

Drivers and Constraints for Integration Policy Learning in Small European Localities

Andrea Pettrachin (Collegio Carlo Alberto)

ABSTRACT

This conference paper illustrates some preliminary findings of the Whole-COMM Project, asking which key factors obstruct or favour the diffusion of best practices in the local integration policy field in small and medium-sized towns and rural areas in Europe. This is a highly relevant question if we consider that these localities have been at the forefront of refugee reception and integration in Europe since the 2015 European ‘asylum crisis’. The paper identifies three overarching factors that prevent policy learning in small localities: the isolation of local governments from higher levels of government; the lack of policy discussions between local governments on immigrant integration; and the very infrequent use of specialized sources of information by local officials and policymakers. Subsequently the paper identifies a number of enabling factors that seem to allow policy diffusion despite the above-mentioned challenges. These include: the presence in these small localities of local officials or bureaucrats who are formally assigned a specific competence or mandate on integration; local policymakers’ perception of being responsible for the integration of migrants; and a low local salience of the immigration issue (in contrast to the growing local political contestation of immigrant integration policy in most of the small localities analysed).

Introduction

This conference paper illustrates some of the findings of the Whole-COMM Project, addressing the following research question: Which specific conditions or factors allow or constrain transfer of good practices in the immigrant integration policy field in European small and medium-sized localities? What are the key differences compared with big cities and metropolises?

These are highly relevant and salient questions. Since 2014, small-sized and medium-sized localities in Europe – most of which had previously very low experience with cultural diversity – have been at the forefront of refugee reception and integration (Caponio and Pettrachin 2021). This was mainly an effect of the implementation of ‘redistribution’ systems by national governments (in the vast majority of EU countries) which led to the dispersal of asylum seekers and refugees who arrived in Europe during the so-called ‘asylum crisis’ outside the bigger European cities (van Liempt and Miellet 2021). Small and medium-sized towns have been therefore described as ‘key actors in the multilevel governance of migration’ by OECD and the European Commission (OECD 2018). Once again in the past two years, in the aftermath of the arrival of thousands of Ukrainian refugees in 2022 and following the increase in asylum applications in 2023, asylum seekers’ dispersal to small localities and rural areas has been framed in EU policy debates as a potential solution to the challenges related to the housing crisis that is affecting European big cities (Karasapan 2022).

Despite this new centrality of small localities in European policy discourses on immigrant integration, the very few scholarly works have so far specifically analysed integration policymaking in these localities suggest that integration policy responses that local governments of these localities have developed tend to be very much isolated from each other and fractured. Despite the growing number of research projects and initiatives organized by civil society and

international organizations aimed at favouring policy diffusion in this field (Yilmaz 2023), scholars have therefore suggested that best practices on immigrant integration policy very rarely transfer across localities (Broadhead and Hillmann 2021).

It is therefore important to study how best practices transfer across localities, which factors prevent policy diffusion, and how small cities differ from bigger cities in this respect.

In order to answer these questions, this conference paper uses findings of the Whole-COMM project , an H2020 research project which is looking at asylum-seekers and refugees' integration in 36 small and medium-sized towns and rural areas across 7 EU countries (Caponio and Pettrachin 2021). In particular, it relies on around 600 semi-structured interviews conducted by Whole-COMM researchers in these localities with policymakers and local stakeholders, with the aim to know more about the integration policies developed at the local level. These interviews also included a short, structured survey which was designed to gather quantitative data about policymaking interactions between local governments and all the other actors involved in integration policymaking and about collaborations and conflicts within local integration policy actors. Interviews were conducted between October 2021 and February 2022 and therefore refer to policy processes that precede the recent Ukrainian crisis.

In the following sections of this conference paper, I will first describe three major obstacles to policy transfer in the integration policy field in small European localities and, second, I will outline a number of 'enabling factors' that seem to favour such policy transfer.

Three major constraints to policy transfer in the integration policy field

Three main insights emerge from analyses of this interview material which are highly relevant for the research questions addressed on this conference paper about the potential transferability of best practices on refugee integration across small localities. These connect to some established findings in the existing literature on knowledge transfers and policy learning, and specifically to works that adopt network-centred approaches to explore the diffusion of policies and practices (Füglister 2012; Gilardi and Wasserfallen 2019; Krenjova and Raudla 2018).

First, the transferability of knowledge and good practices requires meaningful exchanges or discussion on immigrant integration between local governments and between localities and other stakeholders involved in integration policymaking. This is an obvious point, but a highly relevant one when we focus on small localities. The data collected by the Whole-COMM project on the interactions of small localities related to immigrant integration indeed suggest that most of these small localities are very much isolated. They have occasional interactions related to immigrant integration with their regional governments and national governments, they have no direct contacts with the EU level. They sometimes interact with other local governments, but these are mostly neighbouring municipalities within their countries. Local governments of small localities have no interactions with other localities outside their country.

This is a first striking difference with big cities and metropolis. A vast body of literature in the past decade has explored policymaking interactions of European cities, finding that many of them are very proactive in trying to build alliances with other policy actors at the EU level, and that they often have direct access to national and EU policymakers (Caponio, Scholten, and Zapata-Barrero 2019). A grow-

ing scholarship has focused on European city networks on migration, which are becoming increasingly important actors in the multilevel governance of migration in Europe (Caponio and Pettrachin 2023; Triviño-Salazar 2023). Some European cities have even succeeded in building global partnerships and engaging in diplomatic activities beyond the borders of their nation-states (Stürner-Siovit 2022). Compared to big cities, small localities are much less frequently or never invited to international events, they are rarely part of transnational city networks. Such isolation seems to have a direct and negative impact on learning processes.

Moving to my second point, the data we collected on the interactions of local governments in small localities suggest that NGOs and particularly NGOs which operate across different localities and regions seem to be the actors that are potentially in best position to indirectly favour the transferability of policies and learning processes within countries. On the one hand they – indirectly – connect different localities. On the other hand, they often have close and direct contacts with policymakers in these small localities, often much closer than in bigger cities. In this sense, it is however important to highlight that interactions with civil society are very different across localities. Progressive local governments tend to have more frequent and more collaborative interactions with civil society actors, while conservative localities tend to have much less frequent and more conflictual interactions. More broadly, rather than finding a pragmatic orientation of policymakers in small municipalities as some studies seem to suggest (Fisher Williamson 2018; Whyte, Larsen, and Olwig 2019), our preliminary results show that the political affiliation of LGs influences policymaking relations and also the kind of integration policies that are developed at the local level. The research conducted therefore challenges a rather established finding in the existing scholarship on local integration policy that, mainly analysing big cities, has often argued that party politics is not a key driver of local integration policymaking in small localities (Steen 2016). One possible explanation might be related to the more central and prominent role that elected policymakers play in integration policymaking

in small localities compared to bigger cities, where local officials and top-level bureaucrats often develop integration-related policy-making interactions independently from elected politicians. Another possible explanation might be related to a generally higher public salience of the migration issue in small localities compared to bigger cities, where public opinion tends to be more welcoming towards migrants and more used to cultural diversity (Tintori et al. 2018).

Finally, my third point concerns the role of access to relevant sources of information. When describing the key sources of information that local policymakers use to guide their decisions related to immigrant integration, most local policymakers in small localities referred to “non-specialist” sources, newspapers, local media, sometimes even social media (see also: Pettrachin 2019, 2022). Very few policymakers reported that they consult “specialist” sources. This might certainly again have a decisive impact on the potential for transferability of policies as access to specialist sources or material published by international organizations or civil society reports might in principle compensate for the absence of direct contacts between local governments of small localities and these other policy actors. These findings describe therefore a situation where the composition and features of the local integration policy network – and the configuration of interactions between local governments and other actors therein – represent a major obstacle for the transfer of best practices in the integration policy field.

Enabling Factors for Policy Diffusion

Having identified some general trends and challenges that prevent the transferability of good practices in small localities, in the second part of this conference paper I focus on four enabling factors, that seem to favour the transfer of best practices possible under specific circumstances.

The first enabling factor is the presence in these small localities of local officials or bureaucrats who are formally assigned a specific competence or mandate on integration. This is very rarely the case in small localities, and particularly rural areas and small towns (while in medium towns – with more than 100,000 inhabitants – the presence of specific officials with a mandate on immigrant integration is slightly more common). Our data suggest that the smaller the size of the locality, the lower the likelihood to find local officials with a specific mandate or competence on immigrant integration. In many localities responsibility for immigrant integration is (often implicitly) delegated to officials responsible for local social services. At the same time our research also suggests that very rarely these officials in small localities have received specific training on – or have any specific expertise about – migration or integration-related issues. The lack of personnel is particularly evident in Southern and Eastern European countries, but also affects localities in central and northern European countries – while the lack of expertise seems to be a crosscutting challenge across most of our case localities. Once again, this seems to be a specific feature of small localities compared to big cities, which tend to have permanent staff with specific expertise and with specific mandates and responsibility on migration-related issues.

A second important factor that seems to enable the transfer of best practices is a low politicisation of the migration issue, which seems to foster more proactive policymaking approaches in many of our localities and therefore remove some obstacles for the transfer of good practices. In fact, when asked about the factors that influenced their decisions in the integration policy field, many policymakers we interviewed pointed first and foremost to constraints related to public opinion. As already mentioned, existing research on public attitudes to immigration has shown that locals' attitudes to immigration tend to be more negative in smaller localities than in bigger cities (Tintori et al. 2018). The Whole-COMM project is further testing this finding in a large-scale survey that will be conducted in 2023. Beyond that, however, our data suggest that policymakers'

perceptions of public opinion also matter. As part of our research, we asked both local policymakers and other actors involved in integration policymaking in our case-localities to assess locals' attitudes towards migrants on a scale of 1-5. The data collected suggest that perceptions of public opinion vary remarkably even among actors within the same locality. In particular, we found that conservative policymakers tend to assess public attitudes as much more negative than progressive policymakers, and that policymakers in rural areas tend to assess public attitudes more negatively compared to policymakers of medium towns (with small towns positioned somehow in between). More research is needed to establish whether this decoupling between policymakers' and other actors' perceptions of public attitudes to immigration emerges also in big cities.

Policymakers' perception of being responsible for immigrant integration is another important enabling factor that seems to favour processes of mutual learning and the diffusion of best practices. During the interviews conducted for the Whole-COMM project we asked policymakers and local officials about their perceptions of the role of local governments in the multilevel governance of migrant integration. Certainly, legal frameworks variously distribute competences and responsibilities to municipalities across different EU countries but beyond that our interviews suggest that local policymakers – even within the same country – have very diverse perceptions of the role that local governments can play for immigrant integration. Most of the interviewed policymakers, in fact, perceive immigrant integration as an issue for which local governments are not primarily responsible. Some of them think that national or regional governments should be primarily responsible, while others think that this is largely migrants' own responsibility. Not surprisingly, those policymakers that perceive immigrant integration as a key responsibility of local governments are those who seem to adopt more proactive policymaking approaches and to be more open to learning about policies successfully implemented in other localities. Conversely, these perceptions of not being responsible for immigrant integration is another key obstacle for processes of policy learning.

Finally, our analyses also suggest that the covid-19 pandemic has represented another important obstacle for learning processes in the integration policy field. Our data on the frequency of policy-making interactions between actors (collected for both the 2020-2021 and the 2018-2029 time periods) suggest that interactions/discussions on immigrant integration have been remarkably affected by the pandemic. In particular, interactions between LGs and between local governments and nongovernmental actors have become even more infrequent during the pandemic compared to the previous time period. Interestingly, conversely, the (very rare) interactions between local governments and national governments seem not to have been affected.

Which role for the Ukrainian ‘refugee crisis’?

As already mentioned, these analyses have been conducted relying on interviews and data collected in early 2022, before the arrival of thousands of Ukrainian refugees in many European localities. An important open question concerns the role of the Ukrainian crisis on the above-described dynamics and whether this recent ‘crisis’ has opened a positive window of opportunity for enabling more transfer of good practices. Research has indeed shown that public attitudes towards Ukrainians are more favourable compared to public attitudes to non-EU migrants (Drazanova and Geddes 2022). The activation of the Temporary protection Directive has led to a very different management of these refugee flows (Irastorza 2022). Ukrainian refugees have settled in many European localities on the basis of pre-existing social networks, and not merely as an effect of national dispersal schemes (Karasapan 2022). This different mode of arrival of refugees in small European localities might have had important implications for policymaking processes and for the dy-

namics described above in this conference paper. Some anecdotal evidence we have collected suggests that the Ukrainian crisis might have pushed some more small localities to develop initiatives on immigrant integration and therefore maybe to be more open to learn some good practices but definitely more research is needed to shed light on these very recent dynamics.

References

Broadhead, J., and Hillmann, F.. 2021. Planning for Migrant Integration and Inclusion in Smaller Municipalities. COMPAS Report.

Caponio, T., and Pettrachin, A.. 2021. A Whole-of-Community Approach to Study Post-2014 Migrants' Integration in Small and Medium Sized Towns and Rural Areas. Working Paper.

Caponio, T., and Pettrachin, A. 2023. Modes of Migration City Network Mobilization in the EU and US Multilevel Institutional Systems: The Neglected Role of Politics. "International Migration Review". Published online: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/01979183221149921> (last checked 1st November 2023).

Caponio, T., Scholten, P. and Zapata-Barrero, R. 2019. The Routledge Handbook to the Governance of Migration and Diversity in Cities. Routledge.

Drazanova, L., and Geddes, A.P. 2022. Attitudes towards Ukrainian Refugees and Governmental Responses in 8 European Countries. "Asile"; <https://www.asileproject.eu/attitudes-towards-ukrainian-refugees-and-governmental-responses-in-8-european-countries/> (last checked 1st November 2023).

Fisher Williamson, A. 2018. Welcoming New Americans? Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Füglister, K. 2012. Where Does Learning Take Place? The Role of Inter-governmental Cooperation in Policy Diffusion: Where Does Learning Take Place? "European Journal of Political Research" 51, 3: 316–49.

Gilardi, F., Wasserfallen, F. 2019. The Politics of Policy Diffusion. "European Journal of Political Research" 58, 4: 1245–56.

Irastorza, N. 2022. What Can We Learn from the Reception of Ukrainian Refugees? "Nordic Journal of Migration Research" 12, 3: 255–258.

Karasapan, O. 2022. 'Ukrainian Refugees: Challenges in a Welcoming

Europe'. "Brookings"; <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/ukrainian-refugees-challenges-in-a-welcoming-europe/> (last checked 1st November 2023).

Krenjova, J., Raudla, R.. 2018. Policy Diffusion at the Local Level: Participatory Budgeting in Estonia. "Urban Affairs Review" 54, 2: 419–47.

van Liempt, I., Miellet, S.. 2021. Being Far Away from What You Need: The Impact of Dispersal on Resettled Refugees' Homemaking and Place Attachment in Small to Medium-Sized Towns in the Netherlands. "Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies" 47, 11: 2377–95.

OECD. 2018. Working Together for Local Integration of Migrants and Refugees. Paris: OECD Publishing.

Petrachin, A. 2019. Decision-Making Processes and the (Non) Politicisation of Migration in Sicily. Working Paper. 2019/48. European University Institute.

Petrachin, A. 2022. "Tuscans Are Different": The Cognitive Dimension of Local Asylum Policymaking during the 2015 European "Refugee Crisis". "Territory, Politics, Governance" 10, 3:366–88.

Steen, A. 2016. Deciding Refugee Settlement in Norwegian Cities: Local Administration or Party Politics? "Journal of Refugee Studies" 29, 4: 464–82.

Stürner-Siovitz, J. 2022. "All the World's a Stage?" A Role Theory Analysis of City Diplomacy in Global Migration Governance. "International Migration Review" Published online: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/01979183221139113> (last checked 1st November 2023).

Tintori, G., Alessandrini, A., Natale, F. 2018. Diversity, Residential Segregation, Concentration of Migrants: A Comparison across EU Cities : Findings from the Data Challenge on Integration of Migrants in Cities (D4I). Joint Research Centre Publications Repository. European Commission.

Triviño-Salazar, J.C.. 2023. Transnational City Networks on Migration and Integration and Local Collaborative Governance: Establishing the Nexus. "International Migration Review". Published online: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/01979183231154558> (last checked 1st November 2023).

Whyte, Z., Romme Larsen, B., Fog Olwig, K. 2019. New Neighbours in a Time of Change: Local Pragmatics and the Perception of Asylum Centres in Rural Denmark. "Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 45, 11: 1953-1969.

Yilmaz, S. 2023. How Can Good Practices Be Transferred/Upscaled? Trends and Key Features of Transferability. SPRING Report.