



# MIGRANT INCLUSION IN DECISION MAKING AND THE ROLE OF MIGRANT ORGANISATIONS

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**MILE POLICY BRIEF 2**  
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief explores the role of migrant-led and migrant-serving non-governmental organisations (migrant NGOs) in promoting and supporting the inclusion of migrants in decision making. It builds on novel insights from the MILE project which aims to promote the empowerment of migrants as active citizens in four European municipalities – Birmingham (UK), Ioannina (Greece), Riga (Latvia) and Ripollet (Spain) – and at the EU level (see version 2). In what follows, we outline contextual factors that showcase the need for migrant engagement and examples of interaction between municipalities and migrant NGOs.

Political participation is one of the weakest areas of migrant integration policies, according to the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX).<sup>1</sup> As immigrants are slightly more discouraged to participate in the decision-making process,<sup>2</sup> it is in the hands of authorities to remove institutional barriers that may hinder migrants' access to political participation structures, when designing policy and models of participation.

**The more opportunities for participation, the higher the level of political interest among migrants.**<sup>3</sup> Overall, “inclusive policies not only increase positive attitudes and interactions between the public and migrants, but also create an overall sense of belonging, trust, and well-being.”<sup>4</sup>

While conventional political participation, inter alia, voting, is mainly individual, unconventional political participation (for example, in consultative structures) oftentimes requires political mobilisation of migrants for a more effective representation or expression of interests.<sup>5</sup>

Crucially, **successful engagement and participation of migrants often relies on the strength of migrant NGOs.** As they may be established in response to the needs of migrants in general or one specific group of migrants, the fluidity of migrant groups and their specific needs can lead to a short-term character of these organisations.

1) MIPEX (2020). *Main Findings. Policy Incidators: key findings.* Available: <https://www.mipex.eu/key-findings> (Accessed: 09.03.2023.)

2) *Ibidem.*

3) Solano, G., Yilmaz, S., Huddleston, T. (2022) *The link between migration policies and migration and migrant integration dynamics. An Overview of the Existing Literature.* <https://hummingbird-h2020.eu/>

4) Yilmaz, S., Solano, G. (2022) *Do migration policies work? Exploring the role of migration policies on migration and migrant integration dynamics.* HumMingBird Policy Brief. <https://hummingbird-h2020.eu/>

5) Martinello, M. (2006) *Political Participation, Mobilisation and Representation of Immigrants.* In Bauböck, R. (Ed.). (2006). *Migration and citizenship: legal status, rights and political participation (IMISCOe Reports).* Amsterdam: Amsterdam Univ. Press. ; Sardinha, J. *Providing voices? Civic participation opportunities for immigrants in Portugal.*

**Migrant NGOs also serve as political opportunity creators**

– “the more migrants become members of group associations and the more those associations link together in a network, the more trust is created among migrants and the more opportunities to participate in the wider political life in their country of residence.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, creation of migrant associations and the promotion of their interaction in the wider civic and political space is a step towards representation.

Evidence suggests that migrant NGOs act as representatives of migrant communities and vital intermediaries between the authorities and migrant communities since municipalities often reach out to migrants via these organisations. Besides the different forms of support offered to migrants, both at local and the EU level, migrant NGOs participate in various consultative platforms to raise migrants’ concerns with the authorities.

This is crucial where migrants’ engagement in more direct forms of participation, such as voting or consultative bodies, is low. NGOs sometimes lobby governments to advance migrants’ rights. However, migrant organisations face many challenges, including bureaucratic, administrative and language-barrier related obstacles limiting their ability to advocate for migrant communities.

The existence of migrant NGOs in towns and cities with sizeable migrant population differs across municipalities, and at the EU level. In municipalities with strong civil society networks and a long history of migration, well-established migrant organisation networks are more common. Moreover, the representation of diverse migrant communities within civil society networks is shaped by local opportunities to sustain migrant NGOs. In some municipalities, migrant NGOs face obstacles to accessing resources to carry out their activities continuously. In many cases, funding available is mostly project-based, affecting the operational sustainability of these organisations.

6) OSCE (2017) *Migrant political participation: a review of policies and integration results in the OSCE region*. Research Paper.

# FINDINGS

International migration to and within the EU has mostly increased over time. Many cities as well as smaller towns have been at the receiving end of these migration trends. Some of the municipalities within the MILE network have a long history of migration while in others the share of migrants has increased only recently, hence the focus on promoting migrants' involvement in decision-making differs across municipalities and is relatively recent in some cases.

Becoming a place of immigration and having a large share of new foreign-born population, municipalities must address the changing circumstances and respond to diverse needs which also creates conditions for migrant self-organisation and involvement in local politics. We find that migrant organisations play three major roles in promoting the inclusion of migrant communities in decision making as their **representatives, intermediaries, and as activists.**

## 1 REPRESENTING MIGRANT COMMUNITIES' INTERESTS AT THE LOCAL AND THE EU LEVEL

Migrant NGOs often act as representatives of migrant communities, by taking part in the existing civic participation structures at the municipal as well as the EU level. Civil society organisations more widely can support the role of migrant NGOs in policy-making by creating opportunities for knowledge exchange and collaboration. At the EU level, several migrant-led NGOs exist and are consulted on policies directly related to integration (housing, education, health, employment).

At the local level, the situation differs across municipalities. In Ripollet, there are no formally registered migrant-led organisations, but several NGOs that support migrants. Similarly, in Riga, there are several migrant-serving NGOs, but the political participation of migrant-led organisations has been fragmented. In Ioannina, certain migrant communities originating from Syria, Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan are already

represented in the local Migrant Integration Council, though there is a general lack of migrant associations in the city.

NGOs focusing on aspects related to migration usually are local branches of NGOs active at the national level. As for Birmingham, there is a strong civil society network, including an established body of migrant-led NGOs that provide various kinds of support and promote political participation of migrants in some cases.

It is noticeable that **in larger municipalities with longer history of migration**, like Birmingham, there are **strong and established networks of migrant NGOs**, while **smaller municipalities** or those new to migration **tend to lack migrant associations**. In municipalities of Riga and Ripollet, migrant-serving NGOs participate in consultative mechanisms within the municipality, but there is an overall under-representation of different migrant communities.

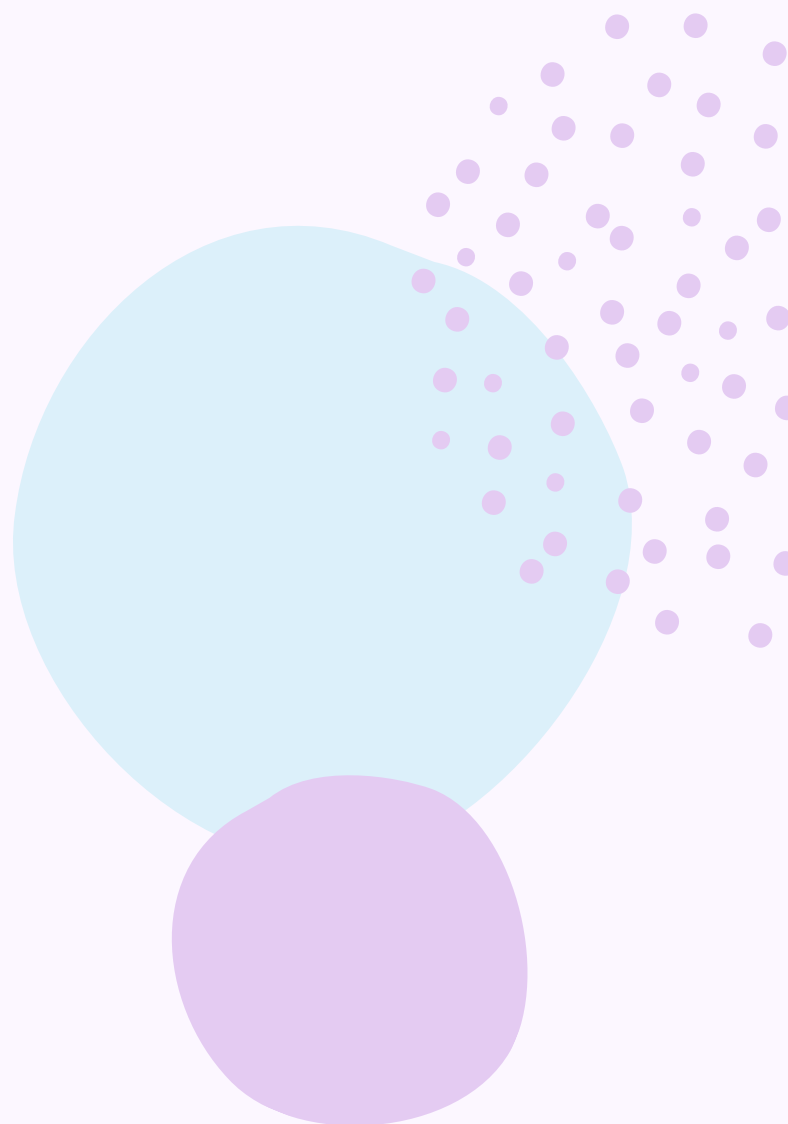
The development of migrant NGOs, and thus migrant participation, is a process that unfolds over time as towns and cities evolve and engage more with newcomers who also become more embedded and organised (see also [MILE\\_policy\\_brief.1](#)).

However, **a long history of migration in a municipality does not always correlate with diverse and strong networks of organisations.** In Ioannina, for instance, there are long established migrant communities, particularly Albanian nationals, but a lack of organisations representing them. In contrast, some of the more recently arriving migrant groups (Syrian, Afghani) are already involved in the local migrant consultative body. According to representatives of Ioannina municipality, Albanian community often do not see themselves as migrants in the city and seem less willing to participate in local consultative mechanisms.

Generic category of ‘migrants’ could also be considered stigmatising for certain long-established groups. As priorities and needs of longer-established migrant communities change over time, it is important for these groups to be represented in consultative bodies.

Migrants’ under-representation in the existing civic participation structures can somewhat relate to wider migration discourses (see also [MILE\\_policy\\_brief\\_1](#)) and attitudes within larger civil society organisations. Migrant advocates are often underestimated and used as volunteers rather than employed as regular staff or experts. Moreover, migrant NGOs are often under-resourced and unsupported by the authorities which limits their ability to support migrant communities’ civic participation activities.

Finally, evidence suggests that migrant-specific communication channels are rarely used to promote opportunities for civic and political participation and, in some cases, there is a lack of civic participation structures or platforms to engage with migrant NGOs and facilitate the representation of migrant communities.



## 2 ACTING AS INTERMEDIARIES BETWEEN MIGRANTS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

**Migrant NGOs are important conduits or gatekeepers** that can help local authorities reach out to migrant communities and share information about opportunities to participate. They play a key role in establishing trust-based relationships with migrant communities which can enable local authorities to connect with migrants who may otherwise be distrustful and hesitant to participate in local decision making.<sup>7</sup>

### Good practice 1: Birmingham Migration Forum

Birmingham Migration Forum (BMF) is a platform, chaired by Birmingham City Council, for key stakeholders in the city to collaborate and share concerns and opportunities related to migrant integration. BMF brings together organisations from public, private, voluntary and community sectors, including migrant NGOs, to share knowledge and to influence policy in areas such as basic rights and needs, safety and security, involvement and inclusion, and esteem and recognition.

**Migrant NGOs provide information to local governments about the needs and interests of migrant communities** and oftentimes, it is important for these organisations to represent diverse migrant communities in the civic participation structures to develop effective integration policies that address the needs of the target group.

Availability of resources and support for civil society organisations affect the ability of migrant NGOs to carry out activities. Examples of the municipalities analysed in this policy brief show that **problems regarding organisational capacity and attraction of financial resources create barriers for migrant NGOs to participate** in the decision-making process in local consultative bodies, as oftentimes it is envisioned or expected that NGOs will play a central role in service provision, promotion of inclusion and participation without sustainable funding available for such activities. Funding for initiatives to promote and support political inclusion of migrants (see MILE policy brief 3), involving migrant NGOs, is mostly project-based, constraining the capacity of these NGOs to participate and represent migrants in the local decision-making process in longer term.



**PARTICIPATORY STRUCTURES WILL ONLY HAVE IMPACT IF A MECHANISM IS IN PLACE TO ENSURE THAT PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS RESPOND AND INCORPORATE THE MIGRANT VOICE IN THEIR DECISION MAKING PROCESSES.**

INTEGRATING CITIES TOOLKIT,  
EUROCITIES AND MIGRATIONWORK



7) OSCE (2017) *Migrant political participation: a review of policies and integration results in the OSCE region*. Research Paper.

## 3 LOBBYING LOCAL AND CENTRAL GOVERNMENTS TO ADVANCE MIGRANTS' RIGHTS

Besides representing migrants and connecting migrant communities with policy makers, **migrant NGOs can play a key role as advocates** of migrants' civic and political inclusion. Both at the EU and local level there are migrant NGOs that seek to raise awareness of problems migrants are facing and campaign on issues such as voting rights, the right to work and human rights. In the case of Birmingham, pressure from civil society organisations played a key role in Birmingham's commitment to become a City of Sanctuary and welcome Syrian refugees under the UK Government's resettlement scheme which was voluntary. "The3million" – the largest grassroots organisation for EU citizens in the UK – advocates for voting rights for EU citizens and all migrants in the UK.<sup>8</sup> In Ripollet several NGOs have presented motions to improve the registration conditions for newcomers in the municipality, resulting in an improved access to education, health and social services for newcomers.

A strong civil society network, including migrant NGOs, can have a more collective influence on policies that impact on migrant communities' access to services as well as their political inclusion.

**Existing migrant NGOs face certain obstacles that limit their ability to advocate for migrant communities' civic and political participation activities.** At the EU level, migrant NGOs lack recognition and organisational capacity to network and influence EU level policy making on issues affecting migrants. Similarly,<sup>9</sup> at the local level, migrant NGOs often lack the capacity to participate in the existing consultative mechanisms and advocate for migrants' inclusion.

### Good practice 2: Refugees and Migration Engagement Officer, Birmingham

The role of the 'Refugees and Migration Engagement Officer' is to promote opportunities for migrant communities in Birmingham to increase migrants' participation and access to services. This role involves engagement and outreach work, where information is disseminated to relevant stakeholders, including migrant NGOs that collaborate with the Council, who share information with migrant communities. The Officer also raises awareness of migration issues and liaises with migrant NGOs, service providers, council staff and other relevant organisations.

8) The3million . Our Home Our Vote. Available: <https://the3million.org.uk/node/1100849867> (Accessed: 02.05.2023.)

9) EPIM (2019) 'Migrant-led advocacy across Europe. Challenges and Opportunities', Available at: <https://www.epim.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Migrant-led-advocacy-across-Europe-Report.pdf> [Accessed on 25/09/2022]. The European Programme for Integration and Migration (EPIM) is an initiative of private foundations who have the aim of strengthening the role of civil society in building inclusive communities and developing humane and sustainable responses to migration. Here for further information on EPIM: <https://epim.info>.



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Research shows that migrant NGOs often focus primarily on the provision of support services to newcomers and participation in consultative bodies, although some also engage in different forms of advocacy. Limited resources and prioritisation of support delivery potentially prevents NGOs from playing a more active role in promoting and supporting migrants' political inclusion and participation. For example, in Birmingham, austerity and withdrawal of funding for community organisations over the past decade, has impacted on their sustainability and the capacity to campaign for greater inclusion of migrants in civic and political life. In Riga, bureaucratic and administrative obstacles were found to stand in the way of capacity building of migrant NGOs. Finally, in Ripollet and Ioannina, informal networks play a key role in regard to communication with local authorities. In this case, it would be in the hands of local authorities to remove institutional barriers and promote capacity building of migrant NGOs.

### **Good practice 3: The3million**

The3million, formed in 2016 after the Brexit referendum, is the main grassroots organisation representing the interests of citizens of the European Union, European Economic area and Switzerland and their non-EU family members in the UK. Its objectives include mobilising communities, research-based policy building, campaigning, influencing and advocating for social justice. During the Brexit negotiations, for example, The3million successfully advocated for removing the fee for the EU Settlement Scheme applicants. It has also built a strong awareness of the rights of the EU citizens.



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The role of migrant NGOs is key to prompting migrants' political and civic participation, especially regarding unconventional participation that requires collective action, identification of interests and needs, and conveying those in a concerted manner. Evidence suggests that in regard to unconventional political participation, **migrant NGOs play three main roles:**

- as the representatives of migrant communities;
- as vital intermediaries between migrant communities and local governments;
- as advocates who lobby local and central governments to advance migrants' rights.

MILE shows that in municipalities where the share of foreign-born newcomer population has begun increasing only recently, or where immigration has exceeded emigration in the last few years, barriers to migrant participation have not been addressed, or there are no empowering avenues for migrants' political engagement. As a result, the existing consultation mechanisms do not provide continuity and longevity to effectively promote and support migrants' engagement.

This policy brief outlines **recommendations** for local and national governments for strengthening migrant NGOs and their role to promote and support migrants' political and civic engagement:

- Allocate funding and introduce project calls targeting migrant NGOs at the local, national and the EU level to promote migrant self-organisation and to support organisational capacity building and sustainability of migrant

NGOs in order to improve the representation of diverse groups of migrants within civil society networks and to strengthen their capacity to advocate for migrants' rights. As migrant NGOs represent migrant communities, targeted funding measures would contribute to the development of strong networks of diverse migrant NGOs.

- Support the creation of a strong infrastructure that promotes migrant self-organisation and networking of migrant NGOs, for example, by establishing local NGO hubs, providing event spaces and support with organising, to help migrant communities access relevant information, support and resources, and to encourage migrants and migrant NGOs to participate in the local decision making processes. As migrant NGOs help municipalities to reach out to migrant communities, it is important that the necessary infrastructure is in place to ease the barriers migrants face regarding self-organisation.
- Establish relationships with local migrant NGOs as a basis for knowledge exchange and collaboration to promote and support migrant inclusion in decision making. For example, collaborating with migrant-led organisations to develop more accessible, migrant-specific, communication channels can help improve outreach and engagement with migrant communities. Promotion of knowledge exchange and collaboration would give a better understanding of the needs of migrant communities and help the authorities to react to changes of migration landscape in the city.



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