

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our research on immigrant integration policies in small and medium-sized towns and rural areas in 9 European countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, The Netherlands, Turkey) and Canada found lots of variation in the design and implementation of immigrant integration policies and the extent to which these policies were accommodative to asylum seekers and refugees. This implies a lack of consistency and predictability in integration services and support and hence unequal life chances among asylum seekers and refugees accommodated in different localities within countries and across Europe. In light of the recent war in Ukraine and an increased influx of people seeking refuge, creating more even/equal standards for providing integration support and seizing the opportunities that immigrants bring in small and medium-sized towns and rural areas is of high urgency. Whilst European institutions have long supported ‘the local level’ in dealing with immigrant integration, so far EU policymaking on this issue is largely informed by the realities of large cities and capitals. Moreover, small and medium-sized towns and rural areas seldom affect European policymaking on immigrant integration and make limited direct use of European funds and other support. In order to close this gap between European and small locality policymaking on immigrant integration, this policy brief calls EU institutions and policymakers to finetune existing immigrant integration policy frameworks in order to include the needs, opportunities, and realities of small and medium-sized towns and rural areas.

INTRODUCTION

Small and medium-sized towns and rural areas have become increasingly important places for dealing with the reception, accommodation, and integration of asylum seekers and refugees. Some of these localities have had limited experiences with migration beforehand, and limited policies, structures, and actors in place for handling immigrant integration. In addition, small and medium-sized towns and rural areas are often further removed from the national level as well as the European level than frequently consulted large cities. They lack the networks but also have fewer



staff, less experience and limited involvement in order to directly access EU support and funding schemes.

Conversely, European policymakers have paid limited attention to the specific realities and needs of small and medium-sized towns and rural areas in policymaking on immigrant integration. This is surprising, as there has been considerable attention for the local level and recognition that localities matter in promoting immigrants' integration in EU policymaking for more than a decade. In light of more restrictive policies by national governments, European policymakers have set their hope on municipal authorities, as they would be better suited to deal in pragmatic ways with the integration of immigrants.

This results in problematic situations, where small and medium-sized towns and rural areas (often) lack experience, expertise, and resources to deal with immigrant integration and are unable to draw on the support mechanisms and funding schemes at the European level. An underlying reason is that larger metropolises and capital cities have often been considered frontrunners and models for immigrant integration policymaking and have received most/more attention and benefited most from European level support. Furthermore, small and medium-sized towns and rural areas have seldom been involved in deliberative fora of policymaking in Brussels, lacking the capacities and resources to participate or not being invited to the table. Conversely, European networks of cities are often spearheaded by larger cities, who have the resources and staff to participate in such deliberations. The result is a vicious cycle. As EU policymaking institutions do not facilitate small and medium-sized towns' and rural areas' access to policymaking spaces and processes, their voices are not often heard at the EU level, and their realities are less present in the policymaking process. Consequently, they receive less attention and support.

With yet again an increased inflow of people seeking international protection after the invasion of Ukraine and reception centres filling up quickly, large numbers of asylum seekers are being accommodated in small and medium-sized towns and rural areas. They once again are called upon to help accommodate large numbers of arrivals, yet there are substantial differences in their preparedness to promote and foster immigrant integration.

Therefore, we direct this policy brief to European Commission policymakers with a call to consider the specific needs, challenges, and opportunities of small and medium-sized towns and rural areas in dealing with the integration of asylum seekers and refugees. In the brief, we develop propositions of possible ways forward towards improving existing policies in and towards decreasing policy variation between small and medium-sized towns and rural areas.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

a) The current policy and its limits

The EU has long recognized the role of the local level for immigrant integration. With the European Agenda for Integration, published in 2011, the European Commission called for more action at the local level, highlighting the need to address disadvantaged urban areas, to improve multi-level

cooperation and for the EU to provide financial support to local initiatives. This focus on ‘the local level’ was based on the presupposition that the local level offers opportunities for more pragmatic responses to immigrant integration than the national level, which often has taken a more restrictive stance (Caponio & Borkert 2010, Schiller 2016, Scholten & Penninx 2016).

With the unfolding of the 2014 ‘refugee crisis’, the importance of EU level support for local authorities was reinforced, because of a friction in approach between local authorities and national governments in the reception of immigrants. As a representative from a European city network said, local governments generally wanted to implement more welcoming and progressive policies and action programs, despite the reluctance of national governments whose approach was ‘not in my backyard’.

Experts on the European and international level acknowledged that small and medium-sized towns and rural areas have taken a relevant role in dealing with the refugee crisis and in coming up with creative solutions for immigrant integration. Several interviewees recognized the willingness of cities – including those who had little experience with accommodating asylum seekers and refugees – to learn more about and develop their integration infrastructure after 2015 (Representative of an international association of cities; Representative from a European city network). They acknowledged also that it took small localities some time to get to grips with their role in dealing with the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ and to begin providing integration supports.

The European Commission as well as other international organisations published policy documents on immigrant integration since many years. We focus here on those published since 2014:

The EU's first policy document in response to the large increase in immigrants coming to Europe was the Action Plan on the integration of third country nationals (2016). Its aim was to provide immediate assistance to immigrants at the first stage of integration and called for a coherent approach to integration. It conceived the EU's role to coordinate policy development and involve all relevant actors – including local authorities.

With the recent Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2020), an attempt was made to look at a long-term perspective of integration for immigrants in the years 2021-2027. The local level in this policy document is considered as playing a key role in welcoming and guiding immigrants when they first arrive in their new country.

Providing guidance on issues relating to integration specifically in view of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Action Plan on the integration of third country nationals 2021-2022 suggested research on the links between national policies and local integration outcomes. It further calls for an expansion of cities' knowledge and use of available financial instruments to invest in the social infrastructure needed to advance immigrant and refugee inclusion.

Finally, the OECD (2020) has published *The Local inclusion of migrants and refugees: A gateway to existing ideas, resources and capacities for cities across the world*. The document presents a collection of recommendations from different international bodies, including OECD, CMO, UN HABITAT, UNICEF, UNCTAD, UNESCO and WHO.

Whilst the local level is mentioned in these supranational level documents, none of them is dedicated to small and medium-sized towns and rural areas. They do not differentiate between local realities and needs based on different size, economic development or political orientation. Nor do they provide examples from small and medium-sized towns and rural areas. Because of that lacking attention to small and medium-sized towns and rural areas and to variation between capital cities and non-capitals, the local level becomes a uniform category, which, in turn, stands in the way of a more fine-grained approach.

We also identified several networks and fora of interaction on immigrant integration on the European level, but some of these fora do not include local authorities at all, are led by large cities or have limited influence. This includes the interactions with local and national governments created based on the European agenda for integration 2011, the European integration network (EIN), the Partnership on Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees based on the Action plan 2021-2022 by the Urban Agenda for the EU, EUROCITIES and the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) network. The direct involvement of smaller, medium-sized cities and rural areas to date seems negligible in the European sphere.

We can conclude that the EU level, while emphasizing the role of the local level, has often based its policies on the realities of larger cities and metropolises. Also in existing fora of policy deliberation on the EU level, voices from smaller localities and rural areas seem to be largely absent or have limited weight.

There is one notable exception that deviates from this pattern and differentiates small and medium-sized towns and rural areas from larger cities, namely the document by the European Committee of the Regions (Commission for Citizenship, Governance and Institutional and External Affairs) on Integration of migrants in middle and small cities and rural areas in Europe (2020). Drawing on case studies from five countries, this report provides a useful overview of some of the key opportunities and challenges outside of large cities.

The report specifies that immigrants offer significant benefits to medium and small cities, but that these cities have often been left alone to deal with issues that the national level has failed to address, such as providing refugees with quick access to medical care or education. It points out that small and medium-sized cities have been adaptable to changing realities and policy-needs, but that there is also a great variety of integration policies and activities. For these localities, financial support, for example by the European Union, is in many cases difficult to obtain due to the lack of resources to submit applications and prepare reports, as financial and human resources in these localities are often thin. It also shows that small and medium-sized towns and rural areas have been successful in sharing resources and services with geographically close towns and villages and have used informal channels for knowledge sharing in regional level networks, whilst European level networks have often remained difficult for these localities to participate in.

The authors of this report suggest to conduct an EU wide needs assessment of small and medium-sized towns and rural areas regarding the integration of immigrants, to provide tailored capacity building support, to broadcast outcomes of small localities across Europe and expand the program of sharing good practices. Further, the authors recommend (to the European Committee of the

Regions) to advocate on behalf of these localities for more accessible EU funding. They also point out that the needs of small and medium-sized towns and rural areas need to be considered separately from each other and from bigger cities, due to their distinctive realities, and that monitoring through more data collection, analysis and dissemination would be important.

We can confirm the findings of this report and second its suggestions based on our Whole-COMM research. These would be highly relevant measures in order to fill the void in European policymaking on small and medium-sized towns and rural areas.

b) Findings from WholeCOMM that illustrate the limitations of the current approach

Small and medium-sized towns and rural areas are important places of arrival and residence for asylum seekers and refugees and provide the context of building up a new home. Variations between localities in terms of policy situations and presence of actors/support structures means that immigrants arriving in these places could find themselves in a disadvantaged situation in comparison to immigrants arriving in larger cities, where generally some policies and support structures are in place.

Examining the extent to which small and medium-sized towns and rural areas have created policies and put municipal actors in place to deal with the integration of asylum seekers and refugees, focusing specifically on those that arrived after 2014, we found that from our 49 sampled localities, 12 had accommodative policies and dedicated municipal actors in place, 13 had no accommodative policies and dedicated actors in place or had restrictive policies or disengaged actors, and 24 localities were positioned somewhere in between these two extremes. We showed that the variation in size among small and medium-sized towns and rural areas has limited explanatory value for the policies and actors in these places. What does seem to be of some relevance is their economic development as well as the political orientation of their local government, as localities of a more conservative or right-wing political leaning seem to be more reluctant to put in place accommodative policies. As many small and medium-sized towns and rural areas do not have accommodative policies and engaged actors in place yet or are somewhere on the spectrum between no accommodative policies and having accommodative policies, they would be in most urgent need for support from the European level.

Based on our analysis of the quantitative data collected through an online survey filled in by 67 local officials and local elected policymakers across 7 EU countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain and Sweden), we also explored the interactions of policymakers in small and medium-sized towns and rural areas with policymakers at the EU level. Remarkably, as we can see in Figure 1, interactions with the EU level are almost entirely absent in the vast majority of small and medium-sized towns and rural areas.

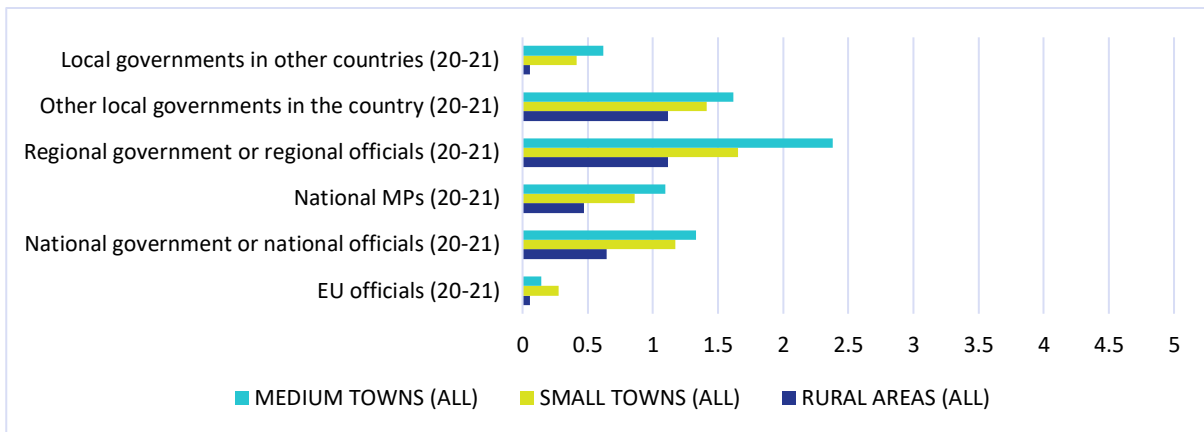


Figure 1 Frequency of vertical interactions of local policymakers and officials with other actors in 2020-2021 in different types of localities (scale: 0=no interactions to 5=daily interactions).

Overall, we can conclude that there is some scope for boosting accommodative policies as well as interactions with the EU level in small and medium-sized towns and rural areas. Whilst factors like economic development and political orientation may be factors that also play a hampering role for more accommodative policies in bigger cities, small and medium sized towns and rural areas may still need a different approach because of their limited staff resources and available expertise, limited experiences with immigrant integration, and the close-knit character of smaller communities that can provide a challenging context for asylum seekers and refugees to become an accepted member.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- a) Three policy options:** a generalized approach to the local level, a differentiated approach to localities of different sizes, and a targeted approach for small and medium-sized towns and rural areas.

Based on these findings, there are three different policy options European policymakers have at hand. In the following we will describe these three options and discuss their potential advantages and disadvantages.

Option 1: One potential pathway of European policymakers is to keep emphasizing the role of the local level while keeping the “local” as a generic category and paying most attention to best practices and experiences from larger cities. This option requires the least or actually no action to change the current path with little or no transaction costs in developing a new policy and getting it approved. Choosing this option would mean accepting a situation where small and medium-sized towns and rural areas are disadvantaged vis-à-vis larger cities, and where asylum seekers and refugees can face huge differences in their treatment depending on which town or rural area they are accommodated in. The extent to which a newcomer gets support measures and opportunities to integrate in the locality of arrival is then a question of luck – as it depends not only on the country but also on the locality the newcomer is being accommodated in. Variation in the extent to which

small and medium-sized towns and rural areas have integration policies in place (from no policies to highly developed policies and structures) and in the character of these policies (from restrictive to accommodative) would persist. In addition, this option relies on the self-sufficiency of small and medium-sized towns and rural areas. It envisions that they will learn and develop policy responses by themselves and adapt policy ideas from larger cities for their local realities.

Option 2: In order to recognize different realities and needs between large cities and small and medium-sized towns and rural areas, another potential pathway is to differentiate support measures and funding schemes and tailor them to localities of different sizes. Small and medium-sized towns and rural areas could then be targeted in a more dedicated manner, receive more support and funding to improve their local reception and integration services and structures, and potentially build up links with the European level of policymaking on immigrant integration. The more general understanding and framework of integration at the European level could be maintained, whilst the European Commission would tailor specific support and funding mechanisms to localities of different size. In other words, this option does not represent a full path cessation of the current policy, but it would entail further differentiating the existing framework. However, despite a more tailored approach to the size of a locality, localities of more right-wing political leaning may still be reluctant to make use of such an offer. An opportunity of this option could be that some mechanisms of nudging the more resistant localities could be developed, with the potential for real impact.

Option 3: Another possible pathway for policymakers would be to re-construct existing policies (which have largely been inspired by the realities of large cities) to develop a separate policy and funding scheme for large cities on the one hand and small and medium-sized towns and rural areas on the other. It means that a policy would be created that starts from the needs and realities of small and medium-sized towns and rural areas and develops tailor-made and out of the box approaches that fit with that reality. This option would come close to a complete path cessation, requesting policymakers to start developing policy from scratch, with new ideas, structures and staff being involved. Acquired expertise could be lost and double-structures could be created. On the other hand, this option could give a signal to small and medium-sized towns and rural areas that their specific challenges are taken seriously by the EU. Also, fresh and novel ideas and approaches in immigrant integration policymaking could be developed.

b) Recommendations

Whilst in the long run we encourage European institutions and organizations to consider also developing more specific measures for small and medium-sized towns and rural areas, in our view option 2 provides the most realistic and feasible option in the short run. It is an option that does not require complete path cessation, but can be achieved by adapting and differentiating existing measures for small and medium-sized towns and rural areas. This process of adaptation could also take place in the implementation phase of the policy, without needing to go back to the drawing board and allowing for an incremental approach. Especially now that we see small and medium-sized towns and rural areas becoming again very central in accommodative larger number of asylum

seekers and refugees, we are reminded of Churchill's call to 'never waste a good crisis'. After the arrival of Syrians in and around 2015, Afghans in 2021 and Ukrainians in 2022, it is clear by now that 'refugee crises' are a recurring phenomenon and that the EU hence needs a long-term and systematic approach to tackle related challenges and opportunities. European union policymakers could seize the opportunity of the present 'crisis' to create acceptance and support for and a positive narrative about refugees in small and medium-sized towns and rural areas.

The specific practical steps or measures that need to be taken would be:

To identify the specificities of integration processes, needs, and opportunities (in terms of concepts, structures and funding) in small and medium-sized towns and rural areas and adapt existing support (conceptual approaches, support structures, funding schemes).

To inform small and medium-sized towns and rural areas about support measures and funding that is available to them on the European level and address potential barriers in accessing such funding.

To invite small and medium-sized towns and rural areas to deliberative fora and networks in European policymaking on immigrant integration, and ensure these spaces discuss the needs and opportunities raised by small and medium-sized towns and rural areas.

Differentiating between large cities, small and medium-sized towns and rural areas is extremely important. Only through such a nuanced and fine-grained approach can we ensure that asylum seekers and refugees receive similar opportunities to integrate and receive similar life chances in their context of arrival.

Migration is a long-term phenomenon, and localities outside the big cities remain important when a large number of asylum seekers and refugees arrive within a short period, and over the long-term as asylum seekers and refugees integrate and build lives in their new communities. There is a need and a potential for more tailored policies and support measures on immigrant integration by European institutions, so that refugees feel welcomed and have the opportunity to become members of the community in the long run, no matter the size of the locality they live in.

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