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The External Relations of Mediterranean Cities with Civil Society Organisations in Migration Governance

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***EuroMedMig Working Paper Series,
No. 9 – November 2022***

With the support of the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



IMISCOE

Background Rationale and Content

In July 2018, a Euro-Mediterranean Research Network on Migration (*EuroMedMig*) was launched during the 15th IMISCOE Annual Conference in Barcelona, with an initial composition of 18 Members in the Steering Committee. Countries covered are: Algeria, Belgium, Egypt, Europe (EU), Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, France, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Portugal, Spain, Norway, Netherlands, Tunisia and Turkey. It has initially received institutional support from The Union for the Mediterranean and academically recognized as an IMISCOE Regional Network.

This WP Series is part of first a specific action within a three-year (2019-2022) Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Network Program (Project Reference: 611260-EPP-1-2019-1-ES-EPPJMO-NETWORK) entitled "[Mapping European Mediterranean Migration Studies](#)" (Acronym: *EUMedMi*) and coordinated by GRITIM-UPF. More information about the project can be found on its [website](#).

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Abstract

Following the attention brought by a 'local turn' (Zapata-Barrero, Caponio & Scholten, 2017) and multi-level migration governance theory, this paper aims to prove that city diplomacy does not describe well the *decoupling* of local governments from national agendas in their foreign relations. The guiding question that the paper addresses is *why* some cities have decoupled from State agendas and engaged with ICSSOs to tackle migration challenges. The analysis is based on the city-to-CSSO agreements of Barcelona with ProActiva Open Arms and Marseille with SOS Méditerranée on the one hand, and the involvement of *Terre d'Asile Tunisie* with the municipality of Sfax (Tunisia) in the ICMPD-led Mediterranean City-To-City project on the other. The findings reaffirm that mayors play a major influence in migration governance (Lacroix, Hombert and Furri, 2020; Bazurli, Caponio, and de Graauw, 2021), and on the detachment of the city's relations from the security-oriented and managerial idiosyncrasies of national governments.

Keywords

City diplomacy, city external relations, migration governance, Mediterranean, civil society organisations.

Author's biographical note



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Acknowledgements

The author would like to express her sincere gratitude to Professor Ricard Zapata-Barrero, supervisor of the Master's Thesis on which this paper is based, Coordinator of the Master's program and Director of *EuroMedMig* and GRITIM-UPF for all the support and opportunities awarded over the past years.

Suggested citation: Casanovas i Oliveres, A. (2022). "The External Relations of Mediterranean Cities with Civil Society Organisations in Migration Governance". *EuroMedMig Working Paper Series*, no. 9 (November): <http://hdl.handle.net/10230/54694>



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Introduction: The 'local turn' of migration governance and the international relations of cities

On the ongoing wave of globalisation, the international system has been penetrated by a diversity of non-state actors, including cities, seeking to regain a voice of their own in global debates. Although the pulse of 'global cities' (Sassen, 1991) may be stronger, smaller cities have also stood up to confront global challenges. In an increasingly urban and interconnected world, migration to cities is the cause and consequence of many transnational economic interlinkages and cultural interdependencies (Kerr, 2019). In an attempt to reorganise the complexity of diverse societies, competition for decentralisation across government tiers has become frequent everywhere (Bazurli, Caponio & de Graauw, 2022: 2). These changes have been noticed by scholars, which place more and more attention on the implications of an ongoing 'local turn' (Zapata-Barrero, Caponio & Scholten, 2017) to multilevel governance (MLG) of migration. This 'local turn' should not be understood just as the localisation of national migration policies, but also as a shift away from integration models rooted in national identity and belonging (Scholten & Pennix, 2016: 98, in Garcés-Mascreñas, 2016). The Euro-Mediterranean area is probably one the most significant laboratories of this paradigm change, where local governments have engaged in policy innovation to face the unprecedented migrant arrivals of the past decade (Bendel & Stürner, 2019, in Pejic, 2020: 103).

Multilevel governance is the negotiation between interdependent actors (Schmitter, 2004: 49, in Zapata-Barrero, Caponio & Scholten, 2017: 2) whereby some functions of governments at multiple levels of territorial aggregation are scaled up and others pushed down to the local level (Marks, 1993). It compares to other types of relations between government levels, like *centralism* (top-down), *localism* (bottom-up) and total *decoupling* (Scholten & Pennix, 2016, in Garcés-Mascreñas & Pennix, 2016). 'Decoupling' implies an absence of coordination between government levels as observed in Barcelona, London, Berlin and Rotterdam's adoption of immigration policies that differ a lot from national governments (Scholten & Pennix, 2016: 91, in Garcés-Mascreñas & Pennix, 2016), which often results in policy contradictions and conflicts. Among the many interpretations of the concept, Caponio and Jones-Correa characterise MLG with (2018: 1996): 1) challenging vertical or top-down hierarchies; 2) implicit

interdependence of actors; 3) multiactor bargaining. These characteristics are a tool to assess *why* some cities engage in MLG of migration and *how* these arrangements change over time from more or less decoupled positions to higher coordination, or vice versa (Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2018: 2006).

Most literature on MLG of migration has focused on immigration and integration policies in the absence of coordination across government levels. In Europe, the coordination gap between the *local* and the EU has been mediated by cities and city networks (Scholten & Pennix, 2016: 91, in Garcés-Mascreñas & Pennix, 2016) with a critical view on national and supra-national migration policies (Lacroix, Hombert & Furri, 2020: 5). *City diplomacy* literature has equally accorded city networks an important role for conflict resolution, cooperation, regional integration and solidarity building (Kihlgren, 2020: 9, 11). However, thematically, it has not dedicated much ink specifically to migration governance yet.

As an emerging scholarly and policy field, *city diplomacy* can take a narrower and State-centric interpretation of the international relations of cities, or a broader one focused on governance processes with a multiplicity of actors. While the International Relations scholarship sees city diplomacy with scepticism for its empowerment of cities in a traditionally State-centric system, this paper problematises the concept for two different reasons. Firstly, 'diplomacy' bears a nation-state connotation that clashes with the ongoing *local turn* of migration governance. Secondly, it may not be representative enough of the challenging attitude of some city councils with national migration policies. This is the case of the unprecedented foreign relations between Mediterranean cities and international civil society organisations (ICSOs) in response to large migrant arrivals. I believe the conceptual confusion conceals the different approaches to migration governance and international relations that cities may adopt with or without State mediation.

With the aim to answer *why* some cities have decoupled from State agendas and engaged with ICSOs to tackle migration challenges, this paper is structured as follows. The subsequent section discusses the most common terms used to describe the international dimension of local governments and offers a definition of *city external relations*. Next, it gives an overview of the methods and sources used to discern the two concepts based on evidence. Then, it provides a comparative analysis of three case

studies with a few policy recommendations. Finally, it outlines some methodological limitations and future research pathways.

1. Conceptual framework: From city diplomacy to city external relations

Throughout the past century, cities have increasingly developed international action from simple bilateral cooperation to complex network arrangements (Kosovac et al., 2021). In this section, I offer a nuanced overview of the different terms that have proliferated to define them. The conceptual debate stems from a discrepancy over 'city diplomacy', which I link to the State-centric field of International Relations (IR). That is why I propose the adoption of *city external relations* (CERs) for those international city actions that sideline and contest States through alliances with international non-state actors.

City diplomacy has been defined by Pluijm (2007: 11) as "the institutions and processes by which cities engage in relations with actors on an international political stage with the aim of representing themselves and their interests with one another" and emulating traditional state diplomacy. In a similar manner, Levebre and d'Albergo (2007, in Viltard, 2010: 603) conceive it as "the actions and activities with an international dimension pursued by local actors". Other non-state diplomacy categories have also proliferated since the mid-20th century including 'non-central government diplomacy', 'paradiplomacy', 'sub-national diplomacy', and 'sub-state diplomacy' (Leffel, 2018: 505). 'Paradiplomacy' (Soldatos, 1990) being one of the most common describes "the performance of subnational entities in foreign policy activities" which may be complementary but also challenging to nation-state diplomacy (Tavares, 2016, in Pimienta, 2019: 3). On the contrary, Hocking (1993) and Pejic (2020) propose that *city diplomacy* may be additional and subsidiary to national diplomacy.

At the local level, the development of the local foreign policy domain has seen a diversification of its policy areas from security and peace, development, economy, technology and science, culture, to environmental issues (Pluijm, 2007; Kihlgren, 2020). Whereas migration in national foreign policy can be traced back to Western involvement in the 1970s in Middle Eastern countries (Pimienta, 2019: 1), migration joined *city diplomacy* later. The first examples have been situated in the 1980s 'sanctuary cities' movement against Ronald Reagan's restrictive migration policies with refugees (Leffel,

2022); a movement that has lasted into the 21st century to protect undocumented migrants from racist police prosecution.

Therefore, the international engagement of cities in migration issues has a historical record of contesting central government decisions to rescue the values of respect for human rights (Pluijm, 2007; Leffel, 2018; Kerr, 2019) and sort out with the help of other cities and non-state actors the overwhelming situations that they faced without State support (Lacroix, 2021). But despite the tensions that city international actions certainly may create between the local and the national, they do not always mean a challenging stance against national governments, either in democratic or non-democratic States. By way of example, cities in undemocratic regimes like China enjoy little autonomy from the central government to the extent that their international activities may be seen as just the localisation of national diplomacy. While in such cases, the use of 'diplomacy' could be fair to their State-centric approach to foreign affairs, the city-State relationship might also be seen along a spectrum rather than through dichotomic national regimes (Leffel, 2022).

One could also think that regardless of these nuances, the spectrum does not remove the utilitarian culture implicit in 'diplomacy' that emanates from the IR domain. This is very obvious in Kihlgren (2020: 139-140), who describes migration as a "resource for city diplomacy" –a means to an end– for three main areas of municipal governments: the Culture department (to promote cultural diversity), the Social Services department (in charge of aid and assistance to migrants), and the International Relations office. Yet most cities do not enjoy the human capital or financial resources to develop city diplomacy as an institutionalised and formal practice of its own (Kihlgren, 2020: 24, not to say that they already incorporate migration in their international agenda).

Another thing to consider is that *city diplomacy* is not a label imposed on cities *per se*. Cities themselves have also embraced the notion when pledging for recognition and participation in intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) like the EU Congress of Regional and Local Authorities, the EU Commission, or the UN (Viltard, 2010: 596). But cities also seek to distinguish their international strategies from one another through different names. For example, whereas The Hague, which had a notable role in the invention of the 'city diplomacy' field embraces the concept (Viltard, 2010: 596), French cities are loyal to the idea of 'decentralised cooperation' (*coopération décentralisée*) to refer to all

international activities developed by local governments (European Commission, 2008, in Kihlgren, 2020: 54). Decentralised cooperation is also recognised by and across the EU as the “publicly and privately funded aid provided by and through local authorities, networks and other local actors” (European Commission, 2008: 3).

One of the obstacles to the development of a homogenous city foreign action at a global level may be the lack of a common jurisdictional umbrella. Whereas States organise their foreign action through the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (Pejic, 2020: 42), cities are not included in any framework. Its recognition is therefore a national decision that a few States make explicit in their Constitutions (i.e., France, Belgium, Argentina) although at the same time, few States pass laws limiting the international relations of cities (Pejic, 2020: 53). Consequently, cities are beginning to pierce the system and bridging the national and the international without clear boundaries, rights and responsibilities (Pejic, 2020: 51; Pluijm, 2007: 14).

While these changes do not arrive, cities are more and more being invited to international events because of their supportive discourse with migrants. To name just the more significant ones, the 2015 IOM Conference on Migrants and Cities can be considered a milestone in migration city diplomacy. That was followed by the elaboration of the UN Global Compacts for Migration and Refugees in 2018, the Global Conference on Cities and Migration by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) in 2017, and the Mayoral Forum on Human Mobility, Migration and Development in Marrakech in 2018 (Pimienta, 2019). Parallely, cities have also created their own forums, most prominently the Global Parliament of Mayors (2016), the Mayors Migration Council (2018) and a variety of transnational networks (Kihlgren, 2020: 145).

According to Barbara Oomen (2019) transnational migration-related city networks operate in a double dynamic of “decoupling” and “teaming up” with one another to bypass restrictive national frameworks. Prominent examples are Eurocities, the Council of Europe’s Intercultural Cities, the European Resettlement Network, and the Mediterranean City-To-City Migration (MC2CM) project by the International Centre for Migration and Policy Development (ICMPD). Many of these city networks and platforms include non-state and non-city members from the civil society world, research institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and regional organisations (Oomen, 2019: 21). Besides, while some of these networks are city-led, others have been

co-opted by IGOs (Lacroix, 2021: 2) which means that they are not independent from State influence.

The composition and sponsorship of city networks in terms of diversity of actors may also explain their origins. Daniel Pejic (2020: 66) has analysed the main triggers of city diplomacy as synthesised in the table below (Figure 1). They include the constituency of the local government and its electorate, the existence of historical contacts, the relative abundance of resources, as well as the nature of the national and international dynamics, etc. Kosovac et al. (2021) also point that the lack of professionalisation of city offices or departments for foreign affairs pushes them to search for inspiration in other municipalities. Bazurli, Caponio and de Graauw (2022: 4,5), for instance, shed light on ‘mayoral activism’ for its leadership in migration governance such as the critical situation faced by many European cities over the past years. They praise mayors for their pragmatic, strategic and contingent approaches to migration but they also warn us of coexisting municipal discriminatory practices.

Rather, in this paper, I will focus on international civil society organisations (ICSOs) that have pulled Mediterranean cities outside their territorial limits. Civil society organisations have been defined as “all forms of civil self-organisation that may assume formalised structures but often remain informal and temporary” which differentiates them from those “non-governmental organisations’ operating either at a national level within a formalised organisational structure [...] or at a global scale as part of a larger organisation” (Bürkner & Scott, 2018: 11). Given the overlaps between the two, in this paper, ICSOs and INGOs will be used interchangeably.

<p>Inside-out factors</p>	<p>Mayor’s attitude Citizens’ pressure Urban society Political culture Historical track record Expediency Resources Type of economy Institutional framework and degree of decentralisation Lack of national diplomacy Geographical factors</p>
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Outside-in factors	Presence of transnational networks Nature of the international system and pull effect by IOs Pull effect by other cities
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Figure 1. Explanatory Variables for City Diplomacy (Pejic, 2020: 66).

CSOs and transnational activism are usually valued for their provision of services where States or public entities cannot stretch out, and as moral agents in support of migrant rights (Ambrosini & Van der Leun, 2015: 105). Cooperation with CSOs is also a strategy that local authorities use to remain in power because it enhances their moral legitimacy as purveyors of human rights. On the other side, CSOs may benefit from city alliances when their budgets fall short (Ambrosini & Van der Leun., 2015: 108) but their contributions may remain untapped or limited due to neoliberal approaches to 'migration governance and management' of global institutions (Delgado Wise, 2018: 758; Schierup et al., 2019: 9). That is why, CSOs have also increasingly partaken in global migration governance debates like the High Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development (UN-HLD) in 2006 or the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD). And at the same time, they have created their own deliberative spaces to promote alternative readings of globalisation such as the Global Coalition on Migration (Schierup et al., 2019: 3,4) or the Charter of Lampedusa (2014).

All in all, we could say that depending on the authors we choose, 'city diplomacy' has two interpretations. A narrower one that is more State-centric and does not defy national authority, and a broader one that focuses more on the governance process with a richer diversity of actors. Thus, in order to investigate this possible 'decoupling' from national governments, the concept of *city external relations* will be used to differentiate between non-detaching and detaching city international relations.

2. Methodology and Sources

This paper aims to provide empirical evidence on the difference between city diplomacy and city external relations and answer *why* the latter have developed in the Mediterranean context. Although in contemporary times migration has become a global phenomenon, the migrant tragedies recorded in the Mediterranean this century have contributed to making it one of the deadliest regions in the world (IOM, 2017). As a

consequence, cities have mobilised to provide a solution. Mayoral leadership and municipal militancy in this context have already been surveyed by Lacroix, Hombert and Furri's (2020) and Bazurli, Caponio and de Graauw (2020). In my study, I aim to reaffirm their hypothesis that local representatives are drivers of alternative migration governance strategies, which Pejic (2020: 66; Figure 1) considers an "inside-out" driver. Additionally, I point at their influence in *decoupled* city international action in migration governance with other non-State actors that have been overlooked.

With the intention to bring them to the forefront, I have devised a comparative analysis of three Mediterranean cities that have teamed up with CSOs of international scope and participate in the governance of migration either before the trans-Mediterranean migratory journeys starts off, or during/after migrant departures. The selected case studies are: on the one hand the agreements of Barcelona with ProActiva Open Arms (POA), and Marseille with *SOS Méditerranée* (SOS Med) in representation of the 'decoupling' aspect of CERs and as bridges between departure and reception cities. And on the other hand, the engagement of the Municipality of Sfax (Tunisia) with *Terre d'Asile Tunisie* (TAT) in the ICMPD-led MC2CM project as an example of the more paternalistic nature of city diplomacy in the governance of those who cannot leave the southern Mediterranean shore.

The analysis is based on three dimensions that should be explored in more depth in the future: 1) the role of mayors and city councils in the kick-off of these engagements, 2) the relations between the cities and their respective national governments, and c) the contextual drivers of city-CSO alliances. The main data sources used are official documents, such as project and conference reports, city council resolutions and press articles searched in Catalan, English, French and Arabic. The time frame covered dates from as early as 2011, the onset of the Mediterranean humanitarian phenomenon and the Tunisian revolution, which will be considered the emergence period of the CERs phenomenon in the region. Because it is a preliminary study of city-CSOs external relations, and because of time constraints, it does not include the points of view of institutional or organisation representatives beyond what has been identified in press releases or literature. Further research should incorporate their perspectives through interviews.

3. City external relations and city diplomacy with ICSOs in the Mediterranean

The unprecedented migrant arrivals and the thousands gone missing or dead in the Mediterranean since 2014 (IOM, 2022) have put many cities between a rock and a hard place to protect and save those in distress at sea. The pragmatic local view that sweeping the problem under the rug would not make it vanish has mobilised transnational alliances between cities and CSOs. Answering *why* these cities have taken such actions is not simple given their different national contexts but we will try to outline some patterns.

3.1. *Barcelona and ProActiva Open Arms*

Barcelona is one of the first cities that reacted in front of the increased migrant arrivals since 2015 leading a coalition of municipalities both at the national and international level for a reimagined 'cosmopolitanism from below' (Agustín & Jorgensen, 2019b: 199) that often has given birth to what is known as 'solidarity cities' or 'sanctuary cities', with which Barcelona is usually identified.

Until 2015, asylum in Spain was a competence heavily concentrated at the national level. In this context, Barcelona and the Catalan government, despite their political differences, shared that it should be delegated to the autonomous communities, which was ruled in favour in a judicial appeal of 2018 although the role of cities is still unclear (Garcés-Mascreñas & Gebhardt, 2020: 13). Despite the closeness with the Catalan government, Barcelona City Council has historically used its involvement in international cooperation and solidarity to escape the Catalan and Spanish nationalist battles. The most commonly cited historical mobilisation dates back to the Yugoslavian wars in the 1990s to welcome refugees. This is a precedent that could not be overlooked when refugees from Syria and beyond started to crowd Eastern and Central Mediterranean cities in 2015 (Agustín & Jorgensen, 2019b: 101).

Other than that, migration was for a long time a depoliticised and mere administrative matter for the city council. The 2015 electoral win of *Guanyem Barcelona* (currently *En Comú*), a political party of anti-establishment and activist background, reintroduced migration at the city council through the issue of urban politics (Hansen, 2019: 56-58). The party is headed by Mayor Ada Colau, former human rights activist, and

founder of the party. Throughout her mandate she has also become special envoy for the relations of cities at UCLG and vice-president of C40's Steering Committee (Ajuntament de Barcelona, n.d.).

When images of refugees became commonplace in the media, civil society's pledges for the welcome of refugees pushed the local government to declare itself as a 'Refuge City' and draw up a Refuge Plan comprising a reception strategy, refugee care for those already in the city, sensibilisation and organisation of citizen participation, and external action with European cities. The Plan was meant to be implemented at the neighbourhood level in collaboration with NGOs –its traditional ally and custodian of expertise in migration governance (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2019b: 46). However, the ambitious international relations provided by the Refuge Plan were watered down by the restricting Spanish and European asylum policies and legislations (Garcés-Mascareñas, 2020). The city had then to look for alternative ways to support migrants by scaffolding the Care Service for Immigrants, Emigrants and Refugees (SAIER), the creation of the Nausica programme (2017) for accommodation and support of asylum seekers and refugees, and increased information efforts (Agustín & Jorgensen, 2019a: 101).

Barcelona's failed attempt to establish international relations with other cities and networks (city diplomacy), was compensated later on through its participation in several UN discussions, annual international meetings, and the endorsement of the Marrakech Mayors Declaration (2018). Other more modest contacts were also promoted, like the 2015 declaration by Mayor Ada Colau together with Mayor of Paris Anne Hidalgo, Mayor of Lampedusa Giusi Nicolini, and Mayor of Lesbos Spyros Galinos urging European cities to provide shelter to migrants, and the EU to include cities in the discussions on the management of migrant arrivals. Differently, city networks have proved stronger to pledge before national governments. Barcelona is a member of several at different levels (Catalan, Spanish, European, EU). Most prominently, it promoted the Spanish *Ciudades Refugio* (Refuge Cities) network, and Solidarity Cities (2016) to formalise the transnational relations of cities with the EU Commission and States.

Despite the numerous initiatives by the city council, Catalan civil society feels that it should have adopted a more disobedient stance with the State and EU policies. But we should not forget that cities not only face limited competencies, but also economic resources, as highlighted by Barcelona's councillor Marc Serra at the From the Sea to the

City conference (Consortium From the Sea to the City, 2021: 25). In February 2017, thousands of Catalans gathered in Barcelona's streets demanding the Spanish government to open its borders in a demonstration named 'Casa Nostra, Casa Vostra' (Our Home, Your Home). Although the demonstration translated into limited policy changes, as acknowledged by the City Council and criticised by civil society, it paved the way for interesting collaborations between the city council and CSOs beyond their territorial boundaries. In April 2017, Barcelona City Council signed an agreement with the Stop Mare Mortum platform and funded it with 60,000 euros (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2018b).

Since 2017, the presence of search and rescue (SAR) organisations in the Mediterranean has been increasingly framed by States and some anti-migrant groups as a 'pull factor' contributing to the human tragedy at sea or accusing them of human smuggling (DeBono & Mainwaring, 2020: 94). To counteract that hostile environment, that year, Barcelona's municipal government declared to be a 'safe harbour city' for migrants under the #SafePassageBarcelona campaign. Its goal was to provoke a city-led movement to raise awareness of city action in front of 'no-state action'. Moreover, the municipality donated €100,000 to ProActiva Open Arms and Save the Children respectively to fund their SAR operations. The bail allowed the rescue of 10,585 people, out of which 1,650 were children (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2019b: 35).

ProActiva Open Arms is a non-profit organisation founded in 2015 by two lifeguards from Badalona (Catalonia) who used to work for a company specialising in aquatic safety. After an overwhelming volunteering trip to Greece, they decided to take advantage of their background to do what no national government or NGO was doing back then: saving refugees from drowning (Álvarez-Jiménez & Padrós-Cuxart, 2017: 220-222). In 2019, in response to the Italian 'closed ports policy', Barcelona's City Council signed a new agreement with POA and donated €500,000 (equivalent to 35% of the NGO's budget) to lock in its operations at sea and the municipality's commitment to 'the right to the city'. Mayor Ada Colau also sent a letter to the Spanish Minister for Public Works urging him to ease the blockade on the Open Arms boat to leave Spanish waters (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2019a).

In early 2021, Barcelona City Council started a private accusation against former Italian Minister of Interior Matteo Salvini for obstructing during 20 days the

disembarkation of 130 migrants rescued by the Catalan NGO back in August 2019. Mayor Ada Colau declared before the press that Barcelona is suing Salvini for jeopardising the lives of all those aboard the Open Arms and the NGO's activity: "We appear in this legal case because if they attack Open Arms we feel that they are attacking the entire city of Barcelona, a city committed to peace, human rights, democracy and the defence of life above any other consideration". In addition to that, the city is claiming for a reparation of its image for Salvini's several false accusations against Barcelona during the 20-days boat seizure and for the delay in the municipality-funded activities carried out by POA (Europa Press, 2021, 27 January). In this judicial process, they also count on the support of the Municipality of Palermo, Emergency, Arci, Mediterranea Saving Humans, Accogliere, other Italian associations and some migrants who were on the boat during the blockade (Alliance Migrations, 2021: 19).

3.2. Marseille and SOS Méditerranée

As the oldest city in France dating back to the 7th century BC, Marseille still is today one of the most dynamic cities in France and the Mediterranean. It is by virtue of its port and the successive waves of immigrants that have chosen it as a new home, a 'world-city' connected to the rest of the globe (Thomas, 1994: 86). But what makes Marseille different from its neighbouring metropolises (Nice, Toulon, and Avignon) is its unique sociodemographic profile and late urban development in the early 2000s (Gastaut, 2009: 53).

Twenty-first century Marseille, like many other Mediterranean cities, is confronted with a new migration challenge for which it is ill-equipped. France has traditionally distributed its population between small towns and rural areas in order to limit the political visibility of migrants. This paradigm began to change in 2015, when French cities saw themselves overwhelmed with increasing poverty levels and unable to respond to rising asylum demands. A by-product of this pressure was a reform of asylum law, whereby having a fixed domicile became a condition to be granted asylum. The demand clashed, however, with a low availability of housing. Consequently, in 2021, the State, Marseille's authorities and local associations came together in a *Contrat territorial d'accueil et d'intégration des réfugiés* (CTAIR-Territorial Reception and Integration Contract) that will give it €300,000 over three years to deploy a localised national

strategy of reception and integration with housing, health and access to basic rights as strategic priorities (Vinzent, 2021).

Rather than challenging the French hypercentralised and security-oriented reception system, which leaves cities with a mere implementing role (Geisser, 2020: 5), the Contract reveals the top-down dependence on local actors for governance of asylum and migration matters (Flamant & Lacroix, 2021: 22) and shields the local pro-migration agenda from less favourable regional politics. The Contract does not however affect Marseille's 'coopération décentralisée', (international engagement), enshrined in the *Code général des collectivités territoriales* (General Code of Regional Authorities), allowing it to sign development or humanitarian cooperation agreements with foreign municipalities and CSOs (Makhlouf, 2021: 16, 27). Despite their salience, the official website of Marseille's International Relations¹ does not make justice yet to the prominent role of CSOs in its decentralised cooperation.

Marseille's migration *municipalism* started with the 2020 electoral victory of the left-wing coalition *Printemps Marseillais* (PM) led by Michèle Rubirola. Rubirola is herself daughter to a family of Napolitanian and Catalan immigrants and has a long professional career both as a doctor and as a representative of the local green party at the *Conseil Départemental* (Department Council) (Rubirola, 2019). Benoît Payan, the original PM candidate, took over her position a few months after the electoral win due to Rubirola's health problems.

The origins of *Printemps Marseillais* as an associational movement explain the shift in the city's approach to migration and asylum and its willingness to collaborate with NGOs, which were never addressed by the previous right-wing government. Representative of that is Mayor Payan's statement from 2021 that honouring the city's long immigration history, Marseille "would never close its port to those who have risked their lives at sea" ("Le Maire de Marseille", 2021). Last year, Marseille also joined the *Association Nationale de Villes et Territoires Accueillants* (ANVITA) network in search of ideas from national and European cities to put in place long-needed public policies in reception and integration (Geisser, 2021: 3). Nonetheless, associations still complain that

¹"Marseille, open on the world": <https://www.marseille.fr/international/marseille-ouverte-sur-le-monde/marseille-open-world>

"Réseaux de villes" : <https://www.marseille.fr/international/relations-internationales/r%C3%A9seaux-de-villes>

the local government does not do enough, which the latter justifies with restrictive legislation and competencies forcing it to establish difficult priorities over socio economic precarity matters and 'accueil inconditionnel' (unconditional reception) (Geisser, 2021: 5-6). One of the organisations that have benefited from this new relationship is *SOS Méditerranée*, which the city council has sought to support in line with its speech of 'transit city' and 'reception place' for victims of historical tragedies (Geisser, 2020: 10).

SOS Med is a transnational European CSO founded in 2015 by citizens who were displeased with the management of irregular migration and the withdrawal of national SAR navies after the Italian *Mare Nostrum* operation in 2014 (Vallat & Taïbi, 2019: 49-50). It is made up of four associations born in France (June 2015), Germany (May 2015), Italy (February 2016) and Switzerland (August 2017) that run the SAR ship *Aquarius* and carry out awareness-raising activities in their respective territories (*SOS Méditerranée*, n.d.). According to Caroline Abu Sa'Da, –Director of SOS Med– the organisation distinguishes itself from other international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) like *Médecins Sans Frontières* or *Save the Children* for its politicised engagement (Fiori, 2019).

Marseille has proved its willingness to collaborate with CSOs and more specifically SAR organisations like SOS Med several times even before the current progressist government. In 2018, still under the leadership of Mayor Jean-Claude Gaudin and with Payan as former leader of the opposition, Marseille already offered *Aquarius* to become its 'port d'attache' (home port), but the national authorities, owners of the port, prevented it (Vinzent, 2020). In August 2020, the city showed again its solidarity with *Sea-Watch 4*, a ship ran by the German counterpart organisation, and opened its port when no one else was willing to. Despite its gratitude with Marseille, *Sea Watch* is critical of the effectiveness of this institutional disobedience, which would not be necessary if national maritime authorities complied with international law (Vinzent, 2020). Lastly, in 2021, Marseille furthered its commitment to save migrants in distress through a donation of €30,000 to SOS Med (Vinstock, 2021). Sophie Beau, co-founder of the organisation has also expressed an ambivalent satisfaction for the private and public donations placing her hopes on city councils to foster a nation-wide response (Vinzent, 2020) similar to Marseille's.

3.3. Sfax and Terre d'Asile Tunisie

Tunisian cities and civil society have been at the centre of the democratic transition and power decentralisation experienced by the country since 2011 (OECD, 2019: 2). Since 1975, cities have had a specific committee for decentralised cooperation and external relations (OECD, 2019: 3) that now aims to show to the world their ongoing reforms. However, this dimension enshrined in Art. 140, Chapter VII, of the 2014 Constitution and Art. 40 of the new *Code des Collectivités Locales* (Code of Local Authorities) has faced many delays due to the latter's low implementation and the dependence on the Ministry for Foreign Affairs' approval of any agreements. Thus, municipalities have little leeway in strategic planning such as migration governance.

The new Code also gives civil society organisations special monitoring responsibilities, which complains of not having been taken enough into account in the Code's drafting process (Natter, 2021: 9). Despite the mistrust between associations and State actors (OECD, 2019: 14), the small field expertise forces many to rely on the public administration. That is why citizens are sceptical of the CSOs capacity to materialise any migration governance reforms (Yerkes & Muasher, 2018: 22-23). Furthermore, conflicts also exist between the Social and Foreign Affairs ministries over the newly created State Secretary for Migration (2011).

In the aftermath of the revolution, many refugees from Libya and sub-Saharan Africa started to flock in for its increased liberties, while Tunisian youth departures for Europe were also soaring (Natter, 2021: 2). In this context, not only local civil society organised to demand a more rights-based approach to racial discrimination, immigration and asylum. The lack of a national asylum law or comprehensive migration strategy explains why despite the fact Tunisia is a signatory of the UN Convention and Protocol on the Status of Refugees, national CSOs, UNHCR and IOM took over migration management. INGOs such as EuroMedRights, *France Terre D'Asile* (FAT) and *Médecins du Monde* (Pastore & Roman, 2020: 8-9) were also attracted promising technical and financial support and competitive positions allowing for the professionalisation of former activists (Cassarini & Waine, 2022).

Hence, civil society has adopted a strategic stance whereby on the one hand teams up with IGOs to lobby for immigrant rights, and on the other one sides with the government against the EU's externalisation policies (Natter, 2021: 13). In general,

however, only a small circle of civil society experts is aware of migration debates and EU-Tunisian negotiations (Natter, 2018: 11,12). Additionally, animosities between Arab countries prevent regional strategic alliances in favour of migrants and local migration governance (Pastore & Roman, 2020: 13-14).

In this context, Sfax has to be singled out from Tunisian cities for its rapid response capacity to support a large and vulnerable immigrant community. Sfax is a regional capital and the second economic pole after Tunis. Despite the city's long history of immigration from Sudan, the Levant, Libya, with Jewish and French communities, and a vibrant civil society fabric devoted to integration, it was only during Covid aid distribution campaigns that their magnitude was unveiled by data collected by associations, the Municipality, and the IOM (Boubakri, 2021: 8).

Since 2016, the Municipality of Sfax hand in hand with *Terre d'Asile Tunisie* and led by ICMPD has developed the first project of urban migration governance in the city. TAT is a branch of FAT, which in 2012 set up its first international permanent mission in Tunisia to transfer its expertise to a new immigration country. In Sfax, it implemented with two other Tunisian cities the project "*Améliorer la coordination de la migration par les acteurs locaux à Sfax*" (ACMALS-Improving the Coordination of Migration by Local Actors, 2018-2021), sustained by the EU, the Swiss Agency for Cooperation, ICMPD, UCLG, and UN Habitat.

During the sanitary confinements, in an unprecedented effort, the Sfax City Council and TAT called on to and coordinated the societal and private sector solidarity with migrants (Cities for Global Health, n.d.). Many other actors like the Governorate of Sfax, the Regional Council, the University of Sfax, the Catholic church, IOM and CSOs were also engaged (Boubakri, 2021: 19). According to TAT and UCLG officers, the quick response provided during the sanitary crisis responds to the experience gained by the municipality through its partnership with ICMPD and TAT (UCLG, 2020).

But it is hard to attribute all the success of ACMALS to the ICMPD leadership given the above-mentioned mistrust between CSOs and the administration. Instead, the good relations between the municipality, the city's associational fabric and other cities could be explained by the personal engagement of Deputy Mayor (DM) Mohamed Wajdi Aydi. DM Aydi is in charge of the city's Decentralised Cooperation and Exterior Relations, and the migration portfolio since 2012, and a member of TAT and *Avocats sans frontières* in

his spare time. As a pro-migrant advocate, DM Aydi has been at the battlefield of advocacy for migrant rights since 2019, when he personally pledged for a legislative migration framework before the MPs for Sfax, the Secretary of State, the diaspora and the immigrant community (Rekik, 2020: 31). During the pandemic, he also negotiated with the national government the stay permits of foreign students and immigrant lease agreements with landlords (Boubakri, 2021: 18). DM Aydi's commitment is the more remarkable given that he belongs to *Ennahda*, a conservative and Islamist political party that has experienced a rapprochement to secular democracy since 2011 (Grewal, 2020).

At the international level, DM Aydi was also behind the initiative to bring regional cities together in a major MC2CM event organised by ICMPD on 25 and 26 June 2019, in Sfax, to discuss the main challenges of municipalities and CSOs in migration governance and mechanisms for cooperation. The event gathered 20 regional cities and over 12 CSOs involved in the 'the right to the city' movement (UCLG, 2019).

It could be said that the top-down organisation of this event by ICMPD speaks to the incapacity of some city councils to do it on their own, but it also begs to think about the effects for national sovereignty and migration governance. It has been argued that the EU and its members use southern CSOs and IGOs to externalise migration. TAT, for instance, has been accused of acting as an intermediary of the EU with the national or local level because of its EU-funded provision of migrant legal assistance to retain them in Tunisia (Cuttitta, 2020: 8). The paternalistic and egocentric discourse put forward by TAT officers that they have "the impression to be the only ones who really do something for the migrants here" (Dini & Giusa, 2020: 77) reinforces the impression that they are trying to establish themselves as the 'good' model. Furthermore, it is true that small NGOs are oftentimes fall into the trap of surrendering to foreign migration management approaches aimed at externalisation in exchange for funds from large IOs (Cuttitta: 2020: 5). As for ICMPD –largely unknown both in Europe and Tunisia– it is an organisation that represents 19 European governments and the coordinator of the EU's border control and externalisation in Tunisia. Thus, the *urban* focus of the MC2CM project and its "multi-level" approach to migration is likely to mask a European intention to shape how Tunisian authorities handle migration through civil society and the city (Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Économiques et Sociaux, 2021: 43).

4. Main findings and policy recommendations

The analysed CERs cases reveal an interest in local governments to fund NGO operations consistent with their migrant reception agendas (i.e. Barcelona-POA and Marseille-SOS Med) and shield one another from criminalisation. Although the detachment of local governments from national authorities does not seem to have as an initial goal to develop city foreign policy, their claim for 'the right to the city' seems to bear an implicit claim for 'the city's right' to take bolder and more autonomous international action. Hence, it could be said that CERs represent the efforts of some Mediterranean cities to deborder themselves and claim sovereignty over the sea as a shared transit space.

From the mayoral and municipal point of view, Marseille and Barcelona are governed by mayors with a social democrat profile and activist background who enjoy rich contacts with civil society that have been furthered throughout their mandates. Both cities seem to have repoliticised migration issues at the city council with the arrival of their current local governments as part of a wider preoccupation for urban politics. But it is not so clear to what extent the colour of local politics alone is the main explanatory variable of the decoupling from the State or to what extent regional and national politics may play a role. This is a possibility that comes to the fore in both cases, but perhaps more evidently in Marseille, where despite its right-wing orientation, the precedent Mayor had already offered its port to Aquarius and it was rather the national government that blocked the proposal. On the contrary, since the victory of PM, the State has signed an unprecedented Contract with the city to support its financial needs including migrant integration and reception, while regional politics have looked away from the problem.

Despite the evolution of these two Mediterranean city councils, the disappointment expressed by civil society with the final scope of migration policy changes points to a more modest detachment from national authorities than what they initially planned and I defined as a broad 'decoupling'. Therefore, a more realistic description of CERs based on the limitations faced by the analysed cities could be in terms of 'decoupling' *intentions* instead of a radical separation. On the one hand, that would still allow us to recognise the remaining multi-level interdependencies created by the centralisation of asylum and immigration competencies in national governments and

the local dimension of migrant reception and integration. On the other, to reclaim more local sovereignty and coordination in a real MLG of migration.

Similarly, in the city diplomacy case of Sfax, the personal motivations of DM Mohamed Wajdi Aydi and his linking role with other governmental levels and civil society explain how Sfax has managed to engage at the international level despite its weak migration governance and international capacities. While the MC2CM experience has to be valued for the capacity that it has to put in contact cities that otherwise would not communicate because of limiting national frameworks and political instability, we also observe that that IGO-led city diplomacy may facilitate the top-down and even foreign control of migration without any intentions to transform State-centric and security-oriented approaches. Yet, to be just it should be said that power dynamics may not change, not only because of State or foreign intervention, but also because of the ambivalent position of CSOs that rely on IGOs for strategic reasons.

Thus, comparatively, CERs allows us to differentiate those IRs that are meddled by national governments without transformative approaches and even with foreign involvement from those that move away from them as observed in the cases of Barcelona-POA and Marseille-SOS Med. As a consequence, without any intentions to downplay city diplomacy, I am still reluctant to use it in migration governance. Alternatively, to avoid competence overlaps, top-down, or foreign control of migration, and enhance the multi-level approach, I would encourage larger power decentralisation and transfer of resources to local governments in foreign relations and migration. This also means finding common communication spaces for local and national governments to negotiate their respective competencies but with guarantees of bottom-up influence based on evidence from local problems and effective practices. This could be the first step towards the establishment of a global juridical framework of city foreign affairs that ensures basic similar capacities, rights and responsibilities and restores trust between local and national governments.

5. Conclusions

The international dimension of cities is becoming more visible and important year after year thanks to their participation in global conferences and compacts on the many challenges of globalisation, from climate change, health, to migration due to their

pragmatic approach and faster response capacity to crises. Migration scholarship has increasingly advocated and detected a 'local turn' (Zapata-Barrero, Caponio & Scholten, 2017) in multi-level migration governance most prominently in Europe, where a number of cities have 'decoupled' their migration policy agendas from the national ones (Scholten & Pennix, 2016: 91, in Garcés-Mascreñas & Pennix, 2016). Whereas most MLG literature has focused on immigration and integration policies, the approach has not been applied to *city diplomacy*, a field that has exacerbated the international community for its contestation of the State's monopoly over migration.

In an attempt to shift from methodological nationalism, this paper has sought to problematise the nation-state connotation born by *city diplomacy*, a concept derived from the International Relations domain, and reaffirm that migration governance is a policy area that is pushing cities to act outside their territorial boundaries. City diplomacy is usually described as the institutions and processes in which local governments partake at the international level to advance their own interests before States (Pluijm, 2007; Levebre and d'Albergo, 2007, in Viltard, 2010: 603). I contend that the *diplomacy* element does not describe well enough the horizontal and decentralised approach (Pimienta, 2019) of some city international relations. With a focus on the mobilisation of Mediterranean cities over the migrant arrivals of the past decade, I proposed *city external relations* –a provisional term– to refer to the actions of municipalities conducted beyond their geographical boundaries with a *decoupling* intention from national authorities. Rather than cancelling one another out, I suggest that city diplomacy and CERs can coexist since they describe different goals and relationships with States at the international level.

Through evidence from three case studies, I have tried to define the limitations of the city diplomacy concept answering to *why* the selected cities allied with ICSSOs to deal with migration governance. The analysis is based on three main dimensions: 1) the relations between the cities and their respective national governments, 2) the role of mayoral and local government leadership, and 3) the contextual drivers of city-ICSSOs alliances. My empirical findings reaffirm the observation of Lacroix, Hombert and Furri (2020) and Bazurli, Caponio and de Graauw (2021) that mayors and local governments can play a determinant role in migration governance and city diplomacy (Pejic, 2020: 66). On that, my theoretical contribution is that they are also responsible for the *decoupling*

of the city's international relations (in migration governance) from national governments. I showcase that through the alliances between the Barcelona City Council and ProActiva Open Arms and Marseille with *SOS Méditerranée*, and contrast it with the Municipality of Sfax's engagement with NGO *Terre d'Asile Tunisie* in the ICMPD-led MC2CM project (Figure 2).

My investigation suggests that mayors and local governments may have decoupling *intentions* (that in practice are more difficult to implement) to ensure migration governance and 'the right to the city' when regional or national politics are reluctant to transfer enough competencies or resources. However, mayoral leadership in city international relations speaks to CERs experiences as much as city diplomacy. Consequently, the difference between the two concepts may be better explained by other inside-out or outside-in factors, as defined by Pejic (2020), like the nature of the city's relationship with the State, the richness of the city's international connections, the length of immigration histories, the existence of shared regional jurisdictional space, or democratic standards allowing international city action without fears of top-down crackdowns. This is not the situation of Tunisian cities, which are surrounded by political instability, weak real power decentralisation and for which migration governance is a new policy area.

Another thing to consider is the extent to which the political orientation of local governments can explain the detachment, as DM Aydi's affiliation to a conservative party has not prevented him from taking pro-migrant action. Besides, IGO-led city diplomacy seems an opportunity that local governments like Sfax may embrace to scaffold their migration governance capacities in the absence of political guarantees from their national government. Consenting to this international alliance may also be a tactic of the national government to portray itself as a young democracy and access resources, even if at the cost of IGOs channelling their migration governance interests in the country.

Regardless of which strategy may be more effective in the long run –either city diplomacy or CERs– and for what purposes, which needs to be explored more in the future, from a scientific point of view, the questionable impact of CERs can only reaffirm that fears over the nation-state's sovereignty loss are unreasonable. Therefore, recalling Dahl and Tufte (1973: 135), States should accept that transferring powers to the subnational level does not necessarily jeopardise their functions as cities may prefer to

avoid animosity between government levels. Finding spaces for dialogue and common points on their respective foreign interests is a first step towards improved local governance without competence gaps or overlaps. In the future, a global statute for city foreign affairs could ensure basic similar rights and competencies to local governments, and clear boundaries between local and national authorities internationally.

But attention should not be confined to local governments. It is also to wonder whether international CSOs/NGOs will become more attached to local governments as an extension of their administration to fill up the international activity that city councils cannot address on their own. Moreover, CERs could be investigated in thematic areas other than migration where national policies also lag behind the local level's initiative and power concessions are small. Acknowledging the limitations of this paper, it should also be noted that similar studies could be conducted with a focus outside the Western Mediterranean to verify whether CERs are unique to this part of the world. Besides, the findings could be enhanced with a diversification of sources including interviews with representatives of each municipality or organisation, and a larger and more even distribution of CER and city diplomacy cases. Lastly, a promising line of investigation for the future is on how city diplomacy may be a strategy to foster the EU's migration externalisation policies.

	Type of international relations	Drivers of the city-CSO alliance	Mayors and Local Governments	City Council-State relations
Barcelona - Open Arms	SAR Operations City External Relations	Limited competencies, lack of funding, criminalisation.	Mayor Ada Colau Political Party: <i>En Comú-Podem</i> : Centre-left, activist background. Repoliticised migration at the City Council.	Higher complicity with the Catalan government than the Spanish one. Local government remains at the margin of nationalist ideologies.
Marseille - SOS Méditerranée	SAR Operations City External Relations	Limited competencies, lack of funding.	Mayor Michèle Rubirola Political Party: <i>Printemps Marseillais</i> : Left-wing coalition.	Animosity between the local government the <i>Conseil Départemental</i> . Cooperation with the central government through a <i>Contrat Territorial</i> .
Sfax - Terre d'Asile Tunisie-ICMPD	Urban migration City Diplomacy	Poor migration governance competencies and funds. Weak democracy and mistrust with the administration.	Deputy Mayor Mohamed Wajdi Aydi Political Party: <i>Ennahda</i> : Conservative, Muslim democrats.	Unfulfilled Code of Local Authorities. 'Decentralised cooperation' requires direct ministerial consent. Civil society is equidistant to the administration and IGOs.

Figure 2. Analytical summary of the three case studies

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