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International migration and the rise of urban militant networks in the Mediterranean

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From the US to Italy, from Brazil to Japan, cities from all over the world are increasingly vocal on migration issues. Advocating for alternative approach to immigrants' welcome, their stand and policies may at times be in blunt contradiction with national approaches. This paper gives an overview of this new form of urban militancy, its recent evolution, its forms, its networks. Drawing on case studies in France, Spain and Italy, it seeks to explain why the Mediterranean has been an important setting for the politicization of municipal involvement and the rise of multi-actor power assemblage of municipalities and voluntary organizations.

KEYWORDS

city networks, local governance, Mediterranean, migration policies, urban diplomacy

Introduction

City networks involved in migration issues have mushroomed over the world. Some gather a few cities from a local or a national area, others spread their connections at continental or even global scales; some nurture a political agenda challenging migration policies, others provide guidance in immigrant integration; some are spontaneous initiatives of like-minded mayors, others are sponsored by national and international organizations such as the United Nations, the Council of Europe or the High Commission for Refugees (HCR) (Lacroix, 2021). The European Union has been a fertile ground for the development of such networks (Caponio, 2018; Oomen, 2019). Over the last two decades, the European Union and its member states have increasingly relied on cities and their groupings to support the implementation of a new generation of integration policies. A wealth of projects, institutions and forums have been funded by the EU and other international organizations to support city-level initiatives.

Oomen (2019) argues that this trend goes hand in hand with a policy of decoupling between the local and national governments. A growing number of cities implement inclusive measures to facilitate the local incorporation of immigrants, against the grain of security-oriented strategies imposed by national authorities. Municipalities may adopt policies at the margin of legality, especially when the latter target undocumented migrants. This trend is attested by the various accounts of the strategies of dissent endorsed by municipalities in Europe and North America, from

the silent implementation of discrete measures to vocal opposition (Oomen et al., 2021; Darling, 2022). This municipal activism is embedded into a wider movement of radical urbanism, calling for a “right to the city” and the development of urban commons (Carpio et al., 2011; Harvey, 2012; Tsavdaroglou et al., 2019) and adds to the commitment of the volunteer sector in reception areas. In the context of migration policies, cities have become a locus of power and counter-power (Bontemps et al., 2018). Is this insurgent atmosphere also observed among city networks as Oomen seems to suggest? This might be true in North America where the sanctuary cities movement was formed, with cities refusing to cooperate with the immigration enforcement administration (Ridgley, 2008). But the picture is different in Europe where well-established organizations prevail, receiving support from European and other international organizations: Eurocities and its various programmes (Payre, 2010; Russeil and Healy, 2015; Gebhardt and Güntner, 2021), the EU funded URBACT (Briot et al., 2021), Intercultural cities (White, 2017) to name but a few. Well embedded into the institutional framework, it is difficult to qualify these organizations as insurgent actors in the migration policy landscape.

We argue, however, that a new generation of militant groupings, displaying a much more oppositional stand toward states, is emerging. Drawing on field research in the Mediterranean, it unravels their specificities, their commitments and the conditions under which they emerged. It questions the influence of the securitisation of migration policies and the role of civil society organizations. This paper sheds light on inter-city mobilisations in the Mediterranean. This region of the world, epicenter of the tensions between national actors, police agencies, migrants, NGOs and local authorities, has become the crucible of militant city networks. The rich associational landscape, the sinking of migrant boats and the criminalization of pro-immigrant support, the surge of populist parties and the counter movement of solidarity have formed the background against which city militancy in migration-related issues has thrived. This paper is the outcome of an ongoing research programme named “Localacc¹” funded by the Institut Convergence Migrations and of the PACE² programme funded by the National Research Agency. The research relies on a comparative framework. The three authors of this paper have undertaken ethnographic and participant observations among city networks in three countries: in France (Association Nationale des Villes et Territoires Accueillants); Italy (Network of Solidary Communes) and Spain (*Red de Municipios de Acogida de Refugiados* and *Ciudades Refugio*)

1 Welcoming in Question: Rural and Urban Localities facing Migration: <https://www.icmigrations.cnrs.fr/recherche/les-projets/localacc/>.

2 Politics of Migration and Asylum Crisis in Europe: <https://anr.fr/Project-ANR-18-CE41-0013>.

between 2018 and 2021. It also focuses on a transnational coalition of NGOs and municipalities, the so-called Palermo Process and its associated campaign “From the Sea to the City.” The research is informed by participant observation in this campaign. The authors have attended the online preparatory meetings and launch of the campaign (2020 to 2021). Interviews were carried out with NGO activists (Open Society Foundation, Welcoming International, Open Arms, OCU and Seebrücke), representatives of cities (Barcelona, Palermo, Riace, Mantova, Villeurbanne, Marseille, Grenoble, Montreuil) and city networks (ANVITA, ReCoSol, ANCI, Rete dei Piccoli Comuni del Welcome, Arci Toscana). During the different field studies, researchers have paid a particular attention to the relations between the city networks, their members, and their state and non-state partners (governmental and European institutions, civil society organizations), and city networks.

This paper starts with an overview of the scholarship on city activism. Building on the extant scholarship, this section defines and relocates militant networks in the landscape of migration related networks. Drawing on the findings of previous studies, it elaborates a series of hypotheses regarding the emergence of these types of coalition. The third section examines the formation of militant networks in the three Mediterranean countries (France, Italy and Spain). It pays attention to the policy context that led to their formation and the role of civil society actors in the process. It shows how this process is partly connected to grassroots social movements but also benefits from the impetus of charismatic mayors. The paper carries on with a presentation of the “From the Sea to City” campaign linking municipalities and civil society organizations at a transnational level. Finally, we draw on a comparison between the field studies to outline the common features of militant networks.

City networking and migration: From policy support to political activism

A city network can be defined as a group of municipalities endowed with some form of organizational structure and pursuing a common agenda. This broad definition actually covers a wide range of situations (Lacroix and Spencer, 2022). These networks can constitute generalist organizations for which migration is just one issue addressed among others, while other city networks may have migration as their exclusive focus. Their level of institutionalization also varies: some are permanent organizations endowed with a central administration, a rotating board and salaried staff, others are informal groups of cities maintaining contacts on a more or less regular basis (as is the case with Sanctuary cities in the US), or even temporary groups formed over a time-limited campaign (e.g., the CNCD campaign of the communes hospitalières). Thomas Lacroix has shown that Europe is the region with the highest number of migration-related networks,

counting 39 networks; he identified 64 worldwide. In Europe, the diffusion of city networks is embedded into the European Union political space (Lacroix, 2021). Supported by the European authorities, cities and their networks have played an important role in the structuring of the European political space (Van der Knaap, 1994). The Assembly of European Regions and the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) were incorporated in the institutional architecture of the Commission in the early nineties to establish a communication channel between Brussels and subnational governments.

In Parallel, the European Union (and to a lesser extent, other institutions such as the Council of Europe) supported the emergence of transnational city networks. Among them, Eurocities, a grouping of “secondary cities” such as Barcelona, Birmingham and Lyon (mostly large European cities which are not state capitals) was founded in 1989. It has gradually been incorporated into the European institutional framework as a key partner for policy implementation. It now counts 190 members across EU countries and beyond. These institutions enabled the European Union to rely on cities and their networks to decentralize the implementation of a range of policies, including integration policies (Caponio and Borkert, 2010). To this effect, two financial tools were put in place. The first one “URBAN” (1988-2006) gradually shrank under the pressure of the member states. It was replaced in 2006 by a second instrument “URBACT.” Endowed with lesser financial means than its predecessor “URBAN,” this new programme primarily aims at favoring knowledge sharing and networking (Russeil and Healy, 2015). In consequence, since the early 2000’s, a flurry of new networks and institutions has been created, supporting knowledge exchange and training on integration issues (Arrival cities, Open cities, Integrating Cities, Solidarity cities, CLIP, Intercultural Cities, etc.). These networks also share similar purposes, such as supporting project-building endeavors and the dissemination of best practices. They have largely contributed to promoting the concept of diversity in the integration agenda of European cities.

The local turn of integration policies in Europe spurred the multiplication of city networks in this domain. By contradistinction, in North America, the security turn taken by the management of immigrant populations initiated the emergence of a different profile of city networks. This trend started a decade before in the United States (Ridgley, 2008; Lippert and Rehaag, 2012; Roy, 2019). It gained momentum once again in the early 2000s with the surge of undocumented population. The Clinton laws following the Oklahoma bombings and the Patriot Act following the World Trade Center bombing triggered an increase of undocumented people by withdrawing the residence permits of people who had committed an infraction (Boe, 2020). The skyrocketing number of undocumented immigrants urged cities in charge of these groups to take a stand. Many joined the sanctuary

city movement³ to prevent the identification and deportation of people with no legal permit of residence. It now includes nearly 200 members in the US and eleven in Canada.

It is only in the 2000’s that a similar trend emerged in Europe. The City of Sanctuary network in the United Kingdom is, in that regard, a forerunner. Although their names are very close, the UK movement is not an offshoot of its US counterpart. The British movement targets asylum seekers rather than undocumented workers. It was launched in 2005 in the wake of the reform of the asylum policy undertaken by the Cameron government. The reform led to the scattering of refugees and asylum seekers over the UK, thereby leading to the formation of refugee communities in places which had never hosted such a population before. This scattering triggered a mobilization first of civil society organizations and then of municipalities willing to undertake welcoming policies toward refugees. The network now boasts 110 cities in the UK and Ireland (Darling et al., 2010). This type of network spawned, from 2015 onwards, with the surge of asylum seekers coming from Africa and the Middle East: the Association Nationale des Villes et Territoires Accueillants in France, the Communes hospitalières in Belgium, the Fearless cities or Solidarity cities in Europe and beyond, etc.

In the scholarship, the changing features of migration policies appears as a key driver for the creation of militant city networks. This observation elicits a first hypothesis regarding the formation of such coalitions: authoritarian migration policies favor the emergence of militant city networks.

Another aspect stands out in the literature: the surge of civil society organizations committed to the reception of immigrants at the city level. The commitment of voluntary organizations to the support and integration of immigrants is nothing new. But the succession “migration crises” has spurred a social movement of a novel kind: long-standing religious and secular organizations now co-exist with anarchist collectives and apolitical citizen movements (Feischmidt et al., 2019). The use of internet and social media has deeply transformed the organizational landscape with the emergence of scattered and connected activists working locally but in coordination. The generalization of dispersal policies of asylum seekers (Tazzioli, 2019) has led to the multiplication of local groups involved in the reception of migrants. Of particular interest for this research are the civil society organizations which managed to spur a

³ In the early eighties, the Reagan administration refused to grant the status of refugee to migrants fleeing conflicts in Central America (Nicaragua, Costa Rica, El Salvador). In reaction, church organizations called for “civil disobedience,” advocating the reception and support of exiles in defiance of the national policy. San Francisco, in 1985, became the first “sanctuary city” by refusing to support immigration enforcement in its constituency. The movement spread over the US in the following years, before becoming dormant with the end of the refugee wave in the early nineties.

networking dynamic among cities. This is true of some large and well-established civil society organizations such as the CNCD 11.11.11 in Belgium. This platform of NGOs launched in 2012 an advocacy campaign called “commune hospitalière” urging municipalities to improve the living conditions of immigrant populations. But it is also the case for smaller communities. A first instance is one of the cities of sanctuary mentioned above. The former UK grassroots movement of local volunteers has now turned into a fully-fledged and institutionalized city network (Darling et al., 2010). The second one is Seebrücke, in Germany. This movement started in 2018 with collectives of activists scattered across different German cities and connected via their Facebook pages (Bauder, 2021). In both cases, these groups have managed to connect their involvement with municipal authorities. In the US, similar dynamics have been observed thanks to the commitment of Welcoming America, an NGO supporting the design and implementation of local policies geared toward undocumented workers (Housel et al., 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2018). By and large, several studies highlight a correlation between the presence of pro-migrant civil society organizations and the propensity for a city to become a “sanctuary” (Filomeno, 2017; Huang and Liu, 2018, p. 23). Henceforth our second hypothesis: militant networks are more likely to emerge if they are supported by a dense ecosystem of immigrant-serving voluntary sector.

In Europe and North America, one observes the surge of militant city networks, i.e., groups of municipalities specifically created to cushion the effects of migration policies on immigrant populations and advocate in favor of their reform. They greatly contrast with the networks sponsored by European and other international institutions. Four distinctive traits can be highlighted. Firstly, while the former have benefitted from public funding since their foundation, the latter are grassroots self-funded endeavors, even if such networks may expand their resources in the course of their development. Secondly, sponsored networks tend to be grounded in partnerships with international or European institutions, whereas militant ones tend to collaborate with (and sometimes stem from) civil society organizations. In this regard, they form what Michele Acuto and Robert Curtis call “power assemblages” of public and private actors (Acuto and Curtis, 2014). Michele Acuto and Simon Curtis have imported Assemblage thinking in order to address coalitions of multifarious actors acting together at the international level for a common objective. Militant urban networks tend to form alliances with voluntary organizations rather than international ones or states. Thirdly, another difference regards their respective geographical scope: their international support gives sponsored networks a propensity to form cross border ties; militant ones have, more often than not, a national scope. Fourthly, while the former focus on integration and diversity at large, the latter focus on more contentious issues: the welcoming policies of recently arrived or in transit migrants (in Europe); the provision of services to undocumented people

(mostly in the US). Their claims encroach on the domain of competence of national authorities: the attribution of visas and immigrants’ rights in a variety of domains (welfare, education, housing, etc.).

Of course, this distinction between the two categories of networks cannot be pushed too far: as will be seen in the Spanish case, city networks with public funding may also target the welcoming of asylum seekers, and organizations such as Eurocities are vocal advocates for a more open approach to immigration. And conversely, one may find examples of grassroots networks seeking to pragmatically fill a void in the national policy agenda without politicizing their aims. Militant and sponsored networks are two poles of militancy from the most to the least confrontational ones. And yet, understanding the respective dynamics of both kinds of networks is key to comprehending how policy agendas are shaped, circulated and transformed in the realm of migration governance.

The following section presents the emergence and evolution of militant city networks in three countries: Spain, France and Italy. It examines the conditions of their foundation and enlargement, the role of civil society organizations, the issues driving their involvement and their position toward state authorities. The research highlights the bearing on the formation of these networks of security-oriented migration policies on the one hand and of civil society organizations on the other.

Urban militancy: France, Spain, Italy

France: The Association Nationale des Villes et Territoires Accueillants

There is a long history of involvement of French cities in migration issues. The “politique de la ville” launched in the eighties, granted to cities a larger role in the management of poverty in working-class neighborhoods, with a specific focus on immigrant integration (Epstein and Kirszbaum, 2019). Large French cities such as Lyon, Nantes, Strasbourg and Lille have been involved in European city networks such as Eurocities (Flamant, 2014). But a more militant stance is observed since 2015. A case in point is the creation of the *Association Nationale des Villes et Territoires Accueillants* (ANVITA) in France. A turning point was the decision to open a humanitarian camp in the commune of Grande-Synthe. In March 2016, taking an opposite stance to Calais, the mayor of Grande-Synthe chose to open a reception camp for transit migrants with the support of Doctors without borders (MSF) and in accordance with UNHCR standards. A second camp was opened in Paris a few months later. The aim was not only to respond to pressing needs regarding the dire situation of immigrants, but also to propose a counter humanitarian model to the security-oriented management that prevailed in Calais. The camps crystallized media attention: it was the first time that mayors were asserting

such a stand against the grain of current immigration policies. A second step was taken after the dismantling of the Calais “Jungle” in October 2016. The disbanding of the camp was followed by the resettlement of the immigrant population in other parts of France, including in smaller cities and villages that had not received any inflows of refugees until then. This triggered a demand by concerned municipalities for resources, skills and guidance. The reception of immigrants was done on a voluntary basis. It brought to light that a sizeable proportion of local authorities (and their population) was actually willing to receive immigrants. Finally, in December 2017, a petition was published in the newspaper *Le Monde*, signed by mayors of several large cities in France (including Bordeaux, Lille and Strasbourg⁴). The petition asked for more financial support to enable local authorities to cater for the needs of vulnerable immigrants in wintertime. But the text also asked for the relaxation of police pressure on immigrants. The petition was signed by mayors belonging to parties of both right and left. It revealed that the opposition to the state policy did not follow the right/left cleavage. This mobilization heralded the creation of ANVITA in September 2018. At its core stands the group of municipal leaders from the Green Party led by Damien Carême, the mayor of Grande-Synthe. Beyond this municipality, the founding members include Grenoble (green), the 1st arrondissement of Lyon (PS), Ivry s/Seine (communist), Montreuil (communist), Briançon (socialist), Nantes (socialist), Strasbourg (socialist), Saint-Denis (communist). The aim of the network is to promote policies and practices articulated around the principle of unconditional welcoming (*accueil inconditionnel*). Since its creation, the context of emergency encouraged the involvement of new cities less for ideological than for pragmatic reasons: the immediate needs for support and advice accelerated the networking process. The situation widened the recruitment of cities beyond the core of actors that had shown interest in migration and integration issues for ideological reasons. It now includes over 100 members⁵, be they municipalities or elected representatives in city councils. The municipality of Briançon opted out after a change in the political majority. Grande-Synthe, the founding city, was excluded after the new mayor reoriented the local policy in a direction that did not fit anymore with the ANVITA standards. In parallel, ANVITA expanded its international agenda. In 2021, it joined the Mayors Migration Council (MMC). The MMC is a task force dedicated to link municipalities with the UN migration governance framework. It coordinates the voices of cities and manages the relations with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Global Forum on Migration and

Development (GFMD), gathering states on migration matters. In the wake of the Afghan state collapse, ANVITA members joined an MMC call to welcome Afghan refugees.

So far, little has been said about the place of civil society organizations. As seen above, voluntary organizations have only played a marginal role in the creation and development of the French network. And yet, these actors are omnipresent when it comes to its activities. So far, the activities of ANVITA have been focusing on the sharing of experiences and good practices. In 2019 it published guidelines for welcoming policies, “Comment accueillir (how to welcome).” The guidebook itself has been compiled by an association of architects, urbanists and researchers called “Actes & Cités.” The different “good practices” showcased by the publication all draw on joint collaborations between municipalities and associations. It shows the background work of the volunteer sector at the grassroots level. Civil society organizations have been for ANVITA a vector for the development of its international strategy. In October 2019, it organized jointly with the *Organization pour une Citoyenneté Universelle (OCU)*, a conference gathering a range of local authorities and organizations from around the world, including representatives from the New York and Ouagadougou mayors’ offices. The OCU is a coalition of organizations including the *Comité Catholique contre la Faim et pour le Développement (CCFD)*, *Emmaüs International*, and *Espacio Sin Fronteras*. In the wake of the conference, ANVITA and OCU founded the *Alliance Migration*. However, it has recently expanded its advocacy activities. So far, their activities and expansion has enabled the organization to gain credence nationally and internationally, including among national authorities. ANVITA was approached by the administration in charge of managing the reception of Afghan refugees. It remains to see if this collaboration will pave the way for an incorporation of ANVITA as a key player in French asylum policy.

Italy: The anti-Salvini decree movement

The question of the reception of refugees and vulnerable immigrants is relatively recent in Italy. Local authorities have been stakeholders in the reception policy for asylum seekers within the SPRAR programme (*Sistema di protezione per richiedenti asilo e rifugiati*) in the early 2000’s (Accorinti and Wislocki, 2016; Gois and Falchi, 2017; Bini and Gambazza, 2019). The programme is managed by the ANCI (National association of Italian communes) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs with the support of the UNHCR. Launched in 2002, the SPRAR programme gathers most of the cities supporting reception projects in Italy. This early municipal engagement has informed two types of mobilisations: the RE.CO.SOL network and the Anti-Salvini Campaign. Below, we focus on the role of mayors in these dynamics.

4 <<Face aux flux migratoires, nous, les maires, sommes au pied du mur >> *Le Monde*, 2017/12/16, last accessed on the 18th of May 2020.

5 For a list and map of these members, see <https://villes-territoires-accueillants.fr/> (last access 24th of February 22).

RECOSOL and the anti-Salvini decree campaign

At the same time (2003) a network of “solidary communes” (RE.CO.SOL) was created⁶. It counted, at the time of its foundation, around a hundred members and now boasts around 300. Recosol was initially created to support international solidarity projects: the network promotes collaborations in Italy and abroad with other stakeholders engaged in “domains such as peace, solidarity, environment, responsible consumption, civil rights, immigration.” The network’s activities include the exchange of “good practices,” and a model of decentralized cooperation between small and medium-sized municipalities, around developing projects and practices compatible with the limited budget capacities. The network has set up projects in Algeria, Mali, Niger, Palestine, Peru, Moldova and Romania.

Gradually, Recosol became more and more active in local reception policies: many municipalities in Recosol are part of SPRAR or participate in other reception projects (managed by associations or NGOs). However, with the successive migration “crises” (2008; 2011; 2015) in the Mediterranean, the arrival conditions gradually deteriorated and the various governments, instead of strengthening the capacities of SPRAR, preferred to reinforce containment and control systems. They increasingly transferred the responsibility of initial reception to emergency humanitarian organizations, coordinated in 2011 by the “Protezione Civile” and from 2015 onwards directly by the Prefectures. This transfer contributed to the proliferation of temporary reception structures (CAS, extraordinary reception centers) entrusted to private institutions (service cooperatives, hotels) less controlled, and often failing to meet basic requirements. The business of welcoming became obvious when the “Mafia Capitale” scandal came into the public light: a police investigation dismantled a criminal network of mafia organizations and corrupt politicians diverting the funding for a reception center located in Rome. In 2016, the hotspot approach added a new layer to the “emergency” approach to migration management. This trend had already been obvious since 2011, but it reached another level in 2018 with the arrival of Matteo Salvini (Lega, extreme right populist) at the Ministry of Internal Affairs (the main link with SPRAR municipalities). The Salvini decree, which came into force in October 2018, limited the remit of the SPRAR system (renamed SIPROIMI (sistema di protezione per titolari di protezione internazionale e minori stranieri non accompagnati), and SAI (sistema di accoglienza e integrazione) after 2020 to the management of migrants with statutory international protection, while asylum seekers would be taken in charge by centers for extraordinary hospitality. The 877 SPRAR projects in place, facing this measure and its corollaries (the suppression of humanitarian protection, replaced by a much more limited extraordinary protection, etc.), were seriously affected.

⁶ <https://comunisolidali.org/> (last accessed 18/05/20).

In June 2018, against the background of the preparation of the reform planned by Salvini and of a strain put on the European reception system, in particular with regard to search and rescue operations at sea, Recosol and other civil society actors convened an international meeting in Bardonecchia. The aim was to raise awareness about the dire situation of migrants and ask European countries and the EU to streamline reception and asylum procedures. The forum foreshadowed the mobilization triggered by the enforcement of the so-called Salvini decree. The latter, among other things, removed the possibility for asylum seekers to register in their city of residence, thereby banning access to local civil status and relevant services (access to education, health services, etc.). This resulted in the greater precariousness of a very high number of people. Many municipalities expressed their disagreement on the grounds that it destabilizes the living conditions of migrants and impedes integration processes, with potentially very negative repercussions, in economic, social and security terms, on the community at large. Among the municipalities which have openly positioned themselves against Matteo Salvini, most are part of Recosol. A mapping compiled by Cristina del Biaggio shows the extent of the movement over the Italian territory (Del Biaggio et al., 2019). The authors show the variety of stances taken against the decree amongst local authorities: some expressed their disagreement while others maintained the registration of asylum seekers in direct contradiction to the decree. Interestingly, the opposition to Matteo Salvini included that from right-wing municipalities, which perceived these measures as disruptive and restricting the capacity of control they exert over the migrant population, noticeably thanks to and through the network of accommodation they maintain to monitor them. In parallel to the mobilization, legal procedures were launched to assess the constitutional validity of certain aspects of the decree, notably the measure which removes entitlement for registration and local civil status.

The role of mayors

One of the particularly vocal mayors opposed to Matteo Salvini was the mayor of Palermo. Leoluca Orlando decided to personally register asylum seekers with civil status, refusing to implement the decree with a view to emphasize that his city was and wanted to appear “open,” hospitable and welcoming. This was a significant move: mayor of the city since 2012, and already mayor between 1985 and 1990, and between 1993 and 2000, he maintains very close relationships with a constellation of national institutions and civil society actors. He has been at the forefront on reception and integration issues for several years. The municipality participates in a variety of networks and programmes which advocate for migration, open borders, and cohesive societies: EUROCITIES, ECCAR (European Coalition of Cities against Racism), the UNICEF programme UPSHIFT, Solidarity Cities, amongst others. The

mayor is famous for writing the “Palermo Charter,” which aims at promoting international mobility as an unconditional human right through the suppression of residence permits⁷. The municipality is also known for the multiple initiatives taken in favor of the reception of immigrants in its port. This positioning, his political contacts with actors in Spain and Germany and his involvement on the international scene make him one of the mayors most involved in defending the rights of migrants, in supporting NGOs working in the Mediterranean.

Leoluca Orlando is not the only Italian mayor with an international stature being influential in the European and international debate on alternative approaches to welcoming and integrating migrants. One can mention the earlier experience of Venice’s mayor Massimo Cacciari, involved in several international solidarity networks in the 1990’s; the outstanding experiences of the village of Riace and its mayor Domenico Lucano⁸ (2004–2014), as well as the city of Lampedusa headed by Giusi Nicolini (2012–2017). Nicolini took part in 2015 with Ada Colau (Barcelona), Anne Hidalgo (Paris) and the mayor of the island of Lesbos, Spyros Galinos, in the creation of a network of refuge cities, connecting border islands and welcoming metropolises. This project itself failed, but it prefigured a new initiative developed around the Barcelona-Palermo connection, as will be shown below.

Spanish cities’ mobilisations

As in France and Italy, Spanish cities have a track record of presence and involvement in European city networks. This is particularly so for Barcelona, the city which boasts the largest number of memberships in migration-related city networks (Lacroix, 2021). It hosts the headquarters of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the United Nations organization representing local governments. It is also a founding member of Eurocities and is an active member of a range of EU funded networks involved in migration issues. The other major Spanish player is Madrid with an equally large range of experience in city-led initiatives. The particularly high level of involvement on the international scene is embedded in the context of the competition between Catalunya and the central government; Catalan municipalities have found in urban diplomacy a way of developing their own international agenda distinct from the governmental one (Zapata-Barrero, 2006).

The so-called “migrant crisis” exacerbated the tensions between Spanish, Catalan and local governments. As Mariano Rajoy’s government (Partido Popular) had not been proactive

in European discussions on the reception of migrants, the Barcelona City Council decided to take the lead in autumn 2015 by proposing a local reception policy and called on other cities to join them in this dynamic, by creating a network of “*Ciudades Refugio*.” A week later, 55 self-declared “refuge cities” voiced their support all over Spain (Garcés-Mascareñas and Gebhardt, 2020). Two years later, the network counted at least 25 cities, including Madrid, Valencia, Pamplona, Zaragoza, Cordoba and Málaga. As in the French case of ANVITA, this city network corresponds to a model of interurban militancy, bringing forward strong political demands and criticism of national governments’ and European institutions’ actions. In autumn 2017, in a speech at the Spanish Parliament (*Congreso de los Diputados*), the *Ciudades Refugio* network denounced the “immobility” of Mariano Rajoy’s government in the reception of asylum seekers and refugees on Spanish territory (La Vanguardia, 2017). At that time, Spain had only received 13.7% of the quota of migrants that it had committed to welcome as part of the relocation process negotiated 2 years earlier between European leaders (Amnesty International, 2017). A second criticism targeted the allocation of European funds assigned to Spain for immigration management on its territory, and particularly for the management of the country’s southern border, which constitutes an external border of Europe. For the period 2014–2020, Spain has received €691.7 million under the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and the Internal Security Fund. This is in addition to €29.6 million emergency aid released by the European Commission in 2018 to help Spain deploy additional staff along Spain’s southern borders, organize repatriations and transfers from the Ceuta and Melilla enclaves, and develop reception infrastructure (European Commission, 2018). In 2017, through the voice of one of its spokespersons, Jaume Asens, Deputy Mayor of Barcelona, the *Ciudades Refugio* network already deplored the security orientation and the lack of transparency in the use of these funds by the Spanish government, leaving the cities to finance part of the reception costs at the local level with their own funds: Madrid City Council allocated around €4.5 million to refugee aid programmes between 2016 and 2017, while Barcelona City Council had assigned €1.5 million to emergency accommodation during the same period (La Vanguardia, 2017). Criticizing the governmental management of migrants’ reception, cities call either for a change in practice, toward a more humanist and supportive approach, or for a transfer of competences and resources - including European funding - to the local level, so that they can have the capacity to take in charge the reception of migrants and refugees. To organize this reception at local level, voluntary groups collaborate with municipalities. However, these groups do not partake in the *Ciudades refugio* network. There seems to be a disconnection between the involvement of volunteers at the local level and the development of these city networks. More than a place for building local public action, this network seems to

⁷ <http://leolucaorlando.it/palermo-la-citta-dellaccoglienza/>

⁸ Mayor Lucano was condemned in September 2021 to 13 years and 2 months of imprisonment for providing support to undocumented immigrants and corruption. The condemnation triggered a Europe-wide movement of support.

be mainly a tool for political advocacy, making use of elected officials, and not open to professionals and activists, although its founder Ada Colau comes from this milieu.

Following the municipal elections of 2019 and the changes in political orientation of many city councils, this network seems to have lost its impetus. An employee of the *Ajuntament de Barcelona* who participated in the making of the city's reception policies explained this situation as follows: "The mayor did not really make a city network, she made a network of mayors from the same political group. She looked for mayors from the *Comunes* or *Podemos*, and I think she made a mistake, she had to seek a more transversal consensus, seek other mayors and other parties to create a truly municipalist network in favor of refuge. The proof is that once losing the mayors, nothing remained." (Interview City Council Manager Barcelona, November 2020)⁹. Nevertheless, this network appears as a first instance of the new municipalism which the city of Barcelona has since developed, through initiatives such as Fearless Cities (Russell, 2019). By proposing to create a network based on "solidarity" between welcoming cities and by opposing state management of the refugees' reception, the *Ciudades Refugio* constituted a form of "newly-politicized and radical-reformist orientation toward the (local) state, in imagining new institutional formations that embody *urban* rather than state logics" (Thompson, 2021, p. 318).

A second network of Spanish host municipalities was created in spring 2016: the "*Red de Municipios de Acogida de Refugiados*". More precisely, this network is in fact a sub-network specializing in issues of migrant populations' reception, within the mayors' association of the *Federación Española de Municipios y Provincias* (FEMP). Less critical and militant than the *Ciudades Refugio* network, this network was nonetheless created in reaction to the observation that the EU and national governments were unable to properly welcome people seeking refuge in Europe. The FEMP president, Abel Caballero, thus declared that the municipalities could no longer tolerate "Europe's indecency in the lack of refugees' reception" and that they were then ready to implement this welcoming that "the EU and its governments were not doing" (*Federación Española de Municipios y Provincias*, 2016). This network has many objectives, such as developing a "protocol for the reception of refugees" common to the member cities, improving access to social services and *empadronamiento*¹⁰ for refugees, raising awareness among the local population of the plight of migrants, or simply sharing information and experiences between municipalities and local governments.

One of its specificities is to maintain a strong collaboration with national and international organizations specializing in migration and social issues, such as the *Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado* (CEAR), ACCEM, the Spanish Red Cross, the UNHCR and Amnesty International. However, smaller locally based and militant civil society organizations are not represented among these partners¹¹. The network, and more generally the FEMP, wishes in particular to position itself as an intermediary between the Spanish government, on the one hand, and local governments and municipalities on the other, as was the case when the *Aquarius* arrived in the port of Valencia in 2018: the organization had thus centralized the call of volunteer cities (more than 300) to receive the 629 survivors on the boat (*Federación Española de Municipios y Provincias*, 2018). The Spanish government has regularly collaborated with the FEMP on refugee reception issues since 2015 (*Bermúdez de Castro Mur*, 2017).

Finally, it is worth noting the existence of interurban networks and initiatives at the subnational level, such as the *Red Valenciana de Ciudades de Acogida* or the Catalan coastal towns self-declared as "safe harbors" (*puertos seguros*). The first one is a municipalities' network in the Valencia region, most of the members already belonging to the national network *Red de Municipios de Acogida de Refugiados*. As stated by the *Federación Valenciana de Municipios y Provincias* (FVMP), which stands behind this local network, the aim of the latter is to « promote the objectives of the FEMP's *Red de Ciudades Acogedoras* network in order to disseminate them among the mayors of the Valencia Community » (*Federación Española de Municipios y Provincias*, 2018). As for the second, the so-called Catalan "safe harbors," it is less a network than a local interurban initiative, promoted by the *Generalitat de Catalunya*¹². In spring 2018, when search and rescue organizations were facing the closure of Italian harbors, the *Generalitat* took the decision to declare all ports in Catalan coastal cities as "safe harbors" where ships could come ashore without hindrance. In April 2018, the Interdepartmental Commission on Safe Ports (*Comissió Interdepartamental de Ports segurs*) was created to work on the development of a reception programme in these municipalities, bringing together *Generalitat* departments as well as the Catalan Federation of Municipalities (*Federació Catalana de Municipis*) or the Catalan Association of Municipalities (*Associació Catalana de Municipis*). In both cases, these are local and inter-municipal organizations that are trying to provide a dignified reception for migrants, a reception they do not believe the Spanish government is providing.

9 Personal translation from Catalan to English.

10 The *padrón municipal* is the register in which all the inhabitants of a municipality have been registered since 1858. Registering in the *padrón* - the *empadronamiento* - allows access to the health system, schooling and even regularization.

11 Conversely, these organizations are actively involved in other networks such as the Fearless Cities network, which deals with migration issues, but also feminism, environment and democracy.

12 The *Generalitat de Catalunya* is the political institution representing the autonomous community of Catalonia.

The formation of a Mediterranean power assemblage: The Palermo charter platform process

The previous section has depicted the rise of militant networks at the national level. Recent attempts to upscale their mobilization has given birth to a heterogeneous assemblage of public and civil society actors. This evolution took place against the background of a growing opposition to migration flows and civil society organizations in the area. In May 2017, Italy and the European Union started to devolve to Libyan coastguards the management of Search-and-Rescue operations in the Mediterranean¹³. This gradual transfer was confirmed in June 2018, when Libya delineated a large Search-and-Rescue area in international waters over which the UN International Maritime Organization acknowledged its capacity to intervene. In parallel, the arrival in power of the Five Star government and Matteo Salvini as the Ministry of Interior spurred the criminalization of NGO activities in the Mediterranean. The SOS Méditerranée/MSF ship “Aquarius” was forced to divert to Valencia after it was refused docking in Italy and Malta. The disembarking in Valencia of the 600 immigrants onboard was allowed by the mobilization of local authorities. As seen above, after having received the green light from the central government, the “Red Valenciana de ciudades de acogida” and the city of Valencia mobilized to welcome the boat¹⁴.

In a context of mounting pressure against their activities, European NGOs involved in Search-and-Rescue operations turned to local authorities to secure docking possibilities. Contacts had been made in May 2018 with Italian cities such as Palermo, Riace and Naples. The discussions gradually widened to include Berlin, Valencia, Zaragoza, Syracuse, Milan, Barcelona or Bologna. In February 2019 a meeting was held in Rome gathering city representatives from Spain, Germany and Italy and NGOs during which the Palermo Charter Platform Process was launched. From the NGO side, the process includes European Alternatives, Emergency, Humboldt-Viadrina Governance Platform, INURA, LasciateCIEntrare, Mediterranea Saving Humans, Open Arms Italy Office, SeeBrücke Germany, Tesseræ, Welcome to Europe/Italy, and Watch The Med Alarm Phone. Beyond the cities mentioned above, the platform includes a number of cities from Spain, Italy and Germany. On the French, side ANVITA and the NGO Migreurop are also active members of the consortium. The group recruits beyond the scope of militant organizations with the presence of Eurocities, and

members of the European Parliament were also present during preparatory meetings.

The Palermo process received funding from the Rosa Luxembourg Foundation. Its first outcome was the launch of the “From Sea to City” campaign: In June 2021, the city of Palermo organized a meeting gathering 33 European municipal representatives for the signature of a common declaration of international safe harbors. The campaign is articulated around five objectives: (1) a combined effort to lobby the European Commission on migration policy; (2) the creation of a framework of action linking Search-and-Rescue operations and city welcoming; (3) advocating for direct sources of EU funding for both cities and civil society organizations; (4) the creation of legal corridors for the mobility of asylum seekers within Europe; (5) securing access to fundamental rights in housing, health and other welfare domains. This series of aims and demands mirrors the mixed positioning of cities and NGOs in this debate. The demand for specific channels of EU funding for the benefit of cities is a central claim of several established European city networks, including Eurocities. It reflects the will to gain room for maneuver with regard to state tutelage and to be acknowledged as legitimate players in the European policy architecture. By contrast, the provision of services and the securing of rights for asylum seekers have been at the core of urban militancy since the early days of the sanctuary city movement. The three other points result from the specific alchemy between militant municipalism and Search-and-Rescue activism. As shown in this paper, collaborations between local authorities and civil society organizations are commonplace. But those are usually organizations well-versed in reception issues within the urban space, not immigrant rescue operations outside its limits. This explains why the “Sea to City” campaign includes three demands that relate to migration policy rather than integration or welcoming *stricto sensu*. The creation of legal corridors within the EU to facilitate the circulation of asylum seekers between the port cities and cities of the European hinterland (especially in Germany) is, in this regard, a ground-breaking novelty. Legal corridors are a legal framework enabling cities and other actors to organize the circulation of migrants without the interference of immigration enforcement institutions. For the moment, the campaign is limited to European actors. It remains to be seen if the discussion will be broadened to incorporate partners from the southern side of the Mediterranean, and also beyond if legal corridors could link cities hosting refugees in the Middle East with European host cities. This would be a real breakthrough reshaping in a radical way the design of European migration policy.

The Palermo Process is still today a work in progress. No recent development has extended the momentum of the conference. However, in 2021, Seebrücke, drawing on the contacts established during the Process, produced a mapping of welcoming cities

13 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/19/eu-shifting-rescue-libya-risks-lives> (last accessed 18/05/2020).

14 <https://www.fvmp.es/red-valenciana-de-ciudades-de-acogida/> (last accessed 18/05/2020).

in Europe. The mapping includes details about 700 cities¹⁵.

Discussion and conclusion: Upscaling city activism

The presentation of these four case studies provides an overview of the factors driving the emergence and upscaling of grassroots city networks involved in migration issues. The contrast between militant and EU-supported networks is striking. While the former has primarily been driven by the international agenda on integration, the latter have been spurred by national political disputes. In Italy, the RECOSOL movement created an environment favoring pro-immigrant sentiments among mayors. When Matteo Salvini came to power and enforced a strongly anti-immigrant policy, it immediately triggered a mobilization of municipalities. In France, the Calais “Jungle” and its subsequent dismantling propelled the mobilization of cities. Finally, in Spain, the reception of refugees from the Middle East and Africa in 2015 and the Aquarius crisis in 2018 set the stage for the formation of migration-related city networks. The first hypothesis driving this research is confirmed by empirical observations: the policy context affecting the condition of reception and settlement of immigrants is a key driver for the emergence of militant city networks.

By contrast, the second hypothesis regarding the role of civil society organizations is only partly confirmed. In the three investigated countries, there is no evidence of the role played by the local voluntary sector in the emergence of militant city networks. The Mediterranean dynamic differs in this regard from what has been observed in the US (in the case of Welcoming cities), in Germany (with the Seebrücke movement) or in the UK (Cities of Sanctuary). By and large, there is a disconnection between the reliance of cities on voluntary organizations for the management of immigrant populations locally and the upscaling of their involvement in national inter-city networks. It is worth noting that the *Red de Municipios de Acogida de Refugiados* in Spain has benefited from partnerships with large national and international organizations such as the Red Cross or Amnesty International, but not with smaller organizations active in the field.

However, the partnership of city/civil society organizations has been key in the upscaling of intercity mobilization at the regional level. The last case study provided in this paper, the PCPP, offers a rare example of international networking effort with a militant agenda. This case study points to the variety of actors involved in this power assemblage and, in particular, the role of civil society actors behind the scenes. The PCPP was initiated by the need of Search-and-Rescue

NGOs such as Open Arms, Seebrücke and SOS Méditerranée for a stronger collaboration with Mediterranean local authorities. If the PCPP is conclusive, it will lead to the constitution of a cross-Mediterranean city network of safe harbors (with an extensive definition of the Mediterranean area since it includes Germany!). The PCPP is, to our knowledge, the first initiative supported by both civil society organizations and local authorities at the international level. Moreover, the presence of Search-and-Rescue organizations rather than integration has oriented the focus of the PCPP toward migration management. It is illustrative of the types of power assemblage produced by militant city networks, contrasting with those sponsored by national and international organizations. It shows, in particular, the key role played by civil society organizations, both as initiators and decision-makers, while we observe the absence of international organizations and state representatives. They form, in this regard, international power assemblages of a new kind that need more scholarly attention in the coming years.

In this regard, the PCPP highlights the specific nature of the Mediterranean political space: a liminal space at the crossroads of different Nation States toward which a range of public, private and civil society actors gravitate. It is a favorable environment for the emergence of such a mobilization: a space of political tensions in which civil society organizations and political personalities with an international stature evolve. The confrontational nature of this political context may explain why the co-opted municipal networks have failed to embody a “safe harbor” voice, thereby leaving a space for the emergence of alternative and more militant groupings.

Last but not least, we would like to draw attention to the pivotal role of key mayors. Their involvement is a driver which has been highlighted by our empirical observations but not by the literature on city networks (for an exception see [Thouez, 2020](#)). This is why this driver has not been included among our initial hypotheses. Damien Carême in Grande-Synthe, Leoluca Orlando in Palermo and Ada Colau in Barcelona have all played a key role in mobilizing their counterparts. The role of charismatic leaders is an issue that requires more scholarly attention. By extension, we have, during our investigations, come across individuals working behind the scenes for the advancement of municipal activism and its upscaling. These collaborators may be social entrepreneurs coming from the voluntary sector or municipal civil servants committed to the support of immigrant populations. A political sociology analysis of individuals involved in this field may uncover relations between the political personnel and civil society that remain hidden when one focuses on the organizational level only. This may nuance our findings regarding the absence of role played by local volunteer groups in the formation of militant city networks.

¹⁵ <https://moving-cities.eu> (last access 24/2/22).

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

TL framed the theoretical section, wrote the introduction and conclusion and part of the final section, and streamlined the whole article. FF wrote the section on Italy and part of the final section. LH wrote the section on Spain. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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