

## FAR-RIGHT PARTIES AND LOCAL MIGRATION POLICY-MAKING IN SMALL WESTERN EUROPEAN LOCALITIES

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### Introduction

In recent decades, local governments have become [increasingly central actors in the governance of migration and migrant integration across Europe](#). The growing relevance of the local level in migration governance is often described in the literature as the “local turn”. National governments across Europe have progressively delegated responsibilities related to migrant reception, integration, and service provision to municipalities. As a result, local governments now play a crucial role not only in implementing national policies, but also in designing autonomous measures in areas such as access to healthcare, education, housing, language training, labour market integration, and political participation. Importantly, this shift has not been confined to large cities. While earlier research focused predominantly on metropolitan areas, small towns and rural localities have increasingly become sites of migrant settlement, particularly through national dispersal policies for asylum-seekers. In countries such as Italy, Austria, and Germany, asylum-seekers have been distributed across municipalities in proportion to population size, leading even small villages to host reception centres.

These important developments took place in a historical moment in which far-right parties have expanded their electoral presence not only at the national level, but also within [regional and local political arenas](#). These parties – sometimes referred to as [populist radical-right parties](#) following Mudde’s conceptualization or [exclusionary populists](#) by Graziano and Caiani – have expanded their presence across all territorial levels of governance. Their support has been particularly strong in smaller localities and rural areas, a pattern observed not only in Europe but also in comparable political contexts such as the United States.

This article addresses the intersection of these two developments by examining how the rise of radical-right parties affects migration policy-making at the local level. The central research question is therefore: What impact do radical-right parties have on local migration policies in small European localities?

To answer this question, the article distinguishes between two types of effects. First, it examines the indirect effects of radical-right parties when they are present in local councils but do not control the local executive. Second, it explores the direct effects observed when far-right parties

enter local office and gain executive power at the local level. Empirically, the analysis of the indirect effects draws on findings from the Horizon 2020 project Whole-COMM (2021-2024), covering 36 localities in seven European countries, while analysis of the direct effects relies mostly on previous qualitative research that I conducted in Italy in 2018-2020.

### Small Localities as New Sites of Migration Governance

Before discussing the effects of the growth of far-right parties, it is relevant to introduce the specific context analysed in this lecture, which is that of small localities in Europe, which have traditionally received far less scholarly attention than large metropolitan areas, but account for a substantial share of Europe's population.

I define small localities – following European Commission and OECD standards – as municipalities with populations between approximately 10,000 and 200,000 inhabitants. This category encompasses rural towns (but excludes very remote rural villages in, for instance, mountainous areas), small towns, and medium-sized towns, which differ significantly from one another but share several structural characteristics relevant to migration governance. These localities generally possess limited administrative capacity. Compared to large cities, they have smaller bureaucracies, fewer specialized staff, reduced financial resources, and thinner civil society networks. Their ability to engage in multilevel governance is also constrained, with infrequent interaction with EU institutions and limited access to European funding schemes, which are often designed with large urban administrations in mind.

Despite these constraints, small localities have hosted substantial numbers of asylum-seekers and refugees, particularly since the mid-2010s. National dispersal systems have often placed similar proportional responsibilities on small and large municipalities alike. As a result, many small localities have faced significant integration challenges without the institutional infrastructure available in major cities.

The Whole-COMM project [documented](#) several persistent challenges related to migrant inclusion across the localities studied. Years after arrival, many refugees and asylum-seekers exhibited limited social interaction with local populations, a pattern more pronounced than in larger urban settings. Interviews with local elites revealed widespread assimilationist understandings of integration, with responsibility frequently placed on migrants rather than conceptualized as a shared societal process. While access to employment was often relatively attainable – particularly in economically dynamic regions – access to housing emerged as a major barrier in most of the localities we studied, [also due to informal and exclusionary local housing markets](#).

In this context, data we collected in [a large-N survey with local residents](#) in Italy, Austria, Germany, and Sweden revealed a striking paradox. While a majority of respondents believed that refugees were not well integrated, most nonetheless expressed support for more inclusive local integration policies. Only a minority opposed the development of additional integration measures. In contrast, interviews with local policy-makers revealed a pervasive perception that

local populations were deeply hostile to migration and inclusion initiatives. This discrepancy points to a significant [decoupling between actual public opinion and policy-makers' perceptions of public opinion](#). Such misperceptions play a crucial role in shaping local policy choices.

Consistent with these perceptions, migration and integration policies in the small localities studied in the Whole-COMM project were [generally underdeveloped](#). Few municipalities had comprehensive integration strategies, monitoring mechanisms, or sustained programmes. Measures addressing language training, healthcare, education, or employment were unevenly distributed, while initiatives fostering contact between migrants and locals or combating discrimination were particularly rare.

These findings challenge earlier assumptions that local governments, especially in smaller contexts, respond pragmatically to integration challenges. Instead, they suggest that local policy-making is increasingly shaped by political calculations and perceived electoral risks.

#### **Indirect Effects of Radical-Right Parties on Local Policy-Making**

The presence of far-right parties within local councils was found to exert a significant indirect influence on migration policy-making when these parties did not control local government. This effect was particularly pronounced in municipalities governed by centrist or centre-right parties. Three main mechanisms can be identified. First, the strength of far-right parties [altered local governance relations](#). Their presence tended to reduce both the [frequency and quality](#) of interactions between local governments and civil society actors involved in migrant integration. Governance networks became more conflictual and less cooperative, weakening actors that traditionally advocate for inclusive policies.

Second, radical-right parties exerted [substantial influence over agenda-setting and public discourses](#). By consistently mobilizing around migration-related issues, they increased the salience of these topics in local political debates and media coverage. This politicization affected not only governing parties but also pro-migrant non-public actors, who often refrained from visible initiatives to avoid public backlash.

Third, radical-right mobilization contributed to [distorted perceptions of public opinion](#). Protests and campaigns – often organized by small but vocal groups, typically activists coming from other parts of the country and not rooted in the localities – sent powerful signals to local elites, reinforcing the belief that the electorate was overwhelmingly opposed to refugee inclusion. This dynamic fostered policy inaction, issue avoidance, and symbolic rather than substantive policy-making.

Together, these mechanisms demonstrate that local migration governance is no longer insulated from partisan competition, even in small localities traditionally considered less politicized.

#### **Direct Effects: Radical-Right Parties in Local Government**

When radical-right parties gain control of local governments, their impact on migration policy becomes more direct, though not uniform. Evidence from Italian case studies shows

considerable variation in both discourse and policy outcomes across regions and time. I [have examined](#) a number of local governments controlled by far-right parties (mostly the Lega) in Italy between 2017 and 2019, specifically in the Tuscany and Veneto regions.

[In some cases](#), particularly in parts of Tuscany, far-right local governments pursued highly visible exclusionary policies, including withdrawal from national reception systems and symbolic opposition to refugee centres. These measures often had limited practical impact but served strong communicative and electoral functions.

In other contexts, especially in parts of northern Italy, radical-right administrations displayed policy disengagement rather than overt hostility. Some local governments adopted a strategy of non-intervention, while selectively supporting inclusion measures related to labour market needs, often under pressure from local businesses.

[In my research](#) I have argued that this variation can be mostly explained by perceived issue salience. When migration was viewed as highly salient among local voters, far-right governments tended to adopt exclusionary and/or symbolic anti-migration policies. When salience was low, they were more willing to tolerate or even implement pragmatic inclusion measures, particularly those aligned with economic interests. This is particularly evident in northeast Italy, where pressure from employers' associations for more open migration policies and integration measures is very high.

### Conclusions and Open Research Questions

This article has shown that far-right parties play a significant role in shaping local migration policy-making in small European localities, both indirectly through opposition and directly when in government. Their influence operates through politicization, distorted perceptions of public opinion, altered governance relations, and strategic adaptation to issue salience.

At the same time, several questions remain open. First, the role of radical-right parties in large cities would deserve further investigation, as urban contexts may produce different dynamics. My findings so far merely apply to the case of small localities. Second, while this article has focused on the effects of the far-right on local migration policies, the relationship between the two might be, in fact, two-way, and the impact of different types of local migration policies on the (local or national) electoral success of far-right parties remains underexplored: do restrictive policies curb or reinforce radical-right mobilization? Finally, more research is needed on effective strategies adopted by progressive local governments to counter radical-right influence without exacerbating polarization.

Addressing these questions is essential for understanding the future of local migration governance in Europe.