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The role of sub-national actors in coordinative Europeanisation: insights from the digitalisation of asylum services

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Abstract

Coordinative Europeanisation is a powerful frame to explain the rapid response of EU institutions in times of permanent emergency. So far, though, little is known about sub-national actors' role in this process. Moving away from a state-centric approach, this article investigates the role of sub-national actors through the case study of the digital provision of services to asylum seekers. Given the field's high salience and state-centric nature, this article elucidates the critical role of European sub-national actors, particularly at the municipality level, to accelerate the digital provision of services to refugees. Comparing 3 European cities (Paris, Palermo and Malaga), we argue that sub-national actors can play a role in coordinative Europeanisation and that 2 main mechanisms may enable it. In the cases observed, discursive coordination around humanitarian duty facilitated the emergence of similar digital solutions across countries. Subsequently, horizontal and vertical networking was used by sub-national actors to legitimise their actions and enhance their anchoring in processes of coordinative Europeanisation.

Keywords Coordinative Europeanisation · Asylum · European Union · Digitalisation · Discursive institutionalism · Public services

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Introduction

Do sub-national actors play a role in processes of coordinative Europeanisation? If so, how do they participate in these processes? Coordinative Europeanisation is “a bottom-up process where the member states are actively involved by the European Commission in the policy-making process early on to guarantee the highest level of implementation possible” (Ladi and Wolff 2021, p.32). Observed during crises like Covid-19, Brexit or Russia’s war on Ukraine, it is characterised by a swift, coordinated answer and informal processes where states play an essential role and coordinative leadership is endorsed by the European Commission (Ladi and Wolff 2021). This mode of cooperation is neither supranational nor intergovernmental but an approach that involves direct consultations on emergency solutions, enabling the EU to reach “good enough” outcomes (Ladi and Polverari, this issue).

The strengthening of national executives during crises, observed at European and member-state levels (Moury et al. 2021), reflects a trend towards centralisation to manage unexpected events (Hegele and Schnabel 2021). At the same time, research indicates that sub-national actors—local governments, regions, cities, and civil society organisations (CSOs)—are often better positioned for swift responses in Europe (Panebianco 2022), as evidenced during the Covid-19 pandemic, where they played key roles in containment strategies in Germany (Kuhlmann and Franzke 2022) and Spain (Navarro and Velasco 2022). This article explores sub-national actors’ roles in the coordinative Europeanisation of digital services for asylum seekers and refugees, noting a significant shift towards digitalisation across the EU during the pandemic. All 27 European Union (EU) countries witnessed a significant transition towards digitalisation throughout the pandemic. This involved digitalising existing services or establishing new ones to support third-country nationals (TCNs) in diverse ways, from providing AI-led language translation to accelerating the digitalisation of first asylum procedures. These developments are noteworthy because few migration and integration documents mentioned digitalisation, despite the EU launching the Digital Strategy in 2015, the Digital Education Action Plan in 2018, and the adoption of the European Data Strategy in 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic heightened the importance of these policy initiatives. It urged the EU to link access and refugees’ rights with better service design and the EU’s core values and responsibilities. This is visible in broad strategies such as the Digital Compass Initiative or the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and integration policies and instruments, such as the 2021–2027 Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion or the EU Pact for Migration and Asylum. The Ukraine crisis further emphasised the EU’s commitment to digital connectivity for refugees, involving significant coordination between the European Commission, the European Parliament, and telecom operators (European Commission 2023).

Although sub-national actors initiated or actively supported digitalisation for asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants under national authority leadership, their roles are not included in the conceptualisation of coordinated Europeanisation (Ladi and Wolff 2021). We address this by hypothesising that sub-national actors contribute to coordinative Europeanisation during permanent emergencies, especially in areas



like migration and asylum involving numerous actors. Subsequently, we explore how those actors interact with national and supranational levels of government in the digitalisation of asylum services in the EU.

Methodologically, we combine content analysis of EU and local digitalisation strategies in Paris, Malaga, and Palermo with 12 semi-structured interviews to trace digital service implementation for asylum seekers and refugees. While Covid-19 accelerated digital Europeanisation, our analysis also covers the 2015 and Ukrainian refugee crises, when sub-national actors were front-liners in crisis response.

Our contribution is twofold. Conceptually, we enrich the debate on coordinative Europeanisation as a “new mode of Europeanization” (Ladi and Wolff 2021; Ladi and Polverari, this issue), highlighting sub-national actors’ roles in coordination. Empirically, we investigate digitalisation in asylum services, a topic receiving less scrutiny despite the “techno-hype of migration research” (Tazzioli 2023). It includes examining the emergence and diffusion of digital policies in migration governance, which has attracted scholarly attention even in the study of European integration (Pellizza and Loschi 2023) but lacks detailed analysis (Misa and Schot 2005), especially at the local level.

We argue that sub-national actors may, to varying degrees that depend on their institutional structure, size or political orientation, play a role in the coordinative Europeanisation of digital services through discursive coordination on humanitarian duty and network coordination. Humanitarian duty focuses on supporting vulnerable groups, which is different from the politically oriented civic duty, and from the community solidarity that we may find in associative duty. Moreover, while humanitarian duty is international and does not know state borders, civic duty is often confined to a state-centric definition and derived from citizenship rights (Reid-Henry 2014). This study shows that both discursive and network coordination—horizontal and vertical—were crucial for engaging in Europeanisation. The networking dynamics and their effectiveness varied across the cases, reflecting differences in state structures and digitalisation progress, including the direction of coordination efforts.

After discussing the contested role of sub-national actors in migration governance, we outline our methodology and analyse coordinative Europeanisation processes in Paris, Palermo, and Malaga. The conclusion reflects on the implications of our findings for the research agenda on coordinative Europeanisation.

The contested role of sub-national actors in times of emergency

Our study deals with a paradox observed when examining the roles of sub-national actors in the context of so-called refugee crises. Cities, regions, and CSOs have become frontline actors, experts and innovators in delivering public services to refugees and asylum-seekers (Campomori et al. 2023; Panebianco 2022; Navarro and Velasco 2022). However, their capacity to influence a more humane approach to asylum and migration governance clashes with the prevailing welfare chauvinism and limited changes within the Common European Asylum System at the national and EU level (Kriesi et al. 2024; Hadj-Abdou and Petracchin 2022).



On the one hand, European sub-national actors have shown expertise and legitimacy in managing refugee crises, notably during the Ukraine crisis when 4 million refugees sought protection in Europe. Limited resources and the absence of cohesive EU and national policies have often overwhelmed street-level bureaucrats, spurring an asylum governance crisis. Mediterranean cities and regions swiftly implemented coordinated emergency reception strategies through city networks (Caponio 2021). Moreover, cities and mayors have spearheaded coordination efforts with national governments and the European Commission (Scholten 2018 in Caponio 2021). Drawing from Palermo's experience and a transnational movement of municipalities, proposals emerged to shift CEAS negotiations from higher to local levels, suggesting local actors' crucial role in addressing national political paralysis and enhancing EU asylum policy implementation (Walter-Franke 2020). However, this "local turn" might not always align with democratic principles, risking devolution into local entrapment under authoritarian governments (Purcell 2006; Kutz and Wolff 2021). Despite states' primary control in asylum governance, there has been an increased focus on local actors' roles in norm shaping by decoupling from national directives (Panizzon and Riemsdijk 2019, p. 1232). These actors have been pivotal as front-liners, social innovators, and challengers of exclusionary Europeanisation processes. Post-colonial studies illustrate cities' active contestation against refugees being framed as European citizenship' outsiders' (Kirndörfer 2024). Cities and regions have sought to translate local practices into global human rights discourses during Global Compacts on Migration and Asylum negotiations, advocating for rights-based governance and seeking influence in international and European policy arenas (Stürner and Bendel 2019, p. 215).

On the other hand, despite gaining an international reputation and political influence, sub-national actors have not significantly shifted geopolitical paradigms (Kutz and Wolff 2021; Bialasieczicz 2016 in Alagna 2023). The ongoing 'crisisification' of migration by EU and state actors, framing it as a perpetual crisis, has justified restrictive measures, including push-backs and extraterritorialisation (Moreno-Lax 2023; Cantat Pecoud and Thiollot 2023).

This state of crisis in migration policy-making (whether perceived or framed as such) offers a lens to advance the conceptualisation of coordinative Europeanisation dynamics. Despite narratives of renationalisation (Trauner and Stutz 2021) and reform failures, overlapping crises underscored the need for supranational-domestic governance collaboration. The 2023 EU asylum and migration system reform may reflect this recognition. However, the role of sub-national actors in coordinative Europeanisation during poly-crises or permanent emergencies like the Covid-19 pandemic remains poorly understood.

Prior research during the 2015 influx of refugees has paid attention to the dynamics of cooperation and competition between law enforcement authorities and CSOs (Cuttitta 2018; Panebianco 2022) and experiments of alliance-making between CSOs and municipalities with networks such as 'From the Sea to the City' or the International Alliance of safe Harbours' who pursue the project to create safe corridors and pathways to Europe (Alagna 2023). Multi-level governance (MLG) approaches have been useful in explaining how sub-national actors influence and interact with supranational levels of governance and, vice-versa, how the EU



translates within the local settings and whether this creates sites of contestation in a highly politicised field (Zapata-Barrero et al. 2017). They have also explained how cities and sub-national levels often remained side-lined in MLG processes during the 2015 refugee crisis (Caponio 2022b).

Our contribution speaks to these debates but analyses more specifically if and how processes of coordinative Europeanisation triggered by states of permanent emergency (Ladi and Wolff 2022) include sub-national actors. This mode of Europeanisation involves establishing innovative policy solutions at the highest level of EU governance through informal coordination. This approach is crucial for achieving policy outcomes during times of permanent emergency, such as exogenous shocks or crises, without necessarily replacing other Europeanisation modes (Ladi and Polverari, this issue). Coordinative Europeanisation occurs when these crises affect EU citizens universally and in all corners of the Union, creating an increased demand for a coordinated response from the EU (Ibid, 1031). It shares a connection but differs from the literature on MLG, which conceptualises policy-making systems characterised by non-hierarchical and cooperative approaches (Caponio 2022a, p. 3). Coordinative Europeanisation leads to processes that emerge during times of symmetric crisis and affect all EU member states and policy areas simultaneously, fostering a sense of interdependence between EU member states and the appetite for coordinated solutions (Ladi and Polverari this issue). This appetite for coordination and swift policy decisions may create a different setting to research the role of sub-national actors in times of permanent emergency, which is not necessarily explained by a MLG perspective that tends to analyse “the dispersion of power from central governments to other “centres” and the sharing of policy-making responsibility between supranational, national, regional and local government” (Broadhurst and Gray 2022, p. 88).

In other words, this article is interested in understanding how sub-national actors behave in a broader context where coordinative Europeanisation is at play and where national and supranational executives decide to coordinate in a flexible, informal and solution-oriented way to achieve “good enough” results. Unlike in the 2015 crisis, where responses were uncoordinated amongst EU institutions and member states and led to continuous ‘free riding’ by national governments (Thielemann 2017 in Eylemer and Soylemez 2020, p.318), following decisions such as the second phase of restrictions of movements during the pandemic, or the activation of the temporary protection directive for Ukrainian citizens are instances of coordinative Europeanisation (Ladi and Wolff 2022).

The case study of asylum digitalisation across Europe is particularly relevant to our research questions. Legislative coordination on a supranational level is limited, mainly governing specific EU-wide systems like Eurodac, Eurostat, and EU-LISA (Vavoula 2021). However, gradual harmonisation and coordination have emerged, particularly after the 2015 migration crisis, which prompted governments to implement IT systems for efficient asylum processing and essential services (ECRE 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digitalisation efforts, with education services leading the way, followed by social services and healthcare (European Commission 2022). Governments also improved digital information access for migrants and refugees through mobile apps, online portals, and updated websites, aiming to protect



their rights and address vulnerabilities (OECD 2022). While some EU governments had already started digitising services, the pandemic further expedited the transition for most European governments (OECD 2022). As service provision is a core function of local government mandates (Wollmann and Marcou 2010), we hypothesise an active role of sub-national actors in this process of Europeanisation of digital services for refugees and asylum-seekers.

Since the value of the dependent variable (the role and extent of involvement of sub-national actors in coordinative Europeanisation) is unknown, and the theorisation of processes of coordinative Europeanisation is at the onset, we cannot hypothesise which mechanisms sub-national actors put in place to “be heard” by other actors (interview P1). Our inductive approach considers previous research on local governments’ involvement in policy-making. Sub-national entities are often rationally driven, aligning their interests, achieving specific goals, and securing additional funding (Huggins 2018). This behaviour is influenced by mayors’ desire for political leverage and addressing domestic challenges. Alagna (2023, p. 19) suggests that these actors seize emerging opportunities regardless of EU-level constraints. Rational choice factors can lead sub-national actors to form transnational alliances, seeking legitimacy independently from contentious local municipal politics (Alagna 2023). Ideational factors matter, with actors interacting more frequently and collaboratively with like-minded actors (Pettrachin 2023). This is visible in allies at the local level among sub-national authorities and CSOs (Alagna 2023). A logic of appropriateness explains why ‘political sensitivity to the cause displayed by mayors’ plays a role in building alliances with CSOs (Alagna 2023, p. 19). Constructivist research examines how transnational cooperation across cities generates new norms, made possible through ‘participation in mainstream state-centric processes, and norm-generation within their own networks’ (Durmus and Oomen 2022, p. 1048). Network coordination thus seems like a natural mechanism of coordinative Europeanisation, as illustrated by the ‘Commission-Capital networks’ created during the pandemic (Russack and Fenner 2020). However, a gap remains in understanding how these norms or ideas emerge and are communicated across governance scales. Drawing on discursive institutionalism (Schmidt 2008), our analysis pays particular attention to sub-national actors’ strategic mobilisation of ideas for transformative processes. The significance of discourse has been recognised as a key mechanism driving the process of coordinative Europeanisation (Ladi and Wolff 2021, p. 36). For example, during the pandemic, the European Commission employed discursive coordination by promoting a functional-solidarity framework. This framework aimed to support the mobility of goods, professionals, and cross-border workers at a time when national narratives had framed public health as a matter of national security (Wolff et al. 2020).

Methodological note

Our research has two main objectives. First, we seek to determine whether sub-national actors have played a role in the coordinative Europeanisation of digital services for asylum seekers and refugees. As highlighted since the onset of this article,



we understand sub-national actors as regions, cities and CSOs that form the ecosystem of service provision. If this initial hypothesis is confirmed, our second objective is to pinpoint the mechanisms that have enabled these actors to play such a role. Nonetheless, our focus is not on the impact of Europeanisation efforts on digitalisation. Although important, this pertains to the domain of policy implementation and involves a different set of factors. Instead, our interest lies in understanding the extent to which processes led by the European Commission and national executives during and after the pandemic have included sub-national actors from the onset in an informal yet coordinated manner and the dynamics underlying this involvement. Since the role of sub-national actors in coordinative Europeanisation is uncharted territory, our research proceeds inductively. This approach allows us to build an analytical framework from specific observations to broader generalisations, contributing new insights to the emerging debate on coordinative Europeanisation (Ladi and Polverari, this issue).

Our case selection is based on a most dissimilar system design. Indeed, Paris, Malaga and Palermo display different institutional and administrative settings in public service provision, especially in the field of asylum. They range from Paris, a municipality embedded in a highly centralised system, to Palermo, characterised by a partly decentralised system where sub-national actors informally play a substantial role in service provision, to Malaga, which enjoys high autonomy from the national level (European Union 2021). Despite those differences, a preliminary exploratory analysis conducted in the framework of the Easyrights H2020 and the Co-duties project suggested the tentative presence of coordinative Europeanisation in all cases. The case selection in the framework of these projects controlled for the type of digital tools being developed right before and during the pandemic: these were very similar across cases. The similarity in tools developed allows controlling for the size of the ecosystem of sub-national actors. The diversity of the cases increases, to some degree, the chances of generalisability of our findings in identifying patterns and mechanisms of participation in coordinative Europeanisation processes. However, we also know this claim should be nuanced since these localities share a relatively big size and a strong commitment to promoting liberal and inclusive narratives on migration. The shared progressive stance among the selected cities serves as a control for a potential confounding factor (King et al. 1994) and allows us to better isolate the effect of institutional variables on coordinative Europeanisation, which are crucial for digital service provision (Kuhlmann and Heuberger 2023; Budding et al. 2018). However, this choice also brings a note of caution, suggesting the need for further studies. More research should investigate if sub-national actors in smaller communities play comparable roles in coordinating Europeanization. Additionally, it should examine how differing views on migration and integration, as noted in studies on integration policies, might influence these coordination efforts (Schiller et al. 2023).

Data collection combines content analysis of EU and local digitalisation strategies in Paris, Malaga, and Palermo with 12 semi-structured interviews of European, national, and sub-national actors. We trace the process and mechanisms behind implementing digital services for asylum seekers and refugees. Extensive data, including network descriptions during the pandemic for digitalising asylum services



(Zardo et al. 2023), are gathered from the EU-funded EasyRights and co-Duties projects.

And yet they move: sub-national actors in the Europeanisation of digital asylum services

The comparative analysis of Paris, Malaga, and Palermo supports the idea that sub-national actors are integral to coordinative Europeanisation processes, challenging the executive-led nature. This analysis highlights a dynamic interplay among governance levels, with local governments actively shaping the Europeanisation of digital services. Having confirmed the presence of the outcome in the cases under scrutiny, we sought to uncover the mechanisms that enable sub-national actors to engage in coordinative processes effectively. First, we ascertain how the discourse on humanitarian duty facilitated the coordination of digital strategies for asylum seekers and refugees across Europe. Based on their past experiences, all sub-national actors in Malaga, Palermo, and Paris combined and strategically mobilised this concept similarly despite their structural and institutional differences. Moreover, we identified network coordination as the second enabling mechanism for sub-national actors to participate in processes of coordinative Europeanisation. Discursive institutionalist approaches to cities' coordination show that local governments may seek legitimacy by joining networks (Grønnestad S and Bach Nielsen 2022; Schmidt 2013). Network coordination, as a second mechanism, involves vertical and horizontal networking, facilitating participation by leveraging shared values within networks, thus enhancing legitimacy in domestic and international spheres (Ibid). In our 3 cases, we observe different combinations of networking dynamics, influenced not only by the specific formal competencies of sub-national actors in asylum matters but also by the varying degrees of advancement in the digitalisation of asylum services.

'It is our humanitarian duty' as coordinating discourse

Sub-national actors responded swiftly to the Covid-19 crisis, participating in the coordinative Europeanisation of digital services for asylum seekers and refugees through discursive coordination centred around humanitarian duty. Unlike the fragmented and contradictory discourse on migration and duty during the 2015 crisis, the pandemic response witnessed a notable narrative shift towards discourse convergence between EU and sub-national actors, sometimes conflicting with national-level discourse. In 2015, the discourse on humanitarian duty emerged primarily among CSOs. It did not consistently resonate at the national and European levels, focusing on rescuing migrants at sea without calling for coordination with sub-national actors. As Mediterranean crossings and fatalities increased, European leaders invoked humanitarian duty for military rescue operations, contrasting with a border management discourse prioritising defence (Panebianco 2016, p. 441). This tension led to contested interpretations



of humanitarian duty, with sub-national actors using it to shape the institutional landscape. In France, for example, grassroots organisations in Calais and Paris's La Chapelle provided humanitarian aid without institutional support, highlighting the gap between coordinated sub-national discourse and unaltered securitised border practices (Sandri 2018). Despite this, the concept of humanitarian duty struggled to gain traction at national and European levels, maintaining the status quo at borders.

During the pandemic's onset, the European Commission's guidelines on the free movement of workers (2020/C 102 I/03) and border management (2020/1753 final) signified a narrative shift towards recognising non-EU workers' crucial role in essential services. Subsequent research by the European Commission and the Joint Research Center highlighted migrants' substantial contributions, with migrants comprising 13% of key workers in the EU in 2020, closely mirroring their overall employment rate of 13.3% (Fasani and Mazza 2020). This data suggest that migrants' vulnerabilities in host labour markets might have impacted their pandemic resilience, indicating the need for targeted support measures (Fasani and Mazza 2020).

In Paris, Palermo, and Malaga, sub-national authorities extensively utilised this discursive shift to overcome operational and political challenges and find solutions to ensure the provision of services. Any interruptions in service lasted a maximum of 2 weeks and were mostly compensated through emergency interventions. For example, in Italy, the SAI network (the reception and integration system) extended refugees' stay in beneficiary facilities to ensure a safe place for everyone in need. In Malaga, asylum seekers were granted a grace period for document submission and renewal requests. When asked about their ability to respond quickly to disruptions, interviewees often referred to a sense of duty and solidarity as the driving factors behind their actions, leveraging higher levels of governance. A civil servant in Palermo states: "The machine had to go on. We could not let people without any access. It is our role and duty" (interview P1).

Unlike the 2015 migration crisis, the discourse on humanitarian duty was not presented in contrast to opposing discourses at the EU or national level. Instead, it became part of a shared narrative legitimising actions even when not explicitly mandated by competent authorities. As described by social workers in Malaga, "Everybody agreed on that, there was this feeling that it was inevitable. We had to do it" (interview M3), and "even Europe was behind us" (interview M2).

The EU Action Plan for Integration 2021–2027 formalises the link between duty and digital public services for refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants. The document, which was circulated at the end of 2020, connects duty to the idea of efficiency and economic benefits given the post-Covid recovery:

'The EU will need everyone's contribution to the recovery and resilience of our economies in the aftermath of COVID-19. It is, therefore, not only a moral duty in line with the EU's fundamental values, but also an economic imperative to step up action in promoting integration and inclusion. As shown by recent research, fully integrating migrants into the labour market could generate large economic gains, including fiscal profits, contributions



to national pension schemes and national welfare in general' (European Commission 2020:2).

The reference to digital solutions for inclusion in EU migration documents highlights their economic potential. It addresses obstacles migrants and EU citizens with migrant backgrounds face, such as infrastructure gaps, language barriers, lack of electronic identification, and digital skills. It emphasises online services' effectiveness in pre-departure phases for language learning and skill acquisition to facilitate integration (European Commission 2020, p. 22). The discursive shift emerges in the speech of Margaritis Schinas, Commissioner with the portfolio of 'Protecting our Way of Life' at the launch of the Plan:

"Being European means protecting the most vulnerable[...] 'this is what defines Europeans. [...] integration is key for people coming to Europe, local communities, and the long-term health of our society and economy. Indeed, if we want to help our societies and economies thrive, we need to support everyone who is part of that society, with inclusion being both a right and a duty for all'" (Schinas, 2020).

Due to confounding factors, a direct causality between the discursive shift at the EU level and discursive coordination at the sub-national level may be difficult to trace. However, our interviews in the observed localities and the analysis of the process leading to adopting the EU Plan for Integration and Inclusion suggest a circular process connecting EU, national, and sub-national discourses. The launch of the Action Plan acknowledges lessons learned from previous integration plans and extensive consultations with various actors, including individuals working in the integration sector (interviews P2). Some saw this engagement positively, with one civil servant expressing satisfaction that "finally, they listened to us" (interview P2). Furthermore, documents related to digitalisation projects and follow-up reports supported by the EU Commission, such as the "Migration White Paper on digital services for migrants," reveal the development of a discourse on the duty to access digital services across different levels of governance. The Action Plan also emphasises strengthening coordination between national, regional, and local actors. It highlights the importance of mobilising EU funding and creating partnerships with migrants, host communities, social and economic partners, civil society, and the private sector. While there is no explicit reference to EU-wide digital solutions, the European Commission emphasises the importance of bottom-up approaches in driving digitalisation processes. In Malaga and Palermo, this narrative was seen as a "legitimising call to action" by sub-national authorities to accelerate the further provision of digital services.

These dynamics show how discursive coordination has emerged as an enabling mechanism for coordinated Europeanisation of digitalisation, particularly during the COVID-19 crisis. However, a closer examination of responses to the arrival of Ukrainian migrants suggests that discourses on humanitarian duty and access to digital services remain prevalent. The EU's activation of the Temporary Protection Directive provided Ukrainians with temporary protection status, and digital tools played a central role in the EU's strategy to support refugees. The European



Commission coordinated access to digital connectivity, affordable roaming, and guidance for Member States, demonstrating a proactive digital strategy in response to the refugee crisis. Once again, a discourse on humanitarian duty, supported by various levels of governance, underpinned EU actions and those of sub-national actors. In her speech on the ‘safe homes’ project, Commissioner Johansson emphasised the EU’s duty to collaborate with citizens and local authorities, acknowledging their contributions in accommodating Ukrainian refugees. Sub-national actors, particularly cities, were positioned as key partners during the Ukraine crisis. The European Commission regularly met with cities facing accommodation and schooling challenges (interview EU-1). Localised digital initiatives like chatbots and digital application systems became best practices throughout Europe.

In her work on discursive institutionalism, Vivien Schmidt emphasises the pivotal role of discourse in coordinating policy actors and shaping policies and programs (Schmidt 2008). Empirical evidence from the cases of digital service provision for refugees in Paris, Palermo, and Malaga reinforces this argument, underscoring how discourse acts as a fundamental mechanism in facilitating the engagement of sub-national actors in the process of coordinated Europeanisation. When comparing the refugee crisis in 2015 with the ongoing Covid-19 crisis, we saw that the discourse development and dissemination timing significantly impacted its transformative potential. The heightened uncertainty during the Covid-19 crisis created a conducive environment for disseminating the discourse on humanitarian duty from sub-national to European levels. We observed a circular dynamic in the coordination of discursive efforts, as the EU provided discursive anchors on duty at the onset of the pandemic, thereby facilitating the upward propagation of the humanitarian duty discourse that the sub-national level had already developed in the past. We also observe that this circular dynamic worked from the individual level of civil servants and experts interviewed who felt that they had to act out following their sense of humanitarian duty for foreigners and that the EU dimension of the discourse helped to strengthen and legitimise this discursive coordination.

Europeanisation through network coordination

Sub-national actors in Paris, Palermo, and Malaga utilised vertical and horizontal networking alongside mobilising ideas to ensure their local initiatives influenced broader digital crisis responses. An interviewee in Palermo highlighted the goal for solutions to “scale up to the European level and scale out to different localities” (interview P4). Despite similar discursive coordination in these cities, networking dynamics diverged due to administrative decentralisation levels and the maturity of digitalisation strategies in their countries. This variation in networking, encompassing direction (horizontal, vertical, transnational) and intensity, impacted the nature of their involvement.

In France, the coordination of the digitalisation of public services for refugees has been initiated at the central level, particularly by an inter-ministerial mission launched by the prime minister in 2018. This mission was initiated as a response to the increasing number of refugees, as France in 2015 had received almost 40% more



refugees than the average of the EU. In 2018, a prefect—territorial representative of the state—was appointed to coordinate the Interministerial Delegation for Welcoming and Integrating Refugees (DIAIR). However, the mission had limited anticipation and foresight capabilities due to the absence of appropriate tools and a coherent digital strategy to address the crisis. The prefect sought support not only from national actors such as the General Direction for Foreigners in France, the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (Ofpra), and the French Office for Immigration and Integration (Ofii) but also from sub-national levels (“les territoires”). The interministerial delegation’s mission letter explicitly requested local authorities to assist in “supporting all innovative initiatives by associations or citizens that contribute to the successful integration of refugees” (Philippe 2018). This call for assistance at the national level prompted sub-national authorities in France to initiate networking efforts. Subsequently, in 2018, the French government adopted a national strategy for refugee reception and integration, which included the proposal to develop a multilingual national digital platform accessible to non-literate or non-reading refugees. The platform *Refugies.info* (also a mobile application) takes inspiration from similar ideas in the United States, Canada and Turkey (interview F1) and the “Ankommen” application in Germany (DIAIR 2018, p.15). It is conceived as a “collaborative Wikipedia” gathering all helpful information about public services for refugees, with the challenge of the translation (interview F1). This app was co-created with various stakeholders, including CSOs and start-ups. While the government initially relied on its funding to support the project, the gradual alignment of digitalisation priorities at the EU level during the negotiation of the French National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) unlocked an additional 300,000 euros to upscale and upgrade it. In the French case, however, coordination with the EU level was limited, and transnational networking took place beyond the EU’s border to learn from past initiatives.

Despite the initial top-down approach during the first development phase, sub-national actors have played and continue to play a crucial role in the design and expansion of the application. Before the initial design, the DIAIR conducted a comprehensive assessment of local initiatives (interview F1) to leverage existing experiences. However, despite being widespread across France, many of these initiatives were discontinued after the initial funding ended. In alignment with the coordination efforts of the DIAIR, “territorial ambassadors” lead content creation and dissemination campaigns. They ensure that sub-national authorities upload relevant information through “territorial notes”, constituting 80% of the website’s content (F1). The Covid-19 crisis strengthened these coordination dynamics and empowered sub-national authorities to act more autonomously, collaborate with other French administrations, and receive additional funding to enhance their activities. According to a 2022 communication from the DIAIR, networking and partnering with sub-national actors has become the platform’s core purpose. The delegation has announced the formalisation of partnerships with associations such as France Terre d’Asile, Coal-lia, France Horizon, and Groupe SOS, with plans to establish new collaborations by the end of 2023.

In Italy, sub-national actors actively mobilised horizontal and vertical networks to respond to the crisis, digitalise their asylum services and transfer them beyond their



administrative borders. Unlike in France, where digital services had been already identified as response tools during the 2015 migration crisis, in Italy, the increase in the digitalisation of its public administration started relatively late, owing to the implementation of a 2020 nationwide mandate that required all public administrations to adopt key eGovernment platforms. This policy shift led to increased uptake of digital public services. However, given the nascent state of national coordination of the digitalisation strategy and the significant role traditionally played by NGOs and non-profit associations in providing social services to migrants and refugees, sub-national and sub-local levels of government assumed leadership roles in digitalisation initiatives. According to an interviewee, “national decrees had the required flexibility to work under emergencies, for instance, to review contracts for public calls, or adjust working methods to individual needs. So, we had good autonomy at the municipal level in the response” (interview P2). Building on prior experiences during the 2015 crisis, Palermo’s municipality initially relied on horizontal networks to cope with the lack of necessary knowledge or resources. In her analysis of the management of refugees’ arrivals by Italian local authorities, Panebianco argues that “close interdependence among actors, continuing interactions and exchange of resources, trust among participants and significant autonomy from the state characterised the expert networks [...] that were created to face the emergency, thus profiting from the expertise of relevant actors in the migration field, at local or international level” (Panebianco 2022, p. 755). These dynamics also emerged from our empirical analysis.

At the onset of the pandemic, for instance, municipal councillors, including the local administration in Palermo, used a common chat to communicate with other mayors and civil servants across Italy and seek effective practices implemented in other localities. As highlighted by one interviewee, “communication was easy with partners because we felt the same sense of duty and we were facing the same challenges” (interview P1). “The pandemic”, added another respondent, “showed the ineluctable need for cooperation” (interview P2). During the initial phase of the pandemic, the Municipality of Palermo, like the rest of the country, temporarily suspended asylum services, including support for asylum applications. However, it quickly transitioned to an online platform with active involvement and coordination from the Civil Protection Department, an essential component of Italy’s crisis management system, and volunteer efforts (Capano 2020). Working in collaboration with non-governmental organisations and a dedicated Covid-19 Municipal Task Force, sub-national actors, including third-sector organisations, stepped in to provide migrants with intensive support in navigating online application processes for various benefits for vulnerable individuals. This support included assisting with completing online applications, obtaining food vouchers, and translating administrative documents to expedite asylum procedures. The successful implementation of digital strategies relied not only on the willingness of individuals to adapt and learn but also on the informal networks that helped overcome bureaucratic hurdles (interview P1). Informal decision-making processes played a significant role, as one interviewee explained, “we are used to working in emergencies; we have learned so much over time. We know our boundaries, responsibilities, and limits, irrespective (*laughing) of our formal mandate” (interview P4). Informality also extended



to interactions at the national level, as another respondent highlighted the improved and less hierarchical communication with Ministry representatives, with whom the Municipality of Palermo maintained ongoing contacts even after the crisis subsided (interview P1).

Once digital solutions were established, the municipality of Palermo tried to use European networks to improve and scale digital service provisions. Sub-national actors involved in migration and asylum intensified their collaboration with partners in EU-funded projects, networks such as Eurocities and platforms available at the EU level. In the framework of the easyRights project, for instance, the Municipality of Palermo was particularly active in supporting the writing of the “Migration Whitepaper”. This document resulted from a Joint Migration Policy Roundtable organised by six EU-funded projects, in cooperation with the European Commission, to address the challenges of ICT-enabled integration services. While the disclaimer reports that the Joint Migration Policy Whitepaper positions are those of the projects concerned and not the European Commission, the document had good resonance in following official websites and working documents related to digital connectivity and inclusion.

The network coordination observed in Malaga combines elements of both the French and Italian cases. Sub-national actors are crucial in Spain’s asylum governance system and have been actively involved in previous refugee crises. In Malaga, NGOs such as Christar International, Diez42, Centro Luz, CEAR, the Red Cross, and Malaga Acoge provide extensive support to refugees and asylum seekers, particularly during asylum applications. They conduct interviews, serve as the main point of contact for migrants, collaborate with the city of Malaga (especially the Department of Employment), and work closely with the National Office of Asylum. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, similar to the experience in Palermo, the municipality and third-sector organisations in Malaga coordinated among themselves and with networks across the country to lead in online service provision and digital transformation planning. Malaga Acoge, for example, adjusted its approach by drawing on practices from other Spanish localities and sustaining its activities digitally.

Despite the overall decentralised administrative system, vertical networking at the national level was also necessary for sub-national actors to play a role during the Covid-19 crisis. The pandemic strained the Spanish intergovernmental relations system, subjecting it to a “stress test” (Navarro and Velasco 2022, p. 192). One interviewee referred to this pressure as “coordination fatigue” (interview M3), which emerged after the central government declared a state of alarm in the initial weeks of the pandemic. This centralisation disrupted the power distribution among different levels of government (Navarro and Velasco 2022, p. 200) and among service providers (interview M4). Re-centralisation often led to delays in online service provision, which had a greater impact on small local NGOs than the municipality itself, as noted by a public official from the Municipality of Malaga (Interview M1). Moreover, the lack of information hindered NGOs’ ability to support migrants immediately due to their heavy reliance on national and regional decisions.

The city of Malaga initiated online participatory activities to overcome these challenges and expedite the digitalisation process. It established crisis management working groups through the City Social Council (Consejo Social de la



Ciudad de Málaga), a platform for dialogue among economic, social, and professional entities. Interestingly, the outcomes of these discussions were discussed at the ministerial and then European level to scale up experiences and inform the implementation of the digital component of the Spanish National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP). The NRRP acknowledges the need to reinforce positive trends by increasing digitalisation at all government levels and improving access to digital services, particularly in rural areas. A municipal public official emphasised the pandemic's role in formalising collaborations between the city council, local associations, and NGOs, recognising their valuable contributions to operational activities and strategic thinking. They said, "they have always been there but were not visible enough" (interview M4).

In Malaga, aligning with EU priorities and coordinating with the EU through funding was particularly important, with numerous projects supported by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and Horizon2020. A civil servant highlighted the reassuring collaborative nature of EU initiatives, stating, "We did not feel alone because if you read all the work programmes of Horizon and all these funds [...] well, you see, we are all going in the same direction. Those EU documents all say the same thing: we design inclusive services, or you are not doing the right thing. This is an important feeling; it helps us, even when there are differences, you know it is the right thing to do" (interview M4).

The dynamics described so far refer to network coordination efforts initiated by the national or sub-national levels to reach the supranational one. At the same time, the EU's efforts to map, link, and consolidate networking initiatives primarily involve the European Union Asylum Agency (EUAA). As acknowledged by an EUAA officer, coordination among EU member states during the Covid-19 crisis was initially sporadic, with varying levels of technological advancement (Interview EU2). In response, the EUAA issued guidelines for remote interviews and registrations at the start of the pandemic. A few months later, the Agency established an Asylum Digital Innovation Group to enhance network coordination and facilitate information exchange on digital innovation projects within the EU, associated countries, and the EUAA. Due to complexity and sensitivity, achieving Europeanisation in this field and mapping digitalisation efforts across Europe remain challenging. Moreover, unlike other operational areas related to asylum reception and processing, the EUAA has limited contacts with the sub-national level in digitalisation, as local experiences are communicated to the Asylum Digital Innovation Group via the national contact points. Nevertheless, progress is being made towards harmonising processes and working on strategic objectives and guidelines (interview EU2).

Research on city networks shows they provide legitimacy for local governments in domestic and international politics, establishing their position (Grønnestad S and Bach Nielsen 2022). Studies on asylum policies reveal that well-networked entities manage crisis challenges effectively (Garcés-Masareñas et al. 2019). Despite variations in network coordination, sub-national actors consistently leveraged their networks to support EU-wide digitalisation and enhance their initiatives. This reflects a circular pattern of coordinative Europeanisation that includes, rather than excludes, sub-national actors.



Conclusion

While current literature debates sub-national actors' roles in asylum policies and governance, contrasting their innovative approaches with their challenges in influencing EU-level policies, this article examines their role in coordinative Europeanisation, characterised by swift, informal decision-making among EU and state executives. This governance mode has become prominent during the Covid-19 crisis and the war in Ukraine, pointing to the interdependence across policies and governance levels. Within this context, it would be natural to assume that sub-national actors have a little role, as decision-making needs to happen quickly and quickly at the highest level.

Focusing on digital solutions for asylum-seekers, we challenge the notion of an exclusively executive-led coordinative Europeanisation, proposing a model where sub-national entities shape coordinated pandemic responses, albeit to varying degrees. We explored mechanisms enabling sub-national actors to engage effectively in coordinative processes.

First, we demonstrated how discourse on humanitarian duty facilitated the coordination of digital strategies across Europe. This discourse, emerging during the 2015 crisis and spreading to the EU level during Covid-19, helped sub-national actors influence Europeanisation. The concept of duty, as outlined in the European Charter for the Safeguarding of Human Rights in the City, boosted the "actor-hood" of sub-national entities. In France, discursive coordination centralised efforts to ensure sustainability, while in Italy and Spain, it supported a bottom-up process for digitalising local services. Despite differences, a shared sense of duty and interdependence supported coordinative dynamics in all cases, with the EU adopting this discourse during the pandemic.

Second, we observed various networking dynamics influenced by sub-national actors' formal competencies in asylum matters and the digitalisation level of asylum services. Networks advanced rational interests and facilitated the exchange of practices, creating a community of shared values. The pandemic catalysed digitalisation strategies, prompting dialogue and collaboration across governance levels and activating long-pending or upgrade-required solutions, with EU funding playing a crucial role.

These findings offer insights into the conditions under which coordinative Europeanisation occurs and its coexistence with other Europeanisation forms. They provide a better understanding of the EU member state relationship, incorporating the sub-national and non-state actor levels. We found that sub-national actors initiated bottom-up processes, gaining momentum across crises by mobilising discourse on humanitarian duty and coordinating within networks. This demonstrates the complexity and diversity of coordinative Europeanisation channels, highlighting the European Commission's facilitative role and the marginal impact of countries' digitalisation levels on the activation of solutions. Given the specific characteristics of our cases—namely their considerable size and commitment to liberal and inclusive migration narratives—the applicability of these insights to smaller localities with potentially different attitudes towards migration



and integration requires further investigation to determine the extent and nature of their involvement.

Innovative sub-national and EU-level solutions are possible in fields where the state is a primary gatekeeper and, therefore, is promising for research in other policy fields. The pandemic facilitated dialogue between governance levels, activating pending solutions and highlighting the conditional success of sub-national actors based on the degree of Europeanisation and domestic political settings. This highlights the potential of sub-national actors to bridge the gap between welcoming, integration-focused approaches and the exclusionary processes of Europeanisation at state or EU levels.

List of Interviewees

- F1 Interministerial Delegation DIAR France, 2 experts, 15 February 2023 online.
- F2 French Civil Society Organisation, 22 February 2023 online.
- M1 Project Manager Municipality of Malaga–January–November 2022 (3 online, 1 in person).
- M2 Project manager—Malaga—January–November 2022 (2 online).
- M3 Civil Servant—Municipality of Malaga January–November 2022 (1 online).
- M4 Civil Servant—Municipality of Malaga January–September 2022 (online).
- P1 Civil Servant—Municipality of Palermo January–November 2022 (4 online).
- P2 Head of Department—Municipality of Palermo August 2022 (online).
- P3 Social worker—Municipality of Palermo January–November 2022 (2 online, 2 in person).
- P4 Civil Servant—Municipality of Palermo January–November 2022 (3 online).
- EU1 European official—DG Home Affairs–July 2023 (online).
- EU2 European official—European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA)—May 2023 (online).



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