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ARTICLE (REFEREED)

## Immigrant Inclusion and Municipalism in a Danish Context

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### Abstract

This paper explores municipalism in a Danish context. The notion of municipalism has over the last decade gained both renewed academic traction and developed as a political practice, especially in a Southern European context. Within this framework, municipalities have sought to develop alternative policy frameworks targeting societal challenges such as climate change, sustainability, diversity and also immigrant inclusion and integration. These pathways to inclusion frequently challenge the often restrictive national policy frameworks. However, current investigations of municipalism also argue that we have seen the peak of this kind of framework and identify less room for manoeuvre on the local level in terms of developing approaches different to the national ones. This paper asks if we can identify municipalism in a Danish context, what may have shaped such relations, and discusses its potential and limitations. It draws on interviews with politicians and civil servants in three larger Danish cities.

### Keywords

**Hospitality; Municipalism, Integration, Denmark, Immigrant Inclusion**

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## Introduction

This paper explores what room there is for municipalism in relation to immigrant inclusion in Denmark. In both Europe and the Americas, we have over the last decade seen a new transformative force in municipalism. Municipalities have sought to develop alternative policy frameworks targeting societal challenges such as climate change, sustainability, diversity as well as immigrant inclusion and integration. These pathways to inclusion often challenge the often-restrictive national policy frameworks. Municipalism thus indicates a progressive localism, where the municipal scale is perceived as the essential scale for developing efficient and just policies for immigrant inclusion. It is therefore also different from urbanism which focuses on the development of cities in relation to the built environment. Municipalism in contrast focuses on the urban in relation to governance. A rich literature now exists investigating such processes from the perspective of multi-level governance and urban studies focusing on geographies, space, and scale ([Darling & Bauder 2019](#); [Hillmann & Samers 2023](#)). There is also a growing scholarly consensus that municipalism may have peaked and does not necessarily have the transformative potential that was first assumed. This article asks whether we can identify municipalism in a Danish context, what may have shaped such relations, and what the potential and limitations may be. To do so, we draw on interviews with politicians and civil servants in three larger Danish cities and on findings from an ongoing research project.

In recent decades, municipalism has emerged as an alternative to national policies and practices that have failed or considered restrictive and exclusionary across geographies, spaces, and scales. Concretely, in Europe and the Americas, there is a growing literature pointing to municipalities as not only being the epicentres for societal challenges but a real conduit for proving pragmatic and innovative policy frameworks ([Agustín & Jørgensen 2021](#); [Bauder 2021](#); [Hillmann & Samers 2023](#); [Ridgley 2007](#)). These policy frameworks often focus on housing, health, immigrants' inclusion, climate change, and sustainability, among others. In Europe, the so-called migration crisis in 2015 and the role municipalities and civil societies played at the time led scholars of diverse backgrounds to consider municipalities as key actors in bringing transformative change and development amid a lack of EU and national solutions to crises ([Ambrosini 2021](#); [Oomen 2020](#); [Agustín 2020](#)). This promise is gradually eroding as strong municipal leaders lose their positions in municipal elections, and the European constitutional arrangement continues to preserve more powers for nation-states. Yet municipalities in Europe, including Denmark, have adopted innovative and pragmatic socio-economic and cultural policies and practices worth acknowledging ([Hillmann 2021](#); [Agustín & Jørgensen 2019](#)). So far there has been few studies of municipalism and immigrant inclusion in a Nordic (European) context ([Fry & Islar 2021](#); [Søholt & Aasland 2019](#); [Myrberg 2017](#); [Jørgensen 2012a](#)). In this regard, [Barbara Oomen \(2020\)](#), like other scholars, has argued that the EU and nation-states' failure to provide lasting solutions to the migration crisis made municipalities and civil society come together to provide emergency assistance under the premise that 'it may be that states grant asylum, but it is cities that provide shelter' ([Oomen 2020](#), p. 916; [Heimann et al. 2019](#)). However, it should also be mentioned, as [Felicitas Hillmann and Michael Samers do \(2023\)](#), that the dichotomy between cities being pro- or anti-migration is too crude. We need a more refined vocabulary and framework to understand urban, city-based responses to immigration. Likewise, we follow their argument that governance structures situated at the municipal scale that respond to both local and global challenges involve 'complex socio-spatialized power relations *that are sometimes more heterarchical than hierarchical*' ([Hillmann & Samers 2023](#), p. 5; italics in original). Drawing on these different claims and insights the paper proceeds as follows. First, we present our theoretical framework theorizing municipalism. Here we offer a typology we construct from the existing literature on municipalism. In short, we develop a typology showing a spectrum of municipalist approaches which we connect to urban sanctuary policies and practices. This section is followed by our methodology and a contextual description of the Danish case. From there we move on to our analysis and findings structured by our theoretical framework. We end with a short conclusion.

## Theorizing Municipalism

Óscar García Agustín describes municipalism ‘as a form of progressive localism, which on the one hand connects the local and the global through trans local solidarity, and on the other scales-up and becomes an alternative way of doing politics beyond the state’ (2020, pp. 55-56). It is important to remark, as Agustín and others do, that localism in itself do not imply space for progressive politics. Localism, municipalities, cities may have reactionary agendas and promote exclusive policies (e.g., [Ambrosini 2021](#)) as well as progressive agendas. Likewise, municipalities are not outside of electoral logics and struggles. Hillmann in her work on municipal responses to the ‘refugee crisis’ in the Brandenburg state emphasizes both to focus on vertical and horizontal integration (within municipalist responses) as well to investigate how mayors deal with right-wing tendencies and populism (2022). As shown in a special issue of *Urban Studies*, scrutinizing municipalism in recent years, many of the progressive examples tend to disappear as power shifts hands ([Roth et al.2023](#)). Despite this backlash, we still find it worthwhile to examine how municipalism has or has not impacted on local immigrant inclusion strategies in a Danish context. As an organisational and institutional model, municipalism speaks for political innovation and transformative practices to expand participation, empowerment and democracy.

In this paper, we do not have ambitions of generating a new theoretical understanding of municipalism but instead offer a typology of forms of municipalism as discussed in the broader literature. Here we distinguish between four forms of municipalism: weak, pragmatic, progressive, and radical. *Weak municipalism* indicates a model where the municipality more or less implements state-policies pertaining to immigrant inclusion as they are formulated at the national scale. It is a top-down approach with minimal involvement of civil society actors except as fulfilling volunteering roles in pre-defined fora. This approach can be seen as the default solution where little autonomy is given to local policy-makers. *Pragmatic municipalism* describes efforts to re-municipalise social services, manage cities smarter and takes a pragmatic and entrepreneurial approach to local problematics including immigrant accommodation ([Warner 2023](#)). The main goals here are not necessarily transforming the social and political system or directly challenging national policies and regulations but rather making use of local resources, stakeholders and experiences to do things smarter, more efficiently, and to depoliticise contentious politics to find pragmatic solutions to pressing issues and challenges. We connect this to earlier studies of multi-level governance structures of immigrant integration that show how the local level has developed pragmatic approaches ([Jørgensen 2012a](#)). The underlying idea of Benjamin Barber’s *If Mayors Ruled the World* (2013) and his envisioning of cities managed by a network of liberal minded mayors is depicted as an ideal scale for liberal technocracy that better can deal with challenges of globalisation and spur democracy ([Barber 2013](#)). Cities like Bologna (Italy) and Gdańsk (Poland) are examples of this approach. The latter is the leader in inclusion policy among Polish cities. Pragmatic municipalism does not envision major transformation or ruptures with the existing order. Neither does it promote new ways of thinking and doing politics as such. The approach entails collaboration with civil society actors but most as service providers and mostly in a co-opted model of collaboration. *Progressive municipalism*, as the name indicates, comes closer to such goals ([Beveridge & Naumann 2023](#)). Progressive municipalism in relation to immigrant inclusion entails local efforts and ambitions to create stronger instruments and structures for inclusion. Like in the pragmatic approach, its aims do not go towards radical transformation of the structures but seek to spur incremental changes towards more inclusive structures. It is progressive, however, as aims and goals are not only driven by a motivation to solve existing problems but also from a belief that municipalities, the local governance level and civil society, can develop means and solutions that are better than the ones stipulated by the national scale. Progressive municipalism will often include participatory processes and engagement of citizens and civil society broadly. Cities subscribing to a progressive municipalism will often be part of networks

of progressive cities, also intersectional issues pertaining to immigrant inclusion. Bern (Switzerland) is good example of this approach. The introduction of the City Card for Urban Citizenship to benefit undocumented migrants shows both a change of discourse and legal framework. Lastly, *radical municipalism* describes an approach pursuing structural transformation (Roth, Russell, & Thompson 2023). Such an approach seeks to construct an alternative polity that can challenge not only national policy structures but also larger economic structures and hierarchical, patriarchal norms. Rather than being incrementalist and seeking to reform the existing system/organization, it is a prefigurative approach that strives towards starting over. It builds on values such as feminisation of politics, democratisation of politics, economic reorganisation. As Laura Roth and colleagues argue, this approach entails shifting both the definition and distribution of power from a top-down power-over, to a bottom-up power-with model (Roth et al.2020). Civil society actors and local communities are not only included in the democratic processes but also participate in shaping these: ‘ruptural revolution as its long-term horizon’ (Roth et al. 2023, p. 2014). Radical municipalism has been criticized for being abstract and utopian, but goals are not narrowly defined and stand as exactly prefigurative for shaping the future to come. Barcelona (Spain) offers a good example of a city that has pursued such an approach. Barcelona has been known as a leading solidarity city in Spain and Europe since the municipal movement Barcelona en Comú (BComú) won the 2015 municipal elections. Barcelona’s own municipal politics is the initiator, model and organizing principle for its communal pro-migrant policies.

To align this typology of forms of municipalism, we include Harald Bauder’s outline of aspects of urban sanctuary policies and practices (2017). He points to four distinct aspects, revolving around legal, discursive, identity-formative, and scalar themes. Legal aspects entail official commitment by the municipal legislative body to support immigrant inclusion (also of illegalized migrants). The discursive aspect includes efforts to challenge exclusionary narratives of immigrants and refugees. Identity-formative covers the formation of collective identities expressing unified membership in an urban community. Lastly, the scalar aspect describes the active contestation of exclusivist national migration and refugee laws, and efforts to articulate policies and practices of belonging at the municipal scale (e.g. as in identity-making campaigns including ‘we Amstedammers’, as in securing equal access to services, or as in the deliberate creation of an ethnic neighbourhood for Latin Americans in Toronto (Veronis 2007)). To these, we add a fifth theme, namely that of collaborative, entailing an examination of the role and power of the municipalist frameworks we see in the Danish case. We expect to see a stronger presence and formulation of these aspects in progressive and radical forms of municipalism than in weak and pragmatic forms. In the next section we proceed with the methodological approaches underpinning this study followed by a contextual description of the Danish case.

## Methodology

We conducted semi-structured expert interviews with 15 city officials and community serving organization (CSO) representatives in Copenhagen, Aarhus, and Aalborg to understand how municipalism works in Denmark. Our selection criteria were grounded in a dual approach seeking to include both representatives from different parties and especially so, political profiles who have been engaged also in collaboration with civil society organisations working on issues relation to immigrant inclusion. This rationale is based on the literature on municipalism and experiences from other projects (Agustín & Jørgensen 2019). The interviews were conducted between spring 2022 and fall 2023 and lasted between 30 to 90 minutes. The interviews were mainly conducted in English and afterwards transcribed.

## PROFILE OF THE STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Codes	Gender	Organization	City/Country
RR	Female	CSO	Copenhagen
HH	Female	CSO	Copenhagen
LL	Female	CSO	Copenhagen
AA	Male	Municipal Assembly	Copenhagen
KD	Male	Municipal Assembly	Copenhagen
NN	Male	Municipal Assembly	Aalborg
LA	Male	Municipal Assembly	Aalborg
DD	Female	Municipal Assembly	Aalborg
ZN	Male	CSO	Aalborg
HZ	Male	CSO	Aalborg
AD	Male	CSO	Aalborg
BB	Female	CSO	Aalborg
MA	Male	Municipal Assembly	Aarhus
YY	Male	Municipal Assembly	Aarhus
MM	Female	Municipal Assembly	Aarhus

We used open-ended questions where we asked informants to tell us how the city council or the CSO worked on immigrant inclusion. This was combined with focused thematic questions on urban and Municipalities Policies on adaptation and integration; relations with national authorities; (for city council members) relations with CSOs and other actors (and the other way around for CSO representatives). We used the five aspects of urban sanctuary policies (legal, discursive, identity-formative, scalar, and collaborative) as a structure for the analysis.

## Context: The Danish Municipal Landscape

Denmark has five administrative regions and 98 municipalities. The 98 municipalities are organized under one umbrella organization called the *Kommunenlandsforening*. Every year, the *Kommunenlandsforening* organizes a meeting for all the elected politicians from the 98 municipalities to discuss common interests and challenges. It is important to note that the 2007 local government reforms [*kommunalreformen* in Danish] led to the merger and reduction of municipalities from 271 to 98 ([Jørgensen 2012a](#)).

The 1999 Integration Act required all municipalities to establish integration councils as a means of facilitating communication between national authorities and citizens, including immigrants. Subsequently, the 2004 reform removed the compulsory veil, granting municipalities the autonomy to decide whether to form an integration council or not. In December 2015, the government introduced a new refugee distribution form across the 98 municipalities, thereby changing the previous mandate that exempted some municipalities, such as Copenhagen, from hosting refugees. Indeed, the Danish government determines the number of refugees and immigrants allowed to enter the country, while the municipalities are responsible for ensuring their integration process ([Jørgensen 2012a](#)).

Denmark is one of the first signatory countries to the 1951 Refugee Convention. Yet in recent years, Danish immigration policies and practices have generally become more restrictive and exclusionary, making them comparable to integration policies adopted by other European countries in the 2000s ([Jørgensen & Thomsen 2016](#)). Following 2019 Law L 140, also known as the ‘paradigm shift’ (*paradigmeskift* in Danish), the Integration Act replaced the term ‘integration’ with the new discursive words: ‘return’ and ‘self-sufficiency’. The goal of Danish politicians was to ensure that refugees’ and immigrants’ stay in Denmark is based solely on self-sufficiency ([Rytter et al. 2023](#)). According to Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen, ‘Danish exclusionary policies and practices aim to make the asylum system and protection conditions appear as unattractive as possible, [...] pushing asylum-seekers towards other countries’ ([2017](#)). Around 15.8% of the Danish population are immigrants and descendants. Denmark receives a fairly low number of asylum-seekers. The last years the numbers have been 3,600 (2018), 2,740 (2019), 1,490 (2020), 2,100 (2021), 4,595 (2022), and 2,480 (2023) (Nordic Statistics 2024). The peak in 2022 was due to 2,020 Ukrainian citizens applying for asylum that year. Ukrainians received the general EU temporary protection in March 2022, and after that date no longer appear in the total asylum-numbers. Almost 40,000 Ukrainians (including the 2,000 applying for asylum in 2022) now reside in Denmark.

In response to the Russia and Ukraine war, the Danish Parliament adopted a bill on March 17, 2022 (the Special Act) that allowed temporary residence permits for displaced people from Ukraine ([NewtoDenmark.dk 2022](#)). Indeed, Danish municipalities have responded differently in certain areas to the policy changes implemented by the national government over the years. On this basis, we chose three cities—Copenhagen, Aarhus, and Aalborg—to shed light on how they responded to national policies from below.

Considering the three cities, Copenhagen is Denmark’s largest and capital city. The population is approximately 1,872,800. Of these around 23% are immigrants and descendants. The city has 29 municipalities, including Copenhagen. The Copenhagen City Council adopted its model for the reception and integration of refugees from the Danish immigration service’s model for receiving and integrating refugees. As a result, the city received a total of 117 refugees in 2016 and 169 in 2017. In addition, in 2017 and 2018, the city signed agreements with the Danish Refugee Council, the Association of New Danes, Neighbourhood Mothers, and the Red Cross, with the sole purpose to match refugees with volunteers to enhance their integration into the economic and social life of the city ([Copenhagen Municipality 2021](#)).

Aarhus is Denmark’s second-largest city; its population is approximately 352,700. According to one of the city councillors, 18.5% of the population of Aarhus are immigrants and/or descendants (YY 2023). Due to their share of refugee and immigrant populations, economic size, and institutional structures ([Jørgensen 2012a](#)), the cities of Aarhus and Copenhagen are able to implement concrete and innovative integration policies that differ from the national government. While the national policy discourse frames refugees and immigrants as crises and a threat to the Danish welfare system ([Agustín & Jørgensen 2019](#)), cities—Copenhagen, Aarhus—that share the burden of hosting refugees and immigrants – have sought to challenge this narrative and frame a more progressive perspective on immigrant inclusion.

Aalborg, on the other hand, is the largest and capital city in the northern Denmark region. The estimated population is 591,800. In total, the city has 11 municipalities ([Danmarks Statistik 2022](#)). According to one of the city council members, Aalborg alone has a little over 222,000 people, and out of the total population, 7% are immigrants or refugees. He stated that: ‘The policy framework seeks to ensure that Aalborg is a city that welcomes and provides opportunities for everyone’ (NN 2022).

Developed in 2005, the Aalborg city integration policy has largely remained the same. The basic vision is that all citizens, including refugees and immigrants, share the same needs and should receive the same services. Aalborg did not receive labour migrants during the 1960s and 1970s. This was due to the lack of economic development in the city and the northern part of the country. Additionally, there were almost no

arrivals of refugees, and no immediate need for working labour due to women's lower participation in the labour market compared to other regions. Generally, Aalborg adopted a different approach to migration and integration compared to Copenhagen and Aarhus ([Jørgensen 2012a](#)) closely following the national integration plan.

## Results, Analysis and Discussion

In the following sections we aim to enhance understanding of the Danish version of municipalism. We have organized our analysis and discussion around the five aspects presented earlier—legal, discursive, identity-formative, scalar, and collaborative—using them as our framework.

### LEGAL ASPECTS

The Danish municipalism or local-level solidarity practices do not deviate much from the general European municipal solidarity and policy practices. They are effective at providing basic services and every need for its inhabitants, such as water, language education, and skills training ([Agustín 2020](#); [Heimann, et al.2019](#)). They do, however, differ slightly from the national immigration and integration policy logics. Nonetheless, they do not significantly diverge from the national policy framework. In a previous study, one of the authors of this paper argued that there is substantial divergence not only between local approaches but also between national and local levels in Denmark ([Jørgensen 2012a](#)). Nonetheless, we can argue that the initiation and implementation of municipal solidarity policies in Denmark is not as contentious as in the USA and Canada ([Warner 2023](#); [Bauder 2021](#)). In fact, no Danish municipality has yet implemented municipal ID, unlike sanctuary cities in Canada and the USA. According to Harald Bauder's typology, this process involves municipal or city authorities defying national immigration policies to provide legal sanctuary to precarious or undocumented immigrants and their families ([Bauder 2017](#), pp. 180–182). A main difference in the Danish context compared to other cases in Europe and North America is that the categories of irregular and illegalized migrants play a very minor role. This group of people is not perceived to be very big or demanding special attention. Sanctuary policies address exactly such groups, so this makes it less easy or even relevant to discuss sanctuary policies in a Danish municipal setting when assessing legal measures. Where we do find a mention of such groups is in discussions regarding access to health ([Jørgensen 2012b](#), [Salifu 2022](#)).

But we cannot ignore the tangible social and integration policies of the three cities—Copenhagen, Aarhus, and Aalborg—as revealed by literature and our interviews. Copenhagen, out of the three cities, has the most advanced integration policies. It should come as no surprise that Copenhagen, the capital city, has the largest economic, population, and organizational structure—seven sub mayors, one lord mayor, and six professional mayors. To reinforce this position, a city councillor from Aarhus narrated: 'We are talking very much with Copenhagen, because they have had the same or more refugees as we do, but it is also a municipality that we can learn a lot from; they already have much more diversity than we have in Aarhus' (MM 2023).

The new employment and integration vision of the city stated: Through good user experiences and a high level of professionalism, the Employment and Integration Administration will help unemployed Copenhageners into jobs, education, or clarification, and be a strong partner for the Copenhagen companies ([Copenhagen Municipality 2018](#)). In contrast to the 2006 vision, which placed significant emphasis on inclusion, culture, and diversity ([Jørgensen 2012a](#)) the new vision prioritizes safeguarding the welfare system, emphasizing education, skill development, and robust labour market participation for everyone living in Copenhagen.

From a different viewpoint, an interviewee from a civil society organization in Copenhagen explained that due to national law, the city of Copenhagen provides more support to refugees compared to other

vulnerable or undocumented migrants. The study participants revealed significant restrictions on immigration laws over the past 10 to 15 years in Denmark (RA 2022). In the same vein, one city council member in Copenhagen stated: ‘We are unable to make our own immigration laws. We follow the rules set by the government. However, when it comes to the schools, we have flexibility in making decisions’ (AA 2023).

Indeed, we can also point to concrete policy measures demonstrated by both Aarhus and Aalborg. In this regard, two Aarhus city council members respectively stated:

We have a policy strategy that aims to provide the best service possible for our elderly and everyone in the city. We usually organise a larger conference in our local parliament, where various stakeholders from the Aarhus workforce gather to recruit new workers. This year has been particularly successful because of the increased interest in hiring Ukrainian refugees (MM 2023).

Over the past two years, we have established connections with major NGOs such as the Danish Red Cross and the Refugee Council, as well as smaller local organizations that assist refugees in finding employment (YY 2023).

In Aalborg, a study participant from the job and integration center stated: ‘We have the same law for the Ukraine refugees as for everybody else. We also have refugees coming from Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, and Eritrea, among others. However, there have been some changes in the law regarding Ukrainians; they did not go to asylum centers like other refugees’ (TT 2023). Additionally, a member of the city council explained: ‘In my political work, we deal with policies and strategies’ and ‘We implement integration policies and maintain an integration council. We also host a diversity event annually, and one of the activities is a free visit to the zoo with our people—refugees, immigrants, and families’ (LA 2023).

Inferring from the above submissions, one can argue that both Aarhus and Aalborg, just like Copenhagen, have some integration strategies relative to care for the elderly, the labour market, and reception strategies for the people living in those cities. One intriguing finding is that Ukrainian refugees receive special treatment. Unlike all other refugees, they have not been to the asylum centres. They were admitted directly into the cities and municipalities because of the special law passed on March 17, 2022 ([NewtoDenmark.dk 2022](#)).

Following this, a city council member in Aarhus posited: ‘Over the last year, we’ve learnt that some refugees are more eligible for support than others’ and ‘For the first time, we fly the Ukrainian flag in front of City Hall. We haven’t flown the Afghan flag or the Palestinian flag. We have recently sent a convoy of decommissioned buses from Aarhus to Ukraine. We have never sent buses to any conflict zone’ (MA 2023). This revisits our previous contention that Danish municipalities, such as Copenhagen, Aarhus, and Aalborg, face constraints in challenging restrictive and exclusionary national policies. Taking this into account, we can argue that the Danish municipality cases do not provide evidence of a strong legal aspects of municipalism ([Bauder 2017](#)).

## DISCURSIVE ASPECTS – PROMOTING IMMIGRANT INCLUSION

As established by various studies, different crises present different responses from nation-states, as is the case with municipalities ([Beveridge & Naumann 2023](#); [Agustín & Jørgensen 2019](#)). In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Aarhus and other cities has exhibited a different solidarity approach toward the refugees from Ukraine. For the first time, Aarhus flies the Ukrainian flag in front of City Hall. According to one of the city council members, this show of solidarity is quite unusual: ‘We’ve chosen to demolish buildings in the western part of Aarhus. We made this decision after the ghetto law came into effect. We are removing refugees and immigrants of Middle Eastern descent from their homes and preparing to welcome Ukrainians into these buildings as temporary residents’ (MA 2023). As shown in our literature section,



cities are more progressive and innovative than nation-states in providing solidarity practices to the people; however, they can also be exclusionary in doing so ([Ambrosini 2021](#); [Agustin 2020](#)).

Different municipalities in Denmark responded differently to the 2019 ‘Ghetto,’ or ‘parallel societies’ law, implementation. The law advocates for the elimination of parallel societies, and to achieve this, each municipality must ensure that it does not contain any neighborhoods that meet two out of the four stipulated criteria. These include a high percentage of people with criminal records (over three times the national average over a two-year period); lower level of employment (more than 40% of the population between 18–64); level of education (more than 60% with only primary school education); and income level (less than 55% of the age group 15–64 holds the average income within the region). When a neighbourhood falls into this category, municipalities have two options: either to demolish or sell the area for redevelopment. Aarhus and Copenhagen took the first and hardest option—to demolish the affected areas ([Olsen & Larsen 2023](#)).

In solidarity with the housing residents, in disagreement with the government, and in response to municipal policy choices, one city council member stated, ‘We’re going to demolish seven or eight apartment blocks and move all 800 residents out’ and ‘there are 200 families. We need to relocate these residents to alternative social housing, meaning we must construct seven or eight additional apartment blocks to accommodate the 200 families. That will cost us 1.3 billion. We have now exceeded the 2 billion kroner threshold, potentially reaching 2.5 billion, including VAT. The estimated amount can cover the salaries of 250 individuals, including pedagogues, teachers, and street workers, for a period of 20 years’ (MA 2023).

In an effort to alter the persistent and unfavorable discourse surrounding migrant rights and housing issues in Aarhus and other Danish cities, some refugees have partnered with city council members and civil society organizations like *Almen Modstand* to challenge the policies and practices in the cities. In this context, our study participants from Aarhus provided the following narratives: ‘They reached out to me, our party, and various other parties in Aarhus. Together, we submitted a petition to the city council, advocating for Aarhus to welcome refugees from refugee camps located in Greece, Turkey, and Syria, primarily within European borders’ (YY 2023) and ‘I am the chairperson of an NGO that helps refugees start their own businesses. So, I have been helping hundreds of refugees through the last 5, 6, and 7 years to establish their own businesses and get off the social welfare system’ (MA 2023). In reference to Copenhagen, one city council member with an immigrant background stated: ‘I also have an immigrant background. We collaborate with a variety of organisations from different backgrounds and countries. I do transfer my knowledge from the *Kommune* to them. So, I’m a bridge between the municipality and the civil society organizations’ (AA 2023).

In Denmark, the need to protect the welfare system and political logics are crucial in shaping national and municipal political discourse ([Olsen & Larsen 2023](#)). To support this claim, one of the study participants emphasized that politicians face a political dilemma: ‘They are aware that the issue of immigration often garners public support. While they argue in private that they need a workforce and that it would be beneficial to welcome more immigrants to our city to help with the labour shortage, they refrain from making such statements in public due to the risk of losing voters’ (YY 2023). It is plausible to argue that in Denmark and some of the Nordic countries, neoliberal austerity measures—protecting the welfare system and risking losing voters—are explicit and implicit variables in prognosis policy framing. Nevertheless, individual politicians in Aarhus and Copenhagen have variously cooperated with refugees and other activists to not only highlight the exclusionary political discourse but also demand some policy reforms in Copenhagen and Aarhus. This connects with Bauder’s discursive aspects ([Bauder 2017](#)).

## IDENTITY-FORMATIVE ASPECTS – CREATING NEW INCLUSIVE COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES

In the solidarity and sanctuary cities literature, one area that seems to have much potential is the collaboration between mayors, local authorities, and civil society actors in contesting restrictive national immigration and integration, as well as supporting progressive policies from below ([Hillmann & Samers 2023](#); [Myrberg 2017](#)).

In the following, we will present the Danish case relative to available literature and data. Starting from our primary data, we have these revelations from city councillors in Copenhagen, Aarhus, and Aalborg, respectively: ‘I’d say that without the cooperation and knowledge we have with our local associations and our binding agreement with the Red Cross, we would be facing more challenges than we are now’ (KD 2023) and ‘We have a strong collaboration with our civil society and our local businesses. Our mayor consistently strives to foster closer collaboration with new local businesses, ensuring that they assume a greater responsibility in promoting integration by incorporating a diverse workforce into their operations’ (MM 2023). In addition to the politicians, civil society was readily prepared to assist the individuals from Ukraine. There were approximately 1,600 to 1,800 Ukrainian refugees in Aalborg at the time. ‘Civil society demonstrated a greater level of responsibility than we previously saw. Many of them [regular people] opened their doors and houses to people from Ukraine for the first three, four, or six months, until we can find accommodation for them as a municipality’ (NN 2022).

These statements by the three city councilors from the three cities are a strong indication of the potential relationship between municipal authorities and civil society actors in tackling challenges—migrant rights, housing, and care—facing the cities in Denmark. To get the civil society actors’ perspective, two statements, one from a refugee women’s group in Copenhagen and one from *Asylforum* Aalborg, revealed the following: ‘We get funding from the Copenhagen municipality. I know many of the politicians, and we have a favorable relationship. They visit us every second or third year, where we talk about our challenges and what is important to me and the group’ (LL 2022); and the *Asylforum* spokesperson stated ‘We get some money from them to buy food for the people coming here. And for the students, we buy different books, chairs, and whatever else we need. We also get this office space from Aalborg *Kommune*’ (ZN 2023).

Previous studies in Denmark and other cities across Europe connected civil society actors and local authorities in confronting city challenges and providing solidarity for refugees and precarious migrants ([Fry & Islar 2021](#); [Agustin & Jørgensen 2019](#)). Nevertheless, two study participants, one from Aarhus city council and the other from a non-government organization (NGO) from Copenhagen, posited: ‘From the perspective of an NGO, my experience with the municipality has shown that if I fail to establish a connection with the system and find someone who understands the potential benefits of civilian contributions, the municipality often fails to seize the opportunity and continues to produce unnecessary paperwork. However, we have come to understand that sometimes it’s more beneficial for an NGO to avoid collaborating with the municipality, as the municipality’s insistence on producing paperwork can easily drag you down’ (MA 2023). And: ‘Our involvement with the municipality is limited, primarily due to its focus on providing support to individuals with CPR numbers. We are independent, but those supported by the municipalities are not; they can’t choose whoever they want to help’ (RR 2022).

In stitching the issues together, we can safely argue that there is a strong connection between the municipal authorities and civil society actors in providing essential support and everyday solidarity practices for refugees and precarious migrants. It is equally imperative to point out that such relationships are not without challenges, especially for civil society actors who support undocumented migrants as well as those who want to provide quick responses and solutions facing the vulnerable in society.

## SCALAR ASPECTS OF MUNICIPALISM

In both literature and theory, we understand solidarity to be spatial and relational. Its practices connect people of different citizenship statuses—refugees, academic activists, local authorities, among others. It also transcends different geographies—cities, national, and transnational scales ([Oomen 2020](#); [Søholt & Aasland 2019](#); [Agustín & Jørgensen 2019](#)). Like other European countries, Denmark has solidarity groups such as Friendly Neighbours, Elsk Aalborg, Aarhus for Solidarity, Refugee Women Group in Copenhagen, Trampoline House in Copenhagen, and *Asylforum* Aalborg, which developed in the wake of the recent refugee crisis in Denmark and Europe. Indeed, refugee women groups in Copenhagen—Aarhus for Solidarity, Trampoline House, and *Asylforum* Aalborg—are still active in helping to address the harsh conditions faced by asylum seekers in the few existing asylum and deportation camps. They also provide integration services, such as passport renewals, family unification applications, apartment searches for new refugees and migrants, language classes, and counselling for their members.

These cross-cutting solidarity practices, both locally and globally, have significantly influenced the discourse and practice of municipal and city solidarity ([Hillmann 2021](#); [Myrberg 2017](#)). In concrete terms, a city council member from Aarhus explained the initiatives of an NGO named a street kitchen. The organization operates in three containers: one housing a professional kitchen, another housing toilets, and the third housing an office. ‘They have partnerships with various stores, such as Netto, Føtex, and Rema 1000, who deliver food to them. So, people of Ukrainian, Palestinian, and Eritrean descent meet to eat together, talk together, laugh together, and make this facility run’ (MA 2023). In addition, a civil servant from Aalborg municipality narrated: ‘We work very closely with *Asylforum* Aalborg, Elsk Aalborg, the Danish Red Cross, *Udlændingeretshjælpen* in the city library, religious groups, churches, and mosque leaders to prevent crime in the city’ (DD 2023). Furthermore, a study participant from a refugee group in Aalborg posited: ‘We visited refugee camps, talked to people, and listened to their stories, which was exactly what many of them needed’ (BB 2023). Imperatively, different actors contribute to municipal solidarity practices. Various actors are involved in transforming municipal integration and solidarity practices in Copenhagen, Aarhus, Aalborg, and other Danish cities. Indeed, scalar or transversal solidarity practices can take place in everyday places of encounter, including churches and mosques, refugee camps, libraries, and refugee meeting centres, among others. Based on our findings here, we can join others to make a point that solidarity practices can scale up—emanating from refugees and other autonomous groups to the local authorities—or scale out—from local authorities to refugees and other parts of civil society ([Agustín & Jørgensen 2021](#); [Bauder 2017](#)).

Spurred by initiatives in other European cities that jointly offered to give unaccompanied minors from the camps asylum – and thus circumventing the Dublin regulations – civil society groups started putting pressure on local city council members to get them to put the proposal of accommodating refugees from Greek camps on the agenda of the local city council meetings ([Ataç et al. 2024](#)). The Danish government has repeatedly stated its opposition to receiving refugees from these camps. However, because of ongoing solidarity work by *Venligboerne* on the local urban scale, the city council of Helsingør was the first to join the cities of Amersfoort, Amsterdam, Barcelona, Ghent, Groningen, Leipzig, Nuremberg, Tilburg and Utrecht, by offering to take in more than 20 children. It would require the formal approval of the Minister of Immigration and Integration to actually receive refugees which did not happen – their hope therefore also was to bring the issue to the European scale in order to apply pressure on the national scale, thus enabling practical solidarity on the local scale. It is an illustration of how solidarity can be up-scaled.

## COLLABORATIVE PROCESSES

Alliances, or collaborations, are one key area where localism, municipalism, or cities tend to have a lot of impact. The literature on fearless cities, radical municipalism in times of crisis, and rising cities ([Beveridge & Naumann 2023](#); [Roth et al. 2023](#); [Oomen 2020](#)), clearly identifies collaboration as a crucial factor in

making cities effective and strong. Sanctuary cities have emerged in North America (US and Canada), while solidarity cities, also known as sanctuary cities, have emerged in continental Europe, Latin America, and Africa. In particular, during the so-called migration crisis in Europe, collaborations between cities such as Barcelona and Athens, among others, have been critical in promoting solidarity practice across the board ([Agustín 2020](#)). To return to the point of interest, municipalities such as Copenhagen, Aarhus, and Aalborg, as well as other municipalities in Denmark, have implemented visible collaboration strategies.

Indeed, some of the collaborations are internal, involving the municipalities, civil society actors, allied agencies such as local police, and public housing associations. Other types of relationships are external, involving Danish municipalities and cities both within and outside Europe. Regarding internal collaboration, four city councilors—one from Copenhagen, two from Aarhus, and one from Aalborg—narrated: ‘We rely on housing associations to determine which category of people to send to which area. So, they help us prevent our neighbourhood from being considered a ghetto area’ (KD 2023) and another informant stated that: ‘We are in discussions with some of the larger municipalities and cities, such as Copenhagen, Aalborg, and Odense, which are the four largest city councils in Denmark’ (MA, 2023). ‘We are engaging in extensive discussions with these municipalities and cities, aiming to understand their current practices and identify potential areas for improvement’ (MM 2023). Another mentioned close collaboration with Aalborg University, an educational institution that employs many international staff members (LL 2023).

In terms of external collaboration, the three cities have relationships with other cities and networks outside Denmark. In this context, two study participants from Aalborg and Aarhus expressed their strong commitment to customer and citizen service approaches, e.g. ‘within the house, besides the public paperwork, we have around 30 civil society organizations. We got this idea from Amsterdam. Amsterdam is very impressive at managing the international workforce and tourism in one place’ (LL 2023) and ‘Aarhus has connections to cities outside Denmark. We have established a friendship city with Bergen in Norway, and we recently established a friendship city with Lviv in Ukraine. We previously maintained ties with St. Petersburg, but that has stopped because of the war in Ukraine’ (YY 2023). Clearly, the municipalities in Denmark take advantage of external relationships to discuss their common challenges and enhance strategic development in the areas of climate governance and crime prevention, among others. Indeed, two study participants, one city council member in Copenhagen (AA 2023) and a civil servant in Aalborg (DD 2023), confirm that they got the idea of SSP - *Skole, Socialforvaltning og Politi-samarbejde* (school, social administration and police collaboration) from sister cities in the USA—a common weekly meeting of security services including police, city councillors, and public housing associations to prevent crime in the municipalities. As a result, according to our primary data and literature ([Oomen 2020](#); [Jørgensen 2012a](#)), collaboration is critical in giving municipalities the platform, voice, and ability to address common challenges and contest national restrictive and exclusionary policies and practices. If we connect collaborative aspects with scaling strategies, we see less involvement and commitment to transnational and translocal city networks. None of the Danish cities actively partake in any of the European networks for solidarity cities (in relation to immigrant inclusion) (e.g. Solidarity Cities) or global networks (e.g. Fearless Cities). Copenhagen as mentioned has been part of a European Council network initiative on Intercultural Cities ([Council of Europe 2024](#)). When joining, ‘Copenhagen want[ed] to be the most inclusive city in Europe’ based on the belief that ‘an integrated city is a better city’. The aim formulated by the city was that ‘if you feel you are a Copenhagener, this means you are included in the city’ and ‘inclusion means partnership, shared responsibility, mutual respect, and recognition of the value of diversity’ ([Council of Europe 2024](#)). Besides situating Copenhagen in a city network, albeit institutionalized from above, it also emphasizes discursive aspects of inclusion. In conclusion, municipalities – like the three in focus here – still share experiences and engage in policy diffusion but less so in a way that resembles progressive or radical municipalism.

## Municipalism in Denmark – Concluding Discussion and Reflections

Why do we find few strong examples of municipalism in Denmark? When comparing the institutional context of Denmark with that of many of the cases in the literature on municipalism, the importance of a strong and comprehensive welfare state cannot be neglected. Especially when it comes to the issue of immigrant inclusion. Across the literature we find very few Scandinavian examples of progressive or radical municipalism. The Moving Cities project that maps urban solidarity practices and municipal solidarity frameworks in Europe for instance includes 700 of such examples but no Scandinavian ones (<https://moving-cities.eu/>). Departing from that fact it is not surprising that we do not find evidence for a progressive or radical form of municipalism in a Danish context either. In our analysis of the three municipalities, we have mainly drawn on our interview material as well as the contextual material describing the municipalities at large. We also draw on past studies of local integration policy frameworks (Jørgensen 2012a). One shortcoming of this approach is that it mainly tells us something of possible municipalist approaches as far as they are concerned with immigrant inclusion. However, the literature on municipalism is broader and the three cities may have frameworks encouraging more collaborative and participatory aspects. In Aarhus the reconstruction of the inner harbour for instance was put out to public involvement. This has also been the case in many urban renewal projects in Aalborg. However, when restricting the analysis to the issue of immigrant inclusion, our findings are less confirmatory of any forms of municipalism in the Danish context. The local level matters and our material and all conversations with informants show locally situated analyses and attempts to solve issues as they emerge, often in more pragmatic ways than the national immigration and integration policy framework would suggest. There is not much space for developing alternative approaches however, and even less space for progressive or radical approaches. The multi-level governance structure set up in the Danish case is especially top-down driven when it comes to receiving refugees. A city councilor in Aarhus told us:

For the first three years after receiving refugee status, you cannot choose where to live. The government places you in a municipality of its choosing. The reasoning behind placing the asylum seekers in smaller cities is to compel them to engage with the Danish population. This approach enables them to acquire the language more quickly, which is indeed the case. But after three years, we discovered that they frequently move away from the smaller towns in favor of the larger cities (YY 2023).

Moreover, the issue of needing to develop special mechanisms and forms of protection for people with an irregular or illegalized status is not perceived as a real need. Another informant from Aarhus reflected on this point: ‘I don’t think that Aarhus will adopt more administration to solve the problems. So, if we were to start issuing new ID cards, we would add an administrative layer... We are cutting down on bureaucracy because we are running out of funds. We had to save \$229 million last year, and this year will be no exception’ (MA 2023; informant mentions sum in US \$).

The issues perceived as most important for our informants across the three cities have to do with integration rather than inclusion of people without status. Here, we found policy innovations and ambitions of setting up inclusive, flexible and efficient structures that reduced the obstacles the local councilors felt the national level was imposing on the municipalities. A key aspect here is the expansion of collaboration and new partnerships with stakeholders and local communities. A city councilor from Aalborg talked in detail about the strategy to prevent areas in Aalborg being categorized as ‘parallel societies’: ‘Therefore, for us, partnership is crucial in ensuring that the necessary framework for citizens is established. Regarding the Ghetto List, there are numerous strategies to prevent your neighbourhoods from being included on the government list. We work closely with public housing associations such as Vivabolig, Alabu Bolig, and Himmerland, who are extremely close partners’ (LL 2023). The approaches found in the municipalities are remarkably alike despite the marked differences in terms of the size of immigrant populations in the three

cities, ranging from 7% in Aalborg to 23% in Copenhagen. However, a conclusion here is that the issue of inclusion of irregular and illegalized migrants is not a pressing one, nor is it perceived to be. Illegalized immigrants, such as rejected asylum-seekers refusing to leave the country, are placed in deportation centres far away from the larger cities and thus this is not a municipal issue as such. Where we do see internal differences is in integration efforts taken and especially so in the discursive aspects.

When assessing the political constituencies at the local scale across Denmark, we find no equivalent of Barcelona en Comú or any other citizens' platform having transformed local-scale policy approaches. Across Denmark we can find citizens' lists (that is lists not affiliated with traditional parties) running for power in local elections. Often these groupings are the result of past political contention and they emerge from the traditional big parties. At the national scale, the party *Alternativet* was established in 2013 inspired directly by Barcelona en Comú and it sought to develop a progressive participatory bottom-up approach to politics. The party is still represented in the national parliament and in four municipalities including Copenhagen. It calls for decentralization and for letting municipalities design policies locally to best adapt to local needs and challenges. *Alternativet's* agenda has a considerable focus on the green transition and sustainability, and has been less focused on issues pertaining to refugees and immigrants although its policy overall must be characterized as empathetic and pro-migration (when compared to most other Danish political parties). We mention this party as one attempt to actually promote a progressive municipalist agenda.

In sum, when analyzing the overall Danish governance structure, we find limited space for developing a progressive agenda. We do find room for interpretation of policy messages and implementation and in all three municipalities, we recognise a more accommodating discourse to immigrant inclusion than we find on the national scale. In that sense, we identify aspects and traces of pragmatic municipalism in Aalborg, Aarhus and Copenhagen. A deeper analysis of this would require us to expand such approaches to other policy areas than immigrant inclusion.

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