

# Practices of integration and local networks in Small and Medium-Sized Towns

Insights from the project PISTE

edited by **Kerstin Schenkel**, **Sven Messerschmidt**  
and **Katrin Grossmann**



PISTE has received funding from the European Union's Asylum Migration Integration and Integration Fund (AMIF/2020/ AG/CALL-03) under grant agreement No 101038374



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**MIGRATOWNS**

No.1

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## **PRACTICES OF INTEGRATION AND LOCAL NETWORKS IN SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED TOWNS**

INSIGHTS FROM THE PROJECT PISTE

Collection of reports from the Working Package 2 of the Project PISTE  
PISTE (Participation in Small- and Medium-Sized Towns: Experiences, Exchanges, Experiments)

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# Introduction

*Katrin Grossmann, Sven Messerschmidt, Kerstin Schenkel*

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 society 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 lo-

cal 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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# Local practices of integration and local networks.

## The case of Bebra

*Kerstin Schenkel, Sven Messerschmidt, Katrin Grossmann*

### Preface

As an urban sociology research group from the University of Applied Sciences Erfurt, we accompanied the city of Bebra for almost a year as it dealt with its migration and integration policy. We encountered a small town that looks back on a wealth of experience with immigration and refugee movements that are quite unusually strong for small towns. We found ambivalent ways of dealing with the situation: strong integration efforts, a variety of civic groups, and active administrative staff on the one hand, and on the other a town which still had to deal with conflicts, tensions and even racism reports in parts of the local society.

Bebra's formerly negative external image – stigmatised as a “Turks town” in the 1990s and 2000s – has changed significantly: intensive redevelopment and development activities have revitalised the inner city and led to a diverse mix of new migrant and traditional small-town businesses. Many residents are aware that Bebra would be exposed to severe shrinking processes without the migrant community due to the present demographic decline. Nevertheless, Bebra's different communities live separately, both spatially and socially: the inner city with a high share of migrants next to village districts with residents of mainly German descent, disadvantaged districts

next to better off single-family house districts. There is a generational divide: while older, first-generation migrants often stick to their communities of origin, the younger generation generally sees the ethnic mix of Bebra as normality.

Regarding political activities and participation, with the exceptions of two longstanding established migrant communities, newcomers are poorly networked and weakly organised. Representation of migrants' interests lies mainly in the hand of advocates for integration in core positions of the municipality, mostly of German descent. In addition, in recent decades there has been a lack of formal instruments to strengthen integration and political participation of migrant communities. However, since the Hessian Municipal Code was amended by the federal<sup>1</sup> State of Hesse in 2020, all Hessian municipalities with more than 1000 inhabitants must implement one of two possible instruments of migrant participation, an integration commission or a foreigners' advisory board. The establishment of a commission for integration perhaps means for Bebra the start of a new chapter in political integration, which we have been able to accompany from the beginning.

Bebra is of course part of the history of immigration and refugees in Germany and Europe in how it deals with immigration. German regulatory efforts and legal frameworks as well as the discourses on integration and immigration of the last decades have also shaped Bebra. We would therefore like to begin our case study with a brief overview of the different phases of emigration and immigration from and to Germany, as well as the refugee flows of the last ten years. These have repeatedly triggered public debates on the migrants' participation rights and led to various phases of state integration and migration policy (s. chap. 1). The study also includes the various legislative projects that have greatly increased in scope and design, especially since the mid-2010s due to the rising numbers of refugees. Since 2019, we have observed a very restrictive dichotomy

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<sup>1</sup> In this report, we use "federal" for the governance level of the 16 federal states of Germany. However, some institutions may officially have "Federal" in their title, e.g. the ministries.

between relatively lawless refugees on the one hand and favoured skilled workers on the other, who are supposed to relieve the labour market. In recent years, new cross-sectorial institutions of political regulation have also emerged at the federal and state levels (s. chap. 2). Against the background of national and federal integration policy for our empirical case study of Bebra it is important to identify which entities pursue the integration policy with what responsibilities and to what extent. Therefore, we have focused on the integration networks and the network-independent actors as well as their activities in the municipality and the relevant district (s. chap. 3). From this analysis we were able to gain valuable inputs that form the starting point for the development of guidelines for strengthening integration and political participation in small towns (s. chap. 4).

## 1. Modern migration and its discourses in Germany

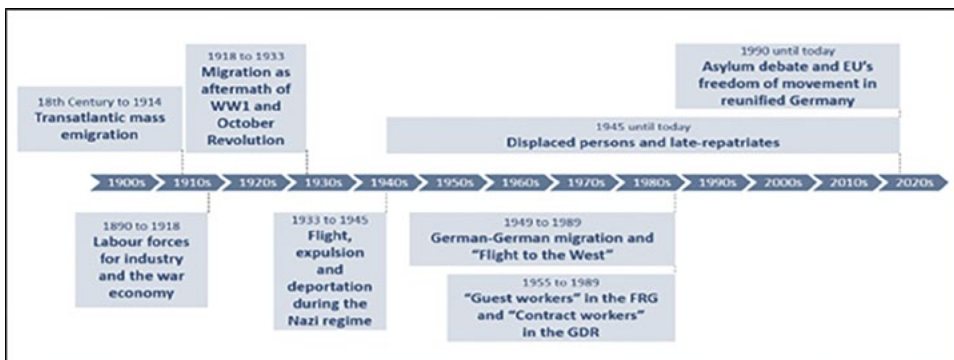
### 1.1 History of modern migration in Germany

Germany has never been just a country of immigration or emigration. In German history there have been different phases of migration. In the 19th century, emigration to Northern America dominated, whereas at the beginning of the 20th century, many workers immigrated. The two world wars were marked by expulsions, deportations, and forced labour. After the end of the Second World War, immigration occurred first as war-displacement from Eastern Europe and later, in 1960s, the majority of migrants came as so-called “guest workers” to fill the labour force shortage in the (Western) German industries. After the 1990s, immigration was chiefly composed of refugees and asylum seekers or “late repatriates” resp. “late re-settlers” from Russia or former soviet states like Kazakhstan. Lately, most people arrived to Germany thanks to the establishment

of freedom of movement as European Union citizens, and for a few years now again as asylum seekers (Oltmer 2017). Today, Germany is the main destination country for migration in the EU and 26.7 per cent of Germany’s population has a migration background, as first or second-generation migrants (BMI 2020: S. 7). Historical migration research has analysed a large number of different migration processes (see fig. 1). Currently, the most elaborate works focus on the 19th and especially the 20th century.

Today, Germany has now become the main destination for migrants in the EU. 26.7 per cent of Germany’s population (21.9 million people) has a so-called “migration background” (Federal Government’s Migration Report 2020). This counts people without German citizenship or with at least one parent who did not have German citizenship at the time of their birth. Spatially, they are distributed very differently across the individual federal states (see fig. 2). In particular, the federal states of Hesse and Baden-Württemberg as well as the city-states Hamburg, Bremen, and Berlin have a very high share of migrants. Nevertheless, Germany was also characterised by constant work-related outmigration to mostly Western Europe and the US.

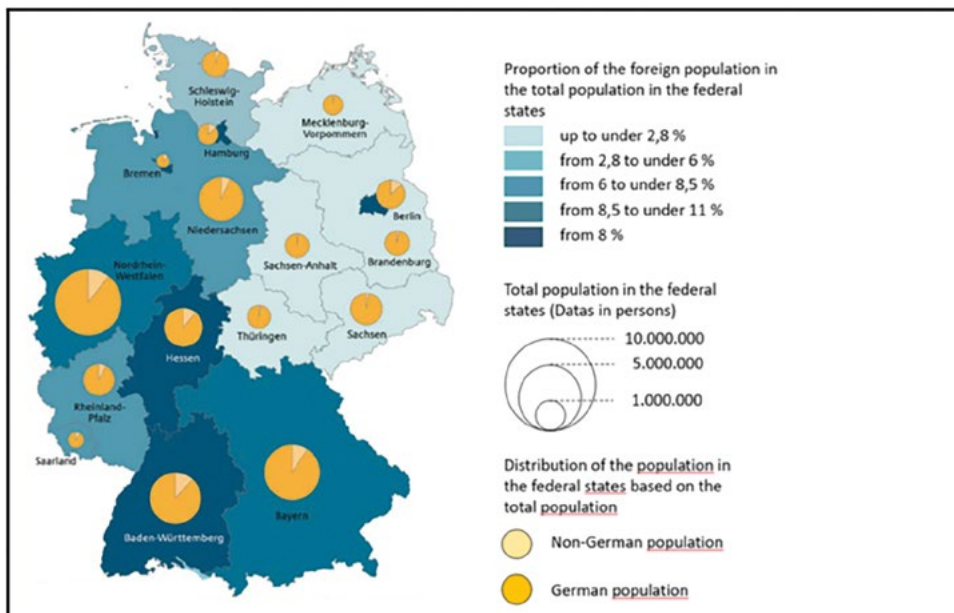
**Figure 1. Phases of migration in German history from the 20th century until today.**



Source: Own illustration based on Garschagen, Lindner 2015

More than half of residents with a “migration background” are by now German citizens. Almost two-thirds of this group immigrated to Germany at some point in their own biography. However, despite the fact that the latter group has on average lived in Germany for around 21 years, they still have no right to vote in national elections and partly in state and local elections (BAMF 2020: 7 ff.).

**Figure 2. Foreign population in the federal states.**



*(Foreign population are residents without German citizenship)*

*Source: Federal Statistical Office 2009*

## 1.2 Development of migration discourses

### 1.2.1 State migration discourses

The definition of the state’s integration policy goals and instruments and the respective legislation in Germany have changed a lot since 1990. During the reign of Chancellor Helmut Kohl (1983-1998),

policies stuck to a concept of integration that was referred to as the ‘German *Leitkultur*’ (Reinhardt 2021: 123). The concept of *Leitkultur* (guiding culture) is based on ethnically, culturally, religiously and historically grown traditions and habits of an ethnically defined population and demands newcomers to adapt to this guiding culture. Habermas defines this as “[...] historical ethno-cultural understanding of nationhood” (Habermas 2004 after Takle 2007: 24). In the Red-Green national government of 1998-2005 and later under Chancellor Angela Merkel (2005-2021), there was a gradual distancing from the *Leitkultur* concept and a shift toward an integration policy, which recognises Germany as a country of immigration. During this time, immigration was seen as an economic necessity and a growing cultural-religious diversity was valued as an expression of modern cosmopolitan society. However, not all national ministries, state governments of the *Länder*, and municipalities shared this view to the same extent. The federal state of Bavaria, for instance, recently signed its critically discussed Bavarian Integration Act, in 2017, holding on to the concept of German *Leitkultur*:

“It is the aim of this law to offer these people help and support for the time of their stay, to make their life easier in the country that is at first foreign and unfamiliar to them (integration support), obliging them to respect the *Leitkultur*, which is indispensable within the framework of their guest and residence status, and requiring their integration efforts (integration obligation). This should at the same time avoid overtaxing the social-integrative and economic capacity of the state and its municipal levels” (Reinhardt 2021: 123; see Art. 1 BayIntG).

A comparison with other European countries explains the continuing relevance of the question about the necessity and legitimacy of a *Leitkultur* in Germany. Already in the 1990s, Brubaker (1992) emphasised that the ethnos-demos antagonism is more deeply rooted in Germany than in its European neighbours. As the Bavarian integration law illustrates, Germans rather see themselves as a community of origin, which is why there are far higher obstacles to



citizenship than for example in France, which sees itself rather as a territorial community (Takle 2007: 13).

### **1.2.2 Current public debate on migration**

Reinhardt (2022) distinguishes - following Hahn (2016) and Stojanov (2022) - four ideal-typical basic positions in the public debate on migration in Germany. The extreme right-wing ethnic-nationalist position propagates an ethnically homogeneous national state that is to be shielded against foreign immigration. The national-conservative position insists on the concept of the 'German *Leitkultur*' (see 2.1), a dominant national culture, to which migrants should be subordinated. Both the neoliberal and the inclusive-democratic positions reject the ethnic-nationalist and the conservative-national positions. The neoliberal position emphasises the economic benefits of a diverse labour supply in a globalised economy and therefore rejects a national foreclosure policy. The inclusive democratic position, emphasises the importance of implementing democratic norms of a plural democracy and advocates inclusive, egalitarian, and socio-economic development (Reinhardt 2022: 32).

Before 2015, the public discourse focused for a long time on the tension between the need to create a 'welcome culture' for high-skilled, but also for humanitarian migrants, and the fear of 'poverty migration', exploiting the German welfare system together with a loss of the German *Leitkultur* (Aksakal, Schmidt-Verkerk 2014). Since the 'long summer of migration' in 2015, these concerns are shifting towards concerns about the integration, particularly of successful asylum applicants, into different spheres of the German society (Faist 2016). In Germany, the refugee debate dominated domestic politics from 2015 to 2018. Then the open conflict between Chancellor Angela Merkel and Minister of the Interior, Horst Seehofer, on how to deal with the rapidly growing number of refugees, was not only a dispute within the Christian conservative party. It also reflected the conflict between controversial positions in society, a growing cleavage be-

tween cosmopolitan, humanitarian liberal positions pro-immigration and conservative, nationalist positions against immigration. Chancellor Merkel represented a humanitarian-liberal program, while the Minister of the Interior represented a national-conservative, even populist one. As in many EU countries during these years, national conservatives and right-wing extremist groups have succeeded in politicising and instrumentalising the rapidly growing arrival of refugees from the Middle East. In this atmosphere, we have seen a rising of right-wing populist, even nationalist-authoritarian positions within society (Reinhardt 2021, Heitmeyer 2018).

The events of 2015 and 2016 had a strong effect on the public debate in Germany. As a result, the perception that migration should be re-regulated strengthened, leading to the introduction of a “migration pact” in the Bundestag. As a result, several national laws were signed in 2019 and 2020, mainly re-regulating labour migration (see chap. 2.1).

In December 2019, the Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration published a report that is a sort of counter-draft to national conservative positions. It is entitled “Germany can integrate: Promoting potential, demanding integration, strengthening cohesion” and presents in detail the results of migration research, integration problems and planned measures (Bundesregierung 2019). The report rejects a concept of integration that primarily refers to a “cultural and ethnic origin or a supposed group identity” (ibid. 37) of migrants and describes the weaknesses of the concept of “migration background”. Finally, the “Catalogue of Measures of the Cabinet Committee to Combat Right-Wing Extremism and Racism” was signed in November 2020 (Bundesregierung 2020). There are also initiatives at the municipal level that are turning away from national conservative positions. These include the “Cities of Safe Harbours” alliance founded in June 2019 with twelve founding members in Germany. In June 2021, the cities of Palermo in Sicily and Potsdam in Germany initiated the foundation of the European alliance of cities “International Alliance of Cities of Safe Harbours”, which supports

the rescue of refugees in the Mediterranean Sea. The participating cities are ready to take care of all rescued refugees (European Mayors 2021).

So, the current German discourse on migration is simultaneously characterised by political polarisation and by a paradigm shift at local and national policy level towards an inclusive, liberal agenda of immigration and integration. The polarisation mirrors an urban-rural or, more precisely, periphery-centre divide. However, there are major deficits in the representation of migrants in political decision-making bodies at municipal, state, and national levels (Reinhardt 2021: 129).

### **1.2.3 Postmigration**

Since the beginning of the 2010s, the German debate in civil society, the public sphere, academia, and politics have increasingly been influenced by the term “postmigration”. The prefix “post” does not stand for the end of migration but describes social negotiation processes that take place in the phase after migration (Foroutan 2015). The use of the term post-migrant, coined in a theatre project in Berlin, is intended to refer to the emergence of new experiences linked to being German in the course of the pluralisation of society (Langhoff 2011). The term is meant to open up the space for demarcation from the problematic and hierarchical attribution as a migrant. The prefix also includes the recognition of migration as a constitutive component of the social structure. Furthermore, lines of conflict that are being disguised as migration-related conflicts but can be decoded as social conflicts, gender inequalities or racism, should be questioned (Foroutan 2018; Römhild 2015; Yildiz 2018).

## 2. Development of migrant participation.

### 2.1 Regulations on migrant social participation

Up to the 1970s, legislation was determined primarily by the control of the so-called guest-worker immigration. At the beginning of the 1980s, the focus lay on regulating the immigration of refugees. In 2001, the “Independent Commission on Immigration” developed recommendations for action to reform the integration policy. It was the first time that long-term immigration had been recognized as positive, so integration measures started to be considered. In 2006, the first Integration Summit convened, and subsequently the National Integration Plan was adopted at the second Integration Summit. In 2011, the National Integration Plan was further developed into the National Action Plan on Integration (NAP-I) with concrete, binding and verifiable targets (Bundesregierung 2022; BBMFI 2022).

The Integration Act 2016 in particular tightened asylum law and integration measures because of the increase in refugee migration in 2015. Integration was primarily discussed in terms of normative and cultural integration. This included, among other things, the demand for integration into the so-called “German value concepts”. The debate on immigration to Germany led to the redefinition of nationality, which is associated with the obligation to sit the so called “naturalisation tests” (Einbürgerungstest, literally “test to enter citizenship”) that test language skills but also knowledge of the legal system, of society, and of ways of living in Germany, some of which are considered controversial. Integration courses now also impart knowledge of the legal system, culture, and national history.

Since the mid-2010s, there has been a clear intensification of legislative procedures to develop general legal frameworks. The 2015 and 2016 refugee flows led to the adoption of a “migration

pact” in the Bundestag. This migration package marks a clear turn towards a more restrictive and selective migration policy: as a result, several national laws were signed in 2019 and 2020, such as the Skilled Workers Immigration Act, the Foreigners Employment Promotion Act, the Act on the Toleration of Training and Employment, the Act on the Deferral of Integration Act, the Third Act Amending the Asylum Seekers Benefits Act and the Third Act Amending the Nationality Act. Among other things, the new laws provide for simplified deportation of rejected asylum seekers. On the other hand, those who meet the requirements of the German labour market will be asked to stay. These laws are the result of the agreement reached by the so-called “grand coalition” in the 2018 national government between the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats. Here, the defined immigration conditions are based on the needs of the national economy, such as qualifications, age and language, as well as proof of receiving wages from regular employment (Reinhardt 2021).

## **2.2 Migrant interest groups**

The appointment of ombudsmen, migrants’ interest representatives was the first step towards migrants’ interest protection and started in the 1970s (Hunger, Candan 2009). Ombudsmen supported migrants in matters of daily life and represented them politically before the administration. In parallel, coordinating groups were established which consisted of representatives of social organisations (churches, associations, political parties, craftsmen’s association) and municipal institutions (city administration, employment office). The members of the coordination circles were appointed by the respective institutions. The coordination circles worked with representatives of migrant organisations at the municipal level (ibid.; Hoffmann 1986).

Political participation was intensified with the formation of local foreigners’ advisory boards in the early 1990s, initially in two

federal states – North Rhine-Westphalia and Rhineland-Palatinate. These foreigners' advisory boards reacted to the simple reality that an increasing number of the so-called guest workers intended to stay in Germany for good. This led to social, political, and legal integration issues on which migrants had no political influence. Through the introduction of foreigners' advisory boards, for the first time, they gained influence on municipal decision-making processes. Although the councils had only an advisory function, they were long regarded as the central political representative body for migrants. At the beginning of the 2010s, some federal states reformed their regulations. Currently, in ten of the 16 federal states the formation of such councils is optional. Two federal states have mandatory rules, and only three – including Hesse since 2020 – have binding commandments. An evaluation by the Institute for Social Pedagogical Research in Mainz (Gesemann, Roth 2015) shows that the reform has led to an increase in the acceptance and legitimacy of the advisory boards. Central goals of the advisory boards are simplifying their own election modalities and the municipal decision-making processes, expanding the number of eligible voters and target groups, and further developing opportunities for participation in formal and informal political bodies. However, there is still considerable room for manoeuvre in involving the advisory boards in municipal decision-making processes (ibid.; Budnik et al. 2022; Kersting 2020).

Since 2020, the federal state of Hesse, where this case study was carried out, amended its municipal law to implement a new form of a political representation of migrants. This amendment was motivated – or rather justified – as a reaction to the difficulty in establishing foreigners' advisory boards. In fact, the municipalities did not show much consideration for these boards, as proved by the very low participation of the foreign residents in the local foreigner advisory board elections (FAB) in Hesse but at the meantime they wished to implement a better concept of the migrant interest's representation. Differently from FABs the Committees of integration are formed according to composition criteria (1) the mayor as chairperson and administration representative, (2) at least 50% of expert citizens

proposed by the migrant communities, with a 50% proportion of women. Furthermore, the ethnic diversity of the communities should be kept into account (see §89 HGO; Federal state of Hesse 2020).

Parallel to these processes, migrants in Germany began to establish their own interest groups in the 1980s. Today, migrant organisations (migrantische Selbstorganisationen, MSOs) are established state partners in shaping integration policies and are partly seen as instruments for involving migrants in political decision-making processes (Thränhardt 2012: 5 ff.). The spectrum of migrant organisations is very heterogeneous as well. It includes very small voluntary temporary networks as well as large organisations with full-time staff (ibid.). The variety of their activities ranges from cultural or sports associations to political interest representation.

At the federal state level of Hesse, the federal state relevant for this report, the various MSOs have different forms of umbrella organisations. With respect to political representation in Hesse, the association of municipal foreigners' advisory boards (Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Ausländer: innenbeiräte in Hessen, agah), is the Hessian interest group of about 80 municipal foreigners' advisory boards. Its objective is to improve the social and legal situation of migrants in Hessen, promote integration and counter discrimination and racism (agah 2022). Among those municipalities that have chosen to establish an integration commission rather than a foreigners advice board, a network of integration commissions (IC) is set up to discuss the objectives or guiding principles of the work of these integration commissions and share experiences. In addition, with respect to specific interests of migrant women, female migrants and their associations are organised in the Intercultural Women's Network Hessen e.V. (DaMigra), acting as an interface between Hessian institutions and women with a migration background. The district of Hersfeld-Rotenburg, where Bebra is located, namely the city focused in this case study, boasts 25 organisations which deal with migration and integration issues, out of them 10 are migrant self-organisations. They are mainly active in the areas of culture and religion and

networked with local politics and administration through the newly formed integration commissions. Institutions of integration policies on national, federal, and local level.

### **2.2.3 Institutions of integration policies on national, federal, and local level**

The Ministry of the Interior and Home Affairs in Germany (BMI) regulates integration and migration issues (see fig. 3). The Immigration Act in 2005 concentrated on integration as a national priority. Within this framework, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF, national level) was entrusted with the management of measures to promote integration. The Immigration Act represents the central element of integration policy efforts at national level. Here, the National Action Plan on Integration defines five stages of integration, (1) Before migration”, (2) “Initial Migration”, (3) “Integration”, (4) Growing together”, and (5) “Cohesion” (see fig. 3).

Political participation is considered part of cohesion, the fifth stage of participation. It is defined as the area of political education as well as participation in parties and committees. The BAMF is the highest managing institution for conducting asylum procedures and granting refugee protection in Germany. It is also the coordinator of the nationwide promotion of integration. Furthermore, it works as a research institution to obtain an overview on the state of migration and integration and how it can be governed. It organises decentralized institutions like local offices, arrival centres and decision centres (see fig. 4).

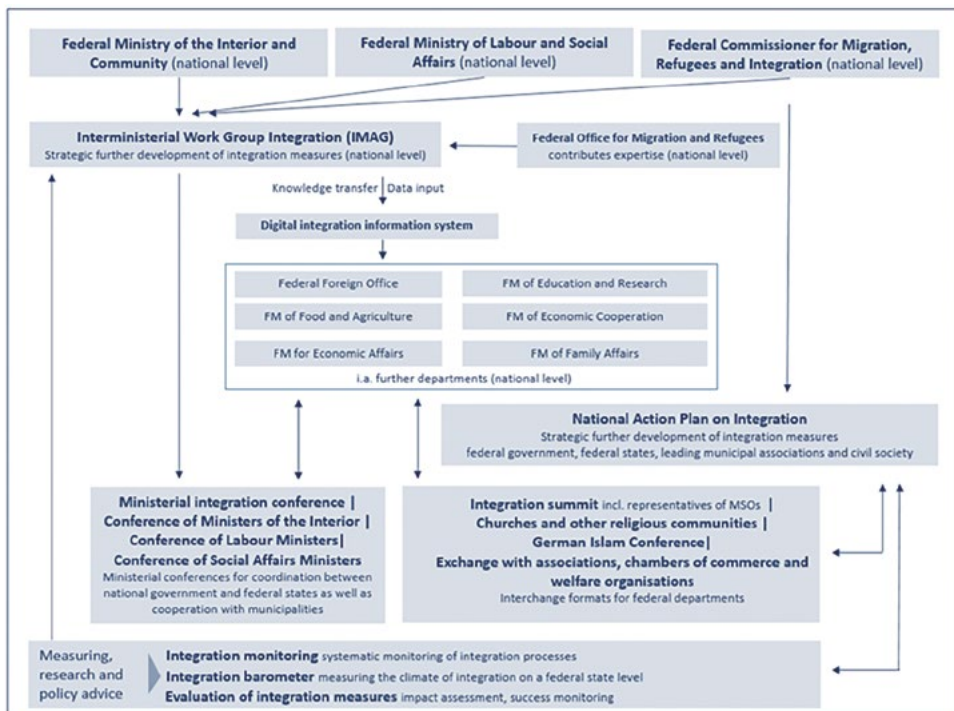
As well as at national level, the German federated system implements the integration policy also at federal and local government levels. This cross-cutting task requires efforts in different policy fields and the respective government and administration departments. It includes education, culture, and religion as autonomous fields of action of the federal states, as well as the definition of the



legal framework according to which the municipalities are obliged to implement integration measures - such as the formation of foreigner advisory boards or integration commissions. The integration processes can be steered by legal regulations and support measures such as language and qualification programs as well as cooperation with civil society actors, and symbolic political procedures such as naturalisation campaigns.

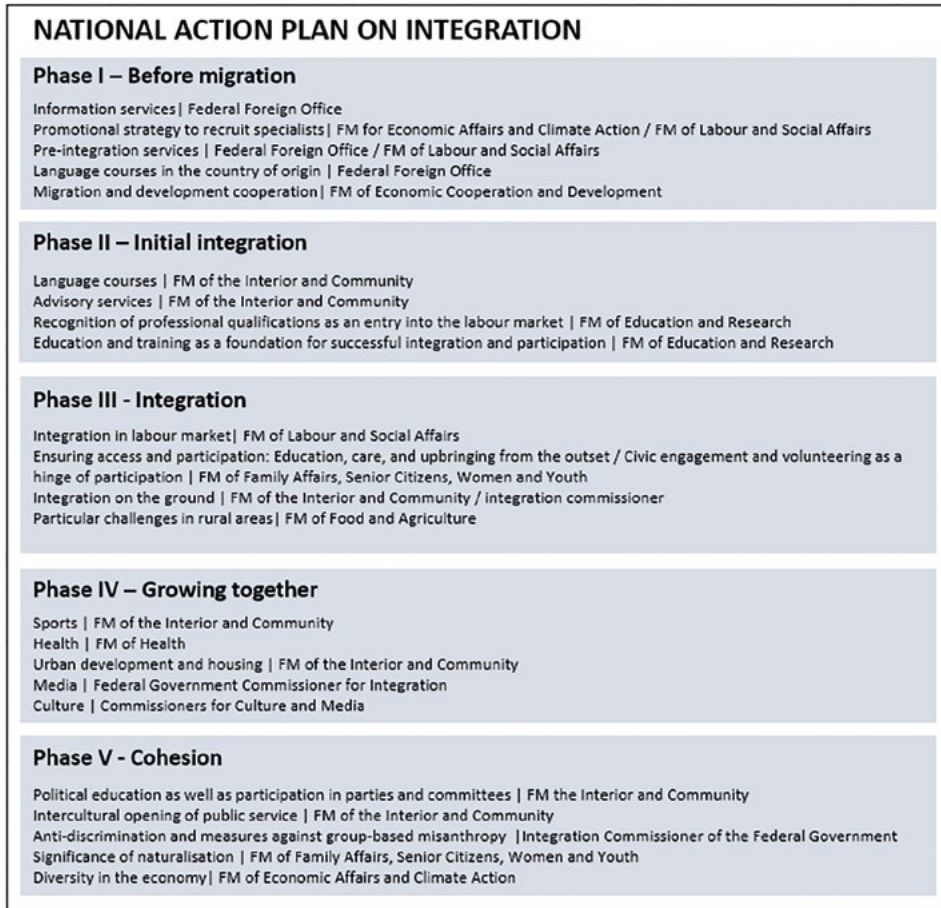
All federal states have developed integration concepts or corresponding guidelines for integration (Hanewinkel 2021). The state also promotes migrant engagement by supporting MSOs (see Chap. 2.1).

**Figure 3. Governance on national and federal levels since 2021.**



Source: Own Illustration

**Figure 4. National Action Plan for Integration.**



*Source: Own Illustration*

## The federal state of Hesse

Compared to other German federal states, the Hesse is among the pioneering states in the legal structuring of participation opportunities for foreign population. This is also reflected in the development of the foreigners' or migrants' advisory boards, which began in Wiesbaden in 1972. The Hessian County Code (HKO) and the Hessian Municipal Code (HGO) regulate the establishment of foreigners' representation at the district and municipal level. With the amend-

ments to these codes in 1993, municipalities with more than 1,000 registered foreign residents were obliged to establish a municipal foreigners' representative body (KAV) or foreigners' advisory board (FAC) (Budnik et al. 2022).

In 2009, the federal state of Hesse began to view integration as a cross-cutting task. It started to involve integration as tasks in all state government domains. In parallel, model programs were introduced such as the program "Model Regions for Integration", which, in 2014, was continued as the follow up-program "WIR" for further development of integrative projects for migrants. The relevance of the integration policy was further elevated with the appointment of a state secretary and a representative for integration and anti-discrimination in 2014 (ibid.). At the end of 2017, for the first time the Hessian government adopted a comprehensive Hessian Integration Plan. It bundled together the political objectives, concepts, and programs into a long-term plan. The Hessian Integration Monitor analyses the progress in participation of immigrants in various areas of society over time. It also monitors the representation of migrant groups in social life and institutions (HessMSI 2022). As part of its local government legislation reforms, Hesse renewed its municipal legislation in 2020 to promote the political participation of immigrants, a reform that has been contested by MSOs. Before 2020, municipalities with a population of 1,000 or more were obliged to elect a Foreigners' Advisory board (FAB), but since then, they have been able to choose between two options: Foreigners' Advisory board or Integration committee (GVBL 2020; see fig. 4). By and large, both have only an advisory function for the municipal council and the right to bring in suggestions for municipal decisions, but they differ in legitimacy and composition.

**Table 1. Comparison of Hessian FAB and IK 2021**

	<b>Foreigners' Advisory Board Hesse (FAB)</b>	<b>Integration committee Hesse (IC)</b>
Election / nomination	Foreign residents by secret and direct election	Members are nominated
Chair	Elected chairman	Mayor together with a co-chairman elected by the group of expert residents <sup>2</sup>
Composition	Voters: foreign residents / stateless persons / legal status as (also) foreign residents	50% / 50% expert residents plus politicians and administrators / 50% female / P
Institution	Obligation to set up in municipalities with more than 10000 foreign residents	Optional FAC or IC / obligation if foreigners' advisory board is not formed
Competences	Municipality has duty to inform Right to be heard, right to make proposals, right to file applications	IC advises the municipality
Contra	Composition does not consider the heterogeneity of MSOs / no link to administration and council	Restriction of autonomy due to lack of electoral legitimacy and missing rules of procedure

*Source: Own Illustration*

The choice between these two options has been contested. Especially MSOs at federal level in Hesse criticise the option of integration commissions as a loss of electoral legitimacy, also the composition and the mayor's strong influence is criticised as a step back in political influence of migrants. On the other hand, small towns like Bebra had rather negative experiences with the election of foreigners advisory boards, a) because participation in the election was low, b) because foreigners' advisory boards did not lead to a strong migrants' representation in the municipality, c) because their members rather reflected the existing competition and power relations of migrant organisations in Germany, and d) because they did not manage to have all interests represented on a supra-ethnic basis.

<sup>2</sup> Expert residents ("Sachkundige Bürger") are a group of residents who participated in thematic committees of the municipal council, bringing in their expertise but not entitled to vote.

Thus, some welcome the introduction of integration commissions and see a potential advantage in the participation of the mayor and members of the city council. First experiences expressed in online meetings of a network of small towns in Hesse show, that they still have difficulties in finding their role and mode of work. So just like the foreigner advisory boards previously, the actual political instruments available to them are limited to the right to propose certain issues to the city council.

## 3. The case of Bebra

### 3.1 Recent immigration in Bebra

Bebra, a small town of about 14.000 inhabitants, it has developed since the mid-19th century as a railway industry town and - related to this - as a city strongly influenced by labour migration (1960s and 80s). Accordingly, the migration history of this city is reminiscent of a metropolitan context. In the 1980s, the successive loss of importance of the railway industry as the main employer of native German workers led to the town centre depopulation. The influx of migrant workers into these vacancies in the town centre led to strong ethnic segregation, for example in the neighbourhood Göttinger Bogen, which is an arrival district, with rental housing mainly targeted to the less privileged and migrants. To the contrary, the outer neighbourhoods, mainly former villages, had and still have a very low proportion of immigrants. The town started to be associated with immigration and the immigrants' concentration in the centre signified the town's image decline and earned it the name of "Turks city". Since 1985, two phases of intensive urban renewal attempted to counteract this loss of image and actually succeeded in re-qualifying the city. However, the urban renewal has led to an increased attractiveness and demand for inner city housing. This fosters residential segregation and separates spatially less privileged migrants

(and Germans) from well-established migrants. Today, ethnic segregation seems to be less important than social segregation as the economic rise of immigrants has allowed them to reach the middle class - in some cases even the upper class:

“From 2000 onwards, one can say that the whole thing has taken a positive turn. I think of the school, of the fact that there have been infinite contacts between the different cultures, between the natives and the immigrants. Of course, this has also led to the fact that fears of contact have also disappeared at some point, and many young people have taken up professions, settled down, built houses, acted as investors” (Administration 1, pos. 18).

As a result, not all immigrants identify with “immigrant only” concepts of integration:

“The word integration? It is a relationship you have to arrange, we have to arrange. It has to work on both sides, but integrate? Integration is not only for migrants” (Migrant or migrant organisation, pos. 22).

Four interviewees, all rather central persons of the local autochthonous society, criticise of the concept of integration as exclusively concerned with the integration of migrants and with ethnic differences:

“The explicit call for the participation of migrants is a transitional process because integration is actually about the inclusion of all citizens, not forgetting also other social groups with experiences of exclusion” (Administration 8, pos.1).

At the same time, the vast majority of interviewees sees integration more traditionally and positively. People understand integration as meaningful in the sense of accepting different cultures:

“So for me, someone is integrated when they understand and accept all cultures. For me, that’s someone who is integrated” (Migrant or migrant organisation, pos. 189).

## 3.2 Migrants organisations in Bebra

Currently people from about 80 countries live in Bebra (Bebra Municipality 2022). The Turkish nationality is the most strongly represented one. Most of the Turkish community came to Bebra in the course of the “guest worker” labour migration in the 1970s and 80s mentioned earlier, together with Spanish and Italians. Syrian, Eritrean, Kurdish, and Armenian people are part of the refugee movements that took place since 2000, as well as Indian, Somalian, Albanian, and Egyptian people. Overall, the share of migrants without German citizenship in Bebra in 2020 is 13.3%, the share of immigrants with German citizenship is approx. 20% and the share of first, second and third generation migrants is approx. 60%, as estimated by the head of social affairs within the municipality (Administration 1, pos. 33).

The level of organisation of these ethnic groups varies a lot. The community of the Syrian Orthodox Aramaic church is very well organised. It went through a long and conflictual recognition process in Bebra and was finally able to build its orthodox church in the city. The Turkish-Islamic cultural association, which is run by the Turkish state organisation DITIB, is well organised as well. Both cultural associations had and have an important integration function in the refugee situation of the 2016s and the following years:

“We have a big Syrian Orthodox church here ... that’s a Syrian Orthodox church with quite a big community, they do quite great volunteer work, ... thanks to that the Syrian refugees ... have been taken in” (Political body 3, pos. 125).

The mosque association, a local religious association formed by the Turkish Muslim community, is a contact point for the Syrian-Muslim refugees, and the Christian Aramaeans for the Eritrean refugees. In addition, the Albanians and the Russian-Germans are organised as Mennonites and as a so-called country association, the Somalis own a bar as an informal meeting place and the Kurdish

Yazidis are connected with politics and administration as well as other MSOs through the vice chairperson of the integration commission. It is clear that good self-organisation of ethnoreligious groups correlates with stronger network integration. They are better able to articulate their needs and establish contact with the mayor, for example. However, the priority assigned to these groups to create a strong community integration in order to preserve their language and religion corresponds to the special role they play in society.

### **3.3 Preconditions for political participation**

Political participation needs social and cultural integration as a precondition. There are some dimensions of social and cultural integration of migrants, which are a kind of civic participation, a participation in community life, for example integration in local relationships and networks, access to local services and institutions, e.g. attending religious services at local worship places and be part of the local football team. Political participation is about making decisions, being recognised as a full member of the local society, having a voice and being listened to. It means also being a co-producer of community development, being able to engage in conflicts on eye level with other community members without being assigned an inferior position (or accepting to hold an inferior position). In our research, we focus more on political participation. However, even within the migrant communities, especially the longer established ones, civic and political integration and participation are inseparably linked issues: (1) Large migrant self-organisations in Bebra for instance organise integration into social services of general interest, like school launch events for the entire city. At the same time, they have (2) a form of internal democratic and (3) strongly informal access (private contacts, sports clubs etc.) to formal institutions and their actors.

Integration policies fall into the responsibility of the municipality but also of a regional government level based on regional dis-



tricts within the state of Hesse. Thus, the district of Hersfeld-Rotenburg as well as the municipality of Bebra are responsible for such policies (see fig. 5). The district office's tasks are the registration of immigrants, the handling of asylum seeker procedures and decisions on residence status, the admission to social welfare and the organisation of social integration support (e.g. language and integration courses). Other support is distributed in the form of distribution of financial allocations for the welfare organisations, which offer integration and migration counselling as the case management in Hersfeld and Rotenburg as well as in Bebra.

The municipal administration of Bebra is responsible for the registration of immigrants, for urban and neighbourhood development, and the housing and economic policy. The state educational institutions – responsible for education and training requirements, clubs (especially football) and festivities – are organised partly by the city and partly by private initiative. The current status is as follows:

- According to the Asylum Seekers Benefits Act, refugees without a residence permit generally have no right to work (BMJ 2021). In contrast, recognised migrants with a residence permit have been widely integrated into the labour market, achieved economic progress and some are self-employed as entrepreneurs.
- The big charities such as Caritas cover important integration needs and in particular fill the gaps that are not covered by standard state benefits: e.g. food distribution, second-hand sales of clothing and smaller household items. They are responsible for various counselling and language services for migrants and refugees. Language courses are organised by the Migration and Asylum department in the district of Hersfeld-Rotenburg and the city council, but they are far from covering the high demand. Poor skills in German is the most urgent obstacle

to integration. The shortage of language course teachers partially explains this situation but also, due to the district being responsible for language teaching, for Bebra residents reaching Bad Hersfeld, where the courses take place (Public service or commissioned service 3, pos.55) is time consuming and expensive, as the district centre is 14 km away.

- Specific needs for migrant women are still not considered enough in integration policies. For example, Turkish men seem to have created an infrastructure that meets their socio-cultural needs whereas Turkish women lack this to some extent: “The men (migrant men, the recorder) already have everything, football, tennis, 4 bars, 2 arcades, what is missing is something for us women” (Migrant or migrant organisation 7, pos.1). When migrant women are well organised as cultural associations, for example in the Syrian Orthodox Church, the needs of women are more likely to be taken into account.
- Other prominent integration needs are access to affordable housing and infrastructures for residents of different origins. There is also a demand for social infrastructures for ageing migrants, shared flats for mother-tongue residents with dementia (Public service or commissioned service 5, pos.88).

### **3.4 Network of integration and political participation**

One aim of the PISTE project was to investigate the existing networks for integration and political participation. The network structure we found in Bebra is characterised by the interplay of formal and informal structures and is centred around one key person in matters of migration in Bebra, the head of the department of social

affairs (see fig. 5). The network structures mainly provide support and services for social and cultural participation, which are (only) the pre-conditions for political participation.

### **3.4.1 Network structures of integration and political participation**

Beyond the responsibility of the Hessian district of Hersfeld-Rotenburg and the administrative and political institutions here, the formal structures of social integration are primarily state and state-mandated bodies and institutions, the craftsmen's association, as well as smaller networks and civil society actors. For children, teen-agers and young adults in transition to employment, a state-financed youth centre, school social work as well as a counselling service of the regional craftsmen's association offer important social integration support. The Bebra Diakonie (Social Service of the Protestant Church) is a well-established welfare organisation. Important networks exist in the "Ecumenical Working Group", the "Language Working Group", the Round Table "Social Commitment" and the "Network for Integration", which has organised communication with key stakeholders in recent years. In addition, some migrant communities have migrants' self-organisations, MSOs. About the approx. 80 ethnic groups represented in Bebra, the degree of self-organisation can be classified as rather low.

Regarding actual political participation, in Germany, foreigners have limited voting rights, hence limited chance to be elected. This entails that the total share of migrants with and without German citizenship is not represented in formal political bodies (Roth 2018), and this is also the case for Bebra. The migrant's share in the Bebra city council, the main political institution, is 20%, in the magistrate<sup>3</sup>, the elected executive body, is 9% and in the municipal administration, which represents the implementation level, the share is 10% approx-

3 The magistrate is the elected body, leading the administration.

imately. The structural lack of opportunities for co-determination in urban development policy issues as well as the influence of other political cultures and language barriers make access even more difficult. At the same time, however, these figures can also be read as a sign of an existing political integration process because the share rose over the years. For the more established migrants with contacts into local society, there is also the possibility of expressing needs or objections through networks and informal contacts. The network key person is seen as an easily approachable, open, and supportive networker.

When it comes to formal bodies for political participation of migrants, Bebra opened a new page in 2021 by founding an integration committee (IC), prompted by the amendment of the municipal law in the overall state of Hesse, as described above and in figure 6. The implementation process was largely determined by the central migrant networker who prepared nominations, gathered migrants who agreed to be nominated and organised first meetings. It takes account of the representation interests of different actors and the strong authorities of the MSOs. The networker nomination was confirmed by the magistrate. The IC members we interviewed confirmed that they see the Integration Committee as having adequate legitimacy. Since the vice-president is a migrant woman democratically elected by the IC, the latter shows signals of emancipatory progress. According to legal requirements, the integration committee must be composed of a mayor, three councillors (including one woman and one migrant), and ten expert residents, all with a migrant background from ten different ethnic groups, among which five must be women. However, many of the sixty less incorporated and less organised ethnical groups are not represented. Actually, the goals of the IC are defined by the active involvement of the migrant target group in order to promote political participation, to create cross-cultural cohesion and to strengthen the migrant communities' impact on the local urban society.

**Table 2. Strength and weaknesses of political migration structures.**

	<b>Advisory board Hesse (FAC)</b>	<b>Integration committee Hesse (IC)</b>
<b>Contra</b>	<p>Lack of a leader with vision</p> <p>Problematic compatibility of work and voluntary work = no employer exemption (see FFW)</p> <p>No further training for members</p> <p>Dominance of the Turkish-Muslim list</p> <p>Lack of representation of heterogeneous MSOs</p> <p>Too little creative power - too loose a link to administration and local council</p>	<p>Restriction of autonomy due to lack of electoral act</p> <p>No extension of competences vis-à-vis AB</p> <p>No employer exemption, further training for members and budgeting for volunteers</p> <p>Advocacy function + Welfare associations include risk of appropriation</p>
<b>Pro</b>	<p>Legitimised through election</p> <p>Greater autonomy</p> <p>Self-representation</p>	<p>Decision-making competence of the networker advocacy function is accepted</p> <p>Revitalisation of interest representation</p> <p>Better representation of the different MSOs</p> <p>Closer institutional link to administration and municipal council</p>

*Source: Own Illustration*

Further objectives, a mission statement and a self-image have not yet been formulated and are understood as part of the future work of the IC. There are different assessments of the IC chances to influence Bebra's integration policy among our interviewees. Some hold that the implementation process is still young, and the rules of procedure, a mission statement, and a definition of goals are still missing. Others argue that the top-down implementation is only an example of so-called fig leaf politics:

“They have to find out now whether they are satisfied with what they have brought to the table and whether they can really work with it or whether they are just followers ... There are no rules of procedure, there is no mission statement, there is no definition

of goals ... if we want to lay a foundation somewhere and have a goal, then not only on paper" (Migrant or migrant organisation, pos. 64-65).

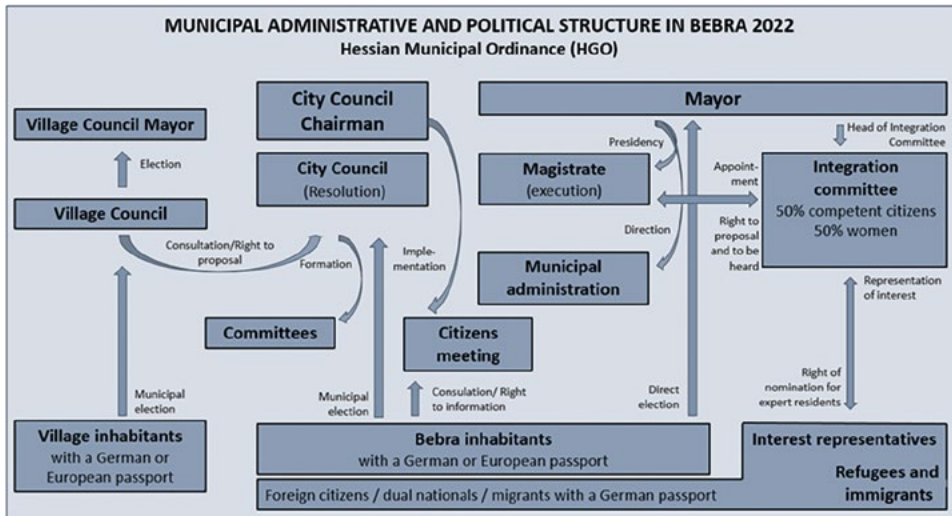
Others argue that, after all, the integration committee has the right to propose requests to the city council:

"The fact alone that the integration commission is the only commission that can independently submit requests to the city council is worth doing it this way. ... As a member of the integration commission, I can define something ... I can make a request ... and the parliament has to deal with it. You can initiate a lot of things. So without this possibility, I think it's just as much hot air as everything else" (Public service or commissioned 1, pos.179).

One problem, however, seems to be that within migrant communities - as in other parts of the German population - there is little practical and detailed knowledge about the political system and its possibilities:

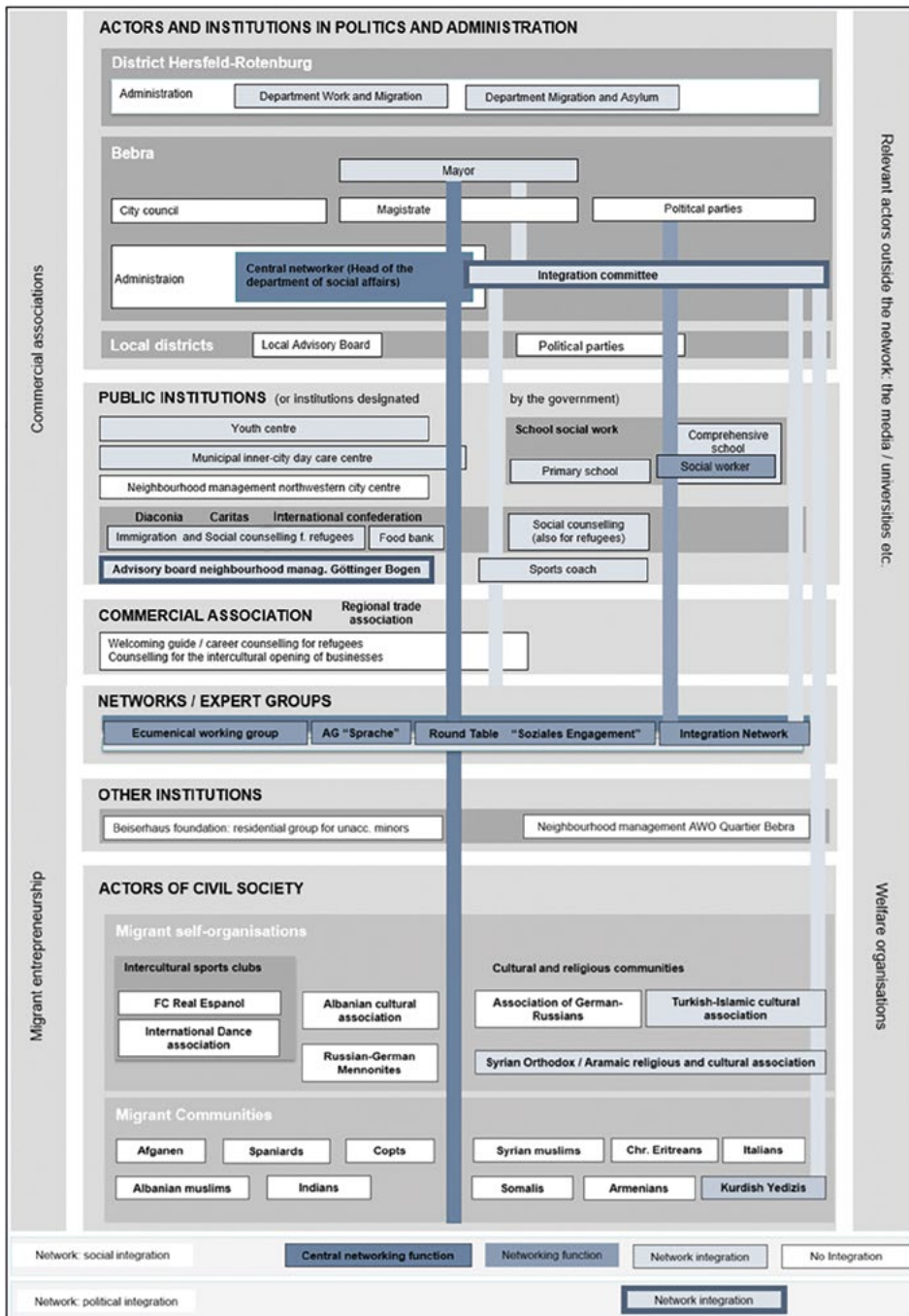
"I also believe that the migrants have not yet realized what an opportunity there is in it. ... they probably don't even know this political system, they don't even know what you can do with it, ... perhaps they not even used to such a concept, because it doesn't exist in their own culture, that you can work somewhere and have your say and that the topic is self-determination. And ... that process will not be over even in ten years" (Political body 4, pos. 72).

**Figure 5. Formal structure of municipal administration and politics in 2022.**



Source: Own Illustration

Figure 6. Policy networks of social and political integration of migrants



Source: Own Illustration



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## Stakeholders

The entire migration-related network is centred around one key figure, the head of the Department of social affairs, who has intense connections with the administration and strong informal networks in various local communities. According to self-definition he is a networker:

“That’s what a city councillor once said to me, networker. I think that perhaps sums it up a bit. Of course, it’s not an official job title, but when you have contact with many people from the world of Germans on the one hand, but also from the world of migrants, then something like us automatically comes into being, I think, a network worker who knows the two different worlds and tries to link them, ... to create encounters, to clear up misunderstandings, to explain one world to the other and vice versa. And just again and again ... communication” (Administration 1, pos. 3).

At the same time, due to his many years of work in the Bebra Youth Centre, he has good contacts into almost all migrant communities. He had considerable influence on the composition of the IC, on the work of MSOs, on individual migrant actors and, typical for a small town, a direct line to the mayor.

Another important networking position is held by his wife, who is a city councillor for the Social Democrats, member of the integration commission and social worker in the comprehensive school. She, too, has the reputation of being a strong advocate for migrants’ interests. In addition, individual key personalities from each of the organised communities - e.g. the head of the mosque or the patriarchs of the two large family associations of the Syrian Orthodox community - have a representative function for the entire community. In contrast, other not or less formally organised communities are little or not represented at all in the network, such as refugees of various nationalities - as far as they are not supported by the Muslim or Aramaic religious institutions - as well as the so-called late repatriates. The needs of marginalised groups, such as women, young people, seniors, the educationally disadvantaged and black people, are not represented, too.

Considering the entire network structure, the central political and administrative leadership positions in Bebra are held by the mayor, the political and administrative bodies - the magistrate and the city council - as well as the political parties. The parties seem to be strongly influenced by the local German communities and represent their interests, while the migrant communities are only marginally represented by them:

“In essence, integration has taken place in the minds only ... But the tangible direct political influence has remained small” (Political body 3, pos. 57).

The mayor has a strong power to define the degree of attention given to migrant interests and whether they are of local interest. In our interpretation, this is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it can be read as openness to intercultural issues:

“I think we are still a long way from where we need to be. I would say that ... [the central networker] has always been our reminder when it comes to intercultural issues, and if he wasn't here, the topic would be totally understudied” (Political body 4, pos. 72)

On the other hand, such a perspective possibly prevents the perception of structural inequalities:

“Integration issues? I'm pretty naive about that. Maybe I would even say that we don't need that at all, because sometimes issues are simply constructed that aren't even there, aren't they?” (Political body 4, pos. 72).

## **Informal structures**

Informal support networks can be found within the refugee communities, e.g. organised by Ukrainian or Syrian refugees. Their multipliers sometimes contact the existing counselling institutions with questions, but there are also some informal support networks

that have no links to formal structures. On the one hand, this makes it possible to provide fast and unbureaucratic support. However, this practice also entails risks, in fact in some instances these structures can lead to strong dependency relationships, which in the most negative case also lead to indebtedness and exploitation:

*“Refugees are also sometimes betrayed by people from their own community, where they first felt safe. We often see this with landlords who supposedly have good intentions and do everything for the refugees and take care of them. They are familiar with the country, they have been in Germany for a long time. [...] The refugees survive through some dubious contacts who come to them later and have horrendous demands” (Public service or commissioned 5, pos. 38-40).*

The bars and coffee shops that have emerged - especially those of the Turkish and Arab communities, but recently also established by the Somali community - also form a kind of informal network. They are generally used by men, there is no comparable informal offer for women. However, this gap has now been clearly articulated to policymakers via the Integration Commission.

### **3.4.2 Strengths and weaknesses of the network**

The strength of the migration supporting network in Bebra is first and foremost the fast central decision-making. With the central networker there is one contact person for everything. As head of the department of social affairs this position is networked in politics, administration and migrant communities. Through personal relationships and informal contacts, a high level of trust to the individual is built up. On the other hand, the importance of this person also leads to the dependence of the entire structure on the central networking figure who is about to retire. This person cannot be replaced so quickly, with the risk of an immense weakening of the network in the medium term. The high level of trust also makes it difficult to keep a critical distance from a person who has a strong power of definition

and who, for example, has significantly influenced the composition of the IC:

“The head of the department for social affairs is a great man. And we’ve been together with him for just over 40 years now, since he managed the youth centre back then. ... I’ve known the youth centre since I was a kid, it’s really great. He has also helped us a lot. With everything in general. Yes, and then the municipality said, we don’t want the members to be elected, we want them to be nominated” (Migrants or migrant’s organisation 3, pos.80).

Another problematic aspect is the compartmentalisation of political institutions and parties, which is due to the fact that these structures mainly represent locals and migrants are little included in local political discourses. In addition, socially weak migrants and refugees, old migrants, educationally disadvantaged classes, late repatriates and blacks as well as migrant women with children – especially without a family environment – are only weakly integrated politically:

“In contrast to Hersfeld, I always notice that the women here are not very well networked. They are very, very much on their own. I notice that just by looking at the fact that they come to me for counselling and asking information on children care. Very often they don’t know what to do here in Bebra. ... that strikes me extremely in Bebra [that they] have no idea where anything is located. Yes, what can I do where and when and how? From public and official matters to leisure activities” (Public service or commissioned service 5, pos. 94-96).

Very likely, many needs of migrants have not yet been articulated. Overall, we observe a partly weak social influence as well as a still low level of political integration. However, migrants’ children may bring some changes in future, as a first-generation migrant explained:

“Of course, if I come from another country ... I want to first work, earn my bread, first lead my life sensibly. That was important for us first. And we didn’t think about the political side at all. Many of us were weak in terms of education, so we didn’t have the oppor-

tunity. But our children today were born here and are also educated. And I think the time is coming ... I can already hear that many young people are already party members in the right positions. I think that's coming more and more in the next few years as well" (Migrant or migrant's organisation 8, pos. 78).

However, through the implementation of a neighbourhood management and a family centre, which is currently being established, attempts are being made to close this gap in a marginal settlement in the north-west of the city, the Göttinger Bogen. Middle-class migrants are also more likely to be informally consulted as strong economic actors. Some circumstances can also be seen as small town specific; these include the behaviour of migrants in the initial adaptation process, but also the central networker. Due to the limited personnel in small towns administrations, many positions are usually tied to one person. However, there is little outreach work, only "pull" structures. Several times the interviewees highlighted that new immigrants should behave calmly, adapt, not just make demands. Such claims even came from (older) representatives of migrant communities. To what extent this is an effect of the small town's limited social arena, we cannot say. This behaviour certainly occurs in metropolitan areas as well, but it can be assumed that the sanctions for misbehaviour are stronger in small towns as it is easier to exercise control in a limited area.

## **3.4 Activities for integration and political participation**

### **3.5.1 Activities fostering integration**

Most activities in the field of social integration and participation are organised formally and initiated by public institutions and municipal bodies, the big charities as well as educational institutions. Mostly, the activities are executed or coordinated by a few professional employees and a team of volunteering supporters. In Bebra, the profes-

sional employees are, with few exceptions, autochthonous Germans. Among volunteers, the proportion of people with a migration background has been slowly but steadily increasing over the years. Formal integration work is also done by the two large MSOs, the Islamic Cultural Association, and the Syrian Orthodox Church and Cultural Association (see chap. 3.2). While the two MSOs mainly serve their own communities, the two charities, Diakonie and Caritas (see chap. 3.), reach a variety of migrant groups. Nevertheless, interviewees report that a specific institution, like a youth centre or a counselling office may be (temporarily) “occupied” by a certain (migrant) group with the risk of discouraging other groups from visiting this institution:

“We’re just in a very, very small town here. Yes, and when one group comes in, I think my office becomes a taboo for the others. So, word gets around very quickly that helps in your own community. And suddenly there are lots of people from Eritrea here. And then I get more or less burned for others. You have to be careful that you are not seen as the one who is only there for one migrant group, without actively pushing it. Yes. That already happened very often here” (Public service or commissioned 5, pos. 20).

We can summarise that most of the analysed integration activities target the groups that are to be “integrated”. Only a few activities are aimed at the groups that are “integrating” in order to initiate processes of mutual acquaintance, opening up structures or raising awareness. A prominent exception is the role of the “welcome pilot” of the district craftsmen association. This person advises businesses and companies on how they can open up to refugees and recruit them as workers.

### **Activities launched by the Municipality**

The lead person of all the municipality’s initiatives related to integration and social participation, as well as the central networker for this issue is the head of the department for social affairs. Integration is one of this figure’s core concerns, and is included in all depart-

ment and municipality activities. The city organises the cultural festival “Kirmes”, a traditional fair or festival which is mainly attended by autochthonous Germans that has been altered in character so to include also non-autochthonous groups and display their food and music. The Kirmes is a prototype of a new generation of festivals that do no longer make a difference between traditional festivals and specific events to foster integration. In previous years, the central integration networker together with the “Integration Network”, had initiated the “Intercultural Festival” and a connected “Night of the Open Houses of Religion”. In the meantime, the festival has been abolished because the central integration networker has the ambition that all festivals should be perceived as intercultural festivals:

*“No, there were four times, if I remember correctly. But then we scrapped it because I said there would be ... no more intercultural festivals, but only intercultural festivals” (Administration 1, Pos. 92).*

The position of the “City Sports Coach” is also staffed by the municipality. As a volunteer, the coach acts as a link to connect the city, refugees and the sports clubs and takes care of the integration of refugees into the clubs. Bebra is receiving funding from the state of Hesse through the “Sport and Refugees” programme for this project. Among the city’s current projects there is the creation of a family centre with neighbourhood management and community work in the rather marginalised and migrant-dominated neighbourhood “Göttinger Bogen”. Funding has already been secured and the construction planned.

### **Activities initiated by migrant’s organisations**

Formal activities are carried out by the two religious MSOs “Turkish Islamic Cultural Association” and “Syrian Orthodox Church and Cultural Association”, as well as the Real Español football club and the International Women’s Dance Club Bebra. The two religious associations focus their activities primarily on their own community.

Both organise religious education (only the Syrian Orthodox Church is allowed to teach in public schools), work with refugees, language courses, social welfare work. Both organisations try to preserve their traditions and culture; for example, the church is planning its own kindergarten where the Aramaic language can be taught. Both organisations also engage in intercultural work. The Turkish-Islamic Cul-tural Association organises the annual intercultural festival “Kermes” (not to be confused with the “Kirmes” festival, see above) with the aim to gain an impact on the local society in order to build bridges between the cultures. This is also the aim of the “International Women’s Dance Group” and the Real Español football club. Originally, Real Español was founded by Spanish immigrants who were not welcome in the local German football clubs, today it has developed into one of the main sports institutions in the city and, like the dance group, is now a multicultural association.

### **Stakeholder initiated activities**

In Bebra individual stakeholders provide most of the activities and services for migrants, especially for refugees. The main actors are charities, educational institutions, regional government district offices, as well as the Protestant church. The charities Caritas and Diakonie have a Christian background, but are open to all groups of the population and are accepted by most. They offer individual case counselling (from arranging language courses, help with bureaucratic errands, help with applications for social welfare benefits, job search, etc.). A similar service is provided by the “Integration Assistance” of the regional government district with its office in Bebra. The “Language Working Group” is an association of independent organisations that organises and offers language courses. The “International Bund” is an educational institution that offers language, social, educational and vocational integration, especially for young people and women. The district handicraft union offers career guidance and the integration of refugees through employment and training courses. The Protestant church is a contact point for Ukrainian refugees in particular, offering access to low-threshold support services.



## Informal activities

A noteworthy and significant part of the activities for integration and social participation takes place informally, through personal contacts. Interviewees stress that usually people who belong to a certain community support each other. A common case is the connection with a person with a migration background or migration experience who has lived in Germany or Bebra for a long period and is well-integrated in the local society. Usually, such person supports newcomers from his or her community. The well-integrated person and the newcomer may have family relations, be already known to each other, or may be connected through networks such as social media. Well-integrated contacts often assist migrants in the arrival phase, for example in administrative procedures, translations, and job and flat searches. We were told that for instance such informal activities are common among Syrian refugees. This makes fast and uncomplicated support possible:

“There is a very strong consolidated Syrian community here in Bebra [...] I can hardly work in there, they are able to cover all the needs of newly arrived” (Public service or commissioned 5, pos. 10)

Interviewees also report on the ambivalent nature of help and support. Relationships between those who give help and those who receive it risk degenerating into dependency relationships. Moreover the helpers also take personal risk, for example, we were told that long established families take out loans and guarantees for newcomers sometimes assuming indebtedness.

### 3.5.2 Activities fostering political participation

While integration is an established field of policy, institutions, and activities in Hesse and also in Bebra, political participation is way less developed. The reform of the Hessian Municipal Code 2020 has made political participation formats for foreign citizens obligatory in Hessian municipalities (see chap. 2.3). Municipalities, in-

cluding Bebra, are increasingly trying to achieve a more intensive political participation of all citizens through informal participation formats like neighbourhood walks and participation workshops. The establishment of these formats is still at an initial stage in Bebra. At the same time, MSOs are organising their members and professionalising their structures. This enables them to identify the demands of the communities they represent and then address them to policy-makers through formal and informal channels. Marginalised groups are gaining recognition through self-organisation. Nevertheless, the political organisation and articulation of interests of many other migrant groups is still missing.

### **Political participation activities initiated by the municipality**

We identify two types of activities initiated by the municipality: Activities demanded by the legal system including the establishment and regular meetings of the integration commission (IC, see chapter 2). The commission has the right to submit proposals for decisions to the city council. However, this right has not yet been exercised in Bebra with the IC now working since September 2021 (14 months at the moment). The voluntary activities are divided into formal occasion-related activities and informal citizen participation processes. In the formal occasion-related activities, the city administration invites the various stakeholders involved in a process, such as road construction, to express their views. The large MSOs in Bebra are regularly invited to such events. However, they have no decision-making power, they are just consulted. Migrant actors are also invited by the city to informal citizen participation processes. Formats of informal citizen participation such as neighbourhood walks and workshops are becoming more widespread in Germany; they are voluntary and their results do not bind the municipality. A self-created participation instrument in Bebra is the neighbourhood management advisory board for the north-western core city. According to the Head of the Department for Social Affairs, this committee is composed of an equal number of migrants and non-migrants.

## Political participation activities initiated by MSOs

MSOs organise themselves into sub-groups and in this way enable their members to have a more effective participation in the organisation. The Syrian Orthodox Church Association, for example, has set up a women's group and a youth parliament. We also learned of similar groups in the Turkish-Islamic Cultural Association. The large MSOs initiate political involvement by regularly organising informal discussion evenings with representatives from politics and administration, e.g. by inviting newly elected mayors to introductory visits, to talk about planned projects or to request information from the authorities on specific topics. In addition, migrant groups also use the support of public institutions to get in touch with political decision-makers. In one case, the staff of a municipal institution helped a group of Syrians write a letter to the city asking for facilities for their association:

*"I know from the Syrian refugees that they wanted to start a dance association where they could practise their traditional dances. I assisted them in writing a letter to a city officer to use the clubhouse for a certain period of time, so that they could then meet regularly" (Public service or commissioned 22, pos. 62).*

It is evident that Bebra's MSOs tend to implement their political participation through informal, rather than formal, channels of participation.

## 4. Strengthening political participation in Bebra

Based on the results of the studies on the legal framework and the migrant participation networks, a number of essential aspects appear to be essential for strengthening the political participation of migrants; these include strengthening the preconditions for political participation as well as expanding political rights as such.

## **4.1 Strengthen preconditions of political participation**

We can currently identify six strands that constitute a precondition on the basis of which successful and lasting political participation of migrants can be established. These relate to different issues like ways of communication and cooperation, but also institutional change or resources.

### **Strengthening communication and cooperation culture**

In order to build a stronger communication and cooperation culture, places of encounter and intercultural communication in the inner center of the city - before instance intercultural museums or intercultural libraries - could help to show social as well as migrant diversity. Such places could help to develop a constructive, view-broadening approach to diversity as well as personal relationships among the different population groups, especially within the adult population and the older generations.

### **Developing a culture of conflict resolution**

The empirical findings point to significant - but nevertheless common - conflicts, both within migrant ethnic groups and migrant organisations and against autochthonous parts of the local society. In fact Bebra is home to ethnic groups that have ethnic, religious and even military conflicts in their countries of origin. These kind of tensions, existing rejection of immigration among the autochthonous population, even racism, and unaddressed conflicts need to be made addressed explicitly. Ultimately, only a new culture of conflict management can bridge social divisions, in this direction conflict management activities may be included in the municipality's tasks and institutions, or alternatively might be carried out by external, professional support.

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## **Expanding social inclusion and participation**

There are considerable differences in interests between autochthonous and migrant population and also within the two. The social and legal inequalities between the immigrant and the autochthonous population have developed into disadvantages and privileges that reveal hierarchical - sometimes racist - stratification patterns between the different population groups. These differences need to be understood in order to generate impulses for increasing the social and participation of marginalized people. Such situation affects, among others, black people, migrant single women, elderly migrants, and, to some extent, young migrants, but also impoverished and deprived people of German descent. Moreover, after arriving in a new city, newcomers must first orient themselves and secure their livelihood. Many have the opportunity to become politically active only after having secured their own economic livelihood. Long-term economic security for all groups of the society is therefore also an essential precondition for successful participation. The political integration status is reflected in the social participation status, which means that if you want to promote political participation, you have to enable social advancement.

## **Supporting migrants organisations**

Because only few migrants are organised in MSOs, there is a large lack of support, especially for smaller, volunteer-based associations or non-formalized groups. Access to spaces and infrastructure as well as support in applying for funding are often missing. In this context, the establishment of a place of support, resembling the idea of the “Houses of Resources”<sup>4</sup> for e.g. the regional government district Hersfeld-Rothenburg, can be an instrument to facilitate information and training events on topics such as association and project management, applying for funding and fundraising or public relations.

4 See: [https://www.bamf.de/DE/Themen/Integration/AkteureEhrenamtlicheInteressierte/EhrenamtlichesEngagement/HousesOfResources/housesofresources\\_node.html](https://www.bamf.de/DE/Themen/Integration/AkteureEhrenamtlicheInteressierte/EhrenamtlichesEngagement/HousesOfResources/housesofresources_node.html)

## **Establishing institutional learning**

The sensitivity of administrative structures for intercultural issues and the opening to the civil society could be strengthened beyond the head of department of social affairs. This includes the intercultural opening of specialised departments as well as self-reflection actions and openness to processes of change in the administration in general. It also includes flatter hierarchies and a more equal involvement of all stakeholders in urban development processes. Since in some cases the integration of professionals with a migrant background into the regular services of non-migrant providers is already taking place successfully, the next step could be to advance the recognition of MSOs as providers of social services and political participation. Both measures increase permeability and promote openness on both sides. In addition, the administrative institutions could build up a better welcoming culture, which could also provide information about the opportunities for participation. Within the framework of the integration commission, strategies could be developed together on how the institutions could reduce difficulties.

## **Creating outreach work and group-specific integration services**

Since many primarily marginalized migrants - as well as other marginalized groups within the resident population - find it difficult to seek out existing integration services and are sometimes perceived as very isolated, there is a need to create outreach social work, meaning to seek the contact with marginalized groups actively rather than waiting to be contacted by them and group-specific integration services.

## **4.2 Strengthening political participation**

In order to strengthen the political participation of migrants, a distinction must be made between the different levels of responsibility.

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## **Municipal level**

### *Transforming and extending participation processes*

In future it will increasingly be necessary to transform and expand participation procedures. In particular, informal participation procedures that focus on the participation of the whole of civil society, including migrants, could lead to greater overall participation. This includes above all the informal instruments of urban development planning. The empirical results of this study have also shown that political bodies for the time being, still display low accessibility for newcomers. A change in their own self-image towards a more cooperative approach could contribute to their intercultural opening towards the whole civil society.

## **District level**

### *Supporting migrant organisations through political education*

At the political level, support for migrants and their organisations should also be considered. Among other things, migrants are still poorly acquainted with the structures and processes of the national, federal, and local German administrative and political system. It would be desirable to eliminate this lack of knowledge through applied political education to be imparted through organisations like the “House of Resources” mentioned above.

### *End unequal distribution of Resources*

There must be an end to the unequal distribution of financial resources and staff - for language teaching, among other things - between the capital of the regional government district and other district minor towns.

## **Federal state level**

### *Revision of municipal legislation*

The empirical findings show that there is a need to revise the instruments of migrant participation, i.e. the foreigners’ advisory

ry council and the integration commission, in two respects: (1) the municipal choosing process between the election of a foreigners' advisory council or the alternative formation of an integration commission (as per §86) does not seem to be sufficiently regulated. It implies that the municipalities undertake activities to hold elections for the foreigners' advisory council, but there are no regulations on how they have to come about. (2) The regulation of the right of petition in §88 - that foreigners' advisory councils and accordingly also the integration commissions are to be heard "in all matters concerning foreign residents" - leaves room for different interpretations. It should be formulated more clearly.

### *Support migrant organisations*

The district Hersfeld-Rothenburg and the federal state of Hesse are both responsible for filling the knowledge gap of the structures and processes of the German administrative and political system. The federal state should detail and underpin the 2020 requirement for the formation of an integration commission in the Hessian Local Government Act, clarifying tasks and rights, and setting up programmes to financially support the establishment of the above-mentioned "Houses of Resources".

### *Funding*

According to empirical results, the abundance and variety of voluntary tasks undertaken by individuals in small towns involve difficulties related to time resources and integration into professional but also family work. Specific support and privileges such as the introduction of a citizen's or public welfare allowance or a more favourable taxation could be granted in return for social and political voluntary work in rural areas and small towns. At the same time, municipal financing by the federal states could be regulated by a distribution pattern that rewards the public services provided by rural municipalities and civil society (social, cultural, political commitment) outside the official standard service.



## Conclusion

This report investigated the state of regulatory frameworks on different levels of government, the existing networks and the available activities for social integration and political participation in a small town in the state of Hesse in Germany. It further examines how integration and political participation can be enhanced in a small-town setting.

### **Regulatory frameworks**

The institutionalisation of integration measures at national level has made a leap since the 2000. In 2006 the federal government, the federal states, civil society organisations and migrant organisations jointly prepared the National Integration Plan. Its aim is to bundle the integration policy measures of all actors for a better integration of migrants living in Germany. However, political participation – described in the Integration Plan as “Political education as well as participation in parties and committees” – is only one small aspect of the whole Agenda and considers only political education and formal processes of participation. Connected with the National Integration Action Plan is a well-formed institutional restructuring as well as the division of tasks among all participants at all levels, that is national, state and local levels.

Since the mid-2010s, a clear intensification of legislative processes to develop general legal frameworks can be observed. In 2019, the migration package marks a sharp break and strictly separates incomers into two groups, roughly wanted and unwanted migrants: the rejected asylum seekers who are to receive deportation relief, and those who benefit because they are well integrated into the German labour market. Currently, a new three-tiered naturalization law (Einbürgerungsgesetz) is being discussed with the aim of facilitating immigration to the labour market in Germany, which is facing a severe shortage of labour force.

At the federal level, also in Hesse there has been a strong shift in integration policies and in establishing new structures. In 2009, Hesse began to view integration as a crosscutting task, a program for integration was launched, and a first Hessian Integration Plan was established in 2017. In 2020 Hesse reformed its municipal legislation to promote the political participation of immigrants. These reforms are being disputed, because the established Foreigners' Advisory Boards in the larger cities of Hesse and their influential and established actors fear that the new law might lead to fewer rights and less influence of migrants and their organisations. On the contrary, some small towns in particular are gaining a new tool and hope that this will give migrants a greater ability to influence the urban development processes.

For Bebra, migrant society is already a reality in view of the large variety of migrants in town. However, although a large proportion of interviewees in Bebra have a migration background and feel "integrated" in many areas, in local politics only a few people with a migration background are represented. On a spatial level, we observed segregation processes: between (1) the inner city, (2) the local districts with a high rate of natives and mainly owner-occupied houses, and (3) a neighbourhood mainly inhabited by the socially deprived, migrants and asylum seekers. Still, the majority of city councillors have come from the village districts (2) for decades, which demonstrates that political participation and socio-economic factors intersect in Bebra and political migrant participation is weakly institutionalised. Even though the Integration Commission (IC) started its work in 2021; it is still in the phase of running in and gaining experience. In order to implement its tasks successfully, the commission needs targeted support, which means IC member training on the political culture of Germany and its institutions, on the structure and function of the administration and on administrative action and consequently being able to reduce all barriers that hinder participation of migrants in political work. Apart from the main problems that Bebra of course shares with other places, like the safeguarding of privileges or even existing racism, there are also

seemingly neglectable issues like difficulties caused by shift work and commuting, which make afternoon participation in events impossible. An exemption obligation on the part of employers, similar to that applied for volunteer firefighters or other collective interest activities, would be a simple solution.

Also at the level of social participation, which we consider a prerequisite for political participation, too, and where great progress was achieved in the past years, there is still room for improvement. In light of the growing attractiveness of the inner city, it is complicated to integrate new arrivals and the generation of young families into the housing market. Furthermore, there is an urgent need for the state to take responsibility for guaranteeing social security instruments in times of poverty and hunger, such as food banks, etc. Last, but not less important, the lack of German language skills is the most urgent obstacle to integration – and consequently to political participation – across all migrant communities. A better provision of language courses is the most important target for integration. Language courses take place in the district and the city, but they are far from covering the great demand. Moreover, a solution to the shortage of language teachers and to reduce travel time and costs to reach the centres where the classes are held does not seem to be achievable in the medium term. Overall considered, much has been done at the regulatory level in the last decades, but full political migrant participation is still far away.

### **Network of political participation**

The strength of the network is at the same time its weak point: its dependence on one central key person with decision-making power (as well as a few other main actors). This person's influence is widespread in the networks, and thus networks depend on this figure. On the positive side, a key person can foster a fast central decision-making, but at the same time has difficulties to maintain the critical distance that any democratic process needs. Even if young migrants are allowed to participate through informal participation

measures at neighbourhood level, and despite middle-class migrants are integrated as important economic actors, it must be stated that political institutions and parties are still dominated by people of German descent. The relatively weak social influence of migrants and the lack of articulation of interests seems to be problematic.

Small-town specific reasons are also responsible for the lack of representation of migrants in the political process. The fear of sanctions for misconduct in a small town may be greater than in large cities and likewise, the narrow staffing of politics and administration rest on the shoulders of a few people serving many functions simultaneously. In Bebra, this affects almost all stakeholders we have spoken to. Work overload and overstress seem to be the basic characteristic of responsible, committed citizens as well as political or administrative functionaries.

### **Activities of integration and political participation**

The activities of the existing network for integration in Bebra focus on a wide range of offers and services for social and cultural participation and thus for political participation. The majority of integration activities are formally organised by public providers such as the two welfare organisations Diakonie and Caritas - whose funding is not always secured in the long term - as well as the two large MSOs, the Islamic Cultural Association and the Syrian Orthodox Church and Cultural Association, activities are also organised by public providers from the municipalities and the district. Informal activities are offered by a network of private volunteers. Both formal and informal activities focus on basic help and support such as arranging language courses, assistance in contacts with the authorities, help for social benefit applications, finding accommodation and work, etc. On the one hand, informally organised integration activities can offer quick and need-based help, on the other, there is a danger that the newcomers do not come into contact with the official bodies at all, do not learn to cope with the German structures and the local society, ending with isolating themselves in the long run. Most of the

positions in the professional structures are filled by autochthonous Germans, while many voluntary activities are carried out by migrants. We see an imbalance here and the potential for more public positions to be filled by people with a migration background as part of peer learning experience. In Bebra, there are also only a few activities that explicitly deal with political participation.

### **Strengthening political participation in Bebra**

Our empirical study shows that political participation at present is strongly correlated with socioeconomic participation. For this reason, it seems necessary to strengthen the preconditions for political participation and to expand political rights as such. To strengthen the preconditions for political participation, we propose strengthening a culture of communication and cooperation in the city, e.g. by creating (public) places of encounter. Developing a culture of conflict resolution is becoming increasingly important for municipalities with a high proportion of migrants. Conflicts between residents of various backgrounds, not necessarily bound to a dichotomy of migrants vs. German descent, emerge owing to social and legal inequalities that need to be addressed and negotiated. Strengthening social cohesion seems to be one of the most essential tasks. We have seen that MSOs may play a bridging role between communities, their members and the municipality. This potential should be exploited by targeting MSOs and their cooperation with public authorities. We see further potential in the processes discussed under “institutional learning” and “intercultural opening”. In Germany public authorities in particular are encouraged to take on a pioneering role and adapt their structures and processes to the reality of life and the needs of citizens i.

In order to strengthen the political participation of migrants explicitly, changes should be targeted at three levels. The municipality can stimulate participation through informal processes as otherwise it would not be able to achieve any results. For this purpose, the city could set itself self-committed goals and expand its

participation processes. The lack of understanding of the structures and processes of the German administrative and political system can be addressed by suitable programmes of assistance and knowledge transfer offered by the regional government district. In addition, there must be an end to the unequal distribution of financial resources and staff - for language teaching, among other things - between the capital of the regional government district and other district minor towns.

Our empirical findings reveal three aspects for the state of Hesse that need to be addressed in order to revise the idea of the Integration Commission. 1) Hesse has to clarify the regulation of the commissions' proposal right, and introduce IC members to this tool, especially if the municipalities use a restrictive interpretation. 2) It must be ensured that the citizens of Hesse, but especially the members of public boards such as the Integration Commission, gain deeper knowledge of the political system of the Federal Republic of Germany as well as the possibilities that the instrument of the IC offers. 3) In small towns, there are multiple burdens falling on a few people in volunteer work. Therefore, new financing models are needed, such as the introduction of an income for community work, or a return for social and political volunteer work in small towns and communities.

In cooperation with the city of Bebra, we follow the goal of strengthening the participation of people with a migration history in the design, implementation and evaluation of an integration policy and to foster political participation in a wider sense. This small town has a long tradition of international immigration and its dynamics can partly be compared with those of big cities. Nevertheless, there seem to be some small-town specific aspects that are relevant for the instruments to strengthen political participation. These encompass a less specialised administration with limited personnel, more immediate social bonds but also stronger social control, engaged individuals acting in a number of roles, overburdening themselves, and a concentration of networks depending on individuals that take

over a central role making the network system more effective but also more dependent. Such key figures also concentrate their own power to shape political processes. Therefore, testing new appropriate policy instruments will be vital in the upcoming second part of the project.

We close our report with a final and maybe more academic note. The project is focused on migrants' social integration and political participation. Given that AMIF EU is the main funding body for this project, this is in a way something due. However, a focus on migrants in general suggests migrants to be a somehow homogeneous group. Scholars from a range of disciplines have instead underlined the differences within such groups and across the migrants vs. autochthonous divide with concepts like "superdiversity" or even "hyperdiversity". Although also people of German descent are marginalized and have limited access to political decisions, many recent and former migrants are well integrated, they have even become members of local elites, and go for high positions or political mandates. Actually, they partly no longer see themselves as migrants. From a so-called post-migrant perspective – in the German civil and academic discourse widely debated – there is a urge to stop contributing to such sorting and categorising. Therefore, we would emphasise that enhancing political participation is best addressed in an intersectional perspective.

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# Local practices of integration and local networks.

## The case of Fermignano

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### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Historical development of immigration in Italy

Italy has long been a country with high emigration rates, with migration flows towards northern European countries and other continents. Since the 1970s, the net migration rate has become increasingly positive, with inflows exceeding outflows. However, at a political and policy level, Italy continued to self-represent itself as a “migrant-sending” country, with minimal regulation of incoming migration: a key issue in the experience of migrants to Italy, who are not rarely pushed into an irregular or precarious status that heavily affects their lives, precluding access to rights, services and benefits and exposing them to labour exploitation and other forms of socio-economic inequality (Ambrosini 2018; Gargiulo 2021).

Immigration to Italy is primarily a labour migration, especially up to the 2000s, this migration flow later diverted due to stop policies implemented in major European destinations and attracted by specific pull factors in the Italian labour market, with characteristics that place it within a “Mediterranean” model (King 2000): a high

share of undocumented residents and employment in the unskilled, precarious and informal labour market, especially in agriculture and services, including family welfare. However, Italy is at a more advanced stage of the migration transition (Baldwin-Edwards 2012) than other southern European countries, as immigrants are also employed in small industrial enterprises, because of Italy's manufacturing orientation. Nevertheless, the economic crisis of 2007-2008 affected the employment of immigrants extensively, widening the gap between natives and immigrants, who ended up in poverty and material deprivation: as an army of backup workers immigrants were the first to be expelled from the labour market and standard jobs (Mezzadra, Neilson 2013; Barberis 2018).

Due to its geographical position in the centre of the Mediterranean as the “gateway to Europe”, Italy also constitutes a major landing and transit country for asylum seekers, who mainly arrive from the Libyan route, fleeing wars, political crises, environmental degradation and resource depletion (Hasselberg 2013; Ambrosini 2018). In general, the number of new permits issued every year has been decreasing in the long run: 2017-2018 apart, the decrease started in 2010 and peaked in 2019 when new immigrants amounted to some 250.000 – 25% less than in 2018<sup>1</sup> – despite an enduring public discourse on a permanent emergency (Bigo 2007). Border crossings plunged between 2018 and 2020, mostly due to government restrictions. New flows are now active after the limitations related to the pandemic travel bans and considering the ongoing Russian-Ukraine war (2022).

Today, Italy has one of the largest numbers of immigrant residents in Europe, and it is at the forefront of some of the most meaningful social and institutional challenges regarding immigrant-related diversity (Barberis 2018). These challenges include social reception and incorporation of super-diversity (Vertovec 2007), along with the layering of diversified immigrant groups in terms of length and reason of stay, origin and migration path, as well as transformation of

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1 Elaboration of Eurostat, *Immigration by age and sex 1990-2020*, indicator MIGR\_IMM8.



national identities up to the recognition of new and future citizens from immigrant backgrounds (Ambrosini et al. 2020).

According to ISMU<sup>2</sup> (2022), on 1st January 2021, the foreign residents in Italy amounted to 5.756.000 (including some 500.000 undocumented persons) – some 9.6% of the total population. For a richer picture of migration-related diversity, we shall also add an estimated 1,6 million naturalised Italian citizens.

Focusing on the spatial distribution of foreign residents, they live much more in Central and Northern Italy; 38% live in the 14 largest metropolitan areas. Just under half of the non-EU citizens live in cities or densely populated areas, about 41% in small towns and suburbs and a little over a tenth in rural or sparsely populated areas: the spatial distribution depends on the housing and labour markets (ISTAT 2020). Currently, the foreign population in Italy is decidedly younger than the Italian one: the mean age is 35 compared to 46; resident foreign minors are some 1 million, i.e. 20% of foreign residents, compared to 15.1% of the Italian population.

The largest groups of foreign residents are citizens of Romania (21% of foreign residents), Albania and Morocco (some 8% each), China (6,4%) and Ukraine (4,5%). Migration to Italy is quite balanced regarding gender, as 51,2% are women (ISTAT 2020). Among the largest national groups, female migration is more prevalent among Central and Eastern Europeans (Romania, Ukraine, Moldova, Poland), while older national groups, such as those from Albania, Morocco and China, are more gender-balanced, due to reunifications and family-driven migration. National groups with predominantly male migration are those from India, Bangladesh, Egypt, Pakistan, Nigeria and Senegal – which also include relevant shares of recent flows.

About 63% of all permits are long-term: this means that there is a high share of long-term residents, in fact the permit can be is-

2 Independent scientific body analysing migration in Lombardy, Italy and Europe.

sued after 5 years of permanent stay only if the applicant passes an Italian language test and earns a sufficient income. The permit is not subject to renewal, so it is an important step toward a stable position in Italy. Other permits are issued mainly for family (48.6%) and work reasons (41.6%), while in recent years, the share of protection and asylum permits has clearly increased.

## **1.2 Local case: development of immigration in Fermignano**

Fermignano is a small town with about 8243 inhabitants (2022), located in the province of Pesaro and Urbino in the Marche region in Central Italy. The Marche Region is characterised by a relevant presence of foreign population: as of the 1st of January 2022, foreign residents sum up to 127,606, representing 8,6% of the total population (in line with the national share of 8,8%).<sup>3</sup>

As for the municipality of Fermignano, according to official statistical data, it counts 833 foreign residents (2022), i.e. some 10% of the resident population. Although this share is higher than the regional and national one, it has decreased in recent years for two main reasons: the general shrinking of the local population and the naturalisation of long-term residents.

Ten years ago, in 2012, Fermignano had 8646 residents (a loss of 0.5% per year has been recorded), 1246 of which were foreigners (14%). In the period 2016-2020, almost 8% of foreign residents became Italian citizens, while some 6% left the town<sup>4</sup>.

Historically, the vibrant industrial activity in the area hosted relevant manufacturing sites – landmarking the townscape. Over the last decades, large (e.g. the home furniture firm IMAB and the

3 See [demo.istat.it](http://demo.istat.it).

4 Own calculations on data from [demo.istat.it](http://demo.istat.it). Please note that, unlike national ISMU statistics mentioned in the introduction, Istat data do not include estimates on irregular immigrants.

cookware factory TVS) and smaller firms attracted workers both from other regions of Italy and from abroad, especially North Africa and Eastern Europe. However, following the economic crisis of 2008, several families, mainly from North Africa, left Fermignano to head to other European countries. For example, the number of Moroccan residents decreased sharply from 470 in 2011 to 208 in 2021. On the other hand, this trend has been partially countered by the growing presence of sub-Saharan newcomers, particularly from West Africa, including asylum seekers and holders of humanitarian or international protection.

As of January 2021, the largest group of foreign residents is still from Morocco (24.3% of all foreigners), followed by Albania (22.6%), Romania (17.3%) and Nigeria (10%). Overall, there are 41 nationalities residing in the municipality.

**Table 1. Demographic variables about the immigrant population at the national, regional, provincial and local levels.**

	<b>Immigrant population</b>	<b>Immigration rate</b>	<b>Variation 2011-2021 (%)</b>	<b>U20 immigrants (%)</b>	<b>Female immigrants (%)</b>
Italy	5.193.669	8,8%	13,2%	21,9%	51,2%
Marche Region	127.606	8,6%	-10,9%	20,2%	53,6%
Province of Pesaro and Urbino	28.684	8,1%	-17,2%	20,2%	54,9%
Municipality of Fermignano	833	10,1%	-32,0%	23,1%	53,6%

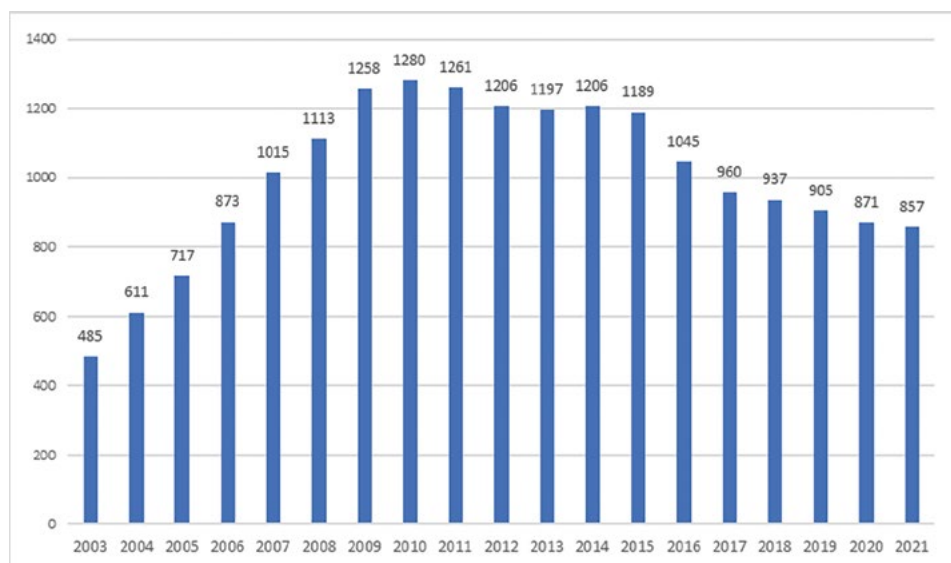
*Source: Own calculation from Istat data<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>5</sup> Data on immigrant population and immigration rate are referred to 2022, while the rest of the data presented in the two tables refer to 2021. Source: Elaboration on Istat data (<http://stra-dati.istat.it/>).

**Table 2. Immigrant population by countries of origin at the national, regional, provincial and local levels.**

	<b>1st national group</b>	<b>2nd national group</b>	<b>3rd national group</b>	<b>4th national group</b>	<b>Countries of origin (n)</b>
Italy	Romania (20,8%)	Albania (8,4%)	Morocco (8,3%)	Popular Republic of China (6,4%)	198
Marche Region	Romania (17,9%)	Albania (11,1%)	Morocco (7,7%)	Popular Republic of China (7,6%)	164
Province of Pesaro and Urbino	Romania (18,5%)	Albania (12,6%)	Morocco (10,8%)	Moldova (7,9%)	141
Municipality of Fermignano	Morocco (24,3%)	Albania (22,6%)	Romania (17,3%)	Nigeria (10,0%)	41

Source: Own calculation on Istat data

**Figure 1. Municipality of Fermignano: number of foreign residents, 2003-2021.**

Source: Own calculation on Istat data.

## 2. Migrant reception and integration in the Italian legal framework

The Italian Constitution defines the general principles on the right to asylum, equality and fundamental rights of non-citizens, leaving the task of regulating in detail migration topics to the legislator. However, migration has mainly been dealt with through “emergency decrees”, piling up highly politicised, confusing and often contrasting regulations (Campesi 2011; Marchetti 2014; Pitzalis 2020).

The first organic law on immigration, also dictated by emergency reasons, was passed in 1990 (the so-called Martelli law, by the name of its first proponent) and it introduced basic welfare measures for immigrants and established an entry system based on the planning of maximum quotas to labour market needs (Colucci 2018).

However, the first general systematic law on immigration, supported and integrated by European and regional legislation (the so-called Turco-Napolitano, Law 40/98), was approved only in 1998. This Law renovated the Italian legal system with the first “Consolidated Law on Immigration”, currently the primary Law on immigration. The Law regulated family reunification (even before it was legislated at the European level) and extended to foreigners a set of rights previously not included in the Italian regulatory system, such as the provision of entry for job search, the establishment of a residence card to stabilise long-term residents and the extension of basic health care also for irregular immigrants. In particular, Chapter IV of the Law includes provisions on social integration, discrimination and the establishment of the Fund for Migration Policies (articles 42 - 46). At the same time, the Law strengthened the control and expulsion policies, considered necessary and complementary to integration measures and national needs.

Since 1998, several amendments have followed, further regulating and stiffening the law’s original structure. In particular, the

focus was on immigration policy, intending to restrain the inflows (mainly through the criminalisation of migration, e.g. with the introduction of prosecution of undocumented migration as a crime in 2008, or with the legalisation of administrative detention in dedicated facilities, and the criminalisation of migration-solidarity initiatives). Law 189/2002 (also known as “Law Bossi-Fini”) acted on the controls of residing migrants in Italy, progressively shortening the duration of residence permits, enhancing the role of the migrant reception centres, and facilitating and increasing expulsions by accompanying the migrants to the border, introducing fingerprinting for all foreigners, introducing the crime of illegal stay.

The legal framework was further tightened in 2018 and 2020 (through the so-called “Salvini Decrees”), introducing amendments to the core legal features of the right to asylum. Today, immigration quotas for non-European workers are defined each year by the Government through a specific Decree (the so-called “Decreto flussi”).

## **2.1 Integration policies**

In terms of integration policies, Italy has its own peculiarities. Although it is quite hard to mention an Italian model of integration, we may recognise a “modality” consistent with Italy’s political culture and welfare state, defined as indirect, implicit and subordinate (Caponio, Graziano 2011) and developed more by chance than by design, with an accumulation of local practices often disconnected from each other, inconsistent national measures, accelerations due to European Union pressures and court rulings. However, a somewhat coherent policy puzzle has nonetheless been progressively created. This policy framework is evident in a widespread rejection of traditional European integration models, whether assimilationist or multicultural, in favour of an assumed intercultural model (Barberis 2018). This model implies both weak assimilation (e.g., lack of policies to contrast inequality and support inclusion) and multiculturalism (lack of policies to recognise minorities) (Bertolani, Perocco

2013; Tarabusi 2014). In this sense, although Italy can no longer be considered a latecomer in migration policies, it is still lagging in establishing a clear policy for incorporating diversity.

Few policies, however, have been implemented to define and realise the possible integration pathways. The most systematic tool concerning the integration of migrants is the so-called “Integration Agreement” (D.P.R. 179/2011<sup>6</sup>), constituting a prerequisite for obtaining the “Residence Permit by Points”, with a series of requirements considered key to integration. The agreement is a binding pact stipulated between the Italian State and a foreign non-EU citizen aged 16 or more who, entering Italy for the first time, applies for a residence permit of no less than one year.<sup>7</sup> The Agreement lasts 2 years, during which the foreign citizen has to obtain the 30 credits necessary for fulfilling the Agreement conditions, designed to ensure integration through knowledge of the Italian language and fundamental civic principles. With the Agreement, the foreign citizen commits to acquiring an adequate level of knowledge of the Italian language (level A2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages); sufficient knowledge of the fundamental principles of the Constitution and the functioning of public institutions in Italy; sufficient knowledge of civil life in Italy (health, school, social services, work, tax obligations); and undertakes to guarantee the fulfilment of the education obligation for minors; adhere to and respect the principles of the “Charter of Citizenship” and Integration Values. On the other hand, the State commits to support the process of integration of the foreign citizen through various initiatives in agreement with the Regions and local bodies; these can avail themselves of the collaboration of the adult education and training centres, third sector organisations, employers’ associations and trade unions.

6 See: <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/temi/immigrazione-e-asilo/modalita-dingresso/accordo-integrazione-straniero-richiede-permesso-soggiorno>.

7 Unaccompanied foreign minors under guardianship, disabled, and victims of trafficking, violence, or exploitation must not sign, as the Agreement is replaced by completing a ‘social assistance and integration program’. The Agreement has a duration of 2 years, during which the foreign citizen has to obtain the 30 credits necessary for fulfilling the Agreement conditions.

In 2017, Italy also adopted the “National Integration Plan for Persons Entitled to International Protection”,<sup>8</sup> as foreseen by decree 18/2014, which transposed the EU’s recast Qualification Directive (Directive 2011/95/EU). The Plan included interreligious and intercultural dialogue, language training, access to education, labour inclusion, and vocational training, and was enforced mainly by local authorities and public services, supported by civil society organisations. Currently, the “Multi-Year Integrated Programming in the Field of Work, Integration and Inclusion (2021-2027)”<sup>9</sup> constitutes the main policy document at the national level providing a concerted plan among ministries, local authorities, associations and third-sector organisations for the integration of migrants into the labour market and the Italian society. The seven priority actions of the plan include: improving the governance of integration with a view to vertical (central government, regions and local authorities) and horizontal (social partners, third sector, migrant associations, etc.) subsidiarity; preventing and combating undeclared work; socio-occupational integration of specific vulnerable groups of migrants (refugees and asylum seekers, unaccompanied foreign minors, women with minors, etc. ) by promoting social and labour inclusion of migrant women; enhancement of skills and actions to prevent school dropout and the link between education, training and the labour market; actions to prevent all forms of discrimination, and finally the promotion of legal channels for legal entry. An “Agreement for the programming and development of a system of interventions aimed at favouring social integration and labour inclusion of migrants regularly present in Italy”<sup>10</sup> was also stipulated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (Directory General for Immigration and Integration Policies) and the Regions, regulating the coordination between the national and the Regional Level.

8 The Plan included inter-religious and intercultural dialogue, language training, access to education, labour inclusion, and vocational training; whose main actors responsible for the implementation were local authorities and public services, supported by civil society organisations.

9 See <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita/immigrazione/Documents/Programmazione-integrata-gennaio-2022.pdf>.

10 See: [shorturl.at/fnrZ5](https://shorturl.at/fnrZ5).



It might be assumed that “integration” should be considered in a “flexible” way, adaptable to a variety of Regional-local paths, and guided by the underlying need to establish and maintain “social peace,” avoid disorder and conflicts, to be achieved through actions that ensure “incorporation” to the autochthonous social texture, and through the creation of economically productive-proactive relationships with the newcomers. Nevertheless, the lack of a national policy framework on integration generates several problems of coordination between authorities and stakeholders on funding opportunities, and possible politicisation (regionalisation) of the migration issue and development of local policies aimed at excluding migrants from various types of benefits and rights (Ambrosini 2013). Such a situation led to a high territorialisation of integration policies at the local level, with many local authorities adopting exclusionary policies through local ordinances (Gargiulo 2011). However, opposite situations also emerge, especially in small towns engaged in reception, where more welcoming and often innovative measures have been developed (Gretter *et al.* 2017; Driel 2020; Patuzzi *et al.* 2020).

The above-mentioned coordination problems also emerge in the overlapping of different actors involved in the multi-level governance of immigration, both vertically (state, regions, and other local authorities) and horizontally (private and public actors). This assumption is confirmed by research (Campomori, Caponio 2017), which showed that in migration policymaking regions have challenged the national government’s attempts to override them; on the other hand, the national government has begun to challenge the constitutionality of regional immigration laws. The lack of a transparent “Italian model” of integration is therefore also a consequence of – and at the same time finds expression in – an unbalanced organisation of migration governance, which focuses mainly on control and security concerns rather than on integration policies.

Overall, as numerous scholars have pointed out (Barberis *et al.* 2017; Colombo 2017), Italy’s national political debates and agendas have usually framed discourses about migration and diversity

(and planned policies and allocated resources) in connection with the construction of supposed “emergencies” (from Roma camps, to refugees and neighbourhood crime). Therefore, Italy’s immigration policy wavered between security concerns, humanitarian claims (expressed by third-sector organisations, the Catholic Church and trade unions) and functionalist perspectives (carried on by social and political pro-business actors). As a result, a late, confused and unplanned immigrant policy emerged with a deficient legal framework. This also means that the local level plays a relevant role in making up the actual national policy line (Campomori, Caponio 2013), as it is the arena where most of the policies and practices take place, although with a poorly coordinated but effective multi-level governance. However, this comes more *de facto* than according to a precise strategy (Angelucci et al. 2019).

**Table 3. Competences and potential overlapping of different levels of governance in the Italian context.**

	<b>Competences</b>	<b>Potential overlapping and conflicts</b>
<i>EU level</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General framework on immigration statuses and rights;</li> <li>• Allocation of funds (e.g., AMIF).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clashes between EU and national laws.</li> </ul>
<i>National level</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National immigration policies and law (regulation of admission, legal statuses and the limit of political participation for non-citizens);</li> <li>• Allocation of funds (e.g., central reception system, FAMI).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clashes between EU and national laws;</li> <li>• Clashes between national and regional competencies (immigration and welfare policies);</li> <li>• Differences between national policies and street-level implementation.</li> </ul>
<i>Regional level</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Definition of welfare policies;</li> <li>• Definition of instrument for non-citizens’ political participation;</li> <li>• Allocation of funds for welfare policies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clashes between national and regional competencies (immigration and welfare policies).</li> </ul>

	<b>Competences</b>	<b>Potential overlapping and conflicts</b>
<i>Provincial and local state institutions (e.g., Prefectures)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementation of national immigration laws;</li> <li>• Management of emergency reception programmes (CAS).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conflict against municipalities over emergency reception;</li> <li>• Conflict against third sector organisations over the street-level implementation of national measures.</li> </ul>
<i>Intermunicipal institutions (e.g., ATS)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Territorial planning of social policies;</li> <li>• Management of some reception programmes;</li> <li>• Language teaching in CPIA.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overlapping of competencies with municipalities or third-sector actors (e.g., language teaching).</li> </ul>
<i>Municipal level</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementation of social policies;</li> <li>• Adoption of local integration policies;</li> <li>• Implementation of measures for non-citizens' participation;</li> <li>• Management of voluntary reception.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clashes between national policies and local integration measures;</li> <li>• Clashes between local policies and third-sector actors over local measures.</li> </ul>
<i>Civil society and third sector actors</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actual street-level implementation of local integration policies and reception as contractors;</li> <li>• Compensation of gaps in public planning through volunteering.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conflict against state institutions over the street-level implementation of national measures;</li> <li>• Clashes between local policies and third-sector actors over local measures.</li> </ul>

Sources: Own elaboration

## 2.2. Competences and responsibilities of institutions at the national level

In addition to the “Committee for the Coordination and Monitoring of Immigration Provisions”, chaired by the President or Vice-President of the Council of Ministers, as established by the

“Consolidated Law on Immigration”, legislation on immigration is governed by different ministries at the national level and the division of responsibilities and competences is as follows:

**The Ministry of the Interior**, through the Department of Civil Liberties and Immigration and the Department of Public Security, operates within the scope of the ministry’s functions in protecting civil rights, which are immigration, asylum, and citizenship. Prefectures, that is, the offices – usually one per Province – representing the national government at the local level, are responsible for work permits for foreigners, family reunification and conversion of residence permits. They are also required by law to have their own advisory bodies on migration issues, called Territorial Councils for Immigration. These Councils may involve local administrations, advocacy bodies and trade unions and are called upon very variably in time and space, according to the prioritisation given to migration issues by Prefects and their staff.

**The Ministry of Labour and Social Policies** is responsible for overseeing the monitoring and evaluating the migrants’ socio-economic integration and publishing annual reports on migrants’ integration in the labour market and their access to pension schemes. Despite the National Council of Economy and Labour developed a set of indicators on migrant integration (including occupational integration and the “degree of attractiveness” of Italy’s different provinces, regions, and macro-areas), a systematised evaluation of the integration of migrants at the national, regional, and local levels is still not traceable.

The 1999 Consolidation Act on Immigration launched the “Register of associations, organisations and other private bodies carrying out activities in favour of foreigners” at the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies.

In this context it is worth mentioning an initiative promoted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy - Directorate General of Immigration and Integration Policies and co-funded by the European Fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals: the mapping of

migrant associations<sup>11</sup> at the national level, that was carried out for the first time in 2014 by the IDOS Study and Research Centre. The website allows associations to be tracked by denomination or community of reference. Currently, 1150 migrant-based associations are registered in the database.

**The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation**, instead, is competent in issuing entry visas to foreigners.

On the side of the education system, the guidelines of the Ministry of Education, University, and Research recommend that schools organise Italian language labs for foreign students, lasting a total of 8-10 hours per week (about 2 hours per day), for a duration of 3-4 months.<sup>12</sup> Recommendations also mention a balanced and heterogeneous composition of classes, with foreign students not exceeding 30% of the total.

### **2.3. Migrant participation and representation at the national level**

Considering all the policy instruments presented above, however, there is still an incomplete description of the broader pattern of “integration-inclusion”, or a systematised strategy, methodology and/or methods of evaluation (milestones, expected results) of what should be considered as achieved/concluded or even ideally “successful” integration through unimpeded access to the local welfare system and participation, which is articulated in different levels both as a policy instrument and political disposition (Cognetti 2022).

In this context, MIPLEX 2020 scores Italy 58/100, higher than the average MIPLEX country (50) and slightly above average among

11 <https://integrazioneimmigranti.gov.it/it-it/Ricerca-Associazioni>. For the organisations of associations representing second generations and their dialogue with public institutions see: <http://conngi.it/>.

12 See “Linee guida per l'accoglienza e l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri”: <http://www.centrocome.it/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/4-Linee-Guida.pdf>.

EU and Western European (EU15)/OECD countries. Foreign citizens in Italy can benefit from access to basic rights and halfway favourable policies on equal opportunities, but they do not enjoy the long-term security to settle permanently, invest in integration and participate as full citizens. Major obstacles tend to emerge in political participation and access to citizenship, as immigrants face slightly unfavourable policies. In fact, Italy is one of the few European countries not granting any right to vote to non-EU residents (not even at the local level).

While the various legislative initiatives taken in the direction of extending the right to vote or to facilitate access to citizenship (e.g. *ius scholae*) have not, in fact, had any concrete development, several alternative means of migrant participation have been tried out over the past decades, such as dedicated Councils, whose composition should reflect the presence of different stakeholders in migrant integration policies, including immigrant associations. The first national association is “the Council for the problems of non-EU workers and their families”, which was established by the Ministry of Labour and Social Security by Law 943/86<sup>13</sup> (art. 2), and also provided for the establishment of regional Councils, similar to the National Council in composition and purpose (art. 2 c.7). Although the National Council is currently not operational, the Regional ones operate in some regions with varying degrees of attention to migration issues.

Regions are also competent for measures regarding the political participation of immigrants at the local level, following a troubled legislative process started with the enactment of the 1992 Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local Level through Art.8, c.5 of the Law Decree 267/2000 and culminated in the Sentence 379/2004 of the Constitutional Court (Menegus 2019). At a general level, these measures usually provide the possibility for

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13 The Consolidation Act on Immigration (Legislative Decree 286/98, art. 42, c. 4) provided for the establishment, at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, of the Council for Immigrant Workers and their Families (with tasks and composition similar to the previous one), regulated, as far as constitution and functioning modalities are concerned, by article 55 of the Implementation Regulation (Presidential Decree no. 394/99 and subsequent amendments). The last decree established by the Consulta is the Prime Ministerial Decree of 9.11.2007.

local authorities to establish advisory bodies and they have paved the way for some experiments for the representation of immigrants' needs and voices at the local level. In particular, the instruments that have been more frequently introduced are (1) the Advisory Boards and Immigrant Councils, which are composed of representatives of the different nationalities present in the territory, directly elected by resident foreign citizens or appointed by migrants' associations and communities; (2) the figure of Deputy Councillor, who is allowed to participate in the municipal council and present petitions concerning resident immigrants, even if he does not have the right to vote.

Although these bodies have stimulated the establishment of immigrant associations willing to be represented, their impact seems to be very limited due to (1) the inability to represent the heterogeneity of migrant groups and different instances and (2) the weak capacity to affect decision-making processes, thus evidencing their predominantly symbolic character (Caponio 2006; Recchi 2006; Colloca 2008).

## **3. Migration policymaking at the regional and local level: the case of Marche Region and Municipality of Fermignano**

### **3.1 Regional Level: Competences and responsibilities of regions in migration management**

Regions have an active role in the implementation of the migration policy: following the constitutional principle of subsidiarity, implementation of policies must be done by regions and other local

authorities through agreements stipulated with associations of migrants and associations regularly registered in the official registers. Reception and anti-discrimination policies, assistance, social protection, and integration initiatives are included in these agreements by independently managing state resources as well as their own funds. Furthermore, regions exercise the functions of verifying the implementation of services at the subregional level and regulating the integration of measures, particularly regarding health and social assistance. Since the regions enjoy full autonomy in planning and implementing policies, in practice management and coordination of services are highly diversified from region to region.

More specifically, the measures that the Regions and Local Authorities are called upon to deal with range from the teaching of the Italian language to the enhancement of the culture of origin, to cultural mediation in services, to training courses, to access to housing. In other words, whatever is included in the field of welfare policy is largely within regional responsibility. On the one hand, the regions have exclusive competence over welfare policies, even though after the reform of Article V of the Italian Constitution immigration is a matter of exclusive state competence; on the other hand, welfare policies include many measures that are also crucial in the field of immigration and, particularly, socio-economic incorporation (e.g. labour policies, housing, etc.).

### **3.1.1 The case of Marche Region**

The first Regional Law regulating migration in Region Marche was issued in 1998 – actually, four days before the National Law. Consistently with the policy context of centre-left governments, integration is praised in terms of reciprocity between third-country nationals and the native population.

Currently, integration issues are regulated by Regional Law 13/2009 with “Provisions in support of the rights and integration of



immigrant foreign citizens” which regulated the creation of “training, retraining and professional updating” paths with interventions provided for by current legislation extended to foreigners as well as interventions specifically aimed at facilitating the “integration of immigrants in the labour market; school staff and operators of local authorities who are in daily contact with immigrants through the coordination of projects on intercultural education” (Art. 11); the design of “courses for the training and updating of intercultural mediators, enhancing this profession” (Art. 15) and the guarantee of the right to housing, promoting “actions aimed at guaranteeing equal conditions for migrants in the search for housing solutions” (Art. 16).

In terms of intercultural education, EU-funded projects (AMIF/FAMI) are important sources to contribute to language education in partnership with a few schools (those with a limited ripple effect on the school institutions at the regional level as a whole). These funds are also employed for promoting social and labour inclusion and counteracting labour exploitation by financing projects with specific activities involving different actors in the social arena.

In short, despite the existence of a specific and long-standing regional legislation - which not only guarantees equal opportunities for migrants in different aspects (health, legal, education, employment, housing, interculturality, and the like) but also expresses an idea of inclusion based on a mutual effort for respect, reciprocity and knowledge - the specific provisions of this legislation are still poorly implemented by local public policies in the context under review. In fact, among the above-mentioned regulations, only a few were applied, for example the professional profile of the intercultural mediator was defined twice, and the training courses were implemented. Yet this professional was not clearly included as necessary in most migration-related services and projects.

### **3.1.2. Migrant participation and representation at the regional level**

The aforementioned Law established the “Regional Council of Immigrants” with the task of expressing its opinion on “regional initiatives and interventions on immigration, within the framework of the plans and programs on social and health matters, professional orientation, vocational training, right to study, lifelong education, public housing”, the Council is to be activated in a separate but collaborative form by the Region and the local authorities, with a three-year regional program. An innovative element concerns the inclusion, among the Council’s tasks (art. 5) of “cooperation with the Regional Observatory for Social Policies [...] to constantly monitor the migration phenomenon in the region in order to use the data to support regional planning”.

In theory, this Council included several representatives of local and national institutions, third-sector bodies, and the voluntary sector; it provided for the participation of “one representative for each ethnic association listed in the register”, acting as a consulting body and representative of different levels of governance and social groups. On the contrary the Council has hardly convened for years, and the regulation of the Regional register also proved to be a barrier for several active associations and groups. What’s more the Council does not really represent the whole foreign population as it is counterbalanced by a substantial presence of components of Italian citizenship (Menegus 2019). Probably this happens because representatives of migration-related minorities have to pass through a double filter: first, that of the registration of their association in the regional register, then that of the designation of the representative at the Council by the association itself. The double filter actually excludes from the consultations a large part of the immigrant population, starting with those who are not members of any of the (few) associations registered. To this, we shall add the limited representativity of these associations themselves (compared to the variety of foreign residents in the Region) and the absence of effective tools to check internal democracy processes. In the end, such a body - beyond the intentions of the regional legislator and any initiatives taken - appears unsuitable

for guaranteeing greater participation by individual foreigners and, consequently, their participation in regional political life.

It is worth mentioning that the Marche Region recognises the right to petition to the residents. However Art. 41 of the “Statute of Marche” does not expressly include the non-EU migrants in the concept of residents, and the legal interpretation of the article leaves little room for the extension of the right to vote to the migrants (e.g. for consultative referendums on general issues) reserving such right to Italian citizens only.

### **3.2 Local level: Municipal jurisdiction and role in migration management**

Municipalities belong to one of the bottom levels of public administration (followed by Districts or Neighbourhoods) and are the closest to the local community, thus playing a significant role in managing migration (Marchetti 2020).

The tasks of the Municipalities also include the administrative functions concerning social actions under the “integrated System of interventions and social services” (Law 328/2000) carried out at the local level while contributing to regional planning. Under this perspective Municipalities are expected to plan, design, and implement the local system of social network services and indicate priorities and innovation sectors through the consultation of local human and financial resources, with the involvement of civil society representatives and associations. Municipalities are responsible for providing services and assistance activities, but they also hold responsibility for authorising, accrediting and supervising social services and publicly managed residential and semi-residential structures dedicated to the hosting of vulnerable individuals/families (Marchetti 2014).

At the same time Municipalities should facilitate and promote, within the local system of social network services, resources of lo-

cal communities through innovative forms of collaboration for the development of self-help interventions and reciprocity between citizens in the context of community life. Finally, Municipalities are also assigned monitoring and evaluation tasks through the adoption of tools for administrative simplification and management control on efficiency, effectiveness and performance results, ensuring the right to participation of citizens in the service quality control following the procedures established by the municipal statutes.

While in terms of reception, Municipalities are assigned - through close collaboration with Prefectures - the task of absolving the so-called “emergency reception”; however, to date, the extraordinary facilities actually operate as if they were ordinary reception structures. Furthermore, Municipalities are called upon to handle the so called “second reception” (SAI, System of Reception and Integration),<sup>14</sup> which is coordinated by the SAI Central Service, whose management is assigned to the National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI)<sup>15</sup> by the Ministry of the Interior.

The Social Territorial Area (ATS) is an inter-municipal aggregation with the task of planning and programming the social services of the Municipalities following the provisions of Law 328/2000, the “Framework Law for the realisation of the integrated system of interventions and social services”. The above-mentioned Law establishes the implementation of an integrated system of interventions and social services aimed at helping all categories of vulnerable people.

14 The “System of Reception and Integration” (SAI) is developed on two levels of services: the first is reserved for asylum seekers and is based on material, legal, health and linguistic assistance. Second-level services are reserved for protection holders and also have integration and career guidance functions. In this context, the projects are assigned to local authorities which voluntarily activate and implement reception and integration services with particular regard to language training, career guidance, essential knowledge of public services, and of the fundamental rights and duties enshrined in the constitution (Sorgoni 2011; Altin *et al.* 2017; Ambrosini, Campomori 2020).

15 The “National Association of Italian Municipalities” (ANCI) represents municipalities with Parliament, Government, Regions, Public Administrations, Community bodies, the Committee of Regions and any other institutions exercising public functions of local interest. Following the principles of virtuous collaboration between central State and territories, ANCI has promoted immigration initiatives such as the SAI.

The universal character of the integrated system of interventions and social services guarantees the inclusion of foreigners, asylum seekers, and refugees among the beneficiaries of such measures. Service providers must facilitate the access and accessibility of such services by informing the recipients of the services available, on the requirements for access and the most appropriate choices. The “Community Social Plan” is the social policy programming tool and allows the relevant community to respond to the needs of the population in the best possible way, involving all the relevant actors coming both from the institutional sector and the civil society in the planning (local authorities, third sector actors, volunteering, associations, etc.). Municipalities associated with an ATS also have a crucial role in adopting this plan, which allows the complementarity of services among territories, the selection of services to be supplied at the local level and how funds coming from different sources are allocated. At the same time, such measures have also been seen as part of rescaling strategies and passive subsidiarisation processes, whereas local authorities are increasingly receiving more competences, but few new resources to actually manage them (Kazepov, Barberis 2017). This is also true in the case of integration policies, whose controversial character probably acts as a further incentive to rescaling (Barberis, Angelucci 2022).

The integrated system of interventions and social services also pursues the promotion of social solidarity, with the enhancement of the initiatives coming from people, families, forms of self-help and reciprocity and organised solidarity. Costs for activating social interventions and services in favour of the individual and the community are borne by municipalities, individuals and associates.

### **3.2.1 Migrant participation and representation at the local level in the Marche region**

In 2019 in the Marche region there were at least ten operational advisory bodies for foreigners. Putting together the various

experiences of the last twenty years, including inactive bodies and ceased experiences, there have been more than twenty participatory institutions promoted by the local authorities (Menegus 2019). These are significant numbers, even higher than those of a region like Emilia-Romagna, traditionally at the forefront for promoting the political participation of foreigners.

At the local level, reference can be made to advisory bodies of both elective<sup>16</sup> and nonelective nature. The case of the municipalities in the Marche Region is characterised by a marked prevalence of the elected figure of the Deputy Councillor as opposed to the collegial Councils. In practice, thirteen municipalities and two provinces have had one or more Deputy Councillors, while the municipalities of Tolentino (non-elective but with a deputy councillor elected by the council), San Benedetto del Tronto (non-elective), Grottammare (elective), Senigallia, and Fabriano have operated with a collegial body (council)<sup>17</sup>.

The research (ibid. 2019) shows, however, certain recurring problems, which can be grouped around four main themes: representativeness (the monochromatic nature of the body that makes it less suitable to represent the complexity of the demands emerging from the foreign residents, the composition of the councils and related election mechanisms that may lead to overrepresentation of some communities and, conversely, penalise others); functions (the merely consultative nature of these bodies and low impact on local authority activity); support (poor technical/administrative support to both the bodies and their members to be able to influence the orientation of local authorities' political choices); and instability (lack of an effective replacement mechanism of Councillors who have acquired Italian citizenship or moved elsewhere in the country or abroad, scarce participation of representatives causing the paralysis of the activity or the interruption of dialogue with administrations, etc.).

16 In the case of an elective Body (Deputy and Elective Councils) there is a direct involvement aimed at the entire foreign immigrant population since the individual foreign resident is granted both the right to vote for the election of the members of the advisory body and the right to run for office and be elected (Menegus 2019).

17 <https://www.integrazionemigranti.gov.it/AnteprimaPDF.aspx?id=1324>.

### 3.2.2 The case of Fermignano

The Municipality of Fermignano is part of the ATS IV that includes nine Municipalities, whose mayors are members of the directive political body: the Committee of Mayors. At a technical level, the ATS IV is led by the Area Coordinator, assisted by staff at the Municipality of Urbino, the lead Municipality. In the case of ATS IV, the lead municipality is meant to provide a long thematic list of areas of intervention without specific reference to migrants, foreigners or integration procedures, except for a generic annotation under “Social Policies,” where reference is made to services and assistance to “vulnerable” people. The “Immigrants Service Centre” through its desk office in Fermignano, is the only migrants dedicated service, offering free-of-charge assistance on bureaucratic practices (residence permit, family reunification, citizenship, etc.); consultancy on housing, work, legal protection, language, IT and professional courses.

As a municipality Fermignano provides a range of general services (such as Social Services and Education Policies), they are generally directed to the population as a whole and a few are specific for the immigrant population, along with some interventions and projects funded by the AMIF/FAMI.

Nevertheless, the municipality supplies information and administrative documents in the languages of the main foreign communities; it promotes Italian language courses and afterschool support for “vulnerable children”, which explicitly includes migrants’ children (“Small Group Aggregation and After School Service”); it also promotes Arabic and Albanian language courses, making public spaces and some teaching materials available to the respective communities.

Since 2017, Fermignano has been sponsoring the intercultural event Popoli in Festa [ Peoples’ festival] to foster migrants’ civic participation and cultural exchange between foreign communities and the local population. The festival is organised thanks to the joint efforts of the municipality and migrant communities, which suggest and carry out the event activities in the main public square.

On the side of migrants' social inclusion of migrants, in 2019, the Municipalities of Fermignano and Gradara promoted the "Charter of Mayors on social inclusion in the Euro-Mediterranean area", engaging with other 24 municipalities mainly (but not only) located in the Marche Region. The Charter identified the following priority actions: i) providing administrative assistance in granting the documentation required for legal residence in the national territory; ii) promoting and organising courses for learning the Italian language; iii) providing the Italian translation of the main administrative acts in the native language for the communities living in the territory; iv) promoting and identifying cultural mediators; v) guaranteeing the worship right for religious minorities; vi) preventing ghettoisation phenomena. The Charter also set up a Council of Mayors aimed at drafting and collecting good practices and promoting actions of general interest to facilitate social inclusion by providing essential services.

With particular reference to the art. V of the Charter on worship right for religious minorities, Fermignano hosts one of the few non-Christian cemeteries and a mosque recognised officially as such (the first one at the provincial and the fifth at the national level).

### **3.2.3 Migrant participation and representation at the local level**

Art. 14 of the Municipal bylaws Statute on "Popular consultations and Permanent Councils" highlights that the Municipality of Fermignano may request consulting of either a part or some aggregated form of the local population to acquire information, opinions and proposals regarding the administrative activity. In any case, the mayor calls a public assembly at least once a year, however, the procedure makes no clear reference to the locally residing migrants.

According to c. 4 The Municipality of Fermignano may also establish:

- a. observatories to support the administrative activity on is-



- sues of particular importance;
- b. a forum for the discussion of problems of particular social and cultural interest.

The “District Councils” (or neighbourhood councils) are recognised bodies of citizens elected by the neighbourhood assembly of all over 16-year-old citizens residing therein, carrying the task to forward discussions on the local problems, detect critical issues and draw up proposals to be submitted to the municipal administration. However, it is far from clear whether resident migrants may participate or not (and why) in any of the 9 existing Districts. Not even the Regulation of the District Councils gives any specific information on the topic.

Reference to “foreigners” is explicitly made in c.3: “[...] a permanent thematic council dedicated to the analysis of all sort of problems and the promotion of proposals for the development of the integration of both European or non-European foreign citizens, but still legally residing in the municipal territory”. This Council’s statute also provides for a representative of foreign residents. However, a former Mayor (1990-2000) pointed out that “when the Council was established, it was not possible to appoint such representative because the various foreign groups did not agree on a candidate, so that rule remained ineffective, in short, inefficient” (Interview, 26.05.22).

Finally, although there have been no experiences or cases of Immigrant Council or Special representative of migrants (Adjunct/ Deputy Councilor) for immigration in Fermignano, it is worth mentioning the election of a city councillor of Moroccan origin in 2016 and 2021, along with a left-wing-oriented civic coalition, after ten years of government (2006-2016) run by a right-wing coalition and a mayor from the “Lega Nord” party. The Councillor is currently responsible for social inclusion and European policies, and its election seems to have improved the representation of migrants’ voices, as we shall see in the next section on data analysis.

## 4. Data analysis: actors, roles and efficiency of the local network for social inclusion and migrant participation in Fermignano

### 4.1 Introduction

Despite the lack of an organic and specific corpus of public policies, in Fermignano there are different actors providing services and promoting activities in the field of social inclusion and participation of migrants.

In this section, we analyse the roles and relationships of different actors involved in policies and services targeting immigrants in Fermignano and nearby towns (see Annex 1). In particular, a focus group was formed and a total of 27 interviews were conducted with associations of and for immigrants, as well as the representatives of public authorities and service providers.

The first part of this section analyses institutional services. Subsequently, we look at the non-institutional network. The third section is on immigrant associations followed by a special focus on participation. Finally, conclusions illustrate obstacles and challenges.

### 4.2. Institutional network

The local public institutional network analysed here includes the Prefecture, Municipality and ATS IV in light of their immigration-related services.

Reportedly, matters under the jurisdiction of the Prefecture of Pesaro, the representative body of the Ministry of the Interior at the

local level, are divided into two macro-areas: (1) admissions through the issue of authorisation for work entries and family reunification as well as the recognition of international or subsidiary protection to asylum seekers<sup>18</sup>, (2) coordination among different stakeholders operating with/for immigrants. In terms of migrant participation, the Territorial Council of Immigration is the instrument through which initiatives are discussed, evaluated and proposed, and which includes the participation of representatives of some local governments and associations of and for immigrants. In addition, AMIF-funded projects aim to strengthen the network through the creation of specific committees involving those who are not part of the Territorial Council, as well as to foster the exchange of information and proposals among the parties involved. However, low participation of migrants has been recorded not only in the implementation of projects/services but also in the regular meetings between network members. The fact that the meetings were conducted online during the Covid-19 period is reported as an impediment to the participation of immigrant representatives due to their limited digital skills.

Interventions targeting immigrant families' integration mainly concern employment and housing. However, it is worth mentioning that there are no policy guidelines shared by all members of the Territorial Council and, therefore, each actor pursues their own ways to achieve integration goals. Individualisation and fragmentation of how integration policies are implemented and services offered to immigrants are also mentioned by ATS. Reportedly, in the absence of general guidelines, there is only guidance regarding individual areas (e.g., registration with the job centre; health registration with the temporary tax code) in response to immigrants' specific needs.

Regarding labour-related activities of the Prefecture, a recurring theme is either the discomfort related to forms of labour exploitation or labour shortages in certain areas. The fight against ca-

18 Residence permits are released by the *Questura*, the provincial police office, which is also competent for renewals and for the recognition of the special protection for asylum seekers (usually following the recommendation of the Prefecture).

*poralato* (illegal labour recruitment and intermediation, that leads to exploitation), in cooperation with the territorial labour inspectorate, is one of the most mentioned activities. Cooperation with the territorial labour inspectorate is also based on checking the workplaces for compliance with the compliance with regulations related to labour security. As well as labour security and the fight against *caporalato*, within the FAMI/AMIF framework, projects are expected also to create pathways aimed at vocational training to gain a qualification and obtain access to most of income-producing job opportunities.

The other critical issue is access to affordable housing, and therefore, interventions focus on this area. The main housing problems experienced by migrants in the province of Pesaro-Urbino, according to the majority of respondents, concern several aspects.

First of all, housing offered by social services (public housing) has limited space for large families, at the same time, there is a shortage of private housing of any size to meet the needs of these families.

Secondly, owners require very high deposits and substantial bank guarantees, especially near the coast, which exceed the economic capacity of these people, as pointed out by an institutional actor:

Many foreign nationals, despite having found employment opportunities near the coast but not finding housing options compatible with their work, are forced to find homes in fairly inland areas of the province, if not even outside the province [...]the problem of housing very often forces migrants to migrate again, because the available housing is too far from the place of work (Interview, 08.09.22).

Moreover, there is a general discriminatory attitude on the part of real estate agencies and landlords toward foreigners emerges, especially those from North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, as pointed out during an interview by the secretary of a local migrants' association:

Finding a house for us [migrants] is very difficult because there is a lot of discrimination. Let me share with you an experience I

had a few days ago. I called a [real estate] agency to ask about renting because I want to live alone. I was given an appointment and when I showed up the guy from the agency asked me: 'Was I talking to you on the phone?' and I said: 'Yes, of course!' and he said: 'We do not rent houses to foreigners, I did not realise you were not Italian' (Interview, 08.06.22).

Such a situation highlights a xenophobic and prejudicial attitude towards foreigners in the housing market, which is linked to a mix of different preconceptions, regarding not only the origin but also the (more or less assumed) precarity of legal statuses and working conditions that many immigrants have to face and the stereotyped assumption that foreigners are incapable of stable employment.

The housing problem affects both long-standing families in the area and new refugee flows:

They (Afghan refugee families) are large families with many children and there has been difficulty in finding the appropriate housing for their needs. As international protection is recognised, we are trying to place them in SAIs but also (in that context) there are difficulties because they are really large families which we are definitely not used to anymore (Institutional actor, interview, 08.09.22).

The general shortage of housing opportunities has led many people to accept accommodation conditions bordering on indecency, especially due to mould and lack of heating. At the provincial level this has created situations of "housing segregation", as in the case of the urban settlement of Ponte Armellina, a suburb of the city of Urbino called 'Urbino 2', where families, almost all with migration backgrounds, live in very precarious housing conditions and a state of socio-cultural confinement (Cancellieri, Barberis 2012).

As part of the Prefecture-related activities, another challenge is the difficult access to citizenship due to the lack of language proficiency of the applicants<sup>19</sup>. Although the territory is well manned by

19 Since the Law-Decree No. 113 of 4 October 2018 (so-called "Security Decree"), a B1 level in Italian language is required in order to obtain Italian citizenship.

CPIAs (Provincial Centre for Adult Education) and other associations that offer Italian language courses, the language problem persists especially in the older age groups: these are parents, but especially mothers who have followed their children in migration. On the other hand, as far as recently arrived (maximum two years) young foreigners in the territory are concerned, insofar as provided for by R.L. 13/2009, there are no language support services to support them in the school or extracurricular context in the first phase of contact with the host society. Although in recent months, with the arrival of Ukrainians in the area, some municipalities have provided language mediators (mostly lacking specific skills) to facilitate school integration of Ukrainian children. However this service, of a merely emergency nature, has not been structured and guaranteed to all young migrants from other countries.

According to what is reported by ATS, which is responsible for coordinating social service interventions and other integrated services, the difficulties encountered primarily affect migrant women residing in small localities, where transportation and services are not always close at hand.

Besides the network formed by institutional bodies and the reported difficulties in service provision, the data collected highlighted how immigrants' relationship with the Municipality of Fermignano is established. The Municipality of Fermignano, after 10 years of office by a right-wing majority (the former Mayor was a member of Lega, a populist party characterised by a strong anti-migration discourse), is now governed by a political formation backed by the Democratic Party, Italy's main centre-left party. The change in local government also represented a transformation in attitudes and openness toward immigrant communities, which is evident, for example, in the official recognition of the Mosque (the first at the provincial level and fifth nationwide) as such and the establishment of a non-Christian cemetery through cooperation with the Islamic community. This also highlights a willingness to listen to the needs of local immigrant communities, which can be discerned in the following quote:

When we took office, we consulted associations and community representatives to listen to their needs. We continue to do so, albeit mainly through informal channels. I think the municipal administration in recent years has been inclusive towards immigrant communities. There is no doubt that having a person of foreign origin in the council helps. You can see the change because nowadays if there is a problem, they call you [...] they turn to me or directly to the mayor [...] this can already be considered a form of interest and participation that until a few years ago did not exist (Local policy-maker, interview, 20.06.22).

The data showed that people with immigrant backgrounds who hold key positions such as city councillor, immigration desk operator, etc. seem essential for immigrant participation at the local level and for improving the accessibility of services for the immigrant population.

Thanks to the city councillor (a young man of Moroccan origin), I have a preferential channel that allows me to get deeper into the needs of migrant communities than maybe other people (Local policy-maker, interview, 30.09.22).

Such a boundary-spanning agency (Ahmed 2020) helps to build and maintain networks between institutions and migrant community members; yet these highly-personalised relationships may also become counterproductive as the relationship between the parties can turn into a certain person dependency, characterised by subordination to person-specific linkages.

As pointed out by a municipal decision-maker, in this current policy line, frequentation of public places such as the central city square, parks, and all other places shared with local people is an important indicator of integration:

When you go to the square, which is the main meeting place, you do not see those little separated groups anymore, but people talking freely among themselves so that there are no more divisions (Interview, 30.09.22).

Initiatives such as the recognition of the Mosque and the establishment of the non-Christian cemetery, as well as the Municipality support to migrant associations in promoting culture and language learning of origin countries by providing space and materials, are conceived as a form of diversity acknowledgment and indicate an approach of openness of the institutional apparatus toward all residents. Another element cited by the institutions, in terms of openness toward diversity, is the abovementioned *Popoli in Festa*, which was launched by the Municipality and represents one of the few moments of formal exchange and the relation between migrant associations and the local administration.

### **4.3. Third sector, civil society organisations and service providers**

In the local area, third sector organisations and trade unions actors also provide (occasionally overlapping) some services and carry out activities for migrants responding to their most urgent needs and requirements, such as access to employment, housing and documents concerning residence permits, family reunification, and citizenship.

In the municipality of Fermignano, there is an office of the largest Italian social-democratic trade union, the *CGIL*<sup>20</sup>. Their services concern the local population transversally but they also supply significant support services for migrants. In particular, there is INCA (National Union Institute for Assistance), a body dealing with the social security protection, social and welfare rights of workers, retired citizens and immigrants in Italy and abroad, and a Tax Assistance Centre for domestic helpers and caregivers.

There is also a local branch of *ANOLF - Associazione Nazionale Oltre le Frontiere*<sup>21</sup> (National Association Beyond Borders), which

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<sup>20</sup> Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (Italian General Confederation of Labour).

<sup>21</sup> Promoted by CISL - Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori - the second largest Italian trade union.



offers information and support services on issues related to the renewal of residence permits and citizenship applications. *ANOLF* is a spin-off of the Catholic-inspired trade-union CISL, and the responsible for *ANOLF* in Fermignano is a trade unionist of Moroccan origin with Italian citizenship. The services are mainly addressed to all persons residing in the territory of the municipality of Fermignano.

Finally, Fermignano hosts some voluntary associations. Among the most relevant associations in our field, there is *Il Vascello* (The Vessel), established in November 2006. This association comprises some 30 members, four of which have migration backgrounds. It aims at promoting a community founded on values such as solidarity, social justice, respect for every person, peace and attention to vulnerable groups in the local society. To pursue these objectives, *Il Vascello* carries out several activities, the most important of which is the ‘social and health care service’, a free service addressed in particular to people who have financial difficulties in accessing specialist health care.

Other relevant non-institutional actors, in addition to the other territorial branches of the two above-mentioned trade unions, operate at the provincial level and are based in nearby towns.

*Caritas Italiana* is a national organisation of Catholic inspiration with several territorial branches in the case area (Pesaro, Fano, Urbino, Fermignano), which provides primary assistance to people with economic, social and psychological difficulties, including migrants. In addition, the Pesaro headquarters coordinate the work of strengthening and implementing the local network on migration issues. One of Caritas’ most significant activities concerning migration issues concerns the experience of the ‘House of Peace’ in Pesaro. Established at the end of the 1990s, it is a meeting space for several organisations in the province of Pesaro-Urbino that are involved in various ways in the theme of inclusion/integration, strengthening feelings of community and coexistence between natives and the foreign population, and creating “a laboratory of cohabitation where

the theme of encounter can be implemented” (Third-sector operator, interview, 01.06.22).

*Arcigay Agorà* is a voluntary association committed to the promotion of LGBT+ rights. Specifically for migrants, the support provided is divided into three main activities. The first activity consists in offering ongoing training to members of the Territorial Commissions for the recognition of international protection to strengthen and increase decision-makers skills concerning the living conditions of LGBT+ people and gender-based discrimination. There is also a collaborative relationship with the Territorial Commissions consisting in providing advice by Arcigay activists for assessing the LGBT+ asylum seeker’s history. The third activity consists of a free legal aid service for LGBT+ migrants in the area.

*Labirinto*, the area’s leading social cooperative, has been dedicated to people’s needs since 1979 by following and designing social-educational, social-health and training services and social research. It runs several reception centres, including a shelter for unaccompanied minors close to the municipality of Fermignano, and implements services and projects for social and labour inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees financed by FAMI.

*L’Africa Chiama* is an NGO based in Fano that has worked since 2001 in some African countries (Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia) and Italy with projects to prevent and mitigate educational poverty. Since 2019, it has collaborated in some FAMI projects with the objectives of capacity building of immigration professionals and administrative employees, promoting socio-cultural inclusion of migrants and fighting against labour exploitation.

*Refugee Welcome Pesaro-Urbino* is a territorial branch of Refugees Welcome Italia, a voluntary organisation that promotes the reception of young refugees who have been left out from the reception system for no more than 18 months.

### 4.3.1 Migrants' self-organisation and associations

Concerning migrant self-organisation in the territory of the municipality of Fermignano and its surroundings, there are a few associations promoted and made up of immigrants or Italian citizens with a migratory background (see annex 1 and Table 4). Alongside community associations (i.e. the Senegalese associations) and religious associations (the Islamic cultural association) that have accompanied the presence of migrants in the territory since early 2000, other associations appeared more recently, such as those composed of second generations or newcomers in specific vulnerable conditions (e.g. asylum seekers and refugees). These associations carry out various religious, cultural and social activities and try to meet the needs of old and new migrants through different means according to the resources available and the specific area/target of intervention.

Within the Municipality of Fermignano the *Islamic cultural association* has brought together the Islamic community for about two decades. Its privately owned cultural centre/mosque today represents a place of worship and socialisation for about 100 people living in and out of Fermignano. The association also carries out social and charity activities, in particular during the month of Ramadan, and provides free Arabic classes for minors.

We are a religious association founded about 20 years ago and are now largely composed of long-term migrants (many of whom are now Italian citizens). We no longer have the needs that our fathers and mothers had... We want to be a place of prayer and meeting, but also make our religion known to second generations, to young people, to teach Arabic...In recent years we have managed to have our own mosque, recognised by the institutions, and we are very proud of it (Interview, 04.06.22).

The Albanian association *Albani* is primarily engaged in maintaining cultural identity by promoting the Albanian language and culture. In this case, some members of the “well-integrated” Albanian community of Fermignano felt the need to start a “disintegration”

process among co-nationals, especially for second generations. The association was founded in 2018, it counts seven volunteers, and currently provides Albanian language classes mainly to second-generation Albanians and children of Albanian immigrants.

Our community is now well-integrated in Fermignano. We no longer have the problems of those who arrive and have to find a job, a house, etc. We have been here for many years, we have obtained citizenship, and our children are Italian. Now we think the time has come for us to 'disintegrate': we want to promote our culture and teach our children our language, which would otherwise be lost. That's why we formed the association five years ago (Interview, 24.05.22).

The *Diaspora migrants* association is also based in Fermignano and represents another example of the recent diversification in the composition and aims of migrant associations. It was founded in 2020 by three Sub-Saharan refugees, supported by two Italian activists. Having directly experienced the asylum system and the difficulties in the transition to full autonomy, their members seek to promote the social inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees, although the association has not yet implemented specific activities in the area.

Other associations promoted by foreigners living in several places and municipalities of the Pesaro-Urbino province, including Fermignano, are based in nearby municipalities. Two of these associations base their membership on nationality or gender: the *Japoo* association was formed about 13 years ago and now involves long-stayers as well as recently arrived Senegalese people; the *Donne del Montefeltro* association was formed about 9 years ago and is made up of Senegalese women, although membership is gender-based and members would also like to include other nationalities. Both associations are mostly aimed at mutual self-help among members, e.g. in the return of remains to origin countries and the financing of funerals, weddings or other celebrations, but also the search for work or housing (the main problems reported by several migrants communities during interviews and focus groups)

and guidance to integration services and bureaucratic procedures, especially for newcomers.

We are an association of Senegalese formed many years ago. We Senegalese, like other nationalities, have in our culture this desire of getting together and support each other. We were formed to get together and also to support each other economically, for example, in the case of weddings, funerals or other difficulties in the country of origin as well as in Italy (Interview, 05.03.22).

If *Japoo* and *Donne del Montefeltro* aggregate migrants based on common origin, other recently-formed associations also aggregate around other factors, such as legal status or shared history of forced migration and social exclusion. As for the case of *Diaspora migrants* in Fermignano, *Giovani Profughi* is a recent-established association formed by sub-Saharan migrants of various origins who have recently arrived in Italy, including asylum seekers and refugees. In addition to directing migrants towards public and private services, this association also seems to play an informal but significant role by trying to directly solve the urgent problems faced by newcomers, asylum seekers and refugees who have been expelled or have exited the reception system with the support of the ca. 60 members and their own networks. While most of the associations interviewed do not appear to be openly involved in political struggles and claims, *Giovani Profughi* represents an instrument of resistance from below to exclusionary policies, such as the “Salvini Decrees”.

We are an association of migrant people who do not identify with a nationality, a region or a political belief... we are young refugees and asylum seekers who trying to fight injustice and social exclusion... Our association was formed in 2017 but formalised in 2020 after the “Salvini decrees” led to the expulsion of thousands of people from the reception system... We have organised ourselves and reacted, helping asylum seekers and refugees exiting the reception system to get a job or a place to stay. Since 2020, we have helped about 20 young people who had nowhere to go through other members who had already obtained a home and a job (Interview, 04.05.22).

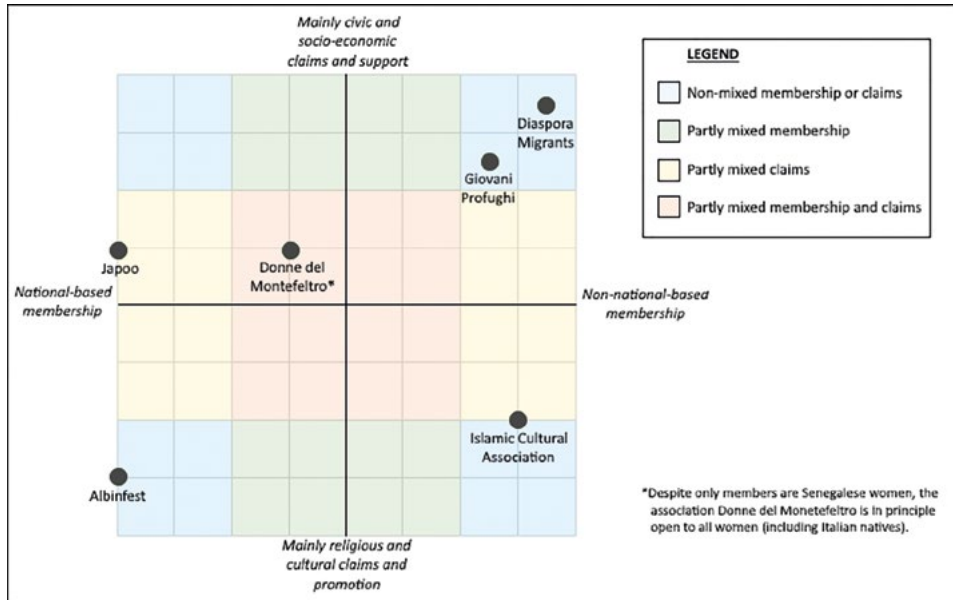
**Table 4. Composition, activities and links of migrant associations in the Fermignano context.**

<b>Association</b>	<b>Promoters and members</b>	<b>Years of activity</b>	<b>N. members and participants</b>	<b>Main ways of participation and interaction in the local network</b>	<b>Links and relations with other actors</b>
<i>Diaspora Migrants</i>	Sub-Saharan refugees and asylum seekers	2	5	-	Other migrant association (spot)
<i>Albani</i>	Albanian community	5	7	Participation in Intercultural events; promotion of Albanian culture	Municipality of Fermignano; Other 'Albanian' associations
<i>Islamic Cultural Association</i>	Islamic community	15+	About 100	Participation in Intercultural events; Interreligious dialogue; Joint charity initiatives	Municipality of Fermignano; Marche Region (spot); Police forces (spot); Charity Organisations; Other Islamic Associations
<i>Giovani Profughi</i>	Sub-Saharan refugees and asylum seekers	2	About 60	Participation in Intercultural events; Joint charity initiatives;	Marche Region (spot); Reception service providers (spot); Trade unions; Charity organisations; Other migrant associations
<i>Japoo</i>	Senegalese community (mixed)	13	About 60	Participation in Intercultural events	Municipality of Vallefoglia; Other Senegalese associations
<i>Le Donne del Montefeltro</i>	Senegalese women	9	36	Participation in Intercultural events	Municipality of Fermignano; Municipality of Frontino; Trade Unions

Source: Own elaboration

To sum it up, the associations interviewed express different interests and claims, also reflecting a broader process of transformation in migrant stayers' status and their self-organisation in recent years. Thus, the overall landscape of migrant associations now differs in terms of composition (some aggregate members of a single nationality, others are cross-national), size (some are very small while others count over 50 active members), years of activity (some are recently born, while others have been operating for ten years or more) and aims. Regarding the associations' purposes, those based on more established communities at the local level (e.g. the Islamic and Albanian associations) aim above all at cultural and religious acknowledgement, while the others (the Senegalese associations) are more oriented towards socio-economic support among members and newcomers. The transnational associations formed by more recently arrived asylum seekers and refugees add to the above mentioned features a more marked and open demand for rights and social justice. However, these features and purposes should not be understood as distinct and static since, perhaps due to the small scale of the context, associations may take them all into consideration, albeit in a different order of priority.

**Figure 2. Tentative typology of migrant associations in the Fermignano context.**



Source: Own elaboration

## 4.4 Interactions and participation in the local network

In this section, we analyse interaction of local service providers/associations for and of immigrants from the institutional and non-institutional perspectives.

### 4.4.1 Institutional and non-institutional actors' participation and interaction in the local network

At the municipal level, the different actors that provide services and activities for migrants do not seem to interact very much. Indeed, during our research, we did not find any significant activity in which they worked together and participated in common projects. Collaborations among third-sector organisations and other service



providers in Fermignano concern sporadic and poorly structured emergency-related initiatives without proper structuring and shared co-planning paths. One of these activities was mentioned by the President of an association in Fermignano during an interview:

During the Covid pandemic, together with Caritas, the Fermignano Scouts, the Civil Defence and the Red Cross, we set up a “Spesa sospesa”<sup>22</sup> initiative: every week, we distributed food parcels that we collected from supermarkets and mostly from Caritas. This initiative started during the first lockdown, continued throughout 2020 and part of 2021 and then re-emerged during the Ukraine emergency (Interview, 31.05.22).

Regarding the relationship between local organisations and the Municipality of Fermignano, the research found two different paths, depending on the actors and the issues in which they were involved.

On the one hand, there is an individual-based relationship between some of these actors and the Municipality, linked to the current administration’s particular sensitivity to civil society organisations and issues related to migration processes and socio-economic hardship, as pointed out by the President of an association in Fermignano:

We have, and I want to emphasise this, excellent cooperation with the Fermignano administration. Also, because social services often call and consult us, we cooperate. We notify all people we assist to social services so that they have an up-to-date map, and sometimes, they ask us for help when they have difficulties with various problems, including bureaucratic and economic ones. So, there is close cooperation with local institutions (Interview, 31.05.22).

On the other hand, some actors pointed to a lack of cooperation between organisations and the Municipality, which led to overlapping and competing for aid and support initiatives for migrants. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic was a destabilising event, as it

22 Suspended/pending shopping, whose name refers to the tradition of petty solidarity of “pending coffee” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caff%C3%A8\\_sospeso](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caff%C3%A8_sospeso))

was also at the national level. Service slowdowns, closures, and restructuring, mainly due to the first lockdown restrictions and limited accessibility due to subsequent Covid-related restrictions, significantly affected service delivery. Reportedly, with the closure of the municipality's immigration service during the Pandemic, many migrants in distress turned to other service providers, which had to compensate for the absence of municipal services.

Honestly, there is little cooperation [...] because instead of complementing each other, sometimes there is even competition. I can mention the municipality of Fermignano, which, for example, has set up an immigration office operating two half days a week. Sometimes they come to us because there is no one there; during the pandemic period, it was the rule, so we indeed need much more cooperation in this sense [...] We used to collaborate, but there is still little or almost no coordination between us (Trade Union operator, interview 25.05.22).

The research thus showed that, at the municipal level, despite the presence of several third-sector, civil society and voluntary organisations interested in migration issues, a common and participatory path aimed at the meeting, exchange and collaboration between these actors and local institutions is still missing. The lack of continuous sharing between the parties prevents the construction of a structured and active local network capable of acting as intermediary at the wider territorial level to which it is rather difficult to refer.

At the supra-municipal level, while some organisations have an ongoing interchange with public institutions, these relationships are developed almost exclusively within the framework of specific short-term (mostly two-year) projects financed by international, national and regional funds (e.g., FAMI/AMIF) and implemented together with municipalities, ATS and Prefecture.

There has been an improvement in recent years concerning the relationship between the third sector and institutions. [...] There is a desire on the part of administrations to co-design, to enter

into subsidiarity pacts [...] We are collaborating much more with local authorities, on the one hand indeed, because we are opening up to new networks by dedicating ourselves to the territory. Still, there is also a greater interest on the part of institutions wanting to network with the third sector. Let's take the example of these two FAMI projects with the Prefecture of Pesaro: if you think about it, the lead partner is the Prefecture, but it has the support of third-sector associations. Lately, we have collaborated much more with local authorities, Prefecture, municipality, ATS, and social services (Third sector operator, interview, 19.05.22).

Interviews often revealed that in implementing these projects, the public and civil society organisations involved do not always succeed in intercepting migrants' needs and interests. These dynamics are reinforced by the fact that such activities are often top-down, implemented without a proper need assessment, relation-building with migrants, and co-design.

Institutional relations are also often limited to meetings convened by the Prefecture – “Territorial Council for Immigration” – on territorial security or the management of asylum seekers and the reception system, as highlighted during an interview by a trade union operator:

Our relations with institutions are mainly with the Prefecture. At the municipal level, we have interacted with the job placement office and the Immigration Service Center as part of a project for the job placement of two asylum seekers, but these are occasional relations. With the Prefecture, on the other hand, there is a periodic table every six months or a year, which also involves other associations and organisations. In addition, we interface with the Prefecture whenever we have problems, such as delays in renewing residence permits or malfunctions of the online system used for administrative procedures, such as citizenship procedures and family reunification. With the war in Ukraine, we requested a meeting with the Prefecture together with the Ukrainian community of the Province, which gave guidelines on how to deal with the situation of Ukrainian refugees (Interview, 25.05.22).

Next sections analyse migrant associations and their participation in the local network.

#### 4.4.2. Migrants' participation and interaction in the local network

The interviews also reveal limited interaction between migrant associations, institutions and other third-sector organisations. Regarding public-private cooperation, almost all of the associations interviewed have a formal relationship with the municipality. However, this interaction mainly concerns the organisation and implementation of festivals and intercultural events rather than decision-making processes or implementation of services. In one case (*Islamic Cultural Centre*), the association was also consulted by the local police to address minor local security issues. None of the local associations analysed participated in the Territorial Council for Immigration convened by the Prefecture, nor were they invited to be part of it. At the regional level, two of the six associations interviewed met with the former regional administration in a formal event to which they were invited along with other organisations operating in the Marche region.

With regard to the municipality of Fermignano, it is worth noting that despite the lack of formal channels of interaction, migrant groups acknowledge the growing efforts of the municipal administration to promote dialogue, inclusion and participation in recent years. In particular, the presence of a foreign-born councillor in the city council since 2016 seems to have benefited the various migrant groups in the area, not only improving their political representation but also encouraging them to put forward some of their needs and demands to the municipality and even to the region administrations:

In recent years we have noticed a more inclusive approach by the municipality of Fermignano. Although it is not our purpose, we have also realised that politics is the only way to achieve certain things [...] I mean that having someone to talk to and willing to listen to us is really crucial. Until a few years ago, that was our main problem. Now we know who to talk to and we can eventually get directed to other levels... Finally, things have changed. We now have the first officially-recognized mosque in the whole Region and the fifth in the whole country... We had the Marche Region recognise circumcision as a service provided in the public health system

[...] We wanted a cemetery because, during the Pandemic, the remains could not be returned to home countries, and we managed in a short time to obtain a space reserved for non-Christians and the Islamic community in the municipal cemetery (President of a migrants' association in Fermignano, interview, 04.06.22).

The municipality has been supporting us since we registered the association four years ago... We can now teach our language as the municipality provides us with a place and materials to hold our language courses. We are also involved in the yearly organisation of the *Popoli in Festa* event, where we invite some Albanian singers and dancers to perform in the public square. It is a great occasion to make our culture known (President of a migrants' association in Fermignano, interview, 23.05.22).

*Popoli in Festa* and other similar intercultural events in Fermignano and nearby small and medium-sized municipalities (e.g., Vallefoglia, PU) seem to be particularly appreciated by migrant communities, as these initiatives provide an opportunity for visibility, engagement with local institutions and participation in civic and social life at the local level. Overall, however, all migrant associations interviewed noted little attention to their involvement in decision-making tables on migration issues.

We are very pleased with the involvement in the organisation of the festivals and events. However, we have not yet been involved or consulted in decision-making processes on migration issues. We would like to participate on this level as well (President of a migrants' association in Fermignano, interview, 23.05.22).

Since we registered the association, we have written many times to the Prefecture and the local administrations asking to be heard but have never been received (President of a migrants' association at the local level, interview, 05.03.22).

There also seems to be limited interaction between immigrant-promoted associations and other civil society actors operating in the Fermignano area and at the provincial level. Apart from sporadic initiatives such as festivals, in fact, there is little room to

engage in common tables and to carry out shared activities with other local organisations. Overall, only a few have been involved in the implementation of some of the activities carried out locally: two associations (*Islamic Cultural Center* and *Giovani Profughi*) have participated in some charity and food distribution initiatives in collaboration with another larger civil society organisation in the area (*Caritas*), particularly in the aftermath of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

We would like to cooperate more with other organisations. With the pandemic, we thought we could help people in need, whether Italian or immigrants. So, we went to *Caritas* and told them we were willing to engage in any activity they were undertaking, we were told we could help by distributing food boxes, and that's what we did in many municipalities (President of a migrants' association at the local level, interview, 05.03.22).

Beyond these occasional initiatives, some migrant associations often turn to unions or larger third-sector organisations to solve the immediate needs of their members and newcomers, revealing a relationship of dependence rather than a horizontal relationship that influences decision-making.

While some of the associations interviewed have links with “similar” organisations in other municipalities, provinces or regions<sup>23</sup>, there is little interaction among the different immigrant-promoted associations in and around the Fermignano area. Although some of these associations know each other or are aware of other immigrant-promoted organisations, opportunities and resources to meet and exchange are quite rare.

We are not very much in touch with other associations promoted by migrants in the area. Actually, we don't know them... Instead, we are in touch with other 12 Islamic associations of the Pesaro Urbino province [...] we can say it is a religiously inspired network

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23 For example, the Islamic association meets regularly with other Islamic associations in the province of Urbino; the Albanian association is part of the Italian network of Albanian associations; the Senegalese community has some exchanges with another Senegalese association in the municipality of Fano.

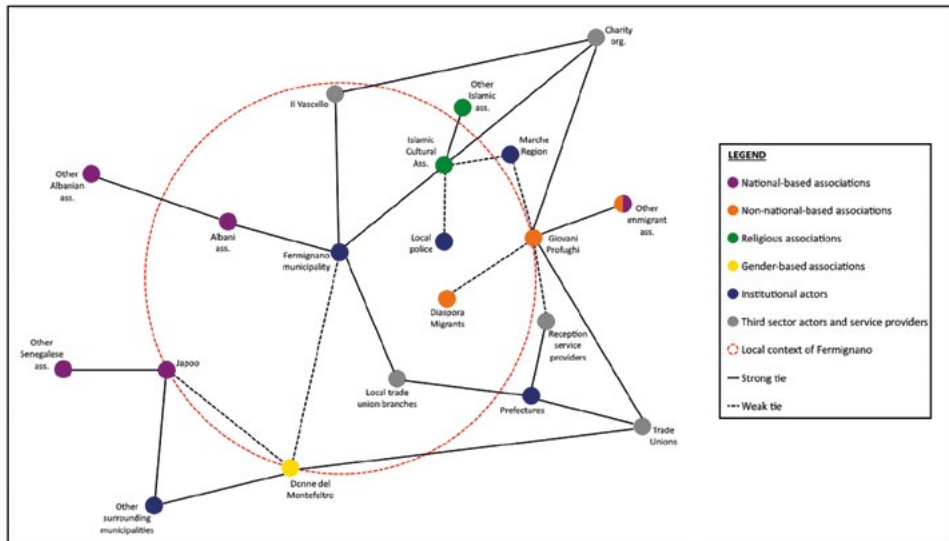
to exchange ideas but also some practices...for example, we have shared the way we managed to establish our own mosque or the procedures through which we obtained the cemetery from the municipality (President of a migrants' association in Fermignano, interview, 04.06.22).

We don't know of other associations promoted by immigrants based in Fermignano or nearby municipalities. However, we collaborate with the network of Albanian associations in Italy...It is useful because we also get some guidelines and teaching materials from the Albanian Ministry of Education, which help us with our language courses (President of a migrants' association in Fermignano, interview, 23.05.22).

We know other associations promoted by immigrants but we have never organised anything together. I'm not sure if they are still active and doing something. We are not very networked among ourselves. We had started to communicate, but the pandemic stopped us...I'm aware that some associations even dissolved (President of a migrants' association at the local level, interview, 09.04.22).

In sum, the various immigrant-promoted associations do not interact intensely and frequently not only with local institutions but also with third-sector actors and other civil society associations in the area. As a result, they have a very limited ability to influence local inclusion policies, as well as the activities, projects and services that are implemented by other organisations. For these reasons, such associations also lack the awareness or realization that they are part of a proper local network.

**Figure 3. Map of the network of actors involved in the immigration and integration field in the Fermignano context.**



## 4.5. Obstacles and challenges to participation

The obstacles to migrants' participation in the territorial network concern several aspects. First, migrants' involvement in participatory settings is limited since they are usually considered more as beneficiaries rather than protagonists of these measures. This is mostly due to the lack of formalised paths allowing the voice of migrants to be heard, which leads migrants to carry out claims through informal and person-based relationships, and to the still low level of inclusion, both individually and at the community level, within the network of civil society actors and public institutions. However, it cannot be ignored that some forms of participation, such as the strictly political one, seem not to be among the main priorities of some groups, especially those of recently arrived persons who primarily have to deal with practical matters as legal status, accommodation and work. Such framework is linked to a long-existing approach to policies towards the migrant population in Italy, which is characterised by a



pendulum between securitisation through exclusionary and restrictive policies and the creation of dependency and “assistentialism” in social services that often denies migrants’ independence (Marchetti, Pinelli 2017; Altin *et al.* 2017; Ambrosini 2018; Pitzalis 2018).

In our context, the relationship between the Prefecture and the associations remains rather formal and not based on equal participatory positions. In the specific case of the “Territorial Council for Immigration” managed by the Prefecture at the provincial level, although there are two representatives of migrant associations, a problem of representativeness emerges:

“Two migrant associations” what’s the point? I mean, if you invite the Imam and the Senegalese association, what kind of representation have you given of the involvement of all the associations in the territory? (Third-sector operator, interview, 01.06.22).

Thus, a concern rises related to the institutional perception of immigrants as one homogeneous category, eclipsing the specificities of each community. In addition, some participants pointed out that the low participation of migrants in these Councils is due to the fact that they are organised mainly on weekday mornings when most migrants work.

Another critical element is that there is no operational continuity on migration issues, and the frequency of the Council often depends on the sensitivity of the Prefect in charge:

If the Prefect is interested in the matter, the Council is convened once every three months, if the Prefect is not, time intervals are even longer, so to say, it also depends on the Prefect who is there how often the Council is convened [...] the previous Prefect cared a lot and convened us at least 4/5 times in two years. Now much less (Third-sector operator, interview, 01.06.22).

Finally, as many interlocutors pointed out, Council meetings at the Prefecture are often organised as “top-down” information ses-

sions, during which the Prefect gives directions and/or information, with no space for open discussion, sharing and exchange among the participants.

Unlike the presence of Territorial Councils for Immigration at the provincial level established by the Prefecture, at the local level, there is no mention of immigration councils in Fermignano and neighbouring municipalities. While, on the one hand, our study highlights the lack of formal institutional channels of migrant involvement, on the other hand, interviews emphasise that the traditional mechanisms experimented in past years (local Immigrant Councils and/or Deputy Counsellors) are considered outdated tools unable to represent the present complexity of migrant presence in the local area.

[The council] was fine in the 1990s, but in 2022, it doesn't need to be done. (Migrants) have to participate in the democratic life of a country, they have the tools that the administration has given and then there is the way of associationism which is a reference point for us [...] I believe that the migrant council was fine in the 1980s but not in 2022 (Local politician, interview, 30.09.22).

Overall, despite these considerations, the relations between the migrant communities and the municipalities seem to be occurring mainly on an individual/informal basis and relating to immediate/urgent needs, so much so that – despite considering representative bodies as “outdated” – another research and listening campaign we conducted at regional level showed an ambivalent regret for the lack of such discussion arenas (Angelucci 2020). The involvement of migrant communities in the process of policy-making still appears to be weak, and institutional/formal practices to promote participation in political life are limited. This limitation is also mentioned by the representative of an immigrant association:

I say this personally but also in behalf of the community, we have always been away from politics, the political terrain, and so on [...] What was our problem? Our problem was not knowing who to talk to [at the institutional level] for certain issues (Interview, 04.06.22).

In fact, we find that migrants at an official level are involved in the organisation of specific events/festivals dedicated to the theme of migration, peace or solidarity, however the construction of decision-making paths starting from migrants' experiences, needs and interests is completely neglected. In this regard, internal difficulties within the associations are also related to the immigrant communities' abilities and willingness to participate.

First, material difficulty related to basic necessities such as housing and work and precarious legal status should also be mentioned. Overall, many interviewees agreed on the need to improve social inclusion and integration services and extend access to rights (including voting and citizenship) to remove the obstacles and further stimulate political and civic participation.

*In my opinion, there is an issue with priorities: a migrant in a new society must first have documents, a job and a roof over her/his head, then she/he can participate in social and political life. It cannot happen before that [...] if your first thought is to find somewhere to sleep, then all other things take second place (Interview, 08.06.22).*

Another difficulty in participation is linked to the weaker organisation compared to established local civil society bodies and limited availability of time and economic resources, in fact associations are based on the voluntary support of their members, as pointed out by the President of a migrants' association in Fermignano:

*We dedicate our spare time, we are all volunteers, and we have very few economic resources. We are all workers, and we have our own lives, our own families, plus we there are only a few of us...the time we can dedicate to the association is little. We t do our best with our limited resources (Interview, 23.05.22).*

The lack of skills, expertise and knowledge of regulations, administrative mechanisms and bureaucratic procedures also limits the networking opportunities and the overall capacity to influence decision-making processes. In some cases, as in the Islamic com-

munity, there is also difficulty in attracting women or second generations and young people, who seem less interested in the religious-type forms of aggregation, that seems more attractive for first generations of North African immigrants.

These problems, in some cases, are intensified by the difficulties in registering associations, especially in the regional register, since 1) the association must possess specific characteristics and meet several requirements to register; 2) the bureaucratic process to register is neither simple nor utterly accessible to the foreign population, which often does not have the tools and/or time to follow it. This fact emerged strongly during an interview with one of the largest non-government organisations operating at the national and provincial levels:

Migrant associations are often very fragile, especially from a bureaucratic point of view, so they may not be registered, they may not have a statute, they may not have a legal personality [...] the passage in which most migrant associations got stuck was when the decision-makers behind the “social promotion association register” began to reject all the statutes of migrant associations of a single nationality, which were, in fact, the most numerous, i.e., the association of Romanians, the association of Ivorians, [...] because their statute was considered not to have the criteria of democracy as it referred to a national group only. Naturally having not been recognised as an association, they struggled more and eventually dissolved (Interview, 01.06.22).

It is also highlighted by the President of one of these associations:

An association must be registered with both the municipality and the Region. At the municipality, we managed to be recognised. At the regional level, on the other hand, we have tried several times, I have personally written two or three times, but we couldn't manage to get registered. When something happens in the region, the registered associations are contacted. But we are not recognised and cannot participate in regional meetings when there is a regional initiative (Interview, 05.03.22).

Despite all these difficulties, however, there are diverse forms of participation that express multiple interests. While for some, the main issue to face is formal integration through legal recognition, as in the case of newcomers, for other long-standing migration flows, new interests and claims emerge, such as recognition of a place of worship or even “a path of disintegration by promotion of the culture/language of origin since integration has already been achieved” (President of a migrant’s association in Fermignano, interview, 23.05.22). Within this diverse array of associations and their claims, policy-making processes need to be able to capture all needs.

In conclusion, the case area we focused on presents some critical issues, mainly concerning the low level of involvement and participation of migrant communities and the lack of a proper territorial network for discussion and exchange capable of bringing together different organisations on common grounds, activities and objectives. Nevertheless, a weak but slowly-rising interest of migrants themselves in civic and political participation seems to emerge, though they might lack the means, knowledge, and often the time to take an active part in political life. In the case of Fermignano, it is possible to trace some initiatives which can be potential starting points for building a network of relations and innovative practices of migrants’ inclusion and participation.

Based on this study, some policy challenges and related recommendations can be identified for small and medium-sized municipalities regarding the participation of migrants in decision making processes, as summarised in Table 5.

**Table 5. Summary of policy challenges and recommendations to deal with them, based on the report's results.**

N	Policy challenge	Recommendations
1	<i>Disproportionate reliance on (national) communities and associations for the participation of immigrants, which risks excluding more vulnerable groups or the acknowledgement and experience of individuals.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organising individual-based information campaigns about the possibility of immigrant participation at the local level, especially pointing the attention to non-immigration-focused councils;</li> <li>• Using, whenever possible, low-threshold criteria for people to be part of local councils.</li> </ul>
2	<i>Poor consideration of practical obstacles to the complete participation of immigrants in participative bodies (time constraints, travel expenses, etc.).</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defining the schedule and the programme of local forums, meetings and councils through the direct involvement of the participants;</li> <li>• Using, whenever possible, measures to facilitate the participation (e.g. blended mode, allowance, mediation with local firms for permits).</li> </ul>
3	<i>Lack of formalised communication pathways between immigrants and supra-local institutions (e.g., the Prefecture).</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Up-scaling demands of the local immigrant population (collected, for instance, in local forum, bodies or through an immigrant office) towards supra-local institutions;</li> <li>• Creating the direct connection between the local immigrant population and supra-local institutions through the promotion of forums involving both these actors.</li> </ul>
4	<i>Very limited inclusion of immigrants within non-immigration-focused participative local bodies.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing, whenever possible, access to local participative bodies based on residence or domicile, especially within sub-municipal councils or councils on specific issues (e.g. youth councils);</li> <li>• Fostering the inclusion of citizens with immigrant backgrounds within the electoral list;</li> <li>• Using or creating established networks of SMSTs to advocate the political participation of immigrants at a higher territorial level;</li> <li>• Introducing the figure of the immigrant Deputy Councillor, assigning actual powers to it and organising an adequate information campaign about the election that also reaches individuals.</li> </ul>

N	Policy challenge	Recommendations
5	<i>Disproportionate reliance on informal personal-based contacts for the connection between immigrants and the administration.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating or enhancing an immigrant office, which focuses not only on legal and bureaucratic issues but also on a larger set of tasks, such as housing and labour support.</li> <li>• Including immigrants within the design, implementation and evaluation of the immigrant office, providing, for instance, periodic open meetings to discuss the activities of the office and the needs of the local immigrant population.</li> </ul>
6	<i>Existence of material constraints to participation regarding the satisfaction of basic needs for individuals or the fulfilment of strict legal criteria for associations.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensuring the accessibility of local welfare, using, whenever possible, the residence or the domicile as a criteria for local social policies and providing easy-to-access information about procedures;</li> <li>• Facilitating the access to information and documents by providing the translation of relevant documents;</li> <li>• Providing legal and bureaucratic support for registration of associations and other similar issues through the creation or the enhancement of an immigrant office.</li> </ul>
7	<i>Difficulties to reach some groups of the immigrant population (e.g., women or young people) with traditional civic participation tools.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fostering the inclusion of immigrant associations in the general network of local associations to widen their scope of action through the creation of local platforms;</li> <li>• Launching awareness campaigns on the importance of activism and associations, especially with young people within schools;</li> <li>• Promoting the training of local associations on how to include and relate with hard-to-reach populations;</li> <li>• Creating local councils on specific issues that can interest these groups (e.g., youth council), giving them actual powers, such as the possibility to present proposals to the municipal council.</li> </ul>

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<b>N</b>	<b>Policy challenge</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
8	<i>Lack of complementarity and exchanges of policy experience among municipalities in this field, especially regarding practices specifically focused on SMSTs.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Creating or joining national and transnational forums and networks of SMSTs about these policy issues (as well as other ones).</li><li>• Including immigrants within SMSTs' networks by allowing their representation in specific consultative bodies or in general forums.</li><li>• Forming specific thematic tables or platforms within SMSTs' networks to discuss these policy issues and exchange experiences.</li></ul>

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*Source: Own elaboration*



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## Annex. Components and activities of the local network

**Table 6. Components and activities of the local network.**

<b>Actors</b>	<b>Type of Organisation</b>	<b>Main Activities</b>	<b>Scale</b>	<b>Role of migrants</b>
Il Vascello	Association	Free health assistance; Second-hand materials and goods free sharing; Intercultural Cooking courses; After school support	Fermignano	Members + Beneficiaries
CGIL local branch	Trade Union	Social security, social and welfare rights; Fiscal assistance; Administrative assistance (i.e. family reunification; residence permits; citizenship)	Fermignano	Beneficiaries

PRACTICES OF INTEGRATION AND LOCAL NETWORKS IN SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED TOWNS

<b>Actors</b>	<b>Type of Organisation</b>	<b>Main Activities</b>	<b>Scale</b>	<b>Role of migrants</b>
CISL/ ANOLF local branch	Trade Union / Association	Social security, social and welfare rights; Fiscal assistance; Administrative assistance (i.e.; family reunification; residence permits; citizenship); FAMI/ AMIF projects.	Fermignano	Members (employee) + Beneficiaries
Diaspora Migrants	Association	Orientation to social inclusion services for refugees and asylum seekers	Fermignano	Promoters
Albani	Association	Promotion of Albanian language and culture	Fermignano	Promoters
Islamic Cultural Centre	Association	Religious dialogue and activities; promotion of Arabic language; self and mutual aid	Fermignano	Promoters
Caritas Italiana local branch	Association	Food Aid; Shelters; Social Inclusion; FAMI/AMI projects.	Pesaro Urbino Province	Beneficiaries
Arigay Agorà local branch	Association	LGBTQ rights protection; assistance in asylum applications and training to Territorial Commission members; intercultural city tours; FAMI/AMIF projects.	Pesaro Urbino Province	Beneficiaries
Labirinto	Social Cooperative	Reception of asylum seekers and refugees; Social inclusion; FAMI/AMIF projects.	Pesaro Urbino Province	Beneficiaries
Refugee Welcome	Association	Family-based reception for refugees exiting the institutional reception system	Pesaro Urbino Province	Beneficiaries
L'Africa Chiama	NGO	Afterschool support; Social and labour integration of Unaccompanied Foreign Minors; FAMI/AMIF projects.	Pesaro Urbino Province	Beneficiaries
Giovani Profughi	Association	Orientation to social inclusion of newcomers, asylum seekers and refugees; Self and mutual aid	Pesaro Urbino Province	Promoters

<b>Actors</b>	<b>Type of Organisation</b>	<b>Main Activities</b>	<b>Scale</b>	<b>Role of migrants</b>
Japoo	Association	Self and mutual aid; Orientation to social inclusion services for newcomers	Pesaro Urbino Province	Promoters
Le Donne del Montefeltro	Association	Self and mutual aid; Orientation to social inclusion services for newcomers	Pesaro Urbino Province	Promoters
Prefecture of Pesaro-Urbino	Public Authority	Entries, for work and family reasons and applicants for international protection; citizenship applications; coordination among different stakeholders operating with/ for immigrants through the Territorial Council of Immigration; FAMIAMIF projects.	Pesaro Urbino Province	Service beneficiaries
Immigration Desk (The Municipality of Fermignano)	Public/local Service	Accompaniment for paperwork (residence permits, etc.); organisation of the Popoli in Festa; orientation services (employment centre, etc.)	Fermignano	Service beneficiaries
ATS IV	Public/Local Authority	General welfare services towards migrants, FAMI/AMIF projects	Urbino (and other 8 Municipalities)	Service beneficiaries

*Source: Own elaboration*





# Local practices of integration and local networks.

## The case of Pentalofos

*Sebene Eshete*

### Foreword

For the PISTE project, the implementing actors from the side of Greece are the NGO HumanRights360 and the Municipality of Voio. The project implementation in Greece focuses on the integration possibilities of unaccompanied minors (UAMs) in small Municipalities. HumanRights360 is a civil society organization established in Greece, that aims to protect and empower the rights of all with no discrimination, but with special focus on the most disadvantaged and vulnerable populations. The Municipality of Voio is a unique case of a small Municipality which manages a shelter for UAMs. Hence, the following Report provides an overview of the framework that influences the integration and participation of UAMs into society in Greece and especially in small Municipalities. More specifically, it provides a presentation on the status quo of integration governance in Greece across levels of administration and goes into depth by observing the local networks.

This research presents the case study of Voio and further explores the local networks in the Regional Unit of Kozani; it was conducted with qualitative methods, using 25 semi-structured interviews to key actors and a focus group which took place from April 2022 until November 2022.

## 1. Greece: migration profile

Traditionally Greece has been considered a country of emigration. The country's transformation to migration country started in the late 1970s and more widely in the 1990s (Fakiolas, King 1996).

According to the estimations of the Greek Statistical Authority in 2021, 921.000 non-Greek citizens lived in Greece, representing 8.6% of the total population (Hellenic Statistical Authority 2021). Albanians hold most of the valid residence permits (62.8%) in Greece (Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2021).

Since 2007 there has been an increase of new arrivals of third country nationals (TCNs) in Greece, due to the country's geographical position rendering it the entry point to Europe (Triandafyllidou 2013). In this context, in 2015 Greece experienced a significant increase in arrivals of asylum seekers, mainly due to the Syrian Civil War. That year, 856,723 people arrived by boats to the Greek islands (UNHCR 2016a). The following UNHCR data present the development of sea and land arrivals from 2014 to 2021 (UNHCR 2022).

**Table 1. Sea & land arrivals to Greece (2014-2021).**

	Land arrivals	Sea arrivals	Total arrivals
<b>2014</b>	2,280	41,038	43,318
<b>2015</b>	4,907	856,723	861,630
<b>2016</b>	3,784	173,450	177,234
<b>2017</b>	6,592	29,718	36,310
<b>2018</b>	18,014	32,494	50,508
<b>2019</b>	14,887	59,726	74,613
<b>2020</b>	5,982	9,714	15,696
<b>2021</b>	4,826	4,331	9,157

Source: UNHCR

The countries mostly represented in the sea arrival figures are Syria and Afghanistan, with the latter gaining a significant percentage rise from 2019 and onwards (UNHCR 2016b; 2017; 2019; Greece Sea arrivals Dashboard - December 2020; 2020; 2021a).

**Table 2. Sea arrivals by gender and country of origin (2015-2021).**

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
<b>Men</b>	55%	42%	41%	40%	41%	41%	52%
<b>Women</b>	17%	21%	22%	23%	23%	23%	19%
<b>Children</b>	28%	37%	37%	37%	36%	36%	29%
<b>Syria</b>	56%	47%	42%	24%	27%	23%	7%
<b>Afghanistan</b>	24%	24%	12%	28%	40%	45%	20%
<b>Iraq</b>	10%	15%	20%	18%	6%	4%	7%
<b>Pakistan</b>	3%	5%	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Somalia</b>	1%	-	-	-	-	10%	20%
<b>Iran</b>	-	3%	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Congo (RDC)</b>	-	-	3%	6%	7%	10%	-
<b>Algeria</b>	-	-	3%	-	-	-	-
<b>Palestine</b>	-	-	-	5%	5%	-	15%
<b>Other (below 3%)</b>	6%	6%	21%	19%	15%	18%	30%

Source: UNHCR

## 1.1 Unaccompanied minors

According to the Greek Asylum Law (L. 4939/2022) “applicants with special reception needs” are the vulnerable persons which need special guarantees to enjoy the rights and to comply with the obligations provided by the Greek asylum law and UAMs are of course in-

cluded in the category of vulnerable persons. The same law provides that an *“Unaccompanied minor”* is a minor who arrives in Greece without being accompanied by a person exercising parental responsibility, care or custody according to Greek law, or by an adult relative who in practice exercises his care for as long as the exercise of these duties has not been assigned to another person in accordance with the law. This definition also includes the minor who ceases to be accompanied after entering Greece”.

The fluctuations of the presence of UAMs in Greece are depicted in the figures below, by the National Centre for Social Solidarity-EKKA (EKKA 2022).

**Table 3. UAMs in Greece (2018-2021).**

Gender	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total	3,741	5,301	4,027	2,225
Girls	6.2%	7.4%	7.3%	9%
Boys	93.8%	92.6%	92.7%	91%

Source: EKKA

The same sources can also provide a good overview of the country of origin of this population.

**Table 3. UAMs - Country of origin (2018-2021).**

Country of origin	2018	2019	2020	2021
Afghanistan	32%	42%	39%	28%
Syria	11%	12%	11%	11%
Pakistan	30%	22%	23%	24%
Others	26%	24%	26%	37%

Source: EKKA

## 2. Development of integration policies at national and local level

This Chapter presents the framework of refugee integration and participation of TCNs in Greece, and the public authorities involved.

### 2.1 General framework

The official texts describing Greece's developing approach towards migrant integration are the following: the *National Strategy for the Integration of Third Country Nationals* (TCNs) (2013); the *National Strategy for the Integration* (2019); and the *National Strategy for the Social Integration of Asylum Seekers and Beneficiaries of International Protection* (2021) (Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2020b).

The issue of integration of TCNs (practically of those who had valid residence permits in Greece) was addressed for the first time within the frame of the National Strategy of 2013. It is important to note that this Strategy was published in a period when Greece had activated legislation allowing for specific categories of migrants to exercise electoral rights at the elections of the Local Government Administration level (L. 3838/2010). Accordingly, the text gave particular emphasis to the need for political participation of long-term migrants (TCNs with valid residence permits who had lived steadily in Greece for at least the last 5 years and, contextually, fulfilled specific preconditions, and children of TCNs over the age of 18 born and residing in Greece and fully participating in the educational system) as well as the need for their inclusion through language and education (Εθνική Στρατηγική για την ένταξη των πολιτών τρίτων χωρών [National Strategy for the integration of TCNs] 2013). Nevertheless, the text did not include specific measures, nor did it have a binding character and monitoring tools. Migrants participated in the elections only once (October 2010). Their participation as voters was estimated a 0.002% of the whole electorate (Christopoulos 2013). On

2013 the Council of State declared these provisions unconstitutional (Generation 2.0 RED 2013) so they were subsequently annulled.

The next National Strategy (2019) was different from the first one, and, in the meantime, the overall migration environment had also changed in Greece. From 2013 to 2019 the context had changed due to the increased arrivals of refugees and the consequent establishment of a distinct Ministry of Migration Policy in 2016 (President of Greece 2016). With regards to participation, the Strategy included the intention of reinstating the participation of migrants in the local elections reform. (Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2019). Nevertheless, after the National Elections (2019) the government changed and this amendment was not voted in Parliament (Syntagma Watch 2020). The Strategy also included specific mentions to measures regarding education, such as the reception classes that had already been set in place and Greek language courses for adults. Nonetheless the new Government announced that this Strategy would not be implemented and a new one would follow (Capital.gr 2021). In the meantime, the Ministry of Migration Policy in 2020, had been reinstated as *Ministry of Migration and Asylum*.

The 2021 National Strategy for the Social Integration of Asylum Seekers and Beneficiaries of International Protection has a narrower focus as its title reveals. This Strategy has a different approach, it doesn't provide for the participation of migrants in elections and is more focused on the concept promoting the "European way of life", which includes training and orientation on the European, national and local socio-cultural context and the engagement of refugees in the local civic life through the Migrant and Refugee Integration Councils-MRICs (see below to find out how they operate). This new Strategy seemed to move towards the approach of assimilation rather than that of integration. During the public consultation for the new Strategy multiple comments of civil society, actors highlighted the lack of specific actions, timeline and budget (Δημόσια Ηλεκτρονική Διαβούλευση για την «Εθνική Στρατηγική για την Ένταξη» | Υπουργείο Μετανάστευσης και Ασύλου [Public Online

## Consultation on the «National Integration Strategy» | Ministry of Migration and Asylum] 2022).

As far as legislation is concerned, integration is mentioned in the Code of migration and integration (L. 4251/2014) which was introduced in 2014 which was amended multiple times since then. The contribution of the new Code was inter alia the fact that it codified the existing legislation, aligning the Greek legislation with the relevant European Directives (as the 2011/51/EU) and that it introduced provisions which addressed the issues of long-term migrants and the Second Generation (those of non-Greek origin who were born or raised in Greece) (Frangiskou *et al.* 2020). The Code also established a protective framework of rights so that TCNs enjoy enhanced protection in accordance with the principles of equality and non-discrimination. These rights refer -among others- to the freedom of movement, the right to education and the equal treatment at work.

Regarding political participation, as mentioned above, electoral rights for long-term migrants have been withdrawn, hence, electoral rights can only be enjoyed after naturalization. The framework for the acquisition of citizenship is split under two distinct categories: First Generation and Second Generation TCNs.

First Generation TCNs refers to those who have been residing legally in Greece for 7 to 10 consecutive years. TCNs of this category can apply for citizenship through the naturalization process, as foreseen in the Greek Citizenship Code, (ratified by L. 3284/2004), which has been amended multiple times. The naturalization process is twofold. The first stage includes the submission of documents proving that the applicant is eligible (e.g., residence permits etc.) and the payment of a 550€ fee (or 100€ fee for homogenis, stateless and recognized refugees). The second stage refers to the “essential criteria”, meaning the evidence that the applicant is integrated into Greek society. The fulfillment of these criteria is proved through a written exam and a series of documents, including a proof of sufficient income (covering the previous 7-10 years). The income criterion is relatively recent (Ministerial Deci-

sion 29845/21) and has raised concerns as it severely impacts people who, at some point of their life, have been students or unemployed.

With regards to the Second Generation, according to the Greek Citizenship Code (Art. 1), a child born in Greece is eligible for citizenship from the time they are registered to the 1st class of a Greek primary school if they are still attending the Greek school at the time of declaration of nationality acquisition. However, eligibility also depends on the lawful residence of both parents and the lawful residence of at least one parent for a minimum of five years before birth. If the child is born before the lapse of the five years' residence, Greek nationality may be acquired after a period of 10 years of continuous lawful residence of the parent.

For children who are not born in Greece, the eligibility for citizenship is connected to their formal education in Greece. A minor who permanently and lawfully resides in Greece, may acquire Greek citizenship if they have successfully attended nine years of primary and secondary education or six years of secondary education (Art. 1b). They can also apply for citizenship within three years of graduation from a Greek university or Technological Educational Institute.

## **2.2 Governance**

The Greek State is organized on a decentralized basis. It comprises two levels of Governance: The Central – State Governance and the Local Self-Government. The former is exercised centrally by Government and Ministries, as well as at a decentralized level (Αποκεντρωμένη διοίκηση [Decentralized Administration]), while the latter is exercised at regional (Περιφέρειες [Regions]) and municipal level (Δήμοι [Municipalities]).

As illustrated below, social integration of migrants and refugees is mainly a matter of the Central Government as the relevant policy areas such as healthcare, housing and education are under its competence.



Until 2016, migrant integration was under the competence of the Ministry of Interior, and more specifically under the competence of the General Secretariat for Population and Social Cohesion (Presidential Decrees 11/2010 and 105/2014). In 2016, the Ministry of Migration Policy was established (Presidential Decree 213/2016) and in the same year the Directorate of Social Integration was established within the (ex) Ministry of Migration Policy (Art. 31 of L. 4375/2016).

Its mission is a. to plan and monitor the implementation of the integration policy; b. to implement the National Strategy for the social integration of legally resident third countries citizens; c. to put in place the corresponding social integration policies and programs, in collaboration with Ministries, self-government bodies, international organizations and civil society bodies, which develop actions in the field of social integration.

After the 2019 National elections, the Ministry of Migration Policy was abolished and merged with the Ministry of Citizen Protection (Presidential Decree 81/2019). In January 2020 the Ministry was reinstated as the Ministry of Migration and Asylum (Presidential Decree 4/2020).

The Ministry's Directorate of Social Integration includes the following departments: the Policy and Program Planning department, the Intercultural Mediation department, the Socio-economic Integration department, and the Support for Beneficiaries of International Protection department (Presidential Decree 106/2020). The Socio-economic Integration department is the one responsible for the cooperation with Local Self-Governments and migrant associations (Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2021d). In 2021, the position of the Deputy Minister for Integration was established (Ministerial Decision 140/2021). This office is responsible for the Integration Directorate and the Special Secretariat for the protection of Unaccompanied Minors (SSPUAM).

In Greece the Regional Self-Governance consists of 13 Regions which do not have any kind of direct competence regarding migrant

integration. The Local Self-Governance level consists of 332 municipalities which can implement policies and participate in programs regarding social solidarity and the protection of vulnerable populations.

The interviews carried out with local and central policymakers within the frame of PISTE project highlighted the fact that these actions have not been accompanied with the proportionate direct funding from the Central Government, due to the severe economic crisis that Greece experienced during the 2010s. Moreover, when there are available European or regional funding tools, small and medium scale Municipalities lack the capacity both to identify them on time and to respond to their complicated and technically demanding application procedures. In view of all these facts, the implementation of local initiatives depends on the capacity of the Local Self-Administration and/or on the political efforts of the local leadership.

## **2.3 Local integration policies**

Some forms of locally based integration actors are the Migrant Integration Centres (MICs) and the Migrant and Refugee Integration Councils (MRICs). They are both foreseen by legislation but not mandatory, meaning that their establishment relies on the initiative of the municipalities.

The Migrant Integration Centres are appendages of the Local Community Centers. They are operated by the municipalities (L. 4638/2016), and monitored by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, more specifically by the Directorate for Social Integration. In 2021, 11 MICs were operating in 10 municipalities across the country, mainly in big Greek cities. Their target group is legally residing TCNs, beneficiaries of international protection and asylum seekers. The services offered include, inter alia, consultation services on integration and networking, Greek language lessons, legal advice, social and psychological support as well as networking and awareness raising activities (Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2020c). According to

the most recent data by the end of 2021 49,170 people had received support in the framework of MICs operations (Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2022a).

The Migrant and Refugee Integration Councils (MRICs) operate on a municipal level. They have a consulting role to Municipal Councils, regarding issues that affect migrants and refugees. They were established in 2010 (L. 3852/2010) and their operation procedures were later amended (L. 4555/2018). Their competences are: a) the recording and monitoring of issues faced by migrant and refugee populations in the municipality concerned, with regard to their integration into the local community, their contact with public authorities or the municipal authority; b) the submission of recommendations to the Municipal Council for the development of local actions to promote the smooth social integration of migrants and refugees; and c) the organisation of events to raise awareness and strengthen the social cohesion of the local population.

The members of the MRICs are city councillors, civil society representatives and 5 representatives of recognized migrants/refugees Collective Bodies, permanently residing at the specific Municipality. In case there are no such Collective Bodies in the municipality, the Municipal Council shall invite one of the recognized Bodies active in the region concerned to appoint a representative. If there are no such Bodies in the region concerned or if, even after the appointment of their representative, the total number of 5 representatives is not reached, the Municipal Council shall further invite the most representative secondary or federal organization of collective representation of migrants/refugees, active on a national level, to appoint the remaining representatives, until the total number of 5 representatives is completed. Currently, there is no registry on the existing MRICs and as a result no information on the implementation of this approach nation-wide.

In this context and given the fact that migrants and refugees continue arriving in Greek cities, the rest of the local integration

actions rely on local political leadership (Sabchev 2022) 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. That is, they depend on the initiatives taken by local policymakers and thus, on their capacity and know-how. One example of strong leadership on a local level is the municipality of the city of Ioannina, where the local authority has created an integration centre with the support of private foundations and supports the social participation of migrant and refugee communities in the area, through the provision of technical support to the local MRIC (UNHCR 2021b).

Additionally, active cities on migrant and refugee integration have created the Cities Network for Integration (CNI). This is a Network operating since 2018, now consisting of 18 municipalities. Small, medium, and big municipalities are represented in CNI. The Network is supported by IOM and UNCHR and its goal is the development and exchange of good integration practices (CNI, online published).

## 3. Integration of UAMs

### 3.1 Governance

In Greece the competent authority for all the issues concerning the reception and integration of Unaccompanied Minors (UAMs) is the Special Secretariat for the Protection of Unaccompanied Minors (SSPUAM) which was established in 2020 (Presidential Decree 18/2020). It belongs to the Ministry of Migration and Asylum and operates under the auspices of the Deputy Minister for Integration.

The SSPUAM is the national focal point for competent institutions of the EU. It collaborates with members of the EU, third countries, organizations, and services within the EU as well as international organizations with regards to initiatives, measures and programs that contribute to the effective protection of UAMs.

The SSPUAM consists of the following units:

- a. Monitoring and Evaluation Unit for Host Centres
- b. Housing and Relocation Request Management Unit
- c. Unit for the Integration and Support of UAMs
- d. Institutional Protection Unit

The responsibilities of the SSPUAM are the following:

- a. Management of accommodation and relocation requests for UAMs
- b. Management and evaluation of hosting facilities and supervised apartments for minors
- c. Support with regards to social integration of UAMs
- d. Safeguard of the institutional protection of UAMs
- e. Operation of the National Emergency Response Mechanism to identify and locate children in need.

In 2021 the SSPUAM drafted the *National Strategy for the Protection of Unaccompanied Minors*. The same year Greece launched a *National Action Plan for children's rights*, part of which is dedicated to children in refugee and migration context.

## **3.2 Legal framework**

Every time an UAM is identified in the country, the SSPUAM is notified. The accurate and timely age assessment of the child-asylum applicant is crucial for the result of their international protection application and their psychological well-being.

Greece has failed for many years to apply an effective guardianship system for UAMs. According to the previous legal framework (L. 4554/2018) the Public Prosecutor was the temporary guardian of all the UAMs and separated children residing in Greece. However, the Prosecutor would merely assume that capacity in theory. In practice, NGO personnel (where available) were taking the authorization by the Public Prosecutor for covering specific needs (e.g. legal representation) of the child. At the end of 2020 a Network of Temporary guardians (run by the NGO Metadrasí) with limited authorization had been appointed. Their role was expanded in 2021 and the operation of this Network of guardians stopped on August 2021 (AIDA 2022).

As provided in the National Strategy for the Protection of UAMs the Greek Guardianship system for UAMs was needed to be reformed. The guardianship model shall guarantee that the State designs, coordinates and monitors the implementation of the institution of guardianship in Greece, while certified partners implement guardianship on the ground adhering to the standards set forth by the State.

In July 2022 a National System of Guardianship and a new Framework of hosting UAMs in Greece was introduced (L. 4960/2022). The law, as incorporated in the Greek Asylum Law (L. 4939/2022), provides for the implementation of the new Guardianship Scheme, which will provide flexibility to various actors that fulfil specific criteria to provide guardianship services. The main actors to implement the new Guardianship scheme are the Public Prosecutor, the “Guardian” (a legal entity), the “authorized Guardian” (the person designated by the “Guardian” to perform the Guardian’s duties in the name and on behalf of the Guardian) and the Guardianship Board (a collective advisory and decision-making body of the SSPUAM).

Regarding the appointment of the guardian the law provides that the Prosecutor a) orders the commission, b) appoints the guardian, c) specifies the personal information and the place of residence of UAMs who are under commissions and d) defines the field of action of the guardian. Additionally, the law provides for the possible

actors that can offer the guardianship services, the procedures to appoint a guardian, the content of the guardianship of UAMs, the personnel and the institutional actors involved and the monitoring and support of the implementation of the new Guardianship system. The SSPUAM, has the duty to develop the operational framework of the new Guardianship system ensuring its effective monitoring, support, and evaluation, in addition it will develop the SOPs for the implementation of Guardianship, the identification of indicators for the Best Interest of the Child Assessment, guidelines in terms of guardianship implementation, training and exchange of best practices with other countries.

This new System is not yet operational.

### **3.2.1 Provisions for the integration of UAMs**

In the Greek legislation, the provisions that refer to the integration of UAMs are those regarding housing and education. Depending on their age UAMs can be placed either in *Shelters* or in *Supported Independent Living apartments (SILs)*. Shelters are buildings operated by NGOs and charities where the minors are housed all together. SILs are apartments where minors over the age of 16, are living in groups of 4 with the support of an NGO. All UAMs receive a monthly allowance.

In order to be admitted in SILs (Ministerial Decision N. Δ11/ οικ.60207/2717) UAMs must meet the following criteria: a. have reached the age of 16; b. have been registered by the Reception and Identification Service or the Greek Police or the competent authorities for receiving and examining an application for international protection; c. have the ability to support themselves and assume further responsibilities; d. not suffer from an active psychiatric illness that can put them or other persons at risk; e. not take illegal psychoactive drugs or other toxic substances (e.g. drugs, alcohol, etc.); f. agree to live in the context of SILs.

In terms of capacity, according to the latest available data (March 2022) 72 UAM shelters (with total capacity of 1,993 places) and 121 SILs (with total capacity of 484 places) were operating in Greece. Additionally, there are 6 Emergency Accommodation Facilities with total capacity of 200 places (EKKA 2022).

Once the minors are identified by NGOs or state authorities, their case files are sent via a common standard referral form to the Housing and Relocation Request Management Unit of the SSPUAM and to the National Emergency Response Mechanism in order to be placed in a shelter. The housing request of the actor who refers the child to the SSPUAM includes a brief social history and some vulnerability indicators (e.g. if the minor is a survivor of torture, a victim of trafficking, a single mother, has a disability etc.) to be considered. The vulnerability indicators play a crucial role for the selection of the proper shelter of the child. With regards to formal education, minor asylum applicants and minor children of asylum applicants are obliged to be enrolled in the public education system for as long as the stay in Greece (L. 4939/2022, Art. 55). The enrolment should take place no later than 3 months from the date of the completion of the identification of the minor. With regards to non-formal education, law envisages the possibility of such activities inside the accommodation centres.

Law 2413/1996 introduced for the first time the concept of Intercultural Schools. According to this law, any school where the 45% or more of its students were non-Greeks citizens, could become an Intercultural School and thus adjust the educational content according to the educational needs of the students. According to the law the purpose of intercultural education was, through the operation of primary and secondary school units, to properly educate children with social, cultural or "educational peculiarities". The Intercultural Education Schools followed the programs of the corresponding public schools, which were adapted in the special social, cultural, or educational needs of their students.



Currently, L. 4415/2016 sets the context for intercultural education and for the operation of intercultural schools. Under the same context, and then under L. 4547/2018 an additional education structure operates, especially for asylum seekers and refugee children. These are the Reception School Facilities for Refugee Education (DYEPs) which operate in the accommodation centers or in the school buildings, in the afternoon. Their curriculum is adjusted to the educational needs of the students and their duration is up to one year with a possibility of extension for one more year.

Furthermore, L. 3879/2010 provided for the Education Priority Zones (ZEPs) meaning Regional Directorates of Primary and Secondary Education where reception classes take place alongside the regular program. ZEPs are established in areas with low overall educational attainment, high drop-out rates, and low access to higher education, as well as low socio-economic indicators, such as a high poverty risk index.

Apart from schools, a support system for refugee children education is operating under the scheme of Refugee Education Coordinators (SEPs) (L. 4547/2018, Art. 77). The SEPs are educators operating in accommodation centers or areas close to such centers or areas close to DYEPs. Their tasks include the coordination, monitoring and consultation regarding the smooth operation of refugee education. At governmental level, refugee education is overseen by the Autonomous Department of Coordination and Monitoring of Refugee Education, in the Ministry of Education (Presidential Decree 18/2018).

Non-formal education takes place in a structured educational environment and leads to the certification of qualifications (L. 4763/2020). It may include initial vocational training and adult literacy. Informal learning on the other hand, as defined in L. 3879/2010, refers to learning activities outside of a structured educational environment.

### 3.3 Policy Framework

The SSPUAM published a *Strategy on the Protection of UAMs in Greece* for public consultation (OpenGov 2022) in January 2022. It should be noted that the Strategy does not have a binding character, nor is it accompanied by a specific timeline.

The Strategy includes 4 pillars of action: a) improvement of the reception and hosting system and safeguarding UAM” rights, b) implementation of sustainable solutions for every child; c) protection of UAMs from all forms of violence; d) modernization of data collection.

Under the second pillar, the Strategy includes provisions for the integration and participation of UAMs. Based on the results of the IMMERSE project which was funded by Horizon 2020, the Strategy defines 5 key dimensions: 1) access to rights (legal status, health care, compulsory education), 2) language and culture (proficiency in Greek language, maintaining a particular cultural identity during integration into Greek society), 3) well-being (happiness, sense of belonging), 4) relationships (friends, peers, teachers, mentors and institutions), 5) educational achievement (academic skills, completion of compulsory education, attendance of formal post compulsory education) (IMMERSE, no date).

Moreover, the Strategy refers especially to the important role of local communities in integration. More specifically, the Strategy proposes:

1. The development of a UAM Registry at local level
2. The delivery of compulsory Greek language and social studies courses at municipal level
3. Establishment of employment programs at local level with the participation of UAMs and minors of the local community

With regards to the civic participation of UAMs, the Strategy refers to the importance of schools and local youth groups and pro-

poses volunteerism as well as their participation in decision making processes regarding matters regarding them. More specifically, according to the Strategy any effort to promote the civic participation of UAMs involves the participation of local youth. School and local youth associations are considered ideal points of reference for planning such initiatives. According to the Strategy, UAMs need additional support and encouragement, as often the only support network they have in the country are professionals and peers they live with in accommodation facilities. Ways to gradually promote social participation are voluntary work in the community (either following an initiative, organized by the Organization that has undertaken the protection of the minor in cooperation with local institutions and authorities, or organized by the school as an action that concerns all students), the participation of minors in the decision-making process on various issues that affect them locally or at school, and the planning of a project on issues jointly chosen by the children of a place or school.

## 4. Migrant and Refugee presence in the Region

The Municipality of Voio is situated in the Regional Unit of Kozani, which administratively belongs to the Region of Western Macedonia.

**Figure 1. Location of the Region of Western Macedonia.**



Source: Wikipedia

At the time of the completion of this Report, the detailed results of the Greek national population census had not been published. Based on the previous census (2011) the population breakdown regarding citizenship of the administrative units that are important for this Report is illustrated in the following table:

**Table 5. Permanent Population of the Region of Western Macedonia (2011).**

Place of residence	Total population	Non-Greek Citizens			Non-Greek Citizens %
		Total	EU citizens	Non-EU/Stateless/Unknown Citizenship	
Region of Western Macedonia	283,689	11,598	1,092	10,506	4,08%
Regional Unit of Kozani	150,196	5,600	541	5,059	3,72%
Municipality of Kozani	71,388	2,543	269	2,274	3,56%
Municipality of Voio	18,386	669	23	646	3,63%
Municipality of Eordaia	45,592	1,826	203	1,623	4%
Municipality of Servia	14,830	562	46	516	2,55%

*Source: Hellenic Statistical Authority*

Moreover, it appears that in April 2020, the holders of valid residence permits in Western Macedonia were 9,475. Half of them were residing in the Regional Unit of Kozani (4,707). As far as countries of origin are concerned, the vast majority of non-Greek residents (4,099) were Albanians (Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2020a).

The location of the region of Western Macedonia also played its own part regarding the refugee population movements since 2015. For example, in 2016, when asylum seekers were moving from Greece towards Western European states (mainly through the border city of Idomeni) the city of Kozani had temporarily hosted 400 people in the local Gymnasium (Pappas 2016). Furthermore, the wid-

er region of Western Macedonia has hosted asylum seekers, on a longer-term basis, in the following facilities:

1. Grevena (town of 13.137 residences): In 2016, 650 asylum seekers from Syria were hosted in 2 hotels in the area of Grevena, (ΚΕΔΕ 2016). By 2021 when this hosting scheme ended, the hotels used for hosting asylum seekers had risen to 9. The operation was under the responsibility of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum (IOM 2021).
2. Velventos (city of 3.360 residents): From 9/2020, to 4/2021, 71 UAMs have been hosted in a hotel in the city of Velvento. The operation was implemented by the Greek NGO SolidarityNow (ERTNEWS 2021; SolidarityNow 2021).
3. Neraida (village of 148 residents): Since October 2019, a shelter for 30 UAMs has been operating in Neraida. The shelter is operated by the Greek NGO “Koinoniko EKAV” (Δομή Κοζάνης [*kozani Facility*], online published).
4. Aiani (city of 2.006 residents): From 4/2018 to 4/2020 the Greek NGO Arsis, operated a facility with an accommodation capacity of 35 UAMs (ARSIS 2020).
5. Kozani (city of 41.066 residents): Since 2021 the NGO Arsis is also coordinating a SIL program for 16 UAMs over the age of 16 in 4 flats (ARSIS 2021).
6. Neapoli (city of 1.442 residents): The Municipality of Voio initially participated through a hotel in Neapoli and then through the municipal shelter of UAMs. The hotel in Neapoli hosted 96 asylum seekers during the period 2019-2020. (Πρωινός Λόγος 2019).
7. Pentalofos (village of 889 residents): Since 2019, the Municipality of Voio has been operating a shelter for female UAMs.

**Figure 2. Map of Regional Unit of Kozani**



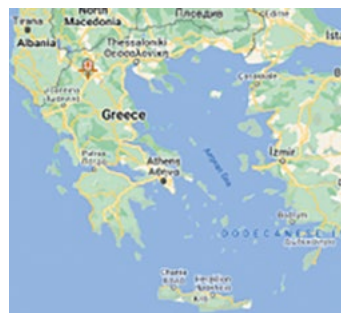
Source: [www.travel-greece.org](http://www.travel-greece.org)

At the time of this Report completion, the official data indicate the existence of no official hosting facility for asylum seekers in the Region of Western Macedonia, apart from the two shelters for UAMs listed above (Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2022b; 2022c).

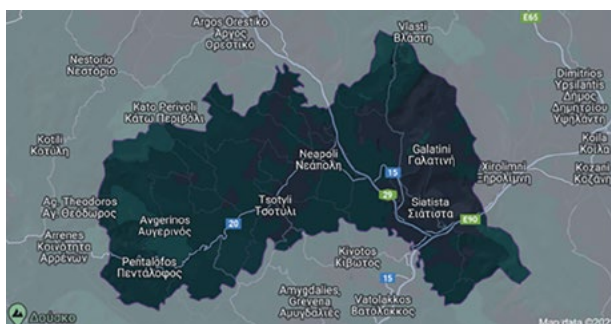
## 4.1 Municipality of Voio migration profile

The case study of this Report, in the context of the PISTE project, is the shelter of Pentalofos, which is the only one operated by a local authority in Greece.

**Figure 3. Location of Municipality of Voio**



Source: *Google Maps*

**Figure 4. Map of Municipality of Voio.**

Source: Google Maps

According to the last national census (2021) the total population of the Municipality of Voio is 15,060 but no results regarding the number of TCNs residing in the area were available at the time of the Report completion. According to the previous national census (2011), the population of the Municipality of Voio amounted to 18,836 people. According to the same data, 669 residents (3.64%) were non-Greek citizens (Hellenic Statistic Authority 2011). According to even older census data, the non-Greek population moved to Voio mainly during the 1990s. Additional data from the 2001 national census, showcase that the vast majority (87.5%) of the non-Greek population were Albanians, proving that the immigration of this area followed the general migration patterns occurring in Greece at that time. It can be also assumed that the position of Voio, close to the land border with Albania, has also played an important role.

**Table 6. Voio Population Development (1991-2011).**

	<b>Total Population</b>	<b>Non-Greeks</b>	<b>Non-Greeks %</b>
<b>2011</b>	18.386	669	3,63%
<b>2001</b>	20.430	618	3,02%
<b>1991</b>	23.465	66	0,28%

Source: [www.statistics.gr](http://www.statistics.gr)

**Table 7. Non-Greek population in Voio (2001) by country of origin.**

<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>N.</b>
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	1
Albania	541
Armenia	1
Australia	7
Austria	1
Belgium	1
Bulgaria	2
Germany	3
Georgia	1
United States	19
United Kingdom	1
Spain	4
Cyprus	1
Hungary	1
Uzbekistan	4
Ukraine	4
Poland	3
Romania	1
Russian Federation	20
Czech Republic	1
Philippines	1
Total	618

*Source: www.statistics.gr*



## 5. PISTE Case study: The Pentalofos shelter

Pentalofos is a mountain village built at an altitude of 1,018 meters. It is located 60 km away from the city of Siatista which is the capital of the Municipality of Voio and 80 km away from the city of Kozani. Pentalofos became part of the Municipality of Voio in 2010.

**Figure 5. The small village of Pentalofos.**



Source: [www.voio.gr](http://www.voio.gr)

According to the testimonies and the desk research, the involvement of both the village of Pentalofos and the Municipality of Voio in refugee reception was the result of an existing infrastructure and the need to rejuvenate an otherwise shrinking village. The town of Pentalofos had a Boarding House, supported by the Karoutas Foundation (which is run by the Center of Macedonian Studies). This Boarding House used to host children from low-income families, who attended the local high-school. Initially the building was owned by the church and was placed under the auspices of the National Youth Foundation in 1985. After 1990, the Boarding House started hosting children of Greek descent from the Albanian village Kodër. From then on, the Boarding House gradually also accepted children of Albanian migrants who were living in Greece. This development led to the establishment of a School for Intercultural Education in

2001 (Vimavoïou 2013). In 2011 all Boarding Houses came under the responsibility of the local authorities (Joint Ministerial Decision 127176/H/2011). Accordingly, the Pentalofos Boarding House came under the responsibility of the Municipality of Voio.

During and after the economic crisis that Greece faced in the 2010s, the presence of Albanian workers in the area gradually declined. This represented a threat for schools in Pentalofos as there would not be enough children to justify the need for schools, let alone an intercultural one. In the long-term, this would create a vicious circle, resulting in an inevitable population decline.

In this context, in 2016 the local community of Pentalofos decided to make use of the Boarding House as a shelter for UAMs and raised the issue with the Municipality. (News Center 2016). In fact, the Municipality applied to the competent Ministry and the AMIF 2014-2020 fund and the shelter started operating in 2019 (Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2018).

During the period of the interviews, the shelter residents were 39 girls coming mainly from Somalia and Congo. Most of the girls had applied for international protection in Greece and a small percentage of them are relocation/family reunification applicants. It has been reported that the population is not stable as the minors are teenagers and often very close to adulthood. This means that in most cases, the minors do not reside in the shelter for more than one year.

The shelter provides legal and psychosocial services consisting of 1 lawyer, 1 nurse and 2 psychologists. During the period of the interviews, the appointed guardian for the minors was the Public Prosecutor of the city of Grevena, who had provided the lawyer of the shelter the authorization to legally represent the minors. The asylum applications of the girls are examined by the Regional Asylum Office of the city of Thessaloniki, which is located 200 km away from the shelter. Concerns about the completion of the asylum procedures were expressed during the interviews. Specifically, it was noted that

the examination of the asylum applications, in all probability, would not be completed until the minors had reached age of majority.

The community of Pentalofos is quite isolated and this has a negative effect on the ability of the minors to participate in extra-curricular activities. The Cultural Center of Pentalofos is organizing local events, which are all attended by the girls, still they expressed their wish to visit places with more activities. Pentalofos is located far away from the city of Kozani, which is the most vibrant urban center of the area, where a minor can enjoy extracurricular activities, in addition, Kozani is over an hour's drive away across mountain roads.

## **5.1 Local networks in the Region of Western Macedonia**

In the Voio Municipality there are 3 volunteer groups, focused on blood donations and 19 cultural associations (‘Συμμετέχω - Προσφέρω’ [I Participate - I offer] 2022). The abovementioned groups do not specialize in the issues of migrant inclusion and participation. Apart from the shelter of Pentalofos, the stakeholder mostly related to migration is the Intercultural School, located also in Pentalofos.

In the larger Regional Unit of Kozani, there are three active Civil Society Organizations (CSOs): *Arsis Kozani*, *Koinoniko EKAV* and *GO Alive*. Moreover, the Municipality of Kozani has also been active on the issue of migrant inclusion and participation, being one of the first local authorities to establish a MRIC. Finally, in the city of Servia, there is a General High School which has been involved in a specialized program on refugee inclusion in education and society. No evidence of organized migrant communities' operation has been observed in the region of Western Macedonia.

The initiatives of the abovementioned CSOs are described below by category.

### 5.1.1 Civil Society Organizations

*Arsis Kozani* is a civil society Organization active both in migration issues as well as general community support. Its activities in the city of Kozani cover a wide range of issues, such as education, Roma inclusion, migrant inclusion, and environment. Most of its activities are based on the work of more than 10 volunteer groups (ARSIS KOZANIS 2022).

Regarding migrant and refugee inclusion, *Arsis Kozani* has operated two housing programs for UAMs in the city of Aiani and in the city of Kozani. These actions have a specific timeline. The Organization is also operating the “Free School” for children of all grades, whose schooling cannot be supported by families and for children from the neighborhood. Apart from offering free of charge remedial teaching, preparation for the national examinations, foreign language and computer courses, it provides individualized educational support, psychosocial support, creative and expression (artistic creations, etc.) activities, recreational activities (excursions, film screenings, etc.) and the “Contra Kozani” football academy. *Arsis Kozani* has also founded an Adult School, aimed at adults who are facing financial difficulties and want to improve their personal and professional skills (unemployed, low paid, single parent families, migrants, etc.). It also provides free Greek language courses leading to the state certificate of attainment in Greek, foreign languages, and computers skills. In the past, the Organization had operated an Immigration Service Centre which was addressing women of migrant origin, with the purpose of creating a safe space for them. In addition, the Organization has implemented actions towards the inclusion of the local Roma community. *GO Alive* is a youth Organization which used to be situated in the Voio Municipality and its Headquarters are now in the city of Kozani. It is focused on youth work, with empowerment, exchange, and civic participation projects. The use of culture and more specifically the use of poetry as instrument of social inclusion of the refugee population was among their projects (Go Alive 2021).

*Koinoniko EKAV* focuses on marginalized populations. Since 2021 it has been active in the village of Neraida, where it operates a shelter for UAMs (*Project «Nefeli» 2022*).

### **5.1.2 Schools**

The Regional Unit of Kozani includes 59 secondary schools (ΟΠΕΚΑ 2022). The schools most actively involved in migrant and refugee pupil integration and inclusion are those in Pentalofos and in the city of Servia.

#### **General High school of the city of Servia**

In Servia, a town of 2.980 residents, the General High School is attended by the UAMs of the Neraida village shelter. Moreover, the school is participating in the Network “Schools for all” which is the result of the three-year funded project ‘Schools for All - Inclusion of Refugee Children in Greek Schools’. This project is supported by the European Economic Area Financial Mechanism, is under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs and is carried out in collaboration with the Institute of Education Policy (IEP). It is managed by the European Wergeland Centre (EWC) and the grant manager is SOL Crowe, in collaboration with HumanRights360 (The European Wergeland Centre 2022).

The school has been participating in this project since 2001 and has developed an action plan for an inclusive school environment. Additionally, the school has participated in specialized training sessions for the teaching personnel and parents, with regards to refugee inclusion in education (Γενικό Λύκειο Σερβίων [General Lyceum of the city of Servia] 2021). In terms of networking, the school has also organized joint meetings with local and refugee pupils, along with the personnel of the Neraida shelter for UAMs so that minors and teachers could exchange views and ask questions on the concept of migration (Volaki 2021). Other relevant actions in-

clude the publication of school regulations in Farsi language (Γενικό Λύκειο Σερβίων [General Lyceum of the city of Serbia] 2022b) and the cooperation with the local football team “Titan” (Κουρελή [Kourelj] 2022). Last but not least, the school has engaged in inclusive and participatory cultural events and activities. Indicatively, multicultural dance lessons, oral history presentations and creative writing workshops (Γενικό Λύκειο Σερβίων [General Lyceum of the city of Serbia] 2022c; 2022d; 2022a).

Figure 6. Action plan for an inclusive school in Serbia.

**ΓΕ.Λ. Σερβίων  
"Ζήσης Σωτηρίου"**

**ΣΥΝΕΔΡΙΟ: 20 ΙΟΥΝΙΟΥ 2022**

Πρόγραμμα Σχολεία για όλους  
(Συμπεριληπτή παιδιών  
προσφύγων στα Ελληνικά σχολεία)

**Σχέδιο Δράσης:  
«Μαθητές, εκπαιδευτικοί, γονείς  
συνεργάζονται για ένα  
συμπεριληπτικό σχολείο»**

**Το σχολείο μας, ΓΕ.Λ. ΣΕΡΒΙΩΝ- «ΖΗΣΗΣ ΣΩΤΗΡΙΟΥ»**  
1οι μαθητές, 9 μαθητές πρόσφυγας συνολικούς, 3 μαθητές με υποκινητικά μαθητικά Επικοινωνιακά (Ε), 2 μαθητές με Επικοινωνιακά (Ε), 2 μαθητές με Επικοινωνιακά (Ε), 2 μαθητές με Επικοινωνιακά (Ε), 2 μαθητές με Επικοινωνιακά (Ε), 2 μαθητές με Επικοινωνιακά (Ε)

**Η επετηρίδα «Ζήσης Σωτηρίου»**  
Το σχολείο μας έχει την επετηρίδα «Ζήσης Σωτηρίου» τιμάμε τον Σερβόφιλο αγωνιστή των Βοσνίων που πρόσφερε την προσφορά του για την ίδρυση της σχολικής του και για τη μάχη του για την Έθνη στην Αθήνα και εργάστηκε ως φιλόδοξος στην Έγερση Ελευθερίας της Αργεντινής.

**Η καινοτομία μας**  
Το σχολείο μας ξεκίνησε στην πρωτοβουλία παρακάτω των Παριζίων όπου ξεκίνησε η καταγραφή των Σερβών, της ιστορίας της πόλης και της Κρατικής Αρχής Παιδείας. Η αρχική ομάδα των Σερβών εργάστηκε για να ενισχύσει τον αλληλεπιδραστικό διάλογο με τα ελληνικά μαθητικά πρότυπα της Δραχίνης της Νερόλης.

**Βασικές μας στόσεις**  
**Με διαδραστική τα παιδιά πρότυπα και συμπεριληπτική τους**  
Η συμπεριληπτική των παιδιών μαθητών με μαθησιακές αναπηρίες κοινωνικές στόσεις

**Οι έρευνες**  
1. Προβλεπόμενες στόσεις, οι βασισμένες και την εθελοντική  
2. Διερεύνηση της δυναμικής, αλλά και η υλική μας  
3. Μεταφορά των αποτελεσμάτων  
4. Προσφορά εργαλείων για αξιολογώντας μαθητές  
5. Σημεία Αποτίμηση Έκτακτη  
6. Συμπεριληπτική διαδραστική διαδικασία Οργάνωση  
7. Η πρωτοβουλία είναι  
8. Η πρωτοβουλία είναι απλή, ηολική, προσιτή, κοινή

**Ομάδα Δράσης**  
Καλλιόπη Αθανασίου, Μάρια Ευαγγελία, Αρμάν Μωρίς, Κωνσταντίνος Παπαδόπουλος, Τελεφάνος Ουμάκης, Καλλιόπη Κωνσταντίνου  
Επικοινωνία με όλους τους ενδιαφερόμετους του Γ.Λ. Σερβίων  
**Επιχειρηματική** - Η επιμετοποίηση του Σχολείου For All, Σερβίων World  
Οι αναφορές της Δραχίνης Σερβίων Αποστολή - Συμπεριληπτική  
**Επιχειρηματική φάση**, ΑΠΕΕ, Σύλλογος μαθητικών Ομάδων, Αθήνας, Σύλλογος ΤΕΕΑ, Βασική ομάδα «Αθήνας Κέντρο», Παιδαγωγική Ομάδα, Σύλλογος Α.Τ. Γενικής Σχολικής

Επιχειρηματική ομάδα μαθητών μας και τις μαθητικές μας  
**Η ιστορία μας, ένας κοινός τόπος αναφοράς**  
<https://blogs.sch.gr/lykeion/category/for-all-oli-kyperioteroi-ten-grammaton-mathiton-kales-gratiotou/>

SOA Crowe

Source: schoolsforall.org

## Pentalofos Intercultural High School

The UAMs’ educational needs in the Pentalofos shelter are managed by the Intercultural School of the village. The Intercultural

High School of Pentalofos was established in 2001 (Vimavoïou 2013). The schedule is adjusted to UAMs' educational needs, meaning that it focuses on language learning, gymnastics, and arts.

## **5.2 Local Governance: The experience of Kozani's MRIC**

The Municipality of Kozani was one of the first ones to operate a MRIC. The first MRIC was constituted by 9 members, appointed by resolution of the city Council. Three members were municipal councilors (one of which was a minority member), 2 members were representatives of migrant communities, and 4 members were representatives of social organizations, which developed activities related to the migrants within the municipality. Non-Greek members should have had a valid residence permit.

In 2018 a new legal framework (L. 4555/2018) made the establishment of MRICs quite challenging. Possible participants were not identifiable in the city of Kozani, because the new provisions included specific prerequisites regarding the form of the migrant communities eligible for participation. This, in combination with the lack of formally established communities in the region, made the participation of migrants very challenging.

Specifically, in 2019, after the municipal elections, the new Municipal Council commenced the establishment of a new MRIC ([www.ertnews.gr](http://www.ertnews.gr) 2019). According to the minutes of the Municipal Council's relevant meeting, the new law made the identification of migrant participants impossible as there was no recognized body of collective representation of migrants/refugees active within the municipality. Similarly, there is no recognized body of collective representation of migrants/refugees within the Region of Western Macedonia. In early 2020, communications took place with the Forum of Migrants (based in Athens) and the Federation of Albanian Associations of Greece (based in Athens), two associations which have a

role of collective representation. Indeed, the Federation of Albanian Associations of Greece provided one candidate, a migrant residing in Kozani, however this was not enough as 5 migrant participants are required for the establishment of the Council.

## 6. Analysis

### 6.1 The inclusion of UAMs in remote towns

Generally constant amendments on policies about migrant integration and participation in political life have caused discontinuity, confusion, and fragmentation in the implementation of inclusive approaches at the local level.

#### 6.1.1 Challenges

The interviews revealed that the lack of adequate funding for the integration of UAMs reflects the lack of an integration policy in general. The funding provided by the state for the operation of shelters covers part of the costs but does not provide resources for the support of extracurricular activities (Non-Formal Education). This issue has been particularly important for the summertime when schools are closed.

Another aspect regarding funding is related to small Municipalities' capacity as they seem unable to undertake fundraising activities either due to lack of specialized personnel or personnel in general. It appears that even though there are needs which could be covered by available European tools, the municipalities are not informed about them or do not have the necessary resources to apply for them, due to the very technical and complex nature of the procedure. As regards the daily needs of UAMs, one critical challenge is



the appointment of guardians. Greece failed for many years to apply an effective guardianship system and the Public Prosecutor, acting as temporary guardian, used to merely assume that capacity in theory. This effectively means that there is no efficient capacity to focus on the specific protection and integration needs of each child. The new Guardianship system, which was introduced in July of 2022, is not yet operational.

In Greece, there is a number of barriers to inclusive education, including cultural obstacles in school community, of the persistence of stereotypes and some negative views of “foreigners”. There is proven lack of a uniform approach to be implemented by school directors, due to reasons which range from lack of knowhow or inadequate training on intercultural education, to incorrect application of the provisions governing children’s school attendance on the part of school directors, for example by barring admittance if no teacher has been hired for a reception class. This can lead to students not attending or dropping out of school. As in the case of other Greek areas, in Voio teachers have not received special training on intercultural education, neither have the buildings been refurbished, nor have students received accessible learning materials that are designed for their specific educational needs. Moreover, Reception classes and DYEP are often critically understaffed and unable to operate for the whole school year in the whole country. Schools in Greece start in September, but reception classes and DYEP are often not fully staffed until the middle of the school year. According to the Ministry of Education, in the school year 2021-2022, 97 Refugee Education Coordinators (RECs) were appointed (with 86 currently active) and 110 school units with DYEP classes functioned (83 in primary and 27 in secondary education). Also, 1,358 teachers were recruited for reception Classes of primary and secondary education and 220 teachers were recruited for DYEP classes, in total 1,578 recruitments of teachers during school year 2021- 2022 (Greek Council for Refugees, Save the Children, Terres des Hommes 2022). The wide range of literacy levels among the students, in combination with the delays in teacher placements, has challenged the access of migrant children to formal

education and has had negative effects on their integration and participation. These drawbacks make their access to the Greek citizenship quite difficult as the required written test is very demanding.

The special reception conditions apply to minors up to their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, nevertheless, there are no provisions for the smooth transition to adulthood for this population. This means that the young adults are rendered even more vulnerable as they do not possess the tools to lead an independent life in Greece. For example, with regards to housing, they are obliged (with the exception of certain conditions e.g. school attendance etc.) to leave the shelters and move to the regular reception facilities offered by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, namely the ESTIA housing and cash scheme or the camps. Given the fact that the ESTIA scheme is now at its final stage and soon will cease operating, these subjects that are eligible asylum seekers will be removed from the shelters and apartments and transferred to accommodation facilities (camps) probably in a remote area from where they lived. Those not eligible to apply for asylum (failed asylum seekers) will have to leave the country. The prospect of adulthood means in many cases that their asylum applications are going to be treated differently by the Asylum authorities as the applicants are no longer considered to be vulnerable. Moreover, minors who come of age before a decision on their asylum claim is issued, lose access to many of their rights, the lack of which is considered likely to affect the processing of their case and, therefore, the outcome of the procedure itself. They also lose their right to family reunification with a family member in another European country.

The humanitarian status within the frame of international protection was for many years the necessary safeguard for vulnerable asylum seekers, who did not meet the criteria to be granted international protection. In 2020, the humanitarian status was abolished in Greece and this severely affected UAMs. The precarity of legal residence demotivates UAMs from making active integration efforts, as their effective integration does not improve their prospect of remaining in the country legally. In practice, minors are anxious and

demotivated to make integration efforts, as the fear for the future renders any effort futile to their eyes.

This Report covers a period in which children, regardless of citizenship/status, were physically absent from schools, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the case of UAMs, this resulted in minimized connections with the local community, which represented more difficulties in learning the Greek language.

### **6.1.2 Opportunities**

The operation of two other shelters in the larger area of Kozani constitutes an opportunity for the shaping of a local network with exchange of good practices and community-building for the UAMs.

The SSPUAM, based also on the National Strategy for the Protection of UAMs has put forward some initiatives for their empowerment and participation: the Mentorship program and the Teenager Network. The Mentorship program attempts to become a good practice for the participatory policy-making approach through the involvement of young adults (mentors) who have been living as UAMs in Greece. The role of these mentors is to empower minors and help them raise their voice to express their needs to the Central administration (Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2021a). Moreover, the group of mentors recently created the Teenage Network in order to spread this action more widely throughout Greece (Moskoff 2022a).

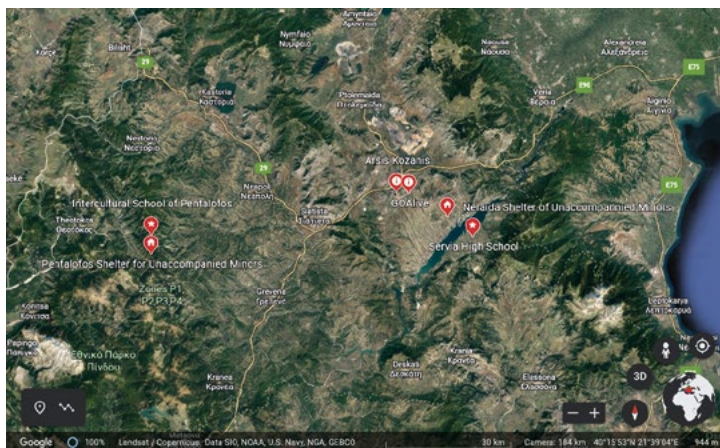
The SSPUAM is improving its capacity on this specific matter through the project “Building Futures, Sharing Good Practices: Migrant Children’s Transition to Adulthood UAC Futures” which is funded by AMIF. One of the deliverables of this project is a *Roadmap to Adulthood* highlighting a series of significant milestones facilitating transition to adulthood and how to achieve each milestone (SSPUAM Greece 2022).

On April 2022, the Deputy Minister for Integration announced the launching of a program called *Helios Junior*, focused on the smooth transition of UAMs into adulthood: “Starting six months before adulthood and ending at the age of 21, the program aims at a smooth transition of UAMs to adult life, i.e. studies, vocational rehabilitation, continuation of their support” (Hellenic Parliament 2022). However, there is no public information regarding the timeline of this initiative.

## 6.2 Interaction with local networks

With regards to the spatial characteristics of reception, apart from urban areas, there are plenty of shelters in small-medium cities around Greece. On the positive side, the relatively small size of these cities provides the children with a safer environment. Nevertheless, when these shelters don’t provide easy access to cultural and educational activities, their isolation can potentially become an obstacle towards the integration of minors and the development of their personalities. The geographical location combined with the scattered nature of local agencies makes transport essential to allow access to various collaborative inclusion initiatives.

**Figure 7. Dispersion of local actors that run projects for migrants’ inclusion.**



Source: Google Earth

The case of Kozani is emblematic of the main challenge faced by Municipalities regarding the establishment of MRICs. According to a recent research conducted by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, 65% of the municipalities mentioned the lack of recognized migrant communities as the main challenge in the process (Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2022e). Field experiences mention that in practice the municipalities entrusted with establishing an MRIC follow a similar path. In lack of formal organized migrant communities or associations, they reach the national forums of migrant and refugee communities. Then these forums could either identify possible members in the area in question or register local migrants as their members. Nevertheless, this practice is not sufficient because the law clearly states that the 5 migrant participants should be members of different associations, not of the same one.

## Conclusions

For many years the situation regarding the protection of UAMs in Greece was problematic. Very often, the authorities were unaware of the existence of the UAMs in the country, while the hospitality structures could not cover their needs. In addition, the protective custody (detention) of minors was widely applied. The establishment of SSPUAM in 2020 with a mission, inter alia, to plan, implement and supervise the National Strategy in Greece for the Protection of UAMs is considered by many a very positive development. A part of the National Strategy for the Protection of UAMs is devoted to finding optimal solutions for the promotion of children's rights and their integration in the Greek society.

Several small and medium sized towns in Greece host shelters for UAMs. Small towns often do not offer cultural and sports activities that facilitate integration and if cultural or sport facilities are located in neighbouring towns, accessible means of transportation are not always in place.

At another level, for many years Greece has failed to operate an efficient Guardianship system which in any case is necessary for the well-being of the minor and can act as a key-factor in the integration process.

UAMs in Greece face a series of educational barriers, mainly due to systemic dysfunctions.

UAMs' transition to adulthood implies a sudden loss of the supportive safety network they have enjoyed. The "ex-minors" suddenly cease to be considered vulnerable and they must become part of the world of adults without being prepared for such a transition. In addition, there is no protective legal provision for UAMs who fail obtaining asylum.

Small and medium sized towns usually lack formal organized migrant communities or associations that can contribute to the integration procedure of UAMs.

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# Local practices of integration and local networks. The case of Ninove

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**Figure 1.**The Social House (Sociaal Huis) that gathers all social welfare services of Ninove.



# 1. Introduction

Belgium has become a permanent country of settlement for many types of immigrants over the past five decades (Petrovic 2012). According to Statbel (2020) 174.591 individuals migrated to Belgium in 2019<sup>1</sup>. In 2021, 24,2% of the total population in the Flemish region had an immigrant background<sup>2</sup> (Statistics Flanders 2022). Antwerp is the municipality with the highest absolute number of persons with foreign nationality<sup>3</sup> in Flanders, followed by Ghent, Leuven, Mechelen and Turnhout. These demographic transitions present significant challenges for municipal governments, who have responded by developing integration policies. Although major cities still receive the largest inflow of immigrants to this day, migration is increasingly less confined to these large ‘gateway’ cities. Between 2012 and 2016, 109.500 residents, of which one in three had a non-Belgian nationality, moved from the Brussels Capital Region (BCR) to municipalities in the surrounding Flemish region (Charlier et al. 2019). Recent statistics indicate that in 2020, 15.165 residents, of which 6.992 had an immigrant background, moved from BCR to the neighbouring Flemish municipalities. Smaller towns in the wider periphery of Brussels, such as Denderleeuw, Ninove and Geraardsbergen, are marked as increasingly important destinations for immigrants (Pelfrene 2015). However, the international academic literature only recently started to focus on the effects of migration in small and medium-sized municipalities and towns (Grossmann, Mallach 2021; Wagner, Growe 2021). Therefore, this report focuses on the incorporation of immigrants in these small and medium-sized municipalities, more specifically in Ninove, a medium-sized town in the periphery of Brussels.

1 The number of migrants decreased to 144.169 individuals in 2020, but this is probably due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Statbel 2021). Given the unusually low level of migration in 2020 due to exceptional circumstances of the pandemic, the numbers for 2019 are more representative for long term trends.

2 Persons with an immigrant background includes persons with a current foreign nationality, persons with a current Belgian nationality but with a foreign birth nationality and persons with a Belgian birth nationality but with at least one parent with a foreign birth nationality.

3 Persons with foreign nationality are persons with a current non-Belgian nationality. Belgians are persons with a current Belgian nationality, including persons with dual nationality.

Ninove has witnessed more than a doubling of the portion of residents with an immigrant background in the last ten years (Provincie in Cijfers 2022). In 2011, only 10,8% of the population in Ninove had an immigrant background. In 2021, this number had already increased up 20,4%. If we look at foreign nationality, statistics indicate that in 2010, 2,94% of the Ninove population had a foreign nationality, which increased up 6,68% in 2021, meaning that 2.629 out of a total population of 39.369 have a foreign nationality (Statistics Flanders 2021). The five most common countries of origin of people with an immigrant background in 2021 were non-Maghreb countries (5,4%), Maghreb countries<sup>4</sup> (4,8%), Netherlands (2,5%), South-EU countries<sup>5</sup> (1,8%) and Asian countries (1,4%) (Provincie in Cijfers 2022).

These rapid demographic changes have led to socio-political tensions within the local community. The Local Integration Scan indicated that 45% of the inhabitants of Ninove feels that there are too many residents with a different origin and that this makes living together in the town difficult<sup>6</sup>. These tensions rose to the surface in the federal elections of 2014, where far-right and anti-immigration party '*Vlaams Belang*' obtained 19,72% of the votes. This electoral victory was followed by even higher scores for this political party in 2019, when it attracted 38,03% of the votes thus becoming the biggest local party by far (IBZ Federale Overheidsdienst Binnenlandse Zaken 2019). The combination of increasing polarisation and the successive electoral victories of a far-right party led to the development of an integration policy in Ninove from 2015 onwards. The local integration policy in Ninove has mainly been developed in response to the concerns of the established inhabitants and not in response to the needs of immigrants, even though the latter are the primary targets of this integration policy. This research project aims to change the perspective and analyses how immigrants experience

4 Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia Libya and Mauritania.

5 Italy, Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Portugal and Malta.

6 Proportion of inhabitants who when asked disagreed, were neutral or agreed to the following statement: 'I think that there are too many people of different origins living in my municipality'.

and (can) participate in the design, implementation and evaluation of integration policies.

Focusing primarily on immigrant's participation in small and medium-sized municipalities and towns, PISTE analyses incorporation<sup>7</sup> (*inburgering*) policies from a multi-scalar perspective and creates an overview of integration practices through an assessment of the policy tradition in the Flemish region. In the next section, we briefly discuss the conceptual definition of integration and political participation, before moving on to the Flemish integration policy and the shifts in emphasis over time. We then analyse the local integration policy, the coordinating role and administrative capacity of municipalities and the political participation of immigrants and explain the current integration policy and the participation of immigrants in Ninove, complementing the report with an explanatory model for political participation as identified in the scholarly literature. Next, we will present three innovative practices of immigrant participation in Ninove and finally we will describe the existing territorial networks in this medium-sized town.

## 2. Conceptual definition

### 2.1 Integration policy

According to Hammar (1985), the integration policy for immigrants can be divided into two domains: a direct and an indirect integration policy. The term direct integration policy is used when governments make arrangements with the specific aim of meeting the immigrants' need. The direct integration policy in Flanders is developed in the Integration and Incorporation Decree of 2013 and establishes an 'incorporation trajectory' (*inburgering*) which consists

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7 In Flanders the incorporation process consists of a trajectory with four pillars: Dutch lessons, social orientation, career development, social networking and participation.

of four pillars (Dutch language lessons, social orientation, economic self-reliance and social networking and participation) and is implemented by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (*'Binnenlands Bestuur'*). In this decree integration is defined as “a dynamic and interactive process whereby individuals, groups, communities and facilities, each from a context of the enforceability of rights and obligations inherent to our democratic constitutional state, constructively relate to one another and deal with migration and its consequences in society” (Art. 2 Integration and Incorporation Decree 2013, own translation). Integration is the intended result of the incorporation process, in which the incorporation policy is an instrument of a broader integration policy: “incorporation is a guided trajectory to integration whereby the government offers persons who are integrating a specific programme, which increases their self-reliance and promotes their professional, educational and social participation” (Art. 2 Integration and Incorporation Decree 2013, own translation). Policies and service provisions that are part of the general offer of the Belgian welfare state - regardless of migration status - but that may have an effect on the integration process of immigrants are considered to be indirect integration policies (Hammar 1985). Indirect integration concerns policy domains such as housing, education and employment. This report will only focus on direct integration policies, since including indirect integration policies would excessively widen the scope of the report.

In addition to direct and indirect integration policies, there are different perspectives in the content of integration policies. In the early years of (labour) migration to Western countries, ‘integration’ was not widely discussed, especially since migration was expected to be a temporary phenomenon (Goeman, Van Puymbroeck 2011). Social organisations, individuals and local policy makers seeking to support immigrants focused on direct needs. Implicitly, assimilation was the dominant perspective. The normative expectation was that over time ethnic minority groups would adapt to the norms and values of the majority by distancing themselves from the history, cultural practices and beliefs of their own ethnic group. Multiculturalism

arose in response to the assimilation perspective and rejects the idea that members of the minority group should assimilate the dominant culture (Song 2017). Instead, multiculturalism believes that minority groups should be able to maintain their ethnic identities and cultural practices. Multiculturalists see this as a matter of human rights and believe that minority groups should be actively supported to improve their position in society. A multicultural policy does provide a framework of voluntary integration, such as learning the Dutch language, but - importantly - it is not mandatory or connected to the acquisition of Belgian nationality (as it is the case now in Flanders and Belgium). This kind of multicultural policy often consists of facilitating self-organisations, which represent ethnic-cultural minorities as communities to policymakers (Van Puymbroeck et al. 2018). While the integration policy in Flanders used to be partially based on a multicultural ideology, in recent years more emphasis has been placed on immigrants' own accountability to integrate (De Cuyper, Wets 2007; Van De Pol et al. 2013). In this context, authors such as Joppke and Morawska (2003), Saeys, Albeda, Van Puymbroeck, Oosterlynck, Verschraegen and Dierckx (2014) claim that over the past two decades integration policies shifted back towards the assimilation logic, after two decades in which multicultural policies were (tendentially) dominant in the approach. As a political ideology, neo-assimilation - the resurgence of the assimilation perspective - rests on the premise that multicultural policies have promoted ethnic-cultural segregation and thus may 'disintegrate' from society (Loobuyck 2003). More recent literature has proposed interculturalism as an alternative framework that keeps an intermediate approach between multiculturalism and assimilation (Zapata-Barrero 2017). Interculturalism opposes the strong multiculturalism dichotomy between a cultural majority and minorities, because this would result in segregation. Instead, interculturalism focuses on dialogue, social cohesion and is less concerned with groups and their cultural characteristics. An interculturalist policy does not start from universal values, but tries to stimulate mutual contact and understanding.

## 2.2 Political participation

Political participation is commonly defined as: ‘all activities that have the intention or the effect of influencing political decision-making within the institutional features of representative democracy’ (Verba Schlozman, Brady 1995: 38). The political participation of immigrants can take on many forms. Martiniello (1997) makes a distinction between direct and indirect political participation. Direct political participation refers to participation in elections and systems of representation, but also arrangements set up by local governments, such as advisory councils. Indirect political participation refers to demonstrating, signing petitions, being a member of an action group or founding ethnic self-organisations. Since Belgium has a constitutionally guaranteed right to freedom of expression, all residents of Belgium are free to engage in indirect political participation.

For immigrants political participation is often difficult to engage in (Vermeersch *et al.* 2016). Immigrants frequently have limited discursive power, lack financial resources and time. Their most pressing concerns are closely tied to the immediate fulfilling of basic needs rather than the long-term goals that are often central in political decision-making. That is why we propose to use a more expansive definition of political participation, that centres the social needs of immigrants. To do so, we draw on Fraser’s (1989) definition of political participation (Dean 2015). In this analytical framework political participation is closely tied to the basic needs of people, as it is not disconnected from everyday life. According to Fraser (1989: 161) ‘in late capitalist welfare societies, talk about needs is an important species of political discourse’. Needs become ‘political’ when made public, hence the question is raised whether there is a collective (rather than merely individual) responsibility to satisfy those needs. ‘Making needs public’ can happen in different ways, such as influencing policy-making through formal channels of participation. Other possibilities are telling your story to a journalist, doing a survey or being part of an advisory council (Dean 2015). We suggest that political participation is in place as long as there is some kind of

'communication' about 'needs' with people outside your own group - in an attempt to appeal them to take responsibility to satisfy those needs. Recognising the importance of power relations, Fraser (1989: 164-65) emphasises that different groups dispose of different 'sociocultural means of interpretation and communication' to engage in the expression of those needs. In Fraser's perspective the emancipation of excluded groups implies a redistribution of sociocultural means of communication, which is an aspect highly relevant to immigrants. The micro-level 'foundation' of citizen participation is what Putnam calls 'social capital' (Putnam 2000) or Fraser (1989) prefers to call 'sociocultural means of communication and interpretation'. Social capital has a structural (networks) and a cultural or attitudinal component (norms and values). Fraser more than Putnam is sensitive to the social inequalities generated in the political participation informing campaigns and phrases the cultural component more in terms of unequally distributed resources. However, if one conceptualises the micro-level foundation of participation, it is clear that there are important pre-conditions to participate politically.

### 3. Research design

A document analysis was carried out on different policy files, such as Decrees on integration<sup>8</sup>, decisions of the Flemish Government<sup>9</sup>, the Ninove multi-annual plan (2020-2025) and the Flemish coalition agreement (2019-2024) on the redesign of the integration policy. Through this explicit policy documents analysis, it was possible to distinguish the intended objectives of the integration policy at Flemish and local level. Twenty-seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with the aim of developing a better insight into the local integration policy and the various integration partners or pro-

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8 Art. 28 Minorities Decree of 1998, Integration Decree of 2009, Art. 12 Integration and Incorporation of 2013.

9 'Besluit van de Vlaamse Regering tot toekenning van taken en kern taken aan een lokaal bestuur' 2014, 'Besluit van de Vlaamse Regering participatie organisatie en aanbod NT2' 2020, 'Besluit van de Vlaamse Regering testen en bewijzen van het taalniveau Nederlands' 2018.



jects active in this medium-sized town. The respondents were key actors operating on different policy levels and organisations. We interviewed three supra-local policy actors, seven local public policy actors, eleven civil society organisations present in Ninove and in the surrounding region, three representatives of local immigrants' associations, two experts on integration and immigration policies and one expert in participatory policy making. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to compare the different interviews, but also to deviate from the questioning protocol (Mortelmans 2018). The flexibility of this research technique allowed the researcher to explain a question to the respondent, ask for examples or ask additional questions in order to rule out any misunderstandings. This proved necessary as concepts such as integration and participation can be interpreted in different ways.

The questionnaire was divided into six themes: definitions and understandings of integration and related concepts, history of integration, local integration policy, territorial networks of actors involved in the integration policy, political participation of immigrants and budgets. The central research questions were: 'What are the concrete objectives of the local integration policy?' 'Which policy interventions or projects had a desired effect and which factors were important for their success?' 'What can small towns do in order to stimulate the political participation of immigrants?'

Chapter ten deals with a focus group which was created with nine local actors. The respondents consisted of two supra-local policy actors, two local public policy actors, four civil society organisations and one inhabitant with immigrant background. In the focus group we presented our findings in the form of statements about the public and private organisations working on integration, the services they offer and their cooperation and asked them to respond. The added value of focus groups over individual interviews is that we were able to collect additional information by letting participants talk to each other (Mortelmans 2018). The result is a more nuanced understanding of integration.

### **3.1 Data analysis and quality assurance**

The interviews and the focus group were audio recorded, transcribed and imported into the software Nvivo. A coding tree was constructed based on the questionnaire six themes. Then, the six themes were divided into several subcategories. The interviews were systematically compared for connections or differences. After the document analysis and interviews, the data was used to complement the academic literature, which made the analysis more complete. However, interview material was used more extensively for section seven, eight and ten, as less information was found on these topics through literature review and document analysis. All quotes in the report were translated from Dutch to English by the authors.

The researchers are well aware of how their personal characteristics might impact the data (Mortelmans 2018). There could be an urban bias in the researchers' mentality because Ninove is only recently confronted with migration and its governance challenges and therefore they may not always have been sufficiently sensitive to the specific context of small municipalities. To minimise this impact, reflexive thoughts were noted during the interviews, pointing out the possible ways in which the data could be biased. The researcher emphasised that he did not evaluate the single respondents and that the aim was just to capture the respondents' personal opinions.

Topics such as immigrants' political participation and integration could have a political value. The integration process may be accompanied by frustration, which in some cases might provoke strong reactions. As far as civil servants or civil society actors are concerned, statements about the political participation of immigrants could be politically sensitive, so they arouse fear of repercussions for their own position in the political hierarchy. By using an informed consent form, explicit permission was requested from the respondent to conduct the interview (Mortelmans 2018).

## 4. The Flemish integration policy

Due to Belgium's multi-scalar governance system and the high degree of autonomy at the regional and municipal level, there is a lot of room for territorial variation of integration policies (Yar, Laurentsyeva 2020). For a long time, when integration policy was still a federal competence, it was a rather *'laissez-faire'* policy without direct or indirect measures to support integration. Since the institutional reforms of the 1980's, integration has been the exclusive responsibility of the French or Flemish community (Goeman, Van Puymbroeck 2011; Deprez *et al.* 2018). However, migration policy<sup>10</sup> remained a federal competence. Given the strong connections between migration and integration policies, the need to align them requires negotiations and governance across different scales of government. Despite the competence federalisation for integration policies in the 1980's, a direct integration policy in Flanders only emerged in the early 2000's with the idea of incorporation (*inburgering*).

### 4.1 The slow emergence of the Flemish integration policy

The integration policy in Belgium started only decades after the country became an 'immigration country' and relatively late in comparison to other European countries (Van De Pol *et al.* 2013; Saeyns *et al.* 2014). After the Second World War, and especially from the 1960's onwards, Belgium became an immigration country. A migration policy was established to address the needs of the Belgian labour market. To compensate for labour shortages in the mining sector, steel and textile industry, bilateral agreements were con-

<sup>10</sup> Within the federal government, the State Secretary is responsible for Asylum and Migration and different government departments (FOD) are indirectly involved (e.g. foreign affairs, employment and justice). Other important actors are the Immigration Department (DVZ) which is responsible for the registration of asylum applications and the voluntary return or removal of illegal immigrants, the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil), General Commission for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGVS), which is responsible for granting or rejecting the refugee status and the Council for Immigration Disputes, which is competent for appeal procedures against the CGVS and the DVZ.

cluded with different countries, starting with Italy, then Spain and Greece, lastly Morocco, Tunisia and Turkey (Van den Broucke *et al.* 2015). Since these immigrants were initially seen as temporary workers who would return to their country of origin, the migration policy – directing migration according to labour market needs – was not accompanied by an integration policy.

The mining disaster of Marcinelle in 1956, which cost the lives of 136 Italian immigrant workers, marked the end of the Italian decade (Martiniello *et al.* 2006). Belgium did not sufficiently meet the demands of the Italian state to provide better working conditions for the Italians, so other labour reserves had to be recruited. In the beginning, the focus was mainly on Spain and Greece, but when the economy started to industrialise in these countries, bilateral agreements were concluded with Turkey and Morocco. Due to the large mobility of the guest workers, Belgian employers had to constantly attract and train new immigrants, which demanded time and financial resources. In an attempt to retain the recruited guest workers, Fédéchar, the coal mine employers' association, started investing in family reunification. This resulted in large numbers of foreign-born families concentrating in a few local neighbourhoods of industrial cities. Martens (1973) argues that the corporate world had asked for workers, but had not taken into account that guest workers would need housing, education and health care.

After the oil shock in 1973 and the subsequent economic crisis, further labour migration was halted through the migration ban in 1974 (Martens 1973). The main policy focus was now on the integration of immigrants who were already on the Belgian territory. There was still no policy to help immigrants with their settlement and participation in the host society (Goeman, Van Puymbroeck 2011). The non-policy of this era reflected the idea that integration was a spontaneous process that could not be influenced by policies. At the same time, civil society initiatives emerged at a local scale in Flanders. Local volunteers set up services to help immigrants. Historically, integration was the domain of the local civil society, but

- as we shall see later - this was gradually taken over by the Flemish government.

In the early 1980's, it became increasingly clear that many immigrants would not return to their country of origin (Martens 1973). Three laws that addressed the demands of trade unions, immigrant organisations and other activists from the 60's were adopted: Aliens Act of 1980, Anti-Racism Act of 1981 and the Nationality Act of 1984. The first law regulated who was and who was not allowed to stay on the Belgian territory. The second act was to ensure that those allowed to stay had opportunities to fully participate by prohibiting discrimination based on race. The third law granted full civil rights through the acquisition of Belgian nationality for certain categories of foreigners. Foreigners could declare their will to become Belgian citizens after seven years of continuous residence in Belgium. It was expected that access to Belgian citizenship would lead to a successful integration. This law has been amended several times<sup>11</sup>, but still forms the basis of the current nationality legislation.

It is important to understand that the integration policy evolution developed parallel with different state reforms (De Cuyper, Wets 2007, Van De Pol *et al.* 2013). The law on institutional reforms of 1980 stipulates that the competence for person-related matters, including the reception and integration of immigrants, belongs exclusively to the French or Flemish community. This means that since then, the migration and integration policy in Belgium has been located on different scales of government. The competence of the migration policy lies with the federal government and that of the

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11 In March 2000, the law was amended (Van den Broucke *et al.* 2015). The minimum number of years of residence in Belgium was reduced to three years and even to two years for stateless people and refugees. Belgium was the only European country where residence alone was sufficient to acquire citizenship, the integration requirement was removed. Fearing integration problems, conservative political parties criticised the flexible citizenship policy and proposed stricter conditions. The law, nicknamed the 'quickly-Belgian law' (*snel-Belg-wet*) by its opponents, was reversed in 2012. On the one hand immigrants could acquire Belgian nationality after five years of residence if the integration requirements were met. On the other hand, an immigrant could be naturalised after ten years of legal residence. Knowledge of one of the national languages and proof of economic participation was required for both processes.

integration policy with the French or Flemish community and municipalities. As a result, different policy emphases emerged in Flanders and Wallonia. Since 1987, integration has been a competence of the Flemish community. The French community concentrated more on the French assimilation and adaptation policy, while the integration policy in Flanders was initially more focused on multiculturalism.

In 1989, the strictly economic character of the policy towards guest workers was abandoned in favour of a more cultural approach. Paula D'Hondt was appointed head of the Royal Commission for Migrants Policy (KCM) (Van De Pol et al. 2013). The KCM was established in response to the political shock effect on the established parties caused by the overwhelming election victory of the anti-immigrant far-right party '*Vlaams Blok*'. In order to prevent a new election victory, the established parties were forced to tackle with the urban problems that the *Vlaams Blok* kept on referring to in their election programme - to justify an immigrant stop and deportation policy. D'Hondt was given the task of developing an integration policy. The integration policy institutionalisation in Flanders was not finalised until 1991, which is quite late compared to other countries. The integration policy in Flanders evolved into an inclusive 'categorical' policy, that followed two tracks (1) an equal opportunity policy to promote the integration of immigrants in important sectors and (2) a cultural '*inpassings*' or 'fitting into' policy that was mainly interpreted as an 'ethnic minorities policy', where a major role was assigned to the 'cultural identity' of immigrants (Blommaert and Verschueren 1992), a term which according to Blommaert and Verschueren has an assimilationist connotation, while avoiding and even explicitly rejecting the term 'assimilation'. Various ethnic associations and self-organisations were subsidised in order to stimulate the emancipation of immigrants (Saeys et al. 2014). At the same time the local authorities were encouraged to take more responsibility for their own integration initiatives. In the Minorities Decree D'Hondt stated that "municipal authorities are the closest to the daily coexistence of Belgians and migrants" (Art. 28 Minorities Decree, own translation). The 1998 Decree stated that local authorities had an important

role in the field of integration policy, they were responsible for “the elaboration, coordination and implementation of the inclusive policy and for involving the target groups”. The focus on integration grew dramatically in the 1990’s, resulting in new institutions, policies and associations.

The year of 1996 marked a historical turning point for the integration policy (De Cuyper, Wets 2007). For the first time, the Flemish government recognized the need for a ‘reception policy’ for immigrants. With the coalition agreement and the September Declaration of 1999, the government launched the idea of incorporation (*inburgering*). Geets, Pauwels, Wets, Lamberts and Timmerman (2006) argue that there was a shift from the multicultural idea of integration as a collective endeavour in which immigrants’ ethnic identity was preserved to an individual idea of integration. In other words, the responsibility for integration was put on the immigrants themselves instead of the host society. The aim of the Incorporation Decree (2003) was to promote a certain degree of language and cultural assimilation, in which minorities merge into the dominant culture. However, there is a lot of academic discussion about whether or not the integration policy entails assimilation (Loobuyck 2003).

The appointment of the first Flemish Minister of Integration in 2004 marked the beginning of the direct integration policy in Flanders, where integration became an autonomous policy domain (Schillebeeckx *et al.* 2016). The Decree specified how the incorporation process was supposed to take place. Non-EU immigrants were obliged to follow a pre-set incorporation trajectory. The trajectory consisted of three pillars: social orientation, career development and Dutch language lessons (Pauwels *et al.* 2010). It was obligatory to participate, but not to achieve a certain level of knowledge. The Flemish integration policy evolved from a voluntary ‘reception policy’ to a more obligatory ‘integration policy’ (Geets *et al.* 2006). However, in 2005 the government started subsidising mosques and granting holidays on religious festivities for Jews and Muslims in the Flemish education system. The government hence combined a program of

obliged incorporation trajectories with a multicultural framework for longer established newcomers.

In 2009, the Integration Decree released a policy with an emphasis on the promotion of ‘living together in diversity’ (Deprez *et al.* 2019; Art. 28 Integration Decree). The government had the responsibility to ensure that everyone had equal opportunities, while at the same time immigrants were expected to fully utilise the opportunities offered by the government and adapt to the Flemish culture. The Integration Decree (2009) and the Incorporation Decree (2003) merged into one single decree in 2013, titled the Integration and Incorporation Decree. The new Decree had to prevent fragmentation of regulations that arose in the previous decrees. Incorporation and integration were intrinsically linked in the Decree, in which incorporation was seen as a first and necessary step towards integration. Knowledge of Dutch was regarded as an important prerequisite for obtaining citizenship and as a lever for participation. Local authorities were assigned a coordinating role: “The cities and municipalities have a coordinating role over the integration policy on their territory. This means that they take care of the elaboration, direction, coordination and implementation of the inclusive local integration policy” (Art. 12 Integration and Incorporation Decree).

## **4.2 Towards a new decree on integration in Flanders**

As mentioned above, over the past twenty years the multicultural integration policy has a shift toward cultural assimilation (Geets *et al.* 2006; Saeys *et al.* 2014). Whereas the Flemish integration policy was previously based on a multicultural ideology in which the integration of minority groups was possible while preserving one’s own identity, in recent years more emphasis has been placed on immigrants’ own accountability to integrate and adapt to the host society (De Cuyper, Wets 2007; Van De Pol *et al.* 2013).



The current Flemish integration policy is mainly based on the Integration and Incorporation Decree of 2013, which states that the incorporation trajectory is mandatory for non-EU immigrants who wish to reside in Belgium for more than three months (Yar, Laurentsyeva 2020). After foreign-language immigrants arrive in Flanders or Brussels, the municipalities and towns direct them to the integration centres to start their incorporation trajectory. This trajectory consists of three pillars: a social orientation, Dutch language lessons and career development. The Flemish Agency for Integration and Incorporation ('AGII') explains the exact content of the incorporation programme. *AGII* manages the social orientation package, which has goals established by the Flemish government. With regard to the Dutch language component, immigrants are expected to achieve the A2 level of the EU-Framework of Reference for Modern Foreign Languages. Illiterate immigrants are expected to achieve an adjusted language level. The third pillar, career development, is guided by the Flemish Employment Service ('VDAB') and 'Actiris' (Brussels). The entire integration program is supported by a trajectory counsellor, who helps with career orientation, gives insight into the Belgian labour market and the educational system.

In 2021, the Flemish government approved the draft decree amending the current decree on integration (VVSG 2021; VUB 2021). The amended decree implements the ambitions of the Flemish Coalition Agreement 2019-2024 on the redesign of the integration policy. From 2022 onwards, the incorporation process will consist of four pillars instead of three: Dutch lessons, social orientation, career development and, the fourth pillar, social networking and participation. A migrant who is not active on the labour market or not enrolled in education at the time of signing the integration contract, takes part in a 'social networking and participation' trajectory of 40-hours. This can consist of a buddy project, an introductory internship at a company or voluntary work. The aim of this fourth pillar is to achieve more participation of migrants and to establish a network. The social networking and participation component of the incorporation trajectory can be seen as reflecting an intercultural approach, giving its fo-

cus on micro-level interaction and dialogue between immigrant and established citizens. Local authorities will be given the coordinating role of this fourth pillar. One of the supra-local policy actors, who is working on the elaboration of the fourth pillar, declared that resources are scarce for local authorities to make it a qualitative pillar:

“I think it would have been better if all local governments had been provided with effective resources. You have to train volunteers who are buddies of newcomers, you have to motivate them to keep contact and sometimes this can be hard when they have to hear personal stories. So, you really have to provide them with a support framework and that requires commitment. (...) for small local governments it is not realistic to make qualitative work of this fourth pillar” (I.6, supra-local policy actor of AGII).

It is important to note that immigrants need to pay for their incorporation trajectory (minimum of 360 euro) (VVSG 2022; VVSG 2021). Immigrants who do not pass their Dutch exam, also have to pay to re-sit the exam. Anyone who fails to sufficiently comply with the integration obligations (for example does not attend classes without reason) risks losing their residence permit. This amended decree was heavily criticised from civil society and local authorities (VUB 2021) as it seems to strengthen the assimilationist character of the integration policy. It was argued that this kind of policy, with strict and chargeable integration requirements, promotes exclusion rather than inclusion. In 2014, the European Commission (EC) stated, in the context of its policy on family reunification, that integration courses should be as accessible as possible and free of charge (EC 2014). Thus, we can see that since 2021, the integration policy has been focusing even more on immigrants' own accountability to adjust themselves to the receiving society. This criticism of civil society was also expressed by a majority of the local policy actors:

“What I do want to say is that it is all coming to us from above. We have a Flemish government that turns a bit to the other side (...). There are frustrations due to roads closing by decisions of the Flemish government. They say ‘each person who registers for

integration is going to pay 360 euro', so I don't know who else is going to be motivated to join that story and meanwhile they have to be integrated and be part of that story. That is very contradictory" (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

## 5. The local integration policy

Even though many relevant integration policies are decided at the national scale, they are essentially implemented locally (Deprez *et al.* 2018; Yar, Laurensyeva 2020; VVSG 2022). Local authorities may execute national policies in different ways and design their own unique programmes. The local economy, degree of housing availability and demographic composition of the municipality all influence the number and type of incoming immigrants. Consequently, immigrants that live in the same country and face the same institutional frameworks may follow very different integration paths, depending on local factors.

### 5.1 The decentralisation of the integration policy in Flanders

In recent decades, the idea that integration policies should be primarily designed and implemented at the local level was increasingly welcomed (Deprez *et al.* 2018; VVSG 2022). In September 2020 the EC announced the 'New Pact on Migration and Asylum', with explicit emphasis on supporting integration in local communities (Yar, Laurensyeva 2020; EC 2022). This pact indicates that successful integration benefits immigrants and argues that it is crucial to look into existing local integration policies in order to benefit from the lessons learned across Europe. Since 2004, when the Flemish integration policy was formulated, emphasis was placed on the important role of local authorities. This could already be seen in the Minorities Decree of 1998, which assigned a coordinating role to local actors (Art. 28 Minorities Decree). The current integration decree of 2013

stipulates that municipalities are responsible for the coordination of an inclusive local integration policy and for leading the relevant actors (Art. 12 Integration and Incorporation Decree). Furthermore, research states that Flemish integration policy is increasingly decentralised (Schillebeeckx *et al.* 2016; Deprez *et al.* 2019). In the following section, we will discuss the various funds and expertise the Flemish government provides to support local authorities in developing local integration policies and assuming a coordinating role.

In terms of budgeting, municipalities can decide autonomously on the allocation of funds to projects aimed at fostering immigrant integration (Deprez *et al.* 2018; Yar, Laurensyeva 2020; Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur 2020). Up to 2015, municipalities could apply for a local integration subsidy, in addition to the financial resources they receive annually from the Municipal Fund<sup>12</sup> of the Flemish government. In order to be eligible, a municipality had to fulfil three conditions: (1) 10% of the inhabitants had to be persons of foreign nationality (2) they had to adopt a coordinating role and (3) they had to include the integration policy in their strategic multi-annual plan. In this plan, the municipalities had to indicate how they would respond to the following five policy priorities: social cohesion, language policy, accessibility of municipal facilities, accessibility of non-municipal facilities (e.g. Public welfare organisation ('OCMW'), Flemish Employment Service ('VDAB') and policy participation. In 2015, 57 out of 300 municipalities in Flanders received a local integration subsidy (Art. 2 Decision of the Flemish government of 26 October 2012). Fifty-one additional small municipalities and towns were eligible, but did not receive funding due to insufficient resources. It is important to note that from 2016 onwards, the subsidy for local integration is included in the Municipal Fund. This means that the subsidy is in-

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12 The Municipalities Fund is one of the main sources of income for local governments, 20% of the income of municipalities is derived from this Flemish subsidy (Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur 2020). Local authorities can spend these resources as they wish. The fund is distributed among municipalities and OCMW's based on various criteria: (1) centre cities or 'centrumsteden' and coastal municipalities (40,96%), (2) centre function based on employed population and pupils in secondary and higher education (7,97%), (3) fiscal capacity (30%), (3) public space (5,98%) and (4) social welfare criteria such as number of social housings or living wage recipients (14,95%).

corporated in the general resources of local governments and is no longer subjected to conditions decided by the Flemish government. In practice, this means that the same municipalities and towns as in 2015 are eligible, but the funds are no longer earmarked. One of the supra-local policy actors, who is working for *AGII*, linked the abolition of earmarked funds to the loss of a common Flemish framework for integration policies at the local level:

“I think that this is a trend in Flanders. In the past, local administrations received very little local integration subsidies, but there were five policy priorities attached to them and they were followed-up by the Flemish government (...). Local authorities received guidance on ‘which priorities they should definitely focus on’. What I receive now, because I train integration officers, is the question: ‘where should we start with the integration policy’, so they no longer have a framework or steppingstone” (I.6, supra-local policy actor of *AGII*).

Given the lack of a framework on integration priorities, the question arises of how this actually influences local policies. One of the local policy actors confirmed that on the one hand the lack of a clear framework gives the municipality the freedom to adjust integration policies to the local context, but on the other hand it causes fragmentation between municipalities:

“It is great that we are given this coordinating role to be able to do what we want and adapt to the local context. But at the same time, it creates such a fragmentation within Flanders, which means that if you go ten kilometres further, you end up in a completely different context. In my opinion, there should be general guidelines from Flanders (...), it is exactly like ‘trying to reinvent the wheel’, because it has to be done over and over again” (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

Municipalities can also apply for various project subsidies that help to implement the Flemish integration policy on the local level (Deprez *et al.* 2018; Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur 2022). In 2015 project grants were distributed among projects of inter-municipal

collaboration with a double focus: welcoming policies for immigrants and living together in diversity. Because of this, municipalities all around Flanders were given joint grants in order to build more comprehensive integration policies. In 2019 the ‘*Vlaamse Randfonds*’ was introduced (Vlaamse Regering 2019; Vlaamse Rand 2021), this fund specifically targets the municipalities in the periphery of Brussels (‘*Vlaamse Rand*’<sup>13</sup>) that are being confronted with metropolitan problems. The use of the given funds were not predetermined by the Flemish government, which makes this a bottom-up subsidy. In April 2022 the Flemish government approved the project subsidy of 33 million euro for ‘*Plan Samenleven*’ (2022-2024), which focuses on 28 local authorities<sup>14</sup> with more than 7.500 inhabitants of non-EU nationality. Other municipalities can only draw on the resources of *Plan Samenleven* through inter-municipal collaborations. *Plan Samenleven* sets seven objectives<sup>15</sup>, which municipalities can fill in themselves in terms of content. They are free to decide how they wish to achieve these objectives, which makes this a bottom-up subsidy.

Municipalities can also draw on funds at the federal level, but these subsidies are administered through a more top-down approach (Deprez *et al.* 2018; Yar, Laurentsyeva 2020). The federal Impulse Fund for Migration Policy (FIPI) is used to fund integration related activities. FIPI funds both public and private initiatives for language courses, employment support, projects to prevent discrimination and promote intercultural dialogue. Next to federal funds, local authorities can apply for project-related funds of the EU. The most prominent EU fund for the integration is the AMIF (Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund). For the period 2021-2027 the EC

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13 Cities that belong to the ‘*Vlaamse Rand*’ are Asse, Beersel, Dilbeek, Drogenbos, Grimbergen, Hoeilaart, Kraainem, Linkebeek, Machelen, Meise, Merchtem, Overijse, Sint-Genesius-Rode, Sint-Pieters-Leeuw, Tervuren, Vilvoorde, Wemmel, Wezembeek-Oppem and Zaventem.

14 Antwerp, Brussels (VGC), Ghent, Leuven, Mechelen, Genk, Vilvoorde, Sint-Niklaas, Aalst, Ostend, Zaventem, Bruges, Kortrijk, Hasselt, Beringen, Sint-Pieters-Leeuw, Dilbeek, Grimbergen, Turnhout, Maasmechelen, Asse, Heusden-Zolder, Roeselare, Lokeren, Halle, Willebroek, Machelen, Houthalen-Helchteren and Ronse.

15 (1) Increasing safety and quality of life, (2) strengthening Dutch, (3) strengthening competences, (4) preparation to the labour market, (5) strengthening citizens’ networks, (6) fighting discrimination and combating exclusion and (7) strengthening diversity at school, in the youth organisations etc.

has proposed 5.08 billion for AMIF, of which 40% is for countering irregular migration, 30% is for asylum requests and 30% (1.52 billion) is devoted to legal migration and integration. Every EU member state will receive a fixed amount of 5 million euro. Belgian regions and local authorities will be able to apply for these funds.

In addition to funding, municipalities can rely on the expertise of the *AGII* (Deprez *et al.* 2018). Municipalities can contact the *AGII* for the development of language policy, volunteer activities, accessibility of services and communication of the local authorities. The City and Municipal Monitor offer local authorities' information about demographic developments, economic figures, living conditions of residents to enable local authorities to plan policies adapted to their local environment. Although Flemish municipalities are not directly or formally involved in developing Flemish integration policies, some cities (Antwerp and Ghent) have established separate agencies who are responsible for the implementation of the integration policy: Atlas vzw (area of Antwerp) and IN-Gent vzw (area of Ghent).

Yar and Laurensyeva (2020) formulated various points of criticism on the extended responsibilities of local authorities. Firstly, the awareness of integration issues in local policy makers is widely diversified. The majority of municipalities are not actively involved in integration policies, but rather leave other stakeholders (e.g. *AGII*) to deal with the issues in a decentralised way. Some municipalities, however, are well aware of the importance of their role in integration and see it as an integral part of their socio-economic policies. Secondly, local authorities often encounter difficulties in ensuring the continuation of successful integration projects, mostly due to the lack of resources.

## **5.2 The coordinating role and administrative capacity of local governments**

According to the Integration and Incorporation Decree of 2013, local authorities have a 'coordinating role' in the field of integration

(Deprez *et al.* 2018; Art. 12 Integration and Incorporation Decree). The introduction of the coordinating role can be associated with the shift from government to governance (Van Dooren 2013). This shift implies that society has become so complex, that governments alone lack sufficient capacity and expertise to govern. Therefore, governments become reliant on cooperation with non-state actors to develop and implement policies. The shift to governance creates an increased need for coordination amongst all actors involved in policy-making and implementation. In the field of integration policies, local governments are expected to take up this coordination role. The Flemish government has this expectation because they are convinced that the local level is closest to the citizen and therefore in the best position to detect problems.

The coordinating role could be defined as ‘a special form of management aimed at harmonising actors, their goals and actions into a coherent whole’ (Pröpper *et al.* 2004: 7-14). Based on two dimensions: (1) perseverance power (‘the potential of an actor to exert sufficient influence to compel unilateral cooperation from other parties’) and (2) own policy framework (‘the extent within which a local authority can shape his own policy script’), Pröpper, Litjens and Weststeijn define four types of coordinators: (1) the control coordinator, who has both perseverance power and policy autonomy (2) the implementation coordinator, which has perseverance power, but is limited by the policy framework imposed from above (3) the visionary coordinator, who has his own policy framework and whose cooperation is based on volunteering and (4) the facilitating coordinator, in which the local government has neither perseverance power nor its own policy framework. According to the VVSG (2021; 2022) local governments in Flanders have little perseverance power, so they are more likely to assume the role of visionary or facilitating coordinators. Nevertheless, the Flemish integration policy is a horizontal policy that touches on different policy areas. Therefore, it may happen that local authorities act as control-oriented coordinator within some aspects of integration policy (Deprez *et al.* 2019). We also have to take into account that the degree of coordination among local



authorities and key players of the integration policy varies across municipalities. In municipalities where different institutions face conflicts of interest and lack communication channels, the integration of immigrants appears to be less successful. Consequently, a larger municipality with several policy instruments can operate more efficiently in the local integration policy than a small municipality with fewer resources:

“Local governments do have the local coordinating role now, but I think that in many local governments it is an empty box. If it is not high on the political agenda and you are a small local government with little administrative power, then it is simply not a priority” (I.6, supra-local policy actor of AGII).

One of the conditions for taking on the coordinator role is that the local government has sufficient administrative capacity. Administrative capacity can be defined as the ability of the civil service to support policy preparation, implementation and evaluation in the context of local government policy objectives (Deprez *et al.* 2018). Deprez and colleagues have shown that more than half of Flemish local authorities believe that they have not sufficient capacity to adopt this role. This was also proved by the interviews; they feel as if the integration policy was increasingly shifted to small municipalities and towns that do not have enough capacity:

“That is always put under the guise of autonomy of the municipality, but you get no resources (...). We have also noticed with the corona crisis how important local government can be (...) local employees know best how to deal with local people. A town like Ninove with one integration officer, that is not serious, she is drowning. Haaltert is now half of Ninove and there, one person has to care for integration and participation, that is not possible. That is not the responsibility of the town, but it is due to the fact that they do not have the means. (...). We are now trying to unite through intermunicipal collaboration, so that we are stronger together” (I.4, local policy actor in Ninove).

Since capacity is a broad concept, we have to deal with the question of what capacity is required to be able to coordinate. Con-

versely, it can be assumed that effectively adopting the coordinating role as a local government creates extra capacity by involving new actors in integration policy. Policy actors in Ninove indicate that taking on the coordinating role has led to increased capacity. By focusing on collaborations with external partners who have expertise in the field of integration policy, a more efficient integration policy can be pursued compared to when the town itself has to provide an offer:

“We have many collaborations, especially with AGII. They bring integration officials together, and that is also very instructive with information sessions and study days. VVSG also does this in its own way. For the coordinating role, we have a few small local partners (...) ‘CAW’ [Private welfare organisation], ‘Kind en Gezin’ [Public welfare organisation for young children and their families] which help us find out how we are going to set things up. In my opinion, things have improved a lot, such as Habbekrats, which came from Ghent. For us taking on the coordinating role means that we have to make sure that partners, both internal and external, are engaged. We bring the partners to the table and we make sure there is a plan” (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

## 6. Political participation of immigrants

As mentioned above, the Flemish integration policy has mainly been developed in response to the socio-political tensions around migration. However, given that immigrants are the group that is subject to integration policies, it is important to analyse the political participation of immigrants in this policy. This question is especially significant, given that ethnic minorities remain underrepresented in both candidate lists and Municipal Councils in Flanders (Van Trappen and Wauters 2018).

## 6.1 History of voting rights of immigrants in Belgium

For a long time, the Belgian legislation made the right to vote conditional on having Belgian nationality (Wauters, Eelbode 2011). Only Belgian citizens were allowed to take part in elections. Having no right to vote constituted an important mechanism of political exclusion for people of foreign origin. The enfranchisement of foreigners was for the first time put on the political agenda by the trade unions in the early 1970's. However, the Belgian government refused to approve their demands. In 1976, immigrant self-organisations and trade-union organisations launched several actions targeting enfranchisement. In 1978, the social movements succeeded in making voting rights part of the election campaign. The government Martens-I included the subject in the coalition agreement of 1979. Despite the efforts of action committees, the resistance to the enfranchisement of immigrants proved to be stronger and no voting rights were granted.

From the beginning of the 1980's onwards, the presence of immigrants in Belgian society became contested (Wauters, Eelbode 2011). Anti-migration parties appeared on the political scene and obtained increasing success. In 1989, '*Vlaams Blok*' obtained almost 25% of the votes in Flanders. The established parties feared that by introducing 'foreigners enfranchisement', they would make *Vlaams Blok* even stronger. The social democrats distanced itself from the idea of voting rights for foreigners. In other words, no party would dare to speak openly in favour of separating the exercise of political rights from citizenship. However, the nationality legislation ('*snel-Belg-wet*') made it easier for immigrants to obtain Belgian nationality and consequently obtaining the right to vote. In 1992, following the Treaty of Maastricht, member states were obliged to grant EU citizens the right to vote in local elections. Belgium finally amended its Constitution in 1998, in which nationality and the right to vote were disconnected. Consequently, the enfranchisement of foreign citizens (both EU and non-EU) could be introduced by an ordinary law.

In 2000, EU citizens could participate in local elections for the first time (Wauters, Eelbode 2011). For non-EU citizens politicians were more reluctant, but pressure was increased by civil society and left-wing political parties. In 2004, the proposal was finally adopted and people without Belgian nationality were allowed to vote, but only for local elections (municipal level) and they were not permitted to run for office nor to hold a seat in any representative assembly or government. On top of these restrictions, the following conditions were applied to immigrants: they must have lived in the country for five years, they have to register themselves and sign the declaration of the Belgian Constitution and the EU Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. Wauters and Eelbode (2011) revealed that the registration rate of the local elections in 2006, ranged from more than 40% (in Herentals and Lier) to less than 4% (in Zaventem, Ninove and Mechelen). Smaller municipalities and those with a mayor from the centre-right liberal party did few efforts to inform foreign voters. As a result, the electoral participation of these people tended to be low. Up to now, non-EU citizens are excluded from EU, federal, regional, provincial and OCMW-council elections.

## **6.2 Self-organisations and the Minorities Forum**

Next to voting rights, the Flemish government officially recognised immigrant self-organisations in 1995 (Van den Broucke *et al.* 2015). Immigrant self-organisations can be defined as organisations established by and for people belonging to the same ethnic group. In order to avoid having to deal with a multitude of independent groups, the organisations are encouraged to join umbrella organisations (Sierens 2003). Immigrant umbrella organisations were specifically set up to support and represent immigrant self-organisations. Immigrant self-organisations may also apply for subsidies since 1999.

The Flemish government subsidises the Minorities Forum (*'Minderhedenforum'*), an organisation founded in 2002 that brings together federations of immigrant self-organisations, giving them a

collective voice to advocate their interests as a recognised dialogue partner of the Flemish government (Van den Broucke *et al.* 2015). From the late 1990's onwards, immigrant self-organisations were accorded an important role in political decision-making. According to Sierens (2003), the Flemish government recognized the importance of a person's own identity for the integration and emancipation of immigrants. However, Flemish and local government support for the political role of self-organisations has dwindled. In 2020, the Flemish government decided not to recognize the Minorities Forum any longer and a tender for a 'participation organisation' was introduced with strict conditions for the board of directors (e.g. not only members of ethnic minorities groups, but also experts and a focus on "living together" rather than only representing interests of minorities). In 2021, a new participation organisation 'LEVL' was established. Civil society organisations criticised the decision to abolish the Minorities Forum and fear that *LEVL* will not be an independent critical centre of expertise, but will become a subcontractor of the Flemish government (MO 2021). In table two (p. 51), we created a timeline of the legal framework of immigrant integration and political participation.

## 7. The regulatory framework of Ninove

In this chapter, we briefly provide a contextualisation on the socio-demographic- and economic development of Ninove, before moving on to the current integration policy. Finally, the political participation of immigrants in this medium-sized town will be described.

### 7.1 Local context

During the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, Ninove was widely known for its textile industry

(Loopmans 2007). The small town of Ninove experienced an influx of guest workers in the 1960 and 1970's, but in comparison to large cities such as Antwerp, Brussels and Liège, this influx remained limited. The 1970's marked the beginning of the economic decline and Ninove - just like many other Belgian industrialised cities in the same period - was confronted with problems of increasing unemployment and a strong decrease in the number of inhabitants in the inner-city neighbourhoods. The main policy focus of the Flemish government was to invest in major cities with the Social Impulse Fund (SIF), while the federal government focused on social and economic re-conversion in a limited number of industries, notably coal mining and steel production. The inhabitants of Ninove and more generally in the Dender region<sup>16</sup> (*Denderstreek*) received minimal policy attention to cope with the de-industrialisation. To this day, Ninove has a large supply of small working-class houses where, over the years, mainly immigrant families have settled.

Statistics Flanders (2020) indicate that municipalities and towns around BCR - such as Ninove - receive many immigrants from Brussels because of the low housing prices. In 2020, 344 persons moved from BCR to Ninove, of which 62% had an immigration background. The five most common countries of origin in 2020 were (1) Morocco, (2) Romania (3) Congo, (4) Guinea and (5) Italy. In 2011, only 10,8% of the total population in Ninove had an immigrant background (Provincie in Cijfers 2022). In 2021, this number already increased up to 20,4%. In 2020, 71 integration contracts were signed, 52 integration certificates were obtained and 311 persons followed NT2-language courses. One of the interviewees explained that this rapid increase in Ninove is different than in the major cities:

“The diversity of this neighbourhood [Ninove], (...) it is comparable with numbers of the cities today. That didn't happen from the 1970's on, but in the last 15 years. The rate at which that has

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16 The Dender region (*Denderstreek*) is a sub-region located in the province of East Flanders, which includes Ninove, but also Aalst, Buggenhout, Dendermonde, Erpe-Mere, Haaltert, Herzele, Lebbeke, Lede, Sint-Lievens-Houtem, Wichelen en Zottegem. The sub-region is named after the river Dender.

happened... that's very fast. That's at a different pace than it has been in the cities. So, it's understandable that it seriously affects people" (I.10, civil society member active in the Dender region).

The influx from BCR consists of mostly French speaking Belgian citizens who have already lived in Belgium for several years and cannot be demanded to follow an incorporation trajectory. The majority of the interviewees pointed out that the integration policy of Flanders is focused on 'external' immigrants, with the result that the influx of 'internal' immigrants from Brussels are excluded from this policy. There is no existing Flemish framework adapted to this specific target group. Local policy actors explained that the immigration from Brussels causes language related tensions within the community and that Ninove has evolved into a 'dormitory town'. This means that on the one hand, work and leisure time of people with an immigrant background is not spent locally, but rather in BCR, on the other hand, the 'autochthonous' population also often works in Brussels and not in Ninove:

"This is real rural Flanders and a lot of those people [with an immigrant background] really want that. They live in a flat in Brussels (...) what do those people do? They always speak French, they come and live in a village, which is in East Flanders, they don't always realise that. Of course, the children go to school there, so within two or three years they will speak Dutch, but these people keep working in Brussels and they don't know Dutch" (I.10, civil society member active in the Dender region).

Due to the Flemish policy focus on major cities, the rapid demographic changes and tensions around language, the existing community is extra sensitive to the arrival of new groups and feel as if they are 'forgotten' and pushed aside. Forty-five percent of the inhabitants of Ninove feels that there are too many differences in origin amongst the residents which causes problems of co-existence within the town<sup>17</sup> (Statistics Flanders 2021). These tensions came to light in the federal elections of 2014, where the far-right party

17 Proportion of inhabitants who answered disagree, neutral or agree to the following statement: 'I think that there are too many people of different origins living in my municipality'.

'*Vlaams Belang*' had 19,72% of the votes. In 2019, these percentage increased even further to 38,03% of the votes, which represents almost a doubling of the votes for the anti-immigration party (IBZ Federale Overheidsdienst Binnenlandse Zaken 2019):

“When I went to school and there was one African boy in the whole school, nobody voted far-right. Now at all the schools, there’s a mix of African people, Asian people and never before have so many young people voted for the far-right” (I.9, civil society member active in Ninove).

Ninove is currently governed by a Liberal Party-led coalition government (2019-2024), but the opposition counts numerous members of the anti-immigrant party '*Forza Ninove*'<sup>18</sup> in the Municipal Council (which despite being the biggest local party is excluded from the ruling coalition). One of the experts on participatory policy making indicated that the rise of an anti-immigrant party could have been predicted due to the history of Ninove:

“If you talk about the Dender region, you could have seen it coming with the de-industrialisation (...). If you don’t invest in it [municipalities in the Dender region] and if there is a big migration influx, Ninove will explode. Flanders also has a role to play in this. As a local authority, you have no control over this, because you cannot restore the economy on your own” (I.16, expert in participatory policy making).

Table one shows a number of general statistics of Ninove compared to the average in the Flemish region. The table below shows that most of the indicators for Ninove closely resemble to the Flemish average, although Ninove scores significantly higher for the share of signed obligatory integration contracts.

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18 Distribution of seats: Forza Ninove (15), Open VLD (9), Together or '*Samen*' (7) and N-VA (2).



**Table 1. General statistics of Ninove compared to the Flemish region**

	<b>Ninove</b>	<b>Flemish region</b>
Population density (inh./km <sup>2</sup> ) in 2021	538	488
% people with an immigrant background in 2020	20.8%	24.2%
% signed integration contracts in 2020 (obligatory)	76.6%	46.4%
Employment rate in 2018 (% of employed population in the population at working age of 20-64 years old)	75.7%	74.2%
Average income per inhabitant in 2018	19.776 euro	20.236 euro

Source: Statistics Flanders 2020; 2021

## 7.2 Integration policy

As mentioned above, we can see that the socio-political tensions around migration led to the development of an integration policy in Ninove from 2015 onwards. This policy was initiated in 2015, because then the town could apply for a local integration subsidy of the Flemish government, in addition to what the town received annually from the Flemish Municipal Fund. The Department of Welfare applied for the subsidy. The first integration initiative was NinoMundo, an annual intercultural culinary market where people with different ethnic backgrounds served self-prepared food from their home country or region, which still exists today. A local policy actor indicated that the main purpose of NinoMundo was to reduce polarisation within the town, but expresses doubts about its positive effect, nonetheless, other interviewees stated that NinoMundo does bring inhabitants together:

“I think NinoMundo was a positive start, but I don’t know what the effect is (...) if I look at the costs and the benefits of such events, that is fairly non-existent, you see people thinking ‘it’s those blacks again who are coming here’ and that is not always positive. This actually draws attention to the differences” (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

“I think that it [NinoMundo] is a pretty good initiative. I used to go there quite often, I used to help out sometimes and I think that it should be pushed more, even from the political side, because I think that (...) those people also deserve a platform and attention” (I.21, Municipal Council member of Ninove).

The local policy actor indicated that in this period the Department of Welfare had minimal knowledge of what integration entailed. This changed with the appointment of the first full-time integration officer in Ninove, who focused on developing a vision for an immigrant reception policy. Because of the increased migration from the BCR to Ninove, the town had to act in a proactive manner and inform the newly arrived immigrants about their policy: *“The principle of the welcome policy is to preventively inform people and not wait until they have lived in Ninove for one year, when they suddenly come knocking at our door and say ‘I have a search warrant for my house because I did not understand that document’”* (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove). Later, the integration officer worked on a horizontal and inclusive policy, including other policy domains such as employment, housing and education in the reception policy (reflecting an attempt to align direct and indirect integration policies). In the past, the different departments of Ninove still worked separately from each other and anything that had a connection to integration was passed to the integration officer:

“All the departments worked on separate islands and everything that had to do with a foreigner (if I can call it that) was just radically shifted to ‘that’s for the integration service’ while it was about sports or about certain basic rights. Even at the reception desk, they saw someone of colour and they already called to say ‘yes, this is someone for integration’ when that person had just come for a building permit (...). That’s where we come from” (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

The ‘*Denderfonds*’, introduced in 2019, targeted municipalities in the periphery of Brussels (Vlaamse Rand 2021). The Flemish government made funds available to address the rise of typically urban problems in small municipalities and towns like Ninove, Denderleeuw, Geraardsbergen and Zottegem. The fund was conceived

to help to compensate for the problems and costs of poverty, unemployment and the inflow of foreign-language immigrants. The Flemish Minister for Home Affairs, Public Governance, Incorporation and Equal Opportunities mentioned that some of these cities fulfilled a central function in terms of mobility in the region because of the high number of commuters on public transport per day (Vlaamse Regering 2019). For this reason, the *Denderfonds* was generally perceived as a grant for small town municipalities with a mobility hub (Lokaal Bestuur Vlaanderen 2021; Vlaamse Rand 2021). Ninove is an exception to this rule though. Ninove does not fall under the grants for cities with a mobility hub, but receives grants for metropolitan issues<sup>19</sup>. The multi-annual plan of Ninove indicates that the *Denderfonds* provided the town with 6.245.358 euros for six years, which translates into 1.040.893 euros per year (Ninove 2022). The mayor of Ninove, Tania De Jonge, mentioned that she had made a plea for extra resources: *“I have been advocating for additional resources for a long time and in recent months I have been increasing the pressure within our party. So, I am a satisfied mayor”* (Ninofmedia 2019). However, the Flemish government did not specify where the resources should be spent on. Many of the interviewees indicate that this lack of substantive policy framework of the *Denderfonds* caused fragmentation between the municipalities in the Dender region:

*“The Flemish government needs to have a vision on how to spend resources and not just offer a blank cheque (...). You can see that there are political reasons that no framework has been set for these resources, that there is a political conflict between the Flemish and local levels (...). That there is room to adapt to the local context, but this is a blank cheque and simply on the basis of the goodwill of the Municipal Council that it will or not will be used for what it should be used for. I actually find that bad governance”* (I.16, expert in participatory policy making).

19 The grants for cities with a mobility hub are granted based on population (min. 20.000 inhabitants), they did not receive benefits from a prefix?? in the Municipal Fund and have a min. of 2.700 train passengers per weekday (Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur 2022). The grants for metropolitan issues are based on population density of 500 habitants per km<sup>2</sup>, the percentage of non-EU nationality (or third country nationals), the percentage of living wage recipients all in relation to the entire population of the city or municipality that is in the highest quartile of all Flemish cities and municipalities.

When we asked where the resources of the *Denderfonds* were spent on, a member of the Municipal Council answered that most of the funds were spent on security:

“We spent that budget on security. So, for example, we decided to strengthen our neighbourhood police with nine people, because we think that the threshold should be lowered to bring the neighbourhood police to our inhabitants” (I.3, Municipal Council member of Ninove).

Looking further into the multi-annual plan of 2020-2025, the grant is being used for a combination of security actions, language policy and enhancing social welfare (Ninove 2022). Firstly, Ninove wants to reduce the feeling of insecurity by investing in the local police force reinforcement, by expanding the camera network to tackle illegal waste dumping and by investing in community service workers to be employed in the most vulnerable areas needing social cohesion. If we look at the statistics on feelings of insecurity in Ninove, we see that it is far above the Flemish average (Statistics Flanders 2020; 2021). In 2020, 17% of the inhabitants of Ninove felt unsafe in their town compared to 7% in the Flemish region<sup>20</sup>. However, in 2020 the average crime rate in Ninove (76,1%) was not much higher than in the Flemish region (74,1%)<sup>21</sup>. One of the reasons that the largest share of the *Denderfonds* is spent on reducing feelings of insecurity is the pressure of the anti-immigrant party *Forza Ninove*. Multiple interviewees argued that local political decisions are often instrumental to the next elections:

“Our opposition, ‘Forza Ninove’, has been around for a long time. But people thought that they would not get anywhere and they just carried on. And it was only after October 2018, when the new legislature started, that they realised ‘we have to see that we do something for all our people and therefore also for those people from the 40% who are not satisfied’. This is now also a difficult

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20 Proportion of inhabitants who feel unsafe in their municipality, citizens’ questionnaire of the Municipality-City Monitor, Agency for Internal Affairs.

21 Statistics of offences recorded by the police. It is the place where the registered offence took place, not the place of residence of the victim.

consideration, for example, when a project is set up, people are already thinking about what the 40% will say and whether they would agree to it" (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

Secondly, the multi-annual plan states that sufficient knowledge of the Dutch language is vital for successful integration (Ninove 2021; 2022). Therefore, Ninove is pursuing an active language policy through investing in Dutch language education. Since 2015, '*Babelonië*' has been set up - a partnership between *AGII*, The Social House<sup>22</sup>, the library and *Avansa*<sup>23</sup> - where immigrants can practise Dutch by talking with inhabitants of Ninove about everyday topics. Next to that, children can practice Dutch in a project that provides playground animation ('*speelpleinwerking*'), where activities are organised with the specific aim of improving the Dutch language. Previously, only French speaking children were put together, but since 2020 the project has been incorporated in the general activities of the playground animation. The Department of Welfare also works together with '*Ligo*' (offering different courses for adults e.g. computer lessons) and '*Groeipunt*' (providing general education for adults) and *AGII* for Dutch language lessons for immigrants ('*NT2*'). In the interviews with local policy actors, it was mentioned that civil servants at the reception desk are afraid of speaking French because of inspections of the opposition party *Forza Ninove* and that this arouses the fear of repercussions for their own position. Civil society members states that the strict language policy of Ninove hinders integration because it perpetuates immigrants' strong link with Brussels, where they can easily interact with social service providers like hospitals speaking in French. Therefore, the Department of Welfare is working together with *AGII* and The Social House to establish a clear language policy. The town will provide a mix of communication tools, taking into account the different language skills and information needs of immigrants. Clear guidelines will be established for situations in which a civil servant is allowed to speak French. On the other hand, they will work on an awareness policy giving insights of

22 The Social House gathers all social welfare services of Ninove, such as '*OCMW*' or '*Kind en Gezin*'.

23 Socio-cultural organisation active in Flanders and Brussels.

what learning a new language or to being illiterate means:

“It is important to give insights into what it is like to learn a new language, what it is like to be illiterate or uneducated. Some people can’t write Arabic (their mother language) and then all of a sudden they’re expected to be able to fill in Dutch forms” (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

Thirdly, the town wants to strengthen social welfare by investing in local integration and building bridges between the communities (Ninove 2021; 2022). A community service ‘The Social House’ was established as a gateway to integral assistance of the various welfare partners for all inhabitants of Ninove. This action was then further broken down into more specific components, such as taking on the coordinating role for the local integration policy and promoting integration while also providing maximum participation opportunities for newcomers. Ninove wants to support associations and inhabitants through quality meeting spaces and leisure infrastructure by establishing a youth centre. All young people from Ninove and the surrounding area can meet here and organise activities supported by professional youth welfare workers. This youth centre of Habbekrats<sup>24</sup> was established in 2021 and focuses on vulnerable young people from eight to eighteen years old. The youth centre is attended by thirty children with diverse backgrounds coming over every day. Before Habbekrats, ‘LEJO’ had a covenant (2003-2020) with the town of Ninove, but because of disagreements about the terms of cooperation the contract was not renewed:

“We focused on young people in a socially vulnerable position and youth with an immigrant background (...). petty criminals from Ninove who were also around, but with us they found a place where they could just be themselves and (...) we treated them as human beings without having to justify themselves (...). The police and the mayor noticed that these young people often came to us and half a year before our departure, they wanted us to report which people came to us, with whom they had contact, what the conversations were about and if we picked up signals of things that

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24 Habbekrats is a socio-cultural association that provides activities for youth in Flanders.

weren't okay, that we reported it" (I.17, civil society member active in Ninove).

Ninove is working on several projects to foster immigrants' integration (Ninove 2021; 2022). In 2015 Ninove started annual intercultural dialogue evenings, where the Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical and Muslim communities come together to discuss different topics in order to achieve a more mutual understanding. The Social House, Ligo and *AGII* started a mother group with AMIF funds in 2017, where non-EU mothers and their children younger than three years could join classes for 'societal orientation' in which they learn how the Flemish society and its institutions work and receive parental counselling from '*Kind en Gezin*' and '*Huis van het Kind*'<sup>25</sup>. From the eleven participating mothers, seven registered their child in a child-care centre in 2017, because they were going to follow Dutch classes, began a new educational path or started working. The mother group still exists today, but is supported by the resources of Ninove. Since 2017 Ninove has been investing in the so-called 'outreach social workers' or '*toeleiders*'. The interviewees described these outreach social workers as persons with an immigrant background that can be either placed within a town welcome policy or within the broader horizontal integration policy. Ninove has currently four outreach social workers working within the reception policy. In 2021 the Department of Welfare, PIN vzw and SAAMO started a community centre (STEK) in the 'Pollare' neighbourhood: "*The idea is to listen to what is going on in the neighbourhood and see what we can do to improve living together*" (Ninofmedia 2021). The STEK refers to an accessible meeting place in the immediate neighbourhood, where inhabitants can (informally) meet and get informed about their social rights. In the same year, Ninove started a pilot project - together with The Social House, '*Teledienst*' and the Poverty Network<sup>26</sup> - where cycling

25 '*Kind en Gezin*' is a Flemish public welfare organisation, with the mission to contribute to the welfare of young children by providing services in the fields of family support, childcare and adoption. '*Huis van het Kind*' is also a public welfare organisation that supports families with childcare, health care, parenting etc.

26 *Teledienst* is a private welfare organisation for people in poverty, working together with OCMW, CAW and Ninove itself. The Poverty Networks is also a private welfare organisation that consists of a steering committee of poverty experts.

lessons were given to adults. In 2022, the integration officer and AGII initiated a project called ‘Dender 360°’ about depolarisation, with the objective setting up an action plan to manage the perceived tensions within the community. Lastly, Ninove is working on inter-municipal cooperation with Denderleeuw and Geraardsbergen for ‘Plan Samenleven’ (2022-2024). The municipalities and towns chose three policy priorities: increasing employment opportunities, guidance to sport and leisure activities and connection in and around the school. In general, we notice that most of the projects to foster immigrants’ integration focus on micro-level dialogue between immigrants and established inhabitants and primary needs of immigrants (welfare related topics). We have also observed that in recent years several projects to foster immigrants’ integration have been launched:

“The city has good intentions. The fact (...) that they are putting SAAMO here, the fact that they are bringing Habbekrats here to actually do something with it, so there is something good going on. But how are they going to solve it? Or can they solve it?” (I.9, civil society member active in Ninove).

Some aspects in the multi-year plan are mentioned very briefly, others are described multiple times (Ninove 2022). One of the local policy actors mentioned that the reason behind these broadly formulated policy objectives is that they can categorise different integration actions within its scope. It must be pointed out that the plan does not indicate how much progress the town has made in the process of building an integration policy., in addition the interviewees reported that until 2020 the integration policy was a one-person operation. From 2020 onwards, the capacity increased and a team of four project officers was hired within the Department of Welfare to work on integration projects. Moreover, the operational budget for integration (2020-2025) has more than doubled since the last legislature. Ninove started investing in several projects fostering immigrants’ integrations from 2020 onwards and professionalised its own integration policy (e.g. writing annual reports, collecting data):



“In some municipalities there was no integration policy, in fact it is a new issue for local governments. Major cities have always been the pioneers in elaborating a policy around that and I think that (...) this is something new from the last decade. Since the ‘Denderfonds’ provided additional resources, especially in Ninove, you feel that there has been a capacity building (...) there are now three to four additional staff members to deal with this” (I.16, expert in participatory policy making).

All in all we observe that in recent years (2020-2022) more capacity has been created to develop an overall vision on immigrant integration and set up actions and initiatives to pursue an integration policy, partly due to the *Denderfonds* given by the Flemish government. A local policy actor states:

“The evolution is mainly the realisation that something needs to be done about integration. If you look at it from 2015, at the time it was like ‘we are just doing something’. But now it is one of the priorities in the policy plan, we have to ensure a harmonious society (...). In four years, we have made enormous progress, integration is recognised as a part of every service” (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

### 7.3 Political participation of immigrants

If we look further into how the town of Ninove faces the political participation of immigrants, the multi-annual plan of 2020-2025 demonstrates that Ninove aims to be a ‘modern’ administration willing to engage in continuous dialogue with all its inhabitants (Ninove 2022). Participation must be established before decisions are made. In 2018, the reception policy of Ninove started to inform immigrants about the upcoming elections. They organised information sessions about the different political parties and their political programs. However the local policy actors indicated that there were barriers for immigrants to attend these sessions (e.g. these sessions could only be organised in Dutch by Flemish law). The sessions tended to always reach the same persons:

“We organised the information session about all the parties and the explanation behind it, but you cannot get these people [immigrants] to come to you because an information session is such a threshold. It is a challenge to get the information to them. If you don’t see them much, don’t hear them much, don’t have much contact with them, that’s a threshold, because we can’t do the explanation in French, it’s difficult” (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

In 2019 Ninove started an online participation platform ‘*Mijn Ninove*’ (Ninove 2022). The online platform works in two directions: it offers the inhabitants of Ninove information, launches questionnaires about current projects and the inhabitants can post their own proposals for the town administration. Through this platform Ninove wants to develop popular support for its policy decisions and wants to include proposals in the multi-annual plan. The municipality launched the project ‘100 times 100’, where inhabitants could submit online proposals within 100 days for which they had to obtain 100 votes. These platforms do not specifically target people with immigrant background, but are focused on all inhabitants of Ninove. One of the local policy actors pointed out that efforts were made to include hard-to-reach groups:

“We are conducting a survey on the services in the swimming pool, so I am trying to submit the questionnaire through the integration officer and through our projects such as Babbelonië. I also try to reach people through community work and ‘Teledienst’, because I think that they are not always involved online (...) but I work for the ‘Ninovieters’, so whoever lives or works here gets the same treatment from me” (I.4, local policy actor in Ninove).

In the interviews it was mentioned that Ninove wants to invest in an ‘Advisory Participation Council’ supported by the Department of Welfare. This council intends to work with a bottom-up perspective, in which inhabitants (including residents with an immigrant background) and civil society actors (e.g. *PIN vzw*) identify needs in town and bring these needs to the council. However, this Advisory Participation Council has not been established yet because of alleged disagreements within the Municipal Council. But when asked

whether it was intentional not to install the Advisory Council, a member of the Municipal Council of Ninove responded: *“No, not really, because everything we do is also shared by those communities (...) we do notice that there are reactions from all directions to our participation platform”* (I.3).

In general, the interviewees concluded that the initiatives to stimulate political participation of immigrants were limited. When asked if enough was being done to involve immigrants in the policy, one supra-local policy actor answered: *“No, very little. Ninove is still far behind (...). There is no newcomer consultation, no refugee consultation, no diversity council, nothing at all”* (I.7, supra-local policy actor of AGII). One of the reasons for the limited attempts to include immigrants in policy-making is that the knowledge and capacity to reach this target group is restricted. Moreover, interviewees state that the strict language policy hinders participation and that policy actors and civil servants of Ninove are sometimes fearful of the response of the far-right electorate:

*“The fact that they [the town of Ninove] do all these things, shows that they are of good will (...). I hope I can take the liberty of saying this, but I think that sometimes they want to be careful not to give the far-right a breeding ground. But I find them courageous nevertheless”* (I.13, representative of a local immigrants' association).

## 8. Explanatory model for political participation

This chapter deals with the analysis of the implementation of integration local practices considered critical in promoting immigrants' political participation. The following is a presentation of the factors identified at micro- and macro-level by the scholarly literature that make immigrants participate or not in policy-making. These factors originate from different academic sources, using var-

ious definitions of political participation. As mentioned above (see section two), this report uses an expansive definition of political participation, namely Fraser's concept of 'making needs public' (1989). Due to this Fraser's expansive and broad definition, all the factors described below fall within the scope of this report.

## 8.1 Micro-level explanatory factors

When explaining immigrants' political participation, we distinguish between micro-level and macro-level factors. The former refers to the level of social interaction between people, while the latter refers to the level of public policy making and broader societal structures like labour and housing markets. The first micro-level explanatory factor for political participation mentioned in the literature is resources (Vermeersch *et al.* 2016). Having the necessary financial resources, time, know-how and skills is an important condition for political participation. On average immigrants have fewer financial resources than people with a Belgian nationality. This can have an influence on political participation, as participating may have a certain financial cost, such as transport cost or membership fees. The financially most vulnerable social group in Belgium are persons born outside the EU (Statistics Flanders 2022). When looking at nationality, statistics indicate that between Belgians and non-EU citizens there is a difference of almost 9.300 euro in median yearly income<sup>27</sup>.

In addition to financial resources, participation requires an investment of time (Hustinx 2012). The effect of time is curvilinear: too much time pressure leads to low participation, but low time pressure also has an inhibiting effect. A measurement of time allocation of immigrants is not available, but there are specific groups that may feel hindered from participating, due to a lack of time (Quintelier

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27 Median income per person is calculated starting from the total net income of the household in which the person lives. That household income is standardised: it is adjusted to the size and composition of the household. This is done by dividing the household income by an equivalence factor. This equivalence factor is equal to 1 in the case of a single person and is increased by 0.5 for each additional person in the household aged 14 or over and 0.3 for each child under 14.

2009). For example, in some cases immigrants might need most or all of their available time to fulfil their primary needs, such as employment or learning the Dutch language. This fact of lacking time to participate was also repeatedly mentioned during the interviews to immigrants: *“The immigrants are coming from another country and many of them don’t have educational qualifications. Moreover they have to work in factories or do something else to support their families, sometimes they have to work in shifts: sometimes in the morning and sometimes in the evening (...), so it is very difficult, because they don’t have the time”* (I. 22, representative of a local immigrants’ association). Participation requires cognitive and social skills, such as the ability to communicate and to be critical towards policy or organisational decisions (Hustinx 2012). Limited fluency in the Dutch language is an element that can be a direct barrier to political participation of immigrants (Vermeersch et al. 2016). As for language mastering, we have only identified some indirect determinants, such as educational level. Research shows that among persons born outside the EU, the proportion of low-skilled people (37.4%) was significantly higher than among those born in Belgium (13.0%) or in another EU country (20.4%) (Statistics Flanders 2022).

The second micro-level explanatory factor for political participation is motivation (Vermeersch et al. 2016). This factor includes variables, such as political interest or political engagement. Immigrants’ institutionalised forms of political participation do not always reach the same level of those exercised by people of Belgian origin. Only 11% of foreigners with voting right registered to vote at the municipal elections of October 2018 (Statistics Flanders 2022). This proportion was slightly higher for people with EU nationality (12%) than those with non-EU nationality (10%). As explained in section two, political participation may also be recognised in contexts broader than just participation in elections. The SCV survey (*‘sociaal-culturele verschuivingen in Vlaanderen’*) examined thirteen activities of political participation<sup>28</sup>. In the period 2016-2018, 45% of the resi-

28 Participating in political manifestations, donating or collecting money, being a member of a political party, standing for election, being a member of a local advisory, consultative or discussion body, a

dents born in Belgium could be considered as political participants. The proportion was significantly lower for those born in EU countries (43%) and those born outside EU (31%). The strict requirements to satisfy to participate in elections<sup>29</sup> probably was a demotivating factor for migrants to participate politically. Their sense of commitment to both the country they live in and their country of origin also affects their motivation for policy participation (Martiniello 2005). If immigrants feel little or not at all represented in the political life of the country they live in, they may also feel less involved and have lower interest in influencing policy making (Leighley 2001). The stronger the political representation of persons with immigrant background, the greater the willingness of these groups to communicate their opinions to politicians. This finding was also mentioned during an interview with an expert in political participation:

“If immigrants don’t feel represented, then a person with immigrant background is going to think: ‘if their workforce is white and their mentality too, are they going to be open to what I’m saying?’ I would say make sure you represent diversity, then people feel more included in the whole story and then they can feel commitment. (...) working on your image as a local authority: ‘What is the image you project?’ ‘Is the municipality’s staff diverse enough?’ If you look up a local government on Google and if they use ‘foreigners’ or ‘immigrants’ on their website, how does that feel to people with an immigrant background?” (I. 24, expert in political participation).

Another factor that influences motivation to participate politically is a persons’ own political ideas, whether one considers their presence in the country to be temporary or permanent as well as their own experiences with politics in their own country of origin

neighbourhood or action committee, signing a petition, boycotting or deliberately buying products for political reasons, expressing one’s opinion to a politician or in the media, participating in a political forum or discussion group on the Internet.

29 Since 2004, people without Belgian nationality are allowed to vote, but only for local elections (municipal-level) and they are not permitted to run for office nor to take a seat in any representative government (Wauters and Eelbode 2011). On top of these restrictions, the following conditions were applied: they must live in Belgium for five years, they have to register and have to sign the declaration of the Belgian Constitution and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

(Vermeersch *et al.* 2016). Persons coming from a country where democratic participation is not tolerated or penalised may be distrustful towards governments and therefore refrain from being involved politically in Belgium. Being unfamiliar with the country's political system is also connected to not having the necessary language skills (Martiniello 2005).

The third micro-level explanatory factor concerns one's own personal networks (Quintelier 2009). Research by Berger, Fennema, van Heelsum, Tillie and Wolff (2001) evidence that having a clear ethnic identity may encourage immigrants to participate in policy making with the focus of strengthening the position of their own ethnic group. The closer the ethnic community of immigrants, the higher the chance of political participation. Berger and colleagues (2001) proved that a government that supports the institutionalisation of networks of ethnic minorities creates a lever for stronger participation of these groups. Research shows that the group identity strength is an accelerator for participation. This may involve identifying with a group of people from the same ethnic-cultural background (Fennema, Tillie 1999) as well as people from different backgrounds (Quintelier 2009). In other words, having a close and/or ethno-culturally diverse network appears to be a premise for policy participation. Lastly, being 'asked' is one of the main reasons for political participation. People who are active in a number of networks are more likely to be asked to join other policy making networks (Hooghe *et al.* 2001).

## 8.2 Macro-level explanatory factors

While the three above-mentioned factors (resources, motivation, networks) are situated on the micro-level, other factors are situated on the macro-level (Vermeersch *et al.* 2016). To get a complete picture of the barriers and opportunities for political participation of immigrants, we should not only look at group-specific characteristics, but also the policy of the local government itself and hence assess whether the institutional environment is accessible enough to participate.

From this perspective Tilly (1978) proposed the concept of the ‘political opportunity structure’. An open system with many ‘points of contact’ stimulates political participation, while a closed system with limited points of contact makes it difficult to bring demands to the political level. A closed system would especially promote non-institutionalised forms of participation. For example, some municipalities offer various possibilities for inhabitants of diverse backgrounds to interact with the administration through advisory councils, while in another municipalities the possibilities for political interaction are limited to what is strictly compulsory. In this second situation, non-institutionalised forms of political participation are more frequent. In general, it can be assumed that an open system with many opportunities for participation in policy-making and sufficient resources, motivation and networks at micro-level, is able to gain wider political participation.

A Flemish research by Vermeersch *et al.* (2016) formulated several guidelines for local governments to foster immigrants’ political participation. They found that there is a strong willingness among both local policymakers and civil society actors to involve immigrants, but that there is often no explicit vision on how to include them. Therefore, the local authorities should consider three aspects to foster immigrants’ political participation: with whom, how and on which topics. Firstly, if we examine which target groups the local authorities should include, the research of Vermeersch and colleagues does not offer a conclusive answer, however, the study found that people do not like being approached based on their nationality, but rather because of their commitment and expertise on a certain subject. It might therefore be better to concentrate on the involvement of young people, parents or culture enthusiasts rather than one specific ethnic community, while trying to reach enough people of diverse backgrounds. This fact was also expressed during the focus group:

“We learned during our EU project that they [immigrants] don’t like to be addressed on their origin, they want to give their opinion on education or employment, it’s about the needs and opinions of those people” (I. 28, expert in political participation).



Secondly, in regard to how the municipality can foster immigrants' political participation, the research indicates that participation is broader than the approach to 'ask for participation' or 'collect input', which is a one-sided view of participation (Vermeersch *et al.* 2016). It is recommended to organise political participation as a comprehensive process, which includes support to participants as well as capacity building or empowerment. Participants should be approached actively and a relationship of trust should be built, they should be adequately informed on the subject and supported through the process of participation. Especially for hard-to-reach or vulnerable groups a political participation expert recommends a structural framework of contact with trusted persons (e.g. outreach social workers) :

“If you want to talk about a certain target group, go to their environment, go to the mosques for example. Gather those people, profile yourself in a very accessible and low-key way and listen to what they have to say” (I. 24, expert in political participation).

Lastly, looking at the topics around which political participation should be organised, the research shows that a strictly sectoral approach should be avoided (Vermeersch *et al.* 2016). Immigrants do not only want to participate in integration policies, but in all kinds of policy domains that affect their daily life (e.g. labour, education or culture). A policy vision should therefore be transversal in the sense that it includes the participation of people with diverse backgrounds in various policy domains. Furthermore, the research suggests that the participation processes should focus on concrete policy themes (e.g. participating 'education policy' is abstract, while 'school enrolment procedures' is more concrete). Participants must have some connection and expertise on the topic. If immigrants see what impact a certain policy has on their own lives, they will be more motivated to participate. An expert in political participation explained that thematic recruitment is preferable, rather than looking for an arbitrarily person of foreign nationality to diversify an initiative:

“If people want to talk about diversity, schedule an evening for people who want to talk about that and if you want to talk about education, just invite (...) people that really want to say something about education. In this way you only get to hear motivated voices and want to change something in society” (I. 24, expert in political participation).

## 9. Innovative practices for political participation in Ninove

In this chapter, we will present three innovative practices for immigrant political participation. As mentioned in section 7.3, we can conclude that the initiatives to stimulate political participation of immigrants in Ninove are limited. However, in each of the interviews, the researcher asked whether there were any local practices of integration in Ninove that were connected in some (direct or indirect) way to political participation, as the participation of immigrants can take on many forms (Fraser 1989; Martiniello 1997). Based on these answers, we identified three cases. In the previous chapter, we have discussed the various scientific factors at micro-level and macro-level that make immigrants participate or not in policy-making. In this chapter, we will assess whether the factors quoted by scientific literature are applicable in these cases or whether new explanatory factors emerged from the interviews.

### 9.1 Database of outreach social workers

The first case that we selected is the database of the town of Ninove used by the outreach social workers (*toeleiders*), in which each help request is recorded. This database is not only used to get a better overview on how things work within the town, but also with the objective to align the different internal and external services with the needs, demands and obstacles experienced by the immigrants. However, the immigrants are not aware that their needs are communicated

to policy-makers, which makes this system an indirect and top-down approach of political participation, anyway their needs are still communicated to the relevant policy-makers within the integration policy.

This system of keeping track of the needs of immigrants provides a tool for horizontal policy-making, since the database indirectly identifies the trends, opportunities and challenges that the city's most vulnerable inhabitants (may) face: *"What you do deduce from the database is how the cooperation with other departments is going. When a subject who has been recorded comes back and says: 'Yes, I haven't been helped there', we talk to civil affairs and see what is the reason behind it: 'Why hasn't that person been helped?' In that way a lot of internal issues come to the surface"* (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove). Another example is the pilot project of cycling lessons for immigrants in 2021, this need for cycling lessons had been identified through the database and thus provided an indirect lever for policy participation:

*"What I try to do with these cycling lessons, is that I had already picked that up (...) in the database of the reception interviews (...) then you do think: 'that must be something important or that is a topic people are concerned about (...) and why does it always come up' and then we do something about this need"* (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

Since 2017 Ninove has been investing in these 'outreach social workers' (Ninove 2022). The interviewees described these figures as people with an immigrant background who speak various languages widely spoken among immigrants. They try to help immigrants in a pragmatic way and can be deployed both within a town reception policy as well as within a broader horizontal integration policy. Since 2022, Ninove has four outreach social workers in the framework of the reception policy:

*"There is a language barrier and they have little contact with the schools. I can use other languages, but I am between the parents and the schools (...) to motivate parents who have time and*

are not working to go to Dutch classes (...). That is a good initiative because when I still lived in Liedekerke, I wanted someone who understood my language and my questions to be able to find everything. People I helped, five years ago, are still happy (...). I compare it with myself in the beginning. It is like you come into a forest where you have ten different roads to find something and you have to take one of those roads to find it" (I.12, civil society member active in Ninove).

The interviewees judged this practice critical in promoting immigrants' participation, because it applied a proactive and out-reaching approach, such as welcoming immigrants immediately on their arrival in town through the reception policy (aligning with the macro-level factor of Vermeersch *et al.* 2016, in which they state that participants should be actively approached). A new explanatory factor that emerged from the interviews is the multilingual and culturally sensitive approach. The fact that the outreach workers were former immigrants themselves and speak multiple languages ensures trust, mutual understanding and better support for the new inhabitants. The outreach social workers cooperate with different kinds of partners (e.g. *AGII*, schools and different departments of Ninove), allowing to bridge the gap between the internal and external services: *"That helps immigrants in a very concrete way and we pay attention to the fact that people's self-reliance is taken into account (...). The local government authorities are well aware that the outreach social workers are bridging the gap between many different services"* (I.06, supra-local policy actor). However, the interviewees also indicated some challenges in terms of setting boundaries to the tasks of outreach social workers. Because of the multiple needs among immigrants, the outreach social workers are often pushed into the role of aid provider.

## 9.2 Intercultural dialogue evenings

In 2015 Ninove started annual intercultural dialogue evenings, where Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical and Muslim communities came together to discuss religious topics in order to achieve mutual understanding (Ninove 2022). However, the intercultural dialogue

evenings now no longer focus exclusively on religious topics, but have been expanded to various themes linked to the community of Ninove. For example, in 2022 the topic of polarisation was on the agenda, so Christophe Busch - director of the Hannah Arendt Institute<sup>30</sup> - was invited to give a guest lecture explaining the factors behind polarisation. The participation criteria are not restricted to association to the different religious communities in Ninove, but is also open to inhabitants, members of the Municipal Council and staff of the Department of Welfare. Due to the fact that also policy makers attend these dialogue evenings and the discussion topic range has been expanded, the needs of immigrants are indirectly taken into account in the integration policy, thus aligning with the vision of Fraser (1989). In other words, the intercultural dialogue evenings seem to be an indirect lever for political participation. One member of the Municipal Council stated that the dialogue evenings are a useful initiative because they allow to detect signals on how to shape the integration policy:

“It is about vulnerabilities that people identify and initiatives that are proposed there. One of the participants said: ‘Look in the corona period, across all communities we did suffer from loneliness, but also from grief, when we had to lose someone and when we could not say goodbye, why don’t we do something collectively around that? To show that we are much more similar than people sometimes think’ (I.25, Municipal Council member of Ninove).

Furthermore, the first member of the Municipal Council with an immigrant background participated in the intercultural dialogue evenings. This person was ‘asked’ to be on the election list of Ninove during these evenings: *“I do admit that it is good that finally there is someone, and I look at it objectively, that finally someone in the Municipal Council will be a voice for the people who are perhaps less heard in the streets. And I do feel that it is appreciated, that I can represent that voice”* (I.21, Municipal Council member of Ninove).

<sup>30</sup> The Hannah Arendt Institute is a platform, set up by the UA and the VUB, that connects scientific knowledge about diversity, urbanisation and citizenship with the insights of policymakers, citizens and organisations.

As mentioned above (section eight micro-level explanatory factors), 'being asked' appears to be one of the main reasons for political participation (Hooghe *et al.* 2001).

The intercultural dialogue evenings were mostly perceived as positive, since they were part of the regular municipal policy. The success, continuation and possible expansion of a project depends on its integration in the regular municipal policies: *"You have to be mindful with that temporary nature (...), the call for projects because you have to focus on long-term plans because if a project ends, you might end up with unsatisfied participants"* (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove). Local authorities often encounter difficulties in ensuring the continuation of successful projects, mostly due to the lack of resources (Yar, Laurensyeva 2020). However, the intercultural dialogue evenings are well established and do no longer focus exclusively on religious topics, they imply a strong co-operation between the town administrators and the project staff, in other words it is vitally important to build a stable network.

Some interviewees mentioned that these types of initiatives always reach the same person profile, people already in some way empowered, who have some relevance within the community. However, other respondents pointed out that these people are a good base to work with as also other people can be reached through them (snowball-effect).

### **9.3 KRAS youth parliament**

The KRAS youth parliament is an annual voluntary programme about political participation that takes place during the leisure time of secondary school pupils (Globelink 2022). Despite the fact that this initiative is not specifically focused on immigrants, yet it proves to be relevant when we look at the changing demographics of the

inflow of school pupils in Ninove<sup>31</sup> (e.g. in the KRAS group of 2022, 12 out of 23 pupils had an immigrant background). This initiative seems to be a direct lever for political participation, since the pupils will directly confront the policy-makers of Ninove with their demands and needs (Fraser 1989; Martiniello 1997). Most KRAS groups include different schools from the same town. The programme content is organised by the Belgian youth service Globelink<sup>32</sup>. The youth service organises discussions and role-plays around an annual topic (e.g. 2021: inequality, 2022: identity), with the goal of teaching them how to discuss local issues. A KRAS year consists of six two-hour and one full-day session in the Flemish parliament with all the KRAS pupils. The sessions consist of an introduction on the year's specific topic, three role-plays, an expert session - in which they prepare critical questions together with local experts - and a closing session in the Municipal Council, in which they confront local politicians with their demands.

When looking at the success factors of this project, the interviewees indicate that the teachers have a crucial role. The KRAS project in Ninove was initiated by a teacher, who gathered other teachers and pupils from different schools, building a relationship of trust with the participants and ensured financial support from Ninove for the next edition. The connection between the teachers and the Globelink social worker was also important, both had the same vision on how to organise the youth parliament. This factor seems to reflect the second macro-level explanatory factor of Vermeersch *et al.* (2016) to actively approach participants and build a structural framework of contact between trusted persons. A second new success factor is the application of techniques to stimulate debates. The facilitator pits students against each other, makes connections

31 In 2012, 245 secondary school pupils came from families in which Dutch was not their native language, in 2021 the number increased to 563 pupils (Statistics Flanders 2021). In 2021, the number of non-Dutch-speaking pupils in Ninove (19.7%) was higher than the Flemish average (16.4%). The number of non-Dutch-speaking pupils in part-time vocational secondary education in Ninove (41.0%) was significantly higher than Flemish average (29.4%) in 2021. Thus, it can be stated that there is an increasing share of secondary school pupils with immigrant backgrounds in Ninove.

32 Youth service Globelink is a recognised, national youth service that works with young people in leisure time to set up projects around political participation (Globelink 2022).

between the opinions and selects certain discussion topics. Thirdly, the Globelink social worker indicated that it is recommended choose locally relevant topics as they should be as close as possible to the living environment of the pupils and connected to what is happening in their towns. With this method the pupils can learn how politics affects their daily lives:

“There is a big hole in our education now. We learn a lot about politics, who the prime minister is and a lot of history (...) but very little on ‘how am I an active citizen’ and ‘how do I decide’ and ‘how does policy affect me’? I think a lot of pupils don’t realise how much influence politics actually has on them or how much influence that they could make (...). Some really say: ‘Before KRAS, I couldn’t express my opinion and I couldn’t give critical comments or anything and now I feel really comfortable in doing that’. (...) So, you do notice that shift in those pupils towards the end of the course” (I.18, civil society member active in Ninove).

A fourth success factor is the format of the sessions, focused on skill and knowledge development (e.g. role-plays and local expert sessions), reflecting the second macro-level factor of Vermeersch *et al.* (2016) in which they suggest concentrating on capacity building or empowerment. The role-play is a suitable approach for introverted pupils, since expressing their own opinion in a public debate can be frightening. Playing a role brings a kind of safety net, because it is separate from the person they are in the real world. The expert sessions allow the pupils to look at their ideas from a different perspective and to prepare themselves against the responses from local politicians. The participants gain more confidence through this approach: *“It’s also about confidence: if you ask them in the first session ‘are you ready to stand in front of politicians next week’, I think they would say ‘no’, but after the sessions I think most of them would say ‘yes, I feel ready’, so you notice that change in confidence”* (I.18, civil society member active in Ninove).

While the project was positively evaluated by the participants, the Globelink social worker observed that the project mainly at-



tracts pupils from general secondary education. The project is focused on language and takes place outside the school hours, making it challenging for some students to participate. This finding reflects the micro-level factor of Vermeersch *et al.* (2016) about resources (e.g. limited knowledge of Dutch and time). A local policy actor specified that some topics brought to the Municipal Council fell outside of its competence and suggested that it would be more valuable if certain suggestions were followed-up (e.g. holding multiple debates with local politicians) and implemented in cooperation with the pupils themselves. By applying this approach, the pupils would get a deeper understanding of the different responsibility compartmentalisation local authorities are faced with.

In this chapter, we discussed two practices of indirect political participation (database of outreach social workers and intercultural dialogue evenings) and one practice of direct political participation (KRAS). In general, we can conclude that the initiatives of direct immigrants' political participation are limited in Ninove. Some explanatory factors found in scientific literature were applicable to these three cases. However, we also found new factors such as applying a multilingual and culturally sensitive approach, embedding a project in the regular municipal policies, applying techniques to stimulate debate and connecting locally relevant topics.

## 10. Territorial networks in Ninove

In this chapter, we will discuss the different territorial networks (public-public, immigrant and external networks) active in Ninove. In annex two (p. 52), we created an overview of all the actors working on immigrant integration in Ninove. In general, we can conclude that Ninove has a limited number of local immigrant self-organisations and local civil society actors, which makes it difficult for immigrants to participate in local policy-making. Most actors working on integration are in the Department of Welfare of Ninove or are external

socio-cultural organisations (e.g. Habbekrats), government agencies (e.g. *AGII*) and public or private welfare organisations (e.g. OCMW). In the section below deals with the cooperation of the different actors.

## 10.1 Public-public networks

As mentioned above (see section 7.2), the integration policy of Ninove is concentrated within the Department of Welfare. Therefore, the integration policy is strongly focused on providing social services and mainly targets immigrants in vulnerable positions. According to the statistics the Ninove immigrant population mainly consist of French speaking citizens who have already lived in BCR for multiple years and cannot be legally obliged to follow an integration trajectory (Statistics Flanders 2021). There is no existing Flemish framework conceived for this specific target group. As a result, the majority of the less vulnerable and self-reliant influx of people from BCR are not specifically targeted:

“What is certainly still missing is a policy that is horizontally supported by all departments (...). Integration falls under the Department of Welfare and is focused on people who are less self-reliant, have more social vulnerability, without this being the major influx into Ninove. The following questions are not asked: ‘What happens to the large proportion of people who are self-reliant?’ ‘What does integration mean for those people?’ (...) ‘How do they get that warm welcome to the town?’ ‘How can we involve these other services?’ (...) So, these questions do not seem to be raised and there is a one-sided focus on that social pathway” (I.27, civil society actor in the Dender region).

The focus on providing social services can be recognised in the fact that the largest share of the public-public cooperation around immigrant integration occurs within the Department of Welfare and not with other departments. For example, many interviewees indicate that the cooperation with the Police Department is challenging. The Department of Welfare wanted to run trajectories with the police forces on subjects such as diversity or racism. They suggested

appointing a youth inspector - a police officer who's not wearing a uniform and can be easily contacted by both young people and the police forces - in order to develop a policy that functioned preventively instead of after the offences took place. However, the Police Department were not open to any kind of cooperation:

“We actually don't get the chance to work preventively and exchange information. (...) they really take out the youngsters with an immigrant background, the others can just go free, we also feel that there is quite some polarisation and racism there with the police services and we would like to run trajectories with them to first look: 'What is diversity?' To gain insights into the multicultural society, but they have some resistance, they don't really want to cooperate, there is also a difference in vision, but also a lack of manpower and time (...). Our police services are still too rural, when someone has a racism complaint (...) they're just laughing, you're going to notice very clearly: 'What are you coming up with now?' (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

As mentioned in section 7.2, Ninove is working on a horizontal policy, which incorporates other policy domains in the reception policy for newcomers, reflecting an attempt to align direct and indirect integration policies. However, most of the interviewees state that other departments, such as housing, employment or culture, are not involved enough in the integration policy of Ninove. Local- and supra policy actors state that the underlying reason behind the limited cooperation between the different departments is due to the fact that the local government staff does not match the changing socio-demographic composition of the population and is a reflection of the political situation of Ninove:

“If Ninove has 40% Forza Ninove voters, I am convinced that there is a part of them in our staff. You can see that in education, civil affairs, the police, the library, it's everywhere (...). I experienced this when I had to introduce [a particular] policy, which has to do with: 'Is that another thing that we should take into account or be sensitive to?' Some civil servants still want to work as they could 15-20 years ago” (I.25, Municipal Council member of Ninove).

The Department of Welfare cooperates across different scales of government (Flemish-level). The local integration officer has regular collaborations with the *AGII* (Flemish Agency for Integration and Incorporation). For example, the *AGII* helped with the establishment of the mosque - in fact they developed a strategic plan to create support for the mosque within the neighbourhood - and assisted the integration officer with formulating a language policy for civil servants. *AGII* is also cooperating with the integration officer of the 'Dender360°' project, which deals with the prevention of polarisation in the Dender region and takes part in the projects of *Plan Samenleven*, *Babbelonië* and the mothers group (see section 7.2). The integration officer has also regular contact with the 'VVSG' ('*Vlaamse Vereniging van Steden en Gemeenten*') for general assistance and study days. The VVSG is a Flemish advocate organisation, reporting policy issues of local authorities to the Flemish government. However, some interviewees notice a scaling-down of the local presence of the Flemish services such as *AGII* (and other civil society organisations such as trade unions), which is connected to the distribution of the Municipal Fund (further discussed in 10.3 external networks):

"If you look at the deployment of *AGII*: 'Where do the most staff members work?' 'Where are the most actions done?' That is not here in the region, while a large proportion of persons with a immigration background live here. You have Antwerp as a large area, but actually second largest are the outskirts of Brussels, but there is no investment in that. The same with trade unions, not present enough (...) and I see that a local government cannot coordinate that either and that's not necessarily an example of bad will, they just don't have the manpower" (I.27, civil society actor in the Dender region).

The Department of Welfare also collaborates with a range of external socio-cultural organisations coming from other towns such as Habbekrats, Globelink, Ligo, Groeipunt and Avansa (see section 7.2 and annex two). However, some local policy actors mentioned that attracting external socio-cultural organisations to Ninove is difficult in some cases, partly because the town has a certain reputation due

to the political situation, that is the strong rise on the anti-immigrant and far-right party *Forza Ninove*. This causes uncertainty about the permanence of employment in integration-related occupations:

“Suppose that next time the far-right party comes to power, what will happen to my job?’ These issues are really of concern with the staff. (...) In the Municipal Council, Forza Ninove has abstained on the extension of the community work project. But it’s also not that people are then going to put down on paper in black and white that that’s the reason, but you do feel that somewhere” (I.25, Municipal Council member of Ninove).

Lastly, the Department of Welfare is working together with Flemish public and private welfare organisations such as *OCMW* and *CAW*. These collaborations mainly entail practical issues related to integration, such as social employment trajectories, reception of refugees, social housing or providing financial support.

## 10.2 Immigrant networks

Ninove has three immigrant self-organisations: centre ‘*Barmhartigheid*’, football club ‘*EOSA*’ and the Evangelical church ‘*E.I.E.N.*’. *Barmhartigheid* is a self-organisation for the Maghreb community. Besides giving Muslims a place where they can practise their religion, this non-profit organisation coordinates iftars, neighbourhood gatherings, exhibitions, homework support for children and Dutch language lessons. The centre of *Barmhartigheid* has collaborated with the Department of Welfare on events such as NinoMundo (an intercultural culinary market where people with different ethnic backgrounds served self-prepared food) and the annual intercultural dialogue evenings (where Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical and Muslim communities come together to discuss various topics). However, the organisation wants to present itself as a politically neutral organisation and, as a result, does not apply for structural subsidies from the town of Ninove. The organisation is entirely financed by donations from local community:

“I want in any case to avoid as many political discussions around the centre. Centre Barmhartigheid is politically neutral and if we would apply for subsidies from the town, a political discussion could be initiated. The centre has already led to political discussions in the past (...) and those discussions, they actually always come from the same source, from the far-right who think that the multicultural society is a big failure, you shouldn't encourage that, you shouldn't reinforce that in any way, you see? And the political discussions once started with (...) the reclassification of a building” (I.13, representative of a local immigrants' association).

*EOSA* is a voluntary youth football association for non-professional players and was initiated by a member of the African community. The football association has around 100 pupils from four up to fifteen years old, the training sessions are held four times per week. Around 70% of these pupils have an immigrant background. When we asked why the founder of the football association had started this project, the founder replied: “*I developed this initiative because many children want to play football, but they don't have the qualities to play in a professional club*”. The founder is planning to establish an ‘African House’, where members of the African community can come together, promote their culture and Dutch language lessons are given for illiterate adults. Despite the founder verbally asked the town of Ninove for providing public infrastructure for the African House or the football club, the organisation did not receive any financial support.

Lastly, Ninove has an Evangelical church *E.I.E.N*, where mainly people from the African community come together. *E.I.E.N* does not only hold church services, but also pedagogical classes for parents and children. The church mainly collaborates with the town during the intercultural dialogue evenings. This local immigrant self-organisation is also not financially supported by nor gets public infrastructure from the town of Ninove. When we asked a member of the Municipal Council of Ninove why local immigrant self-organisations are not financially supported by the town, the answer was:

“Either they then don’t submit for financial support because they think: ‘This is going to lead to controversy’ or they don’t want it? I think it’s more something of: ‘I don’t want to apply for this, because I don’t want to enter into that controversy and I also want to be able to do my own thing. We also have associations, Dutch-language associations, that don’t apply for subsidies because they don’t want the burden of submitting an application. I can imagine, that people who may not have a good knowledge of the language, that it requires a greater effort for them than for an inhabitant of Ninove. But we can’t exclude organisations because they are from a different culture (...) that would be straightforward discrimination” (I.25, Municipal Council member of Ninove).

### 10.3 External networks

Looking at the external collaborations with other municipalities and small towns, we can see a clear trend towards cooperation in the so-called reference regions<sup>33</sup> and inter-municipal collaborations (Deprez *et al.* 2018; Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur 2022; Ninove 2022). Ninove is working on inter-municipal cooperation with Denderleeuw and Geraardsbergen for *Plan Samenleven* (2022-2024). *Plan Samenleven* is a project subsidy from the Flemish government - focusing on 28 local municipalities with more than 7.500 inhabitants of non-EU nationality or multiple local municipalities through inter-municipal collaborations - and contains seven objectives, which municipalities may freely choose in terms of content. The local authorities elected three policy priorities: increasing employment opportunities, guidance to sport and leisure activities and connection in and around the school. The choice of working together with Denderleeuw and Geraardsbergen was due to practical reasons, the municipalities and towns close to each other. Local policy actors underlined that this kind of collaborations between local authorities are often due to financial reasons, where the call for a project from the Flemish government exceeds the municipality’s intended budget. This can be seen in the fact that the Key Performance Indicators

<sup>33</sup> Reference regions are determined by the Flemish government and are the foundation for all forms of inter-municipal and supra-local cooperation in Flanders.

(KPI)<sup>34</sup> are not achieved jointly, but at region level:

“We submitted with Geraardsbergen and Denderleeuw, because of practicality and convenience. Those [municipalities] are next to each other (...). I think everyone just takes their money and does their own thing, not that this is a negative, because it’s simply not easy to start sending people to another city or municipality for labour activation, it’s also so easy to keep working locally with your own partners” (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

Since 2022, Ninove has been working with Aalst, Liedekerke, Geraardsbergen and Denderleeuw on the project ‘Dender360°’, trying to prevent polarisation. The objective is to create an action plan through interviews about the perceived tensions within the communities. By applying this approach of inter-municipal collaboration, the Flemish government wants to strengthen its coordinating role by expanding its networks and offering the possibility to find a suitable solution to shared local issues (Deprez *et al.* 2018). However, the interviewees mention that the city of Aalst - with more than 88.000 inhabitants - does not adopt this coordinating role because they belong to the thirteen centre cities<sup>35</sup> in Flanders and therefore receive a higher share of the Municipal Fund (Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur 2022). Aalst is therefore not financially obliged to engage in inter-municipal collaboration with smaller towns: *“Aalst is large enough to submit alone [for Plan Samenleven], if you have more than 7.500 people from outside the EU, you can submit alone and you can also obtain higher funds. This is also meaningful issue for them: ‘Why do we have to engage with the little ones, when we can do it ourselves and not have to share?’ But I think we can certainly learn a lot from Aalst (...) they have three mosques, they have a bigger civil society”* (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove). Furthermore,

34 Local authorities must report Key Performance Indicators (KPI) for *Plan Samenleven* from the Flemish government. KPI are annually reviewed to examine whether a continuation of the project and disbursement of the balance is justifiable.

35 Flanders has thirteen centre cities, specifically the two major cities of Antwerp and Ghent and the eleven regional cities of Aalst, Bruges, Genk, Hasselt, Kortrijk, Leuven, Mechelen, Ostend, Roeselare, Sint-Niklaas, Turnhout. About a quarter of the total Flemish population lives in one of the thirteen centre cities. The centre cities exercise a central function in terms of employment, care, education, culture, leisure and they receive a higher share out of the Municipal Fund.



Aalst and Ninove also differ in terms of perspective on integration. While Ninove is more focused on social welfare by investing in local integration and building bridges between the communities, Aalst is mainly investing in Dutch language education.

The distribution of the Municipal Fund frequently is quite controversial (Standaard 2022). According to the interviewees, the criteria used for the distribution of the financial resources of the Municipal Fund do not match the objective local needs. Statistics show that the local authorities that had a political majority in the Flemish parliament at the time of the distribution, receive the most funds<sup>36</sup>. For example, Geel does not have significantly more inhabitants than Ninove and is objectively wealthier, but each year it receives five million euros more than Ninove, which is 100 million euros in twenty years. Furthermore, other funds are often calculated using the same distribution criteria, such as investment programs of public transport (e.g. 'NMBS', 'De Lijn'<sup>37</sup> or Roads and Traffic Agency):

“I think that Ninove is really under-financed and okay, we had an extra grant through the 'Denderfonds', but if you look at the problems we are facing today as a small town and compared to others, we are one of the main disadvantaged towns in terms of funding (...). The Municipal Fund is based on what criteria that, I wouldn't know, but I suspect that there was a kind of us know us story there, especially politically and not a story of: 'let's make sure that every Flemish person is entitled to equal treatment. And okay, if I live in a village, I don't have the facilities of a city, you can live with that (...), but the problem areas have become the same as in many cities now and we don't have resources for that” (I.25, Municipal Council member of Ninove).

In general, the interviewees point out that the degree of com-

36 Ninove, a town on the periphery of Brussels with 39.000 inhabitants, receives 9.8 million from the Municipal Fund. Oudenaarde, a wealthy city in a rural region, receives 10.2 million euros for 32.000 inhabitants. Maasmechelen, with an equal number of inhabitants, receives 13.4 million euros, Sint-Truiden with 41.000 inhabitants 14.8 million euros and Geel receives 14.9 million for 41.000 inhabitants. Turnhout, a centre city with 46.000 inhabitants: 26.5 million euros.

37 NMBS is the national company of the Belgian railways and De Lijn is a Flemish external agency for public transport.

munication and cooperation with external local authorities is still too limited. This causes fragmentation between the integration programmes being offered within the Dender region, as well as conflicting objectives, a lack of mutual recognition and additional costs for immigrants in terms of time to navigate through the system of social service provision. Furthermore, many local policy stakeholders highlighted the need for exchange of information and coordination of actions between different municipalities, but also with major cities, which could act as leaders providing example and sharing (proven) best practices (and often a longer history of policy initiatives on immigrant integration):

“The same with equal opportunities, all thirteen centre cities are in there. I registered for the session like: ‘I’m going to sit there too, even though I’m not in the centre city’ (...). Also, with Bruges, I just called and said: ‘How did you start with the rainbow policy?’ And then you actually hear the steps that we have to take and that is nice that you can skip a few steps (...) and then we are as a small town stronger because we learn from other major cities.” (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove)

## Conclusion

The Flemish integration policy started relatively late in comparison to other European countries (Van De Pol *et al.* 2013; Saeyns *et al.* 2014). Despite the federalisation of the competency for integration policies took place in the 1980’s, a direct integration policy in Flanders only emerged in the early 2000’s with the idea of incorporation. If we look at the evolution of the perspective on the Flemish integration policy, we can see that it was initially more focused on the Dutch model of multicultural society, but in recent years the focus was placed on cultural assimilation and on immigrants’ own accountability to integrate into the host society (De Cuyper, Wets 2007). This also can be seen in the amended Integration and Incorporation Decree of 2021, which states that immigrants will have to

pay for their incorporation trajectory. However, the fourth pillar ‘social networking and participation’ of the incorporation trajectory can be viewed as an intercultural approach, giving its focus on micro-level interaction between immigrants and inhabitants (Zapata-Barrero 2017). Furthermore, research states that the Flemish integration policy is increasingly decentralised (Schillebeeckx *et al.* 2016; Deprez *et al.* 2019). There is a growing common idea that integration policies should be primarily designed and implemented at the local level. This is proved by the abolition of various funds which the Flemish government used to grant to municipalities. The majority of the interviewees link this fact to the loss of a common Flemish framework for integration policies at the local level, which causes fragmentation between municipalities and towns. In addition, local authorities are assigned a ‘coordinating role’ in the field of integration by the Flemish government. More than half of Flemish local authorities believe that they have insufficient capacities and expertise to adopt this role (Deprez *et al.* 2018). However, policy actors in Ninove state that assuming the coordinating role creates extra capacity by involving external actors who have expertise in the field.

If we look at the local integration policies in Ninove, we can see that the socio-political tensions around immigration have led to the development of an integration policy from 2015 onwards. The introduction of the *Denderfonds* given by the Flemish government in 2019 created more capacity in planning and managing an integration policy (Ninove 2022). The operational budget for integration (2020-2025) was more than doubled since the last legislature, the town started investing in several projects fostering immigrants’ integration and also professionalised their local integration policy. The current integration policy of Ninove is focused on three topics: security, language and social welfare (multi-annual plan 2020-2025). The largest share of the *Denderfonds* is spent on reducing feelings of insecurity, partly because of the pressure from the radical right electorate (although the anti-immigrant party ‘*Forza Ninove*’ is excluded from the ruling coalition). Next to that, Ninove is pursuing an active language policy through investing in Dutch language education and

is willing to strengthen social welfare by investing in several projects to enhance immigrants' integration.

Assessing the political participation of immigrants in Ninove, we can conclude that the attempts to include immigrants in policy-making is quite limited. However, this research found that there is a strong willingness both among local policymakers and civil society actors to involve immigrants, but often there is no explicit vision or know-how to include them. Therefore, this research identified three scientific factors on micro- (resources, motivation and networks) and macro-level (with whom, how and which topics) that make immigrants participate or not in policy-making (Vermeersch *et al.* 2016). In regard to the micro-level factors, we can conclude that having the necessary financial resources, time, Dutch language fluency is a pre-condition for political participation. Motivation - such as whether immigrants feel represented in the political life of the country - and networks - such as whether networks of ethnic minorities are institutionalised - seem to be key explanatory elements. As to the macro-level factors, most interviewees state that immigrants do not want to be approached based on their nationality, but rather because of their commitment to a certain issue. It is recommended to organise political participation as a comprehensive process, in which participant support and capacity building are taken into account. Looking at the topics around which political participation should be organised, thematic recruitment seems preferable, rather than looking for an arbitrary person of foreign nationality to diversify an initiative. Additionally, this research identified three innovative practices for immigrant political participation in Ninove, two of which involved indirect political participation (database of outreach social workers and intercultural dialogue evenings) and one direct political participation (KRAS). In most of these cases the factors cited by scientific literature were applicable. However, also new explanatory factors emerged from the interviews, such as applying a multilingual and culturally sensitive approach, embedding a project in the regular municipal policies or choosing local area relevant topics.

Looking at the different territorial networks, we can conclude that Ninove has a limited number of local immigrant self-organisations and local civil society actors, which makes it difficult for immigrants to participate in local policy-making. Most actors working on integration are concentrated in the Ninove Department of Welfare or are external Flemish socio-cultural organisations, government agencies and public or private welfare organisations. In addition, we noticed a clear trend of reference regions and inter-municipal cooperation. In general, we observed that the level of communication and collaboration with external local authorities is still low, this causes conflicting objectives, a lack of mutual recognition and additional costs for immigrants in terms of time to navigate through the system. Furthermore, many local policy stakeholders highlighted the need for exchange of information and coordination of actions with other municipalities, but also with major cities, which could act as leaders providing example and sharing best practices.

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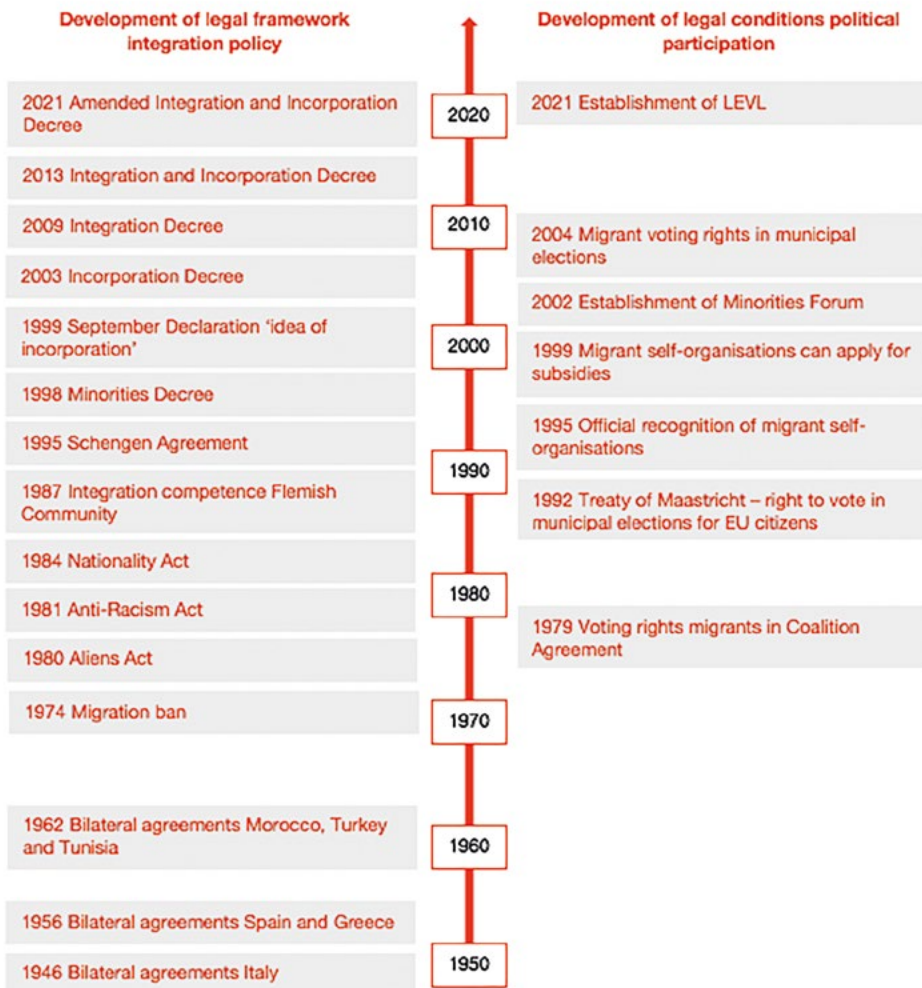
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# Annexes

## Annex 1

Figure 2. Timeline legal framework integration and political participation.



Source: Own illustration

## Annex 2

**Table 2. Overview of actors working on immigrant integration in Ninove.**

Organisation	Level	Type	Projects	Partners
AGII	Flemish and local	Government agency	Dender360°	Ninove, Aalst, Geraardsbergen, Liedekerke, Denderleeuw
			Plan Samenleven	Ninove, Denderleeuw, Geraardsbergen
			NT2, social orientation, participation	Ligo
				CAW
				Groeipunt
			Babelonië	Avansa
				Social House
				The Library
			Language reception policy	Integration officer Ninove
				Social House
Mothers group	Kind en Gezin			
	Huis van het Kind			
	Integration officer Ninove			
	Ligo			
Establishment of the mosque	CC Barmhartigheid			
Avansa	Flemish and local	Socio-cultural association	Babelonië	AGII
				Social House
				Library
CAW	Flemish and local	Private welfare organisation	Social participation trajectory	Integration officer Ninove

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Projects</b>	<b>Partners</b>
CC Barmhartigheid	Local (Ninove)	Immigrant self-organisation	Intercultural dialogue evenings	Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical communities
				Integration officer Ninove
			NinoMundo	Integration officer Ninove E.I.E.N
E.I.E.N	Local (Ninove)	Immigrant self-organisation	Pedagogical classes for youth	
EOSA	Local (Ninove)	Immigrant self-organisation	Football lessons for youth	
Globelink	Flemish and local	Socio-cultural association	KRAS youth parliament	Schools (GO! Atheneum, Hartencollege)
				Integration officer Ninove
			PISTE	Integration officer Ninove Habbekrats
Groeipunt	Flemish and local	Socio-cultural association	NT2	Ligo AGII
Habbekrats	Flemish and local	Socio-cultural association	Youth centre	Ninove
Huis van het Kind	Flemish and local	Public welfare organisation	Mothers group	AGII
				Kind en Gezin
				Integration officer Ninove
				Ligo
Kind en Gezin	Flemish and local	Public welfare organisation	Mothers group	AGII
				Integration officer Ninove
				Huis van het Kind
			Ligo	
			Playground animation	Schools of Ninove

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<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Projects</b>	<b>Partners</b>
Library	Local (Ninove)	Public cultural organisation	Language projects	Integration officer Ninove
			Toy library	Integration officer Ninove
			Babelonië	AGII
				Social House
Avansa				
Ligo	Flemish and local	Socio-cultural association	Courses for adults	
			NT2	AGII
				Groeipunt
			Mother group	AGII
				Integration officer Ninove
				Huis van het Kind
				Kind en Gezin
OCMW	Federal	Public welfare organisation	Reception of refugees	Ninove
			Social employment trajectory	Ninove
			Social housing	Ninove
SAAMO	Flemish and local	Private welfare organisation	STEK (community centre)	PIN vzw
Social House	Local (Ninove)	Public welfare organisation	Bicycle lessons	Poverty Network
				Integration officer Ninove
				Teledienst
			Babelonië	AGII
				Library
				Avansa



<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Projects</b>	<b>Partners</b>
Teledienst	Local (Ninove)	Private welfare organisation	Bicycle lessons	Social House Poverty Network Integration officer Ninove Social store 'sociale kruidenier'
PIN vzw	Regional and local	Private welfare organisation	STEK (community centre) Plan Samenleven	SAAMO East Flanders Integration officer Ninove Integration officer Ninove
Poverty Network	Local (Ninove)	Private welfare organisation	Bicycle lessons	Integration officer Ninove Social House Teledienst
VVSG	Flemish	Advocate organisation	Seminars and intervisions	







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