



Spaces of Decoupling in the Netherlands and Poland: Emerging Local Governance Networks for Hosting Non-EU Migrants in Peripheral and Shrinking Areas

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Accepted: 10 May 2023
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Abstract

A significant share of migration studies is dedicated to understanding how large cities in Europe deal with the influx of international migrants, forced and by choice. Rural and peripheral regions, however, are hardly identified as receiving areas for migrant newcomers. Here, economic degradation, population decline and liveability are at the centre of academic debate. Nevertheless, peripheral—and shrinking—areas are increasingly regarded as favourable locations for hosting non-EU migrants, in particular asylum seekers, refugees and recognised refugees. In our study, we combined the two debates by examining how declining small peripheral cities and rural communities in the Netherlands and Poland deal with the arrival and settlement of non-EU migrants. We identified different spaces of decoupling to better understand how local policy discourses on migration governance relate to national ones. From our study, it appears that in these spaces of decoupling, alternative, cross-regional governance networks are formed to host migrant newcomers, and in some cases, migration is framed as a panacea for the decline. Within these networks, the leading efforts of non-governmental organisations and volunteers stand out and are more prominent than in urban contexts.

Keywords Decoupling · Migration Governance · Periphery · Shrinking areas · Local governance networks · Multilevel governance

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Introduction

By now, the ‘local turn’ in migration studies has been widely acknowledged and is increasingly researched. Scholars have shifted their focus from national and international migration governance (Glorius et al., 2019; Thränhardt & Bommers, 2010; Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017) and arrival infrastructures and generic integration procedures (Guiraudon & Joppke, 2003) to local questions of adaptive policymaking, migrant participation and emplacement (Ahouga, 2018; Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2016; Meeus et al., 2019). While national policies still largely determine how the integration of recognised refugees is organised, a focus on local-level governance sheds light on the complexity of local circumstances and arrival infrastructures for newcomers, including a growing discrepancy between national and local policies. Scholten (2016); Scholten et al., 2018) demonstrated this discrepancy through the theoretical lens of multilevel governance by concentrating on decoupling and a lack of joint policy coordination between national and local levels of governance. In the case of migration policies, decoupling implies that the top-down allocation of asylum seekers, refugees and recognised refugees is not aligned with local-level capacities and that local governments can hardly adapt or modify national policies for meaningful implementation.

Most research on the decoupling of migration governance is dominated by case studies in an urban metropolitan context (see also Caponio, 2018; Doomernik & Ardon, 2018; Matusz & Pawlak, 2020; Oomen, 2020; Pachocka & Wach, 2022; Sabchev, 2021; Spencer, 2018); so far, researchers hardly shed light on other geographic contexts, such as smaller cities and rural localities in peripheral regions. For urban centres, it was found that, besides increasing policy divergence and conflicts, city governments were able to successfully modify national policies. Such cities, however, have larger and more powerful local governments, and their mayors and councillors often have direct access to national ministries and more possibilities to influence policymaking (Scholten, 2016). Moreover, large cities such as Amsterdam, London and Barcelona are frequently featured in national and international media and have a platform to actively shape the migration debate (Oomen, 2020). For local governments in shrinking peripheral areas,¹ this is not the case; they have little means to adapt or mitigate top-down policies. They are far away from the national power arenas not only geographically but also administratively. In terms of staffing, institutional capacity, political power and media presence, it is difficult to cross the distance and influence national policies (Syssner & Meijer, 2020). Moreover, lacking ethnic diversity and vital economies, these local governments are faced with even bigger challenges, such as xenophobia, depopulation, unemployment or underdeveloped social infrastructures (Whyte et al., 2019). And yet, national

¹ In our study, we understood processes of shrinkage as demographic change due to selective outmigration and ageing, and its consequences such as decreasing social infrastructures, underperforming regional economies, mismatching labour markets and abandoned and vacant properties (Jaroszevska & Stryjakiewicz, 2020; Meijer & Syssner, 2017). As such, within our understanding, shrinkage is a broader phenomenon than decreasing population numbers.

governments often consider these shrinking peripheral areas as favourable locations for the reception of asylum seekers, refugees and recognised refugees due to their peripheral location or available space (Berthomière et al., 2020; Chrzanowska et al., 2011; Novak, 2019). Furthermore, other studies have shown that migrants feel more welcome in rural places. In addition to local governments, NGOs, volunteer networks and small- and medium-sized businesses are often more actively involved in enabling newcomers to participate in their communities (Galera et al., 2018).

In our study, we explored different spaces of decoupling to better understand how local discourses on migration governance relate to national ones and, more specifically, how local governments in shrinking peripheral areas deal with the arrival and settlement of non-EU migrants. Our aim was to investigate what strategies local state and non-state actors employ, including the emergence of alternative local governance networks through horizontal local interactions between these actors (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020), and how this can lead to a situation of policy decoupling. Our research comprised two case studies in diverging research contexts, namely smaller cities and rural municipalities in shrinking peripheral areas of the Netherlands and Poland. Although policy decoupling occurs in both countries and the local attitude towards migration is ambivalent (Oomen et al., 2021; Szpak, 2019), new actor networks and adaptive local policies have emerged with the aim of establishing ‘welcoming spaces’ for non-EU migrants (Miellet, 2022; Mołęda-Zdziech et al., 2021). To research the adaptive capacity of governments in smaller cities and rural municipalities, we explored how the tension between national migration governance policies and local integration strategies manifests in the diverging local-level policy discourses in both countries. The aim was to answer the following research question: In what way can we overcome this national and local tension in policymaking and create welcoming spaces?

In the coming sections, we further conceptualise decoupling as a mode of multilevel governance, explain our research methods and present the results of our case study analysis of Dutch and Polish local governments in peripheral and shrinking areas. In the discussion and conclusions, we consider the relevance of our results for understanding migration governance from a peripheral perspective.

Theoretical Points of Departure: Decoupling, Migration Governance and Local Policymaking

Building upon earlier studies on multilevel governance, Scholten et al. (2018) developed a typology of four types of governance in a multilevel setting that distinguishes ‘specific forms of interaction between actors at different governmental levels, driven by specific policy and political factors’. The first two types of governance are the centralist and localist types, which represent a top-down and bottom-up relationship between national and local governments, respectively. Whereas the centralist type of governance puts the national government in the lead in agenda setting and policymaking, the localist type shows how local governments develop strategies to negotiate policy preferences and influence the agenda at the national level. Multilevel governance as the third type of governance reflects joint policy coordination and the sharing of responsibilities through

‘formal or informal vertical interaction between various government levels within a specific policy domain’ (Scholten et al., 2018; 2016). The absence of joint policy coordination at both levels, however, refers to the fourth type of governance, namely decoupling. Here, there is no meaningful interaction between the different government levels, resulting in the separate formulation and implementation of policies, which can lead to policy contradictions between different levels of policymaking (see also Scholten & Penninx, 2016). The mechanisms behind decoupling are relevant for our study on migration governance as we recognise diverging migration policy discourses between the local and national levels. In the following section, we explore the concept of decoupling by presenting three spaces of decoupling: national and local problem framing, local policy agenda setting and local interactions between state and non-state actors in a peripheral context.

First, differences in *problem framing* between national and local governments can lead to diverging policy discourses. More specifically, Spencer (2018) notes how patterns of agenda setting are strongly driven by tier-specific factors, such as institutional factors (i.e. the responsibilities and roles of the different governments), political factors (the balance of power between the political parties) and problem or policy factors (the manifestation of specific policy questions at the different levels). The last mentioned can be linked to the ways in which policy questions and solutions are approached and framed (see also Hepburn & Zapata-Barrero, 2014; Scholten et al., 2018). Looking at national and local competencies, the scale of migration governance differs between national and local governments. Whereas immigration and asylum issues are often the remit of national governments, welfare and integration policies—for example, housing, healthcare, education and social services—are considered the responsibility of local governments. Policy issues at these different scales cannot be entirely disconnected from one another and tend to induce tensions; especially local governments, ‘to varying degrees across Europe, [...] have a level of autonomy in how they interpret and administer national policy’ (Spencer & Delvino, 2019: 28). Although tensions between national and local views regarding migration governance can occur, some migration policies that are implemented locally can be in line with the top-down governance model of the state (Mołęda-Zdziech et al., 2021), or as shown by Miellet (2022: 439) in her study on framing and migration governance, the reception of newcomers can also be framed neutrally, ‘as an administrative duty vis-à-vis state others’.

Secondly, spaces of decoupling are related to *local agenda setting*, as local responsibilities and problems require a local approach. Small cities and rural municipalities in peripheral and shrinking areas often experience not only outmigration and ageing but also a decrease in public services—such as public transport, local grocery shops or educational institutions like primary schools—and a limited or sector-specific labour market in geographical proximity (see also Küpper et al., 2018). As a result, these long-term issues are not only at the centre of local agenda setting but also usually intertwined with other socioeconomic policy and livelihood issues, such as social cohesion, economic viability and liveability in terms of access to healthcare, education, infrastructure and environment (Kotilainen et al., 2015). As found by both Whyte et al. (2019) and Miellet (2022), pre-existing local and regional issues related to shrinkage and peripherality influence local responses to migration governance. The arrival of newcomers can be a means to counter some of the negative outcomes

of shrinkage. When considering the complexity of issues related to migration governance, Scholten (2020) uses the term ‘mainstreaming’. Here, policy topics related to migration are not considered stand-alone issues but are linked to broader policy issues, and ‘[c]oping with complexity means reconceptualising policymaking as an emergent process, requiring flexibility and responsiveness’ (Scholten, 2020: 118). This can occur purposefully but also ‘by accident’, as shown by Józwiak et al. (2018).

Thirdly, spaces of decoupling can be found in *local interactions between state and non-state actors* or, as noted by Campomori and Ambrosini (2020), between state actors and civil society. Recent studies on migration governance highlight the importance of transnational municipal networks of progressive cities, where local policies in these cities differ from national ones when it comes to welcoming migrants (Bauder, 2017; Caponio, 2018; Heimann et al., 2019; Oomen, 2020). Focusing on vertical interactions between different level actors—from the European to the municipal level—the policy entrepreneurship of active mayors and their role in policy design and policy implementation are put forward in various studies (Betts et al., 2021; Garcés-Masareñas & Gebhardt, 2020; Miellet, 2022; Sabchev, 2021). Oomen (2020: 914), however, stresses the importance of examining not only decoupling practices in local and national policymaking but also how local authorities in cities as part of transnational municipal networks team up ‘to contribute to contemporary migration management at a transnational scale’. Additionally, she follows Heimann et al. (2019) and notes that when speaking of these networks, we should speak of local authorities rather than cities because partnerships can also include non-governmental organisations, businesses and other actors.

Processes of teaming up are not necessarily straightforward when looking at horizontal partnerships at the local level. In addition to the formal duties of municipalities, various non-state actors are involved in welcoming migrants through formal and informal activities, which often depend on volunteers (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Mettenberger & Küpper, 2019). The involvement of these different actors does not mean that all local actors are on the same page when it comes to migration governance. In some cases, state actors may engage in exclusion policies while also accepting welcoming activities towards migrant newcomers initiated by non-state actors. According to Campomori and Ambrosini (2020: 14), ‘[t]his is also the case of municipalities where the services implemented by public actors are largely insufficient and local authorities implicitly delegate them to civil society’.

Furthermore, teaming up through horizontal partnerships can mean something different in smaller cities and rural municipalities than in large cities. Municipalities may consist of multiple villages and towns with more dispersed and less accessible social infrastructures. To maintain activities and facilities such as sports, a library, care facilities or meeting places close to the inhabitants of a municipality, non-state actors often participate in multiple organisations and feel obliged to do so (Jones & Heley, 2016). Furthermore, as is the case in the Netherlands, the involvement of and collaboration between state and non-state actors at the local level can take place beyond the administrative borders of a municipality since non-state actors can be active in multiple localities scattered across a region with various municipalities (Gieling et al., 2019). Moreover, in shrinking areas, local actors involved in migration governance have to manoeuvre in a situation of limited migrant networks and

underdeveloped or niche labour markets that might not match the skills or ambitions of newcomers (Galera et al., 2018; Kotilainen et al., 2015). This vacuum is not easily filled but leaves room for a wide diversity of non-state actors to become active.

Methodology

Research Context and Case Study Selection

In this study, we analysed spaces of decoupling in migration governance in peripheral and shrinking areas in the Netherlands and Poland. We examined two municipalities in the Netherlands (Berkelland and Het Hogeland) and two in Poland (Łomża and Łuków) (Figs. 1 and 2) and explored the different facets of decoupling practices among state and non-state actors in diverging national contexts. In line with what Flyvbjerg (2006) calls ‘maximum variation case selection’, these diverging national contexts were selected to provide a more holistic perspective on the mechanisms of decoupling instead of focusing on one specific region or country. While dealing with both the arrival and settlement of migrant newcomers in peripheral and shrinking areas, the Netherlands and Poland have diverging histories, geographies and attitudes concerning international migration

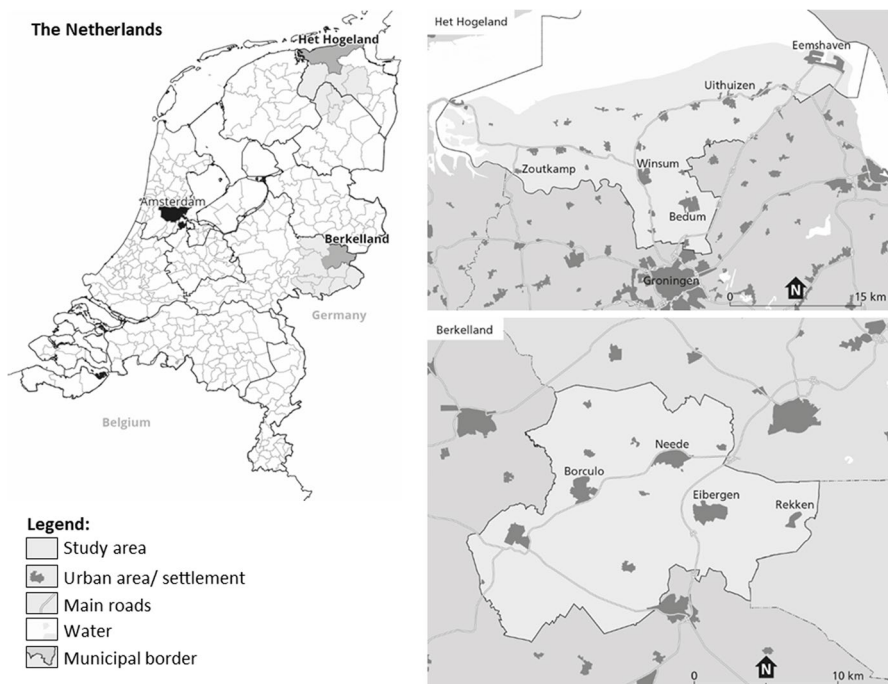


Fig. 1 Map of municipalities Het Hogeland and Berkelland and their location within the Netherlands

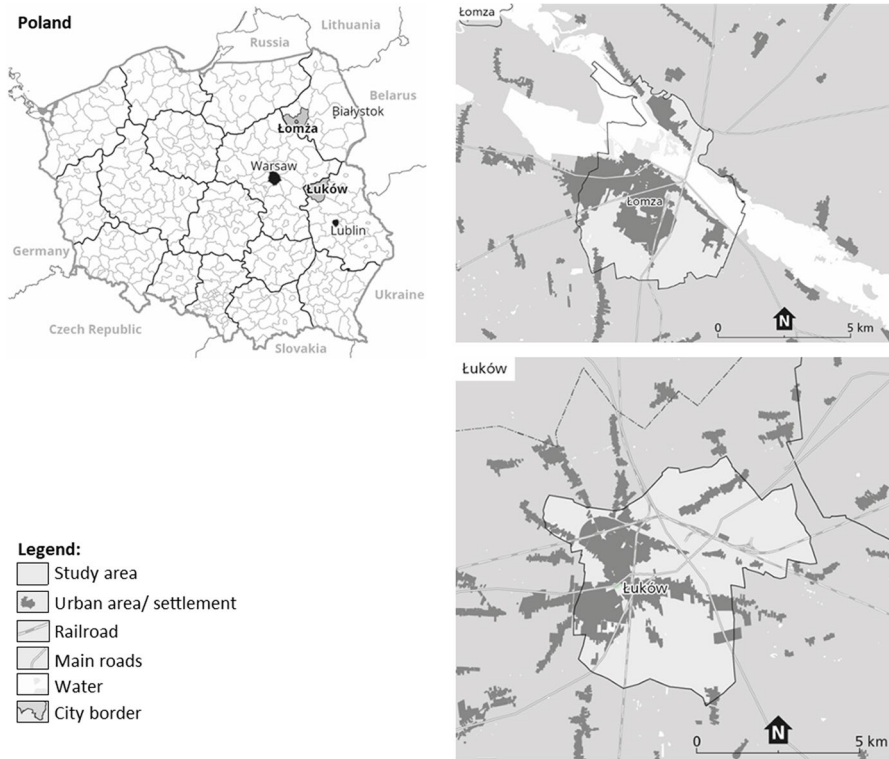


Fig. 2 Map of cities Łomża and Łuków and their location within Poland

and migration governance. We selected the two countries to establish whether these differences in national context also have different impacts on local spaces of decoupling. Within both counties, we selected these municipalities because they experience various characteristics of shrinkage, are considered peripheral in the country they are situated in and experience a growing influx of migrant newcomers, which asks for a policy response at the local and regional levels. At the same time, while being situated in shrinking areas, the chosen localities represent municipalities in an urban context in Poland and a rural one in the Netherlands. This difference in scale needs to be considered for local policies and initiatives as well as for the need for regional cooperation. Because of our focus on local manifestations of policy decoupling, we took a local-to-local comparison approach (Glorius et al., 2019), which enabled us to consider both the national context and local migration governance approaches and to unveil local actor constellations, features of problem framing and local practices by different actors concerning the arrival and settlement of non-EU migrants. While our research focused on non-EU migrants in general, this umbrella term does not always cover the specific context related to migration governance. The legal status of the newcomers has implications at the policy level and for the focus of local initiatives. Therefore, when relevant, we use the specific terms asylum seekers, refugees and recognised refugees.

Data Gathering

Our study was part of the broader Welcoming Spaces collaborative research project.² The data collection took place between November 2020 and August 2022 in collaboration with the project teams in the Netherlands and Poland. The decision to compare two diverging research contexts, however, had consequences for data gathering at the local level. In Poland, migration governance is a highly sensitive topic, which negatively affected the willingness of stakeholders to participate in interviews or public debates. In the Netherlands, conversely, several local stakeholders indicated their interest in exchanging experiences with colleagues and opening the debate with other stakeholders ranging from the local to the national level. For both case studies, we conducted interviews with various stakeholders and policymakers. We also collected data through desk research, which included an analysis of policy documents at municipal, provincial and regional levels, and a web search on municipal websites. To select relevant policy documents, we focused on those related to migration and integration, social infrastructures and economic development and shrinkage. However, due to the diverging research context, we also adopted a tailored approach to data collection in both countries while keeping the focus on understanding migration governance in peripheral and shrinking areas. As part of this tailored approach, we organised two webinars in the Netherlands in November 2020 and March 2021, in which representatives of the selected municipalities, Berkelland and Het Hogeland, participated. The first webinar was attended by mayors, councilors and a representative of the Global Parliament of Mayors (nine participants in total); in the second follow-up webinar, participants included representatives from the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) and NGOs such as Vluchtelingenwerk, UAF (for refugee students) and the National Association for Small Settlements (35 participants in total). More specifically, in Berkelland, three in-depth interviews were held with a representative from the municipality and two from regional partnerships in Achterhoek, and in Het Hogeland, three in-depth interviews were conducted with two representatives of the municipality and with a representative of the grassroots organisation Colourful Het Hogeland. Through these interviews, we gained a better understanding of the wider governance network, local interactions and envisioned strategies and values.

In Poland, the main research methods were in-depth individual interviews conducted mainly among representatives of local governments and civil society. The interviews were based on semi-structured scenarios. The interviews were based on semi-structured scenarios. The first round of interviews (online and face-to-face) was conducted between March and December 2021. In Łomża, five interviews were carried out, two with representatives from the local government and three with civil society activists. In Łuków, six interviews were held in 2021: one with a representative of the local government, three with civil society activists, one with an entrepreneur who employs migrants and one with a priest. In June and November 2022, nine additional interviews were

² Welcoming Spaces is a four-year project funded by the Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, call H2020-SC6-Migration-2019, under grant agreement 870952.

conducted in Łomża, seven with representatives of civil society and two with local authorities.

For both case studies, all interviews were recorded and transcribed in the original language. The transcripts were then triangulated through a policy document analysis. In our analysis, we abductively coded for spaces of decoupling using keywords that were identified in the theoretical framework.

Results: Spaces of Decoupling and Emerging Governance Networks in Peripheral Regions

National Versus Local Competences

In both the Netherlands and Poland, national and local discourses in migration governance have been affected by recent events as a result of not only migratory flows but also policy decisions. After a peak in 2015, there have been many migratory flows into Europe with mobilities affecting reception policies and arrival infrastructures in the Netherlands and Poland as a result of the war in Syria, political oppression in Belarus, regime change in Afghanistan, and, most recently, the war in Ukraine.

In the Netherlands, the national government is responsible for the asylum procedure and the initial reception of asylum seekers and refugees. The Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) guides the reception of asylum seekers throughout the application procedure and subsequently allocates asylum seekers with a residence permit to a specific municipality where the integration period starts. Municipal competences include housing, healthcare, education and social services and are related to welfare and integration policies (Miellet, 2022; OECD, 2018). Since the implementation of the new Civic Integration Act in 2022, municipalities have been responsible for guiding and supporting the newcomers in their municipality, in particular connecting the learning routes to work and participation activities. Unlike the Netherlands, Poland does not have a uniform migration strategy, and the rules regulating migration governance are dispersed among various legal acts and institutions (Szalanska et al., 2022). The national government is responsible for the reception of asylum seekers and refugees, but integration activities (e.g. education and social services) for all migrants take place at the municipal level, where local authorities are obliged to provide these services. Despite the lack of a formal migration strategy, the national government facilitates labour migration, particularly from neighbouring non-EU countries such as Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine (Pachocka & Wach, 2022; Szulecka et al., 2018). As the following case studies show, in both countries, there are tensions between national and local competences when it comes to the integration of non-EU migrants.

The Netherlands: Berkelland and Het Hogeland

Berkelland and Het Hogeland are two recently amalgamated municipalities on the rural periphery of the Netherlands (see Fig. 1). The municipality of Berkelland

(amalgamated in 2005) is located on the eastern periphery and consists of various small and large villages and towns, ranging from 200 (Noordijk) to 11,500 (Eibergen) inhabitants. The population of Berkelland is slowly but steadily declining; it declined by 3% between 2005 (45,227 inhabitants) and 2022 (43,850 inhabitants). Like Berkelland, the municipality of Het Hogeland (northern periphery) is the result of a merger in 2019 of four municipalities. The new municipality consists of over 40 villages; Bedum is the largest (8644 inhabitants) and Startenhuizen is the smallest (17 inhabitants). Since 2013, the population of Het Hogeland has declined by 2.17%, namely from 49,086 inhabitants in 2013 to 48,022 in 2022. In terms of ethnicity, Berkelland and Het Hogeland are relatively homogeneous, with over 90% of the population being Dutch, although the number of inhabitants with a migration background is increasing slightly every year. In 2022, 8% of the inhabitants in Berkelland and 7.7% of those in Het Hogeland had a migration background, in comparison to 24.2% at the national level. Finally, concerning the unemployment rate, both municipalities perform around or below the national average (4.2% in 2021): in 2021, 3.0% of the population was unemployed in Berkelland and 3.4% in Het Hogeland. Net labour participation in both municipalities, however, is 2% lower than the national average since the population is steadily ageing (CBS, 2022).

Local Policies on the Decoupling Path

In contrast to the national-level migration discourse, the mayor of Berkelland actively frames receiving migrants as one of the ways to counter further shrinkage. This, though, does not mean that the municipality actively attracts extra recognised refugees or asylum seekers (above the assigned numbers). Rather, the municipality has set up several projects to stimulate their participation in the local society and aim at long-term settlement. As well as stimulating economic and social participation (targeted at both migrants and local inhabitants), the municipality enhances a positive local attitude towards receiving migrant newcomers; for example, since 2019, they have been hosting the Berkelland Friends Festival (BFF) in their town hall. It is intended for newcomers and provides culturally diverse activities. More formally, since the municipality is responsible for the integration process, they have indicated three routes that recognised refugees can follow, namely participation through education, employment or self-organisation (Berkelland, 2021). These routes are coordinated by the municipal department of social affairs, which has a dedicated integration coordinator and employs a volunteer coordinator/contact person for refugees. For all routes, the municipality collaborates with several local and regional organisations such as educational institutions, a housing corporation (ProWonen), an NGO (Vluchtelingenwerk) and local libraries. Some aspects of this governance network are part of a larger regional network with more expertise and organisational capacity; the integration coordinator, for example, is employed by the social services of Eastern Achterhoek (SDOA) and has been seconded to the municipality of Berkelland.

When it comes to migrant newcomers in Het Hogeland, the municipality has identified three groups of migrants: international employees working at the Google data centre in Eemshaven; migrant workers from central and eastern Europe, most

of whom work in the industrial sector in Eemshaven (a seaport); and recognised refugees settling in the municipality. The presence of the first two groups is closely linked to the strategy of the municipality to enhance economic growth and address the challenges of shrinkage. By committing to the industrial development in Eemshaven, Het Hogeland aims to increase employment opportunities, stimulate local and regional entrepreneurship and improve public transport services. In turn, this could improve the level of liveability for all inhabitants of the municipality. Considering the last group, in 2022 the municipality stepped in on multiple occasions in response to the shortcomings in the reception and registration capacity of the COA. The municipality received Ukrainian migrants in various villages and currently provides temporary housing for Afghan refugees (86 families and 20 individuals) in the villages of Winsum and Uithuizen. Moreover, to relieve pressure on the registration centre for asylum seekers in Ter Apel, the barracks of the Kazerne Marne in Zoutkamp temporarily facilitate and support the central reception centre of COA in Ter Apel.

Similar to the municipality of Berkelland, Het Hogeland focuses on stimulating the economic and social participation of all inhabitants. The local welfare organisation MJD/Stichting WerkPro works together with local volunteers and offers guidance to migrant newcomers, and as part of the Werkplein Ability local work programme, the municipality provides three work coaches, who support locals in participating in the labour market and organise matching events for job seekers and employers. Although Werkplein Ability was initially developed as a general provision, recognised refugees are now a specific target group. As in Berkelland, the work coach takes a customised approach and defines together with the newcomer a learning route where learning Dutch is combined with a participation activity such as voluntary work, education or paid employment. The activities are as local as possible to strengthen local participation. Although Werkplein Ability is a municipal programme, it cooperates with local and regional partners; in particular, the language courses and education programmes are organised with partners in the provinces of Groningen and Drenthe (Gemeente Het Hogeland, 2022).

Local Initiatives

Unlike the findings from other urban situated case studies (such as Utrecht or Amsterdam; see Glorius, Oesch, Nienaber & Doornik, 2019), we found that volunteers and citizen initiatives have an explicit position within the governance network of both cases. Some initiatives are launched by the municipality, but many more are independently organised and function within a broader network or as part of a grassroots initiative focused on local needs. In Berkelland, the focus on self-organisation and volunteering is explicitly related to the regional tradition of helping neighbours in times of need (*noaberschap*): active citizenship is framed as good *noaberschap*. This is also part of the municipal integration policy (Berkelland, 2021). As such, the municipality invites citizens to become a *maatje* (defined as a good *noaber*, a buddy) to help recognised refugees learn Dutch and to understand administrative processes (*de formulierenbrigade*), to inform them about swimming or cycling classes or to stimulate participation in one of the local citizen initiatives

(such as WISE in Eibergen or WIN in Neede). All informal volunteering projects are united under the umbrella of Samen Berkelland (the local branch of Samen Achterhoek), which is funded by the European AMIF.

In comparison to Berkelland, the municipality of Het Hogeland plays a smaller role in initiating activities beyond the local work programme. One of the most prevalent initiatives in the municipality is Colourful Het Hogeland—a grassroots initiative focused on realising community spaces for all locals in the municipality. The aim is to bring together newcomers and long-term residents by organising regular social events in different villages across the municipality. These events are often informally advertised through word-of-mouth, social media and personal invitations throughout the network and are held at local libraries, community centres and other public places. The core team of the initiative consists of many volunteers and is strongly embedded in the municipality through collaborations with various welfare organisations, art galleries and other organisations. Colourful organises similar activities as found in Berkelland, such as swimming, cycling and ice-skating lessons. At the same time, the initiative has a strong focus on music workshops and food festivals to realise cultural and social exchanges between the inhabitants of Het Hogeland. In both municipalities, most informal activities for migrants can be linked to other bottom-up, local citizen initiatives, volunteering projects or local networks. Stimulating volunteering is therefore also part of the social welfare policy at the local level, with the collective aim to encourage citizen initiatives that enhance liveability, such as activities in local libraries, multicultural festivals or sports activities (see Meijer & Ernste, 2019).

Nevertheless, despite this positive frame in both Berkelland and Het Hogeland, concerns and anti-migration sentiments are also present among the inhabitants. When the COA announced the allocation of 750 refugees to Rekken (210 inhabitants) and when social housing was allocated to recognised refugees in another village, protests were reported in local and national media (NOS.nl, 2014; Tubantia, 2016). Residents of Het Hogeland recently raised concerns about safety and public order disturbances in Zoutkamp since the opening of the temporary facility in support of the central reception centre of COA in Ter Apel (Noord Holland Dagblad, 2022).

Regional Cooperation as a Strategy

Despite the slow rate of decline, both municipal governments see the shrinkage and ageing of the population as a serious challenge to future development—Het Hogeland is predicted to be one of the municipalities with the highest shrinkage in the Netherlands by 2035. Both municipalities have formulated several adaptive policies. For Berkelland, the key to these policies is the regional cooperation (8RHK Ambassadeurs) with six adjacent municipalities as well as regional businesses and societal organisations (e.g. education, care, employment and housing organisations), focused on stimulating economic development and improving regional liveability. The municipality of Berkelland is an active stakeholder in this regional cooperation and supports the regional policy agenda (8RHK, 2019), in which maintaining ‘talent’ is regarded as an important way to secure regional economic development, as

the outmigration of young inhabitants and the declining numbers of schoolchildren are considered serious threats to regional labour productivity (Public Result, 2017). Regional partners have organised several activities to move those currently not employed (in particular, recognised refugees) into employment. Examples of such activities are Nieuwkomers in de Zorg (to train migrants for jobs in the care sector), Toolbox Statushouders (which offers training possibilities for migrants and their employers) and, within the municipality of Berkelland, Powervrouwen (an initiative focused on supporting migrant women and enabling them to actively participate in society through working or volunteering and by voting in local elections). Locally, the municipality seeks to downsize its tasks and actively stimulates citizen initiatives in order to maintain social infrastructures despite budget cuts (see also Meijer & Ernste, 2019; Meijer & Syssner, 2017).

Similarly, the municipality of Het Hogeland is an active player in multiple regional partnerships, for instance, the Nationaal Programma Groningen and Regio Groningen–Assen (RGA). These partnerships include additional funding sources for local communities and have a particular focus on issues related to economic development, education, employment, nature and climate in order to improve the regional liveability of the inhabitants of the city of Groningen and surrounding municipalities. Here, keeping talent in the region is also one of the most important points on the regional agenda, although it is not explicitly linked to migrant newcomers. Moreover, as Het Hogeland is situated near the city of Groningen (the regional centre of the province), there are also local collaborations between the municipality of Het Hogeland and public and private partners in Groningen. These collaborations are targeted at both local and migrant groups so as to establish a more resilient local labour market by providing sector-specific training (tourism, hospitality, care) and lifelong learning programmes (Vakland het Hogeland). A private initiative (CONSUL-TECH) recently started a job coaching and training programme for newcomers. Through collaboration, Het Hogeland aims to further expand and embed Werkplein Ability in other regional initiatives.

Despite many local and regional initiatives and collaborations in both municipalities, our interviews and focus groups revealed that stimulating long-term settlement remains problematic, as most migrant newcomers (both families and individuals) move to larger, more centrally located cities as soon as this is legally possible.³ For the municipalities, this implies a loss of investment; they are legally responsible for realising integration policies and have set up programmes to organise not only housing but also social and economic participation for the migrant newcomers, yet they cannot always benefit from a stable and growing workforce or increasing numbers of schoolchildren. Moreover, social cohesion is considered a cornerstone for local liveability in small rural municipalities. The departure of newcomers and the lack of long-term commitment affect the local communities in a community building sense.

³ Recognised refugees are assigned accommodation in a specific municipality by the COA and can only resettle after an obligatory integration period of three years.

Poland: Łomża and Łuków

In Poland, two medium-sized shrinking cities—namely Łomża and Łuków—were analysed (see Fig. 2). The cities are in the Podlaskie and Lubelskie voivodeships in the eastern part of Poland. These regions are categorised as two of the five poorest in Poland and among the twenty poorest in the EU. Both cities face serious structural problems and are also categorised as shrinking. As a result of administrative reform in Poland, Łomża (among 32 other cities) lost its administrative functions as a regional capital (of the Łomżyński region) in 1999. This was also the moment when its shrinkage began. Between 1998 and 2021, Łomża saw a population decline of 4% to 62,019 inhabitants. Another negative trend is the ageing of its population; in 1995, 8.3% of Łomża's inhabitants were of retirement age, but by 2021, this figure had increased to 23.1%—although it was still lower than the Polish average (22.6%) (Statistics Poland, 2022). Łuków faces even stronger depopulation and ageing trends than Łomża. Between 1995 and 2021, its population decreased by 8% to 29,170 inhabitants. In comparison to Łomża, the percentage of retired inhabitants (24.3% in 2021) was even higher than the average for Poland (Statistics Poland, 2022). Another reason why these cities are losing their inhabitants is low wages and a lack of attractive labour opportunities. Between 2004 and 2021, the unemployment rate in Łomża was always several percentage points higher than the average in Poland. In 2021, the registered unemployment rate in Łomża was 6.7%, in comparison to 5.4% nationally. In Łuków, a reverse trend is visible; since 2008, the unemployment rate there has been lower than average for Poland; in 2021, it was 3.6%. At the same time, however, the city is losing its inhabitants. Our study shows that most employment opportunities in both cities are in the food, construction and transport sectors, and there are few job opportunities for young, well-educated people. This unattractive labour market is one of the main reasons that young people move to larger cities or abroad, for instance, to the Netherlands, Germany or (prior to Brexit) the UK (see Szytniewski & Van der Haar, 2022).

Local Policies on the Decoupling Path

The communities of Łomża and Łuków are quite conservative and ethnically homogenous, and the presence of migrant newcomers is a relatively new phenomenon. Łomża hosted a centre for asylum seekers in 2005–2010, and Łuków has hosted one since 1996. For the last 20 years, small groups of newcomers have been settling down in both Łomża and Łuków. We recognise two main groups concerning nationality and type of migration. The first group are Chechens who arrived in Poland as refugees and applied for international protection. In 2020, around 200–300 Chechens were living in Łomża. They were accommodated in the reception centre until its closure, after which many remained in the city. Similar to Łomża, Łuków also hosts around 200 non-EU migrants, mainly Chechens. The second group of migrants in Łuków and Łomża are Ukrainians. Until February 2022, these were mostly male labour migrants, but the war in Ukraine has led to a large influx of women and children. There are no exact data on how many Ukrainians lived in Łomża and Łuków before and after February 2022.

During our interviews, the local governments in Łomża and Łuków indicated that the most significant challenges the municipalities face are a decrease in the number of inhabitants and their ageing, a lack of job opportunities and an overall poor labour market. The local governments of both cities did not treat integration activities as one of their municipal tasks nor as a municipal obligation. Representatives of the municipality noted that such tasks should be conducted by international organisations, diplomatic and consular representatives from the migrants' countries of origin, the Polish government or NGOs. Educational institutions such as schools were also indicated as one of the most important local actors to guide and support the integration of migrant newcomers into their local communities. What is more, an analysis of the strategic documents of the two localities showed that only a little attention has been paid to the presence of migrant newcomers in the cities. In Łomża, a lack of housing for recognised refugees was mentioned, and in Łuków, it was noted that twenty families with refugee or subsidiary protection status were benefiting from the support provided by the Municipal Social Welfare Centre. Newcomers are not treated as a separate group in local public policy, and no specific instruments have been developed to address them (UM Łuków, 2015; UM Łomża, 2007).

Although neither municipality considers integration activities a municipal task, integration activities are facilitated by bodies of the local governments. In both Łomża and Łuków, Individual Integration Programmes (IIPs) for recognised refugees are the only programmes offered by the state and could be considered top-down governance. This tool was created at the national level, financed from the central budget, coordinated by regional authorities (the Voivodes) and implemented locally by subsidiaries of national social assistance institutions. The local institutions (usually Poviát Family Support Centres) run these programmes and cooperate with other local actors such as labour offices, schools, social services offices, medical centres and NGOs (see also Molęda-Zdziech, Pachocka & Wach, 2021). The effectiveness of the IIPs, therefore, depends on the local actors and their ability and financial resources to carry out the programmes, as well as on the competence and involvement of social workers in the field. In addition, both municipalities provide support for all inhabitants (including migrant newcomers) through the Municipal Social Welfare Centre and the labour office. The activities undertaken by these institutions comprise social and financial assistance and job-search assistance. In Łomża, in particular, the Municipal Integration Centre facilitates one-year reintegration programmes during which local residents (including migrant newcomers) can learn new vocational skills and are helped to find jobs. The focus is mainly on participation in society and the local community. The centre also organises professional training courses (e.g. sewing, cooking, construction and IT courses), which usually run for about a year. Course participants receive a financial 'integration allowance'. It also promotes such activities as 'handymen for seniors', the aim of which is to carry out small repairs at the homes of elderly people. These 'handymen' are participants in the reintegration programme and are often migrant newcomers.

The local authorities of Łomża and Łuków focus mainly on activities undertaken within the municipality, while regional cooperation in these localities has a very limited dimension. This is partly because Łomża and Łuków are the largest cities

in the region and are relatively more involved in migration governance than the surrounding villages. However, after the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, when there was an immediate need for cooperation between all possible actors involved in welcoming initiatives for refugees, Łomża undertook spontaneous cooperation with the neighbouring municipality of Piątnica. Together, they organised the collection of food and clothing for Ukrainian refugees.

Local Initiatives

In both Łomża and Łuków, NGOs play a very important role in local migration governance. These active non-state actors undertake independent activities for migrant newcomers across localities and collaborate with various other entities that support newcomers. In Łomża, the most important organisation has a branch in the city and its headquarters in Warsaw. The organisation offers emergency aid such as donations of food, clothes and household cleaning products and services such as assistance in finding jobs and housing and educational courses for children and adults such as language classes. They also organise integration activities aimed at all inhabitants. These activities take place in urban public space; a good example is International Refugee Day (see Popławska & Gać, 2021). In Łuków, another active NGO is engaged in cultural activities, such as music and dance workshops, in particular for children. Moreover, in 2018, an arts and crafts workshop (the Women's Collective) was established in collaboration with nationally recognised designers with the aim of teaching female newcomers to make artistic products and earn some money. The most recognised product of the collective is 'Notebooks from Łuków'—eco-friendly, handmade notebooks sold in an online shop run by the collective and in fancy cafes and art galleries in big cities. The aim of the initiative is to empower women.

Although NGOs organise welcoming activities for migrant newcomers in Łomża and Łuków, they face some systemic challenges, which are found across Poland. One of the most daunting challenges is that the scope and scale of their activities depend on access to external funds received mainly from the EU, and to a smaller extent, from national and local government funds and sometimes from private companies or individuals. The budgets of these NGOs have increased since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, partly due to a large stream of funds to NGOs from international humanitarian organisations such as UNICEF. This increase in budgets, however, has not changed NGOs' dependence on external, unstable sources of funding, which makes it difficult to run long-term activities. In addition, there is limited or no collaboration with the local governments. As a result, the activities of NGOs are not continuous and are often organised in an ad hoc manner. Moreover, they are not part of public policy, nor are they well embedded in the local communities. In line with the national discourse on migration governance, the difficulties concerning the functioning of NGOs in Poland became especially apparent in 2015–2017 when the distribution of EU funds to NGOs was suspended by the national government (Markowski, 2018; Wielichowska, 2017). As a result, most of the NGOs active in migrant integration had to limit the scope of their activities, reduce the number of employees or find new sources of financing. Some NGOs had to cease their activities (see Klaus et al., 2017). The human and social capital accumulated by those organisations has been irretrievably lost.

Discussion

Dealing with the arrival and settlement of migrant newcomers and national-level migration policies adds to the challenges faced by local-level governance in peripheral and shrinking areas. In both countries, municipalities have to cope with a wide range of context-related and self-enforcing challenges: economic decline, downsizing social infrastructures, mismatched labour markets, ageing populations and budget cuts to compensate for decreasing tax incomes (see Jaroszewska & Strykiewicz, 2020; Meijer & van der Krabben, 2018). The specific needs of migrant newcomers and demands from national-level governments to accommodate asylum seekers, refugees or recognised refugees are in this respect regarded as an extra and often unwelcome challenge. Yet, both case studies have shown that while local government networks accommodate migrants, their policies range from embracing migrants through simply accepting them to strategically ignoring the need to host them.

Although the national–local policy gap is largely similar in Poland and the Netherlands, we identified a wide divergence of adaptive strategies related to decoupling at the local level. In this section, we further explicate how decoupling has developed and shaped policies in small cities and rural communities in peripheral and shrinking areas through a local-to-local comparison.

First, processes of decoupling often lead to divergence in problem framing from the national to local levels and between local-level governments (Spencer, 2018). The Polish case studies reveal an absolute disconnection between national- and local-level migration policies. Except for the Individual Integration Programmes (IIPs) locally offered through top-down governance (see also Mołęda-Zdziech et al., 2021), minimal institutional and political attention is paid to migration governance at the national level—and non-EU migration is informally linked to labour market opportunities. At the local level, the municipalities are limited in their capacity, preoccupied as they are with decline-related challenges and do not necessarily consider the integration of recognised refugees and other newcomers as a municipal task.

In the Netherlands, we observed a significantly different local discourse for receiving non-EU migrants. National-level migration policies oblige local governments to actively develop local strategies to accommodate asylum seekers, refugees and recognised refugees. As such, local governments must develop tailored policies, although the top-down nature of this obligation leaves little room for upward adaptation. In the studied cases, we noted the development of a local discourse that goes beyond the implementation of national demands. Both Dutch cases, however, are exceptional in their positive and utilitarian approach to the migration debate. Whereas Miellet (2022) found that migrant reception is often framed in a neutral way—‘an administrative duty vis-à-vis state others’—our cases show an alternative perspective, not through denying national-level constraints but through the local coupling of integration and liveability issues. In contrast to a silenced migration discourse in Poland, we found that in the Dutch case, international migration is framed as a way to deal with shrinkage (see also Küpper et al., 2018; Whyte et al., 2019).

Secondly, spaces of decoupling go hand in hand with local agenda setting. In both countries, local governments lack the capacity (and local demand) for more differentiated policies. In the Netherlands, local governments engage in multiple regional partnerships and play an active role in migration governance. Yet, the top-down allocation of asylum seekers, refugees and recognised refugees is also considered a challenge. For migration to contribute to local economic development, or simply to maintain social infrastructures, municipalities stress better matching to the carrying capacity and economic structures of the region. In Poland, migration governance is the additional outcome of more generic welfare policies. In this latter case, we recognise mainstreaming ‘by accident’ (Józwiak et al., 2018). The indifference towards migrants at both the national and local levels stems from a political strategy but is partly—and unintentionally—compensated for through integration activities that are focused on economic and social participation. This accidental mainstreaming of welfare policies, however, implies that local and national governments can refrain from explicit problem-framing and opt for a silenced migration discourse (Schröter, 2013).

Beyond the municipalities, other locally operating state and non-state actors draw up their own agendas for the arrival and settlement of migrant newcomers. This is partly an outcome of the decentralisation of policymaking. We observed the presence of a large network of non-governmental actors with their own agendas, missions and ambitions. In both countries, non-state actors play an active role in enabling and stimulating migrant integration through activities focused on guidance and support in finding jobs and developing labour skills, empowering women and community building, through either sports or artistic activities or other activities directed at social and economic participation.

Thirdly, looking at the last aspect of decoupling—namely the interactions between state and non-state actors—we notice that self-governing networks have partly taken over the responsibility for creating welcoming spaces in shrinking peripheral areas. In the Netherlands, some initiatives collaborate with the municipality, but many more have been set up independently. In the Polish case, the absence of official local migration policies has led to a vacuum wherein NGOs operate entirely on their own. Similar to what Campomori and Ambrosini (2020) found in their research, the implementation capacity, and to some extent, the willingness of the municipalities is insufficient to realise proper arrival and settlement infrastructures. These NGOs have formed alternative local governance networks to support processes of migrant participation. As demonstrated in the results section, however, they could not escape from enforced decoupling by the Polish national government as their EU funding was suspended.

Furthermore, processes of teaming up—through forming regional partnerships—have been explicated before, especially in the urban context (Heimann et al., 2019; Oomen, 2020). We also identified such processes in our cases; but in diverging forms, the cases in the Netherlands demonstrated interactions and coordination between a large range of locally and regionally operating stakeholders, while in Poland, practices of teaming up were much more restricted and were confined within municipal boundaries and often excluded municipal governments. As such, we observed a shift from absolute decoupling towards more localist types

of governance (Scholten, 2018). Localities in the Netherlands and Poland have little power to influence the agenda at the national level. However, especially in the Netherlands, we see practices occurring where regional agenda setting contributes to a stronger position of communities in shrinking peripheral areas, especially with regards to increasing funding sources for the region and thus at the municipal level.

Where other researchers have explained these local–regional interactions as outcomes of the institutional and organisational setting (Camponori & Ambrosini, 2020; Jones & Hely, 2016), we highlight the geographical setting as an additional explanatory factor. The proximity and spread of urban centres—and the accompanying centralisation of social services and organisations—determines both the need for certain actors to cooperate or develop more localised initiatives and the likelihood that they will do so (see also Gieling et al., 2019). In Poland, distances between urban centres are larger, but settlements are less scattered within the region, with low population densities in surrounding rural areas as a result. In the Netherlands, rural areas have relatively high population densities, distributed over many smaller and larger settlements. Within these settlements, additional activities supporting migrant participation are developed, especially by local volunteer groups.

In line with what Camponori and Ambrosini (2020) noted about the involvement of different non-state actors, volunteering activities in the Dutch case and informal activities organised by NGOs in the Polish case turned out to be an important part of this last space of decoupling. In the Netherlands, we found that local citizens also regard it as their sociocultural duty to take care of their new neighbours (or *naobers*). This kind of active citizenship—also framed as good *naoberschap*—historically provided a socioeconomic safety net and is often promoted as an important pillar or regional identity in the north-eastern parts of the Netherlands (see also Meijer & van der Krabben, 2018). Moreover, in Berkelland, we see that traditional solidarity has also become part of the municipal integration policy to stimulate volunteering—by being a good neighbour—while in Het Hogeland volunteering is seen to realise cultural and social exchanges in the community.

Conclusion

This paper provides further insight into the local turn of migration governance by offering an alternative view from European peripheral and shrinking areas. In our research, we explored different spaces of decoupling to better understand the tension between national and local approaches to migration governance, and more specifically how local governments deal with the arrival and settlement of non-EU migrants. Theoretically, we built on the work of Scholten et al. (2018) on different types of migration governance. Here, we have moved forward in conceptualising the fourth type of governance—namely decoupling—by identifying three spaces in which decoupling mechanisms could be witnessed: the framing of policy problems, local agenda-setting and interactions between state and non-state actors. Through our empirical research in peripheral and shrinking areas in both the Netherlands and Poland, we have further demonstrated the conditions and policy options for dealing with a state of decoupling.

Where other authors (see Garcés-Masareñas & Gebhardt, 2020; Hoekstra et al., 2018 and Scholten, 2016) demonstrated that in urban contexts spaces of decoupling are altered vertically by the efforts of city governments in adapting migration policies at the national level, our findings reveal a horizontal shift, from decoupling to localist governance. As expected, local governments in peripheral areas lack the capacity and momentum to shape the migration debate at the national level. However, by teaming up and forming cross-regional governance networks in the Netherlands, or even realising alternative local governance networks as found in the case of Poland, stakeholders have been able to provide welcoming—albeit incomplete and sometimes temporary—spaces for non-EU migrants in shrinking peripheral areas. Within these networks, the leading efforts of NGOs and volunteers stand out and are even more prominent than in some urban contexts where mayors played a strong role in policy entrepreneurship (Betts et al., 2021; Miellet, 2022; Sabchev, 2021).

Reflecting on local governance networks for migration in four peripheral municipalities in the Netherlands and Poland, we look back at our initial research question—In what way can we overcome this national and local tension in policymaking and create welcoming spaces? In our study, we identified diverse attempts by local actors to overcome the policy and political divide while tying in local interests. Therefore, migration policies are not solely focused on migrant newcomers but are often part of regional strategies to consolidate economic development and stimulate social cohesion to improve overall liveability.

In sum, the following conditions are crucial for creating welcoming spaces and overcoming national–local tensions. First, the careful matching of migrant capacities and local labour markets. In both case studies, economic decline plays a crucial role in local policymaking. Following the example of Berkelland, stimulating economic development and improving regional liveability can go hand in hand with focusing on employment opportunities for migrant newcomers. Secondly, stable rather than ad hoc financing is needed for both governmental and non-governmental organisations to guarantee the full operational power of the actors at the local level. Both state and non-state actors are involved in one way or another in migrant integration activities. Thirdly, stimulating and valuing local, mostly volunteering initiatives and embedding them in the local community and local policymaking practices. Fourthly, it is crucial to couple integration policies with strategies for all inhabitants, and in particular, for other vulnerable groups in society and the local socioeconomic interests of a community.

For all strategies, however, proportionality is key; the socioeconomic position of shrinking peripheries is precarious due to a lack of organisational capacity and the challenge of maintaining social cohesion at the local level while addressing issues of decline. Moreover, tensions at different governance levels—especially between the national and the local level—need to be addressed. Some migration governance practices might be reconsidered while others are too deeply embedded in national or local policies and cannot be changed that easily and need further dialogue.

Finally, the performance of welcoming spaces in this paper is approached from a local and governance perspective. We understand this perspective largely leaves out how migrant newcomers perceive shrinking peripheral areas as welcoming spaces while they are often at the receiving end of active citizen participation (Glick Schiller et al., 2016; Darling, 2018). This perspective, however, could and should be the topic of future research.

Acknowledgements Our researchers conducted some of the fieldwork as part of our EU-funded H2020 Welcoming Spaces project (call H2020-SC6-Migration-2019, under grant agreement 870952). Special thanks to Jana Finke, Hannah Wassbauer and Justyna Szałańska for their contribution to the fieldwork.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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