



Towards more robust and effective policy responses to migrant integration in small and medium-sized towns and rural areas in the EU: lessons learned from the Whole-COMM project

Policy Brief

June 2024

Andrea Pettrachin & Tiziana Caponio, Collegio Carlo Alberto

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief **targets EU policymakers**. It moves from findings of the Whole-COMM project to provide useful evidence for further improving the migrant integration policies and other types of responses to the challenges of migrant integration in EU small and medium-sized towns and rural areas (SMsTRAs). The first section identifies the policy relevance of the issue addressed and the need for more robust and effective policy responses on migrant integration in SMsTRAs. The second part outlines possible factors that are obstructing the development of more robust and effective policy responses on migrant integration in SMsTRAs. Finally, it formulates specific policy recommendations for EU policymakers on how to promote more developed, robust and effective responses to challenges related to migrant integration in SMsTRAs.

MIGRANT INTEGRATION IN SMALL LOCALITIES: FRACTURED POLICIES AND SEGMENTED GOVERNANCE

The new ‘Pact on Migration and Asylum’ clearly states that **a successful integration and inclusion policy is an essential part of a well-managed and effective migration and asylum policy**. The Pact also advocates for ‘effective measures to provide incentives and support for the integration of beneficiaries of international protection’¹. As the EU Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027 puts it, ‘integration and inclusion are key for people coming to Europe, local communities, and the long-term well-being of our societies and the stability of our economies’. Successful inclusion requires efforts from both newcomers and the receiving communities and a **multi-stakeholder and multi-level approach to policy-making**. In particular, as ‘integration happens in every village, city and region where migrants live, work and go to school or to a sports club’, **the local level ‘plays a key role in welcoming and guiding newcomers when they first arrive in their new country’** (EU Commission, 2020, p.7)². It is therefore crucial that the EU ensures that **the local level is ‘fully involved’ in designing and implementing integration measures and has the capacity to do so** (p. 16).

The 2015 European ‘refugee crisis’ **led to a growing migrant presence in small and medium-sized towns and rural areas (SMsTRA)**, often as an effect of national dispersal policies for asylum-seekers. In 2024, SMsTRAs are still on the front line of refugee reception following the arrival of thousands of Ukrainian refugees and non-European asylum-seekers in the last three years. As a result of these developments, SMsTRAs have become key partners in the multilevel governance of migrant integration in the EU and should inform national and EU policy through their experience on the ground (see joint report by the Commission and OECD, 2018³).

The way in which SMsTRAs are responding to the challenges related to refugee integration is therefore crucial for the future of migrant integration in the EU. However, **very rarely EU policy documents on integration (including the above-mentioned Action Plan) make explicit references to SMsTRAs.** From a research perspective, not much is known about how SMsTRAs are responding to the challenges of migrant integration.

Moving from these premises, Whole-COMM has analysed in depth **migrant integration policies in 40 SMsTRA in eight EU countries**⁴. In doing so, it found that **integration policies in the majority of the analysed SMsTRAs are largely underdeveloped.** Some SMsTRAs developed integration policies in **the key policy areas identified by the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion** – namely language courses, healthcare, labour market and education – but the adoption of such measures is far from

¹ See art.4 of the REGULATION (EU) 2024/1351 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 14 May 2024 on asylum and migration management, amending Regulations (EU) 2021/1147 and (EU) 2021/1060 and repealing Regulation (EU) No 604/2013

² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0758>

³ OECD, 2018, Working Together for Local Integration of Migrants and Refugees (Paris: OECD Publishing).

⁴ See comparative working papers available at <https://whole-comm.eu/category/deliverables/working-papers/>

uniform. Furthermore, only in very few localities any policies were developed aimed to promote **migrants' political participation and intercultural communication and contrast discrimination**. These policy dimensions are crucial to achieve long-term inclusion of migrants in receiving communities, as acknowledged by multiple EU and international legal and policy documents. Moreover, only **very few SMsTRAs adopted a strategy of migrant integration** with specific rationales, goals, scopes and targets (as recommended by the EU Action Plan). These localities are also the ones that developed more inclusive and articulated integration policies. Finally, with limited exceptions, we observed very limited efforts in SMsTRAs to **monitor** policies and their impact.

The fact that policies are largely underdeveloped in SMsTRAs has arguably negative consequences for migrant integration outcomes and social cohesion. **Identifying strategies to promote the development of more inclusive integration policies in SMsTRAs seems therefore crucial**. This is even more urgent considering that, as Whole-COMM also showed, in SMsTRAs social interactions between locals and post-2014 migrants are often absent, access to housing for refugees is highly challenging and local residents tend to perceive migrants not to be well integrated⁵.

This policy brief aims to identify the specific factors that, in SMsTRA, explain this situation and to formulate specific policy recommendations on how to overcome these challenges.

KEY OBSTACLES TO MORE ROBUST POLICY RESPONSES TO THE CHALLENGES OF MIGRANT INTEGRATION IN SMsTRAs IN THE EU

Whole-COMM analyses suggest that five key factors **are obstructing the development of more robust and effective integration policies in SMsTRAs**.

1. Lack of capacity, funding, expertise and resources. The lack of capacity of SMsTRAs is well-known and also applies to other policy fields. **In SMsTRAs, unlike in bigger cities, specialised municipal bodies on integration are often missing**. In most of the analysed localities no local official or elected policymaker is formally assigned specific competence on integration (this is slightly less uncommon in medium towns, with more than 100,000 inhabitants) and responsibility for migrant integration is (de jure or de facto) delegated to officials responsible for social services. Furthermore, **very rarely these officials received specific training** on – or have any expertise about – integration-related issues.

2. SMsTRAs' isolation from multilevel governance structures, which prevents policy diffusion. Quantitative data on policymakers interactions gathered by Whole-COMM suggest that, despite calls for more multi-level and multi-stakeholder policy processes articulated in the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion, **SMsTRAs are (still) highly isolated**. Local governments in SMsTRAs have

⁵ See comparative working papers available at <https://whole-comm.eu/category/deliverables/working-papers/>

extremely rare (if any) interactions related to migrant integration with the EU level, highly occasional interactions with the national level, and non-regular (and often conflictual) relations with the regional level. Interactions on migrant integration among different SMsTRAs are also extremely rare, and interactions with foreign localities – which might favour the spread of good practices – are almost absent. Even within localities, interactions between local governments and key stakeholders are often segmented and conflictual.

3. SMsTRAs' limited weight at the EU level. The involvement of SMsTRAs in policy debates and frameworks at the EU level remains, currently, negligible. Supranational policy documents on migrant integration policy do not differentiate between localities with different size (nor on other factors such as economic development) and very rarely provide examples from SMsTRAs. The several transnational networks and fora on migrant integration at the EU level either do not include local authorities at all or merely include (or are led by) large cities, and very rarely discuss the needs and challenges faced by SMsTRAs⁶. **Because of this lack of attention to SMsTRAs, the local level becomes a uniform category in EU policy debates and frameworks.** Therefore, the EU level, while emphasizing the role of the local level, tends to base its policies on the realities of larger cities and metropolises.

4. Local understandings of responsibilities for migrant integration. We asked 500+ public and non-public actors working on migrant integration in SMsTRAs to define migrant integration and specify who should be responsible for it. **44 percent of our respondents replied that migrants are first and foremost responsible for their own integration into the local society/community.** The remaining 56 percent indicated that also institutions, local residents or other societal actors are responsible for migrant integration. Only 11 percent of respondents understand integration as a policy issue that requires intervention by the whole community (i.e., migrants, locals, institutions and other societal actors), in line with the EU Action Plan mentioned above. Such understandings by integration governance actors that migrants should be themselves responsible for their own integration is very much at odds with the EU's definition of integration as a two-way process or mutual learning and adaptation between newcomers and long-term residents, and clearly represents an obstacle for more initiatives by local actors in the integration policy field.

5. The politicisation of integration policymaking. Our findings suggest that **political factors** such as **the political affiliation of local executives and the share of seats held by anti-immigration parties in local councils play a crucial role in influencing local policies and the policymaking interactions that local governments develop with other local stakeholders and higher-level governments.** Centre-left local governments and local governments in localities where anti-immigration parties do not hold seats in the local council tend to develop more integration policies and have more frequent and collaborative interactions with other stakeholders. Remarkably, we asked local policymakers to evaluate the importance of a wide range of factors that influenced their decisions to develop (different types of) integration policies and **the three factors that were mentioned as the most**

⁶ For more details see WP3 Policy Brief, available at: <https://whole-comm.eu/category/deliverables/policy-briefs/>

influential on policymaking were policymakers' values and ideas; public opinion; and exchanges or pressure from the political parties that support the local executive.

6. Policymakers' perceptions of public attitudes. Results of our survey investigating public attitudes to migrant integration **challenge the idea that residents in SMsTRAs have more negative attitudes to migrant integration compared to residents in big cities.** Furthermore, they suggest that people living in cities perceive more tension and hostility in the relationships between non-EU migrants and local residents. Remarkably we also found relatively **little opposition among local residents towards more developed integration measures in SMsTRAs** (more than half of respondents support such measures, only 21 percent of respondents are convincingly against such measures). Despite that, **local policymakers in SMsTRAs often perceive public opinion as rather or very hostile to non-EU migrants** and, as already mentioned, public opinion represents a key factor that influences policymakers' decisions to develop measures on integration. **Such perception that locals harshly oppose integration measures – largely decoupled from objective data from our survey – represents another key obstacle that prevents the development of more robust and effective policies in SMsTRAs.**

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Below we present some policy implications and recommendations for the Commission to overcome the specific obstacles outlined in section 2.

Overall, we recommend the Commission to **keep fostering implementation of the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion**, which outlines key actions and measures to enhance societal cohesiveness and inclusiveness and specifically actions that concern the local level. However, as the Plan does not specifically focus on the realities and challenges faced by SMsTRAs, we think **the following additional targeted measures are necessary to foster integration and inclusion in SMsTRAs** and put SMsTRAs in the position to **directly develop** more robust and effective responses to local challenges related to migrant integration.

1) Overcoming SMsTRAs' isolation.

- The Commission should **extend the scope of existing multi-level coordination mechanisms** to the SMsTRAs specifically, or create specific venues to foster the participation of local policymakers of SMsTRAs (and not merely big cities) in the design of migrant integration strategies and policies.
- EU-level events, fora and networks on migrant integration – and other initiatives aimed at promoting mutual learning and dissemination of best practices – should more often involve local governments of SMsTRAs. Additional efforts should be made to **ensure local policymakers are not merely invited but also put in the condition to participate** (e.g.,

providing translation services, providing adequate material to justify their participation in these events, covering travel costs etc.).

- Besides the Commission, other EU institutions should also make sure that these events, fora and networks in EU policymaking on migrant integration **take into consideration and discuss the needs and opportunities of SMsTRAs**.
- While the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion sometimes refers to ‘rural areas’ (e.g., p. 16) we recommend that the above-mentioned coordination mechanisms, events, fora and networks also **explicitly target medium towns and small towns**, which have needs and face challenges that often differ from those of both big cities and rural areas.
- In line with the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (p. 16), we recommend the Commission to **foster partnership with the Committee of the Regions, and more specifically with the Platform for the Integration of Migrants**, and to existing city networks which involve SMsTRAs to achieve the above-mentioned objectives.

2) Overcoming the marginality of SMsTRAs in current EU-level funding schemes and making additional targeted efforts to increase access to existing EU funds by SMsTRAs.

- In the long run, we recommend the Commission to consider re-structuring the Asylum and Migration Integration Fund (AMIF) to develop, within the Union Actions, a **separate policy and funding scheme for large cities on the one hand and SMsTRAs on the other**.
- In the short run, we recommend the Commission to **adapt and differentiate existing measures for SMsTRAs**, tailoring specific support and funding mechanisms within the Union Actions of AMIF to **localities of different size**. The same applied to other EU funds that can be used for integration-related initiatives (e.g., ESF+, ERDF). At the same time the Commission could consider inviting Member States, which are responsible for managing the 60% of available AMIF funds (COM(2018) 471 Final)⁷, to explicitly develop a strategy on migrant integration in SMsTRAs.,
- The Commission should make efforts to **inform local governments of SMsTRAs of available funding opportunities** and make participation of local governments of SMsTRAs to available funding schemes, and AMIF in the first place, easier, given the size of their administrative apparatus and capacity, addressing possible language and bureaucratic barriers in accessing such funds. Possibly, an annex could be added to the ‘Toolkit on the Use of EU Funds for the Integration of People with a Migrant Background’⁸ that aims to target specifically SMsTRAs and provide specific guidance to these localities.
- The Commission should consider **creating a special Technical Assistance Office** that could serve as a sort of ‘help desk’ **for SMsTRAs**. Such an office could provide information about funding possibilities, management of EU funds, and even make available experts in certain areas or favoring partnerships among SMsTRAs. A model for such Office could

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/budget-may2018-asylum-migration-fund-regulation_en.pdf

⁸ https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/library-document/toolkit-use-eu-funds-integration-people-migrant-background-2021-2027-programming_en

be the TAIEX office created in preparing the candidate countries for their accession to the EU.

- The Commission should particularly **incentivize sharing of information, resources and capacity** between big cities and small localities. This might be done by incentivizing participation of mixed groups of cities and small localities to existing funding schemes.
- The Commission should invite Member States to make sure that representatives of local governments of SMsTRAs from different areas of the country are involved in the **preparation, revising, implementation and monitoring of programmes for upcoming AMIF funds**.

3) Overcoming challenges related to policymakers' and stakeholders' understandings of responsibilities for migrant integration.

- The Commission should organize **campaigns targeting local policymakers and local stakeholders to promote in SMsTRAs the EU conceptualization of integration as a two-way process** of mutual learning and adaptation between newcomers and long-term residents. Possibly such efforts might be developed as part of initiatives/campaigns/trainings **with a broader thematic focus** (e.g. targeting local officials responsible for social affairs, with a focus on managing societal change or local transformations of social service provision) to also attract policymakers who have no specific competence/interest on migration issues. Once again, partnership with city networks (e.g., CEMR) might be crucial to reach this goal.
- We recommend further developing and expanding the experience of the **Urban Academy on Integration Strategies**, established within the Urban Agenda for the EU, targeting specifically policymakers from SMsTRAs through their representative organizations.

4) Overcoming challenges related to the politicization of integration policymaking.

- We recommend the Commission to **promote initiatives aiming to depoliticize the integration issue** in SMsTRAs at the level of public opinion, **improving social interactions between local residents and migrants**⁹. Rather than organizing ad hoc initiatives in SMsTRAs, some targeted funding (e.g., within the AMIF Union Actions) might be created for civil society groups and migrant organizations that might be willing to develop initiatives to foster interactions between locals and residents. Applicants might be asked to demonstrate that the planned initiatives aim to target the 'silent' or indifferent majority in the community, in addition to those who are already engaged.
- We recommend the development of **campaigns or initiatives targeting local residents** in SMsTRAs that promote the idea of integration as an opportunity for community building and provide residents information about migration and sensitize locals about the opportunities linked to better migrant integration. Whole-COMM has developed a

⁹ See our WP5 comparative working paper available at <https://whole-comm.eu/category/deliverables/working-papers/>

specific format of ‘**city tours on local transformations**’¹⁰, implemented in four localities, which has proved to attract a wide audience and was successful in sensitizing locals to migration-related challenges: funding could be made available to NGOs to develop initiatives of this kind with the aim to depoliticize the migration issue in SMsTRAs. Particularly in shrinking and depopulating SMsTRAs, the practical advantages of migration should be highlighted (e.g. avoidance of school closures thanks to migrants’ children).

- As localities of more conservative political leaning may still be more reluctant to be involved in this kind of initiatives, EU policymakers might consider introducing some mechanisms of **nudging** the more resistant localities, including through targeted incentives.

5) Overcoming challenges related to policymakers’ negative perceptions of public attitudes to migration.

- Local policymakers should be provided **evidence-based information about public attitudes** to migration and their drivers which could debunk widespread myths about public opinion and allow policymakers to have more informed views of the matter. Once again, partnerships between the EC and existing European and national networks of SMsTRAs might play a key role in this respect.
- The Commission should promote **research designed to test and identify suitable communication strategies for policymakers** to respond to concerns about migrants’ negative impacts on receiving societies. Some dedicated funds to this type of research could be introduced within the AMIF Union Actions.

6) Encourage local governments of SMsTRAs to develop local integration strategies.

- The Commission should encourage Member States to require local governments to develop local **integration strategies** (as recommended by the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion) and to assign **specific competences on integration to individual local officials of bodies** (even without dedicated funds).
- We recommend the development of **online trainings (non-simultaneous, to allow greater participation)** that could be made available to policymakers and stakeholders of SMsTRAs for them to acquire knowledge about migration, migrant integration, and the advantages and opportunities linked to the development of local measures on integration. Such trainings could be framed with a broader focus to attract policymakers with broader competences/interest in social policies.

7) Promote collection of local level data on migrant integration outcomes (and data on implemented local policies) and encourage monitoring of existing policy measures and interventions.

¹⁰ See our WP5 comparative working paper available at <https://whole-comm.eu/category/deliverables/working-papers/>

- EUROSTAT and national statistical agencies should **promote and fund accurate data collection** on outcomes and practices of integration at a local level. Local level data are largely absent in most EU countries and local governments do not have the resources to collect these data, which are crucial to develop effective and robust policies.
- The Commission and other EU institutions (JRC, Eurostat) should **improve the availability and accessibility of the few existing data** on migrant presence and integration outcomes at the local level.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Peter Bosch for his very useful feedback on a preliminary version of this policy brief and all the members of the Whole-COMM Consortium.

PROJECT IDENTITY

- Coordinator: Tiziana Caponio, Collegio Carlo Alberto, Turin, Italy, info@whole-comm.eu
- Funding programme: H2020-SC6-MIGRATION-2020
- Duration: January 2021 – June 2024 (24 months).
- Website: whole-comm.eu
- Social Media: [Whole COMM Migration](#) (Facebook) - [Whole-COMM](#) (Instagram) – [Whole-Comm Project](#) (Twitter)
- Project Partners:

