

# Organising for System Change: “From the Sea to the City” and the Movement Ecology of Migrant Solidarity in Europe

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**Abstract:** This paper engages with the relationship between dissident European mayors and the migrant solidarity movement in Europe after 2015. With the case study of the coalition “From the Sea to the City”, I examine how its members institutionalise mayors’ dissent at a transnational level through the International Alliance of Safe Harbours. Employing primary empirical data, the study finds that coalition members create a political sequence in four ways: developing a storyline and setting up a broad coalition of migrant solidarity; referencing mayors’ disruptive acts; nurturing counter-imaginaries; and laying the foundation for further action towards transforming the instituted order of European migration politics. To conceptualise the empirical findings, I draw on concepts of political organisation. In this vein, the paper calls for an assessment of movement politics that goes beyond the belief that local disruptions will suffice to set in motion a progressive transformation of European migration politics.

**Keywords:** activism, Europe, migrant solidarity, municipalities, political organisation, transnationalism

## Introduction

Mayors across Europe started to engage in migration politics in a deep crisis of European migration politics. When, in the summer of 2015, more than one million people crossed the border of the European Union, the Dublin system—a core regulation of European migration politics on asylum procedures and the relocation of refugees within member states—collapsed (De Genova 2016). In the upcoming months, European and national governments violently re-established order at European and national borders (Heller et al. 2019). The following years were marked by the re-nationalisation and further externalisation of border controls (Kasperek et al. 2017), the normalisation of illegal pushbacks in the Mediterranean Sea (Karamanidou and Kasperek 2022), the criminalisation of migrant support NGOs (Gordon and Larsen 2022), divisive narratives of “illegal” vs “useful” migrants and related restrictive law making to speed up deportation and to exempt ever more migrants from essential services and increase precarity (Cross 2021). Being unsatisfied with the attempts at (inter-)national levels to secure a good standard of living for the privileged few in “fortress capitalism”

(Georgi 2019), a considerable number of municipal governments and administrations across Europe were mitigating the effects of national and European migration politics. In light of the growing number of migrants with precarious or no residence status in cities (Darling 2017), municipal leaders developed concrete measures to provide essential services that frequently bypassed national laws (Bauder and Gonzalez 2018). Often civil society initiatives not only urged local states institutions to act but also provided expertise to develop progressive responses. Beyond the limits of municipalities, mayors sought to support sea rescue NGOs in the Mediterranean Sea. They also published statements to urge European and national governments to end the devastating situation of thousands of people drowning in the Mediterranean Sea every year and share the burden of Southern member states of the European Union to process asylum claims as countries of first entry (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019). The engagement of municipal leaders in practices of migrant solidarity across Europe—and beyond—reflects a shift in the politics of migration from the (supra-)national to the local level. While national contexts vary, local governments are usually the weakest part of the hierarchical state architecture, with few or no legislative competencies. The fact that mayors actively articulate their demands and find pragmatic solutions to include migrants whose lives have become precarious demonstrates a new proactive interpretation of their role in migration politics. But municipal leaders not only “tend to challenge [European and] national policies and practices regulating migration and belonging” (Bauder 2019:27). Joining the migrant solidarity movement, they also strive for a more extensive project: the transformation of European migration politics.

Concerning cities in this political conjuncture, scholars draw attention to two forms of political action: with the terms “urban citizenship” (Bauder 2017, 2022; Darling and Bauder 2019) and “militant city network” (Lacroix et al. 2022), researchers conceptualise the disruption stemming from mayors that act in solidarity with migrants. These two forms of spatial politics are used as evidence to argue that cities are entry points for “transformative social change” (Russell 2019:991) or “a strategically important conduit for political change” (Darling 2019:244). This literature gives a detailed insight into how mayors exercise their dissent with European and national migration politics and became agents of migrant solidarity along with grassroots initiatives, civil society organisations, NGOs, and researchers. Nevertheless, these studies are limited in two ways. Firstly, scholars tend to understand disruptive acts as the accomplishment of change of the dominant institutional and social order. Instead, Swyngedouw (2021:494) argues that disruptive acts unveil gaps in the “symbolic order of the state”, but it is “the potential subsequent politicisation, the making of a political sequence, that inscribes the political significance”. Secondly, scholars tend to engage with single forms of political action and demands, thus risking nurturing essentialist conceptions of spatial and political strategies (Rogaly 2019:224). At the same time, they neglect to relate these to a “systemic reflection for the elaboration of strategies to intervene in the policy process, contributing to a structural reshaping of the EU migration governance” (Alagna 2021). This call includes a reflection on which actors we may identify as being progressive. In particular, this applies to local

state agents such as mayors, as they are enmeshed in capitalist state apparatuses in their role as local state leaders. To address these two limitations in the literature, this paper engages with organising efforts towards system change in European migration politics that sustain mayors' disruptive acts and militant city networks. In concrete terms, I ask the following questions: How do agents of migrant solidarity create a political sequence that sustains mayors' disruptive acts and militant city networks? How do agents of migrant solidarity envision system change in European migration politics and build collective capacities to advance these struggles?

To assess these questions, I draw on recent work on political organisation theories that reflect uprisings, revolts, and revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries across the globe to develop concepts and strategies for progressive system change in our times. I understand system change as the outcome of movement politics that is conditioned by both internal—social movements' demands and strategies—and external factors—the specific political and institutional context they act in (Vollmer and Gutiérrez 2022:50). As for the internal dimension that this paper is interested in, I follow Nunes' (2021:21) understanding of political organisation as the process of "assembling and channelling of the collective capacity to act in such a way that it produces political effects". In a similar vein, Engler and Engler (2016:253) endorse the way in which movement agents contribute to organising processes and that "[a]t different times [and in different spaces], the skills that various organising traditions offer come to the fore". A perspective of political organisation foregrounds the contingency of organising processes instead of assuming a "deterministic connection between social structure and revolutionary subjectivity" (Nunes 2021:97). While this view has been repeatedly articulated in debates of the workers' movement, among others, a process-driven perspective seems more appropriate to analyse unlike coalitions that transcend the dominant political order, e.g. between radical grassroots initiatives and dissident mayors. To recognise the specific constellation of the migrant solidarity movement in Europe, I rely on Swyngedouw's (2021:491) definition of a "political sequence" as the "process (rather than the staccato of successive interruptive political events) ... [of] universalising the demand for egalitarian inclusion for all, enacted by those who maintain fidelity to the inaugural emancipatory procedure". I argue that these insights from theories on political organisation and the concept of a political sequence enrich the scholarship on migrant solidarity as they permit an assessment of movement practices in relation to system change and, in their complexity, as well as contradictions—beyond strategic and spatial essentialisms.

To illuminate this argument empirically, this paper hones in on one case, the transnational movement coalition "From the Sea to the City" (FS2C), as it represents one of the most advanced efforts of migrant solidarity to build capacities for system change in European migration politics (Lacroix et al. 2022:9). In recent years the main aim of the project has been to create a progressive counter-pole to European migration politics with dissident mayors at its centre. Being rooted in national networks and transnational platforms of migrant solidarity, the platform was designed and consolidated between the summer of 2018 and the spring of

2020. FS2C members include bottom-up actors such as grassroots activists, civil society actors, sea rescue NGOs, and think tanks. While municipal representatives themselves were not members, they closely collaborated with FS2C in the design of the platform as well as in further activities. The agents seek to nurture visions of system change in European migration politics based on solidarity and human rights (FS2C 2023). In 2021, FS2C organised a conference in Palermo, founding a transnational agent based on mayors' dissent: the International Alliance of Safe Harbours (IASH). The primary empirical data that informs the analysis includes nine episodic interviews, one podcast recording, six audio recordings of conference panels, and a variety of context documents (media articles, videos, and social media entries). Based on this research design, I argue that FS2C creates a political sequence that sustains mayors' disruptive acts and militant city networks after 2015 and enhances collective capacities for system change in European migration through IASH—the institutionalisation of mayors' dissent at a transnational level.

This paper proceeds as follows to develop the argument. I start by examining the literature on mayors' disruptive acts and their efforts to build militant networks. After critically assessing the existing literature, the subsequent section presents the research design, including the case study, the analytical perspective of political organisation, and the methods. The empirical section follows, presenting my empirical findings in three parts: the setup of the FS2C coalition based on a specific storyline, and two organising cores that represent different visions of system change—reform and radical shift in European migration politics, the institutionalisation of mayors' dissent at a transnational level to articulate a progressive reform proposal (IASH) in Palermo in 2021, and the specific quality of the collaboration inside FS2C with the result that members criticise the reform proposal for not being feasible, but acknowledge its legitimacy. The last section situates these findings in concepts of political organisation. It concludes that this analytical framework is beneficial not only to relate disruptive acts and the subsequent political sequence but also to provide adequate tools for a sober analysis of collective capacity-building processes in the migrant solidarity movement in Europe.

## **New Agents of Migrant Solidarity: Dissident and Networked Mayors**

Politics for migrant solidarity in continental Europe and the UK following 2015 have been extensively debated within radical geography (Cuttitta 2018; Darling 2017; Karaliotas and Kapsali 2021; Sciarba and Furri 2018; Stierl 2018). There is growing evidence of the hybrid character of mobilisations as humanitarian civil society groups, radical grassroots activists, and charismatic mayors have built alliances of different compositions (Della Porta and Steinhilper 2021) and developed various forms of solidarity, including autonomous, civic, and institutional solidarity (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019). These forms of solidarity materialised as support structures at external and internal borders of the European Union as well as along routes through the provision of counselling and help in everyday necessities (Milan and Pirro 2018). In cities, volunteers, NGOs, anti-racist initiatives, and

welfare organisations set up “arrival infrastructures” (Arnaut et al. 2019) in a very short time to provide for migrants and enable them to arrive or continue their journeys. Due to the regressive forms of crisis management from national and European political levels, critical voices emerged. In particular, anti-racist initiatives, refugee self-advocacy groups, and critical NGOs called for solidarity-based changes in institutions (Baumgärtel and Pett 2022). While in this context mayors enacted migrant solidarity in manifold ways, two forms of political action stand out: local disruptive acts and militant city networks. In the following two subsections, I recast how mayors enacted local disruptive acts and created militant city networks after 2015.

### ***Local Disruptive Acts***

Leoluca Orlando and Ada Colau are primary examples of dissident mayors who reached wider audiences via discursive interventions. These two charismatic municipal leaders seized the crisis of European migration politics in 2015. Then Mayor of Palermo, Leoluca Orlando published the *Carta di Palermo* advocating for freedom of movement, connecting the right to citizenship exclusively to the factual residence and the abolition of residence permits (Orlando 2015). Thanks to the wide circulation of the *Carta di Palermo* in networks and European countries, it has become “an important reference for welcoming movements and organisations participating into the international network of solidarity cities, as well as for institutional and parliamentary debates at both local and transnational levels” (Maffei 2021:20). In summer 2015, Ada Colau, then newly elected Mayor of Barcelona and renowned local housing activist,<sup>1</sup> sent a letter to Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy announcing that she would transform Barcelona into a *Ciutat Refugi* (Colau 2015)—earning numerous messages of support (Hansen 2019:60). In September 2015, Colau initiated a declaration supporting refugees. In the statement, “We, the Cities of Europe”, Colau and her colleagues Anne Hidalgo (Mayor of Paris) and Spyros Galinos (Mayor of Lesbos) declared the availability of European cities and local populations to provide shelter, access to essential services, and support for migrants (Colau et al. 2015). The municipalist wave in Spain politicised mayors across the country. Thus, more Spanish municipal leaders would join the statement in support. As the declaration quickly attracted global attention, Barcelona became a role model for Solidarity Cities across Europe and beyond. At the local level, the statement catalysed mobilising Barcelona’s civil society around solidarity initiatives (Hansen 2019:55). However, the topic of migration remained contentious as the city government was unsuccessful in abolishing repressions against migrants in Barcelona amid the pressure from the media and the opposition (Hansen 2019:65).

In addition to declarations, many European municipal leaders developed local responses to restrictive and exclusionary national and European state politics in the spirit of solidarity and pragmatism (Rodatz 2016).<sup>2</sup> Mayors implemented policies in collaboration with grassroots collectives, sea rescue NGOs, and civil society organisations to grant access to essential services (e.g. health, work, education, political rights) for refugees and a growing number of illegalised populations

(Darling 2019; Spencer and Triandafyllidou 2020). In German cities, for example, long-standing civil society organisations (voluntary medical counselling offices) proposed the concept of an Anonymous Health Certificate, which attempts to counter the arbitrary allocation practices of the municipal social welfare offices and the transfer of data to migration authorities. The approach, already developed in 2009, gained traction after 2015 and has been applied in several cities and federal states in the following years (Liebscher 2023).

Scholars often refer to local disruptive acts with the term “urban citizenship” (Bauder 2022) and conceptualise the politicisation of migrant exclusion from essential services and citizenship rights. The politics of Solidarity Cities—statements of mayors and the implementation of inclusive policies for refugees—“disrupt the dominant discursive frame of territorial nation statehood” (Bauder 2022:10) and the priority of citizenship in questions of access to rights, essential services, and participation in society general. Consequently, mayors posed alternatives informed by principles of solidarity that “produce new social relations and corresponding political subjectivities” (Bauder 2022:73).

### ***Militant City Networks***

Mayors’ unease with the course of national and European migration politics triggered the formation of national and European networks. Militant city networks allowed mayors to make radical claims beyond the urban sphere and to “decouple their local policies from national [and European] policies” (Oomen 2020:923). Thus, they serve “a practical but also a symbolic and jurisgenerative purpose” (Oomen 2020:913). In contrast to Brussels-based and diplomacy-oriented networks, these networks can be described as “a new generation of militant groupings, displaying a much more oppositional stand toward states” (Lacroix et al. 2022:2). Militant city networks experimented in constellations of “mixed memberships” (Oomen 2020:933) including grassroots initiatives, municipals leaders, civil society organisations, think tanks, and research centres, each with different degrees of militancy.

At the national and transnational levels, three networks are essential for our case. In Germany, the civil society organisation *Seebrücke* deployed a campaign to urge municipalities to “make full use of their political resources” (Baumgärtel and Pett 2022:91) in questions of refugee relocation and reception. Through mass demonstrations and a decentralised “open-source campaign” (Baumgärtel and Pett 2022:90) with local chapters, municipalities became known as Safe Harbours in public debates and among political decision-makers at higher levels. In June 2019, *Seebrücke* organised a conference in Berlin which served as a stage for mayors. With the Potsdam Declaration of Cities of Safe Harbours local leaders called for an active role of municipalities in refugee relocation and reception (IASH 2021). The statement includes demands for operational support for rescue vessels in the Mediterranean, admission of refugees above the required quota, and strengthening ties with like-minded municipalities, among others. The number of signatory cities increased from 13 to 120 over time.

The Humboldt-Governance-Platform (HGP), a think tank presided over by social democrat and former president of the European University Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder), Gesine Schwan, launched the initiative Europe Bottom-Up to strengthen the role of municipalities in the European Union. Schwan proposes “a new and holistic approach that supports municipalities with integration and urban development and gives them direct access to EU-Funds” (Schwan and Höpfner 2017:4). In a conference in Gdańsk, Poland, in June 2017, the HGP promoted this concept by inviting high-profile speakers and showcasing the best practices of European cities. The platform combines provocative messaging of bypassing nation-states with a reformist strategy. In 2021, in collaboration with *Seebrücke*, the HGP developed concrete policy proposals to strengthen the role of municipalities within the multilevel governance framework of nation-states and the EU (Pflaum et al. 2020).

A relatively more militant initiative, the Palermo Charter Process Platform (PCPP), is arguably “the first initiative supported by both civil society organisations and local authorities at the international level” (Pflaum et al. 2020:10). Based on the *Carta de Palermo* grassroots initiatives, sea rescue NGOs and dissident mayors (e.g. Orlando, Colau) founded the transnational alliance as a response to both the rise of right-wing governments in European states and the growing criminalisation of sea rescue. The allied agents explicitly stress that they envision a radically different system based on “infrastructures of the freedom of movement” (Ataç et al. 2021:932). With the slogan “From Sea to Cities” (Lacroix et al. 2022:10) they describe their endeavour to connect “actors present along migratory pathways so as to build and strengthen forms of solidarity and encounters ‘along the way’” (Ataç et al. 2021:933).

## Research Design and Analytical Perspectives

In this section, a critical examination of the literature on dissident and networked mayors is followed by the presentation of my research design, including research questions, the case study, analytical perspectives, the role of mayors, and methods.

The examples above demonstrate how mayors of European cities politicised after 2015 through local disruptive acts and militant city networks. In scholarly debates, municipalities are envisioned as entry points for “transformative social change” (Russell 2019:991). Similarly, militant networks present “a glimmer of hope in the deadlocked controversy on refugee reception” (Heimann et al. 2019:215). This literature gives detailed insights into how mayors exercise their dissent with European and national migration politics and become agents of migrant solidarity along with grassroots initiatives, civil society organisations, NGOs, and researchers. Yet, what is lacking in these debates is an empirically evidenced explanation of how both disruptive acts and militant networks can be sustained in organising efforts for transformative change in European migration politics and to what extent the migrant solidarity movement has advanced in this endeavour. These limitations arise from two gaps in the migrant solidarity scholarship. Firstly, Swyngedouw (2021:494) argues that the scholarship on dissident

and networked mayors “revolves around the indexing, archaeology, and excavation of the contradictory dynamics of interruptive action, [while] the focus on the singular act disavows considering the process of politicisation”. Put in other words, this means that scholars are inclined to misinterpret disruptive acts that spotlight migrant exclusion with changes themselves. He continues that “it is the potential subsequent politicisation, the making of a political sequence, that inscribes the political significance” (ibid.) in the institutional order and articulates imaginaries of migrant inclusion. Second, scholars engage with disruptive acts and militant networks in a way that is not related to a “systemic reflection for the elaboration of strategies to intervene in the policy process, contributing to a structural reshaping of the EU migration governance” (Alagna 2021). It is these two limitations in the literature that this paper addresses asking the following questions: How do agents of migrant solidarity create a political sequence that sustains mayors’ disruptive acts? How do they envision system change in European migration politics and build collective capacities to advance these struggles?

To address these questions, this paper hones in on one case, the transnational platform FS2C. It represents one of the most advanced efforts of sustaining dissent among mayors and civil society alike and organising for system change in European migration politics (Lacroix et al. 2022:10). Being rooted in dissident mayors’ commitment (mainly Leoluca Orlando and Ada Colau) and (trans-)national networks of migrant solidarity (Alagna 2023; Ataç et al. 2021; Maffei 2021, 2022; Stierl and Kubaczek 2021), the platform was designed and consolidated between summer 2018 and spring 2020. FS2C members include bottom-up actors such as grassroots activists, civil society actors, dissident mayors, researchers, and think tanks, e.g. Palermo Charter Process Platform, Humboldt-Governance-Platform, German Alliance of Cities of Safe Harbours, and *Seebrücke*. In joining forces, the platform seeks to nurture imaginaries, develop policies, and enact practices based on solidarity and human rights. It aims at system change in European migration politics (FS2C 2023). In recent years, the project’s main aim has been to create a counter-pole to state-led European migration politics. The FS2C consortium, its main coordinating body, organised a conference in Palermo in June 2021, hosted by Leoluca Orlando, to founding IASH. The founding statement of IASH was celebrated for its dissident character and noted in the general press.

To assess how FS2C builds collective capacities to advance in their visions to transform European migration politics, I rely on the analytical perspectives of political organisation. The question of political organisation entails three dimensions for Nunes (2021:35): “politics is about the collective power to act, it is necessarily also about how that power is amassed, focused, reproduced and sustained (the problem of organisation), how it can be expediently deployed (strategy and tactics) and how it can be put to the greatest effect given the goals, the circumstances and the resources available (leverage)”. Building on this understanding of political organising as a process of building collective capacities, the deployment of strategies, and their effects, I focus on the internal organisation of FS2C, and their strategy in the Palermo conference and assess its impact on the



migrant solidarity movement. Key terms will be presented throughout the empirical section.

The conceptualisation of mayors as agents in organising processes for transformative change needs some explanation as they are part of the capitalist state apparatus. Critical urban studies scholar Neil Brenner (2004:451) holds that the socio-spatial organisation of the state is “a socially produced, conflictual and dynamically evolving matrix of sociospatial interactions”. Thus, the relationship between the local state and nation state is neither functionalist nor ahistorical, but socially produced and, thus, constantly changing (Geddes 2009). While the local state is enmeshed in multiscale arrangements of the capitalist state, its development is not fully determined by translocal processes. Accordingly, the specific local relations of power may result in counter-hegemonic forces as the widely acclaimed examples of the New Spanish Municipalism shows (Martínez and Wisnink 2022). Nunes (2021:104) argues along the same lines, when he states that “[p]olitical subjectivation, and the concrete forms that it can take, do not follow necessarily from a position in the [social] structure ... [they] must be composed; they must be organised”. His remark highlights the contingency of organising processes, but it does not evade questions of the political direction of a movement. Rather, agents of progressive transformation may be identified through actions that exceed “historical and sociological determinations” (Nunes 2021:105). Consequently, I argue that dissident mayors bear the potential to act in line with the demands of the migrant solidarity movement as their role as local state leaders conditions but does not determine their actions. The analysis of mayors’ involvement in the migration solidarity movement, then, includes identifying their progressive positioning and consider their actions amid ambivalences of the capitalist state apparatus.

To operationalise the relation between mayors’ disruptive acts and a transnational political sequence, I utilise four characteristics—as defined by Swynge-douw (2021:494)—to examine the political sequence through which FS2C “carves out new organisational forms, maintains a militant fidelity to the originary event, recasts the symbolic framing, and begins to transform the instituted order”. A relational spatial approach (Ward 2010) productively complements the research design. I follow Çağlar and Glick Schiller (2018:9), who understand cities as “institutional political, economic, and cultural actors positioned within multiple institutionally structured scales of differentiated but connected domains of power”. In this view, dissident and networked mayors remain relevant starting points for empirical studies as strategic nodes in a political sequence, which in a reciprocal process, co-constitute each other (Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2018:25). This operationalisation not only accepts the relevance of disruptive acts and militant networks for political organisation. At the same time, it also evades a determinist focus on singular acts or spatial forms of political action. Disruptive acts and militant networks can be analysed concerning the political sequence FS2C intends to build.

The primary empirical data that informs the analysis includes nine episodic interviews with consortium members (Flick 2000:124), one podcast recording (collected between October 2021 and June 2022), and six audio recordings of

conference panels (taken from a webinar series between July and December 2020 and a conference in June 2021 in Palermo). While these sources allow for insights into the FS2C consortium members' individual perspectives, 33 media articles and videos, and other internet documents (social media posts, statements, web sources) are used to contextualise the activities of FS2C. For the analysis, I deploy an argumentative discourse analysis (Hajer 2004) for deducing narratives and strands of action. Hajer (2004) differentiates between three analytical levels that comprise the discourse analysis—storylines, coalitions that structure discourses, and the manifestations of discourse in institutional practices. The analysis does not rely on a predefined corpus; rather, context documents are gathered in case of an apparent connection to the analysed case. The data is sorted thematically in a two-stage procedure using a deductive coding scheme and related across data sorts to develop a saturated storyline and reconstruct coalitions and institutional manifestations. I conducted the interviews in English and German. Quotations from German interviews presented in the following section are my translations. With the acronym "FS2C" which is followed by a number, I refer to the interviews below.

## **Sustaining Dissent in a Political Sequence: The Transnational Platform "From the Sea to the City"**

In this section, I present the empirical data to exhibit how the transnational platform FS2C has sustained mayors' dissent and shaped a political sequence between 2018 and 2021. Concepts and terms of political organisation presented throughout this section offer an analytical framework for understanding these processes. In accordance with the process-driven perspective that has been laid out above, this section intends to relate the organising process to events of disruption. The first subsection focuses on the process of setting up the FS2C coalition between 2018 and 2020 based on the storyline that European cities need to be at the centre of a progressive system change in European migration politics. In the second subsection, I will detail the proceedings of founding IASH in a highly mediated conference in Palermo in 2021. This event marks the institutionalisation of mayors' dissent at the transnational level. I call this form of organising "momentum-driven" (Engler and Engler 2016:65). Finally, I examine the deliberative process of questioning the feasibility of IASH's reform proposal. This intervention indicates that agents in FS2C think ecologically of movement politics as they situate their critique within the context of shared goals (Nunes 2021:169).

### ***Setting Up the Coalition "From the Sea to the City"***

As an initial step in the complex process of organising for system change, agents of migrant solidarity develop a storyline and set up a coalition between the summer of 2018 and the spring of 2020. Key figures at this stage included Alarm-Phone, Ada Colau and Leoluca Orlando, who already collaborated in the Palermo Charter Process Platform, as well as *Seebrücke*, and the Humboldt-Governance-Platform, among others (FS2C\_8). Four meetings in different European cities

served to design the transnational platform. This process can be characterised as a way of “setting up spaces for collaboration that *condition but do not determine* results” (Nunes 2021:205).

The founding members established the storyline of an “active role of welcoming cities” in the organising process for transformative change in European migration politics. Based on the shared belief that dissident mayors have been strategic agents of migrant solidarity, dissident mayors shall be at the centre of the project (FS2C\_5). Mayors are considered friends as they support sea rescue NGOs and have declared their willingness and ability to welcome refugees since 2015 (FS2C\_7). However, the focus on dissident mayors did not reside in moral claims that municipal leaders generally are at the forefront of migrant solidarity struggles. It was instead the result of previous collaborations with dissident mayors, a sober analysis of the potential of advancing struggles of migrant solidarity, and considerations about existing resources, skills, and infrastructures. Having recognised that within the current situation, municipalities needed more resources to participate in such an intense process, FS2C did not include municipal representatives. However, they closely collaborated with mayors in developing strategies and carrying out their actions.

Based on the storyline the FS2C coalition is set up around five goals which make it distinct from other coalitions in the field of migrant solidarity (FS2C\_6). Among the five goals,<sup>3</sup> two stand out as they envision pathways for system change in European migration politics. One vision concerns a progressive reform of state-led European migration policy that includes European municipalities in the decision making around the reception and relocation of refugees from the Mediterranean to cities. Municipal leaders are an essential part of this vision as they “can be actively advocating at the European level” (FS2C\_8) for reform of relocation and reception mechanisms. Another vision is to establish legal corridors between the shores of the Mediterranean and the European municipalities that ensure safe migration regardless of citizenship and nationality. Municipalities are an integral part of support infrastructures for safe migration corridors as they can provide resources and services. While the first vision proposes a change from within the institutions, the latter envisions a radical shift of the relocation and reception system without interference from state authorities. Proponents envisage infrastructures of solidarity along migratory routes that are pillared by a thick web of grassroots initiatives, social centres, civil society organisations, and municipalities.

To facilitate political action to be developed and realised, the coalition created an internal organisational structure that consists of a consortium and two working groups. These three elements resemble what Nunes (2021:203) calls “organising cores”: nodes of networks that create a stable space of collaboration in the complex organising process. The core body of FS2C is a consortium of civil society actors that decides on strategy, alliances, and actions. At the time of the study, the consortium comprised 12 members: grassroots initiatives, civil society organisations, NGOs, and think tanks.<sup>4</sup> The two working groups represent the two visions of system change mentioned above. The reform-oriented core “Cooperation with Cities” consists of think tanks, NGOs, and grassroots initiatives such as *Seebrücke* and Humboldt-Governance-Platform. The core “Corridors of Solidarity”

include sea rescue NGOs and activist collectives like AlarmPhone, Europe Must Act, and Welcome2Europe.

As this section has shown, civil society agents and dissident mayors set up the FS2C coalition that stabilised and set a direction in the complex process of organisation through a shared storyline and spaces of collaboration. The platform allowed for two visions of system change in European migration politics—reform and radical shift—to coexist. In a meeting in Bologna in November 2019, the consortium members decided to create a transnational alliance of dissident mayors to institutionalise their vision that municipal leaders play an active role in European migration politics (FS2C\_5).

### ***Institutionalising Mayors' Dissent at the Transnational Level: The "International Alliance of Safe Harbours"***

The organising core "Collaboration with Cities" decided that an international conference in Palermo would be the founding moment of a transnational alliance of dissident mayors across Europe. Before the conference, the consortium analysed shared interests among municipalities to attract dissident mayors to join the conference. As a result, direct EU funding has been identified as a relevant demand for cities as they struggled to cover the costs of refugee inclusion. The consortium convinced 33 mayors and deputies to participate in the Palermo conference. The preparations for and deployment of the conference resembled features of "momentum-driven organizing" (Engler and Engler 2016:65). This organising approach aims at "placing local grievances ... in the context of a broader fight" to win the commitment of local agents (Engler and Engler 2016:70). This way, momentum-driven organising intends "to create something at once diffuse ... and purposeful, with all localized actions contributing to a unified strategy" (Engler and Engler 2016:71). The Palermo conference is an excellent example of how FS2C's reform core sought to connect mayors' dissent to the vision to reform European relocation and reception mechanisms.

The conference itself served as a stage for dissident mayors to articulate the progressive reform proposal, as can be shown with the example of the leading figures in the conference: Palermo's Leoluca Orlando, who provided municipal resources (venues, labour force, media channels) for the conference (FS2C\_3). Mike Schubert, mayor of Potsdam, is also an initiator of the German Alliance of Safe Harbours that served as a blueprint for the Palermo conference. In his opening speech, Orlando (FS2C 2021a) asserted that the gathering of mayors is a success, "a historic moment". It is a "starting point for a new Europe that starts from local realities", that opposes a state-dominated "Europe ... in Brussels". Schubert pointed out that a transnational city alliance was a driver of reshaping European migration politics. In his mind, an approach of "small numbers [of receiving refugees] and a strong network of municipalities" may convince local host societies that migration is not a burden. The performative act of signing the statement itself was the culmination of the conference. With their signatures, the 12 present mayors officially founded IASH to prove their commitment to the above-mentioned transnational campaign to reform European migration politics based on solidarity.

With IASH the FS2C coalition's vision manifested itself in a new institutional arrangement that enables dissident mayors to speak for themselves in European migration politics. The main effect of installing IASH is to enhance "the capacity of the [migrant solidarity] movement to escalate further" (Engler and Engler 2016:127). The institutionalisation of mayors' dissent allowed for a strategic and functional division of labour between FS2C and IASH in the movement of migration solidarity. Instead of criticising mayors for not being "radical", a consortium member conceives dissident mayors as "proxy advocates" (FS2C\_8)—a legitimate voice of state representatives that joins civil society in the struggle to reform the European migration system. With the Palermo conference, FS2C institutionalised mayors' dissent at a transnational level where there were not "so many different voices advocating for [progressive] migration [politics]" (FS2C\_7). This way, FS2C and IASH expanded "each other's fields of possibilities" (Nunes 2021:166) and "enhanced [its] legitimacy" (Engler and Engler 2016:127).

Through IASH the FS2C laid the foundation that their visions for system change win "more popular support" (Engler and Engler 2016:127).<sup>5</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this paper to study the impact of the IASH statement on public opinion, its dissemination in media outlets across European countries indicates that the conference has sparked interest in the wider public (FS2C\_8). The media coverage took up the narrative of the conference: the two leading dissident mayors, Orlando and Schubert, "articulate their vision of a welcoming Europe" (Bathke 2021) as opposed to state-led European migration politics. FS2C actively worked towards a conference setup that creates high visibility in traditional and social media, and rich documentation.<sup>6</sup>

In summary, FS2C deployed momentum-driven organising to create an alliance of dissident mayors, IASH, as a vehicle to disseminate the proposal to reform relocation and reception mechanisms at the European level in media channels across Europe. In terms of shaping a political sequence, the conference constantly referenced mayors' disruptive acts and recast the symbolic order surrounding migration politics through imaginaries of the inclusion of municipalities in the decision-making of migration politics. Moreover, in institutionalising mayors' dissent FS2C lays the foundation for further organising efforts to transform the instituted order of migration politics.

### *Situated Critique as Ecological Thinking*

FS2C members not only celebrated the proposal of a progressive reform of European migration politics at the Palermo conference. As the example of a panel discussion on "Corridors of Solidarity" shows, some FS2C members scrutinised this vision of system change:

... the EU Commission, for example, ... they are already discussing new policies and new policies, policy ideas for years now and they are not reaching any conclusion or any agreement. On the other hand, corridors should be or could be implemented immediately. And please keep in mind that corridors already exist. (FS2C 2021b)

This FS2C member dismissed longsome negotiations with EU institutions and national governments and emphasised that “Corridors of Solidarity” already existed. Another member hesitated to imagine the concrete effects of the reform proposal on national and European politics (FS2C\_1). As for IASH, another FS2C member warned of the risk that mayors may use the IASH statement for their purposes as they were not bound to do anything (FS2C\_2). As an alternative, FS2C members—aligned with the vision of a radical shift—proposed focusing on the concrete practice and immediate changes that the “Corridors of Solidarity” concept entailed. In addition, group members recalled the origins of FS2C, which has been heavily invested in the Palermo Charter Process Platform and solidarity with migrants (FS2C\_1).

These statements bear witness that the Palermo conference not only mirrored the mixed membership of FS2C, but also functioned as an arena where the coalition between proponents of the two visions of system change—reform and radical shift—is tested. While Corridor group members openly criticised reform of and interaction with European and national government bodies, they refrained from questioning their participation in FS2C. Instead, they second that the involvement of mayors through the IASH statement was a significant success as it has been well received by the wider public (FS2C\_1; FS2C\_2). Rather than dismissing a progressive reform altogether, they accepted it as one legitimate strategy of system change in European migration politics.

The way in which the Corridor group related to the reform proposal indicates “ecological thinking” among agents in FS2C. Nunes (2021:169) uses the concept of “ecological thinking” to refer to movement agents “that combine the ability to intervene at certain key points of the chain with the capacity to think the chain as a whole”. In other words, movement agents develop a sense of a common struggle. At the same time, “[s]ubstantial differences in interests, goals, beliefs and political approaches continue to exist” (Nunes 2021:171). Accordingly, the organising cores inside FS2C relied on divergent visions of system change, reform, and radical shift. Despite concerns about its feasibility, the Corridor group acknowledged the reform proposal as a viable strategy to change European migration politics. The FS2C coalition, thus, has a specific quality. Instead of dismissing divergent political strategies, FS2C agents aligned their proposal to transform European migration politics and contribute to the whole community’s benefit. In addition to the reform group and IASH, the radical shift group expanded FS2C’s possibilities. It functioned as a constant reminder of the existent practice of solidarity. As the intervention by members of the organising core “Corridors of Solidarity” showed, the Palermo conference served as an arena to showcase that FS2C agents are aware of the movement ecology they act in.

Overall, the case study showed how FS2C—and prior networking efforts—have shaped a political sequence that originated in mayors’ disruptive acts and sustained mayors’ dissent along four dimensions: developing a storyline and setting up a broad coalition of migrant solidarity agents to stabilise a complex organising process, constantly referencing mayors’ disruptive acts, nurturing counter-imaginaries of the inclusion of municipalities in refugee relocation and

reception, and laying the foundation for further action to transform the instituted order of European migration politics.

## Discussion

In 2015, mayors across Europe joined the migrant solidarity movement as they were dissatisfied with European and national migration politics. In the following years, they collaborated with grassroots initiatives, civil society organisations, and NGOs to become part of a political sequence. Six years later, in Palermo in June 2021, 33 mayors articulated a reform proposal for European migration based on solidarity: refugee relocation and reception with European municipalities and civil society at its centre. Based on primary empirical data, I argued that the transnational platform FS2C has created a political sequence that sustained mayors' disruptive acts after 2015 and has enhanced collective capacities for system change in European migration politics through IASH. With the institutionalisation of dissident mayors at a transnational level FS2C lays the foundation for further organising efforts to transform the instituted order of migration politics.

To explain this development, this paper engaged with the relationship between disruptive acts of mayors and a subsequent political sequence. Bringing in theories of political organisation I assessed internal movement politics to build collective capacities for system change in European migration in two ways. Firstly, the concept of "momentum-driven organizing" (Engler and Engler 2016:65) helped make sense of how FS2C organised an international and highly mediated conference to stage dissident mayors. The organising process leading to the Palermo conference is an excellent example of how FS2C sought to connect local disruption to the proposal for progressive reform of relocation and reception mechanisms at the European level. Secondly, Nunes' (2021:169) concept of movement ecology and the strategic labour division seems appropriate to theorise the interplay between seemingly divergent agents—radical grassroots initiatives and mayors—and political strategies that strive for system change. IASH, the institutionalisation of mayors' dissent, allows for a strategic and functional division of labour in the migration solidarity movement as mayors articulate their proposal to reform the European migration system from a legitimate position as local state representatives. As the intervention by FS2C members that propose a radical shift towards "Corridors of Solidarity" shows, the Palermo conference is indicative that agents of migrant solidarity think and act ecologically. This collaboration has a specific quality as FS2C members situate their different political strategies within the common goal of transforming European migration politics. As an analytical concept, the ecology concept changes the way we see how movement agents act. They "combine the ability to intervene at certain key points of the chain with the capacity to think the chain as a whole" (ibid.). Far from thinking of it as a blueprint for political action, scholars stressed that the awareness of an "organisational ecology" (Nunes 2021:165) in social movements was already anchored in emancipatory movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup> The world-spanning uprisings of the 2010s witnessed a proliferation of ecological movement-building strategies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> These examples show that movement efforts are more

sustainable if their agents “see themselves as part of an ecology” (Engler and Engler 2016:253).

Further studies can take up the perspective of political organisation. For example, subsequent studies may engage in-depth with proponents of radical politics—an equally relevant component of the migrant solidarity movement ecology—and how they build collective capacities. Further research must also examine possibilities for progressive system change considering external factors (the specific politico-institutional apparatus). This research can complement the analysis of the inner composition of the movement ecology of migrant solidarity that this paper has focused on.

The perspective of political organisation can inform the scholarship on migrant solidarity, precisely on disruptive acts and militant city networks, as it recognises the complexity as well as contradictions in movement efforts to build collective capacities. Critical scholars must be equipped with analytical tools, concepts, and terms of political organisation to “engage more systematically in symbolising and narrating these proliferating alternative socio-spatial ... arrangements” (Kaika 2018:1722). In this vein, I attempted to initiate a conversation between two strands of literature: as the study of political organisation foregrounds the assembling and stabilising of complex processes, the invisible and constant work behind the scenes, and mediations between divergent political actors such as grassroots initiatives and mayors, it can supplement the study of demands and claims in the migrant solidarity movement. Drawing attention to collective capacity-building processes in struggles of migrant solidarity, this paper calls for an assessment of movement politics that goes beyond the belief that dispersed local disruptions or the best argument will suffice to set in motion a progressive transformation of European migration politics.

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## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Ada Colau was a leading figure in the movement against forced evictions in Barcelona. When the municipalist electoral platform *Barcelona en Comú*, which emerged from this context, won the municipal elections in 2015, Colau became Mayor of Barcelona (Hansen 2019).



<sup>2</sup> In 2015, the American concept of Sanctuary Cities travelled to Europe and manifested within urban contexts (Bauder 2022:121). In the UK, cities followed the American slogan of Sanctuary Cities. Different concepts gained traction in continental Europe, e.g. *Solidarische Städte* (Solidarity Cities) in Germany and *Ciudades de Refugio* (Cities of Refuge) in Spain. When, in the 1980s, central American refugees sought refuge in US and Canadian cities, the idea of a Sanctuary City was born (Bauder 2019). Joining social movements, Northern American cities proactively decided to withdraw from cooperation with federal police to protect migrants from deportation. In addition, municipal governments created inclusionary pathways into regular systems.

<sup>3</sup> The goals include: "(1) a combined effort to lobby the European Commission on migration policy; (2) the creation of a framework of action linking Search-and-Rescue operations and city welcoming; (3) advocating for direct sources of EU funding for both cities and civil society organisations; (4) the creation of legal corridors for the mobility of asylum seekers within Europe; (5) securing access to fundamental rights in housing, health and other welfare domains" (Lacroix et al. 2022:9).

<sup>4</sup> European Alternatives, Emergency, EuropeMustAct, Humboldt-Viadrina Governance Platform, INURA, Mediterranean Saving Humans, Open Arms Italy Office, SeaWatch, Seebrücke Germany, Tesseræ, Welcome to Europe/Italy, and Watch the Med Alarm Phone.

<sup>5</sup> FS2C lists 33 press articles, videos, and audio from national and international newspapers (<https://fromseacity.eu/press/> [last accessed 2 August 2023]).

<sup>6</sup> Well-known Italian journalist Maria Cuffaro, who works for a news programme at RAI 3, an Italian TV channel with a national audience, hosted the opening mayors' roundtables. The social media presence included panel live streams and recordings as well as live tweets on YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter on the respective channels of the municipality of Palermo and FS2C.

<sup>7</sup> Struggles around feminist, gay, and civil rights, as well as postcolonial movements, relied on ecological movement thinking (Engler and Engler 2016).

<sup>8</sup> These include the alter-globalisation movement, Arab Spring uprisings, climate, housing, and municipalist struggles, and socialist electoral campaigns in the UK and US (Méndez de Andés 2019; Routledge and Cumbers 2009; Srnicek and Williams 2015; Vollmer and Gutiérrez 2022).

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