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Civil Society and Municipal Activism Around Migration in the EU: A Multi-Scalar Alliance-Making

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ABSTRACT

Civil society and municipal actors – and the interaction between one another – have become increasingly relevant in EU migration governance. Moving from this understanding, this article explores instances of migration activism in connection with the proactive and contentious role of cities. It does so through the in-depth analysis of the dual EU-wide network From the Sea to the City/International Alliance of Safe Harbours, which gathers numerous civil society initiatives and municipalities and aims to achieve a radical change in EU migration policies. Based on extensive empirical research, my contribution illustrates why the emergence of a multi-scalar alliance between civil society and municipal actors around migration is the result of the interaction between the political agency of these actors and the changing institutional opportunities and constraints at different governance levels. In doing so, it explores different spatial and political dimensions, from cities to transnational arenas, reflecting on their significance in the construction of an EU-wide contentious politics of migration.

Introduction

Over the last few decades, migration politics in the European Union (EU) has increasingly been associated with the prominent role played by central governments and their supranational expression, i.e. the Council of the European Union (the Council) (cf. Guiraudon 2018; Maricut 2016). Yet, other actors have also progressively – and, at times, unexpectedly – emerged in the context of such executive-centred and, more broadly, centralised migration politics.

Among them, civil society actors (CSAs) have often engaged in practices of political contention (see Della Porta 2018), whereas cities have increasingly become involved in EU migration governance – also following important institutional developments such as the launch, in 2016, of the Urban Agenda for the EU, foreseeing a greater involvement of municipalities in the field (see, from different perspectives, Oomen et al. 2021; Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, and

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Scholten 2017). The latter aspect reflects the crucial role played by cities as (geo)political actors (Mamadouh 2018b; Mamadouh & van der Wusten, 2016) – an element which, however, does not necessarily entail a shift in dominant geopolitical paradigms (Bialasiewicz 2016).

In this article I address the interaction between civil society actors and municipalities around migration. In particular, I delve into the process of construction of structured and stable alliances between these two actors, with a view to explaining how and why this dynamic overall contributes to shaping the multi-level 'battleground of asylum and immigration policies' (Ambrosini 2021). By doing so, this article substantively contributes to the existing, multi-disciplinary literature on civil society and cities in the field of migration – which has flourished over time in social movement and contentious politics, urban, European, migration and policy studies, human geography and legal sociology.

Scholars focusing on civil society actors have considered diverse aspects of CSAs' engagement in EU migration politics, such as the broad spectrum of dynamics of political contention and solidarity in the context of repressive policy frameworks (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019b; Della Porta 2018; Della Porta and Steinhilper 2022), the political agency of CSAs in the Mediterranean Sea (Cuttitta 2018, 2022), on-the-ground humanitarian practices within migration governance (Panebianco 2019), as well as instances of advocacy and policy-oriented engagement, especially at the EU level (Spencer 2017; Strik 2019).

Academic literature on the participation of cities in EU migration politics, on the other hand, has mostly focused on three major strands, analysing the role played by local authorities in the context of multi-level immigrant, asylum and integration governance (Ambrosini 2017; Bazurli, Caponio, and de Graauw 2022; De Graauw and Vermeulen 2016; Doomernik and Ardon 2018; Hepburn and Zapata-Barrero 2014; Kos, Maussen, and Doomernik 2016; Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, and Scholten 2017), the different strategies adopted by cities to defy national and supranational migration policies (Oomen et al. 2021; Spencer 2018) and the emergence and diffusion of migration-oriented city networks (Lacroix 2021; Oomen 2020).

Some authors have simultaneously addressed both civil society and municipal actors, by focusing on the interaction between one another, as I also do in this article. These authors have considered, among other things, the role of cities as political space of contention for immigrant rights (Nicholls and Uitermark 2017) and as arenas of political dialogue around migration more broadly (Mayer 2018), the relevance of such dialogue from urban solidarity (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019a; Bauder 2021; Kreichauf and Mayer 2021) and citizenship (Kron and Lebuhn 2020) perspectives, processes of scale down of activism to the city level

(Fischer and Jørgensen 2022), instances of civil society/cities networking (Lacroix, Furri, and Hombert 2022), the way in which mayors 'governed' civil society participation in migration politics (Hillmann 2022) and the overall role played by these two actors together in EU migration governance from a multi-scalar perspective (Alcalde and Portos 2018; Ataç et al. 2023; Bazurli 2019; Caponio 2022; Lacroix and Spencer 2022; Panebianco 2022).

Within such rich and diverse literature, however, a closer look at those forms of structured and stable cooperation between civil society and municipal actors on a larger, EU-wide scale is still missing. The only few exceptions are somewhat partial, as they only incidentally touch upon dynamics of structured cooperation, without fully and systemically explore them (see, for example, Lacroix, Furri, and Hombert 2022). The consideration of these cases would actually make it possible to address a salient phenomenon and to explore processes of alliance-making, which encompass a plurality of spatial and political dimensions across different governance levels (cf. Bauder 2020; Bialasiewicz and Maessen 2018; Mamadouh 2018a on the dimensions of scale and space in migration politics and Ataç, Rygiel, and Stierl 2021; Ataç et al. 2023 with particular regard to the contentious politics of migration).

In this article I address this gap by analysing the political agency of civil society actors and municipalities in the construction of structured alliances around migration, their interaction with one another and the way in which they deal with different institutional settings, opportunities and constraints. In doing so, I adopt a theoretical perspective which bridges new institutionalist and political opportunity approaches. This makes it possible to understand the multi-scalar alliance-making as the result of (a) a CSA's response to changing political opportunities and (b) a cities' attempt at fulfilling a perceived duty, while increasing political gain and overcoming local challenges.

Within such context, I contend that some dynamics played a crucial role, and namely: the concurrent (but not interconnected) existence of opening and closure opportunities at different governance levels; the difference between structural and more changing opportunities; the (internal) process of interpretation of (external) opportunities; the complex logic of cities, in between the fulfilment of a perceived role and the maximisation of their benefits. Ultimately, I show how, based on the above dynamics, the extent to which a CSA/city alliance can work depends on the target scales of contention and on the policy arenas involved. I will further address all these aspects in the *Research design* section.

My analysis is based on original empirical research and is focused on a single case, i.e. the dual network[1] From the Sea to the City (FSTC)/ International Alliance of Safe Harbours (IASH). Established in 2020, From the Sea to the City is an informal network of diverse civil society actors[2] (cf. Della Porta 2020 on hybridisation in migration activism), working with several European municipalities, as of now organised in the International Alliance of

Table 1. From the sea to the city – member organisations.

Organisation	Migration as main aim/scope	Main operational scale (in the field of migration)	Main target scale (campaigning/advocacy)
Emergency	No	Italy	EU, Italy
Europe Must Act	Yes	EU-wide, Greece	EU
European Alternatives	No	EU-wide, Italy	EU
Humboldt-Viadrina Governance Platform*	No	Germany	EU, Germany
Inura – International Network for Urban Research and Action	No	EU-wide	EU
Inter Alia	No	EU-wide, Greece	EU
Mediterranea Saving Humans	Yes	Italy, Mediterranean Sea	EU, Italy
Open Arms	Yes	Spain, Mediterranean Sea	EU, Spain, Italy
Sea-Watch	Yes	Germany, Mediterranean Sea	EU, Germany, Italy
Seebrücke	Yes	Germany	(EU), Germany
Tesserae	No	Germany	EU
Watch the Med – Alarm Phone	Yes	Germany, Mediterranean Sea	EU
W2EU – Welcome to Europe	Yes	EU-wide	EU
Zagreb Solidarity City	No	Croatia	(EU), Croatia

Source: https://fromseatocity.eu/ (accessed 8 April 2022) and interviews.
*Now known as Berlin Governance Platform.

Table 2. International alliance of safe harbours – member cities (sorted by country).

Country	Cities
Albania	Tirana
France	Marseille, Villeurbanne
Germany	Braunschweig, Darmstadt, Dinslaken, Dormagen, Dortmund, Flensburg, Göttingen, Greifswald, Gütersloh, Heidelberg, Jülich, Kiel, Leipzig, Mannheim, Marburg, Munich, Münster, Northeim, Potsdam, Rottenburg, Trier, Würzburg
Greece	Athens
Italy	Bergamo, Lampedusa, Palermo, Pozzallo, Reggio Calabria
Spain	Barcelona
The Netherlands	Amsterdam

Source: https://staedte-sicherer-haefen.de/ (accessed 8 April 2022).

Safe Harbours (see Tables 1 and 2). The objectives of the civil society initiatives and cities involved in the network relate to the pursuit of a radical change in EU migration policies, including the creation of safe corridors and legal pathways to Europe; the safeguard of migrant people's fundamental rights; an active role of CSAs/cities in the management of EU funds; the strengthening of solidarity, also including the possibility of transnational municipal relocation (From the Sea to the City 2021a; International Alliance of Safe Harbours 2021).

The case is extremely significant from a multi-scalar perspective, insofar as the alliance-building process involved three different steps – two of them being shifts in the operational scale of action of civil society actors (i.e. the place and space where the organisation mostly acted, in the field of migration[3]). Namely, the first step consisted in a downward scale shift of nation- and EU-wide organisations (with the exception of Zagreb Solidarity City, already locally-based). Following this, a form of alliance took place

between civil society actors and municipalities. This represents the second step, which was horizontal and grounded at the local level. The third step, which followed the process of alliance-building, was an upward shift, which brought the core elements of advocacy and contention from the local to the transnational level.

My study relies both upon semi-structured interviews with activists, policy-makers, researchers and practitioners and upon desk research (document analysis of press releases, newspaper articles, CSA documents). Such source triangulation aims at mitigating the predominance of CSAs' point of view in the interpretation of the case at hand, as shall be further discussed below.

I will present the research design in more detail in the next section. Following this, I will delve into the case at hand, by separately addressing the different steps to multi-level alliance-making. For each of them, I will present the main characteristics and their *raisons d'être*. Finally, I will discuss these results before drawing some conclusive remarks.

Research Design

In addressing my research question, I consider the way in which relevant actors are able to exert their political agency within given institutional con-texts – dealing with the opportunities and the constraints therein. Consistently, two prominent theoretical approaches come into play: new institutionalism and political opportunities structures – which are key in European and social movement studies, respectively.

New institutionalism is broadly considered in this article as a 'general approach to the study of political institutions, [...] concerning the relations between institutional characteristics and political agency, performance, and change' (March and Olsen 2011, 160). The political opportunity approach, on the other hand, explains 'social movements' actions as rational courses fol-lowed in the light of perceived options, possibilities, and barriers present in political contexts' (Della Porta and Parks 2018. For an overview, see Della Porta 2013, 86). Within such contexts, one can distinguish between 'fixed' and 'dynamic' opportunities (Koopmans 1999), depending on whether they are associated with structural and systemic aspects or rather depend on more temporary elements.

Through an integrated application of these approaches, I envisage to answer my research question by understanding the agency of the concerned actors in the context of the institutional environment in which they move (cf. Panebianco 2022, 755, specifically on migration). In so doing, I shall further consider the different logics used by actors (March and Olsen 2006, 9, 2011, 164–165) and the importance of actors' perception and interpretation of the existing reality (Della Porta 2013, 3–4). This makes visible how and why the emergence of a multi-scalar alliance between civil society actors and

municipalities is the result of the interaction between the political agency of these actors and the changing institutional opportunities and constraints encountered at different governance levels (cf. the *Introduction* above).

Provided the intrinsic multi-scalar dimension of the study, elements of multi-level governance (MLG) gain relevance within the new institutionalist approach, with a view to making sense of existing vertical and horizontal dynamics (Caponio and Jones-Correa 2018. See also Bazurli 2019, 347–350; Panebianco 2022, 759–760; Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, and Scholten 2017). Likewise, the contentious politics studies component makes use of elements associated with dynamics of scale shift, i.e. the '[c]hange in the number and level of coordinated contentious actions leading to broader contention involving a wider range of actors and bridging their claims and identities' (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 331).

Analysed through the lenses of this theoretical approach, civil society actors and municipalities are conceived, in the context of an MLG framework, as recipients of and influenced by migration-related issues, which they attempt, for a plurality of reasons, to bring to upper (EU and national) policy arenas. However, this bottom-up process is not successful and the efforts to influence upper policy arenas get frustrated. This leads civil society actors to seek new opportunities at a local level (downward scale shift) and city governments to engage in a cooperation with CSAs. The local alliances which originate from this process try to gain more influence on upper policy arenas and, to do so, produce a new operational (upward) scale shift to the transnational level. Figure 1 shows the different phases of this theoretical model (which is built upon the one elaborated by Bazurli 2019, 350). Overall, the aim of this study is
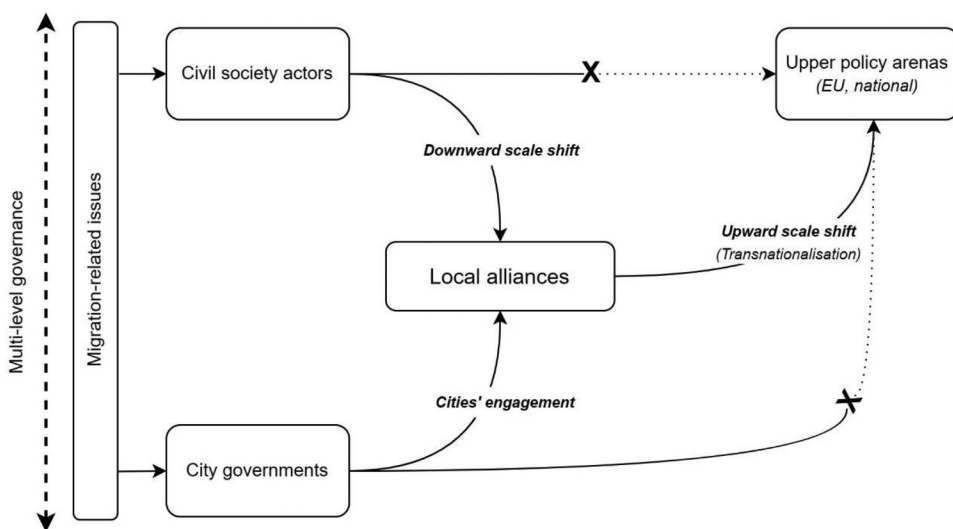
Figure 1. The theoretical model. Source: Adapted by the author from Bazurli (2019, 350).

to unpack the dynamics connected with the three arrows (downward scale shift, cities' engagement, upward scale shift), with a view to understanding the three different phases of the process at hand and provide an answer to the research question.

As for the methodology, this is a qualitative study based on two main sets of sources: semi-structured interviews and desk research. Interviews constitute the main source, while desk research has mostly been used in order to delineate the background, to integrate certain specific aspects and to corroborate information acquired through interviews.

The 20 interviewees were selected based on their specific expertise and through snowball sampling. The wide majority of them were FSTC activists, representative of eight organisations of the network; however, non-FSTC activists, policy-makers, practitioners and researchers were also interviewed – the latter essentially in the context of outside expert interviews, i.e. as subjects who were not directly engaged in the phenomenon, but did have extensive knowledge of it. Interviewed activists were coded based on the country in which they were mostly active, in order to preserve anonymity, while, at the same time, reflecting the territorial distribution across the continent, as well as their contextual knowledge (also with a view to highlighting potential, substantive differences based on the diverse operational scale). Following this rationale, EU practitioners and researchers were not coded based on their country, but rather on their professional activity (see *List of interviews*). Desk research, on the other hand, included both primary sources (press releases, newspaper articles, internal and public CSA documents) and secondary literature. Relevant documents were selected through a keyword search and then systematically analysed. My research is mainly based on activist interviews and I could hence extensively consider CSAs' point of view. However, non-activist interviews and document analysis significantly integrated this approach and enabled evidence corroboration as well as the emergence of other perspectives. Data were analysed following an inductive qualitative content analysis technique.

Political Contention from the Transnational to the Local Level (And Back)

Transnational CSAs Go to Town: The Downward Shift

Transnational civil society actors working on migration in Europe have looked for a long time at the city dimension, supporting (and in turn being supported by) mayors and other 'militant' institutional actors (Lacroix, Furri, and Hombert 2022 among others). From 2017–18 onwards, several transnational civil society actors increasingly engaged in partnerships with municipalities. This broad collaboration and loose support started evolving into something

more stable and structured. This process constitutes the precondition of what would become FSTC/IASH.

Examples of this preliminary process are the activities of the Spanish organisation Open Arms – which promoted informal meetings with mayors and activated a more stable cooperation with the city of Barcelona (Interviews AD1, IT4, RE2; Barcelona al día 2019; Bazurli 2019, 358−361; Otero 2019) –; the collaboration between the Italian platform Mediterranea – Saving Humans and the city of Palermo (Interview IT1, IT4, RE1; Mediterranea – Saving Humans 2018); or the launch of the German initiative Seebrücke (Fischer and Jørgensen 2022).

The Palermo Charter Platform Process (PCPP) is an even more noticeable example, as it constitutes a first form of loose network involving civil society actors and municipalities (Maffeis 2021, 34−35; Watch the Med – Alarmphone 2018b, 2018a). This led to several, significant meetings over the years, in Palermo, Naples, Barcelona and Bologna (Watch the Med – Alarmphone 2019). In particular, activists consider the Bologna meeting a decisive moment in the path which would eventually lead to FSTC/IASH (Interview IT1).

In this phase, the cities of Barcelona and Palermo, among others, became key actors in migration advocacy alongside civil society organisations (Interview IT4; From the Sea to the City 2021a, 19−25. See also Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019a, 97−117; Bazurli 2019, 358−361; Maffeis 2021). Meanwhile, other cities started becoming more proactive, taking strong political stances, such as the proclaim of numerous Italian cities – on the occasion of the first stand-off of a civil society search and rescue ship (the *Aquarius* incident, in June 2018) – who publicly challenged the then Italian minister of Interior, Matteo Salvini, declaring their availability to welcome the ship in the harbours of their cities (Interview IT4; Wintour, Tondo, and Kirchgaessner 2018).

From a political opportunity structures perspective, the reasons that led transnational CSAs to seek a stronger cooperation with cities – operationally shifting to the local level – are twofold. They relate, on the one hand, to the closure of political opportunities at the EU and national levels, and, on the other hand, to the opening of specific opportunities at the local one.

As for the first set of explanations, the closure of political opportunities at the EU (and at the national) level refers, first of all, to the structural, institutional inaccessibility of the EU political system and the way in which this was perceived by CSAs.

Activists shared an overall mistrust as to the possibility to effectively reach EU policy-makers and to find appropriate channels to influence the policy process (Interviews FR2, SP1, SP4). This aspect has been widely addressed in EU migration politics and policy scholarship (Spencer 2017; Strik 2019; Uçarer 2017) and, in the case at hand, is further confirmed by the point of view of an EU policy officer (Interview EU2). Albeit connected to the persisting primacy of the Council of the European Union in

migration policy-making (Guiraudon 2018; Maricut 2016) and to the difficult access CSAs have to it (Strik 2019; among others. See also Alcalde and Portos 2018, 256–259), these systemic constraints are also perceived with regards to the European Commission (the Commission) and, at least partly, to the European Parliament (the Parliament).

The Commission is considered either as incapable or unwilling to act (Interviews EU2, IT2, GE3, GE4, SP2), even if it is not the real 'enemy' (Interview GE3). As an Italian activist points out, the Commission is regarded as an actor who 'talks a lot' but delivers very little: this is why 'many activists [. . .] already think they will not find an interested partner'. The Commission is extremely important as a funder, but 'what we need [. . .] is a political direction which has to come but from the Council' (Interview IT2).

In fact, the political priorities of Member States (MSs), as well as the Commission's capacity issues, are aspects that limit the role played by this body (Interviews EU1, EU2. See also Zaun 2017 on the characteristics of the Commission's approach to migration).

As for the role played by the Parliament, the latter is generally considered as the closest and most reachable institution, even though it enjoys limited power (Interviews GE3, SP2). However, some activists expressed their scepticism towards this point of view, deeming the Parliament inaccessible – excepting some Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) – especially for smaller civil society initiatives (Interviews FR1, FR2. See also Ripoll Servent 2017).

Without delving, for the time being, into the actual consideration of how accessible and receptive EU institutions are, it is worth stressing that the mere fact that they were *perceived* as inaccessible and unreceptive constituted a major constraint per se.

Secondly, the closure of political opportunities was further determined by the escalation of the long-standing repressive and restrictive EU – and, in this case, also MSs' – migration policies, which followed the 2015 so-called 'refugee crisis'.

As an Italian activist pointed out, the year 2015 proved crucial to understand migration policies in the EU, with the outbreak of the so-called 'refugee crisis' and the full implementation of austerity policies. It was the year which marked the turning point of EU strategies, leading to the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement and the 2017 Italy-Libya Deal (Interview IT4). This view is confirmed by a Spanish activist:

> When we started operating in the Mediterranean, [. . .] we were very much supported by the civil society, but above all by institutions: for example, the first rescues that [we did, in 2016], were coordinated by the Italian Coast Guard, supported by the Maltese Coast Guard, and the Spanish government did not cause any trouble, quite the contrary [. . .]. Our work was really supported, a collaboration with institutions existed and we had very good results. (Interview SP1)

Then, in 2017–18, the inauguration of the policing civil society season made it clear that everything 'was about to change [. . .]. That's where we realised [. . .] that a tough disconnection existed between institutions which are closer to citizens and those that are less so, that is between municipalities and states' (Interview SP1).

This situation led to the increased inaccessibility of dialogue with EU and national institutions (Interviews GE1, SP2, SP4). At the same time, it strongly encouraged CSAs to develop an alternative discourse – and some connected practices – which could counter the dominant EU/MSs approach (cf. Cuttitta 2018). The foundation of Seebrücke is an example of that: this was a 'response to what was going on in the Mediterranean [. . .] We were mainly reacting to the political developments and to the discourse [. . .] at the European level in the migration policy and the question that we asked ourselves was: how can we counter this discourse?' (Interview GE2. This aspect was also highlighted in Interview IT4).

Besides the closure of spaces of political contention at the EU/national level, the progressive opening of local political opportunities also played a major role in the CSAs operational shift to the city dimension. In this case, three elements were decisive.

Firstly, the increasing keenness of cities to play an active and militant role (Interviews GE2, IT4, SP4). This is the case of the 2017 informal meetings between CSAs and mayors, as well as the launch of the PCPP. In the Spanish context, mayors played an active role in advocacy, for example, after the seizure of the *Open Arms* ship and the investigation of the crew in 2018 (Barcelona al día, 2019). This led to an increased politicisation of search and rescue (SAR) at sea and to the decision of many more mayors to support civil society actors and declare the harbours of their cities open (Interview RE2). Furthermore, besides political support (such as in the case of the *Open Arms* disembarkation in Barcelona in July 2018, at the presence of mayor Ada Colau), several cities decided to provide direct funding to SAR CSAs in different countries (Interview RE2; City of Barcelona 2019b; City of Paris 2021).

Secondly, the political culture of municipal institutions also played an important role. The Spanish context is again particularly insightful: the existence of a solidarity and cooperative tradition in the field of (internal) migration was an important factor, which marked a substantive difference with the national context (Interview SP1). In this framework, the emergence of the new municipalist wave, which characterised local politics in Spain, and in Mediterranean Europe more broadly, especially between 2014 and 2019, was also significant. Adopting 'the "municipal" as a strategic entry point for developing broader practices and theories of transformative social change' (Russell 2019, 991), new municipalist political platforms made it possible for social movement actors to enter the institutional arena and to take on

institutional roles within city administrations. This also was a contributing factor to make CSAs' voices heard, even though such era was already in decline when the shift to the city level took place (Interviews GE1, GE4, SP1).

Thirdly, the role played by certain pivotal actors within civil society initiatives, in stimulating the perception of cities as a key political dimension is also worth mentioning. Three individuals, active in Italy, Germany and Spain respectively, were repeatedly mentioned, throughout numerous interviews, as the ones who shaped the path leading to a dialogue with local administrations (Interviews GE4, IT4, RE2, SP1, SP2). These actors aroused the perception of the existing opportunities at the local level, in a sense-making process which mattered even more than the actual change in the existing structures. Personal history of pivotal actors, the political paths which preceded and accompanied their engagement in migration activism, their exposure to theories and ideas on the role of cities were all decisive elements in this process of sense-making. They shaped the approach of these individuals, who could then stimulate CSA interest towards the local through internal debates and personal communications (Interviews GE4, IT4, RE2).

One of these pivotal actors shared this self-reflection: From the Sea to the City/International Alliance of Safe Harbours, and PCPP before, has been 'one of the natural outcomes of my entire biographical trajectory' (Interview IT4). More specifically, Italian migration-related struggles over the 1990s contributed shaping the understanding of

> the relationship between struggles for migrants' rights and potential responses within urban contexts and at a local institutional level. So, this is what has brought me, in more recent years [. . .], to always look, with special interest, at the issue of cities; and namely at the relationship between civil rescue in the Mediterranean Sea – and, more broadly, at the political intervention on the external and internal borders of the European Union – and the issue, so to speak, of the processes of urban governance connected to that. (Interview IT4)

Cities Engage in the Process: The Local Alliances

The second step to take in order to understand the multi-scalar alliance-building around migration requires us to explore the reasons why cities decided to engage in the process. Following our new institutionalist perspective, several institutional and agency-related aspects should be given due attention.

Institutional aspects are mostly connected with one key element: all the issues at stake in CSAs' advocacy related to the EU and MSs' migration governance. In other words, they pertained to a policy arena other than the local one (Interviews GE1, GR1, RE1). Cities did not incur any direct financial or political costs by engaging in this process (Interview SP1), insofar as they

did so not as local policy-makers but as part of an advocacy network – being the supporters and not the recipient of policy change requests. They might have still incurred some potential reputational costs, but in those cities that decided to engage in the process said costs were outweighed by benefits, as I will discuss further below. Hence, albeit prima facie paradoxically, the lack of a direct responsibility of cities in the process at hand became a decisive component for their engagement.[4]

In the second place, insofar as cities on the frontline are concerned, their institutional responsibility in terms of integration and reception policies – and the intertwined difficulty arising from the size of migration flows during the so-called 'refugee crisis' – constituted an important incentive to join the network. Arrival cities did not want to be left alone and found in the network a way to make their voices heard (From the Sea to the City 2021b; International Alliance of Safe Harbours 2021).

Thirdly, the existence of external brokers also facilitated the willingness of cities to join forces with CSAs. Both civil society (Interview GR1) and state actors, – such as, allegedly, the European Commission – played an important brokerage role. The latter example is quite surprising, considering that in most cases the Commission was a direct target of political contestation. Yet, some practitioners maintained that it did facilitate the interaction between some civil society actors and local governments, with a view to developing a trans-local approach (Interview EU2. The decisiveness of trans-localism was further discussed in Interview SP3).

At the same time, the proactive role played by certain mayors – and their resolution in joining this hybrid advocacy process – further and decisively contributed to the foundation of a CSAs/cities alliance (Lacroix, Furri, and Hombert 2022). The political agency of mayors – i.e. why they played such proactive role – can be well understood by looking at three different elements.

Firstly, the sensitivity of mayors to the migration issue, from a human rights perspective, which makes these mayors '*unconditionally committed* to humanitarian values, universal human rights, and the right to asylum, even in difficult times' (International Alliance of Safe Harbours 2021, 1–2. Emphasis added. Cf. also Baumgärtel and Oomen 2019). Scholarly literature has already established that this political orientation and 'ideological affinity' facilitates the process of alliance-making between civil society actors and cities around migration (Bazurli 2019 among others). In the process leading to FSTC/IASH, numerous instances of such value-based proactivity were reported, such as in the case of Barcelona and Palermo (Interviews IT4, SP4. See also the declarations of the former Mayor of Palermo, Leoluca Orlando, in Caccia 2017; From the Sea to the City 2021b). This tendency seems to be confirmed by the long-term engagement of these cities in migration politics – from the 2015 Charter of Palermo to the Barcelona 'city of refuge' plan (City of Barcelona 2019a), as well as their commitment to open Italian harbours to SAR civil

society vessels and close detention centres for foreigners (CIEs, in Spanish) in Spain (Interviews AD1, SP4; City of Barcelona 2015; Wintour, Tondo, and Kirchgaessner 2018). The political background of municipal actors further supports this understanding – e.g. in Barcelona, where some key actors in the city administration came from the anti-CIEs movement (Interview SP4). Interestingly, this value-oriented activation developed in a trans-local arena: in the case of Barcelona, for example, it initially took place through the cooperation with Greece-based civil society actors, whereas the foundation of Seebrücke in Germany was very much connected with the pro-migration value-oriented mobilisation of cities in Italy (Interview IT4).

Secondly, new municipalism was also important – as was also the case for the downward shift of civil society actors (see above). The municipalist background of numerous important city governments in the years following the 2015 so-called 'refugee crisis' heavily contributed to a value-oriented approach, not only in terms of contents and ideological stances, but also with regards to the understanding of the broader and systemic role that the city, as an institutional actor and arena, has to play (Interviews GE2, IT1, SP3).[5] In the words of an Italian activist, the same approach that shaped FSTC/IASH

> also goes across the best experiences of the 2014–16 municipalist cycle in different European countries, that is the idea that the issue is not very much that of developing 'good government' experiences at a local level, but rather of how within these very municipal experiences true bottom-up alternative policies can be structured. (Interview IT4)

Such understanding is very much connected with the role historically played – and the path opened – by certain cities: Barcelona, Palermo and, years before, Venice, where migration networks were born, in the 2000s, during the mayorship of Massimo Cacciari and his 'city of refuge' (Interview RE1).

Thirdly (and, perhaps, most remarkably), cities also decided to engage by adopting a rational choice approach, in which the alliance with civil society actors was conceived as a way to obtain political gain, as well as to overcome some local challenges, by shifting attention away from critical local migration issues.

Several CSAs reported on the existence of an ambiguous relationship between the 'foreign politics of migration' implemented by cities in targeting upper levels and the local politics of reception and integration, with many challenges and shortcomings (Interviews RE1, SP1, SP4. See also Alagna 2021b). Moving from such perspective, engagement in migration advocacy alliances would help local governments neutralise challenges pertaining to their migration-related policy arenas, as well as criticism and contestation coming from local civil society actors. This understanding would also explain why certain cities with ambiguous stances on migration policy also joined the process (Interview GE2, RE1) and why local civil society essentially stayed out

of the picture, also expressing some scepticism towards cities' engagement (Interviews IT2, RE1, SP1, SP4. See also Alagna 2021b). The focus of cities on the short term rather than on structural changes, as well as the strong correlation between increased migration salience/politicisation and the willingness of cities to join the process (Interview SP4), further point to the existence of a rational choice component in mayors' decision-making in the process at hand – increasing the risk that this alliance may become an instance of 'political marketing' (Interview RE1).

From the Sea to the City/International Alliance of Safe Harbours is Launched: The Upward Shift

The third step in the definition of the transnational alliance From the Sea to the City/International Alliance of Safe Harbours is the upward scale shift which took place from a local to a transnational level. In other words, this process consisted in a shift from a locally-based form of cooperation to a structured process of collaboration involving different CSA and different municipalities across EU member states, aimed at radically changing EU migration politics and policy, from the creation of safe and legal pathways to Europe to the possibility of transnational municipal relocation (cf. above). By shifting scale, the newly-formed transnational network engaged in different advocacy activities, such as the organisation of important public events (e.g. the 2021 Palermo Conference, see above), direct approach to some MEPs and the elaboration of policy papers (Interview GE1; From the Sea to the City 2021b).

This section aims to provide an answer to a twofold question: why a process of upward scale shift took place; and why such shift consisted in a transnationalisation process, rather than a nationalisation or supranationalisation one (i.e. why CSAs and cities moved to the transnational, rather than national/supranational, arena).

The first question can be answered by once again looking at the structure of opportunities at the municipal level. On the one hand, from a fixed opportunities perspective, one of the elements that had facilitated cities' engagement – i.e. the lack of a direct responsibility from municipalities and the subsequent lack of confrontation with civil society actors – soon became an insurmountable constraint: the municipal arena did not offer any opportunities for a policy impact. To different extents, all interviewees referred to levels other than the local one as the key policy arenas.

On the other hand, in terms of dynamic opportunities, an Italian activist explained how the progressive decrease in the engagement of certain cities – and the concurrent decline of a municipal discourse around migration – further contributed to such process of scale shift. The end of the political engagement of the city of Barcelona represented a crucial moment: while the municipality kept working on service providing and welfare issues for migrants, it no longer had an

advocacy international projection, for different reasons, arguably related to the relationship with the new centre-leftist national government, the decreased salience and politicisation of migration and systemic aspects of the Iberian left (Interview IT4).

Provided that the local level could no longer offer suitable opportunities, our second question comes into play: why CSAs and cities moved to the transnational arena, rather than to the national/supranational ones.

Looking, once again, at this process through the lenses of the political opportunity structures, we can firstly observe that, compared to the initial phase – when the downward shift took place (see above) – the opportunities offered by the EU and national arenas had not significantly improved, nor had the way in which they were perceived by civil society actors.

The EU and its member states maintained a repressive, externalising and evidence-ignoring approach to migration (Alagna 2023; Guiraudon 2018) which was not altered – and not even softened – by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Tazzioli and Stierl 2021).[6]

Institutional interest in the issues that were at the core of this CSAs/cities alliance remained low, and so did the opportunities to engage in direct advocacy at an EU/national level. These arenas continued to be perceived as hostile spaces, with only a few exceptions, such as some MEPs or the European Committee of the Regions (Interviews EU1, GE2, IT1, IT2).

Interestingly, however, some of the actors involved in the process believed that part of such ineffectiveness of playing in the EU/national arenas was attributable to the difficulty experienced by certain CSAs in perceiving the existing opportunities and in adopting a constructive approach (Interviews EU1, IT3, SP2). Overall, interviews reveal a misalignment among civil society actors with regards to the importance of the EU and national levels. Some believe these are key arenas where the alliance should engage in a structured way (Interviews GR1, IT1, IT2, IT3, SP2)[7]; others contend that it is possible to carry out their advocacy in other arenas (Interview GE2), provided that cities continue to engage at the EU level (Interviews GE2, IT1). For example, the national arena can be conceived as more relevant than the EU one, as preference formation within MSs plays a bigger role than the dynamics which take place at the national level (Interview SP3).

Shrinking dynamics at the EU/national level and mixed perceptions of the potential opportunities offered by the same levels for the alliance hindered a shift towards the supranational/national levels.

Conversely, the transnational level offered some interesting political opportunities for civil society and municipal actors. In the first place, these had to do with the interaction with existing transnationalisation dynamics, which suggested and reinforced the suitability of the transnational arena as fertile operational ground for advocacy and contention.

The impact of existing transnational alliances of civil society actors working on search and rescue at sea was remarkable (Interviews IT4, RE1, SP1) – and so was the progressive incorporation of different CSAs in the PCPP, which allowed them to become familiar with such approach (Interview GE4). As recalled by a researcher, the existence of a peculiar operational scale – which is the Mediterranean Sea, and is transnational per se – decisively contributed to the creation of a transnational dimension of activism and to the pursuit of some forms of actor-networking (Interview RE2; Fischer and Jørgensen 2022, 160, 172. See also Cuttitta 2018, on the politicisation of SAR in the Mediterranean Sea).

At the same time, the parallel process of transnationalisation of city networks in the migration domain (Doomernik and Ardon 2018; Lacroix 2021; Oomen 2020) also was extremely relevant. The way in which the transnationalism of cities favoured a similar process in civil society actors is a key point (Interview RE1) and many CSAs looked in fact at municipal networks with increasing interest (Interviews GE2, IT3). Transnationalisation is considered a 'suggestion', based on the transnational contentious stances of cities and 'which was mostly elaborated in Germany' (Interview IT4). At the same time, transnational CSAs networks also reinforced city networks: as a German activist explains, they realised that different actors were institutionally working in different countries, but networking was partly missing. By identifying this gap, the PCPP was launched and then FSTC/IASH followed (Interview GE2). Eventually, the two networking processes reinforced one another – and FSTC/IASH is the product of such interaction and mutual strengthening (Interview RE1). It is a politically connoted network – as opposed to 'spaces for technical exchange' – which makes it possible to overcome deadlocks that take place when a political input is missing (Interview AD1).

Besides the aspects pointing to the transnationalisation of civil society and city networks, other elements also significantly contributed to the transnationalisation of CSAs:

(1) The perceived necessity of a transnational approach, both individually and in some organisations' core values, in a domain which is transnational per se (Interviews GE2, GE3, IT2, IT3) – even though some actors do not share this approach (Interview GE4);

(2) The understanding of the added value of a transnational approach, such as for small organisations, which gained in prestige (Interview GE1), and, from a strategic point of view, as a way to 'de-nationalise' migration governance, which is a 'challenge […] to be mediated by cities' (Interview SP3);

(3) The existence of key brokers, who acted as 'transnationalising' actors and promoted the importance of a transnational CSAs/cities network: this is the case of both single individuals (Interviews GE2, GE4) and whole organisations (Interview GR1).

Last but not least, the emergence of transnational arenas of political contention further strengthened the process of transnationalisation. The case of the transnational judicial arena is particularly remarkable, as it triggered a collaboration between CSAs and cities around politics of litigation across borders.

The city of Barcelona was a pioneer and supported CSAs' judicial cases in different contexts and at different levels, cooperating 'with entities that [...] do strategic litigation in various fields that are politically interesting' for the city government (Interview AD1). Like in other cases of right violations, the city decided to participate as civil party in trials 'where cases are paradigmatic of right violation, that is, it is not an isolated case but it is a case reiterated over time. Thus, what you can do is to set a precedent, not only at the judicial level, but also at a political and symbolic one' (Interview AD1). A strategic litigation case promoted by the organisation Stop Mare Mortum and the city of Barcelona is an example of that (Interview AD1).

Another important case which showed the emergence of a transnationalisation of judicial contention is the trial against the former Italian minister of interior Matteo Salvini, accused of kidnapping for the alleged arbitrary halt of the disembarkation of migrants from the *Open Arms* ship. The trial, still ongoing at the time of writing, is the result of the charges pressed by the Spain-based organisation Open Arms, in an Italian court, and several civil society organisations and cities from different countries (e.g. Barcelona and Palermo) were admitted as civil parties to trial (Interview SP1; Alagna 2021a).

This form of CSAs/cities collaboration built upon an existing transnational politics of litigation promoted by some civil society actors, such as Stop Mare Mortum itself – who contributed to open relocation channels from Greece in 2019 after strategic litigation cases (Interview SP4; Stop Mare Mortum 2018) – or the Italian ASGI (Alagna 2021a for an overview).

In the evolution of the relationship between civil society and municipalities over time, the politics of litigation made a clear difference (Interview RE2), marking not only an effective way of working together, but also prompting the transnationalisation of this collaboration – which is reflected in the increasing transnational engagement of CSAs and cities. The trajectory of Open Arms constitutes a very good example of that (Interview RE2).

However, even if the merits of such an approach are clear, an Italian activist calls for caution on the

> judicialisation of contention [...]. We have been among the first ones to theorise and implement the idea of an offensive use of law, and in particular of international maritime law, to open up room for people's freedom of movement, [but] at the end of the day, the risk is that trials on *us* end up badly and those on *them* come to nothing. (Interview IT4. Emphasis added)

Discussion and Conclusive Remarks

In this article I have explored the process of construction of a multi-scalar alliance between civil society actors and municipalities around migration, with a view to understanding why such process took place. After providing a general background, I have separately considered the process of downward scale shift of transnational civil society actors; the engagement of municipalities in informal alliances with civil society initiatives; the upward scale shift of the newly formed CSAs/cities alliance.

The findings show that such multi-scalar alliance between civil society and municipalities around migration emerged, on the one hand, as a CSA response to the *perceived* opening and closure of both fixed and dynamic political opportunities in different political spaces, at different levels and to different extents. On the other hand, it represented an attempt from cities to fulfil a perceived role, increasing political gain of mayors and overcoming local challenges. Table 3 offers an analytical synopsis of the multi-scalar alliance-making process.

Looking at these elements in more detail, a few aspects related to the political agency of both civil society actors and municipalities in EU migration politics can be discussed in order to explain which factors decisively led to the emergence of a multi-scalar alliance between civil society actors and municipalities around migration in the EU.

Table 3. An analytical synopsis.

Dynamic	Explanation

Downward shift	Closure of EU/national political opportunities
	    –*Fixed: structural inaccessibility of institutions, especially the Council*
	    –*Dynamic: increased repressive and restrictive approach (2015)*
	    –*Strong mistrust (importance of perception)*
	Opening of local political opportunities
	    –*(Mostly) dynamic: Cities keen to engage; political culture of municipal institutions & municipalism; pivotal actors within CSAs*

Cities' engagement	Institutional
	    –*Different policy arena: no direct costs*
	    –*Frontline cities seeking solidarity*
	    –*External brokers*
	Agency
	    –*Mayors' sensitivity*
	    –*New municipalism*
	    –*Political gain & overcome local challenges*

Upward shift	Closure of local political opportunities
	    –*Fixed: no impact in this policy arena*
	    –*Dynamic: decreased cities' engagement*
	Persisting closure of EU/national political opportunities
	Opening of transnational political opportunities
	    –*Fixed: transnational issue 'requires' transnational approach; existence of transnational arenas of contention (judicial); perceived opportunities to obtain gains for small organisations & de-nationalise issue*
	    –*Dynamic: transnationalisation cities and SAR networks; transnational brokers*

Source: elaborated by the author.

With regards to the agency of civil society actors, and their connection with the opening and closure of different political opportunities at different levels, three considerations can be drawn. Firstly, the two opening and closure processes were certainly concurrent, but not necessarily interconnected (e.g. the proactive role of municipalities opened a local window of opportunity, regardless of the closing opportunities at the EU level).

Secondly, both fixed and dynamic political opportunities played an important role in the downward and upward shifts. However, fixed opportunities were essentially more relevant to the closure of the EU (and partly also national) political arenas, whereas dynamic opportunities have been more prominent in driving the decision to engage in the municipal arena and in the process of transnationalisation. This suggests that the closure of the EU (and national) political arenas is a more systemic and structural dynamic, whereas the decision to engage in the municipal arena and the transnationalisation of contention are more dependent on temporary factors, which can more easily change and shape new forms of political activism.

Thirdly, although external opportunities were critical elements per se, the way in which they were perceived and interpreted by CSAs was also determinant. This case study confirms that opportunities and resources are perceived and construed by actors (Della Porta 2013, 3–4). It further shows two complementary sense-making dynamics that can take place, based on the political culture and/or on the role of individuals in the interpretation of reality – interestingly, also through processes of brokerage (Tarrow and McAdam 2005), as repeatedly reported by interviewees. The agency of civil society actors, in light of all these considerations, appears to be crucial beyond the external opportunities that they actually deal with. Said considerations also call for further research on the role played by different elements – such as organisational memories, identity, resources and path dependency issues – in the construction of CSAs' perception.

Insofar as cities are concerned, findings indicate that their decision to engage in alliances with civil society actors is based on a mixed logic, which includes both appropriateness and rational choice aspects (March and Olsen 2006, 9, 2011, 164–165). On the one hand, political sensitivity to the cause displayed by mayors did play a major role (cf. Lacroix, Furri, and Hombert 2022; Maffeis 2021). On the other hand, however, the possibility to obtain political gain and to 'use' the CSAs/cities alliance to overcome local challenges were also key motivations for cities to engage in such perspective (cf. Baumgärtel and Pett 2022). This rational choice approach of cities – which tends to be less considered in academic scholarship

dealing with municipal migration politics – also explains the strict correlation between increased levels of issue salience and politicisation and engagement from cities (and, clearly, also the opposite process). This suggests that, in the case at hand, the 'ideological affinity' element might have played a minor role, compared to other cases of CSAs/cities collaboration in the migration field (cf. Bazurli 2019). These aspects will also need further consideration, including by way of an increased methodological pluralism, given that this interpretation – and this study more broadly – is highly, albeit not exclusively, based upon CSAs' point of view, as was explained throughout the text.

Overall, reconnecting this work with the broader scholarship which has been analysing the way in which local governments defy national and supranational migration policies (cf. Oomen et al. 2021), the agency of cities can be framed in terms of a *discursive* decoupling – rather than a substantive one (Oomen 2020, 917; Scholten and Penninx 2016, 976). This is the case because active cities within FSTC/IASH did strongly distance themselves from EU and national migration policies, but they essentially did so in terms of political discourse and advocacy, engaging in forms of contentious politics. Empirical evidence suggests that this is the result of the constraints encountered by cities in the development of alternative policies in fields such as border policy, resettlement and relocation – unlike in other policy sub-fields (Oomen et al. 2021).

Combining the two above perspectives on civil society and municipal actors – and engaging in the productive dialogue between disciplines that this study aims to enhance – the case at hand ultimately shows that a key element in explaining the emergence of this CSAs/cities alliance and its greater or lesser success relates to the target scales of contention and the relevant policy arenas. The alliance seems to work insofar as the key elements of political contention relate to policy arenas *other* than the municipal one: cities do not *primarily* act as policy-makers or as responsible for policy implementation, but rather engage as advocates and contentious actors. This is perceived as a valuable opportunity by civil society actors, who redefine the spatial arena of contention from transnational to local and back, while maintaining their target on EU and national policy arenas. This aspect further explains why such collaboration was possible in policy fields which did not relate to cities' responsibilities, whereas other elements of migration governance (e.g. reception, integration and welfare policies) caused a more confrontational relationship between civil society actors and cities (some examples can be found in Alagna 2021b; Baumgärtel and Pett 2022; Fischer and Jørgensen 2022). On the whole, by explaining how and why civil society actors and cities engaged in multi-level structured forms of cooperation, this research substantively contributes to

enhancing our understanding of the strategic relevance of scale and space dimensions in the contentious politics of migration in the EU.

Notes

1. FSTC and IASH could prima facie appear as two separate networks of civil society actors and municipalities, respectively. However, the two are strictly and intrinsically connected and can in fact be regarded as a single, dual network. IASH was established as the direct result of the first year of FSTC activities, in the context of the 2021 Palermo Conference, when civil society initiatives brought together several European mayors, urging them to commit to advocating for change in EU migration policy. Since then, they have continued working as a single network, politically steered by FSTC, as widely confirmed by data gathered for this research.
2. The network also includes a limited number of individual members, who were invited due to their pivotal role, besides structured organisations.
3. The target scale (to which campaigning and advocacy activities were directed) remained the same, instead, i.e. the EU/national levels (see Table 1. Cf. also Fischer and Jørgensen 2022).
4. This process was further strengthened by historic problems of urban governance and the inherent possibility of addressing them, i.e. the role of mayors in harbour governance (Interview IT4).
5. At the same time, a Spanish activist drew attention to the fact that municipalism may also become part of the problem, insofar as many activists devote their entire time to city governance issues, also bearing institutional roles, leaving little to no time for other activities (Interview SP3).
6. And not even by the war in Ukraine, which led to the activation of special procedures but with a very narrow scope of application, which does not challenge the systemic approach pursued by the EU/MSs.
7. The idea of having a structured presence in Brussels is further supported, in terms of increased effectiveness, by an EU policy officer (Interview EU2. Cf. the findings of Alcalde and Portos 2018, pp. 256–259).

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AD1,   Member of city administration, Barcelona, Spain, 22–29 March 2022
EU1,   MEP Policy advisor, 4 February 2022
EU2,   Policy officer, European Commission, DG HOME, 23 February 2022
FR1,   Activist, France, 14 February 2022
FR2,   Activist, France, 14 February 2022
GE1,   Activist, From the sea to the city, Germany, 21 January 2022
GE2,   Activist, From the sea to the city, Germany, 3 February
GE3,   Activist, From the sea to the city, Germany, 22 March 2022
GE4,   Activist, From the sea to the city, Germany, 1 April 2022
GR1,   Activist, From the sea to the city, Greece, 31 January 2022
IT1,   Activist, From the sea to the city, Italy, 20 January 2022
IT2,   Activist, From the sea to the city, Italy, 27 January 2022
IT3,   Activist, From the sea to the city, Italy, 17 February 2022
IT4,   Activist, From the sea to the city, Italy, 31 March 2022
RE1,   Researcher, 28 January 2022
RE2,   Researcher, 16 February 2022
SP1,   Activist, From the sea to the city, Spain, 26 January 2022
SP2,   Activist, From the sea to the city, Spain, 27 January 2022
SP3,   Activist, From the sea to the city, Spain, 17 February 2022
SP4,   Activist, Spain, 11 March 2022

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