015's 'long summer of migration'. It presents the results of an interdisciplinary desk and empirical research, which integrates conceptual and theoretical insights from migration and refugee studies, international human rights law, leadership studies, local government studies, urban policy-making, and crisis management literature.

The treatises that make part of this dissertation were written individually (Chapters 2, 3, 5, and 6) and collectively (Chapter 4) in my capacity as a member of the 'Cities of Refuge' research team at Utrecht University. 'Cities of Refuge' is a 5-year (2017-2022) research project funded by the Dutch Research Council (Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek), which explores the relevance of international human rights as law, practice, and discourse, to how local governments welcome and integrate forced migrants. Overall, the project included research activities in six countries that greatly differ in terms of constitutional dispensation, level of decentralisation, and intensity of arrivals: Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Turkey, Italy, and Greece. The focus of this dissertation is on the latter two countries, as the main entry points of forced migrant into the European Union in 2015.

Conjectures and on-the-ground reality

On a sunny spring day back in 2019, I was sitting in a small café in Greece and discussing the reception of forced migrants with a local resident. My interlocutor had directly and voluntarily participated in the provision of humanitarian assistance to people landing on the shores of one of the Aegean islands for several years. He explained in detail how locals had self-mobilised and provided food, clothes, and shelter to thousands of migrants fleeing persecution and rights violations. Towards the end of our discussion, when I asked him about the protection and fulfilment of the human rights of recently arrived forced migrants in Greece, he noted:

'There is no such thing in Greece as human rights. I thought you knew that... You do, don't you?'

His exaggeration prompted me to reflect upon my own understanding of the universality and inalienability of human rights within the country-contexts of my doctoral research. When I started working on the 'Cities of Refuge' project in late 2017, I did share – at least partially – the pessimistic view of my interlocutor. Among the reasons were the adverse record of the Greek State before the European Court of Human Rights (2021) and several landmark judgements against Greece for violating the fundamental rights of forced migrants (for example, "M.S.S. v. Belgium and Greece," 2011; "Chowdury and Others v. Greece," 2017). In addition, during the first months of my field research, I had visited several large reception centres for asylum seekers on the Greek mainland, as well as the 'hotspot' on the island of Samos. These visits, and especially the latter one, had brought me face to face with the abyss between *de jure* commitments and obligations under international and European human rights law, and *de facto* situation on the ground in relation to forced migrants' rights and reception conditions. In Greece, human rights were surely neither everywhere, nor for everyone.

Nevertheless, before meeting my interlocutor, I had also visited several municipalities across Greece, which had recently experienced the sudden arrival and settlement of forced migrants. My findings there were in direct contrast to my expectations. I discovered how local authorities, amidst an acute financial crisis and severe cuts in budget and personnel, had managed to effectively mobilise resources in order to safeguard and fulfil forced migrants' fundamental rights. Examples included municipal policies and practices that facilitated access to adequate housing, healthcare, legal aid, and social services. Rather than limited to the initial phase of reception, many municipal initiatives were designed with the aim of integrating the newly arrived migrants into local communities. Strikingly enough, such initiatives had emerged in a very restrictive institutional context, where local governments have no mandate in the asylum/reception domain, and have only limited competences in relation to migrant integration. Hence, even if no Greek municipality had officially self-designated as a 'human rights city', my research had shown me that there were municipalities which had successfully addressed some of the human rights gaps in the field of migration governance. In Greece, the human rights of forced migrants indeed 'existed', albeit being largely dependent on one's location.

Several months after the aforementioned conversation, I moved to Italy to conduct my field research there. Notwithstanding my initial pessimism, there were rays of hope as regards the human rights of forced migrants in the country, especially when it comes to the role of municipalities. Just as in the case of Greece, the Italian State has been found in violation of migrants' human rights on numerous occasions (for example, "Hirsi Jamaa and Others v. Italy," 2012; "Khlaifia and Others v. Italy," 2016). In contrast to the Greek context, however, there were a number of local governments in Italy that were particularly vocal when it comes to protecting forced migrants' rights, and had explicitly engaged in developing human rights-based municipal policies and practices. In addition, local governments in Italy have considerably more competences in relation to the reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees, which provides them a larger space for discretion in this policy domain.

Regrettably, my field research in Italy was abruptly interrupted by the Covid-19 outbreak in the spring of 2020. Nevertheless, the data that I had managed to collect indicated that some municipalities had proactively developed innovative and effective policies and practices to protect and fulfil the human rights of locally residing forced migrants (see Chapter 4 and Chapter 5). Importantly, this part of my research contributed to shedding light not only on the role of local governments in strengthening human rights effectiveness on the ground, but also on how local governments can strategically use human rights as law, practice, and discourse in their confrontations with higher levels of public authority.

In sum, at the outset of my PhD research, I was rather sceptical about the potential of Greek and Italian local authorities to effectively safeguard the human rights of the forced migrants on their territory. In this respect, my expectation was that my inquiry into the role of municipalities in welcoming and integrating forced migrants would be an intellectual journey through a rather bleak landscape. However, I had underestimated the willingness of local government officials and the ability of municipal bureaucracies to deliver on human rights promises that their national governments had overlooked. To a large extent, the following chapters of this dissertation foreground the reasons that made me reconsider my initial scepticism, and recognise the potential – but also the limits – of local authorities in strengthening forced migrants' human rights, and the human rights regime in general.

In the remainder of this introduction, I situate the research topic of the dissertation within the current scholarship on the role of local authorities in: (1) forced migrants' reception and integration; and (2) the process of human

rights localisation. In addition, I briefly elaborate on the research objectives and questions, the methodological challenges, and the data used in the separate treatises. Lastly, I present a brief outline of the subsequent chapters and outline the interconnectedness between them.

Local authorities, forced migrants, and human rights

This is a propitious time to study the nexus between local authorities, the arrival and settlement of forced migrants, and the protection and fulfilment of human rights at the local level.

To begin, local authorities in different European countries have been designing and implementing their own policies for immigrants since at least the 1960s (Hackett, 2015). However, the study of local responses to immigration and increasing diversity gained prominence only in the last two decades (Alexander, 2003, 2007; Poppelaars & Scholten, 2008; Caponio & Borkert, 2010; Filomeno, 2016; Caponio, Scholten, & Zapata-Barrero, 2019). This 'local turn' in the literature (Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, & Scholten, 2017) has highlighted the significant differences that often exist between the national and the local level in governing migration and migrant integration (Scholten, 2016). Most research has portrayed local governments as more pragmatic, welcoming, and inclusive towards immigrants than the respective national authorities (Jørgensen, 2012; Zapata-Barrero, 2017; Scholten, 2018). In contrast, some scholars have also noted the rise and proliferation of local policies of exclusion (Ambrosini, 2013, 2017).

Until recently, however, the role of local authorities in the reception and settlement of forced migrants in particular had remained only at the margins of migration and refugee studies. This comes as no surprise, given that matters pertaining to asylum and reception are governed by legal and policy frameworks at the national and supranational level, with local governments having little to no mandate in this domain. Nevertheless, the proactive response of many municipalities to the increased arrival of forced migrants to Europe in the last decade provided a strong impetus for research in this area (Doomernik & Glorius, 2017; Scholten et al., 2017). As one would expect, most studies focused on the way large cities and small towns alike filled the gaps left by national governments, providing humanitarian assistance, shelter, and basic services to newcomers (Glorius & Doomernik, 2020). This was the case both in frontline states, such as Italy and Greece (Bazurli, 2019; Dicker, 2017), and in destination countries like Germany (Hinger, Schäfer, & Pott, 2016). Importantly, local authorities from very different institutional contexts

developed similarly innovative and effective strategies for the dignified reception of forced migrants (Geuijen, Oliver, & Dekker, 2020; Sabchev, 2021), implicitly or explicitly diverging their policies from more restrictive national frameworks (Oomen, Baumgärtel, Miellet, Durmus, & Sabchev, 2021). In short, regardless of their limited mandate, local authorities in Europe had *de facto* become active agents in shaping forced migrants' reception and local integration.

In parallel with the increased attention to the relevance of the local level in migration and refugee studies, a similar 'local turn' has taken place in human rights scholarship, albeit to a lesser extent. Human rights research has been traditionally focused on the role of sovereign states as the main protectors and guarantors – and at the same time the main violators – of human rights. More recently, however, this state-centrism has been overcome, especially in analyses pertaining to human rights implementation. Legal scholars, sociologists, and anthropologists alike have invested considerable efforts in studying the way in which civil society organisations (De Feyter, Parmentier, Timmerman, & Ulrich, 2011) individuals (Merry, 2006), and subnational public authorities (Marx et al., 2015; Oomen, Davis, & Grigolo, 2016) 'localise' international human rights law.

One particularly intriguing development reflected in this scholarship is the rise and proliferation of human rights cities, as instances of local governments that explicitly base their policies on human rights treaties (Oomen & Baumgärtel, 2014; Oomen et al., 2016; Grigolo, 2019). Human rights cities invoke binding international agreements to challenge the limitations imposed by restrictive national laws and policies, and to expand the rights of all locally present individuals, including forced migrants (Oomen, Baumgärtel, & Durmuş, 2021). Examples are municipal initiatives grounded in human rights law, which seek to provide universal access to adequate shelter, healthcare, or other basic services (Baumgärtel & Oomen, 2019). Such human rights invocations also enjoy the support of international organisations and institutions, with the United Nations Human Rights Council recently acknowledging that local governments indeed have 'shared and complementary duties [along with States] to respect, protect and fulfil human rights' (2015, p. 5). As can be expected, however, they can escalate into acute political and legal confrontations between local and national authorities, especially when they seek to expand the rights of non-citizens. In this respect, while local governments have at times managed to successfully protect and realise forced migrants' human rights by mobilising international law, their powers remain ultimately constrained by national constitutional orders (Oomen, Baumgärtel, & Durmuş, 2021; Hirschl, 2020).

In addition to engaging with human rights in a legal formalistic way, local authorities can also contribute to strengthening human rights effectiveness through their role as welfare providers. Recent trends of decentralisation across Europe have shifted the responsibility for the delivery of many public services to the local level. As a result, the way in which municipalities facilitate the access to these services can directly influence the chances of locally residing (forced) migrants to enjoy a range of social rights enshrined in international and regional human rights treaties (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2015, p. 8). Notably, this can help addressing gaps in the implementation of human rights law (Kennedy, 2001), which, as mentioned above, are foreign to neither Greece nor Italy. Lastly, local authorities can also use human rights discursively as widely accepted moral-universal norms in order to strengthen the legitimacy of welcoming and inclusive municipal policies for (forced) migrants (Roodenburg, 2019).

The nexus between the rise of local authorities as active agents in the governance of forced migrants' reception and integration and their emerging role as on-the-ground human rights guarantors was well evident in the 2015 'refugee crisis' and its aftermath in Europe. In the general context of a widespread adhococracy (Chapter 2), sudden migrant arrivals took many municipalities in Greece and Italy by surprise. Some local authorities responded to the challenge by proactively mobilising available resources, and by providing temporary shelter and assistance to newcomers and 'people on the move' with often ambiguous legal status. Following the introduction of stricter border controls by Schengen countries, a number of Greek and Italian municipalities turned from places of transit to places of arrival and settlement for forced migrants. With central governments struggling to accommodate the large number of newcomers – especially in the case of Greece – some local governments effectively became the ultimate protectors and guarantors of forced migrants' human rights. This situation undoubtedly posed great challenges to local authorities at a time when they were still struggling with the consequences of the recent economic crisis. However, it also presented an opportunity for them to demonstrate their capacity to safeguard human rights, and to successfully navigate the 'sprint of reception and the marathon of integration' of forced migrants.

Against this background, the motives of local authorities to design and implement human rights-based policies and practices that directly address the needs of forced migrants remain underexplored. The same applies to the strategies local governments use in pursuing often different objectives than the ones set at the national level. Furthermore, the question of the potential and limits of local authorities to effectively protect and fulfil forced migrants' fundamental rights

remains open. Considering all these, the dissertation investigates why and how some Greek and Italian municipalities proactively defended and fulfilled forced migrants' human rights, and sheds light on the consequences of their actions. The separate treatises aim to advance the knowledge of:

(1) the reasons that prompted local authorities to engage in migration governance matters that fall outside their institutional mandate. For example, did the context of large and sudden arrivals, and overburdened or unwilling to take responsibility central governments simply not leave other option for local authorities but to act (Doomernik & Ardon, 2018)? Or did the pragmatic problem coping that characterises municipal responses to migration facilitate the development of local approaches to reception, which often diverged from the logic of more politicised overarching national strategies (Poppelaars & Scholten, 2008)? Alternatively, were there any other incentives for local authorities to actively intervene in addressing the consequences of forced migrants' arrivals?

(2) the protagonists behind instances of municipal policy activism in the reception and integration of forced migrants. To what extent, for instance, mayors (Betts, Memişoğlu, & Ali, 2021), other municipal officials (Bazurli, 2019), or civil society (Oikonomakis, 2018; Fouskas, 2019) can influence the design and implementation of local policies and practices for forced migrants?

(3) the strategies that local authorities apply to strengthen the protection of forced migrants' human rights on the ground. How do local authorities use their space for discretion in the field of reception and integration in order to develop distinct local responses to the arrival and settlement of forced migrants (Oomen, Baumgärtel, Miellet, et al., 2021)? In addition, in the context of austerity and budget cuts, what kind of resources do municipal governments mobilise in order to provide decent reception conditions and access to services for forced migrants?

and (4) the motives behind local authorities' engagement with human rights as law, practice, and discourse in the field of migration governance. More specifically, what triggers the local use of human rights as a legal and discursive tool in 'uphill battles' against higher levels of government pertaining to the presence and rights of forced migrants (Baumgärtel & Oomen, 2019)?

Methodological considerations and data sources

Local authorities, of course, do not operate in a vacuum. Their responses to the arrival and settlement of forced migrants constitute part of a complex multi-level governance system, which includes both institutional and civil society actors (Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2017; Ambrosini, Cinalli, & Jacobson, 2020). Being the lowest tier of public authority, local governments are expected to conform with decisions taken by higher levels of government. Nevertheless, they operate within a system of legal pluralism shaped by multiple normative orders. This gives local authorities the possibility to invoke legal instruments from different levels – including international human rights law – in order to 'decouple' their policies from the ones at the national level (Baumgärtel & Oomen, 2019, p. 173). At the same time, local policies and practices for forced migrants are commonly shaped by a number of civil society stakeholders. Non-governmental and religious organisations, migrant associations, and private businesses are only a small part of the multitude of actors that can influence local 'landscapes of asylum' (Hinger et al., 2016). In sum, the governance of reception and integration in municipalities is a multi-level and poly-centric process marked by both conflicts and collaborations.

In addition, local authorities themselves constitute a complex microcosm inhabited by politicians, executive officials, and practitioners. The decisions and actions of these individuals can have a direct impact on the design and implementation of local reception and integration policies, as well as on the translation of international human rights law to local contexts (Merry, 2006). In this respect studies have highlighted, for instance, the importance of mayors (Betts et al., 2021) and street-level bureaucrats (Oomen & Leenders, 2020). That said, municipal officials do not operate in isolation from their institutional and social environments. Their behaviour can be shaped by numerous factors, such as the boundaries of their formal decision-making power (Terlouw & Böcker, 2019), the access to relevant information and networks (Oomen, 2020; Caponio & Clément, 2021), the availability of funds and other resources (Sabchev, 2021), etc.

In view of this complexity, the dissertation zooms in on several municipalities and opens the black box of migration governance and human rights localisation. It investigates the causal capacity of both agency and structure in shaping local responses to the arrival and settlement of forced migrants, and makes conceptual, theoretical, and methodological contributions to the migration, refugee, and human rights literature. Accordingly, Chapter 3, for example, relies on the concept of individual agency of human rights users to shed light on the possible reasons for invoking human rights in municipal policies for forced migrants. Chapter 4

theorises the role of local political leadership in the reception of forced migrants and foregrounds the potential of mayors to directly contribute to the realisation of forced migrants' fundamental rights, even when local governments lack formal powers in the asylum policy domain. Chapter 2 contributes to recent debates on the added value of different analytical approaches to studying local migration policies (Filomeno, 2016; Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2017). More concretely, it discusses in detail the benefits of applying the assemblage approach in migration policy research, which entails analysing local policies for forced migrants as part of a broader process of change that encompasses actors, factors, and forces from different levels (Youdell, 2015, p. 111).

The dissertation's focus on Greece and Italy is based on the important similarities, but also on some notable differences between these countries in relation to the research topic. Both of them are 'frontline' EU Member States and faced disproportionately high numbers of forced migrants' arrivals in the last decade amidst prolonged conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. In addition, and in line with the above discussion, the governance of forced migrants' reception and integration in both countries involves a complex assemblage of state and non-state actors from different levels (Ambrosini, 2020; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018). When it comes to the role of local authorities, however, there are also important differences. In the much more decentralised Italian state, municipalities can formally participate in both the reception and integration of forced migrants at the local level (Marchetti, 2020). In contrast, in the more centralised Greek administrative system, municipalities have no mandate in the area of reception and have only limited competences in relation to the integration of forced migrants (Anagnostou, Kontogianni, Skleparis, & Tzogopoulos, 2016). Overall, while the dissertation does not aim to compare the effect of country-contexts on the respective local responses to forced migrants' arrivals, the aforementioned similarities and differences between Greece and Italy allow for a discussion on the broader application of the research findings from the separate treatises, as presented in the final Chapter 7.

In terms of research design, the following chapters present separate qualitative case studies. Each treatise outlines concrete research questions and provides details on the respective methodology. The case studies focus on municipalities of different size and scale, which either implicitly or explicitly have engaged with the protection and fulfilment of forced migrants' human rights. Elaborated justifications regarding the selection of cases are provided in each treatise. All data presented in the dissertation has been collected in the framework of the 'Cities of Refuge' project, with the main source of information being qualitative primary

data gathered through semi-structured interviews and participant observation. In addition, secondary data collected through desk research have been extensively used, especially for the purpose of triangulation. Examples include legislation, policy documents, grey literature, (social) media sources, etc. All materials, interview transcriptions, and field notes were incorporated into and analysed with NVivo. Further clarifications in relation to the data collection and analysis are also provided in each treatise.

Outline of the dissertation

Each of the five subsequent chapter has been published or submitted for publication either as an article in an academic journal, or as a contribution to an edited volume. Although the chapters can be read as stand-alone treatises, they also complement each other in line with the overall research topic and objectives outlined above.

Chapter 2 focuses on the 'against all odds' migration policy activism of the Municipality of Thessaloniki in Greece. More specifically, it explores why and how Thessaloniki's local government developed its own progressive reception and integration policies for forced migrants in recent times, despite the numerous structural constraints it faced. The case study largely confirms the aforementioned assumption that local responses to immigration are shaped by complex interactions between multiple actors, factors, and forces operating at different levels. At the same time, it highlights the crucial role that proactive and discerning mayors can play in the enactment of effective municipal responses to the arrival and settlement of forced migrants. Lastly, Thessaloniki's case also pinpoints the relevance of building alliances with local, international, and transnational partners to the development of municipal reception and integration policies within very restrictive institutional and financial frameworks.

On the basis of these insights, Chapter 3 probes further into the role of mayors in municipal responses to forced migrants' arrivals. To this end, I initially develop a novel conceptual framework for studying local political leadership in the reception of forced migrants. Subsequently, I apply this conceptual framework to a qualitative comparative case study in two Greek municipalities. The analysis indicates that mayors' decisions and actions can significantly impact the design and implementation of local policies for forced migrants. Ultimately, the chapter argues that by exercising interactive and multi-level political leadership, mayors

can increase their chances of advancing strategic goals in migration governance, and by extension, strengthen the protection and fulfilment of migrants' human rights.

Chapter 4 is the results of a collective research effort undertaken with two of my colleagues from the 'Cities of Refuge' team: Sara Miellel and Elif Durmuş. It maintains the focus on the capacity of individuals to directly influence migration governance and human rights realisation at the local level. However, it adopts a broader perspective and discusses how public officials working in local government structures can strengthen forced migrants' rights by translating human rights law and ideas into concrete municipal reception and integration policies and practices. The chapter introduces the concept of individual agency of human rights users within local authorities, and illustrates the relevance of this concept to empirical analyses of local migration policy-making in Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey. The findings suggest that municipal officials' background, motivations, and interactions can conduce to invoking human rights at the local level, and consequently improve the reception conditions and integration prospects of forced migrants.

Chapter 5 reorients the focus of inquiry from the role of individual agency to the causal capacity of structural factors. It highlights the way ideologically-driven conflicts between national and subnational levels of government in the domain of migration can trigger and facilitate the process of human rights localisation. The chapter zooms in on the Italian context and presents the case of Bologna as a city that has explicitly engaged with the adoption, institutionalisation, and implementation of human rights in recent years. It shows that Bologna's local authorities used strategically human rights law, practice, and discourse to develop inclusive local migration policies and practices, and thus counter the negative effects of stricter immigration laws and policies at the national level. The findings illustrate the need to move beyond the traditional focus on the dialectics between the local and the 'global' in human rights city analyses, and fully account for the relevance of intergovernmental relations within the state to the process of becoming and being a human rights city.

Chapter 6 brings the focus back to the Greek context to explore the origin, potential and limits of municipal solidarity with refugees. It presents the peculiar case of the small island of Tilos, which despite its limited resources managed to provide first reception to thousands of forced migrants in recent times. Following the 2015 'refugee crisis', Tilos municipality developed its own reception model that offers newcomers dignified living conditions, access to education, and job opportunities.

The findings indicate that Tilos' municipal solidarity with refugees was triggered by the humanitarianism of the local residents, but also sustained in the long run by the opportunistic behaviour of the island's mayor. In addition, by highlighting the contrast between the experience of Tilos and the parallel developments on the nearby Greek 'hotspot' islands, the case study shows that municipal solidarity can generate effective remedies to some of the shortcomings of the dysfunctional EU refugee reception system.

Finally, Chapter 7 highlights the main recurring themes throughout the different case studies. It presents the overall conclusions of the dissertation and elaborates on its conceptual, theoretical, and methodological contributions to the fields of migration and refugee studies, as well as to human rights research. In concluding, it discusses the practical implications of the findings and offers several lessons for politicians and practitioners that can assist them in developing more effective local strategies for the reception and integration of forced migrants.

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Notes

i With the term 'forced migrants', I refer to the broad category of people on the move who seek international protection, regardless if they have already submitted their request for asylum or not. In this way, I aim to account for the complexity of migratory population movements, and the fact that people regularly shift between categories that do not necessarily correspond to their experiences (see Crawley & Skleparis, 2017).

ii See <https://citiesofrefuge.eu/>

iii See Section 2a1.9 in <https://citiesofrefuge.eu/sites/default/files/2017-08/cities-of-refuge-proposal.pdf>

iv This phrase belongs to the former Greek Minister for Immigration Policy Ioannis Mouzalas.

Chapter 2.

Against all odds: Thessaloniki's local policy activism in the reception and integration of forced migrants

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Abstract

Why do local governments develop policies for the reception and integration of forced migrants? What strategies do they employ in pursuing their own policy objectives in this field, especially within restrictive institutional and financial frameworks? In this article, I use an assemblage approach and insights from extensive desk and field research to study the successful migration policy activism of the Municipality of Thessaloniki in Greece. I argue that the initiatives of mayors and access to external funds can both trigger and facilitate the development of local reception and integration policies. In addition, I argue that horizontal and vertical coalitions with local, transnational and international partners may help local governments effectively exploit their space for discretion in migration and integration policy-making. Based on my findings, I emphasise the need to further examine the emerging relationships between United Nations (UN) organisations and local authorities in the field of migration governance. Furthermore, I advocate a broader application of the assemblage approach in migration policy research.

Keywords: Thessaloniki, refugees, local policy, reception, integration, assemblage approach

Introduction

Recent research has shifted the traditionally national perspective in forced migration studies to the local level, highlighting the potential role of cities as active subjects in the reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees (Doomernik & Ardon, 2018; Doomernik & Glorius, 2016). A further impetus for this shift was the ‘long summer of migration’ in 2015, when local governments across Europe demonstrated unusual policy activism in this domain, often developing more welcoming and inclusive approaches than the respective national governments (Glorius & Doomernik, 2020). Municipal policy innovations related to the arrival and settlement of forced migrants included the development of alternatives to state reception (Geuijen, Oliver, & Dekker, 2020; Hinger, Schäfer, & Pott, 2016) and local assistance with civic and labour market integration (Scholten et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, the proactive engagement of local governments in policy-making for forced migrants has remained on the margins of the ‘local turn’ in the study of migration governance (Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, & Scholten, 2017). Consequently, the question of their motives for becoming active subjects in the reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees remains open. The same applies to questions regarding the strategies used by local governments in pursuit of their own objectives in these policy areas. In addition to academic relevance, explaining the underlying reasons and pathways towards successful local policy initiatives for forced migrants also has a practical value. In the face of reception conditions that consistently fail to meet the standards of international and European Union (EU) law – especially in the Southern EU Member States – policy activism by local governments may help protect the fundamental rights of forced migrants (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2019).

This article aims to contribute to the scholarly and practitioners’ debates on local policies for asylum seekers and refugees. To this end, it zooms in on Thessaloniki – the second largest city in Greece and a recent arrival point for forced migrants. Within just a few years, the Municipality of Thessaloniki has undergone a remarkable transformation from a complete novice to a laboratory for innovative reception and integration policies, at least in the Greek context. When the main migration route from Greece to Western Europe – the so-called ‘Balkan route’ – was closed in early 2016 under pressure from a number of EU Member States, approximately 10,000 people were transferred to the metropolitan area of Thessaloniki, effectively turning the city from a place of transit to a place of permanent settlement for forced migrants. Under these circumstances, the local

government of Thessaloniki – the largest of the 11 self-governing municipalities in the metropolitan area (Figure 1) – gradually designed and enacted a coherent set of progressive policies for the newcomers (Municipality of Thessaloniki, 2018a), in stark contrast to the lack of such a policy plan at the national level (Greek Ombudsman, 2017). From housing, to equal access to information and services, to social cohesion and political participation, the municipal approach focused on the long-term integration of immigrants from the outset (Arrival Cities, 2016). In this way, Thessaloniki not only filled many of the gaps in service provision left by the national authorities, but also developed its own local approach to address immigration.

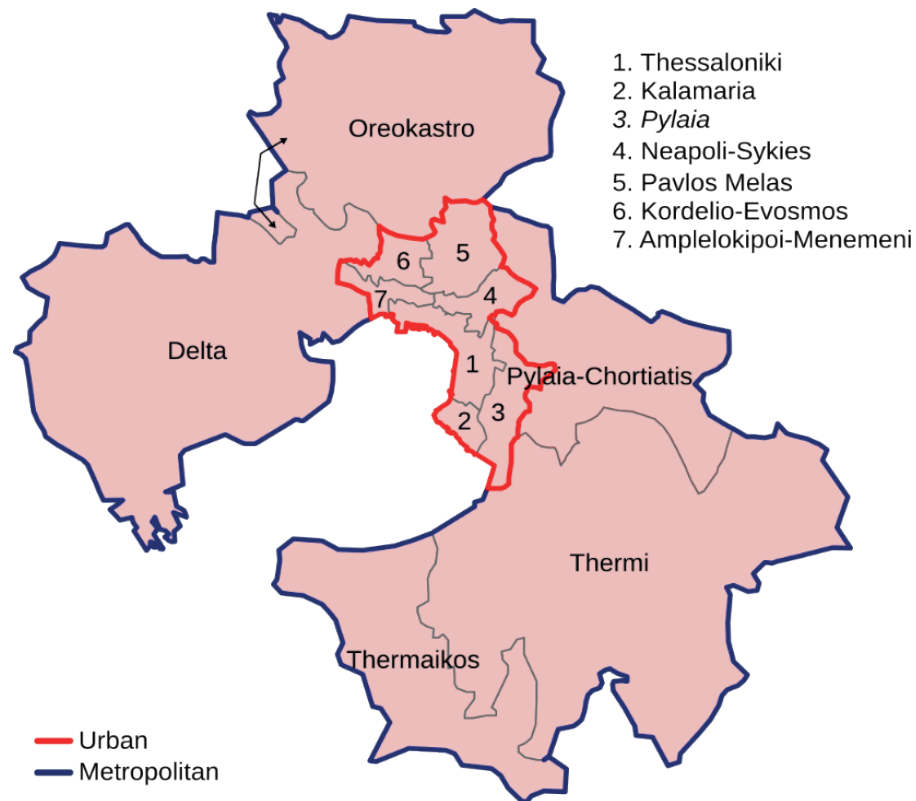


Figure 1. The urban and metropolitan areas of the city of Thessaloniki with its 11 self-governing municipalities, including the Municipality of Thessaloniki (1).

Thessaloniki’s policy activism constitutes a particularly compelling case study, given the very restrictive institutional and financial framework in which it emerged. In the highly centralised Greek administrative system, the central government has exclusive competence in the reception of asylum seekers, as well

as in integration-related policy areas, such as healthcare, employment and formal education. While a major reform called *Kallikratis* (Law No. 3852/2010) gave local authorities an opportunity to develop additional social welfare policy initiatives, no funds were allocated to them for this purpose (Koulocheris, 2017; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018, p. 12). Moreover, direct financial transfers from the central to the local level of government – the main source of funding for Greek municipalities – were cut by 60 percent in the period 2009-2014 amidst the country’s severe economic crisis (Hlepas & Getimis, 2018, p. 61). Hence, Thessaloniki’s policy-making in the field of reception and integration of forced migrants seems unusual, especially in light of the fact that the municipality was on the verge of bankruptcy in early 2016 (CNN Greece, 2016). It is therefore an ‘extreme case’ of both theoretical and practical importance (Seawright & Gerring, 2008).

Against this backdrop, I focus on the questions of why and how Thessaloniki’s local government developed its own progressive reception and integration policies for asylum seekers and refugees: what were its motives to engage in actions that fall outside its mandate, and what strategy and resources did it use to overcome the aforementioned structural limitations? To answer these questions, I adopt an assemblage approach, combined with a process tracing technique, and data from extensive desk and field research. I analyse the local policy-making process through the lens of a reception and integration policy assemblage: a collection of actors and factors that originate at different levels, but directly or indirectly affect events at the local level. Within Thessaloniki’s policy assemblage, I identify various actors and factors that facilitated the municipality’s successful policy activism. More specifically, I argue that the municipal reception and integration policies were largely the result of the discernment of the local mayor, who took advantage of the opportunities that the 2015 ‘adhocracy’ in the area of migration governance offered. Furthermore, I argue that Thessaloniki’s policies were developed and enacted by virtue of external funds, human capital and know-how, to which the municipality gained access through the formation of horizontal (with local and transnational partners) and vertical coalitions (with UN agencies and international donor organisations).

I start with a discussion of the analytical challenges related to the inherent complexity of contemporary local migration policy-making, and present several arguments for applying the assemblage approach in the study of local reception and integration policies for forced migrants. Subsequently, I briefly outline the methodology of the research, followed by a detailed analysis of the evolution of Thessaloniki’s reception and integration policy assemblage. I then discuss the

reasons behind Thessaloniki's successful policy activism, as well as the added value of assemblage thinking for migration policy research. Finally, I conclude with suggestions for future research.

Local migration policy-making and the assemblage approach

The development of local policies for immigrants is a complex, multi-level and polycentric process (Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2017). While the outcomes of this process mainly relate to concrete urban contexts, its causes can originate in very distant times and locations. Particularly with regard to forced migrants, cities have been described as 'landscapes' (Hinger et al., 2016) or 'battlegrounds' (Ambrosini, 2020) – meeting points, where multiple jurisdictions intersect, and where different levels of government negotiate their authority on migration issues (Filomeno, 2016; Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017), influenced by civil society and the private sector (Mayer, 2018, p. 245). UN agencies (Thouez, 2018), (international) non-governmental organisations ((i)NGOs) (Sunata & Tosun, 2019), national governments (Gebhardt, 2016), mayors (Terlouw & Böcker, 2019), and transnational city networks (Caponio, 2018) represent only a fraction of the actors that can directly or indirectly influence the course of local migration policy-making. At the same time, the decisions of all these actors are shaped by various 'non-human' structural factors from different levels, such as available resources, labour market conditions, etc. In short, local policies for the reception and integration of forced migrants are hardly ever just 'local' (Bazurli, 2020).

The overwhelming complexity surrounding migration policy-making becomes particularly apparent when one zooms in on local responses to the arrival of forced migrants in Greece. Until a few years ago, the reception and integration of refugees was low on the agenda of the Greek state. However, this changed in early 2016, when tens of thousands of asylum seekers were stranded in the country (Koulocheris, 2017). The intensity of the events and some hasty institutional novelties (EU-Turkey statement, new domestic Law No. 4375/2016 regulating asylum and reception, establishment of a Ministry of Migration Policy), led to a situation of ambiguity as to who was responsible for what, where, when and how. Some municipalities – including the Municipality of Thessaloniki – suddenly turned into places of arrival, where a plethora of public and civil society actors supported forced migrants with minimum or no coordination, often acting outside any legal and policy frameworks. At the same time, these emerging 'asylum landscapes' (Hinger et al., 2016) were

influenced by contextual factors at different levels, such as unprecedented financial assistance from the EU (Howden & Fotiadis, 2017), and the reduced capacity of the Greek public sector due to prolonged austerity measures (Hlepas & Getimis, 2018).

To unravel the complexity in Thessaloniki's reception and integration policy-making process, while at the same time avoid over-reductionism, I rely on an assemblage approach (Savage, 2020). Assemblages are 'wholes whose properties emerge from the interactions between parts' (DeLanda, 2006, p. 5), ultimately generating certain effects (J. Bennett, 2009, p. 24). They are constructed by heterogeneous human and non-human elements that 'come together in productive relations to form apparently whole but mobile social entities' (Youdell & McGimpsey, 2015, p. 119). In the social sciences, the assemblage approach is particularly useful for the development of conceptual frameworks that adequately capture the complexity of social formations (Youdell, 2015, p. 118), especially in studies of intermediate entities (DeLanda, 2006).

As an analytical tool, the assemblage approach has been applied in studies on policy development in the fields of education (Youdell, 2015), youth services (Youdell & McGimpsey, 2015) and public infrastructure reform (Ureta, 2015). Its added value for policy research stems from the alternative point of departure it offers. Rather than viewing policies as the object of study – as in traditional policy sociology – the assemblage perspective views them as just one of the elements of a broader process of change, encompassing actors, factors and forces from different levels (Youdell, 2015, p. 11). Local policies are therefore analysed as 'experiments involving multiple and messy elements' (Ureta, 2015, p. 169). While the policy assemblage approach integrates the reorientation in policy research from the notion of *government* to the notion of *governance*, it also offers more dynamic and flexible concepts than other approaches, such as the policy network theory (Rhodes, 2007) and multi-level governance (Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2017), mainly because it prioritises the causal capacity of elements belonging to the broader policy context. In other words, instead of reducing complexity by focusing on the policy itself, the researcher unravels it by 'distilling' the assemblage of actors and factors as the new object of study.

Based on this analytical approach, I examine Thessaloniki's response to the arrival of refugees through the lens of a *local reception and integration policy assemblage*. My first aim is to shed light on the processes of assembling, disassembling and reassembling of different elements over time (Youdell & McGimpsey, 2015), and the formation of different 'configurations' within the policy assemblage (Ureta, 2015). The term 'configurations' refers to combinations of elements that can either

limit or facilitate the development of local migration policies. I identify four such configurations within Thessaloniki's local reception and integration policy assemblage: *adhococracy*, *horizontal coalition*, *vertical coalition* and *institutionalisation*. These configurations partially correspond to chronological periods within the municipality's migration policy-making process. However, instead of fixed, stable entities or phases, they should be seen as temporary and dynamic constructions, which can overlap and mix (Ureta, 2015). By focusing on these configurations and the dynamics within and between them, I explain why and how the municipality developed its local policies for forced migrants.

Methodology

Scholars who study policy development from an assemblage perspective inevitably face the challenge of longitudinally mapping a large number of heterogeneous assemblage elements, along with their individual and collective characteristics and productive forces. Several methodological approaches have been suggested to address this issue. While Ureta (2015) relied on genealogy, others have advocated the use of assemblage ethnography (Greenhalgh, 2008; Youdell & McGimpsey, 2015). I choose an alternative approach and apply process tracing (A. Bennett & Checkel, 2014; George & Bennett, 2005). Process tracing can be defined as

'a procedure for identifying steps in a causal process [the complex relations between the elements and the configurations of the local reception and integration policy assemblage] leading to the outcome of a given dependent variable [local reception and integration policies] of a particular case [the Municipality of Thessaloniki] in a particular historical context [during the recent period of increased arrivals of forced migrants]' (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 176).

In light of the complexity of local migration policy-making and the adoption of the assemblage approach, process tracing has several strengths. First, it facilitates the identification of multiple causation within the policy assemblage. Second, process tracing, with its heuristic function, helps uncover elements that trigger or catalyse the local policy-making process. Third, it serves to identify not only relevant actors and their actions, but also their motivations and intentions. In sum, process tracing is a powerful tool to sift through the elements of the local reception and integration policy assemblage, identify the relationships between them and the configurations they form, and develop a comprehensive grounded understanding of why and how concrete local policies are created (George & Bennett, 2005).

The evidence I present in the following analysis is based on extensive desk research, including the review of legal/policy documents (EU, national and local level), municipal proceedings (46 in total for the Municipality of Thessaloniki and 135 for other municipalities in the metropolitan area), media publications and press releases from 2014 until April 2020, as well as secondary academic sources. In addition, a 3-month fieldwork was carried out in Thessaloniki at the end of 2018, during which a total of 28 semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of local municipalities, the regional government, the Ministry of Migration Policy, local (i)NGOs and international organisations operating in the city's urban area (Table 1). The desk research data were used to identify key respondents, design interview topic lists and for triangulation. Moreover, the first sample of respondents was expanded through snowball sampling. All data were incorporated into and analysed with NVivo 11.

ID	Location	Date	Interviewee	Language
T1	Thessaloniki	9 October 2018	Two municipal employees* (Municipality of Themi)	Greek
T2	Thessaloniki	11 October 2018	Two NGO representatives	Greek
T3	Thessaloniki	17 October 2018	Municipal councillor (Municipality of Themi)	Greek
T4	Thessaloniki	19 October 2018	Two NGO representatives	Greek
T5	Thessaloniki	22 October 2018	INGO representative	Greek
T6	Thessaloniki	2 November 2018	Civil servant (Municipality of Neapoli-Sykies)	Greek
T7	Thessaloniki	5 November 2018	Two civil servants (Municipality of Delta)	Greek
T8	Thessaloniki	6 November 2018	Deputy-mayor (Municipality of Neapoli-Sykies)	Greek
T9	Thessaloniki	6 November 2018	Two municipal employees (Municipality of Thessaloniki) and one UNHCR representative	English
T10	Thessaloniki	8 November 2018	Municipal employee (Municipality of Neapoli-Sykies)	Greek
T11	Thessaloniki	8 November 2018	Civil servant (Municipality of Thessaloniki)	Greek
T12	Thessaloniki	9 November 2018	Two NGO representatives	Greek
T13	Thessaloniki	13 November 2018	Regional councillor (Region of Central Macedonia)	Greek
T14	Thessaloniki	14 November 2018	Representative of the Ministry of Migration Policy	Greek
T15	Thessaloniki	20 November 2018	Municipal councillor (Municipality of Neapoli-Sykies)	Greek
T16	Thessaloniki	21 November 2018	Two municipal employees (Municipality of Thessaloniki)	Greek
T17	Thessaloniki	22 November 2018	Municipal councillor (Municipality of Neapoli-Sykies)	Greek
T18	Thessaloniki	23 November 2018	Municipal employee (Municipality of Thessaloniki)	Greek
T19	Thessaloniki	26 November 2018	Civil servant (Municipality of Thessaloniki)	Greek
T20	Thessaloniki	29 November 2018	NGO representative	Greek
T21	Thessaloniki	6 December 2018	UNHCR representative (Thessaloniki office)	English
T22	Thessaloniki	14 December 2018	NGO representative	Greek
T23	Thessaloniki	14 December 2018	Municipal councillor (Municipality of Thessaloniki)	Greek
T24	Thessaloniki	14 December 2018	Three civil servants (Municipality of Thessaloniki)	Greek
T25	Thessaloniki	17 December 2018	UNICEF representative (Thessaloniki office)	Greek
T26	Thessaloniki	18 December 2018	Deputy-mayor, civil servant and two municipal employees (Municipality of Kalamaria)	Greek
T27	Thessaloniki	19 December 2018	IOM representative	Greek
T28	Thessaloniki	20 December 2018	NGO representative	Greek

* **Municipal employees** = project-based and temporary municipal staff whose status is regulated by private law; **civil servants** = permanent members of the municipal administration whose status is regulated by public law.

Table 1. List of interviews.

Thessaloniki's reception and integration policy assemblage

In this section, I present the development of Thessaloniki's reception and integration policies by systematically analysing the formation of the aforementioned four configurations of the local policy assemblage – adhococracy, horizontal coalition, vertical coalition, and institutionalisation – along with their constitutive elements.

Adhococracy

Until the recent 'refugee crisis', Thessaloniki hosted less than two percent of the migrants seeking international protection in Greece. The vast majority of asylum seekers lived in Athens, where asylum interviews took place and where decision-making authorities were located. From the beginning of 2015, however, the presence of forced migrants in Thessaloniki started to increase. Homeless migrants, including families with young children, were often seen on the streets (T19). Rather than being their final destination, Thessaloniki had become an important 'transit point'; up to 1,000 migrants passed through the city every week on their journey to Western Europe via the Balkan route (Arrival Cities, 2016, p. 31).

This new reality led to a number of autonomous solidarity initiatives for people on the move. Local grassroots organisations, schools and immigrant associations, among others, offered various services, such as food, basic healthcare and legal advice (Dicker, 2017). Thessaloniki's local government joined this ad hoc support structure in two ways. First, it opened a large warehouse where in-kind donations for refugees were collected and redistributed. Second, it started providing hotel accommodation and basic support to the most vulnerable migrants, with the help of a grant from an international donor organisation. Since the municipality lacked both personnel and expertise in the reception of forced migrants, this initiative was only possible through the collaboration with local NGOs that provided services such as health monitoring and legal support. In any case, until the end of 2015, the efforts of the municipality remained only 'a small part within a large, widespread solidarity movement' (T19).

Meanwhile, approximately 70 km northwest of Thessaloniki, in the small village of Idomeni on the border between Greece and North Macedonia, two crucial elements of the adhococracy configuration began to take shape: the administrative vacuum in the governance of reception and the impending closure of the Balkan route. The Greek government had just established its Ministry of Migration Policy, which had only one employee in its regional office in Thessaloniki (T19). Acknowledging

its inability to provide adequate protection to arriving migrants, the government requested the support of the EU and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) (Thouez, 2018). As a result, the EU Commission allocated a large amount of funding to Greece, while the UNHCR and other UN agencies, as well as humanitarian organisations started operating in the country. Idomeni was 'overrun' by a plethora of international organisations, (i)NGOs, local grassroots organisations and volunteers, who collaborated and competed with each other in assisting migrants (Anastasiadou, Marvakis, Mezidou, & Speer, 2017). These supranational and subnational actors completely replaced the Greek state in the provision of all services except security (Maniatis, 2018). The result was the emergence of a system of humanitarian adhococracy (Dunn, 2012) characterised by chaos, instability and little to no concern for institutional frameworks, governed by an 'invisible elbow' rather than any real authority (Tilly, 1996).

At the same time, the increasing reluctance of some EU Member States to accept migrants foreshadowed the impending border closures. As of December 2015, only migrants of certain nationalities were allowed to cross from Greece into North Macedonia, while Idomeni turned into a sprawling refugee camp hosting thousands of people (Anastasiadou et al., 2017). It was easy to imagine that the border would soon close for good, and that the stranded migrants would then head towards Thessaloniki, which is the nearest major city (T19). Against this background, the municipal authorities in the area realised that they were about to face a serious challenge in an area where they had no mandate and no extra resources. Caught between a rock and a hard place, the municipalities repeatedly requested the government to draw up a comprehensive plan to address the emerging issues, and suggested that it allocates powers and resources to the local level – however, they received no response (Regional Union of Municipalities of Central Macedonia Region, 2015). Especially in the municipality of Thessaloniki, the 'alertness' that could be felt by the political leadership and administrative staff indicated the growing realisation that the vacuum in the governance of reception was not limited to Idomeni, but that it was about to directly affect the city of Thessaloniki as well (T19).

Horizontal coalition

Under these circumstances, the mayor of Thessaloniki, Yiannis Boutaris, stepped in and began to consolidate the municipality's position at the centre of a wide *horizontal coalition*, as the second configuration of the local reception and integration policy assemblage. He initiated several meetings in the town hall, inviting representatives of other municipalities from the metropolitan area and local civil society. His aim was to bring all local stakeholders together and prepare

a common plan to address the consequences of the expected border closure. The mayor of Thessaloniki used three arguments to convince others of the need to proactively combine their efforts. First, he stressed the humanitarian duty of municipal governments to help refugees. Second, he argued that even if one disagreed with the humanitarian argument, neglecting the issue and leaving the arriving people on their own would create serious problems for the municipalities. Finally, for those who were still not convinced, he presented his third and perhaps strongest argument: ‘In the time coming, it will rain money for the refugee issue, and then – you will hold an umbrella.’ (T19)

In other words, Mayor Boutaris suggested that, at a time when locals were struggling due to severe austerity measures and high unemployment, municipal authorities could play a key role in turning the crisis into an opportunity. However, despite this convincing rhetoric, most mayors in the area distanced themselves from the proposal, fearing that any involvement could become a pull-factor for immigrants (T11). Nevertheless, two local governments and a number of NGOs joined forces with the Municipality of Thessaloniki to look for solutions to the challenges ahead.

At the same time, the horizontal coalition within Thessaloniki’s reception and integration policy assemblage expanded transnationally. At the end of 2015, the municipality teamed up with several other municipalities from different EU countries, which were interested in developing local policies for immigrants. The group eventually secured an EU grant and created the URBACT Arrival Cities network (Saad & Essex, 2018). Each of the partner municipalities committed to developing an action plan in collaboration with local civil society to address a concrete migration-related challenge. In the case of Thessaloniki, the deliverable was a coherent strategy for the reception and integration of forced migrants. As a result, the municipality formalised the already existing informal partnerships within the city, establishing an official ‘URBACT Local Group’ (T9). In addition, separate Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) were signed with several local NGOs working with refugees (T23). In short, the municipality’s participation in the network contributed to the realisation of a ‘more systematic approach’ of collaboration with local partners, mapping the pressing issues in the field of reception and integration, and identifying concrete local policy objectives (T9).

The Arrival Cities network was only the first step of Thessaloniki’s city-to-city collaboration in the field of migration policy-making. Evidence from diverse sources revealed that in just a couple of years, the municipality developed numerous links with other local authorities in Greece and beyond. At the transnational level,

Thessaloniki benefitted from the expertise of local level migration policy-makers from Amsterdam and Zurich (Integrating Cities, 2017), hosted a training for local authorities organised by the Intercultural Cities network (Council of Europe, 2018), and joined the Integrating Cities initiative of EUROCITIES (Municipality of Thessaloniki, 2018b). At the national level, Thessaloniki and Athens initiated a city network, bringing together Greek municipalities hosting asylum seekers and refugees (T9, T19). In addition to exchanging know-how and good practices, the network focuses on advocacy at the international, national and regional levels, both in terms of policy and funding (Cities Network for Integration, 2019). Importantly, this horizontal inter-municipal partnership benefitted directly from the technical and capacity-building support of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (2019) and the financial support of the UNHCR, which demonstrates the blurred boundaries between the horizontal and vertical coalitions, discussed in more detail below.

Neither the consolidation of the horizontal coalition within Thessaloniki’s urban area, nor its expansion beyond the city were accidental. Rather, they reflected the ‘double opening’ – both internal and external – that Mayor Boutaris envisioned for the municipality as part of his broader and rather progressive political agenda (Municipality of Thessaloniki, 2019). After his election as an independent candidate in 2010, the mayor ‘opened the door’ to local civil society (T11). This ended a long period of conservative rule in Thessaloniki’s local politics, during which the collaboration of local NGOs with the municipality had been ‘very difficult to impossible’ (T20). In the context of looming social problems, severe budget cuts and insufficient personnel, the local government gradually developed a close collaboration with several local organisations, which filled the gaps in the provision of social assistance and healthcare services to vulnerable people. Taking advantage of this synergy and again with the support of an EU grant, Thessaloniki’s local government opened, in 2015, its ‘Filoxenio’: the first municipality-run shelter for families of asylum seekers in the country (T18). At the same time, city diplomacy and collaboration with international organisations were the mayor’s two priorities in terms of external opening. In his words, international networking brought the municipality know-how and access to funds, and proved more effective than the support of the Greek state, which had limited the economic and administrative autonomy of local governments with its ‘suffocating embrace’ (Municipality of Thessaloniki, 2019). To shed light on the relevance of the international level to the development of Thessaloniki’s local migration policies, I will now highlight the vertical coalition as the third configuration within the reception and integration policy assemblage.

Vertical coalition

In the spring of 2016, the fears of Thessaloniki's mayor came true: the border between Greece and North Macedonia was definitively closed and several thousand of migrants were transferred from Idomeni to the Thessaloniki area (Anastasiadou et al., 2017). At that time, two parallel reception schemes were created in Greece. On the one hand, the central government opened large reception facilities, which were almost exclusively located outside urban centres. These facilities represented 'out of sight, out of mind' solutions that offered little prospect of integrating immigrants into local communities (Kandylis, 2019; Lohmueller, 2016). On the other hand, following an agreement between the EU Commission, the Greek government and the UNHCR, the latter received a large EU grant for securing at least 20,000 alternative reception places in urban accommodation (European Commission, 2015). Although these places were initially only a temporary solution, they soon became an integral part of the Greek reception system (T21).

It is against this backdrop that the consolidation of the *vertical coalition* configuration within Thessaloniki's policy assemblage began. To implement its accommodation scheme in the city, the UNHCR relied on (i)NGOs, which could quickly rent hotel rooms and apartments to host the arriving migrants. However, following the initial period of emergency, the UNHCR started looking for sustainable long-term solutions. By that time, Thessaloniki's local government had already established itself as the leading actor in the aforementioned horizontal coalition. After brief consultations, the municipality of Thessaloniki – in collaboration with two other municipalities in the area and several NGOs – received its first direct grant through the UNHCR. It used the funding to implement an urban reception project called Refugee Assistance Collaboration Thessaloniki (REACT), which provided accommodation to asylum seekers and refugees in private apartments rented by the municipal authorities, while the NGOs provided services such as legal assistance and socio-psychological support (T24). The project was gradually expanded and offered more than 900 reception places in early 2020.

REACT was undoubtedly very important to the municipality because of its large scale (T19). However, it was just one of dozens of initiatives that mushroomed in Thessaloniki after the closure of the Balkan route. The sizeable needs and funding flows from the EU and international private donors quickly led to the proliferation of a local 'reception and integration economy', in which (i)NGOs continued developing parallel accommodation projects and providing a range of services to asylum seekers and refugees. This resulted in competition between the different actors working on the ground. However, since the local government relied almost

exclusively on local NGOs to implement its policies, it was seen by them not so much as a competitor, but rather as a facilitator that helped attract external funds, which were then redistributed locally (T2, T20).

In this context, the Municipality of Thessaloniki started intensively building close partnerships with supranational actors, primarily with UN agencies operating in the city. A crucial development was the UNHCR's decision to build capacity within local authorities before eventually withdrawing its operations from Greece (T21). The organisation provided interpreters and cultural mediators to the municipal services and seconded two of its employees to the municipality. These two employees started coordinating a large forum of forty-five locally operating actors, with the aim of improving service provision to migrants (T9). At the same time, Thessaloniki's local government signed an MoU with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), which resulted in the secondment of one more employee to the municipality and the development of a number of refugee integration initiatives in the field of non-formal education (T25). Due to its increased visibility and capacity, the municipality was also able to secure additional funding from international private foundations for its refugee-related projects (T19).

Using the funds, human capital and know-how accessed through the vertical and horizontal coalitions, Thessaloniki's local government gradually developed its own policies for the reception and integration of forced migrants. The municipal management and staff agreed that the municipality could never 'get the job done' (T19) without using these external resources to remedy its internal weaknesses (T9, T11). Using process tracing to identify the sequence of events proved particularly helpful in confirming the validity of their statements. It revealed that the economic adjustment programmes that started in Greece in 2010 had largely affected Greek municipalities through continuous cuts in budgets for public spending and staff (Hlepas & Getimis, 2018). In early 2016, Thessaloniki was close to bankruptcy (CNN Greece, 2016), while in the period 2010-2019 the number of permanent municipal employees decreased from 5500 to 3000 (Lazopoulos, 2019). Remarkably, without its external project employees, the municipality with more than 300,000 inhabitants would have had only one psychologist and one social worker (T11). In this context, the emergence of the reception and integration economy became an opportunity for local development; more than 80 new jobs were created within the REACT framework alone, with many young and highly educated locals finding jobs in their field (T11).

At the same time, collaboration with the national government – and therefore its role in the vertical coalition – remained superficial. The regional representatives of the Ministry of Migration Policy were ‘always invited to join’ the aforementioned forum that the municipality coordinated, but they ‘rarely attended’, focusing instead on the large reception facilities in the region (T21). Cooperation between the local and national levels of government was mostly ad hoc and took place only occasionally after a sudden arrival of migrants in the central square of the city, or in other words, when there was an urgent need to resolve an issue quickly (T9). The only significant exception was a nationally designed and EU-funded programme, under which the municipality opened a one-stop-shop mainly providing information to immigrants about the available municipal and NGO services in the area (T24).

Institutionalisation

The final configuration within Thessaloniki’s reception and integration policy assemblage concerns the formal adoption of a local migration policy framework and the unsuccessful attempt of Mayor Boutaris to permanently incorporate migration governance into the municipal administration. In 2018, the municipal council approved the ‘Integrated Action Plan for Integration of Refugees’ (Municipality of Thessaloniki, 2018a) – a comprehensive set of policy objectives resulting from the participation in the Arrival Cities network and the ‘joint process of strategising’ with international and local partners (T9). The plan established a progressive rights-based approach to reception and integration, aimed at ensuring equal access to municipal services for all immigrants. In line with international human rights standards, it also envisaged the adoption of inclusive policies for undocumented migrants. Finally, the plan paved the way for the mainstreaming of immigrant integration into existing municipal services. At the same time, it maintained initiatives targeting asylum seekers and refugees, despite the limited mandate of the local government in this field.

In addition, a number of administrative changes were made. The mayor appointed a municipal councillor in charge of all migration-related issues and established a task force made up of seconded UNHCR staff and permanent municipal staff. With the support of municipal services, the task force started delivering on the various objectives of the Action Plan, implementing an affordable housing project, a labour market activation programme for refugees and locals, and a weekly radio programme designed and run by refugees, to name but a few. Its role was to serve as a transitional body until the establishment of a separate department for the integration of immigrants within the municipal administration (T9).

However, despite his efforts, the mayor did not succeed in assembling this final element to Thessaloniki’s policy assemblage. The establishment of an immigrant integration department was part of a broader plan to reorganise the administrative structure (T11), which was eventually voted down by the municipal council. This defeat – only a couple of months before the local elections in 2019 – was caused partly by political disagreements (factions within the mayor’s party that emerged after his decision not to run for office anymore), and partly by the opposition of members of the administration to the envisaged broader reform (Lazopoulos, 2019). As a result, the attempt to embed migration governance into the organisational structure of the municipality ended prematurely, without being reactivated by the subsequent local government.

Discussion

The previous section outlined the key actors and factors that influenced Thessaloniki’s response to the arrival of forced migrants: from the tangled adhocism, to the impetus provided through horizontal and vertical coalitions, and the incomplete institutionalisation. On the basis of the evidence presented, I now return to the questions of why and how the local government developed its reception and integration policies. In addition, I briefly reflect on the analytical and methodological approaches applied in this research.

To begin with, the above analysis demonstrates that the genesis of Thessaloniki’s reception and integration policies was the product of conjunctural human and non-human assemblage elements operating simultaneously on different levels. In line with previous findings, it shows that the policy response was triggered by local pragmatism (not coping with the issue would only get things worse) (Poppelaars & Scholten, 2008), negligence on behalf of the responsible authorities (lack of response to the municipal requests), and policy gaps at the national level (no plan for the reception and integration of refugees) (Doomernik & Ardon, 2018). However, it also shows that these factors represent only one side of the story. While Thessaloniki’s policy activism was undoubtedly enhanced by the facilitating effect of the adhocism configuration, the municipality remained one of a few in the metropolitan area to develop local policies for forced migrants. The analysis thus points towards two elements that stood out for their primary role in the local policy assemblage: the mayor and the external funds.

The constant positioning of Yiannis Boutaris at the centre of all four configurations of Thessaloniki's policy assemblage highlights the potential role of mayors, but also the limits of their ability to influence local responses to immigration. On the one hand, it confirms the arguments that mayors *qua* mayors *can* make a difference in policy-making for forced migrants (Betts, Memişoğlu, & Ali, 2021; Terlouw & Böcker, 2019), and that progressive local politicians are more likely to promote inclusive migration policies (de Graauw & Vermeulen, 2016). Their strong commitment and perseverance can result in both the initiation and proliferation of such policies, despite structural constraints, such as the lack of a clear mandate on migration-related issues. On the other hand, the incomplete institutionalisation of Mayor Boutaris' policy approach also points to an important risk in new 'cities of arrival': the failure to absorb the accumulated project-based know-how into the municipal administration. In this regard, the Thessaloniki experience demonstrates that local political leaders who are committed to developing policies for forced migrants should 'strike while the iron is hot'. They should use the momentum to transform temporary ad hoc structures into permanent bodies within the municipal administration to ensure the continuity of their local approach to migration governance. Any delays in doing so could jeopardise the long-term sustainability of local policies as a result of new pressing issues appearing on the agenda or changes in government.

Through the dense fog of the adhocism that had engulfed migration governance in 2015, the mayor managed to discern the second crucial element in Thessaloniki's policy assemblage: the oncoming 'rain' of funds that was about to pour down on Greece. At a time when the municipality was on the verge of bankruptcy, assisting refugees became more than a matter of humanitarian duty or pragmatic policy-making. Paradoxically as it may seem, it was also an economic opportunity. In this respect, the insights from this case study contribute to the debate on the dynamics of local migration policy-making in times of economic hardship (Schiller & Hackett, 2018). More concretely, they demonstrate that a 'hybrid combination' between economic and humanitarian reasoning can lead to the adoption of local policies for forced migrants, reflecting similar dynamics in local diversity policies (Moutselos et al., 2018). Moreover, the example of Thessaloniki shows that, under certain circumstances, the development of local migration policies can become an innovative way to address the consequences of austerity measures (Overmans, 2019). In this regard, it confirms the suggestion that reduced local policy activism in the field of migration is not necessarily the only possible outcome during an economic crisis (Caponio & Donatiello, 2017).

Regarding the question of how a new city of arrival can succeed in developing local migration policies within a very restrictive institutional context, the analysis pinpoints the significance of building horizontal (with local and transnational partners at city level) and vertical coalitions (with UN agencies and international donor organisations). While the adhocism broadened the space for discretion in refugee reception and integration, this space could not be 'inhabited' by the municipality without the funds, the human capital and the know-how acquired through Thessaloniki's 'double opening' (Oomen, Baumgärtel, Miellet, Durmus, & Sabchev, 2021). Access to these pivotal resources enabled the local government to free itself from the 'suffocating embrace' of the state and to pursue its own policy objectives.

While the contribution of civil society and transnational municipal networks to local migration policy-making is well documented (Caponio, 2018; Danış & Nazlı, 2018), the decisive role of Thessaloniki's vertical coalition in promoting its local policy approach points to a novelty in migration governance. More specifically, UN agencies have deliberately started to foster closer relationships with local authorities, seeking to promote their own policy agenda for a 'coalition of the willing' in the reception and integration of refugees (Ahouga, 2018; United Nations General Assembly, 2017). This *prima facie* innocent shift from 'traditional' UN intervention – namely through cooperation with national governments and NGOs – could potentially give new meaning to the 'think globally, act locally' slogan. Some authors have emphasised the need for the UN to reach out to new partners and 'capitalize on new and emerging alliances with local and non-state actors' (Thouez, 2018, p. 13). Others have suggested the potential benefits of cooperation between local governments and the UNHCR in the field of refugee resettlement (Sabchev & Baumgärtel, 2020). In brief, the potential win-win scenario of engaging in such vertical coalitions could represent an opportunity for both municipalities and the UN, as well as interested central governments, and therefore deserves further scholarly attention.

Finally, a brief reflection is needed on the use of the assemblage analytical approach and the process tracing technique in this research. To start with the former, the story of Thessaloniki illustrates the contemporary quest of many municipalities to address the challenges associated with immigration by forming 'new and shifting constellations' (Mayer, 2018, p. 232). These constellations undergo continuous transformations; they assemble, disassemble and reassemble. Using an assemblage approach to investigate them as temporary configurations of heterogeneous elements activated by different actors and factors (Greenhalgh, 2008, pp. 12-13; Ureta, 2015) provides a detailed understanding of the local policy-making process.

While the multi-level governance approach (Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2017) also recognises the importance of the horizontal and vertical dynamics underpinning local migration policies, its point of departure remains the policy itself, rather than the broader policy context. As for the relational approach that has recently gained popularity in migration policy research (Filomeno, 2016, 2017), one cannot but acknowledge the fact that it shares a number of core characteristics with the assemblage approach (relational thinking, focus on conjunctural causation and processes, etc.). On the face of it, it seems that the assemblage perspective offers a more solid foundation for the development of concepts that adequately capture the complexity of migration governance (e.g., adhococracy). In any case, it is the future application of these two approaches that will clarify which one provides better assistance in dealing with the inevitable reductionism that (migration) policy research entails.

At the same time, adopting such an analytical angle goes hand in hand with embracing the complexity of migration governance and the associated methodological challenges. In this respect, this study demonstrates that process tracing can serve as a complementary tool to the assemblage approach. For example, its heuristic function and its 'alertness' to multiple causation made it possible to establish a link between the prolonged austerity in Greece, the widespread adhococracy, and the development of local reception and integration policies in Thessaloniki. Furthermore, the use of process tracing helped uncover the intentions behind the mayor's decisions, highlighting not only the 'what now', but also the 'why now' of the policy-making process (Gale, 1999, p. 403). In short, these advantages underline the importance of further exploring and harnessing the potential of the assemblage approach and process tracing in the field of migration policy research.

Conclusion

This article addressed the questions of why and how local governments develop reception and integration policies for forced migrants. In answering these questions, I focused on the 'against all odds' policy activism of the municipality of Thessaloniki, analysing it through the lens of an assemblage approach. My analysis underlines the importance of different actors and factors for the development of local policies for asylum seekers and refugees. More concretely, the insights derived from Thessaloniki's case confirm the assumption that mayors play an important role in enacting local approaches to reception and integration, which may have different goals than national ones. However, the will and capacity of mayors

to achieve their distinct policy objectives depend on a number of conjunctural factors and cannot be explicated in isolation. In this particular case, the loosening of the institutional constraints and the mobilisation of funds for the reception and integration of forced migrants – both directly related to the adhococracy configuration – facilitated Thessaloniki's successful policy-making. In addition, the establishment of horizontal and vertical coalitions with local, transnational and international partners appears to be an effective strategy to increase the capacity of local governments to exploit their institutional leeway. Such coalitions can address internal municipal weaknesses by equipping the local level with funds, human capital and know-how. However, as the case of Thessaloniki demonstrates, the failure to convert such temporary partnerships into permanent municipal structures may undermine the long-term sustainability of local policy initiatives for the reception and integration of forced migrants.

Building on the findings of this research, I conclude with two suggestions for future inquiry. From a practical perspective, further research within and outside the Greek context may bring additional clarity regarding the potential of vertical coalitions to accelerate the development and implementation of local reception and integration policies for forced migrants. If UN organisations can successfully use their resources to build capacity in local governments based on a shared vision of effective migration and integration governance – which is not necessarily shared by the respective national authorities – then how does this process affect the dynamics between local and national government? Moreover, to what extent can the UN fulfil the 'wingman' function (Thouez, 2018) in progressive municipal coalitions established by local governments, as in the case of the Cities for Integration network in Greece supported by the IOM and the UNHCR? At the same time, from an analytical point of view, the application of the dynamic concepts offered by the assemblage perspective should be further explored in migration policy research. This may prove particularly fruitful in deriving new insights on local migration policy activism, especially given the complexity that this field entails.

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Notes

i I adopt a broader definition of local reception and integration policy, as the wide range of measures and practices of local governments which seek to regulate forced migrants' access to services and facilitate their initial settlement and subsequent inclusion into the local community life. This definition corresponds to the way in which migration policy scholars (Filomeno, 2016) and the Greek Ministry of Migration Policy (2018, p. 10) have conceptualized migrant integration policies.

ii Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Thessaloniki_urban_and_metropolitan_areas_map_2.svg

iii See http://asylo.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/1406_oneyearstats.pdf

iv See <https://www.react-thess.gr/>

Chapter 3.

The role of local political leadership in the reception of forced migrants: Evidence from Greece

This chapter is based on: Sabchev, T. (2021). The role of local political leadership in the reception of forced migrants: evidence from Greece. *Territory, Politics, Governance*. (Published online). DOI: [10.1080/21622671.2021.1927815](https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2021.1927815)

Abstract

This article focuses on the role of local political leadership in municipal policy responses to the arrival of forced migrants. Initially, I bring together insights from research on leadership, migration, and crisis management to develop a conceptual framework for studying local political leadership in the reception of forced migrants. To this end, I adopt an interactionist perspective and define local political leadership as the product of the interaction between mayors and their leadership environment (institutional and societal context). Subsequently, I apply this conceptual framework to a qualitative comparative case study, using data from desk research and fieldwork in two Greek municipalities. The findings indicate that differences in local political leadership can lead to the development of very different municipal policy responses in the field of forced migrants' reception. In particular, I argue that by exercising interactive and multi-level political leadership, mayors can increase their chances of advancing strategic policy objectives in migration governance, and by extension, strengthen the protection and fulfilment of migrants' fundamental rights. Finally, in light of the conceptual and empirical insights arising from this research, I emphasise the need to improve the dialogue between leadership and migration scholars, and suggest questions for future research.

Keywords: local political leadership, interactive political leadership, multi-level political leadership, mayors, forced migrants, Greece

Introduction

Recent research in migration policy and refugee studies has shed light on the role of local governments in developing policy responses to the arrival and settlement of forced migrants (Ambrosini, Cinalli, & Jacobson, 2020; Hinger, Schäfer, & Pott, 2016; Rea, Martiniello, Mazzola, & Meuleman, 2019). Some scholars have pinpointed cities' welcoming and inclusive character, presenting them as sites that provide fertile ground for policy innovation in migration governance (Scholten et al., 2017). In contrast, others have emphasised the capacity of urban policy-making to effectively limit forced migrants' access to services and hinder their integration prospects (Marchetti, 2020).

This article contributes to the aforementioned scholarly debates, by zooming in on the capacity of local political leadership to facilitate the transformation of a locality into a 'city of refuge' for forced migrants. Research on migration policy has revealed a number of causal factors that can contribute to the development of more inclusive local policy responses, such as strong presence of left-wing political parties, active civil society engagement, pro-immigrant volunteer initiatives, and mobilisation on behalf of migrants themselves (Bazurli, 2019; Hinger et al., 2016; Lambert & Swerts, 2019; Mayer, 2018). However, little research has explicitly addressed the role of mayors in relation to forced migrants' reception (Betts, Memişoğlu, & Ali, 2021; Terlouw & Böcker, 2019), and an adequate conceptualisation of local political leadership in migration governance is lacking. Despite the fact that local governments usually do not have competences in the asylum/reception policy domain, there is some evidence that mayors can contribute to the development of novel practices in this area, and by extension strengthen the fulfilment of asylum seekers or undocumented migrants' human rights (Sabchev, 2021; Terlouw & Böcker, 2019). This is in line with insights from research in other policy areas, which shows that mayors can significantly alter the dynamics within local communities and advance environmental sustainability (Sotarauta, Horlings, & Liddle, 2012). Therefore, could mayors also make *the* difference in municipal policy responses to forced migrants' arrival? Moreover, how does local political leadership manifest itself in the governance of reception, and could it eventually contribute to the realisation of forced migrants' fundamental rights?

Finding answers to these questions has not only theoretical, but also practical value, mainly for two reasons. First, forced migrants continue to travel to Europe in search of refuge, while frontline countries such as Greece and Italy persist in their ad hoc modus operandi in reception management (Greek Ombudsman, 2017; Marchetti, 2020). Consequently, local governments are often 'taken by surprise' by

the opening of reception facilities within their jurisdiction (Marchetti, 2020). In such cases, mayors are usually called upon by their constituencies to demonstrate leadership and respond adequately to issues arising from the sudden arrival of forced migrants, regardless of whether they have formal powers in this policy area. Second, the failure of some national authorities to guarantee the minimum reception standards enshrined in European Union (EU) and international law has been well documented (Danish Refugee Council, 2017). In this context, mayors can potentially contribute to safeguarding forced migrants' rights, by interpreting and applying regulations from different levels and giving them meaning 'on the ground' (Oomen, Baumgärtel, Miellet, Durmus, & Sabchev, 2021; Terlouw & Böcker, 2019). Notably in this regard, the mayors of major European cities, such as Athens and Barcelona, have been actively engaged in a symbolic – but also very practical – struggle for policy changes in migration governance, strongly emphasising the need to better protect migrants' human rights (Garcés-Mascareñas & Gebhardt, 2020). In short, scrutinising the link between local political leadership and municipal policy responses to forced migrants' arrivals can provide practical insights on how to strengthen the role of mayors in this policy area, and enhance the protection of forced migrants.

This article is an initial step in that direction. It presents evidence from extensive desk research and field work in two Greek municipalities – Themi and Delta – that faced the sudden arrival of a large number of forced migrants in 2016. I address the abovementioned questions and argue that local political leadership can influence the development and implementation of municipal policy responses to the arrival of forced migrants, and by extension, contribute to the improvement of their reception conditions. Rather than focusing exclusively on the role of mayors as local political leaders, I adopt an interactionist approach and define local political leadership as the product of the interaction between mayors and their leadership environment – a mix of institutional and societal constraints and facilitators, which mayors must navigate, to achieve their strategic objectives. Ultimately, I suggest that even in contexts where local governments have no competences in the management of reception, and where the arrival of forced migrants is initially met with hostility, mayors can directly influence the governance of reception by exercising interactive and multi-level political leadership (Sørensen, 2020).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Initially, I discuss the concept of local political leadership in the context of forced migrants' reception. Subsequently, I present the methodology of the research and the justification of

my case selection, followed by a detailed discussion of the developments in the two municipalities. Finally, I briefly discuss my findings and conclude with suggestions for future research.

Conceptualising local political leadership in forced migrants' reception

Although political leadership – like leadership in general – is an essentially contested concept ('t Hart, 2014; 't Hart & Rhodes, 2014), one can distinguish between two main approaches to studying it: the 'classic' approach, which focuses on the role of individual leaders, and the interactionist approach, which highlights the need to understand political leadership as an interactive process (Elgie, 1995; 't Hart & Rhodes, 2014). Scholars who adopt the former approach follow an agent-centred logic and argue that the driving force behind significant social and political changes is powerful individuals who occupy governmental positions (Elgie, 1995, p. 5). These scholars emphasise the importance of leaders' background, motivations and behaviour, advocating a person-centric understanding of political leadership ('t Hart & Rhodes, 2014). Despite its unceasing popularity, this approach has been criticised for its inadequacy to account for the causal capacity of the complex institutional and societal context in which political leaders operate (Bennister, 2016; 't Hart & Rhodes, 2014). As a result, it has lost its dominance in leadership studies to the interactionist approach, which embeds an agent-structure way of thinking and promotes the understanding of political leadership as the 'product of the interaction between the leader and the environment within which the leader is operating' (Bennister, 2016, p. 1). In other words, what makes political leadership effective is the quality of the interaction between the leader on the one hand and the institutions and the society on the other – the way one exploits the opportunities one has in the decision-making process, the operational support or resistance one receives from the administration, and the way one navigates popular reactions to emerging issues. Ultimately, this interaction – or lack thereof – facilitates or sabotages the advancement of leaders' policy agendas.

With regard to local political leadership in particular, scholars have largely recognised the importance of context in shaping mayors' decisions and actions, proposing the adoption of the interactionist paradigm (Lowndes & Leach, 2004). Contextual characteristics can play the role of 'faithful partners' to mayors in realising personal policy objectives, but they can also entail significant constraints (Copus & Leach, 2014; Heinelt & Lamping, 2015). Their effect, however, is anything but deterministic: local political leaders can influence unfolding events and

consequently also change their institutional and social environment (Orr, 2009). They can use their formal authority to mobilise municipal resources, employ ‘soft’ power to successfully negotiate with higher levels of government, or become ‘skilled storytellers’, navigating the local public opinion towards achieving a common goal (t Hart & Rhodes, 2014, p. 13). Understanding the role of local political leadership in municipal policy responses therefore requires looking through the lenses of the urban context, and the ability of mayors to exploit and change this context in a way that serves their own agenda.

Against this background, I adopt an interactionist perspective. My starting point in developing a conceptual framework for studying local political leadership in the reception of forced migrants is the seminal work of Robert Elgie (1995). Elgie conceptualises political leadership as the product of the interaction between the *leadership environment* on the one hand, and the *political leader* on the other (1995, p. 8). I build on this conceptualisation – originally designed for studies of political leadership at the national level – using insights from the literature on local government, urban policy-making, migration studies, and crisis management.

According to Elgie, the leadership environment encompasses diverse factors and forces that can be grouped under two overarching categories: *institutional structures* and *societal needs* (Elgie, 1995). To start with the former, institutional structures set the boundaries within which local political leaders operate (Heinelt, Hlepas, Kuhlmann, & Swianiewicz, 2018). Here, the position of the mayor vis-à-vis other bodies within the municipal structure must be taken into account. For instance, having control over the majority of the municipal council, or authority over new appointments and budget decisions, would make it easier for a mayor to push through policy-proposals (Mullin, Peele, & Cain, 2004). In addition, the ability to respond to emerging issues through the creation of ad hoc/informal bodies can also strengthen mayors’ potential to exercise leadership. Ultimately, while the independent role of ‘street-level bureaucrats’ in implementing mayoral decisions should be taken into account (Lipsky, 1980), administrative structures characterised by a mayor-centred local administration are likely to provide more opportunities for local leaders to shape municipal responses to the arrival of forced migrants at their discretion.

While the above arguments pertain to elements of the institutional structures at the local level, urban policy responses are rarely ‘local’ (Bazurli, 2020). On the contrary, they emerge through interactions, negotiations and compromises between different levels of government (Kaufmann & Sidney, 2020). In this respect, the formal powers granted to local authorities in the field of reception of forced

migrants (and in related policy areas) should be considered in the context of the multi-level governance of migration (Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2017). The multi-level nature of migration policy-making indicates the gradual dispersion of formal responsibility over migration and integration-related issues between supranational (e.g., the European Union), national (ministries, central government agencies), and subnational institutions (regional and local authorities). This inevitably affects the ‘rules of the game’ for local political leaders seeking to respond to the arrival of forced migrants. Mayors who have access to higher-level decision-making arenas (e.g., through party membership) – where asylum-related issues are usually decided – obtain additional resources to influence policy processes within and beyond their jurisdiction (Sørensen, 2020). In addition, discretionary spaces and ‘grey zones’ within established legal/policy frameworks can provide opportunities for mayors to bring forward innovative practices in forced migrants’ reception (Dobbs, Levitt, Parella, & Petroff, 2019; de Graauw, 2014). In short, the institutional structures that shape mayors’ leadership environment extend beyond the local government realm and include higher levels of public authority. It goes without saying that this creates more opportunities, but also constraints, for mayors to exercise leadership in municipal policy responses to the arrival of forced migrants.

When it comes to *societal needs* – the second dimension of the leadership environment – one can identify three important elements that influence political leaders’ capacity to accomplish their goals – historical legacy, societal attitudes and popular desires (Elgie, 1995, pp. 20-23). In the context of forced migrants’ reception, the historical legacy of a municipality pertains to the historical presence of immigrants and the relevant experiences of the local population. For example, local history of refugee welcome may contribute to similar attitudes towards future arrivals. With regard to societal attitudes, the voting behaviour of the local electorate can serve as a good indicator. Significant support for anti-immigrant parties, or alternatively, for parties advocating for the protection of forced migrants’ rights, can create either propitious or unfavourable conditions for mayors to push their own policy agenda. Finally, the popular desires correspond to short-term requests from the local community, especially in response to external disruptions, such as the sudden opening of a reception centre on municipal territory. In these circumstances the mobilisation and actions of locally operating – but not necessarily locally based – collective and individual actors (interest groups, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), grassroots organisations, volunteers, etc.) must be taken into account. Mayors on their behalf are expected to demonstrate leadership by navigating those different stakeholders, while at the same time fulfilling their legal and moral obligations.

Having unpacked the notion of leadership environment, I now turn to the protagonist behind manifestations of local political leadership: the mayor. First, it should be noted that each political leader is unique and has his/her own beliefs, motivations and ambitions (Elgie, 1995, pp. 9-12). In this regard, one approach to studying local political leadership would be to look for a causal link between mayors' personal characteristics and mayors' success in navigating their leadership environment to advance their policy agenda (van Esch & Swinkels, 2015). However, rather than focusing on the *motivations* behind certain mayoral decisions, the purpose of this study is to establish *whether* mayors can influence forced migrants' reception by exercising their leadership, and to shed light on the *process* by which this can be achieved. Therefore, I follow Robinson's assertion that ultimately 'leaders are what leaders do', and focus on mayors' decisions and actions (2014). Nonetheless, I take into account evidence that variations in the partisanship of local incumbents are conducive to different policy responses in the realm of migration (Steil & Vasi, 2014), and consider the potential impact of mayors' ideological stance on their responses to forced migrants' arrivals. In particular, left-leaning mayors and local administrations are more likely to promote inclusive policies than right-wing ones (de Graauw & Vermeulen, 2016; Steil & Vasi, 2014).

A final point to address when discussing mayors' role in shaping forced migrants' reception relates to the widespread uncertainty and sense of urgency that often accompanies sudden migrant arrivals. This is particularly relevant to the Greek context in the period 2015-2016, where reception centres were set up within days, using ad hoc measures and temporary facilities, and without any coherent overarching plan or strategy (Greek Ombudsman, 2017). These circumstances call for the development of a tailored approach to studying the decisions and actions of local political leaders (de Clercy & Ferguson, 2016; Orr, 2009). Therefore, using insights from the framework of Boin, 't Hart, Stern, and Sundelius (2016) on leadership in crisis management, I identify three strategic leadership tasks in forced migrants' reception: *sense making*, *decision making and coordination*, and *meaning making*. First, sense making entails the detection of an emerging crisis and its significance. The earlier an accurate assessment is made, the better a local leader can prepare for the coming disruption in terms of both applying the desired discursive strategy to frame the issue and preparing the operational response. Second, decision-making and coordination involves making critical decisions and orchestrating a coherent response. Here, mayors are expected to unfold their leadership potential by leveraging the enabling factors that their leadership environment offers, or in other words, by mobilising institutional and societal resources to their advantage. Finally, the meaning making consists of building a narrative to inspire and convince citizens, make them understand the events,

accept the mayor's decisions and support his/her actions. By focusing on these three aspects of mayors' behaviour in their relationship with the local leadership environment, I aim to shed light on how they manage – both discursively and operationally – the consequences of the arrival of forced migrants.

In summary, local political leadership in the reception of forced migrants is manifested through the interaction between the local political leader and his/her leadership environment. The former includes the decisions and actions of the mayor in the context of the arrival of migrants, while the latter pertains to the institutional structures within a multi-level governance setting, and the reactions and demands of local society. Mayors unfold and exercise their local political leadership by seizing the opportunities and overcoming the obstacles in their leadership environment. Their success in doing so, determines their ability to push through policies and practices in forced migrants' reception that serve their strategic goals (Figure 2).

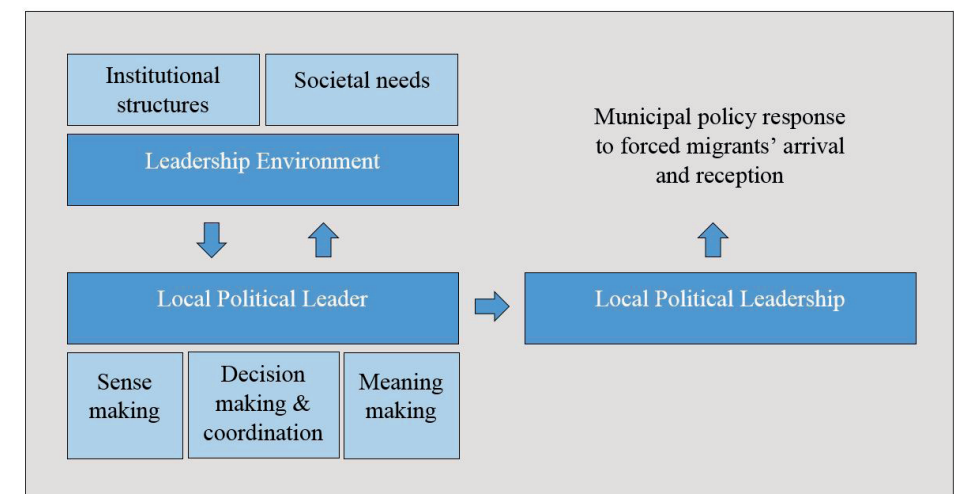


Figure 2. Local political leadership in the reception of forced migrants – conceptual framework.

On the basis of this conceptual framework, I now proceed to presenting my methodology and case selection. I argue that the municipalities of Themi and Delta provide an example of two cases with very similar local leadership environments, in which the respective mayors approached the arrival of forced migrants in a very different way. The diverging dynamics in the two municipalities between the local

political leaders on the one hand, and the institutional structures and societal needs on the other, led to very different outcomes in terms of municipal policy responses.

Methodology and case selection

To explore the potential of local political leadership to influence forced migrants' reception, I apply an in-depth qualitative comparative case study research design (Rohlfing, 2012). Case studies are widely used in research on local political leadership and local responses to immigration, because of the opportunities they provide to use rich data in a context-sensitive analysis (Bazurli, 2019; Copus & Leach, 2014; Hinger et al., 2016). I study two self-governing municipalities – Thermi and Delta – located on either side of the metropolitan city of Thessaloniki, equidistant from its urban centre (Figure 3). In 2016, these municipalities faced the opening of large reception centres on their territory by the central government. I use a co-variational analysis (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, pp. 33-78) and conduct both within-case and cross-case analysis of the role of local political leadership in Thermi and Delta. The two cases show minimal variance on a number of contextual characteristics (Table 2), while at the same time being significantly different in terms of their political leaders.

In terms of *institutional structures*, Greek mayors have significant political authority and have traditionally played a dominant role within municipal structures (Hlepas, 2012, p. 267; Hlepas & Getimis, 2011, p. 417). They are elected by popular vote for a five-year term, which gives them a high degree of legitimacy, a powerful position vis-à-vis other municipal bodies, and the ability to use 'soft' power to negotiate local issues with higher levels of government (Hlepas, 2012). Despite recent reforms that have weakened this mayor-centred model, Greek mayors remain one of the strongest in Europe when it comes to their institutional relationship with the municipal council and administration (Heinelt et al., 2018, pp. 36-37). They appoint deputy mayors, establish task forces and assign them duties, and can also appoint municipal councillors to carry out specific tasks. Finally, at the time of this research, the electoral system in Greece guaranteed the majority within the municipal council to the mayor's faction, effectively placing the mayor at the centre of a majoritarian rule, with all municipal resources at his/her disposal (Hlepas, 2012, p. 269).

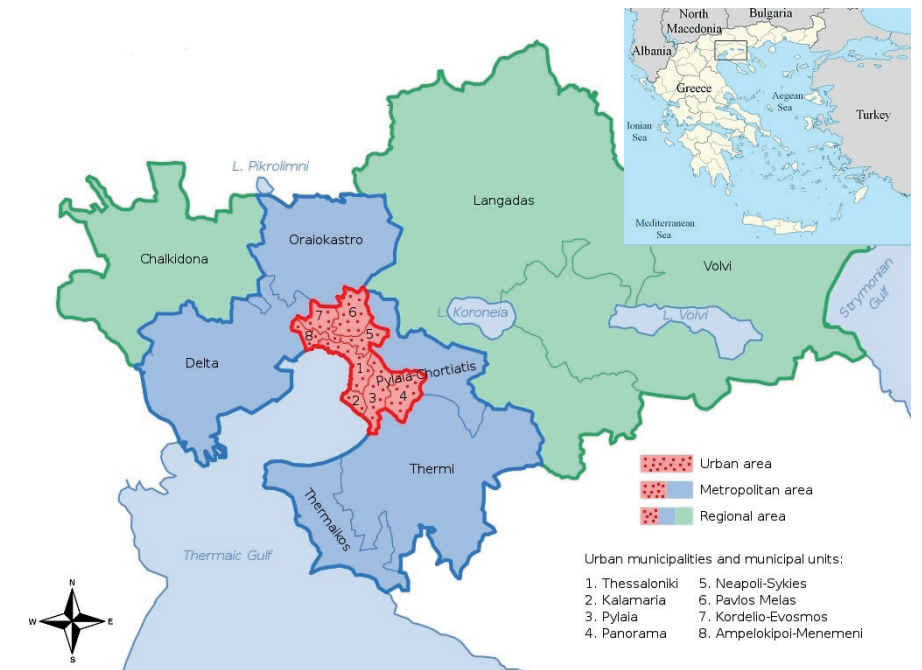


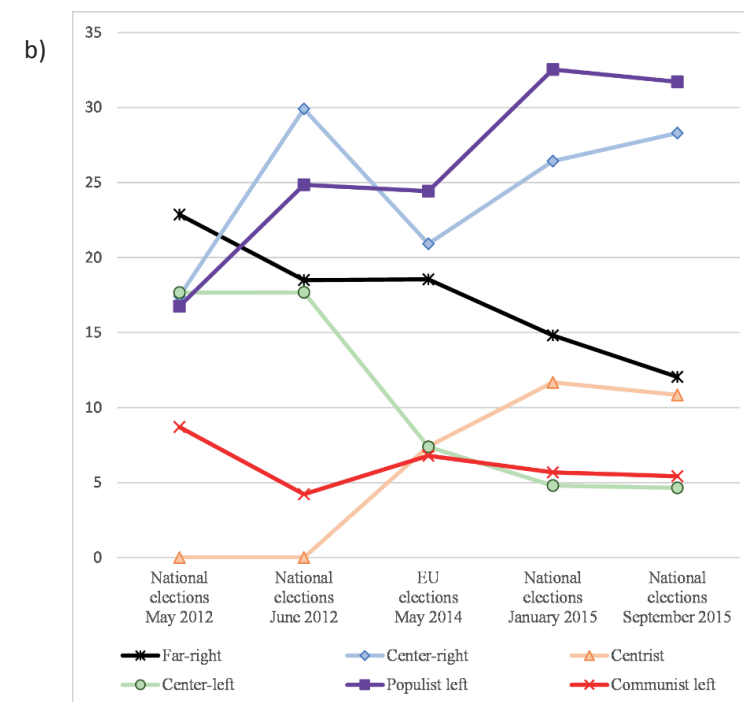
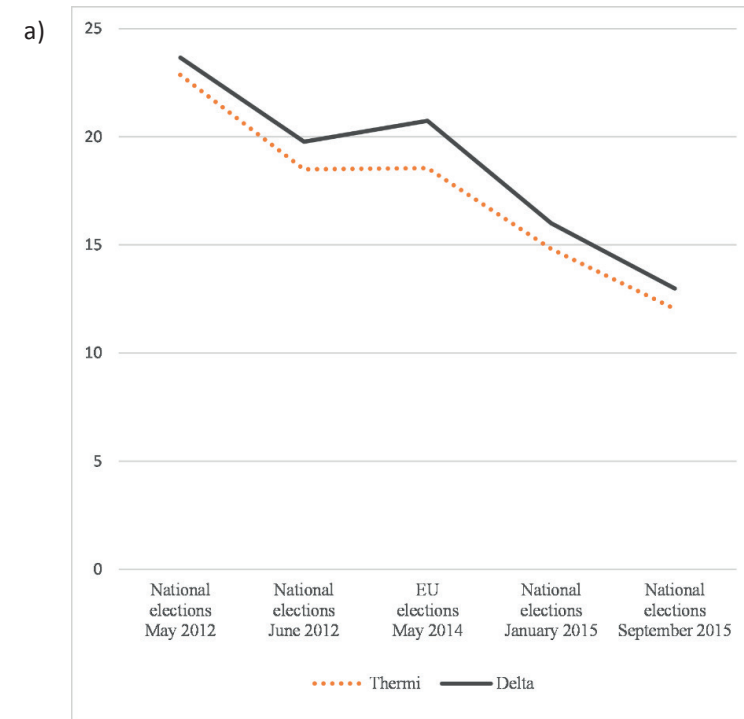
Figure 3. Urban, metropolitan, and regional area of Thessaloniki with its self-governing municipalities, including Delta on the west and Thermi on the east side of the metropolitan area.

Territory				
Municipality	Total area (km ²)	Municipal units	Municipal communities	Local communities
Thermi	385.522	3	9	5
Delta	310.898	3	8	1
Demography				
Municipality	Total population	EU citizens (non-Greek)	Third country nationals/stateless/not specified	
Thermi	53,315	636	2,059	
Delta	45,839	699	3,635	
Economy				
Municipality	Economically active population	Employed	Unemployed	Economically inactive population
Thermi	23,203	19,743	3,460	29,998
Delta	18,791	14,263	4,528	27,048

Table 2. Territorial, demographic and economic characteristics of the municipalities of Thermi and Delta.

Although these features of the Greek local government system facilitate mayors' ability to exercise their political leadership, the reception of forced migrants in Greece remains an exclusive competence of the central state. In theory, local governments can only influence a few aspects related to the functioning of a reception centre, such as waste management and water supply. However, the inadequacy of the Greek government to meet the challenges posed by the increased number of arrivals during 2015's 'long summer of migration' led to a widespread adhococracy in reception management (Sabchev, 2021). A wide range of actors from the international, the national and the local level performed various functions with little or no coordination, often outside the legal and policy framework (Greek Ombudsman, 2017). This created an opportunity for local governments and their political leaders to influence the reception of forced migrants by pushing the boundaries of their competences in some cases, or even overstepping them in others. In short, despite the lack of formal powers in the field of reception, mayors retained considerable leeway to utilise their institutional structures, mobilise available resources, and influence migrants' reception.

Moreover, Thermi and Delta are very similar in terms of their *societal needs*. Both municipalities consist of a number of relatively small settlements spread over the municipal territory, which were established about a century ago by Greek refugees fleeing Turkey. Consequently, both municipalities host a network of local associations that organise various activities with the aim of preserving the collective historical memory of their refugee past. In addition, the municipalities are also very similar in terms of electoral support for far-right anti-immigrant parties and voting behaviour in general (Figure 4). Most importantly, however, the opening of reception centres in Thermi and Delta was met with arguably identical responses of discontent from part of the local population. Amid the announcement of the expected arrival of forced migrants, protests instigated by the far right broke out. Long extraordinary municipal council meetings took place in the presence of angry citizens, who interrupted the proceedings multiple times and requested that no reception centres were opened on the municipal territory. Self-organised 'Committees' of locals who opposed the opening of the centres, as well as groups who mobilised in support of the arriving forced migrants, were present in both municipalities. Lastly, in both cases, there was intimidation and violence against the mayors themselves. In Delta, a group of locals attacked the mayor after his unsuccessful attempt to prevent the opening of the reception centre (Aslanidis, 2016). In Thermi, just a few nights after the mayor expressed his commitment to supporting the arriving migrants, his car was set on fire in front of his home (Fotopoulos, 2016).



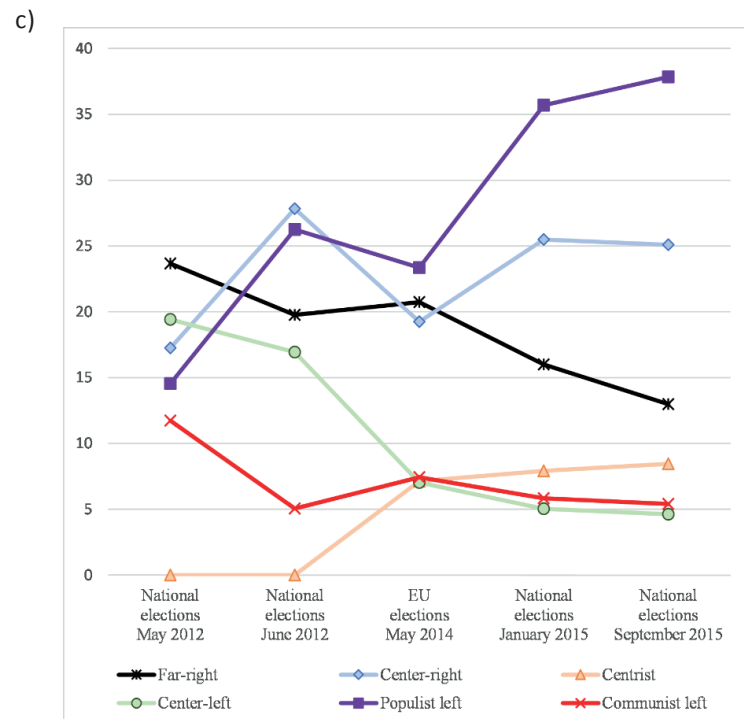


Figure 4. (a) Electoral support for far-right anti-immigrant parties in Thermi and Delta (2012-2015); voting behaviour in national/European Union (EU) elections, Municipality of Thermi (2012-2015); voting behaviour in national/EU elections, Municipality of Delta (2012-2015).

While Thermi and Delta offered very similar leadership environments at the time of the arrival of forced migrants, they differed significantly in terms of political leaders. As explained in the next section, this led to very different outcomes in terms of exercising political leadership and shaping municipal responses. On the one hand, the mayor of Thermi, whose experience in local government structures dates back to 1982, served his 5th consecutive mandate. He was first elected mayor in 1998 and ever since has been securing his re-election from the first round, gaining the support of more than half of the local voters. On the other hand, Delta's mayor served his first term, after winning the local elections in 2014 at the ballotage, and his political career at the local level dates back only to the second half of the 2000s. While national parties in Greece are legally excluded from participating in local elections, Thermi's mayor is affiliated to the centre-left Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) and Delta's mayor to the centre-right New Democracy. During the studied period, these parties were in opposition to the central government led by the left-wing populist Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) (Stavrakakis

& Katsambekis, 2014). Lastly, although both mayors opposed the opening of reception centres in the sites chosen by the central government, their ideological differences combined with the much longer tenure of Thermi's mayor triggered the adoption of very different strategies in managing the consequences of the arrival of forced migrants. The differences in the exercise of local political leadership they demonstrated, had a direct impact on forced migrants' reception conditions.

The data used in the present study was collected in the context of the 'Cities of Refuge' research project. Initially, an extensive desk research was carried out, which included the review of municipal council proceedings and decisions, press releases/public statements of the two mayors, announcements of local political factions represented in the municipal councils, local/national media and social media publications, reports, and secondary academic sources. Subsequently, interviews were held in October/November 2018 with six members of the municipal government and administration. Questions were asked about the engagement of the municipalities in terms of concrete measures related to the reception of forced migrants, and the decisions and actions of political leaders. In this way, any discrepancies between the stance of the local government led by the mayor and the municipal administrative staff could be detected. Rather than in isolation, this data was reviewed in the context of the developments at the time in the wider region of the city of Thessaloniki (Sabchev, 2021). In this respect, participant observation and interviews with representatives of the Ministry of Migration Policy, other municipal authorities in the area, and NGOs delivering services to locally residing forced migrants, provided additional insights into the events taking place in the two municipalities (Table 3). Triangulation between the different sources of data was used to assess the reliability of the information obtained through interviews. Finally, the collected data was incorporated into NVivo 11 and then coded into categories derived from the conceptual framework developed above.

ID	Stakeholder	Date	Interviewee	Language
T1	Municipality of Thermi	9 October 2018	Two employees of the municipal administration	Greek
N1	NGO	11 October 2018	Two employees of an NGO delivering services to forced migrants in the municipality of Delta	Greek
T2	Municipality of Thermi	17 October 2018	Member of the municipal government	Greek
N2	NGO	22 October 2018	Employee of an NGO delivering services to forced migrants in the municipality of Delta	Greek
D1	Municipality of Delta	5 November 2018	Two employees of the municipal administration	Greek
D2	Municipality of Delta	5 November 2018	Member of the municipal government	Greek
TH1	Municipality of Thessaloniki	8 November 2018	Employee of the municipal administration	Greek
MMP	Ministry of Migration Policy	14 November 2018	Representative of the Ministry of Migration Policy	Greek
TH2	Municipality of Thessaloniki	26 November 2018	Employee of the municipal administration	Greek
N3	NGO	29 November 2018	Employee of an NGO delivering services to forced migrants in the municipality of Delta	Greek

Table 3. List of interviews.

Findings

In this section I present the results of the data analysis through the prism of my conceptual framework. I start with a brief background on the broader context in which the events in Thermi and Delta took place. I then provide a detailed description of local political leadership in the two municipalities and its role in the development of local responses to the arrival of forced migrants.

Forced migrants' arrivals and reception in Greece in 2015/2016

In the summer of 2015, arrivals to Greece increased sharply, leading to what would later become known as Europe's refugee reception crisis (Rea et al., 2019). Amid thousands of forced migrants landing on the Aegean islands, chancellor Angela Merkel promoted a welcoming stance and decided to keep Germany's borders open. This led to an intensified movement of people through the so-called 'Balkan route' – the main passage to Central and Western Europe, which started from Greece and ran through the Western Balkan countries.

However, the initial enthusiasm and welcoming attitude towards the arriving migrants quickly succumbed to discussions about stricter border control, which began to dominate the agendas of EU Member States. A new 'hotspot' approach was introduced on the Greek islands, which would ensure that forced migrants arriving in the country would also apply for asylum there (Dimitriadi, 2017). In March 2016, the border between Greece and North Macedonia was closed, blocking the Balkan route and trapping thousands of people in Greece (Anastasiadou, Marvakis, Mezidou, & Speer, 2017).

Under these circumstances, the Greek government had to address an issue that exceeded its capacities. While more than 50,000 forced migrants were in need of shelter, there were only about 4,000 reception places on the mainland. With the help of EU emergency funding, the government began to open large centres, which were managed by the army and the newly established Ministry of Migration Policy, with the assistance of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and a number of (international) NGOs. Reception was usually arranged in abandoned factories and old military camps, with substandard conditions and services, and with forced migrants receiving shelter in tents or in containers (Greek Ombudsman, 2017).

The opening of reception centres was sudden and quick, without any previous consultation with local authorities or communities. In many cases, this led to widespread discontent, misinformation and tensions in the places of arrival. The Greek central government has exclusive competence over reception, as well as over other relevant policy areas, such as healthcare and education, and local governments can only implement additional supporting projects, if they have the good will and resources to do so. However, amid the country's economic crisis, financial transfers from the central to the local level – the main funding source of Greek municipalities – were cut by 60 percent in the period 2009-2014 (Hlepas & Getimis, 2018, p. 61; Sabchev, 2021, p. 2). Therefore, mayors found themselves between a rock and a hard place: they had neither the mandate nor financial resources to influence the reception of forced migrants, while they also had to respond to the discontent of the local population. This was precisely the case in Delta and Thermi, where large reception centres opened in February and in June 2016 respectively.

Mayors' strategies and local political leadership in Thermi and Delta

As already noted, the local leadership environment provided the two mayors similar burdens and opportunities to unfold their leadership skills and realise their policy objectives. However, the relationship between the mayors and their leadership environment differed greatly. With a centre-left ideological background and high local popularity after five consecutive terms in office, the mayor of Thermi decided to pursue a risky strategy and defend the rights of forced migrants. This placed him in direct opposition to part of the local population, who protested against the reception of forced migrants in the municipality. On the other side of Thessaloniki, the mayor of Delta decided to take the opposite stance. He joined the local protests and tried to prevent the opening of the reception centre on the territory of his municipality. A closer look at how the two mayors unfolded their responses within the context of their leadership environments reveals important differences in each of the three strategic leadership tasks identified above, i.e., sense making, decision making and coordination, and meaning making.

To begin with the sense making, Thermi's mayor recognised the significance of the emerging crisis much earlier, took steps to frame it as a humanitarian issue, and immediately began to address some of the pitfalls he had identified within his leadership environment. More than half a year before the news of the opening of reception centres across the country, the municipal government launched campaigns

to mobilise aid for the forced migrants arriving on the Greek islands and passing through the country. These initiatives were realised with the involvement of the municipal services and took place in facilities spread throughout the municipal territory, including senior citizens' centres, where the locals spent much of their time discussing everyday matters. This helped not only to raise awareness about the humanitarian dimension of the situation, but also to identify municipal areas where the local population tended to express negative or even xenophobic views. In such cases, members of the municipal government or the administration visited the place informally, with the intention of introducing a humanitarian perspective and trying to steer the public discourse in the desired direction (T2). Moreover, amid the closure of the Balkan route, when the central government needed to quickly secure reception sites, the mayor of Thermi offered certain facilities within the municipal territory, which could be used for the temporary reception of forced migrants. The facilities could only accommodate a relatively small number of people and served the mayor's strategic objectives (Municipality of Thermi, 2016). However, these proposals were rejected by the ministry, without any official justification. Just a few months later, the central government opened a large reception centre in a new location in Thermi – an old abandoned warehouse – without any previous communication or coordination with the local government (T2).

On the contrary, Delta's mayor underestimated the sensitive and complicated nature of the issue of forced migrants' arrivals, as well as its direct relevance to his municipality. Although Delta's municipal administration was involved in the collection of humanitarian aid in the months before the border closure, this involvement was only marginal in comparison to the one in Thermi, and was initiated by an NGO. In addition, no concrete steps were taken to develop a counter narrative in response to potential xenophobic rhetoric, or to prepare the local community for the eventual arrival of forced migrants (D1).

In terms of decision making and coordination, both mayors opposed the central government's decision to open the concrete reception centres in their municipalities. However, they did so in very different ways, especially in terms of how they exploited their leadership environments. Thermi's mayor announced that the municipal government was against the opening of the centre because of the lack of collaboration from the central government, and the appalling conditions in which forced migrants were sheltered. While he acknowledged that the functioning of the facility itself was beyond his competence, he announced the mobilisation of all the available municipal resources in order to ensure decent living conditions for the forced migrants hosted in the municipality. Taking full advantage of the adhocism in the management of reception at the time (Sabchev, 2021) and of

his formal competences and room for discretion, Thermi's mayor established a task force composed of municipal councillors and technical staff, with the aim of addressing the problems in the reception centre (Thermis Dromena, 2016a). The municipal employees took care of the power supply, provided stoves and wood for heating during the winter months, cleaned the facilities after they had been flooded by heavy rains, and took measures to ensure the safety of the sheltered migrants. Importantly, all these initiatives were carried out with a high level of enthusiasm and professionalism by the municipal staff, which was considered crucial by the municipal government.

'When we asked [name of a municipal employee] to go to the coordination meeting [in the reception centre], she did not go just to pass the time. She went with documents, came back, did... I knew that if I did not go, she will be there and she will communicate, manage things according to the instructions of the mayor...' (T2).

In addition, communication and collaboration with a wide range of actors was a key element in the strategy of Thermi's mayor. When the reception centre opened, he convened a meeting to discuss emerging issues and potential solutions with locally elected members of parliament (MP) and representatives of the regional authorities, other municipalities in the area, the UNHCR, the police, and the church (Thermis Dromena, 2016b). In collaboration with the UNHCR, local stakeholders, and volunteers, the municipality organised a number of activities aimed at making forced migrants feel part of the local community, for example by enabling participation in local festivities and museum visits (Thermis Dromena, 2016c). Moreover, the municipal government 'put in the loop' local businesses (T2). For instance, it arranged that food donations for the forced migrants are purchased by the local association of agricultural producers, which had expressed concerns about the proximity of the reception centre to farms. Such collaborations also helped the municipal government circumvent bureaucratic obstacles stemming from the lack of competences in the field of reception. At the same time, they strengthened the acceptance of the mayor's agenda by showing the local community that not only the municipal authorities, but also other local actors demonstrated solidarity with the hosted migrants.

The mayor of Delta adopted a radically different strategy. When negative reactions against the opening of the reception centre sparked in his municipality, he opposed the central government's decision and joined the local protests. In an attempt to prevent the opening of the facility, the mayor paid a personal visit to the Minister of Migration Policy and the public prosecutor. When these visits turned out to be in vain and the reception centre eventually opened, the mayor initially refused to

send municipal trucks to collect waste at the facility – a decision he later withdrew (MMP, D1). In fact, other mayors from nearby municipalities intervened; they visited the centre and facilitated garbage collection, electricity and water supply, and even donated wood to ensure heating during the winter months (TyposThess, 2016). In parallel, NGOs, grassroots organisations and local volunteers filled other gaps in the service provision in the reception centre (TH1, TH2).

In stark contrast to the local response to the arrival of forced migrants in Thermi, there were no permanent channels of communication and cooperation between the municipal government, municipal services and local stakeholders in Delta. For example, the Association of Municipal Employees organised the collection and delivery of aid to the reception centre immediately after its opening (DeltaNews, 2016). However, the mayor ‘raised a wall’ against any further substantial involvement of the administration (D1). Although municipal services occasionally participated in the implementation of small-scale initiatives for locally residing forced migrants organised by NGOs, all relatively ambitious proposals requiring the approval of the municipal government were turned down. In this respect, municipal staff described the stance of the local government as ‘distant’, explicitly mentioning the mayor as the leading factor behind this (D1). Nonetheless, rather than blaming the mayor for the situation, they explained his actions by referring to the negative and even violent reactions of some locals upon the opening of the reception centre.

Lastly, with regard to meaning making and the role of leaders in building a narrative to influence public opinion and convince citizens to follow them, Thermi’s mayor pursued a strategy that aimed to isolate the far right and prevent it from monopolising the local discourse:

‘Our strategy was to look around and to separate, to split, and not to let the front [against the reception of forced migrants] become too strong, and thus be able to lead astray others. We tried, therefore, to bring this Committee [of locals protesting against the opening of the centre] closer and to release some common statements, hedging them. How – they were saying ‘We do not want refugees here in any case’, and we were announcing – a common statement though – that we do not accept refugee reception without our participation, for instance. Inside [the Committee] there were conservative people, people who were afraid because of the lack of information. We tried, therefore, to break this [front] and to leave those with extreme views very few and isolated from the rest of the community. And the rest to bring... And we managed.’ (T2).

In parallel, Thermi’s municipal newspaper regularly addressed the issue of the reception of forced migrants, emphasising its humanitarian nature. The newspaper detailed the deplorable conditions in the reception centre, whose residents were mainly children, and the inability of the state to ensure access to basic rights and decent living conditions for migrants. At the same time, the outlet presented the local government as the guardian of people’s rights, highlighting all its actions related to the reception of migrants. To give an example, at the end of November 2016 – two months after the start of the school year and when several hundred children living in the centre were not receiving formal education – the municipal government organised a protest in front of the regional ministerial office in Thessaloniki. Led by Thermi’s mayor himself, municipal councillors and forced migrants demanded measures on behalf of the central government, both with regard to the children’s schooling and the improvement of living conditions in the reception centre. Following the demonstration, an article entitled ‘Sub-zero the temperatures and the interest of the state for the refugees in the camp in Thermi’ appeared in the municipal newspaper, which highlighted, among other things, the lack of heating and security in the facility, and the need to fulfil the fundamental right to education for all children (Thermis Dromena, 2016d).

On the contrary, at its extraordinary meeting following the news of the imminent arrival of forced migrants, Delta’s municipal council gave a platform to an MP from the far-right Golden Dawn – a decision that was heavily criticised by local left-wing factions (Laiki Syspirosi Municipality of Delta, 2016). The Golden Dawn MP used this opportunity to portray the expected newcomers as illegals and criminals. On his behalf, Delta’s mayor emphasised that the opening of the reception centre would ‘put in danger the normal everyday life of locals and businesses’ (Municipality of Delta, 2016c). In line with the adoption of a discourse that presented forced migrants as a threat, he put forward measures to enhance security in the area (Municipality of Delta, 2016a, 2016b). Following his failed attempt to prevent the opening of the centre, ‘the mayor kept distance, afraid that any involvement in the refugee issue would result in strong reactions by the local community’ (D1).

In the end, Thermi’s proactive mayor made extensive use of the opportunities that his leadership environment provided and skilfully addressed the challenges that it posed. In contrast, his reactive colleague in Delta was late in discovering the issues arising from the arrival of forced migrants, and failed to organise a coherent response in collaboration with the municipal administration and other local stakeholders. The reception centre in Thermi was eventually closed a year after its opening, due to the high cost and unsuitability of the chosen facility. Shortly thereafter, the municipality joined a reception project, establishing a

partnership with the UNHCR, other municipalities in the area, and several NGOs. As a result, Thermi hosted a small number of asylum seekers in private apartments, facilitating newcomers' access to legal assistance, healthcare, education, and local job opportunities (T1). On the other side of Thessaloniki, the reception centre in Delta remained operational, despite repeated protests from both locals and forced migrants. Local NGOs continued to carry out activities to improve access to services and living conditions in the centre, and also implemented small-scale reception projects for asylum seekers, similar to the one in Thermi, but without the participation of Delta's local government (N1, N2). Finally, the local elections in Greece in 2019 partially confirmed the assumption that successful leadership equals political survival (t Hart & Rhodes, 2014): the mayor of Thermi won his sixth consecutive term – again in the first round – while the mayor of Delta lost in the ballotage.

Discussion and conclusion

What prompted the adoption of strikingly different policy responses to the arrival of forced migrants in the two municipalities? At first glance, and in line with previous research on local responses to immigration (de Graauw & Vermeulen, 2016; Steil & Vasi, 2014), partisanship explains the humanitarian and welcoming stance of Thermi's mayor, and the security-oriented and distant stance of Delta's mayor. However, this is only part of the story. While ideology was arguably one (or even *the*) motivating factor behind the decisions of the two mayors, it says little about the effectiveness of their strategies, and by extension about the 'on the ground' impact of their actions. Both political leaders were called upon to provide solutions by local electorates with very similar voting behaviours, in equally conflict-ridden and unpredictable contexts, and within the same institutional structures. In other words, the two mayors were dealt the same cards, but they played them very differently, which ultimately affected the reception conditions for the arriving forced migrants.

My main argument, therefore, is that local political leadership – i.e., the way mayors seize the opportunities and overcome the constraints in their leadership environment – contributes to the development and implementation of municipal policy responses to the arrival of forced migrants. Mayors 'are not tossed helplessly on the waves of structural changes' in migration governance (Orr, 2009, p. 42). Their decisions and actions can significantly impact forced migrants' reception conditions – thus contributing to the realisation of migrants' fundamental rights – even when local governments do not have formal competences in the

asylum/reception policy domain. Moreover, the findings presented above lead to the assertion that mayors also have the potential to influence in the long-term attitudes of local communities towards forced migrants. In this regard, local political leadership may well be a previously overlooked factor that could help explain cases where local governments led by factions positioned on the right side of the political spectrum introduce progressive policies for forced migrants, seemingly at no political cost. Such cases have indeed been recorded in other Greek municipalities (e.g., Trikala) in the context of the 'Cities of Refuge' research. Local political leadership therefore deserves more attention as a potential new element in the constellation of causal factors that shape municipal policy responses to the arrival of forced migrants.

This brings to the fore the issue of how local political leadership manifests itself in the reception of forced migrants. Insights from crisis management literature (Boin et al., 2016), along with the examples of Thermi and Delta, suggest that this occurs through a combination of political, operational, and discursive responses on behalf of mayors. My findings confirm the assertion that local governments and their leaders have significant room for discretion within legal and situational contexts to influence migration-related matters (de Graauw, 2014; Terlouw & Böcker, 2019). They can 'inhabit' this discretionary space by leveraging available municipal resources and building partnerships with both public and private actors positioned across the multi-level setting of migration governance (Oomen et al., 2021). Moreover, in the highly politicised field of forced migrants' reception, mayors can make a difference by navigating the public discourse in a timely and careful manner, and by making efforts to isolate and weaken sources of extreme and xenophobic rhetoric.

Such practical matters inevitably raise the question of what constitutes 'successful political leadership' in migration governance. In this regard, the two examples presented in this study are closely related to the emerging debate in leadership studies around the concept of 'interactive political leadership'. Interactive political leadership constitutes 'a strategic endeavour to govern society effectively and legitimately through the systematic involvement and mobilisation of relevant and affected members of the political community' (Sørensen, 2020, p. 3). It entails skilful use of what Nye (2008) identified as 'smart power' – a combination between limited use of 'hard power' (e.g., creating a task force with concrete duties) and extensive use of 'soft power' (e.g., persuasion, strategic use of the media). Such leadership – when properly performed – can boost leaders' legitimacy, advance their policy strategies, and maintain or even increase support (Sørensen, 2020). Moreover, for local politicians it also entails purposeful engagement in attempts

to influence policy processes at the national and transnational level of governance, which Sørensen describes with the term ‘multi-level leadership’ (2020, pp. 94-110). In contrast, in the tangled, poly-centric and multi-level realm of urban migration policy-making, sovereign leadership styles and the logic of ‘I do not want to take part if I cannot get things my own way’ becomes less legitimate and of little benefit to mayors and forced migrants alike (Sørensen, 2020, p. 66).

It would be problematic to draw general conclusions on the basis of this study. That said, research conducted in a number of municipalities in several EU countries in the context of ‘Cities of Refuge’ suggests that interactive and multi-level local political leadership has been an important factor in the development of more welcoming and inclusive municipal approaches to forced migrants’ reception and integration (e.g., Oomen et al., 2021; Sabchev, 2021). In addition, a number of studies in migration policy research and refugee studies demonstrate similar findings, highlighting the explicit engagement of local political leaders in building coalitions with local and transnational partners (Betts et al., 2021; Garcés-Mascareñas & Gebhardt, 2020). This is particularly relevant for larger cities, whose mayors have more resources and soft power to employ strategies based on negotiation, collaboration and persuasion in advancing their policy goals (Sørensen, 2020). In any case, further comparative research is needed to clarify the conceptual relevance of both interactive and multi-level political leadership to migration studies, as well as their potential added value in developing policy responses that preserve social cohesion and safeguard the rights of forced migrants.

The above discussion serves well as a reminder of the need to reflect upon the value of the conceptual framework developed in this article. The inherently polycentric nature of urban migration policy-making, in addition to the presented empirical evidence from Greece, seems to justify an interactive approach to the study of local political leadership in migration governance. Nonetheless, alternative conceptualisations and their potential explanatory value for migration research should also be explored. For instance, careful accounts of political leaders’ background could uncover important individual motivations, and help explain *prima facie* contradictions between partisanship and policy responses to forced migrants (Marchetti, 2020).

I conclude with two suggestions for future research, in addition to the ones already indicated above. First, while the lack of formal powers in the area of forced migrants’ reception is common for municipal authorities in Europe, the ‘extreme concentration of power in the hands of the (directly elected) mayor’ in

the Greek local government system is the exception rather than the rule (Hlepas, 2018). Cross-country comparisons of how institutional structures shape the ability of mayors to respond to the arrival of forced migrants may therefore shed light on the possibilities and limits of local political leadership. Second, if political leadership matters at the local level, then does it also affect migration policies at higher levels of government, where the leadership environment provides greater opportunities, but also increases obstacles/barriers? Strengthening the dialogue between leadership and migration scholars can help advance theory building on the role of people holding key positions in politics or public administration in migration policy-making at different levels. On a practical level, it can also help develop effective strategies to address the inevitable pitfalls that the complex realm of migration governance hides.

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Notes

- i With the term 'forced migrants', I refer to the broad category of people on the move who seek international protection, regardless if they have already submitted their request for asylum or not. In this way, I aim to account for the complexity of the migratory population movement in the studied period (2015-2019), and the fact that people regularly shift between categories that do not necessarily correspond to their experiences (see Crawley & Skleparis, 2017).
- ii Sources: Greece_2011_Periferiakes_Enotites.svg: Pitichinaccio derivative work: Philly boy92, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Thessaloniki_urban_and_metropolitan_areas_map.svg and Lencer, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Greece_location_map.svg
- iii Source: ELSTAT 2011, <https://www.statistics.gr/>. Municipal units, municipal communities and local communities are sub-municipal districts created by the 2011 Kallikratis administrative reform. They represent the territorial division of Greek municipalities and facilitate the local political representation in the municipal councils. For a detailed discussion see pp. 119-143 in Hlepas, N. K., et al. (2018). *Sub-Municipal Governance in Europe: Decentralization Beyond the Municipal Tier*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

- iv Based on data from the official database of the Greek Ministry of Interior (<https://ekloges.ypes.gr/>). Political parties included in each category are the following: **far-right (anti-immigrant)**: Golden Dawn, Independent Greeks, Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS); **centre-right**: New Democracy; Centrist: To Potami, Union of Centrists; **centre-left**: Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), Democratic Left (DIMAR); **populist left**: Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA); **communist-left**: Communist Party of Greece (KKE).

- vi Interviews were held by the author and lasted on average 47 minutes. The individuals interviewed were selected on the basis of their direct involvement in: (1) the decision-making process; or (2) the implementation of measures related to the reception of forced migrants.

- vii See <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/46904>

- viii The municipal newspaper of Thermi is a 32-page monthly publication issued by the municipality and distributed free of charge to local residents (20,000 copies). It contains news about municipal programmes, projects, events, municipal council decisions, and a section devoted to announcements by the political factions represented in the municipal council.

Chapter 4.

Human rights localisation and individual agency: From the ‘hobby of the few’ to the few behind the hobby

This chapter is based on: Sabchev, T., Miellel, S., & Durmuş, E. (2021). Human Rights Localisation and Individual Agency: From ‘Hobby of the Few’ to the Few Behind the Hobby. In C. Boost, A. Broderick, F. Coomans, & R. Moerland (Eds.), *Myth or Lived Reality: On the (In)Effectiveness of Human Rights* (pp. 183-211). The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press.

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Abstract

Human rights have been facing criticism on many fronts, including the challenges of the ‘enforcement gap’ and the ‘citizenship gap’, laying bare the shortcomings with regard to the implementation of human rights law as well as regarding its protection of highly vulnerable groups such as refugees. Research on the effectiveness of human rights, the ‘localisation’ of human rights through invocations and practices on the ground, the increased engagement of local authorities with human rights, are all responses to such challenges to some degree. Based on empirical research conducted within municipalities in four countries, this article focuses on a missing piece of the puzzle in terms of conceptual and empirical research: the role of ‘individual agency’. We adopt a socio-legal perspective on human rights and demonstrate that individual agency can make an important contribution to the effective implementation of human rights in the field of migration governance. Behind the black box of the state and local authorities, we find individuals who use human rights – as law, practice and discourse – in local policymaking, in circumstances where invoking human rights is not self-explanatory. Finally, we put forward the notion that reasons such as individual background, motivations, and interactions between individuals influence municipal officials’ engagement with human rights, and we reflect on the conceptual and practical implications that result from this.

Keywords: human rights, local governments, human rights localisation, individual agency, migration, local policies.

Introduction

Over the last decades, human rights have been widely criticised. Some of this criticism relates to the notion of effectiveness (Kennedy, 2001). Those challenging human rights have focused, for instance, on the lack of enforcement of positive human rights obligations (the ‘enforcement gap’) (Marx et al., 2015) and the inability of the human rights regime to protect the most vulnerable, such as refugees and stateless persons, despite claims of universality (the ‘citizenship gap’) (Shafir & Brysk, 2006). The latter criticism also poses an opportunity for human rights to prove their relevance to non-citizens who might lack sufficient protection under domestic legislation and should – at least in theory – be protected by human rights (Baumgärtel & Oomen, 2019).

Partially related to this criticism, and in part because of their *de facto* engagement with human rights, local authorities have recently received considerable scholarly attention. They have been increasingly portrayed as being important actors that can influence – either directly or indirectly – the realisation of human rights on the ground (Aust, 2015; De Feyter, Parmentier, Timmerman, & Ulrich, 2011; Durmuş, 2020; Oomen & Durmus, 2019). More concretely, local authorities have been at the forefront of receiving and integrating refugees, and safeguarding their human rights; an issue which started gaining more attention following the increased mobility of Syrian refugees from 2015 onwards (Oomen & Baumgärtel, 2018). This article focuses on individuals and processes at the intersection of migration, human rights and local authorities. As such, this contribution provides valuable insights on a wide range of questions regarding the effectiveness of human rights. We adopt a socio-legal perspective on human rights and define them broadly, not only as international law, but also as a value, discourse, and ‘social construction and practice’ (Grigolo, 2017, p. 11). Individuals working within local governments are among the actors that engage in such social construction and practice. In line with the scope of this article, ‘local authorities’ refer to the lowest tier of administration in the public administrative organisation of a state, including its executive, legislative, and administrative organs.

While local governments have been receiving attention from scholars concerning their role in human rights realisation, the more general question regarding the effectiveness of human rights has puzzled other scholars – albeit with inconsistent or conflicting results (Brysk, 2019). Bearing in mind the most important challenge to this scholarship – namely the difficulty of establishing a causal link between human rights and change on the ground – we have chosen to refer to the effectiveness of human rights in local migration governance as: *the generation,*

from within the local authority, of policies, practices and discourses inspired by human rights, that are designed to improve the well-being of refugees as a vulnerable group. As such, we do not claim that any local policy, practice or discourse has succeeded in creating an empirically measurable improvement in the well-being of persons. In addition, this definition is a deliberate choice to focus on practical local outputs (policies, practices, discourses), instead of legal formalist or statist understandings of human rights effectiveness. Lastly, the adoption of human rights-inspired migration policies by local governments constitutes a particularly useful case study for gaining insights into the effective implementation of human rights, as it represents an emerging trend, and certainly not a universal nor self-evident observation. As local authorities have been considered as human rights actors much more recently than states (Oomen & Baumgärtel, 2014; Oomen, Davis, & Grigolo, 2016), the effectiveness of human rights in this context – i.e., the success of human rights inspiring migration policies, practices and discourses – can be observed as it unfolds.

Within this context, our aim is to focus on individual agency – a missing element in the conceptual and empirical research on the local relevance and effectiveness of human rights. We use the concept of individual agency to examine how personal background and motivations, as well as interactions with others, can influence the actions of individuals involved in introducing human rights within local authorities. While the role of non-state actors and individuals in *claiming* rights has enjoyed attention in human rights scholarship (De Feyter et al., 2011; Desmet, 2014; Merry, 2006a; Saeed, 2015; Widdows & Marway, 2015), the agency of individuals within the black box of the state (Brysk, 2019, p. 8), its local authorities (International Law Commission, 2001), or other actors holding positive legal human rights obligations, has only recently been addressed. Drawing on scholarly and empirical evidence on the relevance of individual ‘human rights users’ (Desmet, 2014) enacting local human rights-based practices (Mielle, 2019; Roodenburg, 2019; Shawki, 2011; Ward, 2016), we explore *how the exercise of individual agency by public officials within local authorities contributes to the effectiveness of human rights in local migration governance*. Our findings – based on field research conducted in municipalities in Italy, Greece, Turkey and the Netherlands as part of the Cities of Refuge Project – demonstrate the importance of individual agency for the adoption of local human rights-based policies, and suggest that the background, motivations and interactions of individuals can play a role in the extent to which local human rights-based policies are adopted. In presenting these findings, we start with a discussion on the effectiveness and localisation of human rights in relation to local authorities, followed by a conceptualisation of individual agency, and a number of methodological considerations. We then highlight the importance of individual

agency for human rights effectiveness, and elaborate on the reasons why certain public officials engage with human rights in terms of local policy making. Lastly, we discuss the conceptual and practical value of individual agency in human rights research and practice, and conclude with some suggestions for future research.

Human rights effectiveness and the role of local authorities: The story thus far

The question of human rights effectiveness is complex, and one that many human rights scholars have grappled with, addressing different objectives and using different methodologies (Brysk, 2019, p. 2; Hopgood, Snyder, & Vinjamuri, 2017). Brysk suggests navigating this field by asking: ‘The effectiveness of what?’ (Brysk, 2019, p. 2). Is effectiveness the codification of norms into law following ratification? Does it pertain to the success of a particular rights movement? Or perhaps to the on-the-ground fulfilment of minimum requirements of well-being by states accepting international norms? In those cases, the indicators that are measured are often results-oriented, structural, or formal/legal (Council of Europe, 2011). Scholars often analyse the response to ‘emerging channels of horizontal or dialectical international influence’ of the so-called ‘international human rights regime’, consisting of laws, courts, institutions and professionals. The question of effectiveness of human rights is placed within the context of socio-legal and social science literature on ideas, how those ideas spread, how they gain ownership and become norms to which actors adhere (Béland & Cox, 2016; Berman, 2007; Brysk, 2019; Risse-Kappen & Sikkink, 1999). Risse-Kappen, Ropp, and Sikkink (1999) have sought to empirically prove that a causal relationship exists between the idea of human rights and improvement of the standards of well-being on the ground. However, such causal claims were met with widespread scepticism among social scientists, as attributing improvement to the adoption of human rights seems methodologically near impossible. This view was also accepted by the same authors in their subsequent publications (Goodman & Jinks, 2004; Haglund & Stryker, 2015; Risse, Ropp, & Sikkink, 2013; Simmons, 2009).

The literature on human rights effectiveness has recognised the complexity and pluralism of ‘pathways of influence’ (Brysk, 2019, p. 2) that lead to a change in identity, and of interest-building processes that shift the behaviour of an actor or individual (Koh, 1996). However, this research has struggled to step away from the top-down state-centric understanding of what human rights constitute, by whom they are generated, and how they can best be realised on the ground (De Feyter et al., 2011). Human rights are not only imposed top-down and translated

from the international to the local level (Merry, 2006b); they are also developed and contested locally, by actors and individuals invoking or ‘using’ human rights (Desmet, 2014) without outside ‘international’ pressure (Oomen et al., 2016; Oomen & Durmus, 2019). Rather than viewing the local relevance of human rights only as a top-down ‘translation’ of international law into local contexts (Merry, 2006a), we focus on human rights that are invoked and practiced on the ground, by individuals who exercise their agency to introduce their own understandings of human rights (Oomen & Durmus, 2019). The research on the localisation of human rights provides complementary responses to the shortcomings of the research regarding the effectiveness of human rights (Marx et al., 2015).

The term ‘localisation’ has been used to examine a broad range of human rights practices, both from a descriptive and normative perspective (De Feyter et al., 2011; Oomen & Durmus, 2019). Firstly, this term was used to describe the strengthening of local civil society and institutions, such as local authorities, for the protection of fundamental rights (Marx et al., 2015). Secondly, it was used to describe the efforts made to develop human rights in a way that makes it more reflective of local concerns, and more accommodating to the claims of human rights users (De Feyter et al., 2011). Lastly, it also forms part of a broader shift of perspective; away from the primacy of the nation state (Meyer, 2009), and towards a multi-stakeholder agenda that considers the role and responsibilities of a wider range of states and non-state actors (Destrooper, 2017). Rather than neglecting the importance of states in realising individuals’ human rights, the scholarship on localisation demonstrates the limits of state-centric approaches, and the importance of including non-state and sub-state actors in discussions on human rights effectiveness.

In the literature on localisation, one phenomenon was recently highlighted for its potential to strengthen both social justice and the international human rights system itself – i.e., the ‘human rights city’ (Oomen et al., 2016). While some authors have proposed very broad and inclusive definitions of a human rights city (Grigolo, 2016, p. 227), we adopt the one of Oomen and Baumgärtel: ‘an urban entity or local government that explicitly bases its policies, or some of them, on human rights as laid down in international treaties, thus distinguishing itself from other local authorities’ (Oomen & Baumgärtel, 2014, p. 710). The explicit engagement of local authorities with human rights is indeed commonly viewed as a prerequisite for becoming a human rights city (Goodhart, 2019). While local civil society initiatives can often be the ones that ‘make human rights the talk of the town’, these cannot be sustained in the long run without the commitment of local administration, which is usually responsible for ensuring access to services such as education, healthcare, etc. (van den Berg, 2016).

The rise of human rights cities has often been presented as an opportunity to strengthen the effectiveness of international human rights through bottom-up initiatives and implementation at the local level (Grigolo, 2019; Oomen & Baumgärtel, 2018). Examples are plentiful and can be found all over the world. In the United States (US), for instance, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was already adopted as municipal law in San Francisco back in 1998, while Chicago has been using the Convention on the Rights of the Child to shape local policies since 2009 (Martha Frances Davis, 2016, pp. 37-38). Importantly, both treaties have not been ratified by the US government. In Europe, Graz has been applying human rights standards in monitoring local election campaigns and in designing anti-discrimination policies (Starl, 2017). As a final example, the Korean city of Gwangju has developed a more comprehensive human rights approach over the past decade, which involves different rights, policy areas and stakeholders (Durmus, 2020, p. 48). Rather than ‘empty promises’, such actions by human rights cities can potentially directly and positively affect the everyday lives of their citizens through easier and universal access to basic services (Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui, 2005).

The direct link between human rights cities and human rights effectiveness has been particularly visible in terms of migrants’ rights, especially with regard to undocumented and forced migrants. An often-cited example is that of the city of Utrecht, which – along with other Dutch cities – successfully used human rights to extend the provision of emergency ‘bed, bath and bread’ services to undocumented people (Oomen & Baumgärtel, 2018). New York, yet another human rights city, recently banned the use of the terms ‘illegal’ and ‘illegal alien’, and prohibited people from threatening to call the Immigration and Customs Enforcement on the basis of discriminatory motives. Breaking the new local law can result in fines as high as 250,000\$ (NYC Commission on Human Rights, 2019).

The contribution of cities to the realisation of migrants’ human rights is, however, not limited only to those bearing the ‘human rights city’ label. Due to the recent process of decentralisation in many countries, local authorities have gradually acquired a number of competencies directly related to the reception and integration of immigrants (Caponio & Borkert, 2010). As a result, municipalities play an important role in facilitating the access of migrants to local schools, hospitals, labour markets, etc. In addition, local authorities were at the frontline of protecting and fulfilling the human rights of refugees in the recent period of increased refugee arrivals to Europe – often acting at the boundaries of their legal competencies, or even overstepping them in order to guarantee reception services in line with international refugee and human rights law (Oomen, Baumgärtel,

Mielliet, Durmus, & Sabchev, 2021). Cities such as Athens and Milan, to mention just two, provided shelter, food, basic healthcare services and information to tens of thousands of refugees in 2015-2016 (Bazurli, 2019; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018). On many occasions, these municipalities and other local authorities explicitly referred to human rights to justify their assistance to refugees (Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, 2018). Thus, rather than being restricted to the category of human rights cities as the usual suspects, municipal engagement with human rights is a much broader phenomenon when it comes to defending and realising the rights of migrants (Mielliet, 2019).

At the beginning of this section, we presented different arguments for moving beyond the state-centric and legal formalist approaches in studying the effectiveness of human rights. From the discussion so far, it has become clear that human rights cities – but also local authorities in general – can contribute significantly to the effective implementation of human rights in the field of migration governance. While states are shifting towards the externalisation of border control and stricter asylum policies (Polakow-Suransky, 2017), and hence moving away from their human rights obligations in relation to refugees, some local authorities increasingly refer to human rights – as law, practice and discourse – in order to justify progressive local policies designed to protect and safeguard the rights of refugees. Bearing that in mind, understanding the motives behind the use of human rights by local authorities becomes an important next step for both human rights scholars and practitioners. For scholars, answering the question as to why some cities actively engage with human rights in their approach to refugee reception, could reveal the driving force behind instances where human rights inspired effective local policy solutions. For practitioners, it could provide the key towards strengthening the effectiveness of human rights where those rights matter the most: at the local level.

The missing piece: Conceptualising the individual agency of human rights users

Having already arrived at the local level, this section will introduce the concept of individual agency, which in our view constitutes one of the key drivers behind initiating, designing, enacting and implementing municipal human rights-based policies. Our argument is that the actor-based approaches used in human rights

scholarship do not provide the tools to adequately capture the dynamics *within* local authorities. This carries the risk of overlooking the role of individual agency in ‘bringing human rights home’ to the city level (Soohoo, Albisa, & Davis, 2008).

Recent human rights research has contributed to the unpacking of the human rights city, revealing a diverse group of actors: researchers, civil society, local governments, central government agencies and social workers, to name a few (Grigolo, 2017). The same is true for cities active in the reception and integration of refugees, where a multitude of local actors facilitates migrants’ access to services (Hinger, Schäfer, & Pott, 2016). Each one of these actors serves a separate (complementary or competing) function in the implementation of human rights within the city, following its own (human rights) agenda. Local mobilisation in the field of human rights is often seen as involving ‘struggles from below’ initiated by civil society actors and social movements (Chenoweth et al., 2017). As states are presented as monolithic entities, the role of individuals within local authorities remains somewhat of a ‘black box’ (Desmet, 2014). While municipal governments often contribute to human rights effectiveness, as described in the previous section, the motivations behind this contribution remain unclear. What makes some municipalities incorporate human rights in their local policies, and ultimately even regard themselves as human rights cities? Our view is that one important factor which triggers and navigates the process of enacting local human rights-based policies is individual agency *within* local authorities. Drawing on standard conceptions of agency, we associate individual agency with the capacity to act, and the performance of intentional and unintentional actions that derive from the former (Schlosser, 2019). More concretely, by employing the notion of ‘individual agency’, we demonstrate that personal background and motivations, as well as interactions with others, underpin the actions of individuals involved in introducing human rights law, practice and discourse within local authorities.

Our approach to theorising the agency of these individuals draws on socio-legal scholarship, such as legal pluralism and legal anthropological perspectives, which shift the focus away from approaches that study human rights ‘in an abstract, doctrinal and depersonalised manner to a more grounded and contextual approach’ (Desmet, 2014, p. 122). More specifically, our approach draws on recent scholarly work on theorising the involvement of different types of actors involved in human rights practices, also known as actor-oriented approaches, and concepts such as ‘human rights users’ (Brems & Desmet, 2014; Desmet, 2014). Adopting an approach that focuses on the *users* of human rights implies that ‘the perspective from which the analysis is undertaken is that of the person, group, organisation or institution engaging with (“using”) human rights - and thus not the perspective of a specific

legal instrument, theme or right' (Desmet, 2014, p. 123). As Desmet argues, this 'user' approach also allows 'a deeper insight in the human rights system, in how it is used, what its strengths and weaknesses are and will further provide reflection on how it can be improved' (Ouald-Chaib, 2018, p. 4). This is partly due to the fact that the human rights 'user' approach recognises the complexities that result from the multi-layered nature of human rights law, and considers how human rights users may be 'simultaneously confronted with a multiplicity of human rights norms, often both general and specific coming from different institutions' (Desmet, 2014, p. 124). Another factor is that it addresses other challenges to human rights – such as concerns about the effectiveness of human rights on the ground – from the perspective of its users (such as rights claimants) (Baumgärtel, 2014; Desmet, 2014).

Human rights scholars who look at actor-oriented approaches have recently raised concerns regarding the fact that many empirical studies focus on non-state actors and on rights-holders, rather than duty-bearers like states (Destrooper & Sundi Mbambi, 2017). The human rights 'user' approach addresses this criticism by presenting an inclusive but differentiated approach to understanding the users of human rights, and by introducing categories that are empirical – and based on behaviour – rather than legal (rights holder and duty bearer) (Desmet, 2014, p. 127). This approach incorporates a broad spectrum of users, ranging from *direct* users ('rights claimers' and 'rights realisers') to *indirect* users ('supportive users' and 'judicial users') (Desmet, 2014). Of these four types of users, rights realisers are the most directly relevant to this article, as this category includes actors who seek to give effect to human rights. This article draws on – and develops – these insights, by foregrounding how individuals within local governments exercise agency as they work towards 'bringing human rights home', and by adopting a broad understanding of human rights practice. Our understanding of the individual agency of human rights users is therefore also informed by scholarly work on human rights *practices*, understood as 'the many ways in which social actors across the range talk about, advocate for, criticize, study, legally enact, vernacularize, etc., the idea of human rights in its different forms' (Goodale, 2007, p. 24). However, we agree with Desmet that research on human rights practices tends to prioritise specific themes or rights, whilst actor-oriented perspectives – such as those focusing on human rights users – do not. As this article focuses on local engagement with human rights in the field of *migration* governance, it represents a middle way that borrows from both approaches.

A question that needs to be addressed, however, is why this article refers to 'individual agency' of human rights users, rather than adopting more common terms such as 'actors'. We argue that this differentiation is necessary for three reasons. First, it serves to minimise confusion, as many legal scholars that have progressively examined cities and international law, refer to cities or local authorities as unified 'actors'. This strand of research, for instance, examines how the positioning of cities and local authorities in international law should be understood, and whether or not they can – and ought to be – understood as having a dual character as both state and as non-state actors that could obtain international legal personality (Durmuş, 2020).

Second, we also use this term to avoid confusion with legal debates on the 'actorhood' of local governments in international law, and to challenge essentialist understandings of the state – at the local or national level – that obscure the agency of human rights users working *within* the state structure. Although such critical interrogations of essentialist understanding of the state have been particularly common amongst geographers (Meeus, van Heur, & Arnaut, 2019), migration scholars (Gill, 2010) and sociologists (Verhoeven & Duyvendak, 2017), they also feature in the work of human rights scholars who similarly conceive of the state as a 'complex construction of often competing agencies and individuals, at both the national and the local level' (Desmet, 2014, p. 136). This legal scholarship also highlights how this understanding of a state as consisting of different institutions and individuals requires us to examine 'how norms in turn influence individual behaviour of state actors' (Risse-Kappen & Sikkink, 1999, p. 8).

Third and lastly, the scholarship that draws on actor-oriented perspectives to study human rights localisation or vernacularisation focuses primarily on corporate and civil society actors, without necessarily taking into consideration the role of individuals *within* them. To address this shortcoming, we also propose a conceptual differentiation between actor-oriented perspectives and individual agency, as theorised in this article. In doing so, we follow Desmet, who suggests that 'the term 'human rights actor' and its categories thus do not make clear that the same actor may, depending on the situation, stand in a different functional relationship with human rights, i.e. make a different use of human rights' (Desmet, 2014, p. 132). A human rights 'user' approach enables us to theorise the involvement of street-level bureaucrats, local politicians and social workers, without assuming their static categorical identity (as state or non-state actors). Although we recognise that the term 'human rights users' – as developed and understood by Brems and Desmet – can still be used to refer to any individual *or* a composite entity who engages

with human rights, we propose a more restrictive understanding of human rights users that renders visible hitherto more obscured perceptions, understandings and actions of *individuals* that shape local approaches to human rights.

By adopting the term ‘agency’ rather than by adopting the general description ‘the role of individuals’, we also signal that our analysis does not look at agency in isolation, but acknowledges that agency stands in a dynamic relationship with structure. Concretely, this means that we are also interested in examining structural conditions, or opportunity structures that enable individuals to act independently, whether individually or collectively with others. This becomes particularly visible with respect to *interactions* between individuals (discussed in more detail below) in which structural opportunities – such as networks and access to cooperation – interplay with the agency of particular individuals who disseminate and adopt norms, ideas and practices through these structures.

Having explicated *how* individual agency is conceptualised and having situated this notion within the scholarly literature, this discussion now turns to reflect on theoretically and empirically informed insights on *why* studying individual agency is relevant to debates on the effectiveness of human rights. Whilst much of the research on localising human rights initially focused on civil society ‘actors’, scholars have been increasingly focusing on the role of city councils, mayors and administration in processes of ‘downward human rights diffusion’ (Oomen & Van den Berg, 2014), emphasising that such diffusion relies on ‘strong collaboration with municipal authorities in adapting existing human rights norms to local settings’. Other scholars have been paying increasing attention to collaborations between local stakeholders (Roodenburg, 2019) and *within* municipal authorities (Miellet, 2019). Drawing on previous work by Merry (2006b), Shawki, for instance, notes that ‘the initiative of translators, individuals and/or community groups who are well-versed in the international human rights framework and discourse and at the same time very immersed in their local communities, is often the catalyst for local human rights initiatives’ (Shawki, 2011). This scholarship also hints at the motivations of individuals working within local authorities. As Martha Davis (2019, p. 264) notes, ‘inspirational words without substantive impacts are unlikely to be embraced by these local actors. If they adopt human rights approaches, it is almost certainly because they believe that the approaches can do some real work for the community’.

In addition to these theoretical arguments suggesting the importance of individual agency within local governments in mobilising and enacting human rights, there are also practical examples pointing in this direction. In 2018, the United Nations

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) called upon local government representatives to identify ‘effective methods to foster cooperation between local governments and local stakeholders for the effective promotion and protection of human rights (...) and to indicate the major challenges and best practices in this regard’ (2018). The OHCHR report synthesised their contributions and identified more effective ways to promote – and protect – human rights at the local level. The report also highlighted the role played by local stakeholders, such as mayors, in creating a local government culture that is open and oriented towards human rights. Several indications of the link between localising human rights and individual agency come from the international forum ‘Focusing on Human Rights’, which took place in 2015 in Graz – the first human rights city in Europe. The event gathered more than 100 experts from 25 European countries, all of whom were active in the field of implementation of human rights at the local level. Politicians and civil servants from human rights cities discussed – together with researchers, representatives of city networks and international organisations – the design, enactment and relevance of human rights for local policies. As Philipp mentions in her summary of the forum’s workshops, participants agreed that strategies for incorporating human rights into local policy-making usually depend on a ‘specific politician who prioritises human rights’ (Philipp, 2017, p. 36). Importantly, the participants viewed this as a ‘big challenge’ for efforts related to local human rights-based policy-making – an issue that will be discussed in further detail later on. Another key point, also presented as a challenge by the participants, was that ‘people are alone in the field of promoting human rights, it depends on single persons’ (Philipp, 2017, p. 37). As Leen Verbeek, former mayor of the Dutch city of Purmerend, pointed out in his presentation, human rights implementation at the local level was ‘the hobby of the few’, which, through networking and collaboration, could eventually turn into ‘the responsibility of the many’ (Philipp, 2017, p. 35).

Drawing on previous research, we initially outlined several arguments for moving from the macro-level of the state to the meso-level of the city in studying human rights effectiveness. Having introduced our conceptualisation of individual agency, we will now briefly discuss the methodology of our study, and then present the potential benefits of approaching the issue of human rights effectiveness from a micro-level perspective.

Methodology

To explore the relevance of individual agency within local authorities to human rights-based policies, and therefore to human rights effectiveness, we apply a qualitative case study research design (Rohlfing, 2012; Yin, 2017). The examples we present pertain to Turkey, Italy, Greece and the Netherlands, which allows us to study the role of individual agency in very different contexts, in terms of the administrative system (centralised-decentralised), the allocation of competencies and funds for refugee reception/integration (larger role of local authorities in Italy and the Netherlands and marginal in Greece/Turkey) and the number of refugees hosted. Moreover, we focus on local authorities that have proactively engaged with human rights (as law, practice and discourse) in regard to the reception and integration of refugees and undocumented migrants. To protect our interviewees, we have not included the names of the municipalities discussed in the following section. The only exception is the case of Utrecht, in which the availability of a large amount of publicly accessible information made any efforts for city-level anonymisation futile.

Our case selection process was not guided by the ambition to obtain a representative sample – neither of human rights cities, nor of ‘ordinary’ cities using human rights – but rather by the aim to explore how the process of incorporating human rights in local policies start and evolve in different urban contexts, and within different local authorities (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). Consequently, any generalisation to other instances of human rights localisation – within or beyond local authorities – on the basis of our research would be problematic. In any case, we believe that the variation that we sought to achieve with the following examples strengthens the value of our findings, and can serve as justification for future research on the link between individual agency and human rights effectiveness (Rohlfing, 2012, pp. 61-96).

In the next section, we present examples from several municipalities where we conducted field research, primarily consisting of interviews with local officials (politicians, top-level managers, administration, social workers) and representatives of NGOs, civil society and immigrant organisations, local experts, local offices of national/regional authorities and international organisations. By covering such a wide range of locally operating actors, we were able to identify the different steps in the enactment of human rights-based policies: the initial process of the ‘arrival’ of human rights to the city, the way local administrations started engaging with them, the (lack of) implementation, and finally, the (lack of) practical results for refugees and undocumented migrants. The field research took

place between October 2018 and March 2020. In addition, the interview data was triangulated with secondary data obtained through desk research of municipal documents, reports, media publications, social media accounts and empirical evidence from scholarly literature – if available. All data was analysed using NVivo and following an open coding method.

The individual agency of municipal officials in improving the effectiveness of human rights

In this section, we will present examples that highlight the role of individuals as one of the driving forces behind the incorporation of human rights into effective local policy solutions to immigration-related challenges. Without underestimating the importance of local structural conditions and factors, we demonstrate that ultimately, it was specific individuals who initiated the human rights conversation, practice and even law to city halls and municipal offices, and that they did this for reasons that were often not self-evident results of their institutional role. We will start by presenting several examples of *how* individual agency mattered, and will subsequently focus on the issue of *why* individuals engage with human rights-based policy-making.

First and foremost, our data analysis revealed a strong link between individual agency within local authorities and the adoption of human rights-based local policies that provide refugees universal access to services. In all country contexts, we found specific public officials behind the design and adoption of these policies; these officials had either explicitly used human rights law, or had adopted a human rights perspective in the interpretation of ambiguous domestic legal frameworks. In one Greek municipality, human rights law was referred to in a local action plan to justify the adoption of inclusive policies for undocumented migrants. This came about as a result of the efforts of a single employee, who later advocated for universal access to a new municipal shelter for the homeless, which caused conflicts with representatives of the central government demanding that access shall only be granted to people with lawful residence (T. Sabchev, fieldnotes, November 16, 2018). Similarly, in Turkey, some municipalities opted to interpret the ambiguity in the domestic municipal law to treat all refugees and undocumented people present in the city as ‘co-citizens’. As a result, they were provided access to free basic services and in some cases even to specialised ones, such as psychological support, vocational training and language courses (E. Durmuş, interviews, December 5, 2018; December 14, 2018; and January 24, 2019). Behind this approach

were progressive political leaders and local policy makers, some of whom consulted with the UNHCR to discuss whether it was possible to consider refugees as falling under the ambiguous law (E. Durmuş, interview, December 14, 2018).

Moving to more detailed single-case examples, we start with an Italian city with an active local civil society, which for decades has been defending the rights of locally residing vulnerable groups, including immigrants. While in the past the local government had developed plenty of policies to protect and fulfil migrants' rights, it was only a decade ago that it started actively referring to human rights – both in relation to migrants' rights and other policy areas. In this case, human rights emerged in a bottom-up manner within the local administration, and were only 'adopted' by the municipal political leadership in the second instance. More specifically, a civil servant with an education relating to human rights and former experience in an international organisation, intentionally introduced the human rights discourse and practice by involving the municipality in two externally funded projects (Durmuş, 2021). In her own words, she did this because of her strong belief in the 'added value of an approach based on human rights applied at the local entity level' (T. Sabchev, interview, December 19, 2020). Under her leadership, the process of localisation of human rights within the local administration resulted in the gradual introduction of various new initiatives: theoretical and practical training on human rights in migration-related issues for municipal managers and service personnel, workshops for students and teachers in local schools, communication campaigns on migrants' human rights, baseline studies on discriminatory barriers affecting migrants' active participation in local community life, etc. This engagement with human rights received strong support from two important individuals from the local government: a deputy mayor and the mayor. Ultimately, a separate office working explicitly on human rights-related issues was established within the municipal administration. At present, the office designs and implements projects focused primarily on immigrant integration, in close collaboration with the municipal services.

In Utrecht, two senior policy advisors working on municipal policies for irregular migrants were among the first within the municipality to adopt a human rights perspective – long before the municipality adopted a more explicit and general approach as a 'human rights city'. In collaboration with municipal executives and council members, these policy advisors used human rights for policy development and innovation, including the development of the aforementioned 'bed, bath and bread' shelters for undocumented migrants. Together with a municipal councillor who proposed the development of an additional support programme (Sally, 2018), these policy advisors further developed the municipal approach by providing

legal support to – and personal development opportunities for – undocumented migrants. This approach, locally known as the 'fourth B' for 'Begeleiding' (Support/Guidance), has proven to be very successful, as 'in their first ten years, Utrecht found solutions in 94% of cases in the form of a residence permit, voluntary return or restoration of the right to care within the federal asylum system' (Sackers & Bagchi, 2020). Another example of their 'human rights-based policy development' (Antonius, 2017), is the Utrecht-Refugee Launchpad which 'enables an inclusive approach to facilitate integration of asylum-seekers in the municipality from day one'. This project, also known as 'Plan Einstein', aims to create a 'combined learning and living environment for both refugees and the local community' that ensures a 'future proof investment into the participants' lives, which could be built up in Utrecht or elsewhere if the asylum request is denied or when refugees may want to rebuild their home country when the war is over'. As explained by our interviewees, this project was inspired by human rights, and also highlights how human rights can be used to transform targeted projects for migrants into inclusive projects benefiting the local population at large. The same policy advisors are currently working on the development of a collective healthcare insurance and a city pass for irregular migrants staying in the municipal shelter, which will enable better access to healthcare and other services (S. Miellet, interview, August 9, 2019).

In the Turkish context, a former employee of a prominent district municipality and the Union of Municipalities has been running a project that aims to develop the concept and practice of Human Rights Cities in the country (E. Durmuş, interviews, December 4, 2018; December 6, 2018). The project is led by an INGO and a transnational city network that is known in Turkish municipalities. However, this particular individual and her pre-existing relationships – as well as the trust that she has gained in the field – have helped to make the relatively foreign concept of the human rights city more accessible, trustworthy and safe among municipal officials. Some interviewees who work in municipalities that participate in the project and in the Union of Municipalities, referred to the coordinator as 'our (Name of Coordinator)' (E. Durmuş, interview, January 11, 2019), despite the fact that she was employed by a foreign NGO. The project currently develops human rights indicators, trains municipal officials, and encourages member municipalities to pass local legislation announcing that they are human rights cities and to adopt human rights declarations. Even more important than these tangible outcomes, is the fact that this individual works to convince municipal officials from different localities across a wide political spectrum of the relevance, usefulness and the moral, ethical and legal value of human rights for local governance. The project

includes a specialisation for refugees that many member localities voluntarily participate in, with the aim of applying the human rights city concept to their refugee policies.

Having outlined the importance of individual agency within local authorities, we move on to the question *why* the municipal officials from our examples decided to engage with human rights in the first place. Our analysis will further unpack why local government representatives and administrators ‘use’ human rights, highlighting reasons pertaining to individuals’ background, motivations and interactions with others.

Individuals’ background

Firstly, human rights-related education, previous/ongoing professional affiliations or personal experiences were prevalent amongst those local government/administration officials who were most fervently championing greater respect, protection and fulfilment of human rights. In our example from Italy above, the civil servant who introduced human rights to the municipal administration and led the process of incorporating them into local policy-making, had obtained a Master in International Human Rights Law abroad, and collaborated with a human rights scholar widely known for his work as an activist (T. Sabchev, interview, December 19, 2019; fieldnotes, January 21, 2020). Multiple local administrators in different district municipalities in Turkey had a background in working for women’s rights organisations and NGOs before taking up positions within local authorities. Subsequently, they united in an NGO, while still being employed at their respective local authorities, aiming to realise their vision for a more institutionalised, participatory and rights-based local governance by providing training to civil society on how to engage with the local government and vice versa (E. Durmuş, interviews, December 23, 2018; December 15, 2018; and February 13, 2019). In Greece, municipal officials in key positions within the local government or administration were at the same time also active members of the Hellenic League for Human Rights – the oldest non-governmental human rights organisation in the country (T. Sabchev, interview, February 6, 2019). Finally, we also encountered cases in which, according to our interviewees, personal experiences with disability (e.g., developing impaired mobility or having a disabled child) had motivated local officials to incorporate a human rights perspective into municipal decision-making (S. Miellet, interview, December 10, 2018; E. Durmuş, interview, January 24, 2019).

Individuals’ motivations

The background and experiences described above shaped how interviewees ‘encountered’ human rights, but they also pointed to other motivations. The interviewees used and valued human rights intrinsically and instrumentally. Some municipal officials perceived direct municipal human rights obligations, even if the nature of these obligations (shared/complementary/conflicting) was itself contested locally (E. Durmuş, interview, December 4, 2018; S. Miellet, interviews, November 21, 2018; June 7, 2019). One Dutch policy maker explained that whilst the municipality’s divergent approaches to irregular migrants were sometimes interpreted by others as stemming from ‘leftish humanitarianism’ and featuring municipal disobedience, they perceived themselves as respecting a human rights obligation that is ‘binding for each and all’. She explained that they therefore challenged being labelled as ‘rebellious’, and also learned that they would consequently be able to mobilise more support within the municipality for these local policies (S. Miellet, interview, August 9, 2019). Human rights were also generally valued as a unifying force that criss-crosses various policy domains (S. Miellet, interview, May 8, 2019) and political agendas (S. Miellet, interview, June 7, 2019), while several of our Turkish interviewees also saw it as beneficial to the professionalisation of local authorities (E. Durmuş, interviews, December 4, 2018; December 5, 2018; December 6, 2018). One Dutch municipal councillor explained that human rights had helped her navigate gendered power dynamics within the municipal council, which she described as ‘male-dominated’, after some of her colleagues had accused her of being too emotionally involved. She explained that human rights provide a ‘moral compass’, but also a neutral and professional language to address difficult topics, such as the forced return of refused asylum seekers, without being accused of being too emotionally invested.

Finally, some of the municipal officials we interviewed expressed a keen interest in theorising human rights locally, because they had been – or were at the time – involved in research on localisation. In addition, some expressed ‘ownership over human rights localisation’ (E. Durmuş, interview, December 15, 2018; December 23, 2018; and February 13, 2019). One civil servant, for instance, had engaged with human rights from both an academic and practitioners’ perspective in the past, and perceived human rights as ‘her thing’ within the municipality; she was strongly convinced that a ‘serious’ approach to human rights implementation at the local level can produce positive results (T. Sabchev, interview, December 19, 2019).

Interactions between individuals

The third motive behind engagements with human rights of municipal officials and administrators consisted of interactions among individuals. Dependent not only on structural opportunities but also on chance and coincidence, individuals are able to find and connect with each other, combine their understandings of human rights and its local relevance, and initiate collaborations based on shared motivations, interests and values.

Interactions can take place both within a single municipality, between municipalities within the same country, or even transnationally, beyond state borders. Starting with interactions *within* a municipality, the ‘story’ of human rights incorporation into migration policies in one Dutch municipality of Utrecht illustrates how human rights perspectives are tied to personal background and motivations, but also altered through interactions with colleagues. One of the senior policy advisors working on introducing human rights perspectives into migration policies explained that for her, human rights were first and foremost a ‘moral duty’. This was due to the fact that one of her relatives was involved in a renowned act of the Dutch resistance during World War 2, which, she explained, resulted in a ‘heavy moral inheritance’. When a new colleague, a trained public international lawyer, joined their team, this colleague ‘gave them a piece of her own mind’ regarding their understanding of human rights, and made them more attentive to human rights laws. This, in turn, strengthened the overall human rights basis of their approach to irregular migration (S. Miellel, interview, August 9, 2019).

Moving on to interactions between individuals across municipalities, formal and informal networking as well as close personal connections allow individuals to encounter human rights as norm, value, or governance tool. When asked why certain municipalities are more proactive in developing human rights-inspired projects for refugees, interviewees from Turkey referred to a capacity development programme conducted in cooperation with Swedish and Dutch associations of municipalities during the EU accession process, in which a selection of Turkish mayors conducted educational visits to European localities (E. Durmuş, interview, December 6, 2018). A mayor that had been inspired by his visit decades ago, was still being referred to by his peers and municipal employees as a ‘visionary’ (E. Durmuş, interview, December 5, 2018). The mayor went on to create the country’s first municipal ‘community centre’, which offered services tailored to the needs of vulnerable groups, in line with the principles of universal, free, equal access. It is thus important to bear in mind the role of interactions between individuals who (re)

introduce the relevance and utility of human rights – ranging from interactions in the close quarters of a single municipal department, to those across geographical, institutional and sectoral boundaries.

In summary, individual agency within local authorities mattered for the effectiveness of human rights in all country contexts that we studied. In most cases, local representatives and administrators brought human rights to the city level in the form of discourse or practice incorporated into municipal policy-making. In other cases, they applied human rights as a legal tool to justify their inclusive approaches towards refugees and undocumented migrants. Finally, our data suggests that the reasons behind the individual agency’s mobilisation as a local human rights carrier may well originate from experiences and encounters distant in time and space – such as one’s education, previous work experience, or even a single meeting at a conference abroad.

Discussion

The fundamental role that individual agency can play in opening a city’s ‘gates’ and introducing human rights brings to the fore a number of opportunities and pitfalls, both in terms of strengthening human rights effectiveness and in terms of studying it. In some local authorities, such as in our example from Italy, an individual engagement with human rights eventually led to institutionalisation in the form of the adoption of strategies, and to the establishment of task forces or offices developing human rights-inspired migration policies. In others, such as in the Greek and Turkish context, human rights practices remained ad-hoc and driven by a single or few individuals. Several Turkish interviewees, for instance, expressed their concern with the sustainability of human rights approaches in the field of migration governance, as decisions regarding institutionalisation were ‘between the two lips of the mayor’ (E. Durmuş, interviews, December 15, 2018; January 11, 2019; and January 24, 2019). Institutionalisation of human rights within local authorities thus varies greatly from one place to another. That said, concerns regarding the lagging institutionalisation of human rights were also seen as acute and raised by administrators in a Dutch municipality that explicitly adopted the ‘human rights city’ label (S. Miellel, interview, June 7, 2019).

The potential consequences of such concerns remaining unresolved are yet to be understood. What happens when public officials grow tired of them and become frustrated with enacting human rights-based policies in an ad-hoc manner? Some have suggested that municipal human rights practices may start to dissipate in

the face of such challenges (Just, 2018). Within trans-municipal networks and during international workshops on ‘human rights in the city’, the question of how to institutionalise human rights within the local administration and government remains a common theme. It is important to note, however, that participation of municipal officials and administrators may be limited or enabled due to their personal background, (language) skills and agendas, and is also dependent on support and resources from the municipality. Support towards facilitating such interactions between individuals is therefore not only important for the dissemination of local human rights-based policies, practices and discourses, but also for the contestation and development of the future relationship between local authorities and human rights.

The contribution of individual agency to the effectiveness of human rights at the local level – regardless of whether institutionalisation is achieved – merits attention as well. Individual agency can help change the perception of human rights as being something ‘foreign’, by ensuring more localised understandings of human rights, and therefore increasing the ownership it enjoys (Oomen & Durmuş, 2019). This local contestation of human rights also challenges human rights to be more reflective of local concerns (De Feyter et al., 2011). In addition, individuals are the driving force behind the dissemination of ideas and practices in relation to human rights at the local level, increasing their prevalence and reach around the world (Brysk, 2019; Durmuş, 2020; Risse-Kappen et al., 1999). Human rights in the city, and human rights for local migration policies, thus become ‘coalition magnets’ (Béland & Cox, 2016) bringing diverse actors and stakeholders together, mobilising them around a common agenda.

In cases where individual agency leads to higher institutionalisation, how does this affect the exercise of individual agency? It may seem a long way off, given that institutionalisation is generally lagging, and given that the concerns about the sustainability of local engagements with human rights loom large. However, it is important to examine how the local institutionalisation of human rights may shape the future involvement of practitioners, such as municipal human rights ‘users’. What if human rights, instead of remaining a ‘hobby of the few’, (Philipp, 2017, p. 35) become increasingly embedded and mainstreamed into local policy-making? New local government officials and administrators would then enter a setting in which human rights already form part of the ‘opportunity structure’ in the form of established ‘practices’, such as previous experiences with human rights-based policy developments, institutions and artefacts, such as awards for past achievements in the field of human rights. To draw on Eleanor Roosevelt’s metaphor of the curious human rights grapevine: Human rights will always need

individuals to carry their seeds to places and to nurture them as they grow and develop, but how will such acts of diffusion and localisation be altered when more people become involved, over a longer period of time? What this means in terms of the effectiveness of human rights requires further consideration. In this scenario, ‘new’ human rights ‘users’ may encounter the roots of previous (and perhaps failed) attempts to adopt a human rights-based approach, or alternatively, come across already flourishing grapevines and their ‘caretakers’, proudly and perhaps competitively watching over them. How this will shape future efforts, motivations and interactions between individuals within local authorities who are interested in contributing to the effectiveness and localisation of human rights, is a question that is best answered in conversation with these practitioners.

At the same time, the effect of such ‘human rights residue’ also brings us to the academic field, by raising questions regarding the limitations of the explanatory value of individual agency as a concept. It is therefore important that scholars who are interested in this debate reflect critically on the interactions between individual agency and structure, which could either facilitate or sabotage human rights localisation attempts. In focusing on the level of the individual, we highlighted underlying elements such as background, motivations, and interactions with others that enabled individuals to come into contact and engage with human rights. However, a different level of analysis could reveal the macro and/or meso level actors, structural factors and corresponding ‘pathways of influence’ (Brysk, 2019) that operate in parallel with – and reinforce – bottom-up initiatives led by individuals. For instance, international institutions, transnational campaigns, and an active local civil society, among others, can strengthen the effectiveness of human rights at the local level by pressuring national and local authorities to adopt human rights-based policies (Durmuş, 2021). In this sense, background, motivations and interactions underlying individual agency can be considered to constitute ‘micro-pathways of influence’ and complement the existing literature on the socialisation of human rights on a larger scale (Brysk, 2019; Finnemore, 1993; Ikenberry & Kupchan, 1990; Risse-Kappen et al., 1999; Schimmelfennig, 1994).

Having clarified this limitation of our micro-level focus, we move on to the contributions of this study from a scholarly perspective as a final point in our discussion. Firstly, while our study is strictly exploratory, it seeks to move beyond the descriptive accounts of individual agency, such as those focusing on specific individuals like mayors (Ward, 2016). By foregrounding the *actions* produced by these individuals, rather than their formal roles – as is common in actor-centred perspectives – we also acknowledge that their involvement is multifaceted, and that some of them have multiple affiliations (e.g., combining work in a municipal

council with work in advocacy or for human rights organisations). In doing so, we follow the examples of Shawki (2011) and Desmet (2014), but also widen their scope in two ways: by examining the involvement of a broader range of individuals within local authorities, and by bringing to light the importance of micro-pathways of influence (based on experiences, motivations and interactions). In addition, the concept of individual agency facilitates attention to interactions, allowing us to investigate if individuals act independently and proactively, and whether they do so alone or with the support of strategic partners. By choosing this approach, we recognise that the environment *within* local authorities in which public officials operate is different than the one in civil society. This, in turn, calls for the development of a new context-sensitive concept, rather than for stretching already-existing concepts, such as human rights translators (Neubeck, 2016). While acknowledging the added value of the alternative notion of human rights ‘champions’ (Neubeck, 2016, p. 63), we consider its application to be narrower than the one of individual agency. We also believe that it is linked primarily to the symbolic dimension of human rights, and by extension to discussions on the ‘marketisation’ of human rights (Immler & Sakkers, 2014). Lastly, the focus on individuals working *within* local authorities complements previous studies (Berman, 2007; Koh, 1996) by showcasing that individuals matter, even – or perhaps especially – if they find themselves in positions of relative power, working for institutions that have formal human rights obligations. Regardless of any formal legal obligations, individual agency is a factor behind human rights gaining ownership, and behind increasing human rights effectiveness.

Conclusion and future research

The insights emerging from the recent scholarly interest in human rights cities serve as a good reminder that applying novel approaches and concepts in human rights research can yield promising results. The gradual shift in the study of human rights effectiveness – from the formalist and state-centric macro level to the more complex and pluralist meso level – should, in our opinion, continue on its present course to the next logical step: the micro level of the individual within concrete local contexts. The individual agency concept that we introduce in this chapter can be viewed as one of the steppingstones in that direction. Without underestimating the role of state, non-state and sub-state actors, as well as structural factors, we have argued that individual agency should be added as one of the elements that can contribute to human rights effectiveness – by incorporating human rights as law, practice and discourse into local policy-making. While providing a comprehensive

theorisation of why certain individuals have engaged with human rights at the local level is beyond the scope of this paper, our analysis leads to the suggestion that the reasons thereof relate to a variety of experiences, motivations and interactions.

Furthermore, human rights have long been implemented and studied on the basis of frameworks characterised by a high level of generality and focused on state compliance. Only recently has this started changing through the process of human rights localisation. The assessment of effectiveness, however, necessitates socio-legal analyses to further unpack essentialist understandings of the ‘state’ and of ‘local authorities’. In our view, individual agency serves as a bridge connecting the general and specific aspects – both from a theoretical and a practical perspective. As a concept, it adds a missing piece to the puzzle, by distilling the role of individuals in realising human rights, thus paving the way towards advancing our understanding of how human rights are invoked and become relevant ‘on the ground’. In practice, it navigates and contests human rights norms and ideas, transforming them into innovative policy solutions that can contribute to remedying the implementation gap.

Based on this twofold value of individual agency and in addition to the conceptual challenges already addressed in the previous section, we put forward several suggestions for future research. Firstly, we recommend that future studies shed light on any explanatory mechanisms linking individual agency and human rights effectiveness. Rather than just confirming the assumption that individual agency plays a role in the effectiveness of human rights, we suggest that scholars and practitioners also examine the consequences related to this finding – including the question of sustainability. Secondly, all but one of the municipalities incorporated in this study were urban. Additional research is needed to confirm or reject the relevance of individual agency for the implementation of human rights-based local initiatives in rural settings and in other policy areas (e.g., poverty alleviation, youth policies, etc.). Finally, we suggest that future studies provide a comparative perspective on the role of individual agency in strengthening human rights within highly institutionalised contexts at the local, national and international levels. Ultimately, this can contribute to revealing whether there are certain elements that make the local level a particularly fertile ground for the symbiosis between individual agency and human rights effectiveness highlighted in this paper.

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Notes

- i With the term refugees, we refer to forced migrants in general - be it asylum seekers, people who have obtained international protection status or 'guest' in the case of Turkey.
- ii See Website Compas Utrecht Refugee Launchpad <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/project/utrecht-refugee-launchpad/>
- iii See Project Website Utrecht Refugee Launchpad <https://www.uia-initiative.eu/en/uia-cities/utrecht>
- iv For a similar understanding of the potential of human rights, see Teitler, Cuypers, Klever, Hardy, and Steenbergen (2012).
- v Efforts to institutionalise the Human Rights City have led to the creation of the 'Human Rights Cities Network': See <https://humanrightscities.net/>
- vi See (Korey, 1998). As Korey observes, Roosevelt invoked the metaphor of a 'curious grapevine' in 1948. The political and institutional implications of this invocation have been a topic of debate among scholars researching the ethnography of transnational human rights norms.

Chapter 5.

Urban politics and the human rights city: The case of Bologna

Abstract

This chapter focuses on the relevance of multi-level urban politics to the emergence and consolidation of human rights cities. My main argument is that intergovernmental conflicts within the state – between national and subnational levels of government in particular – can play a determinant role in the process of becoming and being a human rights city. To substantiate this claim, I present evidence from a qualitative in-depth case study of Bologna: the capital of the Italian region of Emilia-Romagna and a city with a strong left-wing political tradition, which has explicitly engaged with the adoption, institutionalisation, and implementation of human rights in recent years. My analysis demonstrates that Bologna's transformation into a human rights city can be to a large extent interpreted as a reactive process triggered by legal, policy, and discursive changes at the national level in the field of migration governance. In this process, human rights were instrumentally used for the construction and defence of an idea of justice aligned with the priorities of the local government and its civil society partners in relation to the presence and integration of immigrants. In light of this evidence, I discuss the added value of human rights as law, practice, and discourse to developing strategic local responses to conflicts with higher levels of political authority. In addition, I highlight the need to broaden the focus of human rights city analyses, which have been overwhelmingly concerned with the relationship between the local and the 'global', and therefore to fully account for the importance of intergovernmental relations within the state in moulding human rights city experiences. Finally, I conclude with suggestions for future research on the potential consequences of instrumentalising human rights to advance local political agendas within and beyond the field of migration governance.

Keywords: Bologna, human rights, human rights cities, urban politics, migration governance

Introduction

Human rights cities (HRCs) have recently earned a distinctive place in the human rights localisation scholarship, which focuses on the role of individuals, civil society organisations, and subnational public authorities in the protection and realisation of human rights (Columbia HRI, 2012; De Feyter, Parmentier, Timmerman, & Ulrich, 2011; Marx et al., 2015; Merry, 2006; Sabchev, Miellel, & Durmus, 2021). They have been increasingly attracting the attention of academics and practitioners for their capacity to transform abstract human rights commitments into tangible policies and practices (Davis, Gammeltoft-Hansen, & Hanna, 2017; Goodhart, 2019; Grigolo, 2016), thus strengthening the effectiveness of the international human rights regime and delivering social justice 'on the ground' (Oomen & Baumgärtel, 2014; Oomen, Davis, & Grigolo, 2016).

Notwithstanding the widespread conceptual vagueness surrounding it (Davis, 2017; MacNaughton & Duger, 2020), the HRC can be defined as 'an urban entity or local government that explicitly bases its policies, or some of them, on human rights as laid down in international treaties, thus distinguishing itself from other local authorities' (Oomen & Baumgärtel, 2014, p. 710). Its distinctive feature is a particular approach to city governance, in which the protection and realisation of human rights becomes an important criterion for the allocation of resources. In this respect, the HRC is inevitably shaped by urban politics, broadly understood as the exercise of power by public and civil society actors over the decision-making process at the local level (Davies & Imbroscio, 2009). Rather than isolated from the outside world, however, urban politics and governance are nested within specific institutional contexts, and influenced by interactions with a multitude of state and non-state actors from the subnational, national, and international level (Kübler & Pagano, 2012; Sellers, 2005). In other words, the choices pertaining to the everyday functioning of the HRC are determined not only by local elements, but also by decisions and processes that take place at supralocal levels.

Despite claims that human rights – and by extension HRCs – are transcending, beyond, or above politics (see discussion in Goodhart, 2019, pp. 154-155; Nash, 2015), both empirical and conceptual research demonstrates the relevance of urban politics to HRCs. Grigolo's extensive study on Barcelona, New York and San Francisco, for instance, indicates that political dynamics within the HRC can lead to the prioritisation of some rights over others (2019, pp. 108-109), or that human rights can be used instrumentally in advancing a law-and-order oriented local political agenda (2019, pp. 98-128). Such examples resonate with Oomen's argument that the translation of universal and abstract human rights norms involves 'an

intensely political process' (2016, p. 4), as well as with Goodhart's conceptualisation of the HRC as a 'critical political praxis' realised by alliances between public and civil society actors (2019, p. 145). At a more general level, they also fit well into broader scholarly accounts of the indeterminacy of human rights (See Chapter 1 in Addo, 2010). In short, the HRC seems to maintain one of human rights' main qualities: it is an irreducibly political phenomenon (Nash, 2015, pp. 1-18).

Nevertheless, the HRC literature has so far remained 'remarkably silent' when it comes to the political undercurrent that characterises the framing of local claims in human rights terms (Grigolo, 2019, pp. 179-180). To be sure, analyses of the role of urban politics in shaping the HRC are not missing (Fernandez-Wulff & Yap, 2020; Chapter 4 in Grigolo, 2019). However, such analyses tend to focus on city-level negotiations, bureaucratic routines, and interactions between the local and the global level of governance. At the same time, the role of intergovernmental relations within the state remains only partially accounted for (Baumgärtel & Oomen, 2019; Roodenburg, 2019). As a result, while scholars have recognised the fact that HRCs are horizontally and vertically nested in multi-level power structures (Fernandez-Wulff & Yap, 2020; Oomen, 2016), they have not done full justice to the multi-level nature of urban politics of human rights. Surprising as it may seem, the dynamics between subnational and national governments have remained only on the periphery of the HRC literature.

In addressing this shortcoming, I adopt a multi-level perspective of urban politics and explore the role of urban politics in the process of becoming and being a HRC. I use a qualitative in-depth case study approach (Rohlfing, 2012) and focus on Bologna, the capital of the Italian region of Emilia-Romagna, and a city with a strong left-wing political tradition. In recent years, Bologna's local authorities have engaged explicitly in the adoption, institutionalisation, and implementation of human rights, mainly in relation to the governance of immigration and migrant integration. Such a direct link between human rights and migrants' rights – especially when it comes to undocumented migrants or rejected asylum seekers – is a rather typical feature of HRCs (Baumgärtel & Oomen, 2019; Roodenburg, 2019). While a broad group of human rights advocates has navigated Bologna's experience as a HRC (civil servants, politicians, local civil society representatives, academics, etc.), the municipal government and administration stand out as the protagonists in this process. Lastly, Bologna's distinctive political culture and the high politicisation of immigration and asylum governance in Italy (Pettrachin, 2019; Urso, 2018)2019; Urso, 2018, makes it a compelling case for studying the role of urban politics in the localisation of human rights in general, and the emergence and consolidation of HRCs in particular.

In my analysis, I rely on a socio-legal approach and a broader understanding of human rights as law, practice, and discourse. First and foremost, human rights are a set of international/regional positive law, which delineates the obligations of states party to it (Buergethal, Shelton, & Stewart, 2009; Shelton & Gould, 2013). Classic examples are treaties, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Second, human rights as practice indicates the translation of such legal instruments into concrete initiatives and policies, and their subsequent implementation (Grigolo, 2016; Merry, 2006). It comprises actions justified on the basis of human rights language, or with a goal of promoting human rights (Goodhart, 2016). Finally, human rights as discourse pertains to ideas and moral values that can be invoked for emancipatory purposes, without necessarily making reference to international law (Fernandez-Wulff & Yap, 2020; Ignatieff, 2003; Roodenburg, 2019).

My findings indicate that the use of human rights law, practice, and discourse in Bologna was triggered by fundamental ideological differences between the left-leaning local/regional and the right-leaning national government in relation to the presence and integration of immigrants. More concretely, the adoption of human rights facilitated the development and justification of subnational political responses to legal, policy and discursive changes at the national level. In this respect, Bologna's transformation into a HRC to a large extent can be interpreted as a reactive process, and the result of a conflict between legality as defined at the national, and justice as perceived at the local level. In this process, human rights were instrumentalised for the construction and defence of an idea of justice aligned with the priorities of the local government and its civil society partners in the field of migration governance.

In the next section, I outline my main arguments in relation to the multi-level character of urban politics and governance, and the consequences this entails for the process of becoming and being a HRC. Subsequently, I present in detail Bologna's gradual engagement with international human rights over the last two decades. On the basis of the empirical analysis, I then move on to a discussion on the relevance of intergovernmental conflicts within the state to the emergence of HRCs, and the added value of human rights as law, practice, and discourse to developing strategic responses in the context of such conflicts. In the conclusion, I put forward questions for future research.

Human rights cities and the multi-level character of urban politics

To start with, the process of becoming and being a HRC typically includes some type of self-designation (Neubeck, 2016). In this regard, it is usually local government officials together with their civil society partners that attach the human rights label to their city, and then promote it. At the same time, the dynamics that underpin this process can remain out of the spotlight of bold public announcements, or hidden between the lines of rather vague resolutions and proclamations (Neubeck, 2016). The motives for self-designating as a HRC can vary from genuine moral convictions of local politicians and civil servants (Sabchev et al., 2021), to attempts for enhancing urban governability (Grigolo, 2017), to the label being rewarding in the context of a city-branding tendency based on a neo-liberal logic (see Goodhart, 2019, p. 151), or just because it is 'catchy' (MacNaughton, Weeks, Kamau, Sajadi, & Tarimo, 2020, p. 121). Regardless of the officially communicated reasons behind it, however, translating and implementing international human rights to the local level constitutes a political project that involves contestation of power (Goodhart, 2019). In other words, the HRC has a political undercurrent, which shapes its output in terms of human rights policies and practices.

On the surface, there appears to be a consensus amongst scholars that HRCs have an 'inherently political character' (see also Goodhart, 2019; Grigolo, 2016, p. 293; Smith, 2017). In the HRC, state and civil society actors form alliances and compete with each other for authority over the way in which human rights are translated and implemented (Merry, 2006; Nash, 2015, p. 162; Roodenburg, 2019). This process is influenced by the broader social structure (Grigolo, 2016), and therefore by the selective activation of a concrete political culture that aims to provide answers to questions such as 'What are human rights?' and 'Who are human rights for?' (Nash, 2016). As a result, HRCs adopt different sets of human rights while leaving out others (Soohoo, 2016), and differences occur within the same HRC over time (see Grigolo, 2019, pp. 98-128). In other words, in the HRC the abstract human rights ideas and norms are sifted in the urban politics sieve: the ones that make it through turn into ingredients for the local HRC recipe, while the leftovers can be preserved for future use.

When one delves into analyses on the role of urban politics in HRCs, however, one discovers an important shortcoming: while scholars have recognised the multi-level nature of urban politics of human rights (e.g., by including international institutions and organisations in their analyses), they have engaged only marginally with the role of intergovernmental relations within the state. The HRC

literature is overwhelmingly focused on the dialectics between the international (or the 'global') and the local (Aust & Nijman, 2020; van den Berg, 2016; Nijman, 2016; Swiney, 2020). As a result, the urban politics of human rights seem to be reduced to 'conversations' taking place 'within the camps of civil society and local government' (Grigolo, 2019, p. 98), including interactions with supranational actors, such as UN organisations and human rights treaty bodies. Surprisingly, the dynamics between local governments and higher levels of state power – especially central governments – have remained in the periphery of HRC analyses, although a number of scholars have pinpointed their direct relevance to HRC experiences (Baumgärtel & Oomen, 2019; Roodenburg, 2019; Smith, 2017). In essence, while the HRC literature has acknowledged the importance of urban politics, it has not fully accounted for their multi-level character.

Importantly, the lack of scrutiny in relation to the role of different levels of government in shaping HRCs' experiences can affect one's conclusions. A closer look at analyses that use as a starting point the relationship between the city and the state, rather than the city and the 'global', helps clarify this point. The recent study of Hirschl (2020) on the secondary – and often inexistent – constitutional status of cities, provides a good example. While HRC research paints a genuinely optimistic picture about the potential of cities to strengthen global urban justice through direct engagement with human rights (Oomen et al., 2016), Hirschl puts forward a number of examples that highlight the discrepancy between aspirations and reality in HRCs. In Sao Paulo, for instance, which has institutionalised human rights through the establishment of a large Municipal Secretariat for Human Rights and Citizenship, the difference in life expectancy in neighbourhoods that are less than 10 miles away from each other is almost 24 years (Hirschl, 2020, p. 213). This arguably raises questions pertaining to local residents' right to life. In the city of New York – a classic example of a HRC (Grigolo, 2019) – Manhattan is 'the second most unequal county in the United States, with the top 1% earning 113 times the average income of the bottom 99% families' (Hirschl, 2020, p. 209). In short, Hirschl argues that cities cannot cope with such exacerbating levels of inequality and socio-economic exclusion on their territory, because they overwhelmingly lack constitutional standing and ability to generate own resources. Self-designating as a HRC may help raise public awareness about human rights commitments, but it does little to nothing to advance in practice the progressive agendas of some local authorities.

My argument, therefore, is that studies on the role of urban politics in HRCs need to address more critically the relationship between different levels of government within the state, and between the local and the national level in particular. HRCs –

just as cities in general – are vertically and horizontally nested, with power being dispersed among public, private and civil society actors from all levels (Fernandez-Wulff & Yap, 2020; Kaufmann & Sidney, 2020; Kübler & Pagano, 2012). The invocation of human rights at the local level – especially when local governments are the protagonists in such initiatives – often aims at challenging the authority of upper-level governments over controversial issues, such as the rights of undocumented immigrants (Baumgärtel & Oomen, 2019; Roodenburg, 2019). Such intergovernmental disputes undoubtedly make part of the urban politics of human rights, and can possibly shape the HRC to a greater extent than other interactions with local civil society or with actors from the international level. For better or worse, HRCs exist in multi-level systems of governance, and decisions taken at higher levels can have a profound effect on them (Kübler & Pagano, 2012; Sellers, 2005). Changes put forward by national governments provide both opportunities and constraints to HRCs, especially when such changes relate to the allocation of competences and/or resources in domains that HRCs have prioritised as part of their human rights agendas. Ultimately, overlooking the central state and the (re-) actions of its executive means overlooking the main guarantor, and at the same time, the main violator of human rights (Nash, 2015, pp. 41-66).

In addition, intergovernmental disputes can be the very reason for invoking international human rights in the first place, prior to any subsequent human rights city-branding exercises. Grigolo, for example, notes that cities with progressive culture and orientation can invoke human rights, in order to ‘challenge and modify’ state practices, using human rights’ ‘higher, morally superior status’ (Grigolo, 2019, p. 10). In a similar vein, Kaufman and Ward conclude their brief comment on human rights implementation in the US with the observation that subnational actors and human rights lawyers/advocates must ‘ensure that local progress is sustained and replicated wherever harmful laws and policies surface’ (2017, p. 11). Therefore, local human rights policies and practices – or in other words, the manifestations of urban politics of human rights – are not necessarily the aftereffect of becoming a HRC. On the contrary, they can be instruments that local governments use to address the effect of changes adopted at higher levels of government, and hence a precursor of a transition from an ‘ordinary’ to a HRC.

Lastly, if an intergovernmental conflict is the cause for becoming a HRC, rather than being just a catalyser for it, then one can argue that human rights are ultimately instrumentalised as ‘means towards an end’ (Oberleitner & Starl, 2020, p. 178). The logic behind such an instrumental use is not our municipal policies must fit the framework of international human rights law because we have direct responsibilities under it, or because local civil society urges us to do so, but rather

the human rights framework serves perfectly our policy (i.e., political) goals. One example in support of this interpretation of HRCs is the ‘revision’ of municipal rights charters in line with local government priorities, like in the case of Montreal (Frate, 2016). Another example is the fact that changes in local political leadership can lead to stagnation of HRC initiatives, like in the cases of Graz (Starl, 2017) or Barcelona (Grigolo, 2019). Therefore, in the context of confrontations with higher levels of government, local authorities may be using human rights law and norms to do ‘politics by other means’ (Wilson, 2007). This raises the question: are HRCs ‘a promising vehicle for making rights a reality’ (van den Berg, 2017, p. 49) in all circumstances, or in some cases international human rights can rather be the vehicle for making local political visions a reality?

To sum up, the analytic lens of urban politics and governance in HRCs cannot be confined to interactions between local authorities, local civil society, and supranational institutions and actors. It is imperative that it also reflects on the nested character of cities within national systems of intergovernmental relations, which can generate incentives, opportunities, and constraints for the localisation of human rights. On the basis of such multi-level understanding of urban politics, I turn now to the analysis of Bologna’s transition into a human rights city, with a particular focus on the role of the dynamics between national and subnational authorities in this process.

Urban politics and human rights localisation in Bologna

To explore the role of multi-level urban politics in the way in which human rights were invoked, negotiated and implemented in Bologna, I use evidence from an extensive desk research and a two-month field research (December 2019 to January 2020) conducted in the context of the ‘Cities of Refuge’ project. The former comprised of reviewing municipal, regional, and national legislation, policies, ordinances, and reports in the field of migration/human rights, local media sources, and secondary academic literature. The latter included participant observation (events organised by the municipality/civil society) and seventeen semi-structured interviews with local, regional, and central government officials, as well as representatives of the local civil society and an international organisation in Bologna (Table 4).

Bologna is the capital and the largest city of the Italian Region of Emilia-Romagna. It has a strong ‘red’ political tradition and a long history of social movements (Parker, 1992). Since the Second World War a left/centre-left political majority has

been governing the city with almost no interruption, which makes Bologna ‘the traditional showcase city of the Italian Left’ (Però, 2005, p. 835). In addition, the local civil society has been at the forefront of the Italian emancipatory movements for LGBT rights and women’s rights (Hajek, 2014).

ID	Location	Date	Interviewee	Language
B1	Bologna	18 December 2019	Two representatives of the municipal administration	Italian
B2	Bologna	19 December 2019	Representative of the municipal administration	Italian
B3	Bologna	9 January 2020	Representative of the municipal administration	Italian
B4	Bologna	10 January 2020	Four representatives of a local NGO	English
B5	Bologna	15 January 2020	Two representatives of the municipal administration and one representative of a local NGO	Italian
B6	Bologna	15 January 2020	Two representatives of a local NGO	Italian
B7	Bologna	16 January 2020	Representative of a local NGO	Italian
B8	Bologna	17 January 2020	Three representatives of a local NGO	Italian
B9	Bologna	20 January 2020	Representative of a local NGO	Italian
B10	Bologna	22 January 2020	Representative of the municipal administration	Italian
B11	Bologna	23 January 2020	Representative of the regional administration (Emilia-Romagna)	Italian
B12	Skype	24 January 2020	Representative of an international organisation	Italian
B13	Bologna	27 January 2020	Representative of the municipal administration	Italian
B14	Bologna	29 January 2020	Deputy-mayor, municipality of Bologna	Italian
B15	Bologna	29 January 2020	Representative of a local NGO	Italian
B16	Bologna	30 January 2020	Representative of the Italian Ministry of Interior	Italian
B17	Bologna	30 January 2020	Professor at the University of Bologna	Italian

Table 4. List of interviews.

When it comes to local policies and mobilisations promoting migrants’ rights in particular, Bologna has been again a protagonist in the Italian context (Caponio, 2006). To give an example, the municipality introduced measures to facilitate the access of locally residing immigrants to adequate housing and other services already in 1989. For the design and implementation of its policies at the time, the local government collaborated closely with labour unions and to a lesser extent with migrant associations (Caponio, 2005). Since 2004, the municipality has been also participating in the national Protection System for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (SPRAR). As a result, it has been permanently involved in the reception and integration of forced migrants in close collaboration with local social cooperatives. At present, Emilia-Romagna is the Italian region with the highest share of non-EU immigrants in the population (12,3 %), while Bologna is the city hosting the highest number of asylum seekers and refugees in the region (Osservatorio Regionale sul Fenomeno Migratorio di Emilia-Romagna, 2020).

While the reception and integration initiatives promoting the fulfilment of immigrants’ socio-economic rights date back to the 1980s, Bologna’s explicit engagement with international human rights in this policy domain emerged only in the beginning of the 2000s. The initial impetus for the ‘localisation’ of human rights came from the regional, rather than the local authorities. In 2004, the left-

wing government of Emilia-Romagna adopted Regional Law n.5/2004 ‘On the social integration of immigrants’, which was one of the first regional legislations of its kind in the country. The then legislator chose to refer explicitly to human rights at several points. More concretely, Article 1(1) describes the regional law as ‘inspired by the principles and values’ of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (CFREU). Surprising as it may seem, inspiration was drawn also from the European Charter for Safeguarding of Human Rights in the City – a ‘Charter’ that is often cited in the HRC literature, and that arguably has more symbolic than legal value (Garcia-Chueca, 2016; Grigolo, 2019). Lastly, in addition to these rather general references, in Article 9 (2) the legislator also used specifically Article 21 of CFREU as the basis for the creation of a Regional Anti-Discrimination Centre.

How can one explain this use of human rights instruments, uncommon at the time, in subnational legislation on immigrant integration? According to a participant in the legislative process, Emilia-Romagna’s aforementioned law was ‘a political response to the so-called Bossi-Fini law’ (B11), which was adopted in 2002 by Italy’s centre-right government. While Bossi-Fini’s final draft (Law 189/2002 ‘Changes in Regulations on the Matter of Immigration and Asylum’) was far less radical than the initial bill prepared by politicians from the right-wing anti-immigrant parties National Alliance and Lega Nord, it still included a notable shift towards more restrictive and punitive approach to immigration (Zincone, 2011). The Bossi-Fini law promoted a certain ‘cultural and political idea’, according to which immigration should be governed through ‘control and sanctions’ (B11). On the contrary, Emilia-Romagna’s left-wing government perceived immigration as a ‘structural phenomenon’, an ‘opportunity’, and a ‘strategic resource for the future’ (B11). It wanted to emphasise the ‘equal rights and equal duties’ of locally residing immigrants, and therefore sought instruments that would provide the basis for the adoption of more inclusive policies (B11). Such an approach was also needed to respond to the increasing presence of asylum seekers in the region, many of whom had been excluded from locally provided services. Therefore, the ideological conflict between the Italian left and right within the domain of immigration (Zincone, 2011) ultimately led to the explicit referral to international human rights in Emilia-Romagna’s regional legislation on integration. Shortly after, the national government challenged the constitutional legitimacy of the entire text of the regional law, but the Constitutional Court declared its appeal inadmissible and unfounded (Sentenza n.300/2005).

In the meanwhile, international human rights started slowly appearing on the agenda of the municipality of Bologna as well. In December 2004, the city became one of the founding members of the European Coalition of Cities Against Racism initiative (ECCAR), launched by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (Comune di Bologna, 2008). As per its Statute, one of the main goals of ECCAR is fighting discrimination at the local level and contributing to the ‘protection and promotion of human rights’ (ECCAR, 2007). In addition, in 2005, the municipality also became signatory of the aforementioned European Charter for Safeguarding of Human Rights in the City (Comune di Bologna, 2005).

The real breakthrough, however, came a few years later, when the municipality implemented an EU-funded project called ‘Awareness on migration, development and human rights through local partnerships’ (AMITIE) together with local civil society partners and the University of Bologna. The project included a 50-hour training in human rights for public officials, setting the foundations for the subsequent adoption of a human rights-based approach in local migration policy-making (B1, B2). The underlying logic to the use of human rights in local-level migration governance is well illustrated in the AMITIE final report:

‘... with migrants portrayed as a burden to receiving societies, and even as criminals, the issue of human rights is still neglected. This disregard is particularly acute when migration is considered as a part of the national security agenda, and when referring to those migrants who have crossed the border through irregular channels.’ (Gozzi, Venturi, & Furia, 2011, p. 14)

The project report juxtaposes the local emphasis on human rights with an ‘aggressive media and government discourse against migrants’ and a recent national legislation (Law n. 94/2009 ‘Provisions on public safety’) related to a long list of ‘discriminatory and worrying measures’ (Gozzi et al., 2011, p. 27), as well as ‘possible human rights violations in policies and practices’ (p. 29). The specific law, known as the ‘Security Package’, raised concerns about its compatibility with both EU law and international human rights law (Maccanico, 2009), and was again adopted by a centre-right coalition that included the anti-immigrant Lega Nord. Contrary to its security-oriented logic, the AMITIE project foregrounded human rights as legal obligations, as an ‘idea’ that had played a central role in struggles for justice (Gozzi et al., 2011, p. 14), and as a remedy for problems in migration governance. The human rights-based approach in local migration policy-making was presented as a framework that empowers immigrants and facilitates their integration and participation into local societies (pp. 17-23).

In 2011, Bologna’s local government demonstrated its commitment to institutionalising and consolidating its local human rights approach by establishing an ‘Office for Cooperation and Human Rights’ (later renamed into ‘New Citizenship, Cooperation and Human Rights’) (B14). The office made part of the municipal department overseeing issues of migrant inclusion, integration, human trafficking, and also partially reception of asylum seekers and refugees (B1). Importantly, it was run by an employee with human rights education and experience in an international humanitarian organisation, who started working closely with the municipal social services (B2). While this employee initiated the aforementioned AMITIE project and undoubtedly played a central role in the bottom-up diffusion of the human rights language within the administration, the stance of the local political leadership was also crucial. More specifically, the deputy mayor in charge for international relations – who was also vice-president of the ECCAR at the time – strongly supported the further engagement of the city with human rights, both discursively and in practice. In addition, in the beginning of its second term in 2016, Bologna’s mayor Virginio Merola appointed a ‘rights’ deputy mayor, whose mandate included anti-discrimination, equal opportunities, gender equality and LGBT rights, as well as the supervision of the municipal human rights office (B2, B14).

In this context, the municipality of Bologna started translating the abstract international human rights into concrete local policies and practices in the area of reception and integration of immigrants. Building upon its experience from the AMITIE project, the municipality was awarded a second EU-grant in the framework of a new transnational partnership under the name AMITIE CODE (Capitalising on Development), which again involved sub-national public authorities and NGOs. This project was coordinated by Bologna’s human rights office and aimed at ‘raising awareness among citizens in general and some key groups in particular about the human rights of migrants’, while also leaving a ‘practical and concrete mark’ (Fresa, Furia, Gozzi, Gualdi, & Venturi, 2018, p. 127). As a result, a number of local initiatives were implemented with the objective of improving service delivery, eliminating discriminatory barriers in municipal regulations and services, strengthening social cohesion, and fostering interreligious dialogue. Examples include human rights trainings for 180 policy makers and civil servants, as well as for 210 teachers working in the local education system, and baseline studies identifying human rights issues in areas like access to housing and participation of migrants in local community life (B2).

All these initiatives made part of a four-year 'Local Action Plan for a Non-Discriminatory Action towards New Citizens with a Human Rights Based Approach', which was officially approved by the City Council in September 2017 (Fresa et al., 2018, pp. 143-157). The Local Action Plan (LAP) was the product of a long participatory process, during which representatives of local stakeholders (municipality, regional government, university, civil society, etc.) identified three concrete rights to focus on: participation, non-discrimination and well-being (B2). While 'intended for the entire population', the LAP paid particular attention to 'new citizens, migrant people and communities', who faced 'particular difficulties in accessing their rights' (Fresa et al., 2018, p. 144).

Although a number of concrete measures based on the LAP were implemented, some aspects of it remained only on paper, due to internal dynamics within the local administration. For instance, the LAP foresaw the creation of a Steering Committee composed by department managers, who would monitor, evaluate and communicate the progress in embedding the human rights-based approach in local policy-making. Rather than establishing the Committee, however, the department managers decided that they will discuss the LAP implementation progress at their regular coordination meetings 'whenever there is a need for it' (B2). Nevertheless, until early 2020 there had been no such discussions. In addition, the initial draft of the LAP foresaw evaluations of department managers. Since this was a controversial topic, however, it was rejected and not included in the final version of the document. Lastly, other relatively small modifications of the LAP were made after consultations with local civil society actors.

While the municipal administration translated human rights into concrete policies and practices, Bologna's political leadership continued using them in its confrontations with the national level. By the end of 2018, the Italian government – with the leader of the anti-immigrant Lega Matteo Salvini heading the Ministry of Interior – decided not to sign the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM). In response to this, the mayors of Bologna and Lampedusa started an initiative called 'Global Compact in Comune'. Initially, the two municipalities adopted the principles of the GCM through resolutions passed in the respective City Councils. Subsequently, the two mayors called upon other Italian mayors to do the same. Instead of reconciling with the approach of the national government that in their view put the country's reception system at risk, they suggested following the path outlined in the GCM, with respect to international law and human rights (Global Compact in Comune, 2019). Moreover, to facilitate the diffusion of the initiative a draft resolution for the adherence to the principles of the GCM was prepared for other municipalities. In its very beginning,

the draft resolution provided space for the inclusion of references to any statutes, charters, resolutions, or other documents that demonstrate the commitment of the respective municipality with human rights and anti-discrimination.

Lastly, Bologna also 'discovered' the utility of human rights law as a counterforce to restrictive changes in national legislation in relation to migrants' rights. In 2018, the so-called 'Salvini Decree' (Decree-Law 113/2018), along with a subsequent circular of the Minister of Interior, put a halt on the local registration of asylum seekers. This effectively limited their access to a number of rights, such as signing a work contract, opening a bank account, and obtaining a driving licence. In response, the municipal leadership noted that the municipality will protect the rights of all locally residing immigrants through a path of 'responsibility and not of civil disobedience' (Bologna Cares, 2018), or in other words, trying to 'change things from inside' (B14). Soon after, the municipality started rejecting the local registration of asylum seekers in line with the national law, being well aware that a local civil society association is preparing an appeal against the mayor for this decision. When the case reached Bologna's Civil Court, rather than objecting the appeal the municipal lawyers briefly noted that the mayor had simply applied the national legislation (B14). In her adjudication, the judge noted that according to Article 117 of the Italian Constitution, the legislative power of the state should be exercised within the constraints of EU and international legal obligations. More specifically, she referred to Article 12 of the ICCPR and Article 2 of Protocol n.4 of the European Convention of on Human Rights (ECHR), both of them providing every person legally present on a signatory state's territory the right to freely choose his/her place of residence. Importantly, her interpretation of the Decree's provisions went way beyond the concrete individual case. Consequently, when the court decision ultimately ordered Bologna's mayor to register the applicant, the municipality – based on the judge's broader interpretation – started registering all locally residing asylum seekers. Furthermore, the municipal staff contacted the asylum seekers who had seen their applications rejected in the previous months in order to register them as well. Bologna's mayor immediately celebrated the court decision, claiming that it was 'unjust to deny residence to asylum seekers' (Merola, 2019), while according to a local NGO representative 'legality was restored' (B7).

Beyond their added value in this landmark court decision, international and regional human rights treaties became more important also for lawyers from local NGOs who provided legal assistance to forced migrants. With the aforementioned 'Salvini Decree' abolishing humanitarian protection – the most common form of international protection in Italy at the time – international human rights instruments became 'the only thing that is left in courts in order to prevent people

getting rejected and entering into illegality' (B15). While the implementation of the law had always been problematic in the country and migrants always faced bureaucratic obstacles depriving them *de facto* from their rights, in the last years the *content* of national law itself had become the problem. In a response to that, within the local 'battleground' for the rights of forced migrants, lawyers had to invoke directly the obligations of the Italian State under European and international human rights law (B15). The specific instruments that they used in this respect were primarily Article 8 (but also Article 3 and Article 6) of the ECHR, as well as the provisions of the CFREU, the UN Convention Against Torture (CAT), the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the ICCPR.

Discussion

The empirical evidence from Bologna fosters a number of insights into the multi-level nature of urban politics and their role in the process of becoming and being a HRC. It confirms the assumption put forward in Section 2 that HRCs are horizontally and vertically nested instances of an inherently political phenomenon. In other words, analyses of the role of urban politics in HRCs ought to account for the dynamics taking place on the horizontal, as well as on the vertical dimension of urban governance (Kübler & Pagano, 2012). Importantly, Bologna's case also shows the relevance of political/ideological conflicts between the subnational and the national level of government to *why*, *when*, and *how* HRCs as a distinct form of human rights localisation occur.

On the horizontal dimension, the 'conversations' between the multitude of locally operating stakeholders – the municipal government, municipal bureaucracy, NGOs, social cooperatives, educational institutions, and so on – shaped the urban politics of human rights in Bologna. Just as in many other HRCs (Fernandez-Wulff & Yap, 2020; Grigolo, 2019), this process was often marked with conflicts driven by individual and collective interests, which inevitably influenced some of the choices made (e.g. which rights to focus on, and how to measure the achieved progress). Exemplary in this respect is the fact that Bologna's municipal managers rejected the establishment of a monitoring mechanism proposed by the director of the human rights office. At the same time, however, Bologna's example also highlights the importance of local strategic alliances that represent the consensual side of urban politics of human rights. Such strategic alliances are arguably the bedrock of HRCs (Graham, Gready, Hoddy, & Pennington, 2016; Neubeck, 2016). They

tailor the abstract human rights notions to the local context and provide answer to the question 'who deserves what' in the city. In other words, they promote their understanding of urban justice redressed in human rights terms (Moyn, 2018).

Undoubtedly, the horizontal dimension of urban politics played an important role in moulding the HRC experience of Bologna (e.g., through the participatory process that led to the development of the Local Action Plan). Nevertheless, looking at the interactions on the horizontal level provides only partial understanding of the process of human rights localisation in the city. Bologna's slow but steady course – from symbolic engagement with human rights to their institutionalisation and implementation – was influenced in several ways by dynamics taking place on the vertical dimension of urban politics. First, the ideological conflict between the local/regional and the national government in the field of migration governance provided the reason for the local/regional political leadership to strategically engage with human rights. In this sense, the local adoption of human rights cannot be interpreted solely as a proactive 'downward diffusion' supported by subnational authorities, or 'grassroots localisation' driven by civil society (Goodhart, 2019, pp. 147-148). It was at the same time a reactive instrumentalisation of human rights triggered by legislative and policy changes at the national level. Second, these conflicts left an imprint on the 'translation' of human rights, tailoring them primarily to the needs of locally residing immigrants. Lastly, the closer look on the vertical dimension of urban politics also reveals its relevance to the timing of human rights localisation. In particular, changes at higher levels of government gave impetus to the gradual expansion of Bologna's human rights agenda (e.g., the 'Security Package' in 2009 and the 'Salvini Decree' in 2018). In sum, the vertical dimension of urban politics played a determinant role in shaping the entire trajectory of Bologna as a HRC.

On the basis of this analysis, it becomes evident that horizontal and vertical relationships worked in conjuncture to produce the HRC of Bologna. Both of them provided the motivation and energy needed for 'pulling human rights back in' (Baumgärtel & Oomen, 2019). The explanation seems rather simple: regardless of the results of 'conversations' on the horizontal level around the rights of those present in the city, central governments retain their ultimate legislative (but also resource-allocating) authority to *impose* their own understanding of 'who deserves what'. For this reason, negotiations between local governments and civil society on the content and realisation of city dwellers' human rights – as well-intended as they may be – could end up with the reminder that counting one's chickens before they hatch can be a risky enterprise with a disappointing outcome. That said, Bologna's

example draws a rather optimistic picture of the potential of human rights to be successfully mobilised against decisions taken by higher levels of public authority, partially because of the support received by the local Civil Court.

Viewed through the prism of the broader HRCs literature, Bologna's case highlights a common thread in HRCs: a relatively broad local coalition between public and civil society actors advocating for human rights (despite any internal conflicts) and a confrontation with a higher level of government (predominantly the national) over a contentious issue pertaining to access or realisation of rights (migration, austerity measures, etc.) (Baumgärtel & Oomen, 2019; Graham et al., 2016; see also Chapter 4 in Hirschl, 2020; Kaufman & Ward, 2017; Roodenburg, 2019; Smith, 2017). Consequently, and taking into account the above discussion on the multi-level nature of urban politics, such HRCs can be interpreted as *a response to a conflict between legality and perceived justice, which is manifested at the local level*. In the contemporary world dominated by sovereign states and their central governments, legality is first and foremost determined at the national level. In contrast, injustices such as limiting someone's access to basic services, for instance, are directly experienced at the local level. As 'perceived', or in other words socially constructed, justice here represents the outcome of the inherently political process of rights negotiation in the city. Needless to say, the justice that a local government and its civil society partners seek to deliver could well be instrumental, rather than principled (Grigolo, 2017).

Regardless of the case, when local governments indicate that a concrete urban issue represents an instance of imbalance between legality and justice, they can either remain passive, or seek a remedy. Taking migration governance as an example, in the majority of cases local governments do the former and avoid confrontations with higher levels of public authority. Whenever they decide to respond, however, they are faced with a choice. On the one hand, some of them silently swerve away from the path of legality and enter 'grey zones' of welfare provision (Dobbs, Levitt, Parella, & Petroff, 2019; de Graauw, 2014). In such cases, local governments and their civil society partners focus their efforts on *de facto* delivering the justice they envision, while keeping off the radar of national authorities as much as possible (Oomen, Baumgärtel, Miellet, Durmus, & Sabchev, 2021). A common point of reference in this respect is the provision of basic services to undocumented people who are not entitled to them in accordance to national legislation (Delvino, 2017; Spencer, 2018). On the other hand, usually more resourceful or 'brave' local governments choose the path of open confrontation. To restore the harmony between legality and justice, they need a counterforce that simultaneously (i) addresses the legal source of the conflict, (ii) provides practical remedies, and (iii)

enjoys high levels of legitimacy within and beyond their constituency. Human rights, with their quality to be simultaneously and selectively applied as law, practice and discourse, offer a toolbox for local governments that serves these three functions.

First, international human rights law can be a powerful strategic asset for local authorities in 'uphill battles' against higher levels of government (Baumgärtel & Oomen, 2019). This is particularly relevant for policy areas marked by high degree of politicisation, such as the urban migration governance 'battleground' (Ambrosini, 2020). The use of human rights law as a 'weapon' in such cases shifts the conflict between legality and justice from the arena of national jurisprudence to the one of legal pluralism (Baumgärtel & Oomen, 2019), thus challenging the legality side in the equation. It should be noted that the effectiveness of international human rights law as a strategic tool of HRCs has been questioned (see also Chapter 4 in Hirschl, 2020; Swiney, 2020, pp. 233-243). However, as the evidence from Bologna demonstrates, it can have an added value for HRCs, also beyond 'classic' cases related to undocumented migrants' rights (Baumgärtel & Oomen, 2019; Roodenburg, 2019). Importantly, the availability of local expertise and the willingness of domestic courts to use international human rights law (Hostovsky Branders, 2019) play a fundamental role in such endeavours.

Second, while using human rights as law usually aims at ending a rights violation, using human rights as practice facilitates rights promotion and rights fulfilment. The function of human rights practice, therefore, is to address the justice side of the above equation in two ways: by constructing the local idea of justice through human rights education/training, and by giving this idea shape through policies and practices that enhance the rights realisation of HRC dwellers, with a particular focus on certain social groups. In this respect, local human rights policies, as Starl has noted, represent 'the response to experiences of injustice' (Starl, 2017, p. 57).

Lastly, while the use of human rights as law and practice addresses the legality-justice equation, the use of human rights as discourse serves to legitimise the actions of the alliance behind the HRC. Enjoying high levels of legitimacy strengthens the public acceptance of one's policy objectives and therefore helps advance one's political agenda. In this context, it should not come as a surprise that local governments, including the one of Bologna, choose to employ human rights as a discursive tool. In the end of the day, human rights are 'a benchmark for legitimate authority' (see Introduction in Goodhart, 2016, p. 5), 'the contemporary language of global justice' (Nash, 2015, p. 172), and a major instrument of civil society organisations that have sought to reframe normatively and change state

policies. In regard to advocacy for forced migrants in particular, human rights is one of the most common norms promoted by pro-refugee organisations in Europe, because of their wide acceptance and moral superiority (Schnyder & Shawki, 2019). By ‘tapping into the power of moral-universal norms’ (Schnyder & Shawki, 2019, p. 121), local governments can thus present themselves as duty bearers above politics, whose only purpose for engaging in a conflict is to restore justice (Nash, 2015). In sum, the human rights language is a useful tool for developing discursive legitimisation strategies whenever conflicts with higher levels of government over migration issues (and not only) occur.

To recapitulate, applying a multi-level analytic lens to urban politics revealed the relevance of intergovernmental ideological/political conflicts to the transformation of Bologna into a HRC. Such conflicts seem common for HRCs. They juxtapose legality, as defined and imposed by central governments over subordinate public authorities, and justice, as negotiated and promoted by urban actors. Ultimately, such conflicts can provide a fertile ground for the instrumental use of human rights as law, practice and discourse in defence of locally constructed notions of justice, and by extension for the emergence and consolidation of HRCs.

Conclusion

As Smith has pointed out, ‘there is no single pathway to a human rights city’ (Smith, 2017, p. 354). The case of Bologna, likewise, displays a number of rather unique contextual characteristics. Nevertheless, it shows that if one does not adequately engage with the role of urban politics in general, and of subnational-national relations in particular, one risks to miss a highway towards the HRC. As fascinating as the dialectics between the global and the local in making the HRC may be, the attention to them should not come at the expense of overlooking the role of intergovernmental relations within the state. In this respect, the story of Bologna demonstrates that a main reason for the affectionate relationship between the local and the global can be the estrangement between the local and the national in terms of politics. While this case study cannot serve as a basis for making any broad conclusions or generalisations, it can serve as a building block in future theory-building on the relevance of urban politics to the process of becoming and being a HRC.

From an analytical point of view, the case of Bologna highlights the need to embed the multi-level character of urban politics and governance fully in HRC analyses. In line with general trends in urban politics research, accounts of the urban

politics of human rights must ‘move beyond rhetoric about the global-local nexus’ (Sellers, 2005, p. 441) and critically address the consequences of the subordinate status of HRCs within constitutional frameworks (Hirschl, 2020). While nesting such accounts within larger global trends is undoubtedly insightful (Grigolo, 2019; Smith, 2017), nesting them within national systems of intergovernmental relations is arguably indispensable.

Finally, the instrumentalisation of human rights for re-packing and advancing local political agendas in migration governance or other areas, brings to the surface important questions to be addressed in future HRC research. Cities seem to be well-positioned to employ the discursive capital that human rights have accumulated for advancing their alternative policy goals. But what if the strong rhetorical commitments to human rights of local governments and their political leaders ‘come back to haunt them’ (Greenhill, 2010, p. 54)? This consequence of the instrumentalisation of human rights is likely to occur sooner or later, since cities are far from immune to national governments’ direct or indirect influence over nearly every aspect of urban affairs (Hirschl, 2020). Moreover, it can also make HRCs’ local authorities vulnerable to ‘hypocrisy costs’ in times of crisis (Greenhill, 2010) – such as the current Covid-19 one – when they can be urged by their local constituencies to provide solutions to issues that greatly exceed their capacities. Such situations have the potential to bring cracks within human rights alliances between local governments and civil society, and by extension jeopardise the future of some HRCs.

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Notes

- i Instead of the term 'human rights city', Goodhardt uses the more inclusive term 'human rights community', emphasizing in this way the need not to conflate cities with other types of localities (rural, suburban, etc.).
- ii It should be acknowledged that several scholars have critically reviewed the reception and integration policies of Bologna's left-wing governments, highlighting also their paternalistic and exclusionary side (see (Però, 2005); also (Cappiali, 2017))
- iii See <https://globalcompactincomunehome.files.wordpress.com/2019/06/schema-di-delibera-per-ladessione-ai-principi-del-global-compact-for-migration-1.pdf> [Accessed 28 February 2021]

Chapter 6.

Origin, potential, and limits of municipal solidarity with refugees: A case study of the Greek island of Tilos

Abstract

This article focuses on the power of municipal solidarity to generate approaches to refugee reception that respect the human rights of people seeking international protection and at the same time bring benefits to welcoming local communities. Initially, the article juxtaposes the lack of solidarity in the international and the EU refugee protection systems to the recent rise of municipal solidarity expressions, especially in the context of the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe. Subsequently, it presents evidence from desk and field research on the small Greek island of Tilos. The findings show that in contrast to the nearby hotspot islands, and despite the lack of experience and own resources, Tilos has managed to develop a local reception model that safeguard refugees’ rights, preserves social cohesion, and contributes to local development. From a theoretical perspective, the analysis highlights the multifaceted nature of municipal solidarity with refugees, and the potential relevance of opportunistic behaviour on behalf of mayors to certain expressions of municipal solidarity. In terms of practical implications, the study demonstrates that municipal solidarity can open up new opportunities for improving the governance of refugee reception in the EU.

Keywords: Tilos, municipal solidarity, refugee reception, hotspot approach

Introduction

In 2016, the then United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon famously remarked that the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ was not a crisis of numbers, but a crisis of solidarity (2016). In this succinct but insightful phrase, he captured the root cause of the ‘collective paranoia’ that had engulfed Europe at the time (Chimni, 2018). On the one hand, his words highlighted the lack of solidarity with refugees on behalf of the Member States of the European Union (EU), which were intensely introducing measures to prevent further arrivals on their territory (Koca, 2019). On the other hand, his words also echoed the solidarity deficit between Member States, which was evident in the reluctance or even straightforward refusal of some governments to take part in the relocation of asylum seekers from Greece and Italy (Bauböck, 2018).

Five years on, this twofold crisis of solidarity at the macro level continues to shape the EU refugee protection system. Its consequences are perhaps nowhere more apparent than on the Greek islands of Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Leros, and Kos, which had the misfortune of becoming a testing ground for the implementation of the hotspot approach (Dimitriadi, 2017). In combination with the EU-Turkey Statement from March 2016, and the geographical restriction of movement for newly arriving migrants imposed soon after, the hotspot approach effectively turned the aforementioned islands from places of transit into open-air prisons (Iliadou, 2019; Bousiou, 2020). The slow processing of asylum requests led to prolonged confinement in overcrowded reception facilities with substandard conditions, creating a fertile ground for the routine violation of migrants’ human rights (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2019). Over time, this also brought a dramatic shift in the attitude of the local islanders towards refugees (Siegel, 2019). The erstwhile Nobel Peace Prize contenders for their warm welcome to displaced people (Schoenbauer, 2016) have more recently made news for repeated outbursts of xenophobia, violence against migrants, attacks on aid workers, and clashes with the authorities in Athens over the construction of new reception centres (Kitsantonis, 2018; Smith, 2020; Refugee Support Aegean, 2020). In sum, the macro-level crisis of solidarity transformed into a local humanitarian, human rights, and social cohesion crisis on the Greek hotspot islands (Papataxiarchis, 2020).

In view of the challenges related to increased refugee arrivals, some scholars have recently departed from the narrow state-centric understanding of solidarity in the refugee system, and have highlighted the generative power of solidarity expressions below and beyond the national level of government (Agustín &

Jørgensen, 2019; Okafor, 2020). Individuals, civil society, subnational governments, and transnational networks, they have argued, often fill the gaps in refugee protection left (or created) by national authorities (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Rea, Martiniello, Mazzola, & Meuleman, 2019; Vandevooordt, 2019a; Bauder, 2021). Particularly intriguing in this respect are examples of local policy innovation and municipal policy activism in the field of reception and integration recorded in different EU countries (Bazurli, 2019; Garcés-Mascareñas & Gebhardt, 2020; Sabchev, 2021a). Such expressions of municipal solidarity have shown great potential for developing sustainable responses to refugee arrivals, which safeguard newcomers' fundamental rights, enjoy democratic legitimacy, preserve social cohesion, and benefit local communities in the long run (Bazurli, Campomori, & Casula, 2021; Sabchev, 2021b).

In this context, the present article explores the origin, potential, and limits of municipal solidarity with refugees. It focuses on the peculiar case of Tilos: a small Greek island with just about 500 permanent residents, situated a few miles from the Turkish coast (Figure 5). In the period 2014-2015, Tilos provided humanitarian assistance to approximately 6000 migrants who landed on its shores in search of refuge. Unlike other places of arrival which received operational support from international organisations, NGOs and foreign volunteers, Tilos had to rely at the time almost exclusively on the good will of its local residents, its Coast Guard that had no vessels, its three police officers, and its heavily indebted municipality. In 2016, the municipality set up a small 'hospitality centre' with funding from an international foundation, and requested that the Greek government allows the temporary reception of asylum seekers there (Municipality of Tilos, 2016). As a result, Tilos started gradually developing its local reception model. In stark contrast with the hotspots, asylum seekers on Tilos are provided dignified living conditions, language classes, job opportunities, and access to formal education for their children (Georges, 2017; BBC, 2017). Fatigue and xenophobia seem absent (Felanis, 2021), and locals are largely in favour of the presence of asylum seekers, which has also had a positive spill over effect on the local economy (Ioannou & Savvidou, 2019). Oddly enough, while the nearby hotspot islands seem to be cursed by virtue of their geography (Papataxiarchis, 2020), Tilos appears to have benefitted by it.



Figure 5. Tilos and the Aegean hotspot islands.

In light of the aforementioned solidarity crisis at the macro-level, the experience of Tilos appears highly relevant to both academic and policy debates on refugee reception in the EU. However, in contrast to places like Lesvos that have attracted a myriad of researchers and 'disasterologists' (Siegel, 2019, pp. 6-8), it has remained largely unexplored. Addressing this gap, I present evidence from desk and field research, and trace back Tilos' history of assisting refugees to the very first arrival of 'boat people' in 2010. I use the conceptual lens of solidarity to analyse the way locals and municipal authorities managed to gradually develop the island's reception model, which provided decent living conditions to newcomers, preserved social cohesion, and at the same time contributed to local development. I argue that this was achieved with the proactive engagement of the mayor of Tilos, who successfully capitalised on the solidarity towards refugees demonstrated by part of the local population. By branding Tilos as an island of solidarity, its mayor managed to attract external resources for the benefit of both newcomers and the local community. The analysis shows that opportunistic behaviour can be one of the driving forces behind expressions of municipal solidarity with refugees.

In addition, it highlights the generative power of municipal solidarity and its potential to open up new opportunities for remedying some of the shortcomings of the dysfunctional EU refugee protection system, which currently fails to meet human rights standards in frontline states like Greece.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. In the next section, I elaborate on the problems stemming from the lack of solidarity with refugees at the macro level, and on the recent rise of municipal solidarity as an opportunity to adequately address at least some of these problems. Subsequently, I briefly explain the research methodology, followed by a detailed presentation of Tilos' history of refugee reception. In the last section, I discuss the theoretical and practical implications of the findings and outline the limitations of the study.

Dynamics of solidarity in refugee protection

To start with the 'big picture', two seemingly insurmountable deficiencies have been shaping the global refugee protection system for decades: the lack of solidarity with refugees on behalf of individual States, and the lack of international (or intergovernmental) solidarity in addressing the consequences of forced displacement. *De jure*, refugees are protected by the principle of *non-refoulement* and have a number of socio-economic rights (Hathaway, 2021). *De facto*, however, States largely ignore their obligations under international refugee and human rights law (Betts & Collier, 2017). Highly effective and ever more sophisticated non-entrée policies – often well-disguised as 'international cooperation' arrangements – ensure that undesired refugees are kept outside the jurisdiction of wealthier Global North States at any cost (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Hathaway, 2015; Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2014). At the same time, geographical proximity, rather than equitable burden-sharing, has become the main determinant of responsibility for refugees, the vast majority of whom are hosted by less developed countries in the Global South (Chimni, 2018). The result of this wide gap in international solidarity (Okafor, 2020) is a dysfunctional refugee system, which deprives most people in need of protection from access to basic rights, and often puts them in direct conflict with host country populations (Betts & Collier, 2017).

The recent 'refugee crisis' in Europe unequivocally showed that these two deficiencies are not extraneous to the EU regional refugee system either. In theory, refugee protection here is strengthened by the extensive EU asylum acquis (Moreno-Lax, 2017a), and solidarity between Member States is elevated from an abstract principle to a 'hard' legal obligation by virtue of Article 80 of the Treaty on

the Functioning of the European Union (Moreno-Lax, 2017b). In practice, however, the sobering experience of the last few years is telling. Following 2015's increased arrivals, Member States introduced more restrictive asylum laws, policies, and practices (Gruber, 2017; Kreichauf, 2020), while some of them abruptly violated EU asylum legislation (European Commission v. Hungary, C808-18). In their attempts to avoid responsibility for refugee protection, Member States outsourced it to third countries, such as Turkey and Libya, through quasi-legal bilateral and multilateral agreements (Giuffré, 2017). At the same time, rather than equally distributed, the responsibility for refugee reception continues being disproportionately shouldered by frontline countries. Illustrative in this respect is the disappointing outcome of the two 'mandatory' relocation schemes adopted by the European Council in 2015, which resulted in the transfer of less than 30,000 (out of the envisioned 160,000) asylum seekers from Greece and Italy to other Member States in the course of 2 years (Šelo-Šabić, 2017). Despite the limited success of a more recent small-scale voluntary relocation scheme (International Organisation for Migration, 2021), it is evident that the EU refugee system – just like the global one – is characterised by a lack of macro-level solidarity.

This lack of solidarity, however, has far-reaching consequences on the ground. It triggers a domino reaction, which ultimately leads to attempts to isolate and encapsulate global and regional problems into some unfortunate localities, where refugees' rights are systematically violated and social cohesion is gradually undermined. The example of the Greek hotspot islands mentioned above eloquently illustrates this process. In theory, the post-2015 EU approach to migration governance would provide dignified reception conditions on these islands, fair asylum process, and smooth returns to Turkey of those who do not qualify for international protection (European Commission, 2015; European Council, 2016). In practice, and despite the huge resources spent, hotspots became notoriously infamous for inadequate access to even basic sanitation facilities and violation of fundamental human rights (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2019; Danish Refugee Council, 2017). Local communities on the Greek islands were forced to 'lift the burden' of an artificially created permanent refugee crisis on their territory, which negatively affected their social cohesion, economy, and reputation (Siegel, 2019; Papataxiarchis, 2020). On top of that, these consequences fuelled intense conflicts between locals/local political elites on the one hand, and the national authorities in Athens, on the other (Kitsantonis, 2018). In hindsight, the lack of solidarity at the EU level translated into a migration policy approach that incites social and political conflicts, and threatens human rights.

In this context, new expressions of solidarity with refugees below and beyond the nation-state level have recently gained momentum all over Europe (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Shutes & Ishkanian, 2021; Kousis, Loukakis, Paschou, & Lahusen, 2020; Heimann, Müller, Schammann, & Stürner, 2019; Cantat & Feischmidt, 2019). Examples include autonomous citizens' initiatives (Fouskas, 2019; Rozakou, 2016), civil society mobilisations (Oikonomakis, 2018; Schnyder & Shawki, 2019; Vandevoordt, 2019a; Guma, Woods, Yarker, & Anderson, 2019), transnational solidarity mobilisations (Kanellopoulos et al., 2020), and policies and practices of subnational authorities (Glorius & Doomernik, 2020), which aim at safeguarding and fulfilling refugees' rights. While often overlooked in the past for their limited impact on the refugee protection system at large, such expressions of solidarity have more recently become a major ray of light in the rather bleak international solidarity tapestry (Okafor, 2020), with municipalities arguably having the greatest merit in this.

Municipal solidarity with refugees, defined here as institutional solidarity at the local level of government (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2018), manifested itself in different forms and contexts all over Europe in the aftermath of 2015's increased arrivals. Large cities and small towns alike were at the forefront of developing innovative and rights-based approaches, both in the initial 'sprint' of reception, and in the subsequent 'marathon' of integration (Sabchev, 2021a, 2021b; Geuijen, Oliver, & Dekker, 2020). They covered gaps in the provision of adequate shelter and facilitated access to basic services, at times surpassing their legal competences, and at times even defying national laws and policies (Oomen, Baumgärtel, Miellet, Durmus, & Sabchev, 2021). Often building upon local autonomous and civil society mobilisations (Della Porta, 2018; Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019), municipal governments developed pragmatic solutions that supported newly arrived refugees, and at the same time promoted a culture of hospitality and welcome (Bazurli, 2019). In sum, the experience of the last few years unequivocally demonstrated the power of municipal solidarity to generate approaches to refugee reception and integration, which seek to conform with international and European human rights obligations and also preserve social cohesion.

The motives of local governments to engage in expressions of solidarity with refugees are complex (Bauder, 2020). For instance, they can lie in political contention, humanitarianism, local pragmatism, or even self-interest (Haselbacher, 2019; Sabchev, 2021a). Alternatively, local officials can perceive solidarity initiatives as an obligation stemming from the need to protect and fulfil the human rights of those present on the municipal territory (Bauder, 2020, p. 5). Importantly, however, expressions of municipal solidarity are not necessarily

confined to the administrative boundaries of the locality, but can also extend to refugees residing in other municipalities, or even in other countries (Bauder, 2021; Schwiertz & Steinhilper, 2020). Such trans-local or transnational municipal solidarity engagements clearly rest upon voluntary commitments, rather than legal obligations. They seem to be rooted in the grey zone between politics and humanitarianism (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2018; Vandevoordt, 2019b), and strongly influenced by pressures from local grassroots and civil society organisations (Bauder, 2020; Schwiertz & Steinhilper, 2020).

Recent expressions of transnational municipal solidarity in particular have directly addressed the aforementioned deficiencies of the EU regional refugee system. In 2016, for instance, the mayors of Athens and Barcelona established the 'Solidarity Cities' initiative, and proposed a city-to-city relocation scheme that would transfer asylum seekers from the (overburdened at the time) former to the latter municipality (Garcés-Mascreñas & Gebhardt, 2020). More recently, initiatives like 'Seebrücke' and 'From Sea to the City' that unite local civil society and public authorities from a number of Member States, have called for the direct relocation of refugees from hotspots in frontline countries to municipalities across the EU (Schwiertz & Steinhilper, 2020). In a similar vein, the majority of Dutch municipal councils supported a proposal for the transfer of unaccompanied refugee minors from the Greek islands to the Netherlands (Oomen & Miellet, 2020). Beyond putting forward proposals for refugee relocation, teaming up transnationally has also facilitated the exchange of expertise and best practices in reception and integration policy-making (Oomen, 2020). Lastly, while expressions of transnational municipal solidarity have grown exponentially in recent times in Europe, it is important to note that they are neither a strictly novel, nor an exclusively European development (e.g., the 'Cities of Solidarity' programme in Latin America, see Varoli, 2010).

Against the backdrop of the macro-level solidarity deficiencies, (transnational) municipal solidarity with refugees emerges as a potential new 'basis for shaping social and political alternatives' (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019, p. 123). Municipal solidarity seems to offer sustainable solutions to at least some of the on-the-ground problems generated by the lack of solidarity at the national and international levels. Its generative power translates into rights-based local policy responses, calls for more equitable burden sharing, and attempts to avoid the transformation of global and regional challenges into local crises destructive for the wellbeing of refugees and host communities alike. To be sure, this juxtaposition between macro-level solidarity deficiencies, on the one hand, and municipal solidarity, on the other, neither aims to demonstrate that no central government has shown practical solidarity with refugees, nor that all municipalities are willing to welcome

and integrate refugees. One could recall, among others, Germany's federal government response to the increased arrivals in 2015, and the proliferation in Italy of local policies of exclusion explicitly targeting asylum seekers (Ambrosini, 2020). Nevertheless, the two general trends highlighted in the above discussion can be clearly identified in the recent scholarship in refugee and migration studies (Bauder, 2021, pp. 2-5). Be it because of local pragmatism, pressures from civil society, or yet other reasons, municipalities have been increasingly inventing policy solutions that respect refugees' rights, benefit local communities, and crucially, also enjoy the support of local electorates.

Despite its potential to provide remedies for at least some of the pressing problems related to refugee protection in the EU, municipal solidarity has been so far widely neglected, or in some cases even met with hostility by national governments. The aforementioned relocation of refugees between Athens and Barcelona, for instance, was halted by the Spanish government (Garcés-Mascareñas & Gebhardt, 2020). The Dutch government on its behalf relocated just two unaccompanied minors from Greece, even though municipalities across the country expressed their willingness to welcome and accommodate five hundred. Such examples demonstrate that the lack of international solidarity in fact directly counters the generative power of transnational municipal solidarity. Moreover, they even seem paradoxical if viewed against the background of frequent commitments to evidence-based policy making. Despite scholarly research indicating the added value of scaling up expressions of municipal solidarity with refugees (Bendel, Schammann, Heimann, & Stürner, 2019; Sabchev & Baumgärtel, 2020), EU Member States have remained reluctant to take measures in this direction.

In the context of the above discussion, Tilos constitutes a compelling case study. Tilos is a small remote island, it has very limited resources, and it had no experience in refugee reception until a decade ago. In addition, the local municipality – just like all Greek municipalities – has no mandate in refugee reception, and it has very limited competences in the field of integration (Sabchev, 2021a). Nevertheless, being 'in the eye of the storm' in the period 2014-2015, it had to organise the reception of several times more refugees than its own population, without receiving almost any external assistance. Subsequently, Tilos was not subjected to the migration policy approach implemented on the hotspot islands, and avoided the aforementioned consequences stemming from the lack of solidarity at the international level. By contrast, the municipality of Tilos capitalised on the solidarity that its local residents had demonstrated with refugees, and decided to start hosting asylum seekers on the island on a permanent basis. This resulted in the development of a municipal reception model that provided adequate

conditions to newcomers, and benefitted the local economy. In addition, it fostered the creation of a transnational link between Tilos and a small Swiss municipality, which contributed to the island's attempts to integrate asylum seekers locally. In this respect, the case of Tilos provides insights into the origin, potential, and limits of (transnational) municipal solidarity. Before moving on to the empirical analysis, I briefly elaborate on the methodology of the study.

Methodology

I learned about Tilos' refugee reception model during a field research on the Greek mainland in the autumn of 2018. The case was described by representatives of other municipalities, NGOs, and international organisations as a rather unique for the Greek context example of successful co-existence between refugees and locals. To explore the history, potential promises, and pitfalls of Tilos' solidarity with refugees, I used a qualitative case study research design (Rohlfing, 2012). I applied several data collection methods over an extended period of time, which comprised of four stages:

- (i) An initial *desk research* started in December 2018, including the review of municipal council proceedings and decisions, publicly available interviews of Tilos' mayor, publications in Greek and international media (see for example Carter, 2014; Georges, 2017; BBC, 2017), and practitioners' accounts of the island's reception model (Ioannou & Savvidou, 2019). This resulted in the preliminary reconstruction of Tilos' history of refugee reception, and the identification of its protagonists.
- (ii) A subsequent two-week *field research* on Tilos in April-May 2019, which included interviews with eight individuals directly involved in refugee reception on the island (Table 5). While the field research was relatively short, the small size of Tilos facilitated my access to a large amount of information obtained through informal conversations with local Greeks, migrants residing permanently on the island, local shopkeepers, etc. Importantly, the majority of my interlocutors were either directly or indirectly involved in the reception of refugees through volunteering, provision of humanitarian assistance, donation of goods, etc.
- (iii) The field research on Tilos resulted also in the identification of social media as a pivotal source of new data, which led to a *second desk research* starting in June 2019. In particular, some of my interviewees and interlocutors

indicated that their Facebook Timelines, as well as some Facebook groups, could be used as a digital archive to obtain further information about the events taking place on the island. Indeed, the application of the ‘scroll-down method’ (Robards & Lincoln, 2017) uncovered very detailed primary (e.g., photos, arrival numbers, etc.) and secondary data (e.g., links to previously undetected publications in local, national, and international media). Moreover, through the numerous contacts obtained during the field research, I continued following closely the subsequent developments on the island.

- (iv) Lastly, the data collection process was completed with three more interviews in May 2021 (Table 5). These final interviews filled the remaining gaps in information around the origins and evolution of Tilos’ reception model, and provided an update on the most recent events.

The interview transcriptions, field notes, relevant social media publications, and secondary sources were all incorporated into NVivo 11, systematically reviewed, and coded using both deductive and inductive approach. The longitudinal collection of data from different sources facilitated the extensive use of triangulation to ensure the reliability of the information. In essence, the analysis resembled an investigative work that connected the different pieces of evidence, reconstructed the history of the island’s reception model, and uncovered the driving forces behind and the consequences of Tilos’ solidarity with refugees.

Dynamics of solidarity on Tilos

In a peculiar way, the origins of Tilos’ extraordinary story are rooted in the island’s ordinary problems. Being quite small and remote from larger islands and the Greek mainland alike has chronically hindered its development. In the beginning of the 1990s, its population had dropped to just 270 people residing in its two main villages: Livadia, where Tilos’ port is located, and the inland Megalo Chorio (Figure 6). With the lack of basic services, economic opportunities, and interest for investment on behalf of the central government, local decline seemed irreversible.

ID	Location	Date	Interviewee	Language
T1	Tilos	19 April 2019	School teacher and volunteer at 'Tilos Hospitality Center'	Greek
T2	Tilos	29 April 2019	Two local volunteers providing humanitarian assistance to migrants in the period 2014-2015	English
T3	Tilos	30 April 2019	Deputy Mayor	Greek
T4	Tilos	30 April 2019	Municipal councillor, former employee at 'Tilos Hospitality Center'	Greek
T5	Tilos	30 April 2019	Local volunteer, former employee at 'Tilos Hospitality Center'	Greek
T6	Tilos	1 May 2019	Mayor of Tilos	Greek
T7	Tilos	3 May 2019	President of the Municipal Council and volunteer in the first reception of refugees in 2014-2015	Greek
T8	Online	1 April 2021	Mayor of Tilos (follow-up interview)	Greek
T9	Online	6 May 2021	NGO representative working on the 'Tilos Hospitality Center' project	Greek
T10	Online	8 May 2021	Municipal councillor, Municipality of Menier, Switzerland (answers in written form)	French

Table 5. List of interviews.



Figure 6. Map of Tilos.

Nevertheless, an ambitious and rather progressive mayor took over in 1995, changing dramatically Tilos’ trajectory. During his mandate, the municipality heavily invested in a number of infrastructure projects, and bought its own ferry that connected Tilos to the closest large island of Rhodes on a daily basis, facilitating locals’ access to hospital and services. Trying to prevent young people from leaving, the municipality opened a high school and took measures to promote tourism, turning the whole island into a protected area. The strategy of the visionary mayor was quite costly, but at the same time successful; families who had emigrated started returning, and new Greeks and foreigners settled on Tilos. As a

result, within just three decades, the locally registered population increased to over 800 residents, approximately 500 of whom were living permanently on the island. At that time, however, a severe economic crisis hit Greece. The heavily indebted municipality of Tilos lost its ferry, tourist arrivals went down, and locals started experiencing again the painful lack of services and opportunities.

It was in this context that Tilos experienced its first refugee arrival. In 2010, a boat with 123 people from Afghanistan and Iraq, nearly half of whom children, landed on the island's shores. Under the coordination of the same mayor, who was serving his fourth consecutive term, locals mobilised and provided food and shelter to the newcomers. After several days, refugees were all registered at the local Police Office and could leave the island.

'We did not have any experience; we had not seen people like this... The truth is that the first time the whole village, the whole island, everyone was on their feet... They put them in a hotel in Livadia, which had no electricity. We [the municipality] took care of it, started the electricity, the water supply, etc.' (T7).

Boats with refugees continued landing occasionally on Tilos in the following months, triggering the same humanitarian response of locals and municipal authorities (T5, T7). However, after the island's long-serving mayor passed away in 2012 and a new one took over, refugee arrivals intensified greatly.

'There was a day in which 470 people arrived. Three boats. We could not catch up. On a single day. Three boats on a single day...' (T7).

Moreover, smugglers often abandoned refugees at remote and hard-to-reach locations. With just three police officers who lacked an appropriate vehicle and a Coast Guard comprised of two officers without a vessel, local residents and the municipality had to cover the gap. In the midst of an economic crisis, they supported dozens of search and rescue operations, using mostly private but also municipal resources to bring refugees to safety at the islands' port. Newcomers usually spent only a few days on Tilos, until they were registered and issued documents allowing them to continue their journey to mainland Greece. In the meantime, the only available support from the government was the budget of the police for covering food expenses, which amounted to 5,87 EUR per person per day. With the understaffed police office unable to arrange food provision though, the only way to cope with the situation was to rely on the solidarity of the locals and the limited capacity of the municipal authorities. Paradoxically, in the height of the touristic season, locals were leaving their jobs, 'taking the boat and running

to collect people', while 'the president of the municipal council was all day around the cauldron, cooking' (T6). Lastly, in the lack of space to accommodate the arriving refugees, the municipality arranged the provision of first reception in the yard of the local school or in a local monastery, while the most vulnerable people were often hosted in locals' homes or hotels.

The situation, however, gradually became more and more difficult to manage. While a relatively small core group of locals continued shouldering almost entirely the humanitarian assistance to hundreds of refugees, the unabated arrivals and the lack of adequate support from the central state started generating a visible discontent in others, who were concerned about potential negative consequences on local tourism. Faced with this issue, Tilos' mayor repeatedly requested from the Greek government to fund the creation of a local humanitarian assistance centre, which would provide adequate conditions to refugees during the time they spent on the island (Municipality of Tilos, 2014). Particularly acute were the problems caused by the chronic lack of healthcare personnel, with Tilos even remaining at times without any doctor at all (Municipality of Tilos, 2015). Despite some initial commitments, however, and even though the municipality had found an appropriate site for the suggested reception facility, no funds arrived.

After more than a year had passed, and with refugee arrivals not slowing down, locals realised that they should look for an alternative solution. They organised several online donation campaigns, and used the collected funds and materials to remodel an ex-military site in Livadia, turning it into a small reception centre with basic facilities. This approach to financing humanitarian initiatives was widespread on the Aegean islands in 2015, where local 'solidarians' struggled to provide first reception to thousands of refugees with very limited support from the central state (Rozakou, 2016, p. 185; Oikonomakis, 2018). Increasingly frustrated, neglected by the responsible national authorities, and facing backlash, local residents and the municipality of Tilos seemed to be reaching a breaking point.

At that time, a turnaround marking the beginning of Tilos' municipal reception model occurred. The humanitarian emergency on Lesbos and other Aegean islands had attracted not only international attention and volunteers, but also voluminous public and private funding (Papataxiarchis, 2016; Oikonomakis, 2018). The mayor of Tilos saw the opportunity lying in the crisis, and quickly capitalised on the solidarity with refugees that locals had shown in the previous years. Using Tilos' reputation as a solidarity island that had welcomed and assisted thousands of refugees, she managed to obtain two grants from a Greek non-governmental organisation (NGO) that administered international private funds. The first, and

relatively small grant, covered for the presence of one doctor and one nurse on Tilos for an extended period of time, meeting the needs of both refugees and locals. The second, and relatively large grant, served for the construction of 'Tilos Hospitality Centre'. The centre was built on the aforementioned ex-military site in Livadia and consisted of ten furnished prefabricated container houses with electricity, hot water, air conditioning, Wi-Fi, and separate showers and toilets. It included a large kitchen facility where refugees could prepare their meals, a common area with a TV and computers, and a playground for the children. Importantly, the grant resulted also in the creation of six new jobs, and the purchase of a new minivan, which although initially intended to serve exclusively the needs of refugees, was subsequently used to enhance the island's public transport in the busy summer months.

The way in which Tilos mayor skilfully managed to provide for the improved reception conditions of refugees, as well as for the needs of the local community, merits closer attention. Indeed, the opening of 'Tilos Hospitality Centre' and the formalisation of the support to refugees was a clear expression of Tilos' municipal solidarity. However, the actions of the mayor were not anymore based only on humanitarianism, or on minimising potential negative effects on local businesses. In similarity to other cases recorded both in Greece and abroad (Sabchev, 2021a; Betts, Memişoğlu, & Ali, 2021), Tilos' municipal solidarity also had an opportunistic dimension. The tangible benefits that the mayor's actions brought to the local community tamed the growing fears, showed that solidarity with refugees is not necessarily a zero-sum game, and justified the support of the local government to newcomers. In essence, as discussed in more detail below, 'Tilos Hospitality Centre' paved the way for the transformation of municipal solidarity into a sustained commitment to refugee reception based not only on moral convictions, but also on self-interest.

Following the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016, refugee arrivals to Greece sharply decreased. At the same time, however, the main Aegean islands of arrival turned from transit zones into places of prolonged confinement, where newcomers had to wait in overcrowded hotspots for their asylum applications to be processed (Dimitriadi, 2017). Similarly, border closures across Europe had trapped tens of thousands of refugees on the Greek mainland, with the central government hastily opening large reception facilities and looking for sites that could temporarily host people (Sabchev, 2021b, p. 11). Ironically enough, with 'Tilos Hospitality Centre' being empty at that time, it was the municipality that responded to the government's calls for support. After a unanimous decision, the municipal council notified the responsible Ministry that Tilos had a suitable facility and was ready

to host ten families of asylum seekers. In their decision, the municipal councillors emphasised that 'large reception facilities are problematic both for the dignified reception of refugees and for local communities', calling upon other municipalities to follow their example (Municipality of Tilos, 2016). Importantly, they also noted that the aim of the municipality was 'not only the reception and hospitality of those families, but also their smooth integration into the local community' (Municipality of Tilos, 2016).

Greek municipalities, however, were neither allowed to directly manage the reception of asylum seekers, nor were they eligible to apply on their own for the available EU funding, which was administered by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). To resolve this stalemate, Tilos teamed up with the NGO that had financed its hospitality centre. The partnership resulted in the development of a pilot project that extended far beyond the mere provision of reception, envisioning the long-term co-existence of locals and refugees on the island. Importantly, the project foresaw the development of new services available to both groups, and the recruitment of a number of employees who would not only run the reception centre, but also provide assistance to the municipality where needed. The ambition of the mayor was that after an initial period in the centre, newcomers would be able to find jobs, gain back their independence, move into permanent houses, and integrate into the local community. Although the project was significantly more expensive than the reception of refugees in large facilities in other parts of the country, it was funded by the UNHCR because it was considered a promising pilot that could be tested on Tilos and then implemented in other areas (T10).

Soon after, the first asylum seekers were transferred from the hotspot islands to 'Tilos Hospitality Centre', which provided fifty reception places in total. In line with the idea of connecting reception with local development, thirteen new employees – either Tilos residents or emigrants who decided to return because of the job opportunity – were hired to work as teachers, social workers, technical staff, and cleaning personnel. This was particularly helpful for the indebted municipality that had struggled in the past to pay its own employees (T6). In addition, all five local supermarkets benefitted, providing food and other supplies for the centre. At the same time, refugee families could receive more individualised support than in larger reception facilities. Children could start right away Greek and English language classes, which were also available to their parents. At the initiative of local teachers and with the support of the mayor, all refugee pupils were also enrolled into the regular school system (T1). Moreover, local volunteers regularly visited the centre providing additional activities for the children, such as music and dancing classes (T1, T5). Importantly, forty per cent of the adult refugees hosted in the centre found

employment in the local hospitality industry during the summer months, which facilitated the development of social relationships with locals (Ioannou & Savvidou, 2019). This was possible due to the mediation of the municipality (T2), but also due to the fact that some employers preferred hiring the already available refugees, rather than searching for seasonal workers elsewhere:

'Employers, just like my brother, were happy to find a person here on the island, and not hiring one through an agency... Which agencies ask for a lot as well; one needs to pay for employees' accommodation, food, water...' (T5).

This initial success put Tilos in direct contrast with the hotspot islands, where asylum seekers lived under squalid conditions (Danish Refugee Council, 2017), tourism had dropped (Ivanov & Stavrinoudis, 2018), and a hostility towards migrants was rising (Siegel, 2019). Tilos, on the contrary, was 'a flyspeck island that benefitted from the refugee arrivals' (T6). Jobs were created, tourism was going up, and the number of children in the local school reached 20 for the first time since 1970 (ANA-MPA, 2017). Not surprisingly, the solidarity with refugees that locals and the municipality had shown started attracting attention within and beyond Greece. A number of major international media praised the reception model of Tilos (BBC, 2017; Georges, 2017), and even the popular band 'U2' included a couple living at the hospitality centre in one of their music videos (SolidarityNow, 2017). The mayor of Tilos was invited to participate in national and international fora, and to share the benefits of hosting asylum seekers. The island's reception model had turned into 'the best advertisement, without spending a single euro' (T4).

Growing visibility soon paid off, albeit in a rather unexpected way. In the end of 2017, a municipal councillor from the small Swiss town of Meinier heard Tilos' story on the radio. Impressed by Tilos' solidarity, he decided to help the island both in its humanitarian approach, and in its local development (T10). He contacted the mayor of Tilos and learned that the main obstacle for successfully integrating newcomers into the local community was the lack of stable employment in the winter. To overcome this issue, the mayor had previously suggested the creation of a small agricultural cooperative with shareholders both locals and refugees, which would produce the island's traditional goat cheese and help revive the local primary sector. While her idea had been met with excitement from the UNHCR and the national authorities, practical support had not arrived from anywhere. Ultimately, the idea reached Meinier City Council, which decided to allocate part of its humanitarian aid fund for its realisation, while the aforementioned municipal councillor contributed further with the organisation of fundraising campaigns. The considerable sum that was collected was used for the purchase of a herd of

goats, the construction of a stable, and the installation of a small creamery for the production of cheese. Lastly, an association called Meinier-Tilos was established to supervise and support the progress of the newly founded agricultural cooperative (Municipality of Tilos, 2018).

In the meantime, however, and despite the mayor's efforts, the transition of asylum seekers from 'Tilos Hospitality Centre' to permanent housing solutions and independent living on the island had not been achieved. One of the reasons was the aforementioned lack of all-year-long stable employment, which prompted even those families who had initially considered settling on the island to leave, either for relocation to other EU countries or to the Greek mainland (T5, T6). Another reason was that many of the asylum seekers hosted on Tilos already had relatives in Western Europe and wanted to reunite with them. The inability of the mayor to deliver on this aspect of the project eventually created frictions between the municipality, the NGO that mediated the access to funds, and the UNHCR. Although the broader benefits for the local community were recognised by all stakeholders, the long-term sustainability of the project was questioned, especially in light of its higher cost in comparison to larger reception facilities across the country. Gradually, less asylum seekers were relocated to Tilos, half of the employees in the hospitality centre were laid off, and in the end of 2018, the project was terminated. Oddly enough, by the time that the municipality managed to obtain a creamery and was ready to put forward its plan to bridge reception with the development of the local primary sector, asylum seekers were gone.

Notwithstanding some delays, the good personal relationship that the mayor of Tilos had with the then national authorities resulted in the restart of the island's reception model. Through the mediation of the Greek Ministry of Migration Policy, the municipality established a direct collaboration with the UNHCR and started receiving funds again. As a result, thirty new reception places were created on Tilos. This time, the arriving asylum seekers were hosted in independent apartments and houses on the island, while 'Tilos Hospitality Centre' remained empty. The new program covered the costs for accommodation and services, and the children, who constituted the majority of newcomers, were inscribed in the local kindergarten and school. As in the past, five jobs were created for local residents, while adult asylum seekers managed to find temporary employment, with one of them working at the local creamery. Lastly, locals and the municipal authorities remain largely supportive to the reception of refugees on the island, and the projection of Tilos model as a successful example of mutually beneficial co-existence continues, both within and beyond Greece (Felanis, 2021; NPO, 2020).

Discussion and conclusion

As an initial remark, Tilos' history of solidarity with refugees features a number of intriguing similarities and differences with the nearby hotspot islands. For instance, one of the most urgent and frequent questions in the period of intense arrivals on both Tilos and Lesbos was 'Where is the government?' (Siegel, 2019, p. 164). In both cases, it was mostly the locals who carried for a long time the lion's share of the burden, struggling to provide assistance to thousands of people in times of economic hardship. At the same time, Tilos neither experienced the emergence of a local rescue industry of professional humanitarians (Papataxiarchis, 2016), nor it hosted a hotspot. Due to its smaller scale, it remained in the periphery of the central government's radar and managed to develop its own reception model. Just a few years later, while Lesbos was facing 'the greatest crisis' of its recent history (Papataxiarchis, 2020, p. 23), Tilos was bearing the benefits of its solidarity with refugees. The detailed analysis of Tilos' case and its review in the context of parallel developments on the hotspot islands, but also in the EU at large, brings insights into both conceptual and policy debates on the origin, potential, and limits of municipal solidarity with refugees.

From a theoretical point of view, Tilos' case highlights the multifaceted nature of expressions of municipal solidarity with refugees (Bauder, 2020). It shows that such expressions can rest upon different perspectives of solidarity activated by different circumstances, at different times. Initially, during the period of increased arrivals, the actions of locals and municipal officials in support of refugees were genuinely motivated by humanitarian concerns. Nevertheless, in light of the abdication of the central government from some of its responsibilities, and the rapid shift towards more restrictive asylum laws and policies across the EU, such actions can be also interpreted as implicitly political (Vandevoordt & Verschraegen, 2019). In this respect, Tilos' expressions of municipal solidarity before and during 2015's 'long summer of migration' resemble similar welcoming local responses to spontaneous refugee arrivals elsewhere (Bazurli, 2019), and can be viewed as instances of 'subversive humanitarianism' (Vandevoordt, 2019b; Vandevoordt & Verschraegen, 2019). In other words, although morally motivated, they acquired political character 'through their implicit opposition to the ruling socio-political climate' (Vandevoordt and De Praetere, forthcoming, as cited in Vandevoordt & Verschraegen, 2019).

What is particularly intriguing though, is the subsequent capitalisation on these acts of subversive humanitarianism through the initiatives of the mayor. While preserving its humanitarian and implicitly political character, Tilos' post-2015

municipal solidarity was rooted primarily in self-interest, which is easy to detect throughout the development of the island's reception model. In a peculiar way, with her well-calculated actions the mayor built on locals' humanitarianism, as a rather common expression of spontaneous solidarity in crisis situations, and paved the way towards a broader long-term commitment to hosting asylum seekers. Importantly, the opportunistic character of Tilos' municipal solidarity does not appear to have had a corrosive effect on the solidarity of Tilians with refugees. On the contrary, the tangible benefits for the local community that it resulted into seem to have contributed to preserving social cohesion and enhancing the support for refugee presence on the island. In the (forced) migration literature, such 'self-centred' type of solidarity has typically appeared in analyses of international solidarity, highlighting, for example, the genuine interest of all EU Member States in establishing a more equitable distribution system for refugees (Bauder & Juffs, 2020, p. 55). While the concept of solidarity in these macro-level analyses foregrounds the attempts of Member States to minimise the burden of hosting refugees, in the case of Tilos it emphasises the benefits related to their presence.

The insights offered by the above discussion directly relate to research on municipal solidarity with refugees beyond local administrative boundaries (Bauder, 2021; Schwietz & Steinhilper, 2020). The evidence presented in this article suggests that in addition to humanitarian or political reasons (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2018; Vandevoordt, 2019b), opportunistic behaviour can also play a role in trans-local municipal solidarity expressions. When in early 2016 the municipal council of Tilos offered hospitality to ten families of asylum seekers trapped in other parts of Greece, it explicitly emphasised the importance of providing dignified reception, and implicitly criticised the central government for opening large reception facilities (Municipality of Tilos, 2016). At the same time, however, this decision was also motivated by the eventual benefits for the local economy and community from reviving the empty at the time 'Tilos Hospitality Centre'. Importantly, similar economic reasoning has been detected in expressions of municipal solidarity with refugees in other parts of Greece as well (Sabchev, 2021a).

One last point of theoretical relevance that emerges from the analysis pertains to the highly peculiar and equally significant contribution of the Swiss town of Meinier to strengthening Tilos' reception model. Meinier's support for Tilos represents an unusual type of transnational municipal solidarity, which does not typically feature in scholarly and policy debates. Neither it was related to participation in a transnational network (Heimann et al., 2019), nor it was the result of structural factors, such as contentious politics and pressure from grassroots or civil society (Bauder, 2021; Schwietz & Steinhilper, 2020). Rather, it

came about from the initiative of a single individual – a municipal councillor – who successfully mobilised both institutional resources and Meinier’s local community for the benefit of Tilians and refugees alike. This pinpoints the potential of individual agency of local government officials to strengthen refugees’ rights not only within, but also far beyond municipal and even national boundaries (Sabchev, Miellet, & Durmuş, 2021).

Turning to the practical relevance of this study, the case of Tilos confirms the capacity of municipal solidarity to produce local responses that effectively fill the gaps in refugee protection left or created by central governments (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019). It suggests that even a small, remote, indebted, inexperienced, and at times extremely overburdened municipality can eventually meet the challenges stemming from refugee arrivals in a human rights-conforming way. Moreover, it shows that refugee reception – even when it happens at the margins of Europe – is not necessarily a zero-sum game where the presence of newcomers inevitably translates into a heavy burden for local communities. On the contrary, if it is timely and properly linked to a local development strategy, refugee reception can turn into an opportunity. In this respect, the experience of Tilos foregrounds the generative power of municipal solidarity and puts it in direct contrast to the proclivity of the aforementioned macro-level deficiencies in refugee protection to inflict on-the-ground social, political, and human rights crises, such as the ones on the Greek hotspot islands.

Furthermore, the case of Tilos suggests that at a time when new forms of solidarity are sought in order to mend the dysfunctional EU refugee reception system, building on municipal solidarity expressions can open up new possibilities. In 2015, cities and towns all over Europe spontaneously welcomed refugees and provided for their initial settlement needs (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2018; Doomernik & Ardon, 2018; Oomen et al., 2021). In many cases, just like on Tilos, the initial spark of municipal solidarity subsequently grew into permanent commitment to refugee reception, as well as calls on central governments to alleviate the pressure from hotspots and frontline countries (Bauder, 2021). In this respect, municipal solidarity could set the foundations for a new approach to relocation and reception in the EU, which would conform with international refugee and human rights law, bring benefits to local communities, and enjoy local legitimacy (Bendel et al., 2019). Needless to say, such an approach could be effective and sustainable only if tangibly supported by national governments. While the question of how to systematically scale up expressions of municipal solidarity goes beyond the scope

of this article, the large number of localities that have declared their willingness to receive and support refugees clearly signals the presence of a fertile ground for such a discussion.

Along with the possibilities, the evidence presented in this study also highlights some of the limits of municipal solidarity with refugees. For instance, if the mayor of Tilos had not managed in the end of 2015 to capitalise on Tilians’ hospitality, and in light of the lack of state support at that time, the subsequent dynamics of solidarity on the island could be very different. This highlights the importance of securing promptly adequate support for local expressions of solidarity with refugees. In addition, the aforementioned mismatch between asylum seekers’ aspirations and reality on Tilos poses significant challenges to the successful integration of newcomers and the long-term sustainability of the island’s model. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Tilos is home of a number of third-country nationals, including refugees, who arrived and settled there before the recent ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe. In this respect, the current efforts of the municipality to bridge reception and local development could be strengthened by using matching mechanisms to identify and relocate to the island asylum seekers who have better prospects to integrate there (Bansak et al., 2018). Such a scenario, however, would be feasible only with the sustained commitment and support of national authorities.

Finally, one additional limitation, both in terms of practical implications and generalisability of the findings of this study, pertains to Tilos’ specific context. Indeed, the events described in the above analysis occurred in a very particular setting. Tilos has a politically progressive municipality and local population that is well-accustomed to hosting dozens of foreign seasonal workers and thousands of foreign tourists every summer. In contrast, small landlocked municipalities in continental Europe are usually more conservative and homogeneous (Haselbacher, 2019). That said, expressions of municipal solidarity with refugees resembling the ones on Tilos emerged in different EU countries during and after 2015. While it is clear that municipal solidarity a la Tilos is not *the* solution to the shortcomings of the EU reception system, it is also clear that the island’s experience – especially when viewed in parallel with the developments on the nearby hotspot islands – exemplifies opportunities that all too often go unseized. Therefore, the potential of (transnational) municipal solidarity to translate into local approaches to reception that fulfil refugees’ rights and benefit local communities certainly merits further attention from scholars and policy-makers. In this respect, despite the contextual particularities of Tilos, this case study can serve as a building block in future theory development and contribute to practitioner debates on municipal solidarity.

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Notes

i The ratio of local residents versus arriving refugees on Tilos for the indicated period was 1:12. In comparison, the respective ratio on Lesvos for the same period was only 1:5.

ii The phrases 'sprint of reception' and 'marathon of integration' belong to the former Greek Minister for Immigration Policy Ioannis Mouzalas.

iii See for example <https://www.rodiaki.gr/article/407463/pws-ginetai-ena-toso-mikro-nhsi-na-kanei-toso-megala-pragmata> (January 2019); https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PG2Nqu_Lkdk (November 2018); and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHLIB69t_1c&t=1s (October 2016);

iv See <https://www.meinier-tilos.com/>

v Another relevant to this discussion term is 'opportunistic humanitarianism', coined by Župarić-Iljić and Valenta (2019).

Chapter 7.

Conclusion

Contributions of the dissertation

This dissertation explored the nexus between local authorities, the arrival and settlement of forced migrants, and the protection and fulfilment of human rights at the local level in the context of the 2015's 'refugee crisis' in Europe. It brought evidence from several municipalities of different size and scale in Greece and Italy, as well as in the Netherlands and Turkey, highlighting their attempts to design and implement policies and practices that address the short-term reception needs of forced migrants, and also facilitate their long-term integration into local communities. The separate case studies demonstrated that local authorities, even when situated within very restrictive institutional and financial contexts, have significant potential to directly influence the on-the-ground governance of forced migration. Municipalities can strengthen the protection of migrants' fundamental rights, regardless if they explicitly frame their initiatives in terms of human rights, or alternatively as humanitarianism, expressions of solidarity, or local pragmatism. At times when legal and institutional frameworks at higher levels underdeliver, local authorities can step in and effectively address human rights deficits in the field of migration governance.

The five treatises presented in the previous chapters addressed stand-alone yet interrelated research questions pertaining to municipal engagement with forced migration governance and human rights localisation. They highlighted the great complexity and unique configurations characterising local reception and integration policy assemblages, which logically hinders the possibility to make broad generalisations. Nevertheless, the insights brought by the separate chapters allow for drawing some overall conclusions and practical implications. This final chapter proceeds with a brief outline of the main conceptual, theoretical, and methodological contributions of the dissertation to the fields of migration and refugee studies, as well as to human rights research. Subsequently, on the basis of the findings of each treatise, it points out several lessons for policy-makers and practitioners.

Conceptual and theoretical contributions

To start with, this dissertation contributes to emerging literature on the relevance of individual mayors to the governance of forced migration. A growing number of studies focuses explicitly or implicitly on the role of mayors in the reception of forced migrants (Betts, Memişoğlu, & Ali, 2021; Rosenberger & Müller, 2020; Driel & Verkuyten, 2020). This brings an urgent need for the development of conceptual frameworks which can simultaneously capture the specificities of concrete local contexts and facilitate broader comparative research, both within and across

countries. The initial conceptualisation of local political leadership in forced migrants reception developed in Chapter 3 seeks to respond precisely to this need. It recognises the unique characteristics of the institutional and social structures that every mayor operates in. At the same time, it also acknowledges the capacity of local political leaders to influence these structures by skilfully using a combination between 'hard power' and 'soft power' (Nye, 2008). In short, the framework's analytical value for migration research lies in its focus on the interaction between agency and structure, which allows for its adaptation to particular mayoral behaviours, as well as to particular institutional and social contexts.

From a theoretical point of view, the role of individual mayors in the governance of forced migration at the local level was one of the main recurring themes throughout the dissertation. The evidence presented in the different chapters confirms some recent scholarly findings, and also brings some novel insights into the potential of mayors to influence local migration policy-making. For instance, the case study of Themi and Delta, but also the one of Thessaloniki, largely supports the validity of previous arguments, based on research in Turkey and Lebanon, that 'beyond difference within the municipal authorities, the agency of particular mayors also makes a difference to policy outcomes' (Betts et al., 2021, p. 23). Going a step further, Chapter 3 unpacked the strategy behind the successful attempt of Themi's mayor to influence the local reception of forced migrants, and highlighted the benefits of exercising interactive and multi-level political leadership in this policy area. The findings indicate that a combination of political, operational and discursive engagement on behalf of mayors can lead to effective use of local government discretion in migration management, de-escalation of local conflicts, stronger mobilisation of available resources, and ultimately better protection of newcomers' rights. Importantly, the evidence from the case of Tilos leads to similar conclusions and shows that the discernment and initiatives of mayors can have a positive impact on local solidarity with forced migrants not only in the short, but also in the long term.

Beyond the role of mayors, the dissertation also highlighted the importance of other municipal officials in strengthening the effectiveness of human rights in local migration governance. In this regard, Chapter 4 demonstrated that if one takes a closer look inside the black box of local government structures, one can identify particular individuals who are responsible for the translation of abstract human rights notions into tangible municipal policies and practices. The conceptualisation of individual agency of human rights users within local authorities developed in the same chapter can help scholars move further away from the typical for this field of research state-centrism (De Feyter & Parmentier,

2011). At the same time, it also helps calibrate recent analytical approaches that view local governments as unified actors in their relationship with global norms. To give an example, the United Nations Human Rights Council has recently recognised the complementary duties of local governments in protecting and fulfilling human rights (2015). However, hardly anyone would expect that municipal officials will automatically take this new role at heart. Consequently, focusing on the role of individual agency in the process of human rights localisation can have additional explanatory value. The analysis presented in Chapter 4 suggests that municipal officials' background, motivations, and interactions can be the reasons behind instances of especially strong engagement with human rights law, practice and discourse by some municipal authorities. In this regard, the future application of the concept of individual agency in human rights research can shed further light on the relationship between international norms and local policy-making in the field of migration governance and beyond.

The rise of human rights cities, however, cannot be fully explained by looking only at the agency of particular individuals within municipal structures, or by focusing narrowly on the dialectics between the 'global' and the local, as much of the human rights city research to date has done. Zooming in on the municipality of Bologna, Chapter 5 highlighted in this respect the relevance of intergovernmental conflicts within the state to the localisation of human rights. More specifically, it showed that ideological differences between the national, on the one hand, and the regional and local level of government, on the other hand, can trigger and facilitate the process of becoming and being a human rights city. In the context of confrontations with higher levels of public authority, municipal governments can instrumentally use human rights to do 'politics by other means' (Wilson, 2007). By strategically mobilising human rights as law, practice and discourse in the domain of migration governance, local authorities can simultaneously achieve three interrelated goals: 1) challenge the legality of restrictive national laws and policies before domestic courts; 2) remedy the negative on-the-ground effects of such laws and policies; and 3) provide convincing justification for their practical support to locally residing (forced) migrants. On the basis of these findings, the main contribution of Chapter 5 lies in its emphasis on the importance of accounting fully for the multi-level character of urban politics in future human rights city analyses.

Lastly, when local authorities develop policies and practices that protect and fulfil the human rights of forced migrants, they inevitably need additional resources. Accessing those, however, may be challenging, especially when local governments seek to engage in matters that fall outside of their institutional mandate and when support from national authorities is non-existent or insufficient. A potential

pathway towards overcoming such structural constraints can be the collaboration with likeminded partners at the local, international, and transnational level. Such horizontal and vertical coalitions, as the case of Thessaloniki showed, can channel important material and human resources to municipalities. In addition, they can facilitate the development of local expertise in the domain of reception, which municipal officials often lack. Moreover, as the evidence from both Tilos and Thessaloniki indicated, partnering with domestic and international (donor) organisations can also bring a number of positive spill overs for local economies. In the long run, the access of local authorities to external resources can even turn into a major driving force behind a continued commitment to welcoming forced migrants, along with any other humanitarian and pragmatic reasons for this. Paradoxical as it may seem, at times of economic hardship, forced migrants' reception can become an opportunity for small and large municipalities alike, helping them gain funds and international visibility.

Methodological contribution

The methodological contribution of the dissertation pertains to foregrounding the benefits of applying the assemblage approach and process tracing in the study of local reception and integration policies for forced migrants.

All case studies, to a greater or lesser extent, highlighted the overwhelming complexity that characterises local migration governance. In Greece and in Italy, just as in other EU countries, local migration policies and practices emerge as a result of both cooperation and conflicts between a multitude of state, civil society, and private actors, operating at different levels and driven by different motivations and intentions (Glorius & Doomernik, 2020). This fragmentation within local asylum landscapes inevitably hinders the development of theoretical constructions that combine high explanatory power with a broad applicability. Nevertheless, the growing empirical research on the local governance of forced migration provides a solid foundation for middle range theorising based on in-depth 'building block' case studies (George & Bennett, 2005, pp. 76-78). In such case studies, as demonstrated by the analysis of Thessaloniki's municipal policy activism, the assemblage approach can assist in unravelling the complexity to a reasonable level, without resorting to undue reductionism or unproductive holism. Its emphasis on the process of assembling, disassembling, and reassembling of heterogeneous elements activated by diverse actors and forces (Ureta, 2015) facilitates an inquiry that is sensitive to the causal capacity of both agency and structure. Lastly, the application of the assemblage approach is also consistent with recent calls for practicing and studying migration and integration policy-making as a whole-of-government and whole-of-society enterprise (Papademetriou & Benton, 2016;

Appleby, 2020). In other words, assemblage thinking reflects the increasingly accepted idea that the design and implementation of policies for migrants takes place in multi-level and polycentric settings (Ambrosini, Cinalli, & Jacobson, 2020).

The methodological challenges stemming from the complexity of contemporary local level migration governance, however, do not end with the adoption of the assemblage approach. The large number of actors and factors that can affect municipal responses to the arrival of forced migrants increases the risk of omitting important variables, or failing to account for equifinality (i.e., the possibility that different combinations of elements produce the same outcome). For this reason, as argued in Chapter 2, using the assemblage approach in analyses of local reception and integration policies goes hand in hand with applying process tracing. By distilling the different assemblage elements from the broader policy context and shedding light on the causal mechanisms operating between them, process tracing enhances the analytical value of the assemblage approach. In addition, it helps uncover the motivations that trigger and navigate the actions of important decision-makers, such as mayors. All in all, the insights provided by Thessaloniki's case study suggest that local migration policy research could benefit from further harnessing the potential of the methodological symbiosis between the assemblage approach and process tracing.

Practical implications

In the last decade (2010-2020), the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide has been constantly growing (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee, 2021). This trend is likely to persist in the foreseeable future due to unceasing armed conflicts in different regions, as well as due to the ever more visible negative impacts of climate change. Against this background, it is highly plausible that municipalities in Greece and Italy, but also in other parts of Europe and beyond, will continue facing challenges related to the arrival and settlement of forced migrants. The evidence presented in this dissertation clearly suggests that local authorities can develop effective responses to such challenges. At the same time, however, it also shows that this is not an easy task, especially in cases where local authorities operate within restrictive institutional and financial frameworks. In this respect, the different case studies offer some lessons for local-level politicians and practitioners, which can assist them in overcoming structural constraints and in developing human rights-based future-proof strategies for the reception and integration of forced migrants.

First, the responsibility for accommodating the various needs of forced migrants in the initial phase of reception usually falls outside the mandate of local authorities. At the same time, the challenges related to forced migrants' arrival and settlement are directly experienced by local communities and their political leaders. In these circumstances, it is easy to assume that the first question decision-makers ask themselves is 'Should we get involved?'. The high degree of politicisation of migration and the fear of eventual political costs often tips the scales towards a negative answer, thus leaving room for heightened social tensions and the emergence of human rights gaps. In contrast, the case studies presented in this dissertation unequivocally show that the more proactively local political leaders use their discretion and engage in the reception of forced migrants, the better the results for all affected parties. Timely interventions give mayors more opportunities to navigate the local public discourse in the desired direction, to prepare and mobilise municipal services, to find partners that are willing to support their strategy, etc. When performed well, such actions contribute to maintaining social cohesion, fulfilling newcomers' immediate humanitarian needs, and protecting their fundamental rights. Importantly, they also foreground the leadership qualities of mayors, send a clear message to concerned local constituencies, and may potentially boost the overall legitimacy of local governments.

Second, in the context of limited resources and experience in the management of reception, municipal officials can increase their chances to effectively respond to forced migration challenges by building horizontal and vertical coalitions with actors from different levels. Entering into such partnerships can bring a number of advantages for local authorities. In times of austerity and shrinking municipal budgets, arguably the most important one is the access to external funds. As the cases of Thessaloniki and Tilos demonstrate, such funds can be used not only to fill the gaps in service provision for forced migrants, but also to support local development. As a result, they can extend the boundaries of municipal solidarity with forced migrants and set the foundations of sustainable long-term local integration strategies. In addition, collaborations with international and local organisations that have experience in working with displaced people may help local officials navigate through what very often constitutes uncharted territory for them. Particularly beneficial in this respect seems to be the exchange of know-how through national and transnational municipal networks, which has been pinpointed in a number of previous studies (Oomen, 2020; Caponio, 2018). In short, horizontal and vertical coalitions offer access to the tools that local authorities need in order to design and implement policy solutions that benefit both forced migrants and local communities.

Third, while external funds seem essential for effective local migration policy-making, they usually translate into project-based interventions with scheduled start and end dates. The result can be not just the termination of important municipal services for forced migrants, but also the loss of human capital and accumulated knowledge. This raises the question of the timely institutionalisation of project-based know-how and the incorporation of migration and integration governance into permanent municipal structures. The fact that ever more localities become places of arrival and settlement of asylum seekers and refugees serves as a warning that in the future, municipalities would most likely benefit from having in-house expertise in this field. Such expertise can help address immediate reception needs, and simultaneously prepare both newcomers and locals for a mutually beneficial future co-existence. Therefore, local governments ought to ensure that the valuable experience and skills accumulated in municipal administrations in the last years of the 'refugee crisis' in Europe will not dissipate. While support from national authorities in this respect can be valuable (e.g., through the allocation of resources and competences), the lack of it should not serve as an excuse for local governments to abandon their efforts in enhancing the resilience of municipal structures and their local communities against the challenges that forced migration brings.

Lastly, similar concerns arise in relation to the institutionalisation of temporary and often externally funded municipal initiatives in the field of human rights protection and fulfilment. In its current state, the relationship between local authorities and human rights can be considered to be in its honeymoon period. Within city councils and municipal bureaucracies, human rights remain the 'hobby of the few' (Philipp, 2017). At the same time, despite the support of international and supranational organisations in promoting human rights awareness among subnational authorities (Oomen, Baumgärtel, & Durmuş, 2021), permanent local government structures explicitly dedicated to the localisation of human rights are largely missing, especially in smaller and remote places. Considering also local governments' general lack of adequate constitutional standing and ability to generate meaningful revenues, particularly in Europe (Hirschl, 2020), the future of human rights institutionalisation within municipalities looks bleak. In any case, rather than discouraging local officials from engaging systematically with human rights, this remark should be perceived as a reminder that committing to ambitious promises that one subsequently fails to achieve may bring considerable political costs.

In conclusion, it is safe to say that in recent times local authorities in Greece, Italy, and beyond have significantly contributed to the development of more effective, sustainable, and human rights-based responses to the arrival and settlement of

forced migrants. On the one hand, the 'refugee crisis' put to a difficult test both their resilience and their capacity to guarantee in practice the human rights of newcomers. On the other hand, however, it also fuelled the self-perception of local governments as active agents in the reception and integration of forced migrants. It can be therefore expected that the nexus between local authorities, forced migration, and the protection and fulfilment of human rights at the local level will continue to attract scholarly attention. In this respect, the findings of this dissertation, as well as the avenues and questions for future research outlined in each of the five previous chapters, will hopefully serve as stepping stones for future research.

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Addendum

Bibliography

Dutch summary –

Nederlandse samenvatting

Acknowledgements

About the author

A

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Dutch summary – Nederlandse samenvatting

Dit proefschrift geeft inzicht in twee vrij recente, snel groeiende en nauw verwante onderzoeksgebieden: de rol van gemeenten bij de opvang en integratie van gedwongen migranten en de opkomst en toename van mensenrechtensteden. Het bestaat uit vijf op zichzelf staande en tegelijkertijd onderling samenhangende verhandelingen die de nadruk leggen op de manier waarop lokale autoriteiten in Griekenland en Italië hebben bijgedragen aan de bescherming en verwezenlijking van de grondrechten van gedwongen migranten in het afgelopen decennium en in het bijzonder tijdens en na de 'lange zomer van migratie'. Het presenteert de resultaten van een interdisciplinair literatuur- en empirisch onderzoek, dat conceptuele en theoretische inzichten uit migratie- en vluchtelingenstudies, internationale mensenrechtenwetgeving, leiderschapsstudies, lokale overheidsstudies, stedelijke beleidsvorming en crisisbeheersingsliteratuur integreert.

De verhandelingen die deel uitmaken van dit proefschrift zijn individueel (hoofdstukken 2, 3, 5 en 6) en gezamenlijk (hoofdstuk 4) geschreven in mijn hoedanigheid als lid van het onderzoeksteam 'Cities of Refuge' van de Universiteit Utrecht. 'Cities of Refuge' is een 5-jarig (2017-2022) onderzoeksproject gefinancierd door de Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek. Dit project onderzoekt de relevantie van internationale mensenrechten als wet, praktijk en discours voor de manier waarop lokale overheden gedwongen migranten verwelkomen en integreren. Het project omvatte onderzoeksactiviteiten in zes landen die sterk verschillen in constitutionele dispensatie, mate van decentralisatie en intensiteit van aankomsten: Duitsland, Nederland, Zwitserland, Turkije, Italië en Griekenland. De focus van dit proefschrift ligt op de twee laatstgenoemde landen, als de belangrijkste plaatsen van binnenkomst van gedwongen migranten tot de Europese Unie in 2015.

Hoofdstuk 2 richt zich op het 'tegen alle verwachtingen in' migratiebeleidsactivisme van de gemeente Thessaloniki in Griekenland. Meer specifiek wordt onderzocht waarom en hoe de lokale overheid van Thessaloniki de afgelopen tijd haar eigen progressieve opvang- en integratiebeleid voor gedwongen migranten heeft ontwikkeld, ondanks de vele structurele beperkingen waarmee het werd geconfronteerd. De casestudy bevestigt grotendeels de veronderstelling dat lokale reacties op immigratie worden gevormd door complexe interacties tussen meerdere actoren, factoren en krachten die op verschillende niveaus opereren. Tegelijkertijd wordt de cruciale rol benadrukt die proactieve en kritische burgemeesters kunnen spelen bij het tot stand brengen van een effectieve gemeentelijke aanpak

voor de komst en vestiging van gedwongen migranten. Tot slot wijst de casus van Thessaloniki ook op de relevantie van het aangaan van allianties met lokale, internationale en transnationale partners voor de ontwikkeling van gemeentelijk opvang- en integratiebeleid binnen zeer restrictieve institutionele en financiële kaders.

Op basis van deze inzichten gaat hoofdstuk 3 dieper in op de rol van burgemeesters met betrekking tot de reacties van gemeenten op de komst van gedwongen migranten. Hiertoe ontwikkel ik in eerste instantie een nieuw conceptueel kader voor het bestuderen van lokaal politiek leiderschap bij de opvang van gedwongen migranten. Vervolgens pas ik dit conceptuele kader toe op een kwalitatieve vergelijkende casestudy in twee Griekse gemeenten: Thermi en Delta. De analyse geeft aan dat de beslissingen en acties van burgemeesters een aanzienlijke impact kunnen hebben op het ontwerp en de uitvoering van lokaal beleid voor gedwongen migranten. Uiteindelijk betoogt het hoofdstuk dat burgemeesters door het uitoefenen van interactief politiek leiderschap op meerdere niveaus hun kansen kunnen vergroten om strategische doelen op het gebied van migratiebeheer te bereiken en - in het verlengde daarvan - de bescherming en naleving van mensenrechten van migranten te kunnen versterken.

Hoofdstuk 4 is het resultaat van een collectief onderzoek dat ik heb uitgevoerd met twee van mijn collega's van het 'Cities of Refuge' team: Sara Miellet en Elif Durmuş. Het handhaaft de focus op het vermogen van individuen om migratie management beheer en mensenrechtenrealisatie op lokaal niveau rechtstreeks te beïnvloeden. Het hanteert echter een breder perspectief en bespreekt hoe ambtenaren die werkzaam zijn in lokale overheidsstructuren de rechten van gedwongen migranten kunnen versterken door mensenrechtenwetgeving en -ideeën te vertalen in concreet gemeentelijk opvang- en integratiebeleid en -praktijken. Het hoofdstuk introduceert het concept van individueel handelen van mensenrechtengebruikers (human rights users) binnen lokale autoriteiten en illustreert de relevantie van dit concept voor empirische analyses van lokale migratiebeleidsvorming in Griekenland, Italië, Nederland en Turkije. De bevindingen suggereren dat de achtergrond, motivaties en interacties van gemeenteamttenaren kunnen bijdragen aan het inroepen van mensenrechten op lokaal niveau en daardoor de opvangomstandigheden en integratievooruitzichten van gedwongen migranten kunnen verbeteren.

Hoofdstuk 5 verlegt de focus van onderzoek van de rol van individuele actoren naar het causale vermogen van structurele factoren. Het benadrukt de manier waarop ideologisch gedreven conflicten tussen nationale en subnationale bestuursniveaus

op het gebied van migratie het proces van lokalisatie van mensenrechten kunnen aanwakkeren en faciliteren. Het hoofdstuk zoomt in op de Italiaanse context en presenteert de casus van Bologna als een stad die zich de afgelopen jaren expliciet bezig heeft gehouden met de adoptie, institutionalisering en implementatie van mensenrechten. Het laat zien hoe de lokale autoriteiten van Bologna strategisch mensenrechtenwetgeving, -praktijken en -discours gebruikten om inclusief lokaal migratiebeleid en -praktijken te ontwikkelen en zo de negatieve effecten van strengere immigratiewetten en -beleid op nationaal niveau tegen te gaan. De bevindingen illustreren de noodzaak om verder te gaan dan de traditionele focus op de dialectiek tussen het lokale en het 'globale' in de analyses van mensenrechtensteden en de noodzaak om ten volle rekening te houden met de relevantie van intergouvernementele betrekkingen binnen een staat bij het proces om een mensenrechtenstad te worden en te zijn.

Hoofdstuk 6 brengt de focus terug naar de Griekse context om de oorsprong, het potentieel en de grenzen van gemeentelijke solidariteit met vluchtelingen te onderzoeken. Het presenteert het bijzondere geval van het kleine eiland Tilos, dat ondanks zijn beperkte middelen de afgelopen tijd duizenden gedwongen migranten eerste opvang heeft kunnen bieden. Na de 'vluchtelingen crisis' van 2015 ontwikkelde de gemeente Tilos een eigen opvangmodel dat nieuwkomers menswaardige levensomstandigheden, toegang tot onderwijs en werkgelegenheid biedt. De bevindingen geven aan dat de gemeentelijke solidariteit van Tilos met de vluchtelingen werd veroorzaakt door het humanisme van de lokale bewoners, maar op de lange termijn ook aanhield door het opportunistische gedrag van de burgemeester van het eiland. Door het contrast tussen de ervaringen op Tilos en de parallele ontwikkelingen op de nabijgelegen Griekse 'hotspot'-eilanden te benadrukken, laat de case study bovendien zien dat gemeentelijke solidariteit effectieve oplossingen kan bieden voor enkele van de tekortkomingen van het disfunctionele EU-vluchtelingenopvangsysteem.

Over het algemeen laten de afzonderlijke casestudies in dit proefschrift zien dat lokale overheden, zelfs als ze zich in een zeer restrictieve institutionele en financiële context bevinden, een aanzienlijk potentieel hebben om de *on-the-ground governance* van gedwongen migratie rechtstreeks te beïnvloeden. Gemeenten kunnen de bescherming van de grondrechten van migranten versterken, ongeacht of ze hun initiatieven expliciet formuleren in het kader mensenrechten, of als uitingen van humanisme, uitingen van solidariteit, of lokaal pragmatisme. In tijden waarin wettelijke en institutionele kaders op hogere niveaus onvoldoende presteren, kunnen lokale autoriteiten ingrijpen en de mensenrechtentekorten op het gebied van migratie management effectief aanpakken.

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Doing a PhD is often a solitary experience. Luckily, this was not the case for me. In the last four years, I had the privilege to be part of a small and ambitious team of hard-working and supportive colleagues. I participated in several professional trainings, where I benefitted from the expertise and guidance of many internationally recognised scholars. I spent a year conducting field research in Greece and Italy, where I had the chance to meet and learn from dozens of politicians, policy makers, practitioners, activists, and volunteers. I attended a number of academic conferences, where I made plenty of new friends with similar interests, frustrations, and hopes. I also had the opportunity to teach and to learn from my inspiring mentors and students. Lastly, I was fortunate to share all this time with someone who tirelessly supported me from the beginning to the very end. It is time to thank everyone who made sure that every step of my PhD journey was worth it.

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Completing a doctorate is just the tip of a very large iceberg, the essential part of which remains invisible to the eye. For people like me who come from a small provincial town in Eastern Europe – and I believe that many young academics in Western Europe would relate to this – the essential part comprises largely of the sacrifices of immediate family members. Such sacrifices lie at the heart of my against-all-odds academic progress over the years, and I will always be indebted to those who made them.

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About the author

Curriculum vitae

Tihomir Sabchev was born in the town of Kazanlak, located in the heart of the Rose Valley in Bulgaria. Upon graduating from high school in his home town in 2007, he moved to Thessaloniki in Greece. After completing a nine-month Greek language course, Tihomir started studying political science at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in 2008. The focus of his undergraduate program was on Greek and European politics and history, political philosophy, and political economy. Before obtaining his Bachelor's degree in 2013, Tihomir also followed courses in Italian language and culture at the University for Foreigners of Perugia, as well as courses in Italian politics and history at the University of Florence. In 2014, Tihomir started his postgraduate studies in Comparative Public Policy and Welfare Studies at the University of Southern Denmark in Odense. For his Master's thesis, he conducted field research on the reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees in rural Calabria, Southern Italy. After obtaining his Master's degree, Tihomir joined the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) in Copenhagen, where he supported the Sustainable Procurement Team.

In 2017, driven by his interest in migration governance and refugee protection, Tihomir joined the 'Cities of Refuge' research team at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. His PhD project supervised by Prof. dr. Barbara Oomen and dr. Moritz Baumgärtel focused on the role of local authorities in the reception and integration of forced migrants in Greece and Italy. Tihomir carried out an extensive field research in large and small municipalities in these two countries, interviewing local and national level politicians, bureaucrats, and representatives of civil society organisations and international agencies. The results of his research are presented in this dissertation.

During his doctoral studies, Tihomir completed several professional trainings on the role of cities in migration governance and human rights protection (Barcelona Institute for International Studies, Leiden University, University of Oslo). In addition, he presented his research findings at a number of international conferences, including the annual IMISCOE Conference, the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) General Conference, the Migration Conference, and the Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS) Conference. Lastly,

throughout his PhD track, Tihomir was also guest lecturing in research design and migration/integration governance courses at University College Roosevelt in Middelburg, the Netherlands.

Upon completing his PhD dissertation in 2021, Tihomir joined the Refugee Hub at the University of Ottawa as a Postdoctoral Fellow. His postdoctoral research is part of the 'Sustainable Practices of Integration' (SPRING) project and focuses on the links between refugee sponsorship and integration in Canada. In addition, Tihomir holds a part-time position as a Junior Assistant Professor at Utrecht University, where he is currently working on the preparation of grant proposals.

Tihomir is fluent in Bulgarian, English, Greek, and Italian, as well as conversational in Dutch and Russian. In his spare time, he enjoys travelling, cooking, and playing chess.



List of publications

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