Decentralising integration policies

Managing migration in cities, regions and localities

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policy network paper

An EU "fit for purpose"

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Abstract

As cities and regions across Europe struggle to manage the integration challenges posed by immigration, a growing number of people are looking to decentralisation for answers. This paper argues that increasing the financial and decision-making power of local authorities is a necessary precondition for formulating and implementing successful integration policies, but it is not a panacea. The paper draws on the findings of two large-scale European projects on local integration policies to identify the strategic and tactical advantages which local authorities enjoy over national governments in the field of integration. It warns, however, that if decentralisation is to work for the benefit of integration and avoid a "race to the bottom" in the delivery of public services, the transfer of competences from central to local authorities must take place in a carefully calibrated system of multi-level governance. The paper provides a framework for thinking about decentralisation and its implications at different levels of governance taking into account the varied ideological and institutional settings which prevail across Europe.

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Introduction

In recent years there have been increasing calls for decentralisation from cities and regions across Europe struggling to manage the integration challenges posed by immigration. However, such calls, and the arguments in favour of or against decentralisation, have quite divergent origins and represent different perspectives. First of all, there are those who argue that the very logic of integration policies should lead primarily to local and decentralised policymaking and implementation since most individual and group interactions take place at local level. Secondly, there are ongoing disputes over what stages of the integration policymaking process – the formulation, implementation or evaluation stages – should be decentralised. Calls for decentralisation have different implications depending on which phase one has in mind. Thirdly, decentralisation raises the basic question of political accountability, i.e. who is politically responsible for policy outcomes and who should pay for them. From this perspective, it is logical that positions taken in discussions of decentralisation will vary substantially depending on where one sits within the three basic levels of governance - the local, the national and (since 2003) the EU level. Policy actors at each different level will look at decentralisation differently, depending on how they define the division of tasks and budget allocations between these levels.

All these issues must be taken into account when considering the role greater decentralisation could play in helping local authorities manage the welfare impacts of migration. In this paper, I offer a range of perspectives on this question based on the findings of two large-scale research projects on local integration policies: the MPMC project[1] and the CLIP project.[2] The starting point for both of these projects is the reality that local authorities, whatever their powers and resources, must bear the brunt of managing integration. As such, the projects have primarily aimed at providing a repertoire of good practice measures that other local authorities may want to adopt. Although the costs and benefits of decentralisation were not examined directly in these projects, by analysing cities with very different levels of decision-making power and financial autonomy, the projects provide a rich tapestry of cases for exploring this issue.

The paper is divided into two sections. The first reviews the most relevant findings of the MPMC and CLIP projects for the question at hand. These include observations relating to the nature of integration as a two way process; warnings about the political vulnerabilities of integration policies; and analysis of the tactical and strategic advantages which local authorities have over national authorities for delivering integration. The second section of the paper draws on these findings to consider four critical dimensions of the decentralisation debate: the shortcomings of centralised government in shaping migrant integration policies; the three aspects of decentralisation and their interrelationship; the potential trade-offs for equality and fairness; and the optimal calibration of multilevel governance for the benefit of integration.

1.What do we know about integration policies at local level?

There is a host of literature on integration and an endless variety of definitions of the concept (and of related terms such as assimilation, incorporation, insertion). However, many of these definitions have normative implications that point to a desired outcome. This makes the definitions problematic for the empirical study of processes of integration and exclusion. In my own work, I try to avoid these issues by using the following basic definition: integration is the process of becoming an accepted part of society. This process has three analytically distinct dimensions in which people may (or may not) become accepted parts of society: the legal-political one (do they have residence rights, citizen rights and are they accepted as equal citizens?); the socio-economic one (do they have full rights and opportunities of equal access in the hard fields of labour, education, housing and health?); and the cultural/religious dimension (do they have rights and opportunities comparable to the established cultural and religious groups?).

1.1 Integration: a two-way process with a plurality of (local) outcomes

The immigrant integration process is propelled by the interaction between two parties: the immigrants themselves, with their varying characteristics, efforts and degrees of adaptation, and the receiving society, with its characteristics and its reactions to newcomers. It is largely the interaction between the two that determines the outcomes of the integration process. Moreover, it is important to remember that the two parties in the integration process are fundamentally unequal in terms of power and resources. The receiving society, its institutional structure and its reactions to newcomers are consequently far more decisive for the outcome of the integration process than the immigrants themselves. The interaction between the receiving society and individual migrants (and immigrant groups) takes place in the very concrete contexts of streets, neighbourhoods, schools, work places, public spaces, local organisations. In other words, integration takes place at the local level, even if some of its mechanisms are steered by institutional rules that have been established at higher (regional, national or international) levels.

The cases examined within the MPMC and CLIP projects illustrate the heterogeneous nature of both parties and consequently the variability of patterns and outcomes of the integration process. Looking at the immigrants first, their reasons for

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migrating and their economic and social profiles are highly variable in both time and space. Some migrant flows towards Europe's cities had their origins in past or present colonial relations, as is clearly visible in cities like Amsterdam, Birmingham, Lisbon or Marseille. Other flows can be traced back to a demand-driven migration of mostly low-skilled workers. Some of these flows have a long history; this is the case in Swiss, Belgian, German and French cities. Other flows stem from the post-war decades, as in Austrian cities. And all European cities have received varying shares of mixed immigrant flows during the past three decades: significant supply-driven movements of refugees, asylum seekers, undocumented immigrants, and new migrants who moved after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Most cities received these newcomers alongside highly skilled cosmopolitan professionals and company-linked migrants. The resulting picture reveals not only a significant increase in the diversity of immigrant stocks (from predominantly European to more and more global), but also marked disparities in the social and cultural capital that immigrants have brought with them and/or developed during their stay.

If we turn our eye to the host societies, we see that variability is also strong. The templates of the 17 MPMC cities uncovered wide variations both in their institutional settings and in their policies and responses to immigrants (Alexander 2007), as did the case reports of the 20-30 cities in the CLIP-studies (Bosswick et al. 2007; Spencer 2008; Lüken-Klassen and Heckmann forthcoming). Some of the variation can be explained by differences in the national institutional systems in which the cities are embedded. But there is also a great many local factors and circumstances that account for the high variability of local integration patterns and reactions. This includes, for example, the physical layout of the city and its relationship with the neighbouring area (compare Paris to Berlin before 1991, or Stockholm with Copenhagen); the city's historical experience with earlier immigration and diversity; the concrete instruments and resources available to local policymakers to guide processes in the vital domains of housing and urban regeneration, labour market and entrepreneurship, education and health; and local political constellations and coalitions that work for inclusion or for exclusion. These and many other local factors contribute to the considerable variation which exists in local integration practices and policies.

Considerable attention has been given to the impact of national-level ideologies and institutional arrangements on variations in the models and practices of integration across different countries, to which considerable research has been dedicated (see e.g. Bauböck et al. 1996; Brubaker 1992; Castles and Miller 1998; Favell 2000; Freeman 1995; Guiraudon 1998; Hammar 1985; Soysal 1994). Less attention has been given to the way context also matters at local levels. The context-bound nature of local integration policies is clearly illustrated in the comparative analysis of MPMC cities (see Alexander 2007; Rogers and Tillie 2001; Penninx et al. 2004). The comparative reports of the CLIP cities also make abundantly clear that local characteristics and arrangements have a significant influence on policy opportunities and outcomes.

1.2 The political vulnerabilities of integration policies

Policies are intended to steer processes in society, in our case the integration processes of immigrants. This means that policies are normative by definition: such a process of policy formulation starts by defining the actual integration process or outcome (for certain groups) as problematic (hence the need to have a policy). It continues by formulating a desired outcome of the integration process; a point in time that this outcome should be reached; and the instruments to be used in the policy process. For such a policy to be sound, we not only need a thorough understanding of integration processes themselves, we also have to get such policies politically approved and sustained over time. However, politics and policymaking often follow very different logics, and the gulf between them can have problematic consequences for the integration process.

A basic problem of policymaking in relation to migrant integration is that decisions on the content and the orientation of such policies are often taken by a (non-immigrant) majority vote in political systems in which immigrants or ethnic minorities are not allowed to or cannot effectively participate. This conundrum expresses itself at the national level, but has also been aptly illustrated by Mahnig (2004) at the local level for cities like Berlin, Paris and Zurich. Majority-minority relations, and the actual or perceived clashes of interest connected to them, are played out both at the national level and in cities. This may lead to the outright exclusion of segments of immigrant populations (as alien non-citizens) from the formal political system; or, in cases where they are partially or fully included, it may marginalise their voices. Perceptions of immigrants turn out to be significant factors in such processes – indeed their influence is often stronger than the facts (Penninx et al. 2004). This is even more evident in cases where immigration and the position of immigrants are turned into politicised questions. This situation may result either in a virtual absence of (explicit) integration policies and

an avoidance of issues related to immigrants, or in one-sided, patronising policies that largely reflect majority interests and disregard the needs and voices of immigrants.

During the implementation stage of integration policies, another problematic consequence of the logic of politics emerges. In contrast to the long-term nature of integration processes that can take two generations, the political process in democratic societies requires that policies bear fruit within much shorter time frames – the space between elections. Unrealistic promises and demands that arise from this "democratic impatience" – the political desire to achieve quick solutions for problems and processes of a long-term character (Vermeulen & Penninx 1994) – often produce a backlash. The venement debate over the alleged failure of Dutch integration policies that has been taking place since the early years 2000 is a good example. This debate has led to a reorientation of policy that emphasises decisiveness and control through the adoption of a few highly symbolic topics of national policy - like the civic integration courses, mandatory regulations to do these courses and more restrictive admission policies (see Bruquetas-Callejo et al. 2007). It is not clear whether these measures will have practical effects for integration.[3]

Still more difficult than democratic impatience, however, are situations in which a political climate of anti-immigration and anti-immigrant sentiments – translated into political

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movements and a politicisation of the topics of immigration and integration – prevents well-argued policy proposals from being adopted. Unfortunately, such situations have emerged in a number of European countries today, where debates about integration have become "captured" by abstract arguments about national identity and cohesion, overlooking more basic and practical concerns about fair access to employment and public services. However, the problem is also one that can and does afflict the city level, the Zurich case around the turn of the century (Mahnig & Wimmer 2001) being an extreme example of this. In his analysis of minority-majority relations in Zurich, Hans Mahnig (2004) described in detail how proposals for local integration policies (Leitbild) developed in Zurich in 1998 were systematically voted down by politically mobilised local parties.

An important lesson derived from the foregoing observations is that the viability and effectiveness of integration policies in the long term depends, on the one hand, on setting realistic targets and, on the other hand, on conducting an adequate analysis of the institutional setting and the possibilities provided by this setting for building integration policies. Such a (less ideologically-driven) practical approach, combined with active participation of immigrants and their organisations, will not only avoid backlash effects among the majority population; it will also result in a practice in which immigrants are involved and feel recognised. In the next section I look more closely at the example of Britain, Sweden and the Netherlands where cities have found "winning" strategies and instruments to avoid the negative politicisation of integration policies. As we shall see, these cities have achieved a degree of success in the area of integration but have done so through different means, underlying the importance of taking the different historical and institutional contexts into account.

1.3 Developing (local) integration policies: bottom up and top-down approaches

The MPMC and CLIP data on local integration policies generally confirm the working of the above listed political vulnerabilities. However, some case studies, particularly of British, Dutch and Swedish cities, also point to ways out of these political conundrums. Until recently, most immigrants in British

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cities were of ex-colonial origin and therefore held UK citizenship. As a result, local level integration policies were formulated in a political system characterised by high levels of immigrant participation. Although this has not prevented significant polarisation of majority-minority relations (as a wealth of literature in the UK and Garbaye (2004)'s case study on Birmingham testify), the significant concentrations of immigrants in certain districts, combined with political coalitions with powerful parties, appear to have resulted in substantial immigrant political participation in some UK-cities over the course of time. Crises in some cities have reinforced this "bottom-up" process.

A different, "top-down" trajectory towards more political participation and inclusive integration policies is shown by some Swedish and Dutch cities. Both of these countries introduced rather comprehensive integration policies at the national level in a period when immigration and immigrant integration were much less politicised: Sweden in the mid-1970s and the Netherlands in the early 1980s. These conditions promoted the early establishment of liberal, inclusive measures and policies at the national level, including the introduction of local voting rights for aliens (Sweden in 1976, the Netherlands in 1985) and easier access to naturalisation for many newcomers. Such novelties (at the time) were motivated by a conviction and awareness that forces within migrant groups would need to be mobilised to get policies accepted and implemented and to forge cohesion. Naturalisation and local voting rights were viewed as means to promote integration, rather than as a final testimony to integration achieved (as it is prodominantly viewed today in Europe). The result of such policies is that, in Dutch and Swedish cities, the large majority of immigrants and their descendants are entitled to participate in both national and local elections, a significant part of parliamentary and local council members have an immigrant background, and the immigrant vote actually counts.[4]

Another consequence of the specific historical development of Dutch and Swedish cities is that their relations with national authorities have changed: these cities were confronted with heavy pressures on essential institutions such as the housing system (segregation and degeneration of neighbourhoods), the labour market (disproportionate unemployment, high social benefit costs) and the education system (concentrations of ethnic minority pupils in certain areas and sectors), as well as on public order (racial harassment, crime, inter-group tensions). In order to manage these pressures, the cities joined forces to demand more executive power and greater resources from their national governments. In recent years, cities in the Netherlands and Sweden have bundled integration policies together with general policies on urban regeneration, thus conceivably creating new, wider-ranging possibilities.

In the Swedish and Dutch cases, national policies stimulated local authorities to develop integration policies. However, in Europe there are many more examples of cities which have developed integration policies in the absence of national guidelines. In

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countries like Switzerland, Germany and Austria – where national integration policies have been late, piecemeal or nonexistent – the pressures to formulate adequate policies and the claims for greater responsibilities and resources have come from the cities. Zurich, Bern and Basel, for instance, took initiatives for local policies (Leitbilder) in the late 1990s, prompted by the utter absence of policies at the Swiss national level. Berlin, Frankfurt and Vienna had already taken such steps earlier in response to a similar lack of national policies and resources.

Common to all such cases is the development of a critical dialogue between cities and national governments as a result of clashing perspectives on key issues related to integration. These include different views on how to handle illegal migrants, on access to facilities and services in the domains of

4. It is interesting to note that the "immigrant vote" played an important role in reversing the political situation in Rotterdam in the recent local elections of March 2006, ousting the Pim Fortuijn Party (LPF) and bringing back the Social-Democrats: see Van Heelsum & Tillie 2006.

employment, housing, education and health, on the financing of integration facilities, etc. Cities will not always win such battles. At the same time, city councils are often able to use their discretionary powers – avoiding national public debate when possible – to gain more room for manoeuvre in support of certain immigrants. What such clashes make clear – and this is the broader message of the MPMC and CLIP projects – is that the interests at stake in the formulation and implementation of integration policies may substantially differ, or be perceived as different, at local and national levels. A significant proportion of European cities are increasingly aware that they need long-term, consistent integration policies in order to preserve their viability as community entities and their liveability for all their residents.

Overall, the evaluation of local policies conducted through the MPMC and CLIP projects point to the following areas where local authorities have strategic and tactical advantages over national authorities:

A. Mobilising groups of migrants, not only individuals. Too much policy conception, particularly when it comes to national policies, is "top-down", addressing individual immigrants, while much of the policy implementation has to rely on mobilising forces within immigrant groups to be successful. These groups (e.g. mentor organisations, women organisations, language training organisations) are easier to mobilise at local level.

B. Engaging with majority organisations. Civil society organisations representing the majority population, including churches, trade unions, employers' organisations, political parties, media, are not only important partners in the implementation of integration policies; they also play a crucial political role, helping to frame integration policies in such a way that they are accepted by the broader public. These civil society organisations are also easier to mobilise at local level.

C. Getting priorities right. Local authorities are in a better position to define the right priorities for action in a number of domains of integration. For long-term immigrants, priority should be given to domains in which local authorities have effective and generally accepted instruments to promote integration: the labour market and social policy domains, particularly education and housing. Political and cultural forms of integration are more contested forms of integration and also more dependent on discourse, policy making and legal instruments levered at national level. They are also indispensable over the long-term, but can often be handled more pragmatically at the local level.

D. Monitoring outcomes. Monitoring is a device for developing awareness, for establishing an empirically based diagnosis and on the basis of this for steering policies. Monitoring is particularly important for the functioning of general public institutions, which may have (unintended) unequal outcomes for immigrants as a result of their socio-economic status or cultural particularities. Effective monitoring must measure local impacts and allow for locally specific policy actions.

E. A toolkit approach to promote integration. Integration policy is best seen as providing newcomers with the basic tools needed to acquire a place in society independently: a toolkit of training in the local language, civic training etc. Such training efforts should preferably take place in connection with trajectories for labour market incorporation or education, and therefore best conducted at local level. As such they should avoid normative claims of adaptation or assimilation.

The foregoing sections have given us a general background against which we can now try to develop normative insights about the role of decentralisation in the field of integration.

2.1 The shortcomings of centralised governance

When it comes to initiating policies, we have seen that national authorities and policies may have a stimulating effect on the development of local integration policies, as was the case of Sweden and The Netherlands in the past. But we have also seen that the mechanism may work the other way around: in Switzerland, Austria and Germany, cities pressed national authorities to develop integration policies. There is no particular reason to set priorities for one of these routes towards local or national policies. There are different consequences, however, for the practice of their relations, as we have seen.

The important issue to emphasise is that, whatever route is taken, policymaking and implementation at the national level is always some steps away from the actual practice of integration at the local level, a distance that cannot only be measured physically, but also mentally. This inevitably has consequences for the role that national and local authorities should play in the integration process. National authorities should be involved in the framing of integration policies, providing general directions and ensuring that the principles underlying the integration policies have political legitimacy. They should avoid prescribing the content of the policies, leaving more room for local authorities to translate the general principles into concrete measures adapted to meeting local needs. National policies, and for that matter also EU policies, should be much more facilitating (in terms of sharing knowledge and experience, providing resources) than prescribing.

However, the tendency in many European countries today is exactly the opposite. The politicisation of debates on immigration and the (often supposedly "failed") integration of immigrants manifests itself more strongly at the national level and translates into prescriptive models, policies and instruments

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for integration that are inspired more by normative concerns than by arguments about priorities, practicality or feasibility. The prescriptive policy that Dutch Minister Verdonk developed in the period 2003-2007 for the Civic Integration Courses (Inburgeringscursussen) in the Netherlands is a good example. These courses had already been introduced in 1998 on a national scale as a toolkit provision for newcomers, to be implemented by local authorities, paid from national budgets. Verdonk's policies have changed the nature of these courses to instruments of neo-assimilation by prescribing that the content should be much more about "Dutch" norms and values and by making the courses mandatory for more and more categories of newcomers.

Although such politicisation and its consequences may and does also happen at the local level of cities, in general local policymakers have a better understanding of the key problems and are more inclined to opt for pragmatic solutions.

2.2 The three inter-related aspects of decentralisation

There are three forms of "decentralisation" and all three must be taken into account if decentralisation is to work in practice. The first is decentralisation of the content of integration policies. This implies that the integration framework created at the national level should be open and flexible enough for local authorities to design and apply policies that are adapted to local needs. The second form of decentralisation relates to the instruments, especially the financial resources and budgets needed to implement integration policies. It is quite clear that the first form of decentralisation cannot be done without the second one. However, it is possible to decentralise the instruments, financial resources and budgets associated with integration without decentralising the content. Indeed, such a division of competences is frequently visible in European countries. The reform of the Dutch Civic Integration Courses under Minister Verdonk, for example, involved an increase in priority setting for integration at the national level while obliging local authorities to "tender" the implementation of the courses on the open market.[5] In such cases of partial decentralisation, political responsibility is shifted from national to local level without any transfer of competences and discretionary power to implement policies; a recipe for disaster.

The third form of decentralisation relates to the (political) evaluation of policies. Here we need to distinguish between two forms of evaluation: evaluation of the presence or absence of integration policies; and evaluation of the content and priorities of integration policies. Control over the first process must remain at the national level, however much decentralisation of content and instruments take place; this is the only way of ensuring that cities which are not inclined to adopt special measures to facilitate migrant integration will do so. However, a much more nuanced system is needed when it comes to monitoring the content of decentralised integration policies. Only by setting up monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that are geared to local priorities, aims and means can local authorities meaningfully be made accountable for their actions

2.3 Potential trade-offs for fairness and equality

If the responsibility for integration is devolved to local authorities without providing a flexibility framework for municipalities to shape the content of integration policies and without devolving the necessary instruments and financial resources, there is a real risk that decentralisation can have detrimental consequences for fairness and equality. In such situations, particularly where local integration policies were previously driven by targets and funded by budgets controlled at the national level, we may even witness a "race to the bottom" in municipal integration policies. Although there are European countries which currently confront such a situation, they are the exception rather than the rule. In most cases, the costs of special integration policies are covered by general budgets that cities or local authorities already have at their disposal. Consequently, much of what takes place under the banner of local integration policies is more a consequence of political decisions regarding the allocation of existent budgets (for education, housing, etc.). A race to the bottom is not a likely scenario in cities that have already made the integration of immigrants a political priority. It is, however, a real risk in cities undergoing partial decentralisation which are not so politically inclined.

There is another way in which decentralisation may raise problems from the point of view of equality and fairness. Decentralisation of the content of integration policies could result in a situation where cities list specific groups of immigrants for targeted support, and not others. This could create inequalities for person who would qualify for support in certain cities, but not in others. However, as

long as local policymakers have convincing empirical arguments for making such distinctions, this would not lead to material inequality within the most relevant city context, although it would almost certainly create formal/procedural inequalities at a national level. It would, in any case, be a much less pervasive (and harmful) problem than the inequality created by the fact that some cities have integration policies while others do not.

2.4 Calibrating multi-level governance for the benefit of integration

The preceding observations suggest a clearly normative conclusion about the relationship between local, regional, national and supranational policies that deal with immigrant integration. Cities should be allotted more resources, instruments and latitude to act in ways they deem appropriate in their

local circumstances. There are a growing number of European cities that are building up experience in integration policies for their immigrants and these cities should be given the resources they need to expand these activities. They are also the best equipped to do so.

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At the same time, the fact remains that many cities and local authorities have still not taken steps to develop sound integration policies. Consequently, there is still a need to stimulate (and in some cases even oblige) such local authorities to attend to this matter. National policies – and by implication EU immigration and integration policies – should set out general frameworks and guidelines for integration. One of their primary aims should be to make instruments and resources available that legitimise and facilitate local policies and actors in their efforts to achieve immigrant integration.[6] The real work has to be done locally, and it must be performed creatively by coalitions of actors on the local stage. It is at the level of neighbourhoods, city districts and cities that this cooperation will be forged. And that is where the benefits will first become visible.

6. I have elaborated on this for the EU level in Penninx 2005a and b.

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