



Are Cities Doing the Same? Local Policies on Immigrant Integration in Catalonia Since the Great Recession

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Abstract

This article analyzes the extent to which the councils of five Catalan cities have modified their integration policies. The structural transformations of contemporary societies have had a great impact on city councils and local integration policies, especially from the point of view of planning and policy orientation. The article studies the policies developed in five Catalan cities in the last four mandates, specifically between 2007 and 2023, based on in-depth interviews and analysis of political and technical documentation. Although the strategies used in the five cities analyzed are not identical, the results show that during these years there has been a tendency to limit the approval of plans for the integration of immigrants, although this does not mean that the councils do not have explicit political priorities and objectives. The cities also tend to speak less specifically about integration and, on the contrary, resort to two different orientations: some councils design and implement policies related to security, mediation, and community work in neighborhoods, while others tend to broaden the focus of their policies, opting for more holistic approaches focused on multiple forms of diversity, intersectionality, and anti-racism.

Keywords Diversity · Local · Integration policy · Cities · Crisis · Migration

Introduction

This article studies the changes and continuities in local immigration integration policies in five Catalan city councils in a period of multiple crises (Schiller & Hackett, 2018): economic (which erupted in 2008, the Great Recession and the increase in inequality and situations of poverty and social exclusion); political (crisis of legitimacy of the Nation State and the European Union, as well as tensions between the Spanish and Catalan governments); democratic (polarization, populism, the

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rise of the far right.); the refugee crisis due to war (such as the wars in Syria and Afghanistan, among others); and the incipient climate crisis (with extreme weather phenomena that threatens the survival of large areas of the world).

In Catalonia, the regional government has implemented public policies of integration since 1993, when it approved the first plan to respond to the first flows of foreign immigration that had settled there since the 1980s (Casademont & Serra, 2021). The so-called Catalan Model of Integration had been based on inter-institutional cooperation, through which the higher governmental bodies, such as the State or the Catalan regional government, dealt with legal and competence issues and also the definition of the model of public policy, and based on this, the local bodies implemented the integration policies. The local sphere has been an important pillar in Catalan integration policies, and already in the 1990s, the *Girona Report* (Comissió d'Associacions i Organitzacions no Governamentals de les Comarques de Girona, 1992) was published (prepared by NGOs and public institutions of the province of Girona in which recommendations were made on immigration policy), in which the specific functions of the local government with regard to the social integration of immigrants were established. In policy implementation, therefore, the local bodies had room to adapt it to the territorial and demographic singularities of each municipality. By means of administrative collaboration agreements, the city councils were in charge of deploying, based on their proximity to the population, the policies to favor the integration of immigrants. Nevertheless, local strategies in favor of integration could materialize in different ways. Some councils, especially those in the most populous cities, approved their own local plans, as well as other political and technical instruments in which they defined their responses to promote integration. Others, on the other hand, did not draw up strategic documents and applied their policies based on other parameters or, simply, did not have any explicit planning instruments.

However, after 30 years of regional and local integration policies, the reality of the early 1990s is radically different from today, and these changes have had an impact on cities and their integration policies. For instance, the 2010s was a period of ups and downs in terms of migratory flows. At the beginning of the 2008 economic crisis, Catalonia experienced a reduction, but not elimination, in the number of immigrants, after a long period in which the Spanish state had ceased to be a country of emigration to become one of immigration (Arango, 2013). The economic crisis even led to the reappearance of emigration (González-Ferrer & Moreno-Fuentes, 2017). However, with the passage of the decade, the figures changed and immigration returned to force in Catalonia, caused especially by the arrival of refugees and the return of economic immigrants. The data from the Institut d'Estadística de Catalunya (Statistical Institute of Catalonia) reveal the following: between 2007 and 2009 foreign immigration still grew at an annual average rate of 9%, but between 2010 and 2016, it dropped by an average of 2%, with declines of more than 5% annually between 2014 and 2015. From 2017, the data increased again, and the arrival of immigrants rose to annual percentages of 7 and 8%. These changes, which affect immigration and emigration, as well as the profile of newcomers, had a significant impact on local bodies.

At the same time, the accumulated experience of more than 20 years of public immigration policies at the regional and local level has also involved a development

in the analysis and understanding of migration, which has led to an evolution of the political philosophy of integration. Thus, for example, a detailed analysis of Catalan immigration policies, with their main priorities and objectives, shows us a certain transformation of the problems, initially very focused on the needs of the immigrants when they arrive and those that emerge during the settlement process, later moving towards a new scenario in which fewer immigrants arrived in Catalonia and with a greater concern for needs more related to citizenship status, than those of the immigrants (Casademont & Serra, 2021), as well as the descendants of immigrants. For example, the Catalan government stated that “sociological and demographic data indicate a turning point in migration dynamics caused by the difficult economic situation in Catalonia. For the first time, the migratory balance in 2012 was negative, regardless of the nationality of the migrants [...] This conceptual shift leaves behind exclusive references to immigration policy to speak of migration policies, bearing in mind how the new migratory dynamics affect and will affect Catalan society” (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2014:41). Another example is the number of naturalizations, which between 2008 and 2014 was over 200,000 people (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2016).

With the start of the Great Recession, three main changes occurred in local integration policies. Firstly, the generalization, in most European parliaments and governments, of austerity policies based on the fight against the deficit and the difficulties of debt financing, with the reduction of public expenditure, especially social expenditure (Bermudez & Brey, 2017; Salmon, 2017). This also led to the reduction of funding for integration policies (Collett, 2011). Secondly, a rise of inequality (Milanovic, 2019; Royuela et al., 2017). In Catalonia, as in other Mediterranean European countries (Finotelli & Ponzio, 2018), these effects have been more intense than in other continental and Nordic countries, affecting the quality of life of the population, especially in areas such as the labor market, housing and the availability of a minimum income to meet the basic needs of the population (Castells-Quintana et al., 2019; Ireland, 2017). In Catalonia, the data of the AROPE (at risk of poverty and exclusion) indicator have remained around 25%, ranging from 22.7% in 2009 to 26.3% in 2012 and 2020 (ECAS, 2022). The data show, therefore, that for a decade the figures of poverty and exclusion have not only not fallen but have actually increased and that the intensity has remained high. What is more important, however, is that foreigners suffer much more severely from situations of poverty and exclusion than those with Spanish nationality (52.7% versus 20.7%). Other reports have analyzed in greater detail the extent to which foreigners suffer much more intensely from situations of vulnerability, which translates into much higher percentages in indicators of poverty and exclusion, work and unemployment, education, health, and income (ECAS, 2020). All these structural changes clearly have a direct impact on cities and local integration policies.

This article studies the evolution of local integration policies in Catalonia between 2007 and 2023 (coinciding with four political mandates: 2007–2011, 2011–2015, 2015–2019, and 2019–2023) based on the analysis of the public integration policies of five Catalan councils. Specifically, we ask what has remained and what has changed in local integration policies, as well as what the factors that explain this evolution are and what consequences they have had for local policies and institutions. During the period studied, structural and local changes have favored transformations in the conception of the roles of local bodies regarding migration and in the

local integration policies. Thus, for example, local bodies have evolved from explicit integration policies to more general policies, linked to a broad conception of diversity, and managing integration from more holistic perspectives, such as inclusion and social cohesion. As a result of accumulated experience, the local bodies have consolidated integration as one of their political priorities, which would translate into a commitment to public policy planning and the consolidation of professional structures. The article contributes to the knowledge of local integration policies and provides an in-depth look at how structural changes of today's societies have affected local policies from a relatively long-term perspective, for sixteen years, in a context of transition in the dynamics of migratory flows in Catalonia and Europe.

The article is divided into the following sections. The first section reviews the literature on local integration policies and the role of cities and municipalities in the context of the crisis of the nation state. The methodological section explains the selected cases, the contextual information, and the qualitative methods used. The next section presents the analysis of the results, explaining the similarities and differences between the cases. Finally, the last section presents the conclusions.

The Role of Municipalities in the Integration Process

Several authors emphasize the importance of municipalities in the immigration integration process (Alexander, 2004; Caponio & Borkert, 2010; Kraal et al., 2017), pointing out a better response to the needs of migrants in comparison to nation states (Mahnig, 2004). Although nation states have developed political philosophies of integration (Favell, 1998), it is in the municipalities, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity and proximity between the institutions and the population, where these processes materialize (Jørgensen, 2012). Cities recognize and experience the presence of immigration more quickly than states (Spiecka, 2013), have a more pragmatic attitude to the challenges of integration (Caponio & Borkert, 2010), and work with more coordination between and with public administrations, with immigrant associations and the social sector (Poppelaars & Scholten, 2008). Along these lines, academic literature has focused on the local turn in the multi-level governance framework, stating that “cities and regions, then, are becoming more and more active agents, drawing their own agenda, policy strategies and key questions/answers to challenges related to integration and diversity accommodation” (Zapata, Caponio and Scholten, 2017:2). Scholten and Penninx (2016) highlight the entrepreneurial nature of municipalities when promoting their own integration philosophies and policies, which leads to different approaches, even within the same states. Moreover, as Delvino and Spencer (2019:27) have shown, cities are more sensitive towards immigrants with irregular status, and professionals develop what they define as municipal activism, “actions that facilitate access to services for irregular migrants that are taken in spite of, and to a degree mitigating restrictive national legal and policy frameworks”.

In recent years, in the context of a crisis of nation states (Holton, 2011) and the realization of the institutional tensions typical of multilevel governance, cities have emerged as political actors that claim more sovereignty to address global problems

that especially affect the local area, including the integration of immigrants. Verhoeven et al. (2022) explicitly talk about municipal contestation as diverse political practices that municipalities promote such as protest, lobbying, negotiation, and lawsuits to deal with threats to their political positions or their local communities. The refugee crisis of 2015 is a good example, in which cities like Barcelona and Paris (with the support of other Spanish localities) pressured and demanded more powers from community and state institutions to respond from proximity to attend to refugees. Specifically, they stated: “We ask that they [the ministers of the interior and justice of the EU member states] not to turn their backs on cities, that they listen to the cry that is coming from them, we need the support and cooperation of the states, of the European Union and international institutions to ensure their reception” (Colau et al., 2015).

However, cities and municipalities have also been the seed of institutional responses against the integration of immigration (Gebhardt, 2016). For example, during the economic crisis, some cities have reduced their budget for integration policies, even with cuts that have affected professional teams (Ponzo et al., 2013; Schiller, 2016). Others have been pioneers in policies restricting the rights of immigrants. In Catalonia, for example, limitations have been placed on the municipal register (which allows access to basic rights regardless of the administrative situation of immigrants) or municipal ordinances have been passed that criminalize immigration in a context of emergency policies, discourses, and anti-immigration parties.

However, one of the main contributions in the field of local policies has been comparative research that has highlighted a substantial change in what affects immigration integration policies, and that reveals a conceptual shift towards diversity policies (Van Breugel, 2020; Martínez Ariño et al., 2019; Caponio, 2018; Ambrosini, 2017; Triadafilopoulos & Schönwälder, 2016; Hadj-Abdou, 2014). In this regard, the contributions of Schiller (2016) are important, especially his analysis of the cities of Amsterdam, Antwerp, and Leeds, which highlights that cities accept and recognize diversity as a fact and that, unlike unidimensional approaches, diversity policies take into consideration variables such as “race”/ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, and mental/physical ability. However, these cases have some limitations since “despite this very similar definition of diversity in the cities’ official policies, the implementation of these policies in all three cities revealed a gap between what was being said and done (implementation gap)” (Schiller, 2016:233).

Methodology

This article involves a case study based on an analysis of five Catalan cities: Sabadell, Terrassa; Santa Coloma de Gramenet; L’Hospitalet de Llobregat, and Mataró. The cities were selected based on several criteria: (a) cities with a population between 100,000 and 250,000 inhabitants; (b) with a registered foreign population higher than the Catalan average (10%); and (c) cities with more than 10 years implementing policies on integration. It was also considered of interest to select cities from (or close to) the Metropolitan area of Barcelona since Barcelona is a pole of attraction for immigration and because the cities around it receive immigrants

who initially settle there but later leave given the difficulties of living there. In these five municipalities, the policies implemented in the period 2007–2023 are analyzed, coinciding with four political mandates: 2007–2011, 2011–2015, 2015–2019, and 2019–2023 (see Table 1).

Two main research techniques were used: semi-structured interviews and the analysis of political documentation (basically, strategic plans and agreements derived from municipal meetings) and technical documentation (reports, memoranda, intervention projects, assessment of plans and projects, and so forth).

With regard to the interviews, ten interviews were conducted with technical managers of the city councils with a long professional career in local councils and an in-depth knowledge of local integration and diversity policies, as well of the Catalan government. In the case of the Catalan government, they were selected because they have an external view of the municipality, as well as a global perspective of the policies implemented in different Catalan localities, which allows them to identify the most innovative cases. In terms of the analysis of policy documents, 23 documents were analyzed in depth, mostly local plans, but also reports, policy documents adopted by local councils, policy evaluations, etc.

All interviews were conducted and recorded online, and later, the information was analyzed by coding the material and organizing the information into the following broad categories: (a) policy changes (creation and development of policies), (b) causes of changes in policy plans and, (c) consequences of these changes within the local government. All the participants took part voluntarily and agreed that the information derived from the interviews could be used in the form of quotations.

With regard to the document analysis, special emphasis was placed on the analysis of local plans (although not all the analyzed municipalities have them) as well as technical reports, action reports, political resolutions, intervention programs, and news published on the council websites. In total, more than 24 plans and political resolutions were consulted, as well as other policy documents from the councils, which complemented the information obtained through the interviews. This analysis followed a different categorization process to the interviews, considering a constructivist grounded theory method from initial open coding to focused coding (Charmaz, 2014). Although the plans are considered an important tool because they show the political recognition of a concrete reality that the authorities wish to intervene in and transform, a plan is no guarantee of anything since some local bodies can pass it but then not implement it. The plans also put the issues onto the political agenda and promote social debate, and they also contribute to generating a collective discourse based on the priorities established and how the policies are justified. Secondly, the plans are planning tools, often strategies, that identify priorities and goals to be achieved in a specific period. But if the plans are truly road maps that define a common horizon that the city wishes to achieve, they can be effective instruments to have an impact on society.

Changes and Continuities in Local Policies

Below are the main results in terms of policy instruments, frames, and implementation, as well as the changes and the consequences for the local policies.

Table 1 Main characteristics of the cities selected

Municipality	Population (inhabitants 2007–2022)	Foreign population (2022)	Population density/km ² (2022)	First integration policies
Sabadell	201,712 215,760	28,632 (13.2%)	5769.9	2004: Coexistence Commission
Terrassa	202,136 224,114	31,516 (14%)	3210.9	2003: Management Plan for Immigration, Diversity and Citizenship
L'Hospitalet de Llobregat	251,848 265,444	58,037 (21.8%)	22,307.8	2004: Pact for Integration and New Citizens
Santa Coloma de Gramenet	116,765 117,981	25,470 (21.5%)	17,027.9	1993: Newcomers Program
Mataró	119,035 128,956	21,245 (16.4%)	5767.9	1992: Information Office for Foreigners

Source—the authors

Policy Instruments, Frames, and Implementation

In terms of policy instruments, we can see in Table 2 that the five municipalities analyzed have different strategies. On the one hand, we find municipalities that had already approved specific plans or pacts for citizenship and integration in 2007 (Sabadell, Terrassa, and Mataró), and others that did not have specific plans for integration but implemented concrete policies based on coexistence, security, and community mediation (such as Santa Coloma de Gramenet and L'Hospitalet). Among those who have opted for the formula of periodically approving plans, some emphasize that it has been useful for them to have some basic principles of action that have not been modified over the years and that have gradually been incorporated into the daily life of the City Council, especially based on the work of the officials to promote transversality and a shared vision at the heart of the City Council. On the other hand, others claim that, despite the lack of specific planning tools, immigration and integration have always been part of the political agenda. However, the lack of concreteness is seen as a limitation since “urgency has always taken precedence over importance, and the urgency has always been to resolve conflicts, to avoid social alarm, and this made it difficult for us to focus on prevention [...] Yes, [integration department] it’s a transversal area, but I think that with 24% of immigration, with neighborhoods with one of the highest population densities in Europe, some specific program, some specific plan would indeed be necessary” (I1, Hospitalet). In addition to the specific plans, in all the cases analyzed, the municipal action plans of the city councils, where the priorities of the council as a whole are gathered, also include objectives related to integration.

In addition, different strategies are observed in terms of the way in which the municipalities define their political priorities. On the one hand, most councils choose to approve local plans lasting 4 years, which often coincides with the political mandate. These plans have a certain continuity, although they incorporate modifications over the years depending on the specific nature of each municipality. Different paths were chosen only in two cases: Santa Coloma approved a plan in 1993 and did not update it until 2015 when it considered that it needed to be adjusted to the reality of the moment; and in L'Hospitalet, despite having a plan since 2005, another plan has not been approved, and it proceeds using different lines of action. In three cases, the aim has been to formalize the definition of a strategy and systematize it over the years, which favors a working methodology that over the years has become established. “Never, whenever I have made a detailed proposal with timing, with human, technical and budgetary resources, with impact and evaluation indicators, never have I been told that we could not design a plan” (I2, Mataró). Moreover, the city councils did not want the plans to be a strategy of the government but rather to promote participation and political and social consensus. This approach is often justified by the councils’ desire to prevent immigration from becoming a weapon of electoral confrontation. In one case, the following observation was made: “the Mataró City Council has developed different action programs as part of the municipal plans for the citizens that, with the consensus of the council’s political forces, had two objectives: the integration of newcomers based on respect for rights and duties and democratic principles, and the promotion of cohesion, taking care of the

Table 2 Main features of municipalities' policies

Municipality	Background	Tradition on planning	Emphasis on	Evolution to	Formal political agreements
L'Hospitalet de Llobregat	Pact for Integration and New Citizens (2004)	Short	Coexistence Neighborhoods Mediation	Reception and welcoming Community work	No
Santa Coloma de Gramenet	Program for Newcomers: Information and Advice Centre for the Foreigners (1993)	Medium	Coexistence Neighborhoods Mediation Interculturality	Coexistence Neighborhoods Mediation Interculturality Coexistence	Yes
Mataró	Foreign Information Office (1992)	Long	Integration Coexistence Local pacts between political forces		Yes
Terrassa	Management Plan for Immigration, Diversity and Citizenship (2003)	Long	Integration Diversity Social inclusion	Diversity and intersectionality policies	Yes
Sabadell	Coexistence Commission (2004)	Long	Citizenship Civil rights	Civil rights and diversity policies	Yes

Source—the authors, a more detailed version of this table can be found in Table 3 in the Appendix

entire population as well as the changes and perceptions derived from migration” (Ajuntament de Mataró, Pacte de Nova Ciutadania 2008–2011).

During the four mandates analyzed, however, notable changes can be observed regarding the framing of the policies. On the one hand, two cities (Terrassa and Sabadell) have evolved from citizenship and integration policies towards a broader conception, emphasizing diversity (gender, sexual, religious, and cultural orientation, and so forth), as well as civil rights, equality, anti-racism, and interculturality. Others, on the other hand, have maintained a relatively similar policy over the years, with a focus more on coexistence policies, conflict management, and community work in the neighborhoods (Santa Coloma and L’Hospitalet). Finally, in just one case, Mataró, there has been a shift from an initial approach of explicit citizenship policies to policies aimed at coexistence and security. In all cases, the policies have not been explicitly qualified as integration policies, but other formulas have been opted for. In some cases, there is a commitment to “coexistence policies because if we only talk about reception and integration, let’s say, of the immigrant population, we would be talking about only a part of what our policies would be [...] coexistence is key to generating economic and social progress” (I8, Santa Coloma); Others, however, emphasize their wish to dissociate immigration from coexistence: “The whole migration issue was very much conflated with factors of coexistence, integration and even civility [...] Here there have been these changes in concepts, in saying we cannot link coexistence and civility with migration, but rather we need to start linking migration with reception, with inclusion, and with rights. This for me would be the paradigm change” (I6, Terrassa).

Regarding policy implementation, one aspect emphasized is achieving leadership and political commitment: “The issue of political will is very important. I think that at the time it was given political impetus. I rate it very positively. From the very beginning, we wanted all issues related to diversity, immigration, and so forth not to be politicized in the city. Therefore, in this commission, but also all the other issues, all the political groups of the City Council are present” (I9, Sabadell). However, some professionals express certain exhaustion and frustration regarding the plans on the part of the council officials, who often have difficulties in getting the other professionals and departments of the city halls to get involved in their deployment. Also, plans related to integration are not the only ones that are approved and this means that they have to work with all kinds of plans, which makes it difficult to involve all the departments in their implementation.

I think that from the city council’s point of view we are also questioning the development of plans. Very often there are many strategic plans that are neither plans nor strategies. Sometimes they are cumbersome documents that end up generating a lot of work, a lot of follow-up, but they do not respond to the needs of the service at the moment. And that is why we opted for more specific and strategic projects, but perhaps smaller than the preparation of a specific plan [...] I understand that this is due to this political will and the fatigue of the administrations when it comes to drawing up, following up and developing this type of document. (I6, Terrassa)

What Have Been the Causes of This Evolution?

When asked about the causes that explain the changes in local policies, at least four factors are identified. None of these factors on their own, however, explains the direction taken by the policies in each city council; it is rather in the interaction of all these factors that the nuances that push in one direction or another can be appreciated. Firstly, in most municipalities, there is a *conceptual evolution in the understanding of migration and integration*. That is, as a result of the experience gained, the municipalities have modeled their approach and discourse in order to adapt it to their reality. This has led, in some cases, to policies having to be adapted to the transformations of society and the migration flows themselves, as well as to the socio-demographic reality of cities that have been receiving immigrants for more than 20 years.

I think these two would be like the lines of work that perhaps mark a before and after, when migration policies ended up focusing a lot on a demographic context where a lot of non-EU people were arriving and all the concepts of integration, of reception, were very popular and that's why these services were set up [...]. They have been living in our cities for 22 years, so they are from Terrassa and they have children who have grown up here for a long time. Therefore, the demographic and cultural structure of the city has been expanded, modified and nurtured, and this is where we work. (I6, Terrassa)

Secondly, the local authorities claim that the *economic crisis, which has affected the whole of Catalonia since 2008, has had an impact on local policies*. On the one hand, poverty and inequality are increasing, with all that this entails in terms of social cohesion (especially due to the struggles for scarce resources between different sectors of society that are plunged into poverty). These situations have a particular impact in certain neighborhoods of the city where tensions, coexistence conflicts, and explicit cases of racism appear, which are viewed with great concern by the local political leaders.

It was a hard time, huh? The economic crisis did a lot of damage, and so there was competition for the small labor market we had and for the few public resources available, right? There were neighborhoods like Rocafonda, Palau, Cerdanyola, where, after a period of ten years of constant construction, the descendants of the working class had left the neighborhoods, so to speak, they had gone to other neighborhoods with many more services, and of course we found ourselves with explosive situations that have still not been resolved. (I2, Mataró)

Furthermore, the economic crisis also especially affects the financing of local integration policies—funding that has traditionally been weak, but that with the outbreak of the economic crisis has reduced and has obliged the councils to seek solutions to continue providing services. In Catalonia, these policies depend heavily on the role of Spanish institutions (with powers over nationality and foreigners), Catalan institutions (with powers over some of the most important policies, such as education and health), and also local ones (as institutions that are closest to citizens and responsible for providing basic services, such as social services). The financing of

local integration policies in Catalonia came from State contributions, mainly from the *Fondo para la Integración, Acogida y Refuerzo Educativo de los Inmigrantes* (Fund for the Integration, Reception and Educational Reinforcement of Immigrants). This fund resulted in an annual collaboration agreement between the state and the regional governments which were obliged to allocate 40% of it to local bodies. The regions also had to allocate their own budget to this issue. The total amount of the fund grew to 200 million euros until 2009, but from then on, it was reduced to 65%. This reduction not only occurred in the part that directly affected the local bodies but others as well, such as educational reinforcement or reception and integration, which also had a direct impact on the municipalities (Alonso, 2018). Apart from the historical difficulties of local financing in Spain (Rodríguez et al., 2014), the central government also tried to pass measures to reduce the powers of local bodies, especially with the approval of Law 27/2013, of 27 December, *Rationalization and Sustainability of the Local Administration*, an attempt to recentralize powers and limit local autonomy.

As Catalan government officials explain, economic difficulties have meant that some municipalities have not had the resources to fund local integration policies, and in some cases, teams of professionals have even been laid off. Other councils, for example, are creating new departments dedicated not only to the integration of migrants but also to programs of community work, equality, gender, and so on. In this way, councils seek to generate economies of scale, optimize resources, and create teams of professionals with greater weight within the municipalities, giving them more political and managerial power.

Youth, immigration, international cooperation... were micro-departments with many difficulties, and more so in the years of crisis, both in terms of support and personnel and resources, and by uniting them we made a qualitative leap. I think that it's important, that in the City Council, Civil Rights is not a micro-department but a department comparable to sports, culture or education, right? (I9, Sabadell)

At the same time, the councils regret that in the years of budgetary restrictions imposed by the regional and state governments, different regulations have entrusted them with extraordinary functions without having the resources to carry them out adequately, such as reports on integration or for family reunification. With regard to funding, some councils regret that they "have to work as if they were a third sector entity" (I8, Santa Coloma), always waiting for requests for subsidies to guarantee the sustainability of departments, professionals, and projects. Some claim that it would be unthinkable for other local policies to operate on the basis of such uncertainty and provisionality.

Third, some councils have been strongly influenced by the guidelines set by the Catalan government and have committed themselves to implementing what the regional government has promoted. This was very clear in the first half of the 2010s, when the Catalan Parliament approved Law 10/2010 on the reception of immigrants and returnees in Catalonia, and city councils received resources to implement it. In recent years, however, Catalan policies have been reoriented towards policies of equality and anti-racism, and currently, there are few councils that also prioritize these policies.

Fourth, *the rise of far-right parties and openly racist discourse* have also conditioned local politics. During the 2010s, Catalonia and also Spain experienced the emergence of extreme right-wing parties that fueled openly racist and anti-immigration discourse that began in the town halls and municipalities. Until then several researchers highlighted Spain as an exceptional case, given that other European countries, such as France, the Netherlands, and Austria, already had populist political formations and an anti-immigration and anti-Muslim discourse (Ferreira, 2019). In Catalonia, the paradigmatic case was the party “Plataforma per Catalunya”, which was founded in the year 2000 and which in the various municipal elections from 2003 increased its number of councilors in different Catalan councils. Its growth was due to different factors (for example, the proposal to prohibit the registration of foreigners in an irregular situation in the Vic city hall, which was not a local competence), but above all, it occurred through a strong media presence that not only managed to influence public opinion but to condition the positions of the other parties in relation to immigration. In addition, its leaders deployed an intense activity “on the street” in different Catalan neighborhoods and municipalities from where they instigated conflicts related to immigration and from where they spread their ideology. This strategy not only achieved good results in the local elections but in the regional elections in 2010 they came close to gaining representation in the Parliament of Catalonia (Hernández-Carr, 2011; Pardos-Prado & Molins, 2010). Furthermore, as one of the interviewees states, “We are assuming a certain terminology that is socially accepted, and this means that certain racist and xenophobic expressions that a few years ago were completely unthinkable now nobody reprimands them... things aren’t going well” (I2, Mataró). In some cases, some councils have chosen to develop policies with discretion, for fear of suffering electoral consequences.

I have the feeling that a lot of work has been done in the shadows. From working with all places of worship, with the different mosques and places of worship, with many evangelical churches etc., mentoring programs, accompaniment programs, programs in high schools... A lot of work has been done, but it hasn’t been a clear area... I think it’s one of the delicate issues... I don’t know if it’s due to action or omission, but it’s always been a bit like We get on with it but don’t talk about it much. (I1, L’Hospitalet)

However, as one of the professionals in the Catalan government points out, the lack of a clear and transparent public discourse on the challenges of integrating immigration has helped the far-right parties to be perceived by the population as the only ones talking about what concerns them, although from positions that are often false, populist and demagogic.

What Consequences Have This Evolution Had?

One of the consequences of the economic and funding crisis on local policies has been the precariousness and instability of the professional teams dedicated to integration policies. In some cases, professionals were even dismissed. However, as we

have already seen, some councils opted for the transformation towards teams focused on policies that bring together different areas of intervention. There has been an evolution towards integration policies that have not only focused on the immigrant population but have been based on community work in the neighborhoods, have placed more emphasis on prevention programs, and have adopted a “citizen” perspective, working for the population as a whole. Along these lines, social policies have been strengthened and understood as the best safeguard for social cohesion and to avoid situations of racism.

Also, the global analysis of the different cases shows us that another consequence is a tendency to limit the explicit commitment to planning and the loss of previous policies based on consensus and social and political agreement. The most symptomatic case in this regard is that of Mataró, a city council that during different political mandates had approved citizenship and integration plans but that since the mid-2010s has not only stopped doing so, placing more emphasis on coexistence policies, but rather has ended the search for consensus and agreement with all the political forces. This is due to several factors, such as the political changes at the head of the City Council and the entry of far-right parties into the council, but mainly due to the perception that immigration is a sensitive factor among the electorate and that, to avoid negative consequences, it is necessary to disseminate a political discourse that is more focused on security and the fight against problems of coexistence than in favor of integration and the guarantee of rights.

They tried to give it another veneer to bypass migration, because [political parties] were politically clear that they couldn't talk openly about these issues as it would affect them electorally. Therefore, it was more an issue of 'coexistence'. That is, the paradigm was a city like Mataró with 130,000 inhabitants and 22,000 registered people from 124 different countries who at home speak 140-150 languages, like the rest of similar cities, Sabadell, Terrassa, that is, smaller, Manresa, Figueres or Reus, all have problems of coexistence. It was wanting to mislead a little, in some way. It was not wanting to say “because of immigration we have problems of coexistence”, when that is not really the case (I2, Mataró)

Apart from these cases, other councils have redirected integration and citizenship policies towards broader approaches to the concept of diversity, even explicitly incorporating intersectionality, anti-racism, and social inclusion in their political priorities. The most evident cases are those of Sabadell and Terrassa, but even city councils such as Santa Coloma and L'Hospitalet already incorporate these dimensions in their practice as one of the pillars of their current and future policies.

Faced with these strategies, there are discrepancies between the professionals of the different councils. On the one hand, some professionals perceive this evolution—which dilutes the focus of the integration policies—as a loss, in the sense that programs and actions necessary to favor immigration integration processes are no longer prioritized; an immigration process that, despite ups and downs, has never stopped arriving, and on which we need to continue to work

specifically, given that they are often a significant factor of equality and discrimination. “I think that, a little or a lot, we have to continue with active policies to accommodate the integration of certain groups. Therefore, from this perspective, I can’t rate it well because this has happened more in the background. That is, they used to take great care of what is wrongly called second generation” (I2, Mataró). For others, however, this evolution in terms of citizenship and diversity offers many advantages. In some cases, the example of gender policies is given as a way forward since, in a few years, they claim, they have penetrated most departments of the city councils, which understand that they have an important role in promoting equality. They also highlight that the merger with other professionals and departments has enabled them to gain power within the councils and sustain professional teams and to optimize resources that come from different programs and that they can now use more flexibly according to their needs. Finally, the perspective of diversity and intersectionality favors a better approach to needs and complementarity in public policies.

When the reception [of immigrants] was already very structured, we saw that what we had to do was to manage diversity. This involved many other things. It involved the transversality of all these issues at the City Council. Many issues that we at the council had no knowledge of or training in or knowledge of how to approach them, because the issue of managing religious diversity, initially, with urban planning or with licensing, neither urban planning nor licensing had any idea how to manage all these issues. We all had to be trained. I think that the issue of training is very important internally, of internal training, of the transversality of the policies and the whole civil rights plan, it was kind of more about sharing a theoretical framework of diversity management and seeing from each of the areas how this diversity was managed (I9, Sabadell)

Finally, two important consequences of the evolution of their policies on which most councils agree. On the one hand, they emphasize the need to have coordination mechanisms and relational models of governance that overcome the limitations of transversality so that the city councils, as a whole, are able to implement coherent policies from all levels and areas. They need to change the governance of this multidimensional policy field and make integration and diversity a priority for all departments of the municipality. “Some of us are very aware of it, others less so. I mean this also happens to us in the areas where we work more directly with citizens. Perhaps in areas of urban planning or in other areas, sometimes you have to remember them. ‘We are making this square for people’. Then it’s like gradually incorporating this approach through the administration” (I6, Terrassa). Most emphasize the difficulties in penetrating all the departments, despite the efforts that are made, especially through organizing training courses for professionals and the accompaniment and support they provide to council workers: “This has also meant that our area ends up becoming a point of reference for training, for guiding, for training all workers in the area of migration and interculturality” (I1, L’Hospitalet).

On the other hand, after more than 20 or 30 years of receiving immigrants and having members of the second generation, some professionals are self-critical, questioning the extent to which local authorities have still not incorporated the diversity of immigration into their workforce, which, according to their criteria, would indicate a contradiction between their discourse and practice. Some interviewees openly question why there are still no people of migrant origin as teachers in schools, health doctors, and social workers in social services and wonder to what extent this invisibility of diversity is an example of discrimination and institutional racism. This is partly a consequence based on the influence of regional policies, as the Catalan government has recently promoted anti-racist and intersectional policies and local institutions are becoming more aware of the importance of including all kinds of diversity in councils.

Contradictions are sometimes created in the debates we have about diversity because ... we have to have diverse people in the town councils. Should people have to show themselves to be diverse or should identity be made visible because we want it, just because we want to have someone like him because it looks good? You know what I mean? I think that we should bring up these issues at least internally, because we also have to deal with the policies afterwards. And they are difficult to bring up ... Sometimes access to diversity can stereotype more (I9, Sabadell)

Conclusions and Discussion

This article has analyzed the changes and continuities in local immigration integration policies in five Catalan cities. One of the first contributions of this research is identifying that despite adopting different strategies and intensities in their deployment, during the period 2007–2023, the cities have adapted their immigration integration policies, although with different intensities. The cases analyzed show, as the academic literature points out, that cities are active agents that develop their own agenda in terms of integration and accommodation of diversity (Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017). Most of the analyzed documentation and the people interviewed state that the multiple transformations that occurred during these years, especially the economic and financial crisis the transformations in migratory flows, and the changes in demography have forced the cities to change the content and scope of their policies (Caponio & Donatiello, 2017). The local institutions are not strangers to the transformations of the context in which they intervene, but based on analysis and planning, they redirect their priorities so as to maintain what works but also to respond to new needs and situations that affect them. Moreover, the experience gained over the years has favored the consolidation of certain political priorities that have been maintained over the years, as in the case of the policy of reception of immigrants.

However, the study shows that most city councils have not abandoned explicit integration policies in favor of diversity policies. As Van Breugel (2020) shows, there is a huge policy of migration and diversity at the local level. As we have seen, this is not the main trend but coexists with a relatively continuous policy over the years, which is that of maintaining the focus on policies regarding coexistence, conflict management, mediation, and community work. This trend, which occurs especially in municipalities such as Santa Coloma de Gramenet and L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, has also been adopted in recent years by Mataró. Although it would be necessary to deepen the research to better understand the reasons that justify this trend, it is true that these municipalities present a complex socioeconomic and urban reality, with a strong impact of the economic crisis, situations of extreme precariousness, and neighborhoods with a very high population density. This fact would also explain why far-right political formations have gained electoral support, which has conditioned the responses of other political formations on immigration and popularized their discourse (Mudde, 2019). As for the municipalities that have moved towards policies of diversity and defense of civil rights, such as Sabadell and Terrassa, there are several factors that explain this. Mostly, this change is the result of an evolution in the understanding of immigration and of the recognition that immigration intersects with other dimensions of diversity. Apart from intersectionality, these councils have assumed positions based on the guarantee of rights and non-discrimination, often taking gender equality policies as an example of this holistic approach.

In addition, in recent years, it has been observed that fewer councils choose to approve plans as a policy instrument. This trend points us to different reasons. On the one hand, the weariness expressed by some professionals with the processes of drawing up, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating plans, which are often perceived as slow and rigid, and sometimes do not allow them to be flexible in the face of an ever-changing reality. Moreover, the proliferation of plans in the councils is perceived as a process in which there are repeated discussions, dialogues between the same actors, and overlapping priorities, which causes concern among professionals. However, the lack of specific plans, whether for integration, diversity, or coexistence, can also reflect a lack of political will, changes in the political agenda, or the absence of clear priorities that define the importance of the actions developed. Another practice that is on the rise is the loss of strategies based on pacts and political and social consensus, which was much more pronounced during the first mandate analyzed. This fact represents the inability of political parties to keep immigration, but also other forms of diversity, out of political confrontation, especially in a context in which political polarization and the normalization of hate speech receive more electoral support and condition political debates, especially at the local level.

Appendix

Table 3 Development of integration policies in 5 Catalan municipalities (2007-2023)

Municipality	Background	2007–2011	2011–2015	2015–2019	2019–2023	Evolution
L'Hospitalet de Llobregat	<p>Pact for the integration of new citizens in L'Hospitalet (approved at the municipal meeting 1/6/2004). A plan is drawn up "L'Hospitalet for the integration of new citizens. Working document for the planning of public services" + "Action Plan 2005–2007 Creation of the Department of New Citizens, within the Social and Family Welfare Area (2006) Initial priorities: coexistence, public services and urban planning projects and neighborhoods</p>	<p>"L'Hospitalet for the integration of new citizens" (2008): Follow-up report Community mediation service (security, coexistence, and civility area)</p>	<p>Pilot plan with the Catalan government to promote coexistence in the neighborhoods of L'Hospitalet with most foreign immigration Start of the reception service (initially outsourced)</p>	<p>Office of first reception and integration: (foreigners + reception + community work) [2018] Department of Social Services (separation of mediation and security)</p>	<p>Office of first reception and integration: (foreigners + reception + community work) [2018]</p>	<p>Without continuity in planning despite an initial plan in 2005 Programs related to coexistence/security Continuity of programs Intercultural perspective Influence of the regional policies (reception, community work)</p>

Table 3 (continued)

Municipality	Background	2007–2011	2011–2015	2015–2019	2019–2023	Evolution
Santa Coloma de Gramenet	<p>Program for newcomers (1993): Information and Advice Center for the Foreigners</p> <p>Urban Plan: “Building a city, building citizenship” (1995–1999)</p> <p>Adherence to the declaration of principles of the European Charter of Human Rights in the city, signed in 2000)</p> <p>Intercultural Coexistence Plan (2001)</p>	<p>Local coexistence policy (without approving a new plan, its objectives remain)</p> <p>Information and Service Center for Foreigners</p> <p>Immediate intervention network in the territory</p> <p>Positive values transmission network</p>	<p>The main strategic lines of the previous mandate are maintained, despite nuances (coexistence and interaction)</p> <p>Document: “Report of the intervention: building coexistence.”</p> <p>1995–2015” (published in 2015, a review of the 2001 Plan for Coexistence)</p> <p>Incorporation into the Spanish Network of Intercultural Cities (RECI) and Intercultural Cities</p> <p>Intercultural Community Intervention Project (2014–2017)</p>	<p>The main strategic lines of the previous mandate are maintained, despite nuances (coexistence and interaction)</p> <p>Program “Intercultural narratives; lines of action for coexistence” (2018)</p> <p>Emphasis on coexistence</p>	<p>The main strategic lines of the previous mandate are maintained</p>	<p>Extensive experience in local policies, without the need to approve plans for each mandate</p> <p>Firm commitment to the priorities set in the first policies of the 1990s and the first coexistence plan</p> <p>Impact on the City Council’s mandate plans</p> <p>Unique programs and projects in each mandate</p> <p>Intercultural, civic, and intersectional perspective</p>

Table 3 (continued)

Municipality	Background	2007–2011	2011–2015	2015–2019	2019–2023	Evolution
Mataró	Foreign Information Office (1992) and Ethnic Minorities Commission Extra-Community Immigration Plan (1997) Municipal plan for new citizenship 2004–2007 Resolution of the municipal groups PSC, ICV-EUiA, ERC, CiU, and PPC at the plenary of the Mataró City Council on “the Pact for new citizenship in Mataró” (2004)	Municipal plan for new citizens 2008–2011 Pact with Mataró City Council on immigration and integration policies 2008–2011	Proposal for an agreement with Mataró City Council on citizenship, immigration, and coexistence policies 2013–2015 (November 2012) Citizenship and Coexistence Plan 2013–2015	Mataró Coexistence Plan 2018–2022 (approved in 2017)	Mataró Coexistence Plan 2018–2022 (approved in 2017) NOTE: PSC	Long tradition in planning Local pacts between all political forces Change of focus: from integration and new citizens to a coexistence plan Intercultural perspective

Table 3 (continued)

Municipality	Background	2007–2011	2011–2015	2015–2019	2019–2023	Evolution
Terrassa	Management Plan for Immigration, Diversity and Citizenship (2003) Citizenship Pact (2006)	Strategic Citizenship Plan 2009–2011 (cited by Zapata and Garcés, 2011)	Terrassa Local Social Inclusion Plan (2011–2015)	Mandate Plan 2015–2019: update of the inclusion plan Reception and inclusion Anti-racist strategy and interculturality Transversality European project: “Connected Equality” Intersectionality in local public policies” (2018)	Mandate Plan 2019–2023: (3. A feminist and diverse city committed to human rights, freedoms, and democracy) Work on an anti-racist strategy Intersectionality	Experience in planning, despite a certain weariness towards specific plans Push for transversality Intercultural perspective Trend towards integral policies (diversity, inclusion, intersectionality, anti-racism)
Sabadell	(2004–present): Coexistence Commission (neo-Nazis and hate crimes) 2007: Creation of an immigration commissioner	Transversal plan for new citizenship 2007–2011 New Citizenship Office (2007)	Civil Rights and Citizenship Master Plan 2011–2015 New Citizenship, Civil Rights and Citizenship, 2013–2016 (approved at the Plenary 5/2/2013)	Municipal Action Plan 2016–2019 (Area 1: Social Rights: cohesion and equity. 1.5 Defense of civil rights and life cycles)	Plan Sabadell Intercultural City 2021–2025	Long tradition in planning Push for transversality Some continuity with a focus on civil rights)—feminism and equality Intercultural perspective Intercultural Cities/ Spanish Network of Intercultural Cities (RECI) Network of LGBTQBIQ Municipalities in Catalonia

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