



# Introduction

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The primary goal set by the Scientific and Policy Conference “Migrating in small- and medium-sized towns: experiences challenges and perspectives for participation” (Thessaloniki, March 2023) was to collect ideas and knowledge of academic and non-academic experts on the topics covered by the AMIF PISTE project. Since its launching (February 2023), the PISTE project has put in the spotlight decisionmakers together with their local communities and migrants’ associations with a twofold objective: to shed light on challenges and opportunities for closer collaboration in the decision-making processes at the local level, and co-create, experiment, and ultimately establish locally viable models and practices for migrants’ civic and political participation. From that perspective, the Conference served as a hub for expanding research results through the knowledge gained from experienced models and practices of governance for integrating migrants in SMTs.

The Conference was met with vivid participation and reached a mixed array of attending audiences composed of scholars, local policymakers and administrators, and stakeholder representatives. Consistent with the PISTE project goals, the ‘call for papers’ of the Conference addressed the expressed need to discuss matters related to the dynamics of incorporation of migrants in SMTs from a legal-political, civic, cultural, and spatial point of view. At the same time, the Conference offered a space to share concerns and solutions related to socio-anthropological aspects involving the developing relationship between migrant groups and native populations in SMTs.

The aftermath of the Conference proved that the targeted goals were met while confirming the renewed scientific interest at

the local policy levels. Indeed, spatial patterns and social processes of migrants in cities have been studied widely across various disciplines and with various approaches, methodologies, and data sources. While academic-theoretical and philosophical-conceptual discussions on integration and social-civic-political participation have exponentially refined their analytical power, attention to multi-level governance and the local settings has only recently been raised (Sassen, 1991; Garcés-Mascareñas, Penninx 2016; Filomeno 2017; Richard, Victor, 2003; FitzGerald, 2015).

The local level represents a distinct policy strategy and a peculiar governance level. However, it is also where diversity is concretely experienced, and social identification occurs firsthand. Evidence-based research and academic literature agree that the increased presence of migrants in SMTs, prompted in recent years by the rise of inflows and mobility of migrants within the EU, implied a revived interest in integration policies at the local level, thus establishing various streams of scholarship on the so-called 'local turn' (Caponio 2014; Zapata-Barrero et al. 2017).

When the focus moves on empirical evidence from SMTs hosting migrants, we may ask how local economic, cultural, and social conditions impact SMTs' incorporation chances. In this respect, SMTs are also the space where inequalities, stereotypes, social conflicts and discrimination *prima facie* may be experienced and, from there, be (re-)produced and expanded (Borkert, Caponio, 2010)

With the concerns above, studies suggest that the traditional 'top-down' policymaking model appears increasingly ineffective in many EU countries. While the national framework may provide for some fundamental values and principles meant to orient local initiatives and actions, the spatial dimension is vital, as practical migrants' needs and related policy answers may differ significantly from those proposed at the national level. Different solutions need to be identified and implemented: strategies and solutions still framed at the national level may be disconnected from both the spatial patterns of

migrant presence and from the local socio-economic capacity. Consequently, the role of local authorities, policymakers and stakeholders in the governance of migrant integration policies has increased. (Entzinger, Scholten, 2014)

Against this background, the project PISTE started in February 2022, investigates and promotes civic and political participatory practices to be tested in four European SMTs (in Italy, Greece, Belgium, and Germany) as innovative (or renewed) paths that lead to better incorporation processes for migrants, and local integration as a whole. With a Consortium formed by academic and non-academic partners (thus including four Municipalities as partners and case studies), PISTE intends to connect research to local contexts to make an impact with applied research translated into tailored policy experiments.

Within the broader spectrum of integration policies, trending in the academic realm, we found that the grounds of analysis on the ‘political participation’ of migrants (intended both as an endpoint where integration culminates and as a method leading to better incorporation) were barely explored in the examined PISTE case studies. The focus was set on a substantial variety of explorable settings: the local needs assessment and the responses mapped from the local stakeholders (public, non-public, civic society and networks, migrants), but also on the level of awareness and involvement of the local policymakers and the public administrators, on the existing policy and legal framework, on good practices performed, on the obstacles and the unmapped opportunities on site. When invited to come into the spotlight, the reaction of the local stakeholders is overall positive. PISTE confirmed that the local dimension, while affected by the asymmetric distribution of resources and often limited in specialised knowledge and human capital, is still the critical playground for expressing migrants’ incorporation and participation stances, and it is also the level where policy experimentations and innovations can be accomplished. PISTE results reiterate the vital need for establishing active, intergenerational and intersectional local networks, the necessity for promoting and acknowledging self-organisation pat-

terns among migrants' communities and providing for methods that enable the emerging of bridging figures between institutional and non-institutional actors and spaces, such that can convey the variety of group-specific needs while building mutual trust (Schillebeeck et al. 2023; Schenkel 2023).

The Conference participants further contributed to knowledge on SMTs and integration processes by sharing more fascinating approaches to policymaking and research results, some of which are re-grouped and subdivided into thematic sections.

The first thematic area includes contributions about **'socio-economic dynamics and experiences' in SMTs**; the second area examines **'policy challenges' and related spatial issues emerging in SMTs**; last but not least, the third scrutinises the **experiences of SMTs policy actors, their perspectives and acquired knowledge**.

In detail, within the first area, Groen, Nijhoff, and Giesen's contribution (The Hague University of Applied Science, The Netherlands) discuss how SMTs and businesses deal with EU Mobile Citizens. With the EU labour market as the focus area, the authors conducted interviews with eleven SMTs in Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Ireland, Poland, and Spain, considering the challenges for employment for EU Mobile Citizens (mainly regarding low-skilled and low-paid jobs), housing, health care and working conditions. Municipalities are at the centre of the analysis due to the lack of consolidated registration procedures, which often hinder the actual numbers of workers in particular labour sectors (agriculture, transport, construction, meat industry and logistics). Also, spatial isolation SMTs often experience -- due to limited communication networks -- is an issue. The conclusions of this paper suggest further action research is needed, aimed at establishing collaborations to impact local policies, thus inviting local and regional authorities to play a role.

Krasteva (Policy and Citizens' Observatory: Migration, Digitalisation, Climate, Bulgaria) investigated the socio-economic dynamics

in a small town in the Bulgarian-Turkish-Greek borders. This spatial focus was prompted by the recent abrupt transition from a non-migration place into a migration destination. The case is examined thoroughly from three different standpoints: from the point of view of the temporality-migration nexus, from the perspective of the socio-political crises related to migration as a new socio-political factor, and from the point of view of the relations between migration and populist trends ('populist-securitarian crisis'). The contribution also analyses how the securitarian turn may determine new forms or 'acts of' (Isin) 'local citizenship.' It compares this approach with other models of 'local citizenship,' such as the 'performative' (Barbera) and the 'solidary' citizenship (or, as Krasteva defines it, 'contestatory'). The rise of actors and of 'acts of citizenship' appears consistent with the theories developed in 'place-practices' when confronted with certain practices occurring at the local level ('spiral of development', 'volunteering', 'innovative intercultural education'). Ultimately, the contribution identifies a model method for countering populist securitisation and politicisation of migration while involving different actors – locals and migrants – in practices for constructing the 'place' and re-creating the local identity.

Tservenis (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece) shares results from his comparative research on the impact of different destinations on migrants' incorporation processes. His approach combines objective (general spatial indicators) and subjective (self-perception) elements of analysis. The contribution takes 'integration' as a composite phenomenon that responds to socio-economic terms and considers the 'place of living' in terms and characteristics related to urban and rural spatial typologies, as these emerge in two different countries (case studies were the islands of Crete and Sardinia). Based on survey data and interviews (2019-2020), this research shows that the interplay between the place of settlement and the well-being of migrants (objective terms) was not significantly different in the two areas. On the contrary, the perceptions of migrant incorporation (subjective elements) in rural areas were far from homogeneous in various domains such as employment, housing, financial

conditions, and the attitudes of the local society towards migration across the various rural typologies examined (intermediate, remote, coastal) presented important differentiations as well. Tservenis's contribution calls for better use of existing data in the view of future research on comparable and timely quantitative evidence at the municipality level that would allow for a more geographically precise and richer analysis of migrant integration in rural areas of the EU Member States. Tservenis suggests exploring the possible input of artificial intelligence software to generate meaningful matching between the structural features of the host rural settlements on the one hand and migrants' skills, capabilities, needs and aspirations on the other. Combining the two parameters would optimise the choices and opportunities upon initial settlements and places with long-term incorporation prospects.

Vergou (The University of Thessaly, Greece) investigates recent reforms in Greek migration policy, affecting patterns and "processes of micro-segregation and refugee school education" in SMTs in Greece. The paper proposes a reflection on the link between education and urban marginalisation in the Southern EU as one of the most critical and controversial urban conditions for incorporating migrants. Beyond the need for new forms of local governance, the effects of cuts in welfare provision and the new regulatory powers to municipalities in Greece are expected to produce broader socio-economic and political differentiations at the local level, intensifying the existing inequality conditions. The analysis calls for the local actors to shape policies that mediate the poverty landscapes and play a role in innovating actions towards including the migrants' vulnerabilities (i.e., especially those placed in reception centres) to boost equality. In-depth interviews and focus groups with refugees and local actors contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of social-spatial diversity and vulnerability in SMTs. The analysis includes educational policies' implementation challenges by local actors (municipalities, local educational administrators, teachers) combined with structural-geographical elements. To be able to examine social vulnerability and ethnic segregation patterns and their

links to SMTs in terms of socio-economic conditions, the paper concludes that cities need to be analysed beyond the national-regional governance frames and use the lenses of the supralocal political-economic conditions, as they impact the spatial divisions of labour, the socio-economic flows to the cities, as much as the adopted methods for school distribution.

The second section focuses on ‘policy challenges’. Gilli (Università degli Studi di Torino, Italy), Lucchini (Università eCampus, Italy), and Membretti (University of the Free State, South Africa) present results from the MATILDE Project in the Italian Alps. Data collected through qualitative analysis and action research confirm that migrants’ multifaceted interaction with local structures and places has a significant weight on the inclusion-exclusion processes and significantly impacts the definition of migrants’ agency. Socio-economic and labour integration of migrants are not considered endpoints of the process and are insufficient to establish migrants’ level of ‘real participation in the social life of local communities’. The authors stress the need for new policy tools that consider the local community as a whole while focusing on public spaces and shared care practices for the territory. Suggestions regarding the migrants’ diversified ‘agency’ in the integration process are intended as a temporally embedded social engagement technique. In this perspective, the municipality of Bussoleno (5,806 inhabitants at the end of Susa Valley, about 30 km from Turin), with a long history of welcoming international migrants, was the focal point of an experimental investigation, which involved first and second-generation migrants and employed the role of the public spaces in engaging local actors and residents in action-research participatory activities. The latter focused on self-perceptions and ways of living concerning the mountain territory and the connections to the metropolitan core. Results show that the ‘space-making process’ becomes a ‘sense-making process’: when involved, migrants desire and actively engage in the co-creation of shared use of public spaces, attributing to the ‘place’ a key role for social cohesion, belonging and recognition, especially in small, mountainous and rural areas.



Petrachin's (Collegio Carlo Alberto, Italy) contribution focuses on policy challenges for SMTs, drawing from the WHOLE-COMM H2020 research project results. This project investigates asylum-seekers and refugees' incorporation in 36 SMTs and rural areas across 7 EU countries. Enquiring factors hindering or favouring good practices in SMTs' local integration policy, the Author focuses on three governance factors that prevent policy learning in small localities. The first factor identified is isolation. Second is institutional communication and networking regarding the need for more policy discussions between local governments on immigrant integration. Third, capacity and knowledge, in terms of sources of information local officials and policymakers can access. On the side of the 'enabling factors' contributing to policy learning, results point to competent local figures (officials or bureaucrats) formally assigned with a mandate on integration or to the self-responsibilisation of local policymakers. Interestingly, this paper also highlights how the low local salience attributed to immigration issues may facilitate policy implementation and may contrast the growing local political contestation on immigrant integration policies.

Schenkel, Messerschmidt, Glöckner, Großmann (University of Applied Sciences, Erfurt, Germany), partners of the PISTE project, focused on the case of the small German town of Bebra, characterised by a long migration history. Their focus is on factors influencing migrant political engagement in SMTs. More specifically, institutional, socio-economic, and discursive dynamics in SMTs significantly contribute to shaping political participation, while social networks, migrant self-organisations, and local governance structures also play a role. SMTs face specific challenges, often related to limited resources, a high degree of political and administrative embeddedness, and limited strategic orientation. As the authors note, the effects associated with the local institutional framework depend partly on the level of proactivity of the local actors and partly on the representations of needs and structural conditions that trickle down in the design of migration policy. The case of Bebra is characterised by a critical urban transformation -- suburbanisation and social-spatial segre-

gation – that produces spatial disparities. Policies seem unable to affect this trend. Despite consolidated actions on migration (from social networks to migrant self-organisation and municipal services), barriers still exist. Marginalisation and multiple disadvantages (e.g., affecting women) may hinder participation and impede voice. In conclusion, SMTs like Bebra need arenas for conflict negotiation and management via innovative low-threshold measures to strengthen migrant political participation.

Wierzbicka (University of Zielona Góra, Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning, Poland) reviews the role of small cities in the spatial reception of Ukrainian refugees in Poland, introducing the application of GIS tools for mapping existing settlement patterns at different urban scales. This paper problematises the challenges SMTs face in the reception system. SMTs appear organisationally crucial in determining conditions influencing settlement patterns. In the specific case study of Karpacz, a mountainous small and touristic city of around 6000 inhabitants, Wierzbicka shows a stunning, networked local capacity to welcome refugees – higher than most other locales in relative terms. The research suggests that SMTs like Karpacz may function independently from the major cities' destinations and further develop their reception network based on neighbouring small towns in ways fitter to local characteristics.

Wyckaert, Leinfelder, and De Decker (P.PUL research group, KU Leuven) focus on the Flemish local migration governance and the implementation of integration policies in SMTs. Integration policy passes through specific policy areas (education, labour market, and housing) and through 'social participation' (social contacts and membership of associations); hence, participation should be considered as the result of interactions between individuals and institutions (and the host society as a whole). Therefore, increasing participation entails individual empowerment and improving the accessibility of services and facilities. Starting from the consideration that "the spatial dimension of the society and the actual functioning of newcomers in a spatial context, as part of their 'spatial capital' are

given little consideration in the design and implementation of integration policies”, their research considers the circumstances regarding dispersed urban-rural sites and the differentiated experiences migrants have in their daily routines. The authors aim to explain why local policymakers struggle to meet the needs of such differentiated and dispersed settled migrants. As an outcome, spatially uneven distribution and asymmetric accessibility of services for newcomers translate into internal mobility to access opportunities that ultimately increase challenges for local policymakers. Spatial fragmentation also extends to the use of public space and the opportunities given for equal participation of newcomers at the local level in synergy with planning policies. In short, this research concludes that “integration policies must go hand in hand not only with other social policies but also spatial and housing policies”.

The third section gives voice and collects the experiences of local policymakers. Ascquasciati and Priano (Municipality of Fontanigorda, Italy) focus on policymaking in two small towns in the north-western Italian Apennines (Municipalities of Fontanigorda and Rovegno, Liguria Region) and discuss policy innovations and socio-economic future perspectives. While the geographical and social context is quite challenging (isolation from other towns and critical services; depopulation and lack of opportunities), since 2015, the two municipalities launched new actions by getting involved in the National Strategy for Inner Areas and establishing a reception centre for asylum seekers and refugees (2018). As the authors refer, this political choice was not without consequences: it undoubtedly challenged the local community at first, matched with technical-practical implementation challenges: not only did the local community face newcomers with suspicion, but the local administration was understaffed, lacking in expertise and specialised knowledge while having to address issues related to the geographical remoteness. Despite these challenges, this choice turned instead into a great opportunity: synergies were initiated by experimenting with innovative practices and methods (e-learning and e-training), which led to re-discover, reconverting and re-use local facilities, launching creative enterpris-

es to solve longstanding problems, and ultimately attracting more funding to initiate new projects. The overall benefit was remarkable for the community in demographic terms and for gradually establishing services and providing new hope for the entire area. As the authors describe it, there has been a “role reversal: the beneficiary of the reception becomes the provider of services, for and with the local community”.

Andriopoulou (University of Urbino, Italy) and Kalliaras (Advisor to the Mayor, Municipality of Trikala, Greece) conclude the proceedings with a contribution to the Greek context of the Trikala Municipality, known for its innovative approach to the reception and integration of migrants amidst the Greek refugee crisis. Indeed, the SMTs in central Greece implemented locally-based strategies, focusing on addressing needs beyond primary access to essential services, including integration policies. In the experience of the Municipality of Trikala, it has been primarily the initiative of the local authorities to have determined a shift in local migration policies: a tailored strategy that included the collaboration with liaison experts deployed by the ICMC (International Catholic Migration Commission) and coordinating with the UN Refugee Agency and the Greek government, played a significant role in putting in place locally relevant actions and measures that support integration. Policy objectives aligned to the various governance levels and the different reception spaces. Capacity-building went hand-in-hand with innovation and reconfiguration of the existing local systems to meet the specific needs of the recipients while launching networking with the national and supranational communities of practice, such as the Cities Network for Integration. The case of Trikala carries proof that reception, integration and participation of migrants is possible when the political will meets local-supralocal synergies.

In conclusion, the PISTE mid-term Conference worked as a ‘policy hub’ where aggregated results and experimented practices and models were distilled in ‘practicable pills’, renovating views and hopes for a better local governance of migration and integration.

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