

Introduction

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Europe is characterised by strong immigration and emigration. Every year, several hundred thousand people migrate to and from Europe (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou 2021). In the second decade of this century, the flight from violence, dictatorship, terror, war and poverty has led to new record numbers internationally, which caused migration to Europe to rise sharply. Cities are affected to varying degrees. Both in public and academic discourse, migration seems to be an issue concerning large cities and metropolises. In Academia, the “arrival cities” literature is a metropolitan literature emphasizing inner neighbourhoods as places with specific capacities for newcomers to establish a life in the migration destination (Saunders 2010; Schillebeekx *et al.* 2018; Hanhörster *et al.* 2022).

Small towns and cities remain largely out of focus of migration debates and urban research in general. While the number of small towns is by far larger than that of large cities, the attention they receive does not match their importance in the urban system of Europe (Ocejo *et al.* 2020; Grossmann and Mallach 2021). Nevertheless, they are affected by strong migration movements due to specific histories, to positions in the global geography of migration flows, or due to national policies on the distribution of migrants. These movements have led to different strategies of integration and participation in the various countries of the European Union. Small towns and cities however, are not a homogenous category, they may vary from suburban centres located in metropolitan areas to peripherally located small towns in rural and border areas.

With this scenario, the project "Promoting the participation of migrants in the design and implementation of integration policies" (PISTE) started its work at the beginning of 2022. PISTE aims to improve the quality of integration policies by promoting the participation of migrants in their design, in implementation and evaluation of integration policies, and in local political decisions in small and medium-sized towns (SMT). Three academic institutions, four municipalities - Ninove (BE); Bebra (DE); Voios (GR); Fermignano (IT) - and one NGO in four European countries are involved in this project with one case study in each country. All four case studies give an insight into the local, regional and supraregional history of migration and integration. They look at the discourse on and understanding of integration and related concepts, as well as the legal and organisational framework conditions of integration policy at the different governmental levels: national, regional and local. The issues investigated are local integration policy, the networks of actors that

deal with integration policy together with their activities and the political participation of migrants.

Migration to and from the different countries of the European Union has also led to different discourses on the understanding of integration and its goals. In the years of (labour) migration to Western countries after WWII, "integration" was not widely discussed, especially as migration was assumed to be temporary (Duszczuk *et al.* 2020). Social organisations, individuals and local policy makers who wanted to support migrants focused on immediate needs such as housing and education. Implicitly, assimilation as adaptation to the norms and values of the majority was the dominant perspective. This included the idea of distancing oneself from the history, cultural practices and beliefs of one's own ethnic group. As a reaction to this perspective, multiculturalism emerged, which resolutely rejected notions of assimilation (Berry 2005). On the contrary, minority groups should be able to retain their ethnic identities and cultural practices. A multicultural policy offers a framework for voluntary integration and self-organisation that provides for the promotion of self-organisations as representative bodies of ethno-cultural minorities vis-à-vis policy-makers (Van Puymbroeck *et al.* 2018; Reinecke *et al.* 2010). At the same time, however, scholars reported that integration policy has shifted back to the logic of assimilation in the last two decades of the previous century (Joppke, Morawska 2003; Brubaker 2001). Thus, multicultural policies may have contributed to ethno-cultural segregation, disintegrating society rather than contributing to social cohesion. In recent literature, interculturalism has been proposed as an alternative framework that keeps a midway approach between multiculturalism and assimilation. Interculturalism opposes the strong multiculturalism dichotomy between a cultural majority and minorities, as it would lead to segregation. Instead, interculturalism focuses on dialogue and social cohesion and is less concerned with groups and their cultural characteristics.

Among the recent conceptual contributions on this subject, postmigration was introduced as a concept questioning the binary and hierarchical division into autochthones and migrants in general. Coined in Germany, postmigration marks the normality of migration rather than the end of it (Foroutan 2019). Among other things, the marking of people as migrants is discussed by those who do not even have a migration experience in their own biography and have been part of the local society all their lives. Postmigration also focuses on the lines of conflict that are ostensibly explained by migration but concern socio-economic inequalities, gender and racial conflicts as well as structural barriers. Accordingly, integration should no longer refer to immigrants and their descendants only, but to all people who are denied participation in these areas, therefore the integration policy should work towards the dismantling of structural barriers and exclusions in so-

ciety as a whole. The reports show, how this is as important for small and medium sized towns as for their metropolitan counterparts.

This report is based on a set of empirical steps in the case studies of the project. Firstly, a background analysis of the regulatory framework for the integration and participation of migrants has been conducted for all four countries and localities. Through the analysis of the policy documents, it was possible to distinguish the intended goals of integration policy at the national, regional and local levels. Secondly, an empirical study of the local networks and the practices pursuing integration and political participation has been compiled using qualitative research methods like focus group interviews and up to 30 semi-structured interviews in each case study. The interviewees were key actors from politics and administration at municipal, regional and partly supra-regional level, operators from social services acting independently or on behalf of the state, as well as actors from the civil society sector. The latter included representatives of immigrant associations as well as, in part, individuals of migrant origin who are holding political positions. Within the work flow of the project, these analyses represent a step towards policy experimentation and the final development of guidelines for the implementation of an integration and participation policy in small and medium-sized towns which will be useful to develop further participation instruments.

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