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Integration and Multi-Level Governance in Turkey's Small Towns: An Actor Centred Analysis[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how refugee integration is governed in Turkey's small towns, where strong centralization, local discretion, and informal practices intersect. Drawing on an actor-centred multi-level governance (MLG) framework, it analyzes interactions among Provincial Directorates of Migration Management, municipalities, non-governmental organizations, and refugee opinion leaders in two geographically, politically, and socioeconomically distinct small-town contexts. Based on 24 semi-structured interviews and policy analysis, the study shows that while integration governance in both towns is shaped by centralized authority and limited local autonomy, it unfolds through informal coordination, selective visibility, and reliance on personal ties. At the same time, important differences emerge in how local actors respond to these constraints, with one case producing a more cautious and the other a more exclusionary governance configuration. Overall, by focusing on small towns rather than metropolitan centres, the article demonstrates how urban scale magnifies political risk, informality and dependence on intermediary actors. In doing so, it advances a more differentiated and scale-sensitive understanding of multi-level governance under conditions of centralization and constrained local capacity.

1 | Introduction

In migration and integration research, governance has become a key analytical concept for understanding how policies are made and implemented, highlighting the diverse roles, power relations, and collaborative dynamics among the actors involved (Caponio et al. 2019; Scholten and Penninx 2016). While national institutions continue to play a dominant role, recent scholarship has increasingly examined the multi-scalar nature of integration policy-making, paying particular attention to the interactions among international, national, and local actors.

Within this literature, multi-level governance (MLG) has emerged as a prominent framework analysing both vertical relations across different levels of government and horizontal relations among diverse local entities and non-state actors. Closely associated with the 'local turn' in migration and integration studies, MLG-oriented research highlights the growing role of cities and municipalities in shaping integration policies and practices (Zapata-Barrero et al. 2017), challenging earlier approaches centred primarily on national citizenship regimes.

Most research adopting an MLG perspective has concentrated on large metropolitan areas, often highlighting notable instances in which municipalities have challenged or reinterpreted national integration policies through entrepreneurial and innovative approaches (Spencer and Delvino 2019; Scholten and Penninx 2016). By contrast, smaller localities have received comparatively little attention, despite growing evidence that they are increasingly confronted with refugee reception and integration challenges (Jonitz et al. 2024; Pettrachin et al. 2024). Examining integration governance in such contexts is therefore crucial for assessing the scope and limits of MLG beyond metropolitan settings.

This article examines integration governance in small towns in Turkey—a context that offers an especially revealing case for MLG debates. Over the past decade, Turkey has become one of the world's largest refugee-hosting countries, placing immense pressure on its migration governance system. While national institutions continue to dominate policymaking, subnational actors, particularly municipalities and civil society organizations, have taken on operational responsibilities for refugees' reception and integration. Yet these actors operate in a context where governance arrangements have shifted towards intensified centralization and shrinking civic space. At the same time, public and political discourses surrounding Syrians and other migrant populations have grown sharply negative, marked by rising societal discontent and mounting calls for return, leading to heightened sensitivity among actors around visibility and responsibility.

Our study builds on research carried out as part of the WholeComm project,[2] funded by the EU Horizon Europe program (2021–2024), which examined integration dynamics in small- and medium-sized towns and rural areas in 10 countries. Field research in each case was conducted in two phases. The first phase (October 2021–April 2022) involved semi-structured interviews with a diverse range of local governance actors, while the second phase (August–October 2022) included in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with both host-community members and refugees.

This article draws exclusively on findings from the first phase of the research, reported in detail by Açıkgöz et al. (2022). It focuses on the two small-town cases included in this study and located in Turkey's East Marmara and Central Anatolia regions, which are comparable in population size and migration exposure, yet differ substantially in their geographic, socio-economic, and political contexts.[3] In total, 24 interviews are analysed here (12 in each case) with four sets of actors that emerged as central to local integration: provincial migration authorities, municipalities, NGOs and refugee opinion leaders. Interviews with other local actors (e.g., media representatives, employers, professional associations) also informed the broader project but are not included in the analysis presented here. Interview data are complemented by analysis of relevant legal and policy documents.

Rather than capturing lived experiences of refugees, this article examines how integration governance is interpreted and enacted by key local actors. Refugee opinion leaders are included not as proxies for 'the refugee voice', but as intermediaries who occupy a distinct position within local governance arrangements, mediating between state authorities and refugee communities. Their inclusion reflects an empirical finding from the Turkish cases, rather than an assumption that they speak on behalf of refugee communities.

Building on this research, we ask: How do local actors navigate centralized policy mandates, limited institutional capacities, and political sensitivities in managing integration? And what do these dynamics reveal about the assumptions and limitations of the MLG framework itself? We argue that despite differences in these localities, they exhibit similar governance patterns, characterized by centralized state structures, informal relations among local actors, and concerns about visibility. Additionally, the emergence of refugee opinion leaders reflects the increasing complexity of multi-level governance, primarily through informal relationships rather than formalization. However, we also argue that differences across small-town geographies illuminate how scale itself structures governance: smaller settings magnify informality, dependence on personal ties, and the political risks of visibility, while constraining opportunities for institutional innovation.

2 | Multi-Level Governance (MLG) as an Analytical Lens

Multi-level governance (MLG) emerged in the early 1990s to explain the dispersal of authority within the evolving system of European integration (Marks 1993; Hooghe and Marks 2003). Challenging state-centric models, MLG conceptualizes policymaking as a process distributed across supranational, national, regional, and local levels, involving both governmental and non-governmental actors. It foregrounds both vertical relations (between levels of government) and horizontal relations (among governments, civil society and private actors), which may operate through formal or informal modes of engagement among stakeholders with varying degrees of influence. Its enduring value lies in its actor-centred perspective, which highlights how authority, responsibility, and influence are negotiated across complex governance arrangements (Hooghe and Marks 2003; Piattoni 2010).

MLG has since become a widely used framework for analysing migration and integration governance, offering tools to examine how responsibilities for migrants and refugees are distributed and contested across multiple institutional and territorial levels (Caponio and Borkert 2010; Scholten 2018). While early scholarship focused primarily on vertical coordination between national and local governments, subsequent work broadened the scope to include horizontal relationships among municipalities and NGOs, as well as transnational networks such as city diplomacy (Piattoni 2010; Scholten 2018; Oomen et al. 2021). Rather than focusing solely on formal competences, this literature underscores how diverse actors shape outcomes through negotiation, contestation, and coalition-building (Caponio and Jones-Correa 2018; Pettrachin 2020; Zapata-Barrero et al. 2017).

This body of work has also contributed to identifying the 'local turn in migration governance, highlighting the growing role of cities and municipalities in agenda-setting, resource mobilization, coalition-building, and pragmatic problem-solving, thereby shaping integration outcomes' (Caponio and Borkert 2010; Zapata-Barrero et al. 2017). While early studies emphasized cooperation and coordination, later research underscored tensions, contestation, and informality as defining features of governance. For instance, Spencer (2018) shows how municipalities navigate restrictive national frameworks through informal or ad hoc practices, while Scholten (2018) identifies shifting governance modes that vary across policy fields and over time. Studies on municipal networks and city diplomacy further demonstrate how local actors seek new channels of influence, though rarely overcoming national constraints (Oliver et al. 2020).

At the same time, the conceptual success of MLG has generated important critiques. Tortola (2017) identifies persistent

ambiguities regarding whether MLG should be understood as a structure or a process, how non-state actors are incorporated, and whether the framework is applicable in highly centralized political systems. Relatedly, Caponio and Jones-Correa (2018) argue that MLG retains analytical value only when it challenges hierarchical authority, meaningfully includes non-state actors, and generates interdependence across governance levels. Others emphasize that migration governance often resembles a contested 'battleground' of competing interests rather than a cooperative system of coordination (Campomori and Ambrosini 2020).

Building on these critiques, recent research has extended MLG analysis beyond large metropolitan areas to small and medium-sized towns, where the limits of local autonomy and the importance of informal practices become especially visible (Bazurli et al. 2022; Jonitz et al. 2024; Pettrachin et al. 2024; Caponio and Pettrachin 2025). These studies reveal that, rather than coherent or empowered systems, small-town governance is often fragmented, contingent, and fragile: coalitions are short-lived, responsibilities blurred, and migrants frequently bear the burden of institutional absences. Power in such contexts circulates through relational positioning and brokerage within actor networks, rather than through the formal distribution of competences (Pettrachin 2024). This emerging scholarship re-centres scale and informality as key analytical dimensions, challenging the assumption that the 'local turn' automatically translates into empowered or transformative local agency.

Alongside these developments, there has been renewed attention to refugee participation in governance, particularly following the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees (Milner et al. 2022). While the Compact promotes refugee inclusion and refugee-led initiatives, critics note that participation often remains selective and tokenistic in practice (Diab et al. 2024). Barriers such as legal precarity, limited organizational resources, and authorities' reluctance to share power constrain meaningful participation. In the Turkish context, Sahin Mencutek (2021) shows that refugee community organizations are engaged in selective and subordinated ways, often through informal local channels rather than formal governance structures.

Building on these insights and debates, this study adopts MLG as an actor-centred analytical lens to examine how integration governance is assembled in small-town contexts in Turkey. In highly centralized systems such as Turkey, formal decentralization remains limited, yet, as will be illustrated below, governance nonetheless unfolds across multiple horizontal and vertical arenas.

3 | Integration Governance in Turkey: Institutional Framework and Actor Landscape

Turkey's integration framework is defined by the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP, No. 6458, 2013), which introduced the concept of 'harmonization' (*uyum*) under Article 96 as a voluntary and mutual process of adaptation, representing a deliberate avoidance of the politically charged term integration (Açıkgöz and Arıner 2014). Yet, Yükseker and Çeler (2024) highlight that the ambiguous framing of 'voluntariness' illustrates the state's cautious approach to integration. The same article assigns the Presidency of Migration Management (PMM) responsibility for coordinating harmonization activities with local governments, NGOs, and international organizations. In principle, this establishes a multi-level governance structure, yet the law provides little operational clarity on responsibilities, in particular of local actors, or accountability (Açıkgöz and Arıner 2014).

The Provincial Directorates of Migration Management (PDMMs) act as the PMM's local branches. Bound by Turkey's centralized bureaucracy, PDMMs have minimal autonomy and limited resources to develop local integration policies. Local coordination occurs mainly through Provincial Migration Boards, organized by the governorate, and Harmonization and Communication Working Groups, though in small towns the latter typically consist of a single focal point and lack independent budgets, focusing instead on routine national campaigns such as awareness events or information sessions. Empirical studies confirm that local officials operate as 'street-level bureaucrats' (Üstübici 2022), informally adapting central policies to local realities and mediating between migrants and citizens. Integration governance thus depends less on formal delegation than on personal relationships and tacit coordination within a rigidly centralized system.

Municipalities occupy an ambiguous position in Turkey's local governance of integration. Under the Law on Municipalities (No. 5393, 2005), locally elected administrations have broad jurisdiction over community welfare, ranging from infrastructure and waste management to culture, social assistance, and vocational training. While this wide mandate makes them potential key actors in integration, it is constrained by legal ambiguity: the 'rights of fellow citizens' clause (Art. 13) can be read to include all residents, yet supporting integration is not listed among municipal duties (Art. 14). Further limits arise from budgetary rules: central allocations are based on registered populations but exclude Syrians under Temporary Protection, the largest refugee group. Municipalities wishing to assist them often rely on external funding and partnerships, which restrict continuity and scale of local initiatives. Consequently, municipal engagement across Turkey remains highly uneven and dependent on administrative capacity, local discretion, and political will.

Existing research documents how Turkish municipalities navigate these constraints through discretionary budgeting, external partnerships, and collaboration with international organizations and NGOs (Polat and Lowndes 2022; Memişoğlu and Yavçan 2022). Mayors may play mediating roles in advancing local inclusion efforts within national limits (Betts et al. 2021), a dynamic described as 'entrepreneurial municipalism' (Özçürümez and Hoxha 2022). However, such initiatives remain fragile, shaped by hierarchical tensions, weak institutionalization, mistrust towards civil society, and political oversight (Polat and Lowndes 2022; Saraçoğlu and Bélanger 2021). Critical scholarship cautions against overestimating the local turn, showing that municipalities are often tasked with refugee-related responsibilities without adequate authority, resources, or decision-making power (Memişoğlu and Ilgıt 2017; Kaya 2023).

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also become central actors in Turkey's migration and integration governance. Formally recognized as partners under the LFIP, NGOs

expanded rapidly after 2014 alongside increased international funding and the arrival of large numbers of Syrian urban refugees. Initially, many assumed subcontractor roles in service provision (Mackreath and Sağnıç 2017). In recent years, however, shrinking civic space, heightened governmental control, and declining donor funding have curtailed NGO autonomy, contributing to a pattern of 'delegated centralization', in which NGOs extend state reach while operating under regulatory, financial and political constraints (Nimer 2020; Zihnioğlu and Dalkıran 2022). Relations with local authorities vary accordingly, ranging from 'faithful alliances' that reinforce state legitimacy (Danış and Nazlı 2019) to more cautious or externally oriented strategies among rights-based organizations (Boşnak 2021).

Beyond formal institutions and NGOs, our research identifies refugee opinion leaders (*kanaat önderleri*) as a distinct actor group in local integration governance. While MLG scholarship has extensively examined relations between state and non-state actors, it has paid less attention to how refugees themselves are incorporated as governance actors. Unlike refugee-led organizations, these opinion leaders are individuals recognized by authorities for their social influence within refugee communities. While some refugee leaders mobilize collectively or contest governance arrangements (Clarke 2018), the opinion leaders in our study function primarily as brokers (Vancluysen and Ingelaere 2020), mediating between authorities and refugee populations. They translate official messages, convey selected community concerns, and facilitate implementation through informal channels (Gonzalez Benson et al. 2024). Their role highlights how integration governance in Turkey relies on informal authority, personal trust, and mediated communication alongside formal institutional structures.

Taken together, the literature portrays migration and integration governance in Turkey as multi-actor and multi-scalar, yet strongly shaped by central authority, political sensitivities, and informality. While responsibilities are increasingly delegated, real empowerment remains limited, rendering local initiatives fragile and conditional. Moreover, existing research focuses predominantly on large metropolitan settings, particularly Istanbul, leaving the everyday functioning of integration governance in small towns underexplored. By examining two small-town cases, this study addresses these gaps and contributes to a more differentiated understanding of how national frameworks and actor configurations materialize in peripheral urban contexts.

4 | Integration and MLG in the Case of Turkey's Small Towns: Local Configurations of Actors

4.1 | Small Town I: East Marmara

The East Marmara town is situated between Turkey's two most populated provinces, Istanbul and Ankara. At the time of our research in 2021–2022, it had a vibrant local economy, though unemployment levels were slightly above the national average. Over recent decades, it has observed annual population growth rates that were substantially higher than the national average. Local politics in this case were characterized by a clear divide, with the main opposition party (Republican People's Party) and the ruling party (Justice and Development Party) having very close votes. East Marmara town has a long history of hosting migrant populations (mainly from the Balkans). Over recent decades, it has also seen a significant rise in the numbers of Syrians under the status of Temporary protection and diverse national groups of asylum-seekers under the status of International Protection, as well as foreigners with residence permits, which include wealthy foreigners (mostly from Iraq, UAE, and other Gulf countries) buying real estate.

Our research found that in the East Marmara town, integration governance unfolded within a relatively pluralistic political and civic environment, producing a more networked yet still tightly constrained configuration of actors. The town's institutions displayed a certain pragmatism in their day-to-day dealings, even as they operated under the dominance of central authority.

The PDMM officials described their role as primarily administrative—overseeing registration for asylum and residence permits—and emphasized that they had no separate budget for integration activities. In line with PMM's policy to implement centrally designed 'harmonization' activities, the PDMM reported that they supported organizing events such as *Biz Bize Sohbetler* (Community Conversations), *Mahalle Buluşmaları* (Neighbourhood Gatherings), where host and refugee community representatives meet jointly or separately, and *Yerel Uyum Buluşmaları* (Local Harmonization Meetings), during which migrants are informed about their rights and responsibilities by public authorities. These gatherings are often supported by UN agencies. Alongside these centrally planned activities, PDMM staff noted that they also undertake 'through their own efforts and within their means', small-scale, budget-free coordination efforts with *muhtars* (elected neighbourhood authorities), NGOs, and religious representatives upon PMM's request. Overall, officials portrayed their work as structurally constrained—with 'decisions coming from Ankara'—yet locally driven, focusing on pragmatic coordination among relevant actors through ad hoc, low-cost, and low-visibility initiatives designed to maintain coherence without political exposure.

Despite structural limitations, the PDMM demonstrated a degree of horizontal flexibility by informally engaging local actors, particularly during times of crisis. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, PDMM officials described how they coordinated with the municipality to distribute aid procured by refugee opinion leaders, deliberately avoiding publicity to prevent overwhelming demand and negative public backlash: 'We did not publicize this on our own website because if we did, many refugees would form queues at our door. So, we handed over these aids to the municipality, and they supported us logistically'. As noted, these activities were kept deliberately low-profile to avoid both public criticism and an overflow of refugees seeking assistance. Overall, cooperation with the municipality was largely logistical—such as using municipal vehicles or facilities—rather than programmatic.

Municipal representatives in the East Marmara town saw integration as a national policy matter. As noted by one city council member of the opposition party: 'I don't think the municipality has much of a policy. They can't have, anyways, the government determines all policies. Other than for instance increasing

the price of water.[4] Whether that is right or wrong that can be discussed. Other than that, we have no enforcement'. The municipality saw its role as confined to providing basic urban infrastructural support, while specialized social and other services for refugees were largely avoided due to both political and legal consideration. As one municipal representative noted: 'When you look at it, ultimately these groups are not our voters. I'm not racist, but that's how it is. Ultimately, these people are not voters. ... We receive regular letters asking what we are doing about this issue (refugee/migrant groups) and we reply that we are not doing anything, that this is routine for us'.

Municipal representatives also alluded to occasionally cooperating with the PDMM, mainly upon request and related to aid distributions funded by organizations such as the UN or private donors, including wealthy foreign residents. Yet even such cooperation was intentionally kept low profile to avoid potential electoral backlash from appearing to favour refugees, especially Syrians, a council member of the opposition party explained: 'If you make such works (integration activities) visible to the public eye someone will say "I am missing this and this, why are you doing this for them when I am missing these?"'.

However, our research also identified one domain in which municipalities have taken a more proactive stance, namely, issues of public visibility. For example, growing complaints about Arabic-language shop signs in certain areas of the town prompted the municipality to introduce formal measures through a Municipal Council Decision governing the proportion and font size of foreign-language signage. While this action contrasted with their otherwise limited engagement in migration matters, it reflected how municipalities may act selectively in response to issues that become publicly salient or politically sensitive.

As is the case throughout the country, NGOs in the East Marmara town played a highly significant role in meeting the needs of local refugee populations. Both the municipality and the PDMM reported relying heavily on local NGOs to fill gaps—such as translation support or the delivery of social assistance—and noted that they often adopted this strategy to remain invisible in the field of refugee support and avoid potential host community backlash. In turn, most NGOs described their work with refugees as constrained by internal factors, including limited human resources, the short-term nature of project-based funding, and, in the case of branch offices of national NGOs, centralized decision-making structures. They also pointed to the impinging effects of rising anti-refugee discourse, which made them increasingly cautious about public visibility.

While authorities acknowledged the central role of NGOs, these organizations were reportedly not invited to the monthly coordination meetings convened by the governor. Instead, relations were maintained through informal engagements, such as routine visits by NGOs to the PDMM, which—according to a representative of a rights-based NGO— 'aimed at keeping the information from the field up to date and maintaining close, continuous communication without letting it break down' Yet the same respondent described this as a form of *controlled transparency*: 'We don't try to be completely visible. We maintain a certain level of visibility to keep our relationships with institutions going, but we don't want to stand out too much either. We can get reactions from both the public and society. That's why we try to strike a balance'.

In both towns, PDMM officials were encouraged by the Ministry of Interior to liaise with refugee opinion leaders, who were centrally security-screened. In East Marmara, a PDMM official explained that opinion leaders were selected for their social standing and community recognition: 'they are those who can reach foreigners, who have some economic stability, and whose words would be heeded. Some are known for their charitable actions... everybody knows and respects them'. They were regularly invited to meetings to relay information, convey behavioural guidance, and help monitor community dynamics and risks. PDMM representatives described them as essential extensions of their limited administrative and fiscal capacity: 'We can reach more people through opinion leaders. After we inform them, they serve more people... we throw a pebble in the sea and watch the waves ripple'. These leaders thus helped both inform and discipline their communities, managing visibility amid rising anti-refugee sentiment. Their interactions with officials appeared cordial yet hierarchical. As one opinion leader recounted, PDMM staff were generally 'honourable people' who supported and listened to them; yet when he and a friend proposed donating a sculpture to show solidarity and challenge negative stereotypes of Afghans, the idea was quietly discouraged for political reasons—revealing how even modest attempts at civic visibility were curtailed by sensitivity to public perception. Opinion leaders, then, embodied the informal layer of governance through which the PDMM sought community reach without public exposure, while the absence of municipal ties with them underscores how such relationships are structured more around monitoring and control than inclusion.

As noted at the outset, the East Marmara town hosts both international protection holders and residence permit holders, who are subject to markedly different rights regimes and levels of need, shaping the level and extent of their engagement with local migration actors (Doğuş 2020). While affluent migrants with residence permits generally engage in fewer routine bureaucratic encounters than those foreigners under international protection, our findings suggest that they are not outside local governance concerns either. Their growing visibility in certain neighbourhoods and commercial spaces has generated resentment and symbolic regulation, most notably in municipal efforts to control Arabic signage and public presence. At the same time, their economic role—as real estate investors or, at times, as donors supporting refugee assistance—creates selective and status-differentiated encounters with local authorities. This ambivalent positioning, combining economic utility with symbolic unease, contributes to a governance mode that is neither openly inclusive nor overtly exclusionary.

4.2 | Small Town II: Central Anatolia

In contrast to East Marmara, the Central Anatolia town lies in one of Turkey's least populated regions. At the time of our research, it continued to experience out-migration for economic and educational reasons, and unemployment levels were below the national average. The conservative AKP remained dominant, followed by its coalition partner, the Nationalist Movement

Party. While the town had also seen a rising number of foreign residents, these consisted mainly of Syrians under Temporary Protection and Afghans under International Protection, with few residence-permit holders.

The Central Anatolia town presented a more insular and hierarchically controlled configuration of integration governance. The interplay among actors was thinner and more dependent on personal relationships than on institutionalized coordination.

The PDMM in the Central Anatolian town described their work as primarily administrative—covering residence and protection procedures—and saw themselves as an implementing arm of the central state rather than a policymaking body. Local integration activities were mainly organized in response to directives from the centre. As one PDMM representative explained, 'The Presidency instructed that meetings be held with *muhtars* in every district. We did things like arranging the venue, organizing the event, setting presentations, and the like'. PDMM staff also reported holding monthly migration board meetings convened under the Governorate. This secretariat-like role, in which the PDMM functions as the local executor and coordinator of centrally designed activities rather than an autonomous actor, was also reflected in the narratives of other local stakeholders. A municipal representative remarked: 'They provide information. They intervene. They create records. That's their main duty. I don't think they're doing anything to find a solution. I don't think they can. What can they do right now? If it's not coming from the top, it won't be effective here'. Another municipal representative described the coordination meetings as mere formalities: 'They write a letter, we go, we have a meeting. Here's what we have, we've informed you, okay, thank you, see you later. That's how it is'.

Against such constraints and perceptions, the PDMM reported that they sometimes activated informal coordination in times of crisis. For example, during the sudden arrival of Afghan refugees, PDMM staff reached out to an Afghan opinion leader who mobilized community members to temporarily host the new arrivals until they could find accommodation. Local staff also occasionally took initiative when they identified specific needs, such as tensions in schools where 'Turkish children felt excluded'. Still, limited funding and professional capacity constrained such efforts: 'There is no financial support for these kinds of projects... without NGOs, we could not do anything'. Yet, according to PDMM staff, both informal initiatives and formal coordination mechanisms—such as the monthly migration board meetings—often ran up against an unreceptive bureaucratic environment, where key local institutions and officials held predominantly negative views towards integration.

The municipality in the Central Anatolia town confined its role in integration to routine urban services and basic infrastructure in neighbourhoods with high migrant and refugee populations, rarely extending cultural or social programmes to these groups. While municipal officials were aware of the concentration of migrant households in certain areas, this awareness did not translate into targeted initiatives. Instead, they consistently emphasized that integration was a national, not local, responsibility and depicted their role as strictly subordinate to the governorate. As one municipal official explained, 'We haven't been pulled into these matters (integration policies) that much. Generally, it is managed by the governorates in cities. When we attend the coordination meetings, we exchange ideas, but nothing is put into practice. We are usually invited guests, not the hosts. In other words, the Governor's Office is the governing authority there, and we are more on the listening side'. A council member from the opposition party similarly described this hierarchical dynamic: 'The government will set the policy, and they [local administrations] will implement it. So, they are completely under the government's command'.

The temporary protection status of Syrians was also cited as a barrier to municipal engagement. As another official remarked, 'Syrians have always been referred to as temporary. But if it were said that they are not temporary, that everyone will remain registered and receive services like Turkish citizens, it would be very different'. This legal ambiguity reinforced municipal inaction and discouraged long-term planning. NGO representatives, in turn, criticized this passivity as intentional, arguing that municipal disengagement obstructed cooperation: 'They have a negative view about integration... we can't even get appointments from them'.

Local NGOs in the Central Anatolia town filled many of the gaps left by limited public services. As noted above, both the PDMM and the municipality relied on their community reach to identify vulnerable families, distribute aid, and provide translation support. A representative of a faith-based, charity-oriented NGO explained, 'The state cannot cover everything; we try to help where needed', describing how their association coordinated donations and relief activities with the governorate. A representative from a migrant-rights organization, in turn, emphasized their mediating role: 'We bridge the gap between refugees and public institutions... Refugees come to us without hesitation because they trust us.l Likewise, a member of a grassroots NGO noted, 'The PDMM or the Social Assistance Foundation often send people to us; we try to find a solution together'. In this sense, local NGOs—despite their ideological and organizational differences—recognized their indispensable role in sustaining local support networks for refugees and even reported occasional collaboration among themselves.

Cooperation between NGOs and public institutions tended to follow existing lines of trust and alignment with local authorities. Humanitarian and faith-based organizations were often viewed as reliable partners and were more regularly invited to coordination meetings or consulted by the governorate, while other NGOs reported that their involvement depended on familiarity and personal contacts. Access to official information or participation in local coordination platforms thus varied across organizations. Some rights-oriented NGOs described adopting a strategy of 'selective visibility', maintaining communication with authorities to ensure continuity of their work while avoiding public exposure or activities that could be perceived as politically sensitive.

Refugee opinion leaders again surfaced as key intermediaries between officials and refugee communities. PDMM staff described them as 'those who can explain social occurrences or any practice to foreigners in their own language... not to say tribal leaders, but those who are sympathetic, seen as an older

brother'. Unlike in East Marmara, where regular meetings were held, here opinion leaders were mobilized ad hoc, particularly during crises such as the Afghan arrivals. They were expected to coordinate assistance within refugee networks, compensating for absent infrastructures. Communication with officials also proceeded more often in a one-way manner. One opinion leader described a recent meeting with the governor where 'we were just made to listen, not to speak'. As other respondents also admitted, these leaders functioned less as representatives and more as intermediaries—informal conduits through which local governance extended into refugee communities, but without accountability or autonomy. In this sense, they facilitated refugees' absorption into local systems while limiting their capacity for self-representation.

5 | Comparative Reflections

The two localities presented in this article are very disparate cases, regionally, politically, economically, socially, and in terms of their refugee and migrant profile, as well as former experiences with diversity. Despite their differences, as illustrated above, they presented similar patterns of governance in migration and refugee integration. These findings echo existing migration literature using the MLG lens in Turkey's migration context and suggest that these are common to and shared among urban localities in the country regardless of their size. However, as we illustrate, these forces are much more accentuated in smaller towns.

First, across both towns we found that integration governance is formally multi-actor, yet the centralized state structure significantly limits local autonomy and the distribution of power from the national to the local level and from state to non-state actors. As local government bodies, PDMMs function primarily as implementers of national policy, with little authority to design context-specific solutions. Municipalities, in turn, remain largely inactive—not only because integration is framed as a national rather than local responsibility, but also due to electoral sensitivities and limited institutional and financial capacity. NGOs compensate for these gaps by providing essential services and acting as intermediaries between refugees and state institutions, yet their activities are constrained by political selectivity and dependence on external funding. Refugee opinion leaders likewise operate within these constraints, mediating between officials and refugee communities without formal authority or institutional recognition.

Second, the overarching dynamic of collaboration is one of informality and selective visibility. All four actor groups—state and non-state alike—rely on informal, often undocumented forms of coordination to navigate political sensitivities and institutional rigidity. Whether delivering services or coordinating aid, local actors deliberately downplay their involvement in refugee-related initiatives to avoid public backlash. NGOs, operating within a climate of distrust and patronage, similarly maintain 'controlled visibility', using informal ties and selective disclosure to sustain their work. Refugee opinion leaders, in turn, exemplify this pattern, as how they play their roles depends on the discretion of local authorities rather than on formalized mechanisms. While the category of 'opinion leaders' was conjured by the central state (i.e., the Ministry of Interior), refugee opinion leaders were aware that the extent as well as content of their liaisons with authorities on the ground (i.e., provincial PDMM officials) were largely discretionary. Therefore, they were concerned not to fall out of local authorities' grace and to be perceived as oppositional, when conveying bottom-up concerns from refugee communities. Together, these ad hoc arrangements illustrate how local actors compensate for the shortcomings of formal structures, while also revealing the fragility and contingent character of small-town governance.

Despite these shared structural conditions, the two towns also demonstrate distinct approaches in how actors navigate and negotiate governance constraints, shaped by differences in political alignment, civic space, and socioeconomic context.

In the East Marmara town, with its longer-standing exposure to migration, greater economic dynamism, and political plurality, there is a somewhat more *cautious mode of local multi-level governance*. Municipal actors, though careful, were more open at pointing to central government constraints and more inclined to provide logistical support through informal arrangements. The local civil society landscape is relatively pluralistic, enabling a broader spectrum of NGOs to remain active, albeit with careful attention to visibility. Refugee opinion leaders in this context appear more able to link with the local civil society landscape, thereby also trying to develop room for negotiation with different actors of the local governance structure.

By contrast, the Central Anatolia town reflects a more hierarchical and ideologically filtered governance environment, which can be qualified as an *exclusionary form of local multi-level governance*. Municipal officials closely aligned with the ruling government demonstrated greater deference to central authorities and were less willing to engage independently on refugee issues. The civic space is narrower, dominated by faith-based, government-aligned NGOs, while rights-based organizations face exclusion from formal coordination structures. Refugee opinion leaders are mobilized primarily in response to emergencies such as the sudden arrival of Afghan migrants, highlighting their use as crisis-response tools rather than routine partners in governance.

These differences are further shaped by divergent historical trajectories. The East Marmara town has experienced multiple and socially differentiated migration waves, including earlier flows from the Balkans as well as more recent arrivals from Gulf countries, bringing together migrants from diverse ethnic, racial, and class backgrounds. This exposure has not normalized migration in the sense of social acceptance, but rather in the sense of recognizing migration as a persistent and consequential feature of local life. At the same time, the relative affluence of many newcomer foreigners—whose investments and consumption patterns contribute to the local economy—has produced an ambivalent reception, in which migrants are economically desired yet symbolically contested. This ambivalence has fostered pragmatic but cautious forms of engagement, marked by selective cooperation, informal coordination, and heightened sensitivity to visibility. By contrast, the Central Anatolia town is characterized by sustained out-migration, a more socially homogeneous population, and limited prior exposure to diversity. Here, the

migrant presence consists overwhelmingly of impoverished refugees concentrated in marginalized neighbourhoods, who are stigmatized primarily for their poverty rather than resented for their wealth. This configuration reinforces a more defensive governance posture, characterized by risk aversion, hierarchical control, and limited space for pragmatic manoeuvring.

6 | Conclusion

This paper examined the governance of refugee integration in two small towns in Turkey to assess how different local actors interpret and enact their roles within a centralized migration system. Using an actor-centred MLG framework, we analysed the interactions among PDMMs, municipalities, NGOs, and refugee opinion leaders. Across two politically, economically, and demographically different settings, we observed a striking convergence: governance operates through informal and discretionary arrangements shaped by centralization, limited local capacity, and political sensitivity. PDMMs engage in selective coordination; municipalities and NGOs manage visibility carefully; and refugee opinion leaders act as informal brokers. Taken together, these patterns challenge conventional MLG accounts that emphasize formal coordination, negotiated autonomy, or the entrepreneurial agency of globally connected cities. Instead, in line with work on Turkey's metropolitan contexts, we argue that informality is not peripheral but constitutes the dominant mode through which multi-level governance is practiced in small-town settings.

The role of refugee opinion leaders is particularly revealing in this regard. In both towns, PDMMs drew on individuals within refugee communities who were seen as respected, listened to, and able to 'reach' others. These figures were mobilized to transmit information, encourage compliance, defuse tensions, and in moments of crisis even organize shelter and support among refugees themselves. Their position was therefore broker-like: they extended the reach of local state authority into refugee communities, while also relaying concerns from those communities back to officials. Yet this brokerage unfolded on terms set by the state. Opinion leaders were invited into spaces defined by provincial authorities, not empowered to create political space of their own; they were listened to but not necessarily allowed to speak as representatives. This arrangement sustained hierarchical control, personalized responsibility, and gendered authority (nearly all such opinion leaders we encountered were men), while avoiding the kinds of visible, rights-based claims associated with more formal refugee-led organizing. In this sense, refugee opinion leaders illustrate how multi-level governance in these towns is neither fully cooperative nor openly conflictual, but maintained through managed access, influence-brokering, and informal dependency rather than institutionalized participation. Future research may better establish whether the use of refugee opinion leaders by local authorities remains a consistent feature or whether authorities retrench such activities under centralized pressure. Further research is also needed to understand how opinion leaders' political views (pro-government or not) impact their role and relations with refugee communities.

Building on Tortola's (2017) question of whether multi-level governance can meaningfully operate under conditions of strong centralization, this study also contributes to broader MLG debates by showing how centralization does not eliminate multilevel dynamics but fundamentally reshapes them. The Turkish case demonstrates that, rather than involving a dispersion of authority or empowered local autonomy, MLG under centralization takes the form of constrained maneuvering spaces, informal coordination, and selective delegation without formal empowerment. Local actors engage across levels not through institutionalized authority-sharing, but through pragmatic, low-visibility practices that remain tightly conditioned by central control.

Importantly, this finding should not be read as a Turkey-specific anomaly. At a time when centralization, securitization, and political control over migration governance are intensifying globally—including in contexts often celebrated in the MLG literature, such as metropolitan 'sanctuary city' regimes—the Turkish case offers an analytically prescient example. It foregrounds how multilevel governance increasingly operates in settings where local initiative exists but is politically risky, institutionally fragile, and continuously negotiated. As such, Turkey provides a critical vantage point for rethinking MLG not as a framework premised on decentralization, but as one capable of capturing governance dynamics under conditions of hierarchical dominance and shrinking local autonomy.

Our findings also point to an uneven geography of integration governance in Turkey. Small towns do not simply replicate the dynamics observed in metropolitan municipalities, nor are they interchangeable with one another. Centralization remains the overarching structural constraint, but how it is negotiated locally depends on political configurations, administrative style, local histories of migration, and available social capital. The complexity of MLG in these settings lies not only in vertical misalignment between national and local levels, but also in the everyday negotiation of informal relationships, strategic silences, and contested forms of visibility.

This is not a mere argument for 'size matters'. It directs our attention to the ways in which local actors understand the 'problem' of migrant and refugee integration as well as the political costs and benefits associated with taking responsibility and initiative on this matter. In small towns, doing 'integration work' (Siviş 2020) has higher perceived political risks, especially when local actors do not have the necessary social capital to build national and transnational networks or to reach out to international donor organizations, as is found to be the case in metropolitan cities. In a similar manner, the room for manoeuvre for civil society organizations may be narrower and more tightly surveilled and policed, therefore causing bargaining and negotiation with local state actors to be more conflict prone. Hence, by drawing attention to urban scale, governance informality, and actor emergence, this study contributes to a more grounded, differentiated understanding of MLG. It invites scholars to move beyond metropolitan assumptions and consider how peripheral urban spaces illuminate both the limits and adaptive possibilities of multi-level migration governance.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

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

Peer Review

For transparency, the peer review documents associated with this article are available at https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.70163.

Endnotes

[1] This article builds extensively on the report by Açıkgöz et al. (2022) titled "Immigrant integration in small and medium sized towns and rural areas: local policies and policy making relations in Turkey" prepared as part of the EU-funded Whole-Comm project (2021–2024). https://whole-comm.eu/deliverables/country-report/country-report-on-multilevel-dynamics-turkey/.

[2] https://whole-comm.eu.

[3] The research in Turkey also included one rural area case, which has been excluded from this article for better comparative purposes. The Whole-Comm project also involved preparation of two further country reports, one examining access to housing, employment and other services, and other migrant-host community relations, which can also be found on the project website.

[4] Here reference is being made to the mayor of Bolu, a small town in Turkey, who tried implementing policies like charging higher water bills, etc. to push refugees.

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