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Migrants' Participation and Migration Governance Amidst Hostility in Small Localities: An Italian Case Study

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Abstract

In this article we examine how small and medium-sized towns address migrants' participation amidst hostility. To do so, we focus on a small town in central Italy. We scrutinise two dimensions of participation—visibility and agency in policy-making—and connect them to specific forms of hostility towards migrants that can arise in small communities. We also consider how changes in the social fabric and political discourse can overcome and subvert such hostilities. By exploring the case vertically (involving institutions) and horizontally (involving civil society actors), we analyse local migrants' participation in light of political transitions and changes in the local government's attitude. We focus in particular on how and whether migrants are granted space in the planning and implementation of integration and participation policies across different periods in a small town in central Italy. This case highlights substantial policy transitions that shape migrants' involvement in local life and set boundaries on their engagement. The article, which is based on qualitative research conducted within the EU-funded project PISTE—Participation in Small and Medium-Sized Towns: Experiences, Exchanges, Experiments, relies on policy analysis and 17 semi-structured interviews with policy-makers and civil society actors. The results show that political discourse on migration affects perceptions and practices of hostility in regard to migrants and the forms of visibility assumed by migrants' participation in small and medium-sized towns. When participation is politically hindered, everyday practices of visibility (such as being visible in public spaces) assume political significance. The presence of "bridging figures" is crucial for facilitating the transition from an adverse to a more inclusive political environment, enhancing participation by specific migrant groups. However, reliance on such bridging figures and personal relationships can be a double-edged sword. It can promote participation, but it may confine it to individual interactions rather than foster broader migrants engagement.

1. Introduction

This article explores migrants' participation in the policy-making process in the face of hostility in small and medium-sized towns (SMTs). For this purpose, it uses a case study focused on a small town in central Italy. It contributes to the debate about new, emerging forms of migrants' participation in policy-making processes and inclusion in civic and political life amidst hostility at the local level in SMTs (Bonizzoni & Marzorati, 2015; Schiller, 2023), integrating into this debate the socio-spatial and relational dynamics in which these practices are embedded. By adopting an integrated approach to both vertical and horizontal dynamics, this study examines policy and institutional relations across different governance levels, alongside the formal and informal interactions between institutional actors and other stakeholders. This dual analysis underscores how and why emerging forms of migrants' participation are interconnected with the socio-spatial and relational dynamics in which these forms are embedded, highlighting that they are inseparable in understanding the complexities of migrants' participation and inclusion in SMTs.

In doing so, the analysis adopts a complex notion of participation able to highlight its multifaceted character. We distinguish and consider both the political and civic dimensions of participation. Whilst these two dimensions are practically and analytically distinguishable, their impacts on the emergence (as well as the overcoming) of hostility towards migrants at the local level are intertwined, overlapping, and mutually influencing.

The focus on the political dimension of participation enables us to explore the local implications of how changing forms of representation affect migrants' participation in the policy-making process. This examination also helps us identify emerging political actors, all within the context of a significant political shift at the local level in our case study. Indeed, the case analysed also reveals its own peculiarity in terms of the evolving policy understanding of migrant participation in its different forms, so it is an intriguing example for studying the implications of the shift in political participation and representation of migrants at the local level. This shift has a direct impact on the forms of hostility that migrants experience. It shapes their interactions with local institutions and influences their ability to engage in the civic and political life of their communities.

The civic dimension of participation is explored through a socio-spatial lens which highlights the interactions and connections between local spatial configurations and the practices of exclusion/inclusion. Specifically, we examine how public space is perceived and experienced by both the migrant community and native residents. This includes investigating whether and how accessibility to public spaces becomes a contentious issue between migrants and the local administration. This approach enables us to uncover the forms of hostility directed towards migrants in and through these spaces, as well as the strategies that both migrants and other actors employ to overcome these tensions and foster a more inclusive environment.

How political and civic participation occurs will be disentangled in order to underline two intertwined processes that have been relatively underexplored in the literature on SMTs: the transformation of forms of

participation and representation; and the emergence of new policy entrepreneurs of foreign origin within local administrations. The intertwining of these processes has produced transformative outcomes in local policy-making and integration policies, contributing to the development of a distinctive "mode" of participation in policy-making specific to SMTs. The article seeks to unravel and critically assess this mode of participation, highlighting its strengths, weaknesses, and its innovative potential as a means to counteract hostility and promote inclusion.

The rest of this article starts with a theoretical introduction aimed at positioning this study in the scholarly debate on participation and inclusion at the local level, specifically addressing these issues in the context of SMTs. Then, after the context and the methods of the analysis have been described, the results of the fieldwork will be presented, lingering on two intertwined dimensions related to migrants' participation at the local level: (a) the institutional approaches to the "visibility" of diversity in public space; and (b) the emergence of new actors in the participatory realm able to foster specific dynamics and to smooth inclusive processes. These two steps of the analysis therefore focus on an intermediate level between the formal and informal practices of participation. They particularly stress the distinctive features of the small context of our case study, opening up to the definition of a specific "mode" of participation at local scale in SMTs that this article tries to describe and disentangle in regard to its strengths, weaknesses, and innovative potential.

2. Analysing Migrants' Participation in SMTs: Theoretical and Conceptual Background

In the Global North, the "local turn" in the implementation of policy measures and interventions regarding migration and migrants' participation (Ambrosini & Boccagni, 2015; Barberis & Angelucci, 2022; Penninx & Martiniello, 2004) entailed the delegation of juridical and administrative responsibilities for these issues to lower tiers of governance. This enabled local actors to operate within discretionary spaces—ones often unaddressed by national frameworks—and to define and implement local policies that might complement, exceed, or even oppose regional or national directives (Dimitriadis et al., 2021; Joppke, 2017). Over the past two decades, as small towns have seen an increase in their foreign populations amid declining local demographics, traditional balances in regard to the coexistence of different groups and social cohesion in these places have shrunk, creating new forms of hostility towards migrants. As the increasing visibility of migration becomes a political issue impacting social cohesion in these areas, local administrations are often caught between managing this growing diversity and countering the rise of anti-immigrant sentiments.

Recently, an interesting strand of research in political science and sociology (Caponio & Pettrachin, 2024) has focused on migration and integration in SMTs by investigating community dynamics of inclusion from a cross-national and comparative perspective. SMTs, unlike larger cities, often lack the established frameworks, resources, and historical experience with which to effectively manage diversity; a lack which creates unique challenges in both policy implementation and social cohesion. This distinctiveness has made SMTs intriguing cases for understanding how smaller communities address issues of migrants' participation in local policy-making and integration into civic and political life.

In the context of Italy, this perspective has highlighted the pivotal role that local actors play in managing diversity and addressing the needs of vulnerable groups (Angelucci, 2023). Furthermore, it has enabled scholars to underline the heterogeneity of policy-making approaches on the local level and the importance of local actors (including migrants and migrants' representatives) in determining different policy outcomes.

On the one hand, many SMTs have implemented hostile, exclusionary, and discriminatory policies in regard to migrants (Ambrosini, 2013; Gargiulo, 2017; Marchetti, 2020; Marzorati & Semprebon, 2018). On the other hand, inclusive policies and practices, such as those related to the reception of refugees and asylum seekers, have been fostered in some small towns by various factors: the favourable attitudes of local administrations; blurred boundaries between the public sector and third sector; ease of access for the local population to institutions and policy-makers; and the activation of NGOs and key individuals (Dimitriadis & Ambrosini, 2024; Semprebon et al., 2022).

Recent studies have highlighted how several factors influence local migration governance. These include the population's and the administration's political orientation, the role of NGOs and civil society, and key individuals who can act as "boundary spanners" or "policy entrepreneurs" (Ahmed, 2020; Garcés-Mascareñas & Gebhardt, 2020; Mintrom & Norman, 2009; Schammann et al., 2021). Indeed, in SMTs, where such roles are often filled by a single individual, interactions with migrant groups may be highly personal or even intimate. While this can foster meaningful engagement, it may also create a potential vulnerability, because the participation of migrants may become overly dependent on the efforts of one person. These dynamics directly affect migrants' civic and political participation, either mitigating or exacerbating hostilities in SMTs.

In this article we consider participation in a broad sense that encompasses both the political dimension, linked to shifts in local political orientation and representation, and the civic dimension, which refers to any social action aimed at fostering social change (Cognetti, 2022). In particular, the civic dimension is dealt with by specifically focusing on local network actors as situated in particular socio-spatial configurations in order to highlight local dynamics and coping strategies with respect to the proliferation of social and political environments hostile to migrants in SMTs. In other words, civic participation is understood as occurring in specific places, such as main squares and other public areas commonly used in various ways and for different purposes by local citizens. The focus on spatiality enables the analysis to highlight the unique scale of SMTs in regard to the civic dimension of participation, given that civic participation—whether it occurs or not—reflects the degree of hostility or openness towards migrants. The specific (small) spatial context influences both the visibility and the agency of migrants in these public spaces. At the same time, the political dimension is particularly significant at the local level, where it can take many forms. It is shaped (and often restricted) by legal and institutional frameworks, socio-economic status, and other contextual factors, including the prevailing social and political climate and the willingness of local administrations to engage in dialogue and participatory processes.

These two dimensions of participation—political and civic/spatial—directly influence migrants' participation in the policy-making process and the creation of either hostile or inclusive social environments. By adopting this dual perspective, we aim to highlight two interconnected aspects of migrants' participation in policy-making in SMTs.

The first is that the implementation of participatory processes unfolds within inherently political frameworks, where power dynamics between institutions (especially in terms of decision-making capacity) and various categories of citizens are at play. Drawing on Martiniello (1997, 2005), we distinguish between informal and formal political participation. Informal participation comprises actions such as protesting, signing petitions, and joining trade unions, advocacy groups, or self-organised groups. Formal participation concerns involvement in elections, systems of representation, and alternative mechanisms set up by local

governments, such as advisory councils specifically created to engage migrants excluded from voting by national legislation.

In Italy, dedicated advisory bodies—such as immigrant councils and the role of deputy councillor of foreign origin—have been experimented with since the 1990s to promote the formal political participation of foreigners at the municipal level. For instance, in the region where our case study is situated, at least 13 municipalities have established one or more advisory boards, thereby providing an official platform involving migrant associations and community representatives for the representation of foreign citizens (Menegus, 2019). However, while these processes have encouraged the formation of some migrant associations seeking representation, over time, advisory boards have shown limited capacity to represent the evolving social composition of migration and its internal diversity. Moreover, they have had little influence on local decision-making processes. Recent studies in Italy suggest that there is a trend towards the disappearance of these advisory boards in smaller municipalities (Bertazzo, 2021; Semenzin, 2022).

Moreover, as migrants and their descendants become more integrated into local society and gain Italian citizenship—and with it, political rights—participation and representation are increasingly shifting from dedicated advisory bodies to traditional democratic forums. However, the impact of these recent changes at the local level remains underexplored.

The second aspect that we highlight concerns the actual acknowledgement and involvement of migrants in community life through the use of public spaces, such as squares, public facilities, and gathering places. The fact that the ability to use and be visible in public spaces is granted and legitimised (both symbolically and practically) by the hosting local community significantly affects the migrant communities' capacity to participate in and influence policy-making. Participation in policy-making can occur both directly and indirectly. Direct participation is the involvement of migrant representatives (or other "bridging figures") in the policy-making process, while indirect participation concerns the visibility and presence of migrants, and their ability to have their needs heard in various local contexts. This can also come about through informal activities and uses of public spaces which may indirectly influence policy-making (Verba et al., 1995). For example, using public spaces like a town square to organise events related to minority communities can enhance their visibility and recognition within the local community. This increased visibility can, in turn, lead to greater acknowledgement and give the minority group a stronger voice in the policy-making process. The concept map in Figure 1 illustrates the various dimensions of participation and their interactions.

These dynamics constitute a particularly sensitive issue, because participatory processes can sometimes be used instrumentally to neutralise conflict and pacify decision-making, without genuinely acknowledging diverse perspectives or empowering citizens (Crosta, 2003). This is especially problematic for marginalised groups, such as migrants (Beebeejaun, 2006), who often have weak voices and limited representation. When the voiceless groups are excluded, participation can become selective, exacerbating discrimination and conflict among different groups (Lefrançois, 2021), and fostering hostile environments.

Cognetti (2022) identified three theoretical frameworks based on the level of citizen engagement and the role of public actors within which to analyse participatory processes. In the first framework, the institutional actor has the leading role, promoting and constructing both the participatory process and the guidelines within which this takes place and through which citizens' agency is directed (and constrained). The second focuses
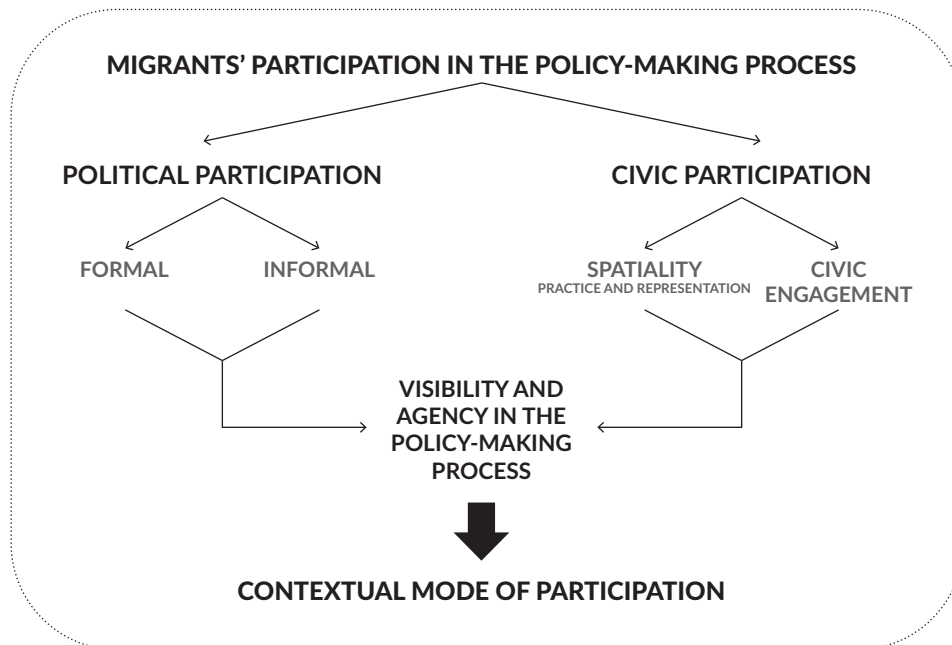
Figure 1. Migrants' participation in the policy-making process.

on active citizen engagement in organised, institutionally supported projects. Here, citizens are involved in interactions and social participation with respect to specific, even small-scale, policy-making and place-making projects concerning different common issues and themes. This framework is strictly context-based, and it is used to create and co-design collective spaces of identity and self-representation. The third framework regards all the actions that citizens take autonomously, without institutional guidelines and support, with the aim of transforming their social environment. These spontaneous actions position participation outside the institutional framework and highlight the importance of everyday life and practices as instruments with which to change the urban environment. While these frameworks are useful for analysis, they are not mutually exclusive, because participation is rarely entirely top-down or completely independent. Instead, a combination of these frameworks often defines the participatory process.

Thus, in an effort to underline both the role of institutional actors and the agency of citizens—especially migrants in both formal and informal settings—the following analysis will explore if, how, and to what extent migrants are able to participate in the policy-making process by being recognized and included within the local context of our case-study town. If we consider SMTs as an emerging urban scale and their main squares (or other frequently used public spaces) as sites—two overlapping and connected areas where "actors" claim to transform themselves (Isin, 2009, p. 368) through their participation in public spaces and where civic participation may occur—we can argue that understanding the changes in the meaning attributed to these public spaces by administrations is essential for grasping the extent to which migrants are "granted" space to be part of them. From this perspective, the analysis will also examine how migrants directly or indirectly influence the planning and implementation of integration and participation policies. In this regard, migrants' participation in the policy-making process can have a strong impact on the transformation of the social and urban environment at the local level, potentially improving social cohesion and laying the foundations for a more inclusive society.

To fully account for the various dimensions of participatory processes, the analysis will adopt both horizontal and vertical perspectives. This approach considers the relationships between different levels of local governance and between institutions, as well as among various actors (civil society, third sector, and institutions) at the same level. This will allow the identification of a mode of participation closely linked to the specific context of the case study which also reflects the local and small-scale dimensions of the town. This, in turn, will enable interpretation of participatory dynamics and processes at the local level in SMTs.

3. Methods and Context of the Analysis

This article presents the results of qualitative research conducted within the EU-funded project PISTE—Participation in Small and Medium-Sized Towns: Experiences, Exchanges, Experiments, which involved policy analysis and 17 semi-structured interviews with policy-makers and civil society actors in the case-study town, as specified in Table 1.

Table 1. Interviews sample.

Interviewees	Number of interviews
Mayors, councillors, and city-level officials	4
Upper-level public authorities	2
Non-profit actors and service providers	8
Migrant-run associations	3

The policy content analysis focused on the regulatory framework for migrant integration at the local level and the measures implemented by the municipality of this small town. The interviews were conducted with key actors such as mayors, councillors, and representatives from administrations with opposing political orientations that had governed the town over the past 15 years. The analysis also involved officials working in services aimed at migrants and representatives of civil society organisations, including three associations established and managed by migrants. The primary methodological goal was to ensure that all actors involved in the migration experience were adequately represented and had their voices heard.

The questions put to institutional actors focused on the relationship between territory and immigration, its evolution over time, available services, the assessment of migrants' participation in policy-making, and their visibility in public spaces, as well as the communication and monitoring of related activities. The questions put to non-institutional actors were similar but concentrated more on the perception, significance, and modes of migrants' participation in both policy-making and public spaces.

Policy documents and interviews were analysed using critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003), which connects textual and contextual elements in a critical and recursive analytical movement. The material was thematically organised, and connections were identified using a thorough interpretivist perspective.

Conducting interviews on migration issues is undoubtedly a complex task, given the strong influence that political, cultural, and value-based positionality exerts on both interviewees and researchers (De Andrade, 2000), particularly when participants view integration as a one-sided endeavour that is solely the responsibility of migrants. As in other contexts, the migration debate in the case under study was highly politicised and imbued with symbolic and ideological meanings, which necessitated constant critical

reflection on how the positionality of both parties affected each stage of the research—from identifying contacts to data collection. Building trust with participants was essential to ensure that they felt comfortable expressing their difficulties and ideas, regardless of their political stance. This relation was facilitated by the researchers' growing familiarity with the area and the actors operating within it.

The case study focused on a small town in central Italy with 8,243 inhabitants, of whom about 10% were foreign residents (833 foreign residents, according to the Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, n.d.). The regional context in which the town is located also has a relatively high percentage of foreign residents—around 10.6% of the total population. Although the share of foreign residents in the town has decreased in recent years, mainly due to the acquisition of Italian citizenship by long-term foreign residents, the percentage remains higher than the national average (8.2%). This makes the town a valuable case for analysing migrants' participation.

Tables 2 and 3 summarise the characteristics of the case-study town that are most relevant to the present discussion. Table 4 provides an overview of the political shifts the town has experienced since the introduction of direct mayoral elections under Law No. 81 of 1993.

Table 2. Demographic variables about the migrant population at the local level.

	Migrant population	Immigration rate	Variation 2011–2021	Under-20 migrants	Female migrants
Case-study municipality	833	10.1%	−32.0%	23.1%	53.6%

Source: Andriopoulou et al. (2023).

Table 3. Migrant population by countries of origin at the local level.

	1st national group	2nd national group	3rd national group	4th national group	Number of countries of origin
Case-study municipality	Morocco (24.3%)	Albania (22.6%)	Romania (17.3%)	Nigeria (10.0%)	41

Source: Andriopoulou et al. (2023).

Table 4. List of elected mayors' political parties since 1993 and policies implemented concerning migrants.

Period	Political position	Policies implemented concerning migrants
1993–2000 (held for two consecutive terms) Prefectural inspector	PDS (the left-wing democratic party)	None.
2001–2006	Centre-left-oriented civic coalition	Proposal for an immigrant council (never appointed).
2006–2016 (held for two consecutive terms)	Right-oriented civic coalition	Proposals for ordinances banning gatherings and burqas in public places; adhesion to a memorandum of understanding on the validity check of mixed marriages.
2016–present (held for two consecutive terms)	Centre-left-oriented civic coalition	An intercultural public event organisation (Popoli in Festa); election of a city councillor with a migration background; the establishment and recognition of a mosque and a non-Christian cemetery.

4. Migrants' Participation and "Visibility" as Seen by Institutions: From Hostility to Mediated Inclusion

Since the early 2000s, immigration has been among the most contentious issues in the case-study town's political debate, because the migrant population has accounted for at least 10% of the total population. In this regard, the town is an interesting case because it exhibits significant transitions in the local administration's approach to migrants' participation in local life. In recent decades, the boundaries that define the extent to which migrants can engage with the communities they live in have either expanded or contracted, depending on the political landscape. This reflects a diverse political representation, where opinions on migrants' participation often vary widely, sometimes even being in direct opposition to each other. Consequently, political alliances or rivalries have significantly affected access to resources, civic engagement, and the inclusiveness of local governance processes. This is largely because, as observed in other contexts, migration is a prominent issue on the local political agenda in the case under analysis. Both inclusive and exclusive proposals significantly shape the programmes presented to citizens.

The particular case analysed in what follows illustrates how, despite an overall atmosphere of hostility, social and political changes have significant transformative effects. They enable the emergence of key actors who, under specific conditions, can become valuable assets for migrants' participation in SMTs.

4.1. "Not to Suffer Migration but to Govern It": Practising Hostility Through Public Spaces

The case-study municipality had been administered for 10 years (2006–2016) by a right-wing-oriented populist political party characterised by a strong anti-migration discourse at the national level. The way in which migration-related issues were administratively handled in that period was described by a former policy-maker as follows, with an emphasis on the limited resources made available to small municipalities:

> I had to deal with an ever-increasing flow of foreigners coming to [case-study municipality]....We local administrators [of small places] were left very much alone in the territory, and then there was a choice to be made: Either you suffered immigration, or you governed it....We decided to govern it [and] not to suffer it. (Int_1)

A particular view of migrant integration—understood in terms of respect for Italian laws, culture, and local traditions—characterised the governance by the right-wing administration of local immigration, fostering hostility against migrants:

> Firstly, integration means respecting the laws of the state...then it means respecting our culture and our traditions...that is to say, when I go to another person's home I respect their traditions, their culture, their roots, and all their customs....It would be right for those who come to our country to respect everything that is linked to our history. (Int_1)

This approach to integration has also influenced the administration's relationship with the foreign communities residing in the area. On the one hand, since taking office, the administration had not implemented any measures aimed at promoting the political participation of migrants (e.g., by establishing councils or appointing deputy city councillors). Instead, it had sought to establish informal and situational

relations with key representatives, mostly in relation to security issues, as a city official explained during an interview:

> As soon as we took office, I called all the representatives of the various ethnic groups...from the Imam to others, and I immediately made matters clear: If you are here to work, to commit yourselves, and not to create situations that are outside the law, you will get the maximum help from me. (Int_2)

On the other hand, the "not-to-suffer-but-to-govern migration" period saw a series of exclusionary measures and ordinances that significantly impacted the everyday lives of migrant communities, and particularly their participation and visibility in public places, such as the ban on wearing the burqa in public. A hostile environment was concretised through the implementation of measures that created a differentiated and conditioned access to public space.

Hostile measures were especially directed at Islamic residents and black Africans. Indeed, shortly after taking office, the administration denied authorization for an event previously held annually in the town—the annual gathering of Islamic communities and associations based in the province—and pushed for the abolition of pork-free meals for Muslim children in public schools. Additionally, the right-wing coalition approved ordinances banning gatherings and burqas in public places, and it signed a memorandum of understanding between the municipality and the police headquarters to check civil marriages between Italian citizens and foreigners for evidence of marriage fraud. Recalling how local policies may become a battleground where different levels of governance conflict over exclusive measures approved by local authorities (Ambrosini, 2013), the burqa ordinance was contested by the prefecture and made ineffective. However, this ordinance was still enforced at the local level by instructing municipal police to conduct regular security checks whenever a woman wearing a burqa was seen in a public place. Another proposed ordinance prohibited the assembly of migrants, particularly from North Africa, in public spaces.

The right of migrants to be visible in public space should meet certain standards of integration and behaviour that are pre-conditions for inclusion, as is clear from the following statement by a former policy-maker:

> Migrants are perfectly fine with us, but they must comply with our protocols. (Int_1)

As can be seen, according to this policy-management approach, migrants' civic participation and their visibility in public spaces are "permitted" only if the migrants are recognized by the administration's parameters as "good" and worthy of residence, similarly to what is reported by Hackl (2022, p. 991). In this context, within a discourse of alterity that emphasises the difference between native citizens and migrants, differential participation and access to public resources is advocated. The dominant position of the receiving country is invoked also by means of the analogy between homeland and home, as highlighted by a former policy-maker:

> I have to respect my culture, my tradition. You cannot come to my home and tell me you do not eat pork....If today there is pork there is pork, [if you do not want it, then] only eat vegetables....Eh sorry, this is my tradition. (Int_1)

> You cannot come here and somehow mock or offend or be highly critical of our traditions, which are often religious, cultural, historical. (Int_1)

4.2. "The Main Square Is a Meeting Place": A Renovated Access to Public Spaces

In 2016, the municipal administration changed, and a mayor from a centre-left-oriented civic coalition was elected. The change in the local government led to a shift in the boundaries between exclusion and inclusion, as well as in the perception of migrants' participation in local life. However, it is important to note that, although left-wing governments may generally adopt more inclusive measures in the context under analysis, they did not always implement the most inclusive policies toward migrants, often due to varying preferences within their constituencies (Harris & Römer, 2023). At the same time, the migrant presence itself in the area had been shaped by significant transformations, such as the gradual advent, stabilisation, and naturalisation of new generations in the public sphere, which had affected the conception and forms of representation and participation of migrants and their descendants. For example, advisory boards were now considered outdated by the centre-left administration, because the participation of migrants should take place within the framework of public life as a whole and not be relegated to immigration issues alone:

> We didn't want it [the migrants' council]. I think it's a segregating thing. It was fine in the 1990s, but in 2022 it's not a thing to do….[Migrants] have to participate in the democratic life of a country as a whole…for instance we have neighbourhood councils, the youth council, which is a group of young people ranging from 18 to 35 years old, or local associations in which migrants are involved. (Int_2)

As corroborated also by the results of policy analysis, in this current policy approach, visibility and participation in public spaces such as the central city square, parks, and other areas shared with the local population were also important indicators of integration:

> When you go to the square, which is the main meeting place, you do not see those separate little groups anymore, but people talking freely among themselves. So there are no more divisions. (Int_2)

The emphasis on non-ethnic aggregation in public spaces indicates both the bottom-up agency of migrants and the support of local authorities for such participation. Participation is a multi-layered process and occurs in the interaction between top-down nation-state efforts and bottom-up citizen acts of redefining such efforts (Horst et al., 2020). In this regard, in the shift in attitudes towards migrant participation in the small town considered, visibility assumed political significance (Brighenti, 2010), and it had been regularised by a number of specific initiatives and policies which, in their implementation, took account of migrant participation, even if in a fragmented manner. A public multicultural event, funded by the municipality since 2017, whose purpose was to foster integration between cultures, was one of the few occasions of formal exchange and encounter between migrant associations and the local administration. Over the two days dedicated to the event, citizens with migrant backgrounds had the opportunity to exhibit their culture of origin through music, dance, and food in the main square. As explained by a city official during an interview, the festival was jointly organised by the municipality and resident migrant communities:

> Meetings [with the municipality] take place through individual or group interviews, when we explain what's new, how, listen to their availability, their proposals, and anything else they can say and do [as far as organisation is concerned]. (Int_4)

As well as being one of the few bridges to institutions, this event also had a symbolic function (Oomen, 2019) because it was intended to strengthen the legitimacy of the residents' identities through visibility in public spaces, while reproducing traditions from their home countries.

5. Policy Participation Through Institutionalised Mediators: From Boundary-Spanner Agency to Person Dependency?

Apart from this multicultural event, the relationships between migrant communities and local policy-makers had generally remained informal, relying heavily on the mediation of a few key figures. These included individuals such as the local Imam, a woman of foreign origin working at the local immigration office (managed jointly by the municipality and the local social authority), and members of voluntary associations, some of whom might also hold overlapping roles within the municipal administration (Semprebon et al., 2022).

For example, the immigration office employee was also one of the founders of the Albanian association, while the president of another voluntary association had previously been a member of the municipal council. These overlaps contributed to blurring the boundary between public administration and local foreign residents, facilitating the transmission of specific requests and needs to the municipal administration through informal channels.

In 2016, a major turning point in the "formalisation" of such figures was the election of a municipal councillor with a migration background, who was responsible for social inclusion and European policies within the centre-left administration. A municipal councillor is a public official who represents the citizens of the municipality where he or she has been elected and has a guiding role (in the case of majority councillors) and a supervisory role (in the case of opposition councillors) with respect to the municipal administration. The election of such a councillor in the case-study town represented a major shift in the political participation and representation of migrants, as well as in the configuration of the local migration policy-making process and its outcomes. After 10 years of right-wing governance marked by hostility towards migrants, the councillor's campaign focused on raising awareness about issues such as headscarves, religious rituals, and places of worship. This was achieved by means of educational initiatives in schools and public spaces, as well as interfaith meetings with the Catholic Church.

During the centre-left administration, the councillor was essential for creating a bridge between local public administration and migrants amid an asymmetry of resources and relational skills. This boundary-spanning agency (Ahmed, 2020) enacted by "a person who would be the community's voice to the administration" (Int_3) helped to build and maintain networks between institutions and migrant community members. City officials, in fact, as explained during interviews, recognized the councillor's prominent role:

> Undoubtedly, having a person of foreign origin [a young man of Moroccan origin] in the council helps. You can see the change because nowadays if there is a problem, they [institutional actors] call you [Moroccan origin councillor]…they turn to me or directly to the mayor…this can already be considered a form of interest and participation that until a few years ago did not exist. (Int_3)

> Thanks to the municipal councillor, I have a privileged channel that allows me to reach much deeper [into the needs of migrant communities] than perhaps other people can [who lack this link to local authorities]. (Int_2)

Moreover, the councillor seemed to have an essential role in overcoming the hostility that migrant communities had experienced for so long, making them feel listened to and considered, as expressed by migrants' representatives during interviews:

> We have needs, and how do we meet these needs? Well, we've recently figured it out. We realised this when [name of councillor] became a councillor, because now we [the Islamic community] have access to topics and discussions in arenas we couldn't reach before. So, this is important, having someone involved in these issues, having them in strategic positions....It makes a difference. (Int_5)

> [The councillor] is a great person, I have always supported him, and he has always supported us, along with the municipality of [name of the town], over the past four or five years. They put us in the spotlight [by creating the multicultural event Popoli in Festa] even against the will of the locals, so to speak. It's not easy... (Int_6)

At the same time, this councillor acted not only as a boundary spanner (bringing migrants closer to the municipal administration) but also as a sort of migration-policy entrepreneur, seizing "windows of opportunity" to promote policy change (Kingdon, 1995). Policy entrepreneurs are usually identified as individuals who operate as advocates of policy change by putting forward convincing arguments on how to define and address a problem; by developing policy networks and coalitions; and by promoting pilot projects and eventually finding resources to support certain measures and drive policy change (Mintrom & Norman, 2009). While in other SMTs in Italy some migration-policy entrepreneurs have been identified among mayors and members of civil society organisations (Semprebon et al., 2022), the case analysed reveals the rise of such figures among municipal councillors of foreign origin as well.

Recalling such migration-policy entrepreneurs, in 2019 the councillor in the case-study town was among the architects of the Charter of Mayors on Social Inclusion in the Euro-Mediterranean Area, which was promoted by two main municipalities in collaboration with 24 others primarily located in the Marche Region. The purpose of the Charter was to provide a shared framework for social inclusion policies at the local level. In strong opposition to the vision of the previous right-wing administration, it placed great emphasis on recognizing diversity and ensuring the right to worship of religious minorities.

In the case-study town, the Charter had been implemented, for example, by helping the Albanian and Islamic associations to hold Arabic and Albanian language courses (providing a space and some teaching materials). More importantly, following the principles of the Charter, the councillor's role was also crucial for the recognition of the local mosque as a place of worship by the municipality in 2020, mediating between the Islamic community and public authorities. The case-study municipality is today the only place provincially (and the fifth nationally) where there is a mosque recognized as such. Furthermore, by leveraging networks and relationships built outside the municipal context, e.g., in academia, the councillor played an important role in the municipality's access to European funds through an Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund project fostering new interactions among local administrations, local associations, and supra-local actors.

The presence of the councillor and the receptivity of the local administration also stimulated the resident foreign communities to advance their grassroots claims through their representatives:

Now things are different, and we feel encouraged….Let me give you an example: We wanted a cemetery and didn't know how to go about it, but now we have one….And how was this achieved? It was thanks to [the councillor] being there, knowing how things work and who to talk to. (Int_5)

In this respect, specific structural necessities also help concretize responses to various needs such as an Islamic cemetery for Muslim Covid-19 victims. However, the fact that, once the request for an Islamic (or non-Christian) cemetery reached the municipal council, it passed unanimously, was the result of a campaign to "normalise" the participation and visibility of migrants in the social context. It should be pointed out, however, that while on the one hand Covid-19 expedited the creation of some specific services and spaces aimed at migrants through a direct relationship with public authorities and communities, on the other hand it slowed down, or in some cases suspended, the existing relationship by delegating public services to third-sector representatives and/or voluntary organisations mainly because of the first lockdown restrictions.

As the aforementioned example confirms, having a migrant representative as a "gatekeeper" within the local authority undoubtedly facilitates greater participation and visibility in public spaces, as well as in decision-making processes. Both specific needs—such as the establishment of an Islamic cemetery for Covid-19 victims—and broader aspects, such as the increased visibility of diversity in public spaces, are addressed through the involvement of these representatives. However, biases may influence decision-making: For instance, the gatekeepers may feel compelled to respond to every request made by the community. If they are unable to engage in effective gatekeeping, they risk exclusion from their own community and may be perceived as incapable of navigating interactions with authorities or as having lost their cultural identity.

Lastly, it should also be noted that these highly personalised interactions may also become counterproductive because the relationship between the parties can turn into a "certain-person dependency" characterised by subordination to person-specific linkages. In such cases, another challenge may be an ethnically segregated (Bonizzoni & Marzorati, 2015) mediation in policy discourse and practice, and the lack of participation in policy implementation of migrants not represented by associations and/or those from other communities.

6. Conclusions: Facing Hostility in Small Towns Through a Place-Based and Personalised Mode of Participation

In the previous sections, we outlined the dynamics of political and civic participation involving migrants within the local context of the small town at the centre of our analysis. In that town, specific social and political conditions had given rise to a distinct form of hostility manifested through both direct and indirect denial of migrant communities' access to public spaces and a failure to address their specific needs.

First, we have demonstrated that, even in such a small community, migration-related issues have significantly influenced the policy agenda for at least the last 20 years, making the political and civic participation of foreign residents a significant issue for both right-wing and centre-left ruling coalitions. We have observed how the alternation of these two political factions in governing the city coincided with a notable shift in the understanding of socio-spatial relations between migrants and natives and how these spaces were inhabited. The result was a gradual improvement in the space and acknowledgement granted to migrant residents and their participation in social and political life.

Most importantly, we have highlighted that, in such a small and localised context, the presence of an intermediary figure able to act as a bridge between migrant groups and institutions proved to be a key factor in facilitating the effective participation (mediated or not) of foreign residents and in overcoming the atmosphere of (experienced and perceived) hostility.

Numerous scholars (Haselbacher & Segarra, 2021; Marzorati et al., 2017) have underscored the delicate role played by local policy-makers, particularly mayors. They have noted that their proximity to the population in SMTs positions them as intermediaries among the various demands they encounter. In regard to the (official or unofficial) representatives of migrants, this intermediary role becomes even more essential in bringing migrants' perspectives onto the policy agenda and shaping the transition from hostility to engagement and participation.

In relation to active political participation, we have referenced Ahmed's (2020) concept of boundary-spanning agency and the figure of the migration-policy entrepreneur (Mintrom & Norman, 2009) to highlight the importance and role of these actors. In doing so, we have emphasised that, in SMTs, where the presence of such actors is often limited to a single individual and typically characterised by highly personal or even intimate relationships with migrant groups, this role can become a double-edged sword, because it ties participation to dependency on only one person.

Given this, what elements of migrants' participation within the context analysed can we assume to be specifically linked to the small size of the town and the local dimension investigated? Can these elements be summarised in a local "mode" of participation that provides a conceptual framework within which to understand participation in SMTs, particularly those characterised by hostile local policies?

The analysis seems to identify a place-based and personalised mode of participation characterised by the following features.

The first feature is the importance of the town's spatiality, particularly the presence of public meeting places shared by migrants and natives. The small size of the town and the limited dispersion of focal points have played a significant role in both hostile and inclusive periods and in shaping attitudes that give different meanings to those spaces. During the hostile period, forced coexistence in shared places limited ghettoization and exclusion, but it also compelled the administration to pragmatically address issues related to the public acknowledgement of foreign residents. Hostility towards migrants during that period was manifested through ordinances prohibiting gatherings, restricting the use of public spaces, and limiting cultural expression in schools, squares, and streets of the small town. In contrast, the more welcoming period allowed these meeting places in order to facilitate familiarisation with different people and cultures by providing space for the acknowledgement and participation of migrants. Thus, the acknowledgement of migrants in public spaces (such as festivals in the public square) and the public recognition of migrants' spaces (including the mosque and the Islamic cemetery) were perceived by policy-makers and migrants themselves as crucial in the transition from a hostile and exclusionary atmosphere to one more open to inclusion, cooperation, and engagement.

The second feature pertains to the dependency of participation on the personal and intimate dimensions of relationships. These are linked to the small size of the town, which renders participation fragile, discretionary,

and eventually fragmented. The significant improvement in participation experienced by foreign residents over the past decade—which has been attributed to the boundary-spanning agency of the second-generation councillor elected in the latest administrative elections—highlights the fragility of these achievements and the fragmented and discretionary nature of participation. The personalised nature of this representation risks generating further civic stratification (Joppke, 2007; Morris, 2003) among different groups of residents, and it could dissipate once the presence of that specific individual in that particular position is no longer guaranteed. Different levels of access to these informal forms of representation, intertwined with the small size of the town, which exacerbate community dynamics of social control, may create pockets of isolation disguised as disinterest. Another risk is tokenism, where time-based representation and participation may lose their strength and potential over time. In this context, it is crucial to consider the small size of towns, and the absence of the material and immaterial resources typically associated with larger cities, because these factors are vital for sustaining social, cultural, and political dynamics.

However, the bridging role played by the aforementioned councillor is an important factor to consider, and its positive impact on migrants' participation should not be underestimated. Indeed, despite the negative implications, the relational dimension and intermediary position of a policy-maker of this kind are assets. They enhance the relational resources of migrant residents and provide them with a vital space in which to claim their stances, thus influencing the policy-making process directly or indirectly. Furthermore, the ability of this figure to seize windows of opportunity and to develop strong networks and coalitions can lay the bases for further improvements in migrant participation levels. This also extends to the inspirational impact that such an actor can have on the second- and third- generation migrants, among whom we may find future representatives of fluid and transnational identities—agents of what has been termed "intimate globalisation."

In conclusion, to better leverage the characteristics of small towns where potential "relational power" can be cultivated, it is essential to strengthen and stabilise the roles of the above-described figures within institutions. To counteract dependency on the personal and intimate dimensions of relationships and to avoid highly selective representation, it is important to promote the expansion of inclusive political-administrative spaces. Special attention should be paid to those "new" citizens who can assume this culture-bridging role, such as representatives of the second-generation migrants. In a context where migration has been present for decades, analysing the civic and political participation of the second-generation migrants and new citizens is crucial.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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