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The path and multi-level dependencies of three second-tier European cities – challenges to local social inclusion efforts

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ABSTRACT

We present a distinct picture of the capacity of municipalities to act when faced with the challenges of migrants' social inclusion, by applying the combined lens of path dependency and multi-level dependency to three second-tier European cities: Cluj-Napoca (Romania), Bologna (Italy), and Halle/Saale (Germany). Based on expert interviews, the case-oriented research addresses facets of local social inclusion policies: the adaptation to migration-related heterogeneity, the provision of services through funds, and the targeting of vulnerable mobile EU citizens. Against the background of intertwined local and supra-local path dependencies, the analysis shows that social inclusion policies are limited due to NGO outsourcing and the short-term nature of policy interventions. The dependencies within the fragmented multi-level governance have adverse effects at the local level and preserve power inequalities in three ways, as elaborated in this article. It, therefore, contributes to the ongoing debates on migration-related institutional challenges and urban governance.

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Introduction

Europe's increasingly heterogeneous societies are experiencing significant changes, with the local level being the central arena for migration and mobility. Governance research has emphasized the “multilevelness” (Scholten & Penninx, 2016, p. 92) of inclusion policies and the key role the local level plays in implementing these policies (Barberis & Angelucci, 2022; Bazurli & Kaufmann, 2023; Scholten, 2018). Local policies for social inclusion address questions of favorable living conditions and emerging needs and conflicts while respecting the conditions set at the regional, national, and European

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level (e.g. Barbarino et al., 2021; Scholten, 2018; Wessendorf & Phillimore, 2019). However, when it comes to developing their strategies within the multi-level arrangement, European cities have varied histories, resources, cultures, and proximities to power centers, defining the capacities for action (Barberis & Angelucci, 2022; Cardoso & Meijers, 2016). So, what drives or hinders the local capacity to act in order to pursue the goal of social inclusion? In seeking an answer to this research question, this article focuses on local capacity for policy-making and action in second-tier cities, under conditions of multi-level intertwined, EU-specific governance mechanisms.

Multi-level governance (MLG) is in place when “(1) different levels of government are simultaneously involved (2) non-governmental actors are also involved at different government levels; and (3) the interrelations thus created (the governance arrangements) defy existing hierarchies and take the form of rather non-hierarchical networks” (Piattoni, 2010, pp. 90–91). Numerous research contributions focus on large cities and metropolitan regions and reach generalized conclusions about the current capacities of local actors within multi-level policy design, stating, for example: “City governments [...] are able to mediate, interpret, and strategically use different, possibly contrasting signals that come from both below and above” (Bazurli & Kaufmann, 2023, p. 1131). To grasp the “nested nature” (Kazepov & Barberis, 2017, p. 302) of the local capacity to act, it is not enough to focus on large cities proximate to political power centers (Cardoso & Meijers, 2016; Loomans et al., 2024). Research on second-tier European cities, small-towns and rural contexts reveals a varied picture of capacities for action. Recent publications indicate resource shortages and the challenging integration and implementation of high-level requirements (e.g. Gajewski & Knippschild, 2024; Pisarevskaya & Hesselmanns, 2025; Schneider & Enßle-Reinhardt, 2024). However, insufficient attention has been paid to how historically and spatially constituted contextual conditions within complex multi-level governance arrangements shape the capacity to implement effective social inclusion policies. Moreover, we argue that multi-level policy frameworks do not simply inform or support local action but are closely bound to the reproduction of power asymmetries, whose consequences for the local implementation of policies remain rarely examined in existing analyses.

Employing a power-distributional perspective, this article investigates the capacities that are available at the local level for the facilitation of social inclusion (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). This perspective considers the path dependency of institutional action to analyze persistent or changing power inequalities in the complex multi-level arrangements behind local social inclusion work. It expands upon common understandings of local social inclusion efforts through applying a lens of both path dependency and multi-level-dependency in three exemplary second-tier European cities: Cluj-Napoca (Romania), Bologna (Italy), Halle/Saale (Germany). The case-oriented research addresses distinct facets of local social inclusion policies that encompass city-specific institutions, political levels, and an entanglement of policy areas: the adaptation to the emerging challenges of migration-related heterogeneity (Cluj-Napoca), the blurred targeting of vulnerable intra-EU citizens (Bologna) and the provision of services through multi-level funds (Halle/Saale). The findings are based on expert interviews across political levels. The analysis focuses on the roles and cooperative efforts of actors at various governance levels and the path dependent options for implementing social inclusion policies and navigating the multi-level setting. An examination of different countries, cultures, and

political systems can help to reveal institutional and cultural characteristics as well as identify similarities in political processes (Morlino, 2018). Across the cases, the evidence indicates that outsourcing to NGOs, the short-term nature of projects, and fragmentation within multi-level governance produce a fragility that constrains local capacities to act and preserves the insufficient status quo for local social inclusion work. This article therefore contributes to research about local institutional challenges and highlights the relevance of debates about the power inequalities that are inherent to today's MLG mechanisms. In particular, the article enriches the discussion regarding the divergent position of second-tier cities in European political discourse.

The article first presents a heuristic framework in line with the state of the art and explains the methodological approach employed. Subsequently, the findings of the three case studies are outlined to illustrate path- and multi-level-dependent inclusion work in each city. The article concludes with a discussion of the options actually available to second-tier cities in the field of social inclusion and highlights the impact of inherent power inequalities.

The path dependencies of multi-level policies for social inclusion at the local level

Institutional action is path dependent against the background of historical circumstances, geography, and the power-political positionality of places and actors (North, 1991). Institutions arise from and are intertwined with concrete temporal processes and are influenced by multiple, sometimes asynchronous, changes occurring across various policy fields (*historical institutionalism*; Thelen, 1999). For example, policy and institutional development is contingent upon prior decisions, experiences, and other critical factors, including financial resources and political will. Prior literature related to social inclusion that employs path-dependency-oriented and power-distributional perspective primarily compares welfare states (e.g. Beyeler, 2003; Bonoli & Palier, 2000; Nullmeier & Kaufmann, 2023) and rarely considers the subnational level (Sorensen, 2018). Today, this framework is gaining increasing traction in urban and migration research (e.g. Barbarino et al., 2021; Budnik et al., 2021), where it is employed, for example, to examine local conflicts as drivers of institutional change.

This perspective enhances analysis that considers power inequalities that exist simultaneously along vertical and horizontal dimensions of policy development and implementation. Prior research has focused on juxtaposing the actions of various actors rather than investigating the interdependencies shaped by historical and spatial contextual conditions at different levels of policymaking (Kazepov et al., 2022). The evolution of European political integration framed by the global neoliberal shift (promoting decentralization, austerity policies and the outsourcing of welfare state tasks) has led to an increased complexity of political and administrative interdependence (Barberis et al., 2019). Analyzing such policies requires navigating between different disciplinary discourses – for instance, here, between urban studies, migration research and political institutionalism – while simultaneously accounting for the specific, multi-level institutional arrangements in which these policies are embedded.

Social inclusion policy, understood here as the set of strategies and measures aimed at ensuring that residents – especially marginalized or newly arrived groups – have equal

access to key resources such as housing, employment, education, healthcare, and opportunities for civic participation, is shaped by this complex institutional environment. A broad range of governmental and non-governmental institutions at all levels influence local social inclusion efforts. They operate with different roles, degrees of competence, and resources that define their capacity to act as an institution's ability to shape policy. In this context, the overall capacity to act of a city or the local level arises from the sum of the capacities of the individual institutions and their corresponding embedding in multi-level institutional arrangements.

At the urban level, the complex setting of regional, national, and European policies (whose development is also a result of power-driven and path dependent histories of the single institutions) converges. The evident "multilevelness" (Scholten & Penninx, 2016, p. 92) in social inclusion efforts produces a dependency on the pathways and gradual transformation processes of the other levels. For example, due to European integration processes, local authorities take on gatekeeping functions that allow access to the social welfare services of the national state (e.g. Tervonen & Enache, 2017); the access of immigrants to local labor markets depends on legal residential status set up and regulated by the national state (e.g. Etzhold, 2017); the local inclusion programs are often limited by a "structural temporality" (Vrăbiescu, 2019, p. 124) and tied to specific goals due to short-term project funding by national and European institutions (e.g. Barberis et al., 2019). Therefore, the achievement of policy goals is also tied to how path dependency at all levels of policy-making impacts finally the capacity of the local level to act.

The literature concludes that two major problems presently characterize multi-level cooperation for social inclusion policies. First, there is a lack of coordination among the different levels of policymaking (van Ostaijen & Scholten, 2018). For instance, the varied responsibilities in various policy fields lead to inconclusive policies. Second, divergent interests and degrees of political will pose a significant challenge (e.g. Engbersen et al., 2017). As present in the reliance on EU funds for the financing of action while allocation depends on policy narrative synchronization between levels, which do not automatically fit the local level (e.g. Magazzini et al., 2019; van Ostaijen, 2020).¹ Although these features are inherently present, migration-related urban and institutional research rarely focuses on the significance of power imbalances across levels and institutions.

Research responds to the growing complexity by highlighting changes in local institutional arrangements and the increasing importance of non-governmental organizations (NGO) involved. One specific complexity is the "civic stratification" of migrant rights, which refers to the pluralization of the statuses, categories, and entitlements of migrants (Hammar, 1990; Kofman, 2002; Morris, 2025). For example, the freedom of movement allows EU citizens to live in any member state, but their vulnerable position as citizens and (temporary) migrants complicates local policy responses that aim at long-term integration (Kunhardt, 2023). Furthermore, cooperative networks arise to readjust local institutional arrangements (Cancedda et al., 2015; Zill, 2023), with NGOs and migrant self-organisations playing a pivotal role in addressing community needs (e.g. Barnard & Fraser Butlin, 2020). Today, local NGOs often serve as important contributors, bridging gaps in service provision, yet their actions depend on the financial and non-material support of state actors (e.g. Wessendorf & Phillimore, 2019).

Migration-related research at the nexus between local action and multi-level governance, however, focuses mainly on large cities. For example, Scholten (2018) concluded

that the dominance of national models of integration, the involvement of many but poorly connected policy levels and the isolated handling of the integration issue in local governance have led to “decoupling or disjointed governance” and therefore, to “a sharp ‘local turn’ in [integration] policymaking” (Scholten, 2018, p. 9; also Bazurli & Kaufmann, 2023; Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017). Major cities “are becoming increasingly entrepreneurial in developing their own integration philosophies and policies” (Scholten & Penninx, 2016, p. 91). To cope with declining welfare states and new public management, local governments increase activities to acquire external funding (Bazurli & Kaufmann, 2023). However, the diverse spatial and political settings in Europe and the ways in which a city’s positionality impacts its responses to challenges are rarely considered (Cardoso & Meijers, 2016; Kazepov et al., 2022; Loomans et al., 2024; Novotný, 2016).

To conclude, the development of social inclusion policy in European cities depends on historical and spatial contextual conditions that are produced and reproduced through institutional action from the local level to the European level. Cities take a variety of approaches to the current challenges that reflect power imbalances among a broad range of governmental and non-governmental actors across political levels. This article extends recent analysis by developing a power-distributional multi-level perspective on social inclusion efforts and placing it within path dependent historical and geographical contexts. This approach contributes case studies of second-tier European cities to enhance discussion of the capacities for local action. The analysis of MLG includes the conditions and actions at the regional, national, and European levels (the vertical dimension) and the corresponding institutional action at the local level (the horizontal dimension), respecting the path dependencies and policy changes of each case (Bazurli & Kaufmann, 2023; Thelen, 1999). This refers to the capacities for action (deemed possible, limited, or non-existent) in the case studies and enables discussion of power inequalities that result from local path- and multi-level dependencies.

Case-based research in different second-tier European cities

Qualitative research, in an interdisciplinary set up and in different European countries poses challenges to the methodological part of this work. This article does not present a variable-based comparison in the classical sense, as has long been customary in most research work. Instead, we present the results of case-oriented analysis (Della Porta, 2012) whose individualized nature seeks to extend the common practices of comparative studies and seeks to contribute to the further development of urban theory (Le Galès & Robinson, 2023). Within the chosen most different system research design (Anckar, 2008; Przeworski & Teune, 1970), we ensure the quality of the approach by defining the local capacity for action as common subject of the research. Using the differentiation along the MLG heuristics described above (horizontal and vertical cooperation between actors) as a common frame for the analysis. In each city, one migration-related challenge is analyzed “with attention to each case as an interpretable whole” (Ragin, 2000, p. 22 in Della Porta, 2012, p. 204) according to the MLG heuristic. delving deeply into the local path dependency and identifying the points that make them unique. The cases were selected based on urgent local issues related to social inclusion, focusing particularly on mobile EU citizens as an often neglected group (Kunhardt, 2023): (1) adaption to migration-related heterogeneity in Cluj-Napoca, Romania; (2) the challenges posed by

the mobility and migration patterns of vulnerable EU citizens in Bologna, Italy; and (3) the provision of services in Halle/Saale, Germany, through the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+). While acknowledging the variation in the specificities of each of the three cases, we make a discursive contribution to updating knowledge production on the influence of institutions on urban life, rather than making a comparison. As outlined above, the focus on the second-tier cities– Cluj-Napoca (RO), Bologna (IT) and Halle/Saale (DE) – also fills in a gap in the research landscape. The economic, political and social role of second-tier cities is often overlooked within the traditional differentiation between major cities and capitals, smaller urban contexts, and rural areas. However, second-tier cities play important roles at the national level, yet they underperform economically and functionally compared with state capitals (Cardoso & Meijers, 2016). [Figure 1](#) outlines the cases and the basic contextual conditions of the cities investigated.

The case-based research design is decidedly qualitative and “justified by its capacity to go beyond descriptive statistical measures, towards an in-depth understanding of historical processes and individual motivations” (Della Porta, 2012, p. 202). The dataset comprises 76 semi-structured interviews conducted with experts in 2021 and 2022. They were selected based on their expert knowledge gained from everyday work. The focus of the interviews was to understand how different institutions and political levels shape policies and how contextual conditions influence decision-making. Therefore, the experts belong to one of three groups: (1) local charitable welfare associations and representatives of foreigners; (2) local, regional, national and European governmental authorities; and (3) intermediate actors such as universities and social enterprises. Interviewees comprise

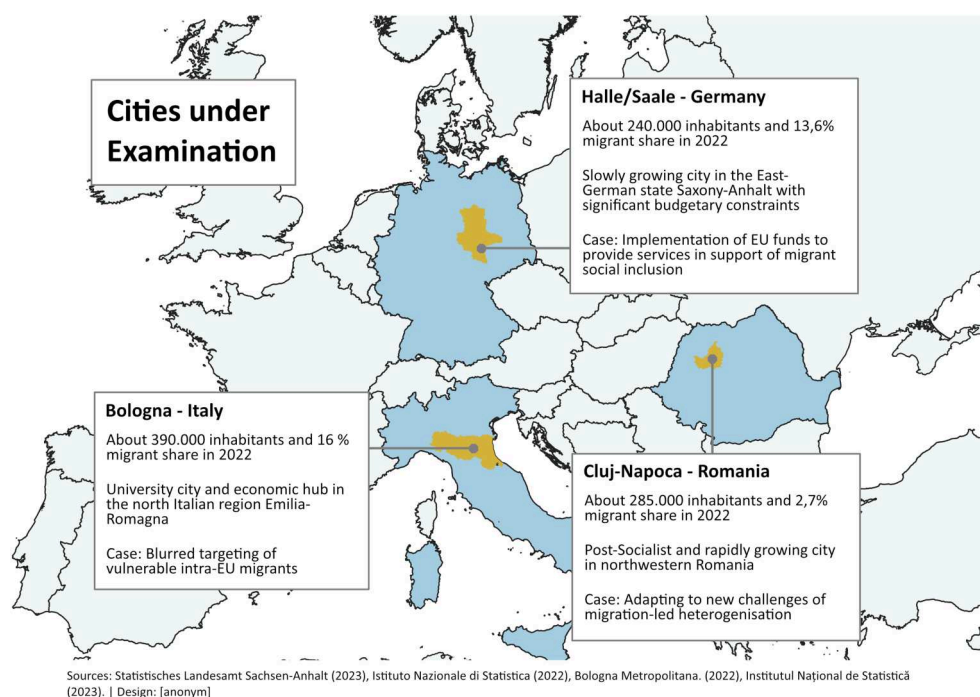


Figure 1. Cases and basic contextual conditions of the cities under examination. Source: the authors.

a mix of middle management, executive level and frontline staff from the institutions involved in the respective topic investigated. Transcripts of the interviews were coded and analyzed via qualitative content analysis (Kohlbacher, 2006) with regard to the role of individual actors, the horizontal and vertical cooperation between the actors and the local path dependency of actions. In line with the research focus, the following presentation of empirical results highlights path dependencies based on historical insights, as well as the specific form of horizontal cooperation within the city and vertical integration with higher political levels in relation to the specific case.

The path and multi-level dependencies of three European cities

Cluj-Napoca: a city in search of cohesive policies

Romania is dominated by profound socioeconomic inequality, which arises from a mixture of push and pull factors. The push largely pertains to the EU integration process, whereas the pull factors stem from the country's communist legacy (Gherghina & Jigla, 2008). Within this spectrum of inequality, Cluj-Napoca stands out as one of the fastest developing cities in Romania, favored for being a large university center close to the Western border. The region has always benefited from superior quality of life, but recent economic development began rather late. Until 2004, extremist nationalistic local administration dominated, fostering interethnic tension and preventing the city from developing (Andreescu, 2003, pp. 59–60). Since then, the pace of transformation has overwhelmed the local community and administration (The Economist, 2018). This comes against a backdrop of historical ethnic diversity resulting from the sizeable Hungarian minority and the smaller German and Roma communities, with increasing rounds of internal migration that bear out the city's reputation as a “a magnet city” (Coşciug, 2021).

Overlapping inequalities, a high degree of mobility, and historical diversity all pose an ongoing and fluid challenge to inclusion. Additionally, an increasing number of external migrants, both from within the EU and from outside, come to Cluj to study, work, or for family reasons, transforming the city's ethnic landscape. The war in Ukraine has led to a significant increase in the number of refugees, generating additional challenges for local authorities. Over time, the initial welcoming response of the local community has gradually shifted toward more ambivalent and critical attitudes regarding the Ukrainian presence in the city – in the words of Kaim et al. (2024), “from compassion to controversy”. This shift is further shaped by the interaction between institutional arrangements and local social dynamics, within a broader context of prolonged uncertainty and transitional tension (Bărbuță & Birou, 2025). The legal provisions that underpin Romania's governance system within the broader EU framework allow and require that each municipality has mechanisms that ensure cohesion and support. Their form must account for local specifics and involve other locally relevant stakeholders within the framework of MLG. Thus, local action is guided by direct interaction with migrants in terms of the legality of their status and the creation of infrastructure to access national and EU funds that aim to accommodate migrants in daily life. However, being relatively new on the public agenda in Romania, social inclusion policies for immigrants are susceptible to falling between the cracks of the governance system. Here, local administration comes

into play, with local responses being highly influenced by the capacity of human resources to understand the challenge, to set up mechanisms in a functioning manner, and to access funding.

In Cluj-Napoca, the municipality has taken increasing responsibility for addressing the primary needs of foreigners. Yet responsibility also lies with the local agencies of national public services (mainly immigrations service), social assistance services, labor and employment institutions, health insurance agencies, and universities, increasing the need for coordination. However, coherent implementation of these governance-specific processes quickly becomes problematic. For instance, some of our interviewees have, since July 2021, been involved in a series of meetings that reflect the multi-stakeholder approach taken at the local level and that aim to draft a local integration strategy for migrants. One interviewee reported that there were difficulties identifying the target groups, since the wording carries normative, political, and empirical significance.

The meetings involved endless discussions about using the terms *refugee* or *immigrant* or rather *expatriates*. (Representative of a research center, RO03)

Further, frontline bureaucrats are poorly equipped for effective interactions with the high number of immigrants, in the context of their daily workload and their professional skills. One interviewee reports a non-EU migrant's account of a stressful experience with an office clerk speaking Romanian, making "his chest go crazy". One representative of the local National Immigration Service office mentioned "the great volume of work, as we are physically limited, [with only] nine people, and the number of immigrants is increasing". A similar point was made by a university representative, who mentions the visa and residence permit assistance that the university must provide to non-EU migrants, especially those

from certain geographic and cultural areas where there are suspicions, [that require] permanent work relationships, or [that pose] even security risks. We need to lobby various embassies, be very careful with various documents and how they are organized. (Coordinator of a university's international programs, RO02)

Within this "fairly unknown space", interpersonal communication among members of the organizations involved often becomes a necessary shortcut to formal communication.

I always approached the individual who was directly responsible within the institution with a friendly and developmental approach. (...) There is an informal network that works very well, meaning we have people with whom, whenever we encounter a problem within that institution, we find solutions together. (NGO representative, RO01)

Confronted with shortcomings in how the administrative layer addresses the social inclusion of migrants at the local level, NGOs in Cluj-Napoca increasingly took a proactive role, providing material, psychological assistance, counselling, Romanian language courses, cultural events, research, legislative initiatives, and other services in support of social inclusion. Other intermediary actors, such as public universities, are in a similar position given their daily interaction with foreigners.

However, insufficient funds for an increasing challenge affects the capacity of these stakeholders. The NGOs are financed mainly by the EU and other international funds, usually channeled through national – local and central – administrators. Yet access to these funds is conditioned by the capacity of the NGOs to write applications, provide

co-financing, and implement projects. Interviewees mention AMIF funds as a particularly important source, but the amounts are insufficient, scheduling is unreliable, and great administrative effort is required. Additionally, NGOs appeal to local donors, including informal communities of foreigners and private businesses or individuals, for financial support. These dynamics restrict the ability of NGOs to provide long-term support since their finances are limited and time and energy must constantly be invested in search for new funding. Poor cooperation across governance levels, between public, private, and third-sector stakeholders, and the high degree of distrust throughout Romanian society also mediate these interactions.

The analysis highlights the positive impact that EU strategies have on fostering of local collective action networks that accommodate mobility-related diversity. As the institution with the primary coordinative role, the municipality highlights the progress made along the strategic lines of action pursued by the EU. International project funding, which includes EU funds, may not cover all expenses, but it helps ensure local cooperation and the creation of a coherent language.

However, superficial implementation of these mechanisms leads to uncertainty about who is supposed to play each role, as well as to shortcomings in the allocation of proper human and financial resources. This hinders local capacity to coherently and sustainably pursue social inclusion goals set by the EU. In the horizontal dimension, NGOs that assist migrants still have the perception that formal cooperation mechanisms, enacted by legislation, do not sufficiently enhance their capacity to provide services to migrants. This adds to the underlying problem that the social assistance system addresses immigrants in the same way it addresses Romanian citizens, granting social benefits according to fixed social and income criteria, with insufficient consideration for the specific challenges immigrants face.

The case of Cluj-Napoca shows that the growing challenge posed by immigration requires coherent coordination along the vertical dimension and proper support for stakeholders along the horizontal dimension. Due to the city's historically diverse nature and the high capacity of its NGOs to act and to cooperate with public institutions, Cluj-Napoca still benefits from a high level of community awareness regarding social inclusion challenges. Yet shortcomings related to MLG and financial mechanisms prevent the city's potential from being exploited fully.

Bologna: vulnerabilization via blurred targeting of mobile EU citizens

Italy is characterized by longstanding spatial divides (Putnam et al., 1993). More than twenty years of reforms to its regionalist structure have strained systems of spatial checks and balances, placing multilevel governance under pressure across multiple policy areas (Kazepov, 2008; Kazepov et al., 2022). Immigration governance is no exception, and this field is characterized by a complex interplay between vertical and horizontal actors. Vertically, state institutions and their local branches oversee key immigration policies (e.g. those related to visas and residence permits), but they also affect local integration processes (Pannia et al., 2018). Nevertheless, in the absence of a coherent national integration strategy, the definition and implementation of immigration policy are largely delegated to local actors, where outcomes depend on their institutional capacity, available resources, and governance networks (Barberis et al., 2017).

Emilia-Romagna, a region known for its economic strength, is a significant destination for both domestic and international migrants. In Bologna, the regional capital, some 15% of inhabitants are foreign nationals – with Romanians forming the largest foreign community. The city attracts a wide range of foreigners, including professionals, students, forced migrants, and labor migrants. While the area is often seen as a hub with welcoming migrant policies (Sperandio, 2025), the growing diversification of migration poses challenges to the MLG of integration policy. The blurred – if not reluctant – national focus on integration, coupled with local difficulties in managing diverse needs, undermine local inclusion. In general, the social condition of migrants in Italy is worse than in other EU countries, with processes of subordinate integration that increase their vulnerability (Campomori & Caponio, 2015; Tuckett, 2015). Mobile and migrant EU groups are no exception, as confirmed in this research, according to interviewees' experience of defining practices and implementing national norms: while they are internally diverse (including populations such as Romanian Roma and Polish caregivers), they share an ambiguous status under current policies. While EU citizenship should grant stronger entitlements to these groups, interviewees confirm that they are rarely explicit subjects of targeted policies due both to the lack of specific policy targeting at national and local level, and to related policy practice, particularly in immigrant integration policies, thereby increasing their exposure to processes of vulnerability.

The fieldwork, highlights three main governance challenges that affect this group: a siloed approach to governance, the category-based nature of Italy's welfare state, where emerging and new categories (like the one of new accession countries) find hardly space in path dependent regulation and practice, and the lack of integration between top-down and bottom-up policy frameworks. Regional and municipal authorities play key roles in Italy's regionalist system, with regions having full jurisdiction over welfare policies. This framework requires intricate coordination between local and national bodies to provide services and address the needs of immigrants. Bologna has a history of prioritizing local welfare investment through collaborative governance models that involve public, private, and non-profit organizations. However, this approach is often constrained both by structural issues within the national welfare system and by ongoing cuts to public spending (Giovanardi & Silvagni, 2021). Limited resources and a limited focus on welfare investment characterize the "passive subsidiarity" of Italian welfare, where responsibilities are shifted to civil society organizations and local authorities without sufficient provision of resources (Barberis et al., 2017). This results in uneven access to welfare. Moreover, new public management principles add complexity, leading to inconsistent funding and measures that undermine the addressing of migrants' needs (Barberis et al., 2019).

In terms of horizontal governance, Italy's immigration policies depend heavily on NGOs, which play a key role in planning, implementing, managing, and advocating for migrant services (with and without the cooperation of public authorities). Emilia-Romagna is recognized for its particularly generous welfare provisions and its effective coordination mechanisms. The region emphasizes the alignment of priorities, knowledge, and equitable treatment across its governance networks:

The public sector ensures that different individuals are not treated unequally. It's not easy, but [...] an example: if a reception facility were run solely by an association, it could decide

to admit blond people rather than those with dark hair. However, since many of our reception facilities are managed by the public sector and then delegated to cooperatives, such distinctions cannot be made. (Public company for welfare services, IT12)

Despite this, an institutional silo culture persists in which policy-specific bodies struggle to collaborate across institutional boundaries. This is particularly visible in interactions between social services and health services. This general situation vulnerabilises EU mobile citizens, as they are often misrecognized by key agencies – including health services – limiting their access to welfare. This fragmentation pertains to both the institutional regulation of this target group (regulations aimed to implement their rights) and the daily practice of mid- and street-level bureaucrats – harmful for highly vulnerable groups with overlapping social challenges.

The Regional authority needs to enhance its coordination activities, particularly in promoting networks with the Local Health Agency and designated contacts in the Health District. Providing guidelines alone is not enough. [...] At the metropolitan level, there is a challenging dialogue between the ASP [Health Agency], the municipality, and the broader health sector. (IT12)

Another factor is the category-based nature of Italy's welfare system, which only deems certain groups to be “deserving” of support (Kazepov, 2010). This system affects newcomers and marginalized minorities, such as Roma, who experience significant discrimination and racialized measures. Being an EU Roma may be particularly disadvantageous, as EU mobile citizens are often overlooked in targeted policies, that define specific recipients.

It's clear that a non-EU national faces issues with residence permits. However, non-EU nationals are monitored more closely, and efforts are made to regularize their status because the penalties are harsher. On the other hand, EU nationals, who are free to move, are more likely to remain unregistered. (NGO representative, care sector, IT05)

The targeting of migrant welfare recipients is largely based on long-standing path dependencies. The 2004 enlargement of the EU, which saw countries with significant migration to Italy become EU members, has not yet been fully integrated into policy categories, jeopardizing access to established welfare categories for many EU mobile citizens. Specific status-related conditions (e.g. those of EU mobile citizens) lack general solutions if they cannot be classified within established categories. This is particularly evident in housing and healthcare access. What is more, despite national and regional narratives depicting Bologna as a “multicultural” city (Tarabusi, 2022), local institutions sometimes display racially biased attitudes. Nonetheless, Bologna offers relatively better case management for under-protected vulnerable individuals due to its last-resort services, and while these services are limited, they are considered valuable by local stakeholders.

The low-threshold social service is an innovative concept. Within Italy, it exists only in Bologna, and it serves people who are non-residents, those living in shelters, and those registered at a virtual address or in temporary housing. (IT12)

Another major issue concerns the interaction between top-down and bottom-up approaches to welfare provision. While regional and local authorities often excel in welfare delivery, they operate within a constraining national framework. Local-level coordination and participation are not always supported by a legal framework that

fosters effective and inclusive practices. This limitation jeopardizes the sustainability of local innovations. Two critical factors arise in this context: resource allocation and policy priorities.

Street-level bureaucrats, a substantial portion of the interviewees, often perceive resources such as funding and staffing to be insufficient. These professionals work in sectors where the demand for services continually outstrips supply. Italy's recent welfare retrenchment and urban austerity, exacerbated by economic and syndemic crises, have had a profound impact on local welfare provisions, reinforcing a neoliberal agenda. This also explains why the inclusion of "new" categories – like EU mobile citizens – is so challenging.

If you ask municipalities and health authorities, they'll tell you they can't hire anyone, or can only hire very few people due to bureaucratic constraints and limited resources. Even if one personally supports full public management, it's costly. (Public, metropolitan level, social assistance, IT01)

Concerning policy priorities, there is often a mismatch between national and local government agendas. Political cleavages and their spatial dimensions mean that local integrative and welfare-oriented strategies are not always supported by national frameworks. This misalignment is worsened by the influence of nationalistic and anti-immigration ideologies that have affected national politics in recent years. This situation also affects EU mobile citizens: while the targeting of this additional group of migrants for integration policies and services is legitimate within the framework of EU law, it is not always politically or institutionally viable.

Great work was done on this issue about ten to fifteen years ago, with many local projects focused on care work and migrant women. Much of this progress has been lost in recent years. (IT01)

The MLG framework, with its inadequate spatial checks and coordination mechanisms, is a major factor in the inefficacy of migration and welfare management. Despite Bologna's relatively effective welfare system, the integration of EU mobile groups – which fall outside the standard welfare categories – remains a challenge. The enhancement of coordination and targeting in public-public and public-private partnerships is essential to address the complexities of MLG. Local and civil society efforts, while significant, are often hampered by category-based measures that fail to meet the specific needs of vulnerable groups, revealing the limitations of the current institutional framework in upholding core EU liberties.

Halle/Saale: a city stuck in reactive problem-solving

Although Germany is one of the wealthiest EU member states, its prosperity is distributed unevenly among its cities. The legacy of the "German division" is still present in Eastern Germany and impacts development processes, as is the case in Saxony-Anhalt, where the case city is located. After post-socialist upheaval and difficult transformation, Halle/Saale has re-established itself as an educational hub, with an economy reliant on industry and logistics. However, the city has endured tight budgetary constraints for many years, and it is under pressure to acquire additional financial resources to overcome the problems of low wages, growing right-wing populism, and an ageing society.

Attracting people to the city and opening local society is challenging. After massive losses, the population has grown steadily since 2010, mainly due to immigration (Stadt Halle/Saale, 2022). To cope with the influx of refugees in 2015, the municipality reorganized the local governance of migration, utilizing the policies and professional networks that have been established since the 1990s. The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) plays a crucial role in enabling the municipality to help immigrants – primarily intra-EU migrants and refugees – and to engage in local discourse on the ongoing heterogenization. Given its precarious financial situation, “this region lives from ESF + alone in the social sector” (representative of local authority, GE05), e.g. the sector that addresses integration into the labor market, poverty alleviation, neighborhood conflicts, and anti-racism work. However, in recent years, the local capacity to use the ESF + has been shrinking, with serious consequences for local social measures. This reduction mainly results from the absence of channels to communicate implementation problems vis-à-vis other political levels, the overburdening of implementation partners due to funding logic, and the growing problem of providing the co-financing shares.

German municipalities are not obligated to undertake the task of social inclusion. Under German federalism, the regional level (“Länder”) regulates budgetary allocation for mandatory and voluntary tasks. A municipality can develop its own policies for voluntary tasks, but it must also finance them. In addition, the EU and the nation-state each aim to intervene in cities with their own policy approaches in form of programmed funding. This creates a complex web of responsibilities, payment options, and co-funding obligations that the local level must navigate in order to realize measures.

For example, the ESF + is implemented under the premise of shared management, a highly regulated mechanism that governs cooperation in European policymaking. Based on contractual agreements between the EU and its member states, the national and regional levels each have their own operational programs, which can be drawn upon by local actors and which are linked to co-financing contributions. In the 2021–27 funding period, Saxony-Anhalt moved to the Region in Transition category and must therefore now contribute 40% of the funds instead of the previous 10% (with co-financing burdens shared among municipalities and NOGS). Influence on funding guidelines is possible through formal (e.g. consultations and project reports) and informal channels (e.g. personal contact and thematic alliances). However, despite the participatory approach to fund design, regional ministerial bureaucrats dominate ESF + policy production and bend local requirements and issues to fit current EU narratives.

Saxony-Anhalt (including Halle/Saale) is performing below average in terms of utilization of the fund, with actors at the regional level wondering whether the state can afford the “luxury” of ESF + projects in the future:

Do I want [...] to afford [these projects]? Or do I just say: Yes, okay, in times of tight budgets it might be a nice-to-have, but right now I have to focus on mandatory tasks, on what is really necessary. (Representative of regional authority, GE08)

The loss of regional ESF + funding would end a large portion of voluntary social work in Halle/Saale. At the local level, ESF + projects are implemented by NGOs in collaboration with the municipality. The NGOs are large and long-standing welfare organizations that are able to devote sufficient time, personnel and bureaucratic capacity:

You have to legitimize everything, prove everything. It's so detailed. [...] We have [...] to prove that we bought paper clips from the cheapest supplier. (NGO representative, GE15)

In recent years, many NGOs have withdrawn from ESF + implementation as they were no longer able to manage the competition and high effort required. Aside from implementing projects, NGOs serve as important informants and co-designers and contribute a significant amount of unpaid work to local welfare development. By standing up for people who are not (yet) able to participate in local discourses, they draw the attention of city officials to new problems and tackle future challenges. However, advocacy and the preparation of applications are not covered by project funding, and these tasks increasingly burden non-state actors.

The same is true for participation in the long-established networks that bring together NGOs and city officials. By organizing networks, the municipality has a stake in local problem-solving without investing any money. Many interviewees from the city emphasized their role as moderator:

By managing the networks, we can ensure that the problems are not neglected, but that they are tackled together with the NGOs in the city. But additional capacities that go beyond this [...] are not really possible. (Representative of the municipality, GE07)

Both governmental and non-governmental actors must deal with the persistent fact that pressure is high, problems are complex, and the financial situation is critical. This leads to very precarious work in social policy. The city administration diverts internal resources and staff away from other tasks to ESF + processing. But bureaucratization, pay increases driven by inflation, and a lack of popularity for social issues in politics all make this increasingly difficult. At the same time, professional non-governmental project workers often survive on project funding alone and become drained by chain contracts, professional and private insecurity, and unpaid work for networks, project applications, and advocacy.

Above all, the expectations placed upon us by politics and the state are enormous. I think that we will manage it all. However, extra hours are piling up. (NGO representative, GE09)

When it comes to migration-related issues, Halle/Saale is stuck in a perpetual loop due to limited-term project funding and (unpaid) work by social organizations. This severely limits the sustainability of solutions for social problems and the strategic pursuit of policy approaches. Throughout the years, a system has developed that depends on additional financing through policy programs from within MLG. In the system of negotiating policy objectives among political levels, there is a considerable lack of sensitivity to the decisive role of local action and an ignorance of current conditions for implementation.

In a path dependent environment of permanent austerity, the city can act because municipal officials achieve a keen awareness of activities in the city by absorbing the intellectual work of NGOs. Professional advocacy work, mutual learning in networks, and the willingness to engage in temporary projects have created and maintained the local capacity to act. However, the voluntary work of NGOs is exploited in a one-sided power imbalance, leading to the threat of burnout and to the withdrawal of involved organizations. NGOs are dependent on the goodwill and project funding of authorities to continue their work for target groups.

The scope for local action is limited, and it requires an ongoing flow of funding applications. Higher-level actors employ rhetoric about a participatory approach to policy development, while the municipality of Halle/Saale and the NGOs rarely can reach out to decisive actors. In particular, they lack the resources (in terms of time and money) to compete for the attention of policymakers and to be involved in policy design. The ongoing challenges of post-socialist transition perpetuate the local narrative that the performance of other regions and cities cannot be matched. It is a fatal cycle, since resources can only be obtained by investing resources to navigate the political levels of the nation-state and the EU.

Discussion: limited capacities for action due to persistent power inequalities

The objective of the analysis was to investigate the capacities for local action in the context of intertwined multi-level efforts for social inclusion. The discussion aims to initiate dialogue among the cases (Cluj-Napoca, Bologna, Halle/Saale) to assess the impact of local path and multi-level dependencies and to frame the debate with a power-distributional perspective. The historical and spatial contextual conditions of the second-tier cities examined point to markedly different pathways, and the selected policy subjects refer to varied multi-level dependencies. However, in all three cases, dependencies are produced and reproduced within fragmented MLG that preserves power imbalances and obstructs local action. Therefore, the analysis of path and multi-level dependencies demonstrates striking similarities with regard to the limits of local capacities for action. As a result, the local responses to current challenges are extremely fragile in all three cases. These patterns are reflected in the empirical findings presented in the section above. It documents how local actors in Cluj-Napoca, Bologna, and Halle/Saale translate multi-level constraints into concrete policy practices. [Table 1](#) summarizes the findings.

Table 1. Capacities for local action against multi-level and path dependencies in the case studies. Source: the authors.

Cluj-Napoca	Bologna	Halle/Saale
Adapting to new challenges of migration-led heterogenisation	Blurred targeting of vulnerable intra-EU migrants	Implementation of EU funds to provide services in support of migrant social inclusion
Path dependency Recent rapid economic growth; establishing migration and integration policies	Solid economy and regional welfare system; continuous migration and integration policies	Debts from the post-socialist transformation and slow economic growth; continuous migration and integration policies
Multi-level dependency Post-socialist transformation / communist legacy (e.g. distrust); EU accession, decentralization, dependence on EU funding	Conflictual (non-)integration of Italian regional and national policy frameworks; EU accession and new intra-EU mobility patterns	German federalism; EU policies for European cohesion and shared management, dependence on EU funding
<i>Fragmented MLG:</i> lack of coordination, inconclusive distribution of competence, differing interests, inconsistent policy/legislation		
Capacities for local action		
Short-term solutions due to lack of competence, resources and political will; outsourcing to and utilization of NGOs and other actors (e.g. universities)		
= <i>Fragility in local policy responses and insufficient problem-solving</i>		

The impact of local path dependency can be illustrated by a look at the economic circumstances and the development of local policy approaches to social inclusion. The evidence indicates that local capacity to act can change positively over an extended period of time, e.g. due to economic prosperity or political will, but it can also be restricted by negative local contextual conditions. For example, Cluj-Napoca experienced a relatively brief period of economic expansion, during which the institutional benefits were not fully realized. Also, current immigration still necessitates the establishment of social inclusion policies, novel network structures and mutual learning about tasks. Bologna has developed considerable economic activity accompanied by an influx of (short-term) residents, migrant and non-migrant. This economic prosperity facilitated the establishment of social inclusion policies and a stable regional welfare system at the local level. However, the current approaches are insufficient for the needs of vulnerable EU citizens. In Halle/Saale, migration-related policies for social inclusion were adopted in the early 1990s and have provided an important basis for addressing new social inclusion challenges since 2015. However, due to the financial obligations that result from the post-socialist transformation, local action is tied to mandatory responsibilities and external funding.

Over the past three decades, the European integration process and the neoliberal reform of national welfare systems have led to a growing interdependence among political levels in Europe (“multilevelness”, Scholten & Penninx, 2016, p. 92). In the cases of Halle/Saale and Cluj-Napoca, EU integration processes and policies were catalysts for the development of local cooperative relationships and remain central to the financing of social policy. In Cluj-Napoca, access to EU financial and institutional mechanisms pushes the adaptation of the local institutional framework to fit the necessities of EU politics, yet does not guarantee their efficient implementation. In Halle/Saale, meanwhile, European politics are an indispensable source of local action regarding social heterogenization.

However, in each case presented (Cluj-Napoca, Bologna, Halle/Saale), the reliance on supra-local pathways and decisions had adverse effects on local capacities for action. To deal with the policy areas addressed, it is imperative that local actors consider regional, national and European legislation and policies however, this legislation and policy is often inconsistent, conflicting and conditional. This is evident in features such as group definition within the context of migration policy (Cluj-Napoca, Bologna) and the allocation of resources for the advancement of social issues (Halle/Saale, Bologna).

Overall, local capacities for action are produced and reproduced within fragmented governance that preserves power inequalities. This fragmentation is reflected in the parallelism of state regulations and the inconsistent distribution of tasks among the levels. Furthermore, there are growing numbers of both players and opportunities to influence decision-making, and a plurality of (state and non-state) funding options that lead to a continuous increase in competition for money and attention. In contrast with large cities, second-tier cities have a significantly lower position in MLG hierarchies, which has a detrimental effect on cooperative relationships. From a power-distributional perspective, the multi-level system is interspersed with (process) hierarchies that distinguish between state and non-state actors and assign different decision-making powers that depend on the level and type of actor. Conversely, local capacities

for action are determined by the ability of local actors to know their position in the hierarchies, to navigate the corresponding range of possibilities, and to act on them. For instance, by relying solely on EU funds in the area of social inclusion, Halle/Saale must limit itself to EU narratives and their reproduction at national and regional levels – without being able to address the inadequacy of policies for problem-solving. Cluj-Napoca has little opportunity to influence the design of Romania's decentralization projects, leaving the city's responsibilities undefined vis-à-vis those of the state. The case of Bologna shows that despite economic prosperity and an adequate regional welfare system, the lack of integration between top-down and bottom-up policy frameworks restricts local initiatives that support mobile EU citizens. However, fragility and the inevitability of short-term solutions still result from insufficient resources for social inclusion and the lack of competence at the local level. Due to the dependency that occurs in the fragmented multi-level arrangement, there is a notable *absence* of autonomy that would otherwise enable strategic or long-term approaches. In all three cases, the current institutional setting, based on the responsabilisation of non-state actors as the implementers of short-term policies, allows the situation to largely stagnate. NGOs are deployed as partners and sometimes react to the inability of state actors, as in Cluj-Napoca. They contribute important knowledge and competence, draw attention to subjects and people's needs, and force (local) state actors to engage and debate them. However, these activities are increasingly taken for granted, without recognizing the growing precarity in this sector. In particular, the temporary nature of policies leads to working conditions that induce stress, personal and professional insecurity, and unpaid work. In an expression of power inequalities, the state's involvement and knowledge are based on the intellectual work that NGOs perform while not being granted equal status in the policy formulation and without their working conditions being prioritized.

To conclude, in the current setting that results from specific historical and spatial contextual conditions, the second-tier cities under consideration cannot avoid short-term policies (funded and shaped by national and European programs) and outsourcing to NGOs. Fragmented governance with regard to the issues described above does not allow these cities to escape their own path dependency (Halle/Saale, Cluj-Napoca) or even to take advantage of it (Bologna). Rather, multi-level dependency cements the horizontal and vertically evident power imbalance within the governance of social inclusion issues. Responsibility for problem-solving always lies at the local level, while higher political levels are unaware of the constraining local conditions in the field of social inclusion policy.

Conclusion

This analysis has clarified how cities actually act within multi-level governance arrangements and identified the structural conditions that constrain the development of long-term solutions to social inclusion challenges. Across all three cases, sustainable policy trajectories fail to emerge because local action is embedded in an interlocking configuration of local and multi-level path dependencies structured by persistent power imbalances. These imbalances systematically disadvantage the local level and the actors responsible for policy implementation, thereby delimiting the scope, temporality, and effectiveness

of local capacities for action. Power inequalities are thus not residual or accidental features of governance, but constitutive conditions through which local action is shaped. They become evident in three analytically distinct, yet interrelated, ways.

- (1) *Path dependent positional inequalities*: From a path dependency perspective, cities and institutions are positioned unequally within multi-level governance systems from the outset. Historical trajectories, institutional legacies, and accumulated resources generate differentiated starting positions that shape the ability of cities and institutions to compete for policy influence, financial resources, and political attention. These positional advantages and disadvantages tend to be reproduced over time through established policy routines, funding mechanisms, and evaluation criteria. Within the current configuration of European multi-level governance, there are no systematic initiatives or corrective mechanisms designed to counterbalance these cumulative dynamics, allowing unequal capacities for action to stabilize across cities and institutions.
- (2) *Vertical power asymmetries in decision-making*: Vertically, the local level is primarily assigned the role of contractor and is addressed as a single, internally homogeneous governance entity. While indispensable for policy implementation, the local level occupies the weakest position in decision-making hierarchies, typically entering the policy process only after strategic objectives, regulatory frameworks, and funding conditions have been defined at higher levels. This vertical sequencing of decision-making systematically limits local discretion and reinforces dependency on supra-local priorities, constraining the possibility of locally driven, long-term, and context-sensitive policy development.
- (3) *Horizontal redistribution of responsibility without power*: At the horizontal level, the inadequacies of multi-level governance are increasingly compensated through the involvement of non-state actors. NGOs provide essential expertise, institutional memory, and implementation capacity in the field of social inclusion, effectively stabilizing policy delivery under conditions of fragmentation. However, their intellectual and organizational contributions are incorporated without a corresponding redistribution of decision-making authority, financial stability, or institutional recognition. Responsibility is thus shifted toward non-state actors while power remains concentrated elsewhere, producing a persistent mismatch between contribution and control.

The article's most different system research design provided important empirical findings revealing the parallels in the possible capacities for action despite the uniqueness of each city and the differences between the specific cases. Despite the formal opportunities within European multi-level governance, cities struggle to navigate the fragmented arrangements in ways that would enable strategic learning or sustainable policy trajectories. The resulting equilibrium is not merely fragile but structurally constrained, characterized by short-term interventions, project-based solutions, and limited capacity for institutional consolidation. Rather than constituting a substantive re-scaling of authority, the frequently invoked "local turn" materializes primarily as a continuation of outsourcing practices and the displacement of responsibility. The threefold power inequalities identified in this analysis therefore call for more

analytically grounded debates in both research and policy practice concerning positionality, authority, and decision-making power in the governance of social inclusion in European second-tier cities.

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Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to privacy and ethical restrictions supporting data is not available.

Use of large language models, AI and machine learning tools

LLM (ProWritingAid, DeepL) was used to assist with spelling, grammar and translation correction.

Research ethics and consent statement

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. The interviews focused on their professional expertise and did not involve sensitive or identifiable personal information.

Note

1. The research project AIM developed policy recommendations to improve local adaptation of European social policies; see Kullmann and Kunhardt (2023).

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