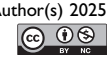
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Local Turn Through International Networking: Istanbul's Migration City Diplomacy

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Pelin Kılınçarslan[1] **and Birce Altıok**[1]

Abstract

This paper explores how the local turn in migration governance is facilitated through city diplomacy and international networks within highly centralized political systems. Drawing on interviews with municipal representatives, NGOs, and experts in Istanbul, Turkey, it focuses on the drivers behind the city's increasing international engagement in urban migration governance. This article shows that municipalities and local NGOs are increasingly turning to external networks in response to administrative, financial, and political challenges at the domestic level. It introduces the concept of "maneuvering practicality" as a dual-purpose city diplomacy approach that explains how international networking enables city-level actors to balance immediate pragmatic needs with strategic autonomy-building within centralized governance structures. While the recognition of "cities as international actors" has been growing, its implications for urban migration governance, especially in highly centralized contexts, have received relatively less attention both theoretically and empirically. By framing international city diplomacy as both a counterbalancing tool and a resilience mechanism in migration governance, this paper contributes to the emerging scholarship on migration city diplomacy within international relations, urban studies, and migration studies.

Keywords

city diplomacy, local turn, urban resilience, migration governance, Istanbul

[1]Migration Research Center at Koç University (MiReKoc), Istanbul, Türkiye

Corresponding Author:
Pelin Kılınçarslan, Migration Research Center at Koç University (MiReKoc), Rumelifeneri Yolu, 34450, Sarıyer, Istanbul, Türkiye.
Email: pekilincarslan@ku.edu.tr

Introduction

In the context of global migration and the challenges of centralized governance systems, this article offers a novel perspective on city diplomacy, reinterpreting it as a strategic tool for local governments to navigate administrative, financial and political constraints. Unlike conventional approaches that primarily examine cities' relationships with international organizations (van der Pluijm and Melissen 2007), this study positions city diplomacy as a mechanism for maneuvering practicality, a dual-purpose strategy that addresses immediate governance needs while creating autonomy-generating spaces within restrictive systems. Through this lens, the article explores how Istanbul leverages international networks and diplomatic activities to counterbalance the pressures of Turkey's centralized governance structure, particularly in the domain of urban migration governance.

Using Istanbul as a case study,[1] this research addresses two key questions: how local actors perceive and utilize international networks to manage migration governance, and what drives the city's expanding international activities. Istanbul's approach demonstrates how cities adapt to systemic pressures, using international engagement not only to enhance local capacities but also to strategically assert autonomy within a multilevel governance framework. In relation to these questions, two caveats should be noted. First, the aim of this article is not to idealize city diplomacy as a form of migration governance. Any such governance must be understood in context, particularly in terms of the conditions under which it operates, such as current neoliberal governance frameworks. Second, the analysis of the Istanbul case seeks to explore the dynamics driving local governments and actors to engage internationally (how these efforts are perceived and practiced, and what motivates them) rather than to assess their concrete policy outcomes.

The theoretical foundation of this study bridges the "local turn" in migration studies and resilience theory. The local turn addresses the increasing role of cities in migration governance, shifting attention from national to local actors in shaping integration and governance policies (Caponio and Borkert 2010; Jørgensen 2012; Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, and Scholten 2017). However, in Istanbul's case, resilience becomes critical as city diplomacy functions as both a means of adaptation and resistance to centralized constraints. This approach aligns with Lacroix and Spencer's (2022) view of cities as "agents of change," capable of leveraging international engagement to navigate challenges in areas such as migration, climate change, and economic development (Andonova, Betsill, and Bulkeley 2009; Thouez 2020).

City diplomacy, as defined by van der Pluijm and Melissen (2007), involves cities engaging with international actors to represent their interests and address shared challenges. While city diplomacy is often seen as a means to enhance global standing, this study redefines it within the context of Istanbul as a counterbalancing tool to expand governance capacities amidst domestic limitations. By fostering international partnerships and accessing global networks, Istanbul's local government navigates the

interplay between national constraints and global opportunities, using diplomacy to shape migration governance at both levels.

This article contributes to the growing discourse on migration governance, urban politics, and multilevel governance by emphasizing how city diplomacy serves as both a pragmatic tool for addressing migration challenges and a transformative strategy for negotiating local autonomy. It introduces the concept of maneuvering practicality to capture the ways in which cities strategically adapt to structural constraints, integrating new actors and leveraging diplomatic tools to rebalance governance dynamics. As the Istanbul case shows, they pursue pragmatic forms of city diplomacy, not always rooted in structured networks or overt political opposition, but rather shaped by a complex interplay of financial constraints, governance gaps, and institutional ambiguities. As such, it exemplifies hybrid modes of engagement, where international collaboration becomes a tool for navigating domestic constraints rather than a straightforward exercise in global advocacy.

The article proceeds by situating the study within existing literature on migration governance, city diplomacy, and resilience. It seeks to develop a theoretical framework that integrates insights from urban studies, international relations, and migration governance to frame city diplomacy as a dual-purpose mechanism for maneuvering within constraints. Istanbul is then introduced as a case study to examine how local governments and actors use international engagement to navigate administrative, political, and financial challenges. The empirical section presents findings from interviews with municipalities, NGOs, and experts, exploring perceptions of migration governance and the drivers of Istanbul's international activities. The analysis shows how city diplomacy fosters a "local turn," balancing domestic constraints with international opportunities.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework: Migration Governance Through the Lens of City Diplomacy

The growing recognition of cities as key actors in migration governance marks a shift from earlier state-centric approaches, highlighting their role across local, national, and transnational levels (Stürner-Siovitz 2022). Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on city networks, as collaborative platforms through which municipalities engage in translocal cooperation, knowledge exchange, and advocacy to address shared urban challenges, including migration governance, and analyzed their roles in multilevel governance structures, their influence on both horizontal and vertical policymaking processes, and their potential to elevate cities as international agents in global migration governance (Caponio 2018, 2022; Lacroix 2022; Lacroix and Spencer 2022; Oomen 2020; Stürner and Bendel 2019). These networks often operate as platforms for knowledge exchange, collaboration and international positioning on a global stage.

However, the forms and functions of these city networks vary considerably across contexts and the degree of alignment with multilevel governance principles (Caponio

2019; Stürner-Siovitz and Heimann, 2023). In the literature, two key trends are evident for city networks: comparative studies, whether transnational or country-specific, and generalizing frameworks those aim to explain the increasing role of cities in migration governance and their engagement in city networks. Generalizing analyses often highlight regional distinctions. For example, Lacroix (2022) notes that in the United States, city networks typically emerge through alliances with civil society organizations around politically sensitive themes such as sanctuary or welcoming policies, whereas in Europe, city networks tend to operate within formal national and EU governance frameworks, emphasizing structured collaboration over independent municipal agendas. Similarly, Caponio and Pettrachin (2023), in their comparative study of EU and US city networks, argue that these networks function as political actors, adapting their strategies to navigate multilevel political environments. They emphasize the importance of political context in shaping how cities tailor their diplomatic strategies within institutional constraints.

Focusing solely on city networks, however, risks overlooking broader city-led strategies and challenges. Cities are increasingly viewed as both implementers of national migration policies and autonomous actors capable of shaping international agendas (Caponio and Jones-Correa 2018; Scholten and Penninx 2016), yet the forms of municipal engagement vary considerably. Cities often tailor governance practices to their unique socio-political contexts, reflecting broader migration policy adaptation trends (Hoekstra, Kohlbacher, and Rauhut 2019). As Triviño-Salazar (2023) and Hoekstra, Kohlbacher, and Rauhut (2019) suggest, city governance practices often diverge due to local political and institutional environments. Oomen et al. (2021) introduce the notion of "discretionary spaces" in national migration law, identifying four strategies (defiance, dodging, deviation, and dilution) that cities employ to assert autonomy under legal ambiguity. These findings identify the importance of municipal engagement shaped by local contexts and diverge in form and impact.

Rather than treating city networks as ends in themselves, this study views them as instruments within a wider strategic repertoire captured by the concept of city diplomacy. Taking city networks as just one tool of city diplomacy (Acuto, Morissette, and Tsouros 2017), city diplomacy refers to "the institutions and processes by which cities, or local governments in general, engage in relations with actors on an international political stage with the aim of representing themselves and their interests" (van der Pluijm and Melissen 2007, 6).[2] Today's city diplomacy spans various activities, including business, culture, environment, peace, security, human rights, migration, and development (Balbim 2016, 138; Marchetti 2021, 69; van der Pluijm and Melissen 2007, 19). It involves actors such as mayors, municipal officials, NGOs, business organizations, and educational institutions (Marchetti 2021, 60). Cities employ tools like bilateral or multilateral agreements, projects, networks, events, and advocacy campaigns (Kihlgren Grandi 2020, 10–21). City networks, such as Eurocities, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), and C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, play a significant role in facilitating these engagements (Curtis and Acuto 2018, 11; Caponio and Pettrachin 2023). Therefore, beyond its traditional focus on advocacy,

city diplomacy now includes leveraging international networks to access resources, share best practices, and foster policy innovation (Acuto, Morissette, and Tsouros 2017). City diplomacy, therefore, represents a more comprehensive approach to international engagement, encompassing various strategies and interactions beyond network participation. Given the diversity in today's expanded landscape of city diplomacy, and in line with Amiri and Sevin (2020, 3), this article uses the term city diplomacy as an "umbrella term," recognizing that the terminology used to describe the international activities of cities can vary, as cities have different ways of internationalizing themselves. In fact, Istanbul's official municipal discourse defines city diplomacy to include multiple forms of international networking, not only city-to-city relations, but also participation in city networks, international partnerships, agreements, and donor-funded projects (IMM FRD 2025). In this way, cities assert their agency on the global stage with various strategies, often filling gaps left by national governments.

The literature emphasizes on this by considering the transformative potential of city diplomacy which lies in its ability to advance local autonomy and address migration challenges within centralized governance systems. Migration and integration are increasingly recognized as multilevel policy issues involving diverse actors and different levels of government (Zincone and Caponio 2006). The "local turn" debate in migration studies draws attention to the role of local authorities, civil society organizations, and immigrant networks in governance (Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, and Scholten 2017, 3). However, cities often face financial constraints and limited autonomy (Lacroix 2022, 1038), particularly in centralized systems like Turkey (Karakaya Polat and Lowndes 2022). Despite these challenges, cities such as Istanbul have become significant actors in migration governance, balancing local needs with international engagements and leveraging city networks to advocate for better integration policies (Özçürümez and İçduygu 2020). Unlike traditional migration management models, which often place cities in subordinate roles, city diplomacy empowers local governments to act as strategic agents (Acuto, Morissette, and Tsouros 2017). By integrating elements of advocacy, resource acquisition, and policy adaptation, city diplomacy bridges the gaps between national and local governance while also engaging with international frameworks (Kihlgren Grandi 2020). The "local turn" in migration studies complements this approach by emphasizing the growing role of cities in shaping migration policies and integration strategies (Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, and Scholten 2017). Scholten and Penninx (2016) describe multilevel governance frameworks as enabling cities to mediate between national priorities and local needs, particularly in migration governance. However, in centralized systems, cities often face barriers such as financial constraints, limited legal autonomy, and political resistance, which necessitate innovative approaches to governance (Adamson 2022; Özçürümez and Hoxha 2023).

This perspective is especially relevant in centralized systems like Turkey, where cities face legal and financial constraints. In the case of Istanbul, international engagement is less about institutionalized networking and more about navigating national

constraints. A closer analysis is therefore needed to understand the nature and depth of some cities' involvement in city networks, without reducing the analysis to city networks alone. On the contrary, concepts such as city diplomacy and urban resilience offer more precise analytical tools for capturing the dynamics of cities that do not align closely with established models. These frameworks allow for a deeper understanding of how cities navigate constraints, pursue autonomy, and shape migration governance beyond the bounds of formalized multilevel systems.

To articulate this strategy, this study introduces the concept of "maneuvering practicality." This term captures how cities adapt, innovate, and balance domestic and international pressures to expand their governance capacity. Maneuvering practicality builds on the principles of multilevel governance, which highlight the diffusion of authority across levels of government, and aligns with urban resilience theory, which emphasizes adaptive responses to systemic pressures (Zapata-Barrero 2023a). As documented in other studies, the central-local dynamic simultaneously creates opportunities and imposes limitations (Karakaya Polat and Lowndes 2022). Although city diplomacy is often perceived as an externally driven or exogenous phenomenon, this study highlights its deeply rooted, endogenous character which emerged directly from the structural tensions and power asymmetries between central and local governments. Maneuvering practicality, therefore, illustrates how cities adapt, innovate, and balance domestic and international pressures to enhance their governance capabilities, navigating the complexities of centralized systems. This reconceptualization aligns with the multilevel governance framework, which emphasizes the diffusion of authority across local, national, and international levels, recognizing cities as active participants in governance (Scholten and Penninx 2016).

In the case of Istanbul, city diplomacy acts as a mechanism of maneuvering practicality. Rather than solely acting as implementers of national policies, Istanbul uses diplomacy to create a space for action within a multilevel framework, balancing the pressures of central government oversight with opportunities for international collaboration. In this context, city diplomacy functions as both a means of governance and a strategy to recalibrate power dynamics and urban migration within the multilevel system. However, the contribution of this study lies in uncovering the intricate interplay between central and local dynamics, which significantly shapes the urban migration governance framework. Drawing on multilevel governance theory, this study presents how authority is distributed across governance levels, enabling cities like Istanbul to mediate between national policies and local realities. Additionally, resilience theory complements this analysis by emphasizing the adaptive strategies cities employ to navigate systemic pressures, such as leveraging international partnerships to address migration challenges (Zapata-Barrero 2023a). In the context of migration governance, urban resilience may evolve in their ability of cities to manage the complexities of migration flows, integrate newcomers, and/or navigate the political and institutional challenges that may arise.

The concept of maneuvering practicality also captures the dual nature of city diplomacy: addressing immediate needs, such as securing funding and expertise,

while strategically building governance capacity to counterbalance the limitations imposed by national structures. This maneuvering is not merely reactive but proactive, enabling Istanbul to integrate new actors, access international resources, and redefine its role in migration governance. Therefore, Istanbul's approach reveals the dual purpose of city diplomacy. On the one hand, it is pragmatic, addressing immediate governance needs such as funding and service delivery. On the other, it is strategic, creating a platform for autonomy-building and navigating domestic political tensions.

In this context, the case of Istanbul presents how cities can navigate the constraints of centralized systems by strategically leveraging international engagement to expand their governance capabilities. This approach redefines city diplomacy as both a pragmatic tool for addressing immediate challenges and a strategic mechanism for creating autonomy within complex political environments. The findings underscore the transformative potential of city diplomacy while pointing to the need for long-term strategies to ensure its sustainability and impact.

The Case of Istanbul: Local Actors' International Networking in Migration Governance

This paper draws on fieldwork conducted in Istanbul by the authors, together with project researchers, involving 15 semi-structured interviews with local actors between October 2023 and January 2024.[3] These local actors included 7 municipal staff (5 from the metropolitan municipality and 2 from district municipalities), 4 experts and academics, and 4 NGO workers (3 from local organizations and 1 from an international organization). The interviews were conducted in Turkish and took place at the participants' affiliated institutions, such as municipal offices located in various districts across Istanbul. If a participant could not attend in person, interviews were conducted online. Each interview lasted 1–2 hours and was either voice-recorded or documented with handwritten notes, depending on the participant's consent. The interview questions aimed to explore the perspectives of local actors, focusing on urban migration dynamics, migration governance, experiences in city diplomacy, and the challenges and opportunities they face in pursuing autonomy in migration governance.

Turkey, and in particular Istanbul, are key contexts for both migration and governance dynamics. As of October 2023, Turkey hosts about 4.7 million foreign nationals, including 1.1 million with residence permits and 3.5 million seeking international protection, of whom 3.3 million are Syrians under temporary protection (PMM 2023). While Turkey hosts one of the largest refugee populations globally, Istanbul has the highest number of international migrants in the country (1.7 million in 2019), comprising Syrian, Afghan, Uzbek, Turkmen, and Pakistani nationals (IOM 2019; PMM 2023). As migrants concentrate in cities, Turkey has become a focal point in discussions about the role of local governments and actors in migration and integration governance (Erdoğan 2017; Erdoğan, Şener, and Ağca 2021; Kale and Erdoğan 2019;

Karakaya Polat and Lowndes 2022; Kılıçaslan 2016; Kurtuluş, Yükseker, and Erdoğan 2022; Lowndes and Karakaya Polat 2022; Sunata and Tosun 2019; Şener 2024; Üstübici 2022; Yükseker 2021). Existing research indicates that ambiguity surrounding national policies and legal competencies, along with growing public hostility toward refugees, has hindered the development of systematic urban migration governance, leading to varied responses from local authorities.

Currently, Turkey's urban migration governance faces two main challenges: the legal framework (administrative and financial resources) and political tensions between local and central authorities. Migration policy is set nationally under Law No. 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP 2013), which established the Presidency of Migration Management (PMM) under the Ministry of Interior. Implementation occurs largely at the local level through various actors, including municipalities, but there is no unified legal framework defining local governments' responsibilities (Yükseker 2021). Municipal Law No. 5393, Article 13, recognizes municipal roles in fostering social and cultural ties among "fellow citizens," a term variably interpreted to include migrants (Erdoğan, Şener, and Ağca 2021, 78). However, municipal funding is based solely on the number of officially registered residents, limiting the resources available to serve most migrants.

Furthermore, political tensions are frequent, especially in Istanbul, Turkey's largest and capital-rich city, where governance is divided between the center-right ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) and the center-left opposition CHP (Republican People's Party). Since 2019, the CHP has led the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IMM), marking a historic political shift since 1984; yet the IMM council remains divided between two political parties, complicating decision-making. Istanbul has 39 district municipalities and one metropolitan municipality overseeing them, with 26 districts governed by CHP mayors, 13 by AKP mayors, and the metropolitan mayor also from the CHP (IMM Open Data Portal 2024).

Constrained by administrative and financial limitations and political tensions on the one hand, and pressing urban challenges of migration on the other, Istanbul offers a significant context to explore city international networking as a strategy to overcome domestic barriers. It is in this recent context that the term "city diplomacy" has entered Istanbul's municipal discourse. The IMM's Department for Foreign Relations features a dedicated "City Diplomacy" section on its website, showcasing participation in international networks, sister city and partnership agreements, MoUs, and donor-funded projects (IMM FRD 2025). In its definition of city diplomacy, IMM frames cities as key actors with "important responsibilities as both the source and solution points of global problems," including migration, climate change, and public health (IMM FRD 2025). Its membership spans international networks such as EUROCITIES, METROPOLIS, UCLG, C40, AMF, and B40, some of which include migration-focused initiatives. The mayor has also drawn international attention for speeches on refugee issues, including a 2021 cooperation memorandum with UNHCR and a 2024 critique of EU policies at

the Council of Europe, where he called for stronger global cooperation (Cumhuriyet 2021; TBB 2024).

Increasing International Networks: City Diplomacy as the Cornerstone of Migration Governance

Before the 2019 local elections, Istanbul's migration governance landscape was marked by successful yet ad hoc initiatives led by certain district municipalities such as Sultanbeyli, Zeytinburnu, and Şişli, where active collaboration with local and international actors took place (Yanar and Erkut 2020). In contrast, IMM adopted a limited role in migration governance during this period. This was largely due to the alignment between the metropolitan and national governments, which led to migration-related responsibilities being delegated to national authorities and other state institutions. The centralized nature of governance discouraged direct municipal involvement in this area. However, following the 2019 local elections, when the main opposition party won the IMM after decades, one of the municipality's key objectives became engaging in city diplomacy on thematic issues such as climate change and migration. IMM now identifies "leading efforts to establish national policies on refugees" as one of its main policy priorities (IMM 2023, 23).

Following the 2019 power shift, IMM launched the Migration and Social Cohesion Action Plan (2020–2024) as a strategic framework to advance inclusive, participatory, and rights-based migration governance. Developed through collaboration with district municipalities, international organizations, NGOs, and academic experts, the plan set out four core objectives: enhancing coordination, building institutional capacity, improving data collection and research, and fostering social cohesion. To implement the strategy, IMM established a dedicated Migration Unit under the Directorate of Social Services, with support from UNHCR (MSCAP 2019). The goal was to set clear priorities to improve refugee and migrant access to municipal services and to enhance the quality of those services, despite the challenges posed by Turkey's centralized administrative system and the lack of state funding specifically allocated for refugee services at the municipal level. This included securing external financial and technical assistance to expand municipal service capacity. As Yavuz Saltık, Head of IMM's Social Services Department, noted: "As IMM, we do not have a defined budget for direct spending on migrants. In addition, our partners such as UNHCR and ILO provide technical support to IMM within the scope of the projects we carry out. We carry out the projects we initiate for refugees and migrants by developing external resources and receiving in-kind support" (Demiriz 2022).

The initial momentum behind the Action Plan and the Migration Unit at IMM began to wane due to implementation challenges, declining interest caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and political sensitivities surrounding migration, which often lead local authorities to act cautiously. However, the Action Plan was developed in collaboration with international actors who were notably critical of Turkey's centralized

administrative system and the lack of coordination and financial support from national authorities. In this regard, the Migration and Social Cohesion Action Plan remains a significant case illustrating the intersection of city diplomacy and urban resilience. IMM's efforts to mobilize international partnerships, such as with UNHCR, and to establish institutional mechanisms like the Migration Unit reflect a diplomatic engagement that extends beyond the nation-state and seeks alternative governance tools. Simultaneously, the plan embodies urban resilience by addressing systemic challenges such as legal uncertainty, limited resources, and social tensions through adaptive and participatory approaches. While its outcomes were limited, the Action Plan represented an important step toward strengthening IMM's autonomy and capacity to formulate inclusive urban migration policies in a constrained political environment.

To understand how this strategy translated into practice, our interviews shed light on how city diplomacy unfolds through IMM's international engagements and collaborations. The interviews conducted also complement the plan, showing that Istanbul's current international engagement involves bilateral and multilateral relationships with cities in Europe and the Global South, as well as various international organizations, civil social organizations, and universities. Additionally, although the term "city diplomacy" is relatively new in Turkey's governance discourse, all the interviewees were familiar with the term and its related activities. Behind this familiarity, one of the most pronounced views was that nation-state-centered approaches are increasingly limited, as migration is a global phenomenon requiring multilevel interventions. In the narratives, cities were positioned as central actors, with both greater exposure to migration flows and better prospects for developing solutions. Therefore, in all the interviews, there was a strong belief in the structural necessity for cities to engage at the international level. As one municipal staff member explained:

> Diplomacy among cities is now the cornerstone of this matter (governance)… We are compelled to establish relationships between cities and supranational or international actors at this point. We need what we call "multilevel governance." It seems like there is no alternative to collaboration among multilevel stakeholders because struggles and collaborations at the national level can only take us to a certain point. (Interview 3)

Exchanging best practices on the international stage was a primary goal behind the networking efforts. Another metropolitan municipal staff member working in the migration department provides some examples of their current international engagements:

> We have developed a distinct field of activity for Istanbul's needs by implementing international best practices in our municipality and blending the good examples from our municipality and Turkey. We have developed an action plan. Here, we specifically collaborate with international organizations. Particularly, we have very close relations with the Berlin Municipality. Since 2020, we have been holding monthly meetings with Berlin Municipality's Department for Migration and Integration, and they will even visit us within

> this month. Besides that, we also collaborate with Swedish municipalities in the fields of migration and integration. Due to the strong presence of civil society and migration initiatives in Sweden, we work jointly with their municipalities, aiming to amalgamate examples from community centers there with our own examples here. In these international partnerships, of course, we work alongside organizations such as UNHCR and ILO on project-based initiatives. (Interview 8)

During discussions about the city's international engagements, the interviewees often underlined Istanbul's unique significance due to its distinct migration dynamics. They believed that these dynamics could serve as a guiding example for other cities worldwide. As one metropolitan municipality representative stated, "You're doing wonderful things here, but the next step is to spread it globally" (Interview 5). In its international engagements with cities worldwide, the metropolitan municipality also considers geographical and population size affinities, perceiving that these similarities may lead to shared challenges. One such collaboration is the Balkan Cities Network (B-40), where Istanbul aims, in one interviewee's words (Interview 3), to "be a pioneer, share experiences, and establish a more city-oriented approach concerning matters within its own geography."

Another example is the first Megacities Summit held in Istanbul in 2023, jointly organized by IMM, Metropolis, and the World Association of Major Metropolises. By inviting high-level officials, such as mayors from megacities including Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Dhaka, Ho Chi Minh City, Lahore, and São Paulo, IMM sought to exchange experiences with large cities whose contexts differ from those of most European cities. This event not only signaled Istanbul's growing ambition to position itself as a global city actor but also revealed a broader structural challenge: the financing gap in urban governance. One of the key themes discussed at the summit was the urgent need for innovative financing models for megacities, especially those operating under constrained national systems. As emphasized in the summit documents, megacities play a crucial role in steering investments toward greener, more inclusive economies, but they often lack the financial autonomy and instruments necessary to act at scale (Megacities Summit 2025). To address this, the Global Commission for Urban SDG Finance, launched in June 2023 and co-led by Nobel Laureate Jeffrey Sachs, Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo, and Rio de Janeiro Mayor Eduardo Paes, aims to create mechanisms that enhance cities' direct access to international funding channels. As further discussed in the next section, this initiative reflects a key aspiration echoed in Istanbul's own diplomacy efforts: to reduce dependence on central government allocations and instead build urban financial resilience through transnational collaboration and visibility.

As these examples show, Istanbul's growing international engagement was supported by critiques of nation-state centrism, recognition of cities as primary actors, the exchange of best practices, increasing its financial autonomy and Istanbul's unique migration patterns, which could contribute to international migration policymaking. This recent process has enabled Istanbul to expand its international networks and

reframe its role in urban migration governance, forming one aspect of the dual-purpose city diplomacy defined in this study. In this way, the city presents itself beyond national boundaries, and expands its space for autonomy-building in urban policy, both regionally and internationally. The second purpose of the city diplomacy reveals in the intensified domestic challenges that municipalities and local NGOs are strategically seeking to navigate. As explained below, these challenges include, first, the legal framework that defines the administrative and financial capacities of municipalities, and second, the political tensions between local and central government bodies, which affect the management of migration in cities.

International Networking as a Response to Administrative and Financial Constraints

As explained earlier, Turkey's Municipal Law No. 5393, Article 13, affirms that "everyone is a fellow citizen of the municipality in which they reside." However, Article 14 restricts municipal responsibilities solely to Turkish citizens. This legal ambiguity serves both as an opportunity for municipalities to address migrants within the city's administrative area and an obstacle if the law is interpreted differently. This law also governs the financial resources allocated by the central government to municipalities, which are calculated based on the number of officially registered residents in each administrative area. Consequently, this system excludes a significant portion of the migrant population. Therefore, Istanbul's municipalities face financial difficulties in delivering services and developing strategies for migrants within their jurisdictions, as the metropolitan municipality staff member explained below:

> One of the greatest barriers for our municipalities in conducting work on migration is legislation. The funds transferred from the central government are targeted towards Turkish citizens, so we are unable to provide services for migrants from this budget. Therefore, we have to secure our budget through external sources, meaning international organizations. This involves a continuous search for funding, writing projects, and carrying out our work through annual projects… To directly deliver services to migrants, we constantly have to write projects. (Interview 8)

International grants hold particular significance for municipalities, serving as both a means to supplement the limited financial resources allocated from the central government and as an avenue for participation in city diplomacy. This holds true for NGOs as well, leveraging international grants for their projects, as explained by an NGO member: "We are unable to provide funding at the national level, and frankly, we don't have such an intention. Because it's both challenging and a process that isn't easily sustainable… I can say that the majority, 90%, 95% (of projects), are funded internationally" (Interview 12). International funding has become a key resource for both municipalities and local NGOs in providing refugee integration

services, including food aid, psychosocial support, language courses, legal advice, and guidance on accessing health care and other public services. As one municipal staff member also explained:

> Local governments have never had, nor do they currently have, a dedicated budget for this purpose (for migrant services). Nowhere in the municipal law have we ever clearly seen anything like: "the municipality must provide health support or health-related services to these individuals (migrants)." These services entered our lives entirely as a result of international collaborations. (Interview 3)

IMM has strategically engaged in international partnerships to overcome structural limitations in funding and legal authority. According to the IMM's Department for Foreign Relations, the municipality participates in numerous EU-supported and transatlantic projects on topics such as urban mobility, digital transformation, climate adaptation, and social inclusion, enabling access to external funding and technical expertise otherwise unavailable through national allocations (IMM FRD 2025). In parallel, IMM maintains formal relationships with a wide range of international organizations and city networks, including sister city arrangements, UN agencies, and global municipal associations, often formalized through memoranda of understanding or project-based collaboration (IMM FRD 2025). IMM explicitly states that they "aim to make maximum use of city diplomacy, which has begun to gain increasing importance and influence by closely following regional and global developments" (IMM FRD 2025). These initiatives are not only financial lifelines but also tools of diplomatic visibility and institutional learning. In this way, IMM transforms its administrative and fiscal constraints into strategic entry points for city diplomacy, expanding its capacity to engage in global urban governance while positioning Istanbul as a key node in transnational municipalism.

It is worth emphasizing that from the early 2000s onwards, the relationship between cities and international organizations has evolved significantly, elevating cities to the status of "strategic partners," particularly in domains where intergovernmental cooperation encounters difficulties (Lacroix 2022, 1039). More importantly, this trend of recognizing cities as key actors is tied to the neoliberalization of governance, where state responsibilities are increasingly delegated to local and private actors. However, since political decentralization is not equally accompanied by financial decentralization, cities face challenges in balancing their resources with their responsibilities. In this context, paradoxically, the reduced capacity of cities to intervene effectively at the local level coincides with their expanding presence on the international stage (Lacroix 2022; Lacroix and Spencer 2022).

This dynamic is particularly evident in Turkey, where, as Kaya (2023, 12) argues, the local turn in migration governance has a "neoliberal face," with municipalities increasingly shouldering responsibilities for refugee integration while central state actors gradually retreat from local engagement. A report by the Marmara Municipalities Union (MMU), edited by Şener (2024), points to these challenges by

revealing that 67% of municipalities that do not participate in international events cite insufficient financial resources as the primary reason for non-participation. While international events are critical tools for fostering collaboration and advancing local diplomacy, such financial constraints illustrate the paradoxical nature of cities' expanding international roles amidst constrained local capacities. This tension shows the structural inequalities that cities face as they navigate both local challenges and global opportunities.

International Networking as a Response to Political Tensions

In addition to challenges posed by the legal framework, political tensions between local and central government authorities, particularly when they belong to competing political parties, further complicate coordination and collaboration. These tensions significantly drive the city's international engagement, as local actors increasingly seek to expand their governance capacity through international networks and partnerships. Given Turkey's centralized administrative structure, frequent political tensions arise at the local level, both among district municipalities governed by different political parties and between district municipalities and central government bodies. In the current parliamentary composition, the ruling AKP holds 45% of the seats, while the main opposition CHP holds 22%. Locally, among Istanbul's 39 districts, 26 are governed by CHP mayors, 13 by AKP mayors, and the metropolitan municipality is also led by a CHP mayor. According to local administration law, municipal councils, chaired by the mayor, serve as the main decision-making bodies of municipalities. These councils comprise members from political parties proportional to their representation in local elections. While the AKP long held the majority in Istanbul's metropolitan municipal council, the 2024 local elections resulted in the CHP gaining a majority. Although this shift may facilitate decision-making processes, tensions persist between opposition municipalities and ruling party municipalities, the local government (governorate), and the central government.

Decision-making becomes particularly challenging on topics primarily within the jurisdiction of the central government. One municipal representative described migration as "one of the challenging topics, especially for local administrations, because matters like migration, education, health, and security fall within the realm of central governance" (Interview 1). The same representative further elaborated on the current context, marked by severe tensions between levels of government over Istanbul, as follows:

> Opposition municipalities are seen as rivals, and their services are seen as scores. There's a truly absurd mentality of not acknowledging, "Citizens benefit from this service thanks to the IMM," but rather, "They're providing services to increase votes in a particular area." Regarding migration, due to security concerns, they expressed that no data could be shared for security reasons, and doors were often closed. (Interview 1)

Political tensions not only reflected electoral competition but also signaled the lack of proper coordination and collaboration between local and central governments. As the narrative above shows, data sharing was a major concern, with opposition municipalities in particular noting that they "don't know what kind of data the central government collects specifically for Istanbul and its districts" (Interview 4). Another interviewee from the municipality explained how they have managed to overcome this problem:

> Our main problem is, yes, funding; but another major challenge is data. Due to the lack of transparent communication between the central and local governments, data sharing is not possible. In fact, we urgently need data disaggregated by district and even by neighborhood. We need this data to identify disadvantaged individuals. Without it, we can't develop sound policies or implement grounded, effective programs. So what are we doing about it? We've designed our own data system, again with funds obtained from external sources. (Interview 8)

The same issue applies to miscoordination in migration policymaking, especially regarding the IMM's Migration and Social Cohesion Action Plan (2020–2024), as mentioned earlier. Developed in collaboration with international networks, this plan marked the first time a municipality in Turkey adopted a five-year migration strategy. However, as explained by an opposition municipal representative below, it failed to establish coordination with central government bodies due to political tensions:

> We have a local strategy and integration document, a five-year plan ending in 2024. More than 50 clauses are related to municipalities, but I haven't seen this plan being jointly evaluated, or municipalities sharing their work related to this plan and its monitoring. This, in my opinion, is a significant loss for the central government. (Interview 4)

While CHP municipalities faced constraints due to political tensions, migration and social service units in AKP municipalities were limited by higher levels of government in their ability to communicate with CHP municipalities. An AKP municipal staff member from social services explained that even when CHP municipalities reached out to them, they were bound by their superiors' decisions: "The mayor's office acts more according to institutional identity than the substance of the issue. I think they also have areas they consider their own responsibility. We had a few brief meetings (with CHP municipalities), but honestly, they were not very productive" (Interview 14). In contrast, the same interviewee described coordination between AKP municipalities and central government bodies as "much easier," illustrating this with an example of social assistance to residents, including refugees:

> I have a friend at the district governor's office whom I stay in contact with. I call them, and sometimes they make small home visits, sometimes they don't. The district governor's office provides cash assistance, the municipality sends food packages and household goods. This is

> how we coordinate, but are we working with institutions? No, we are working with individuals. (Interview 14)

The tendency for coordination to occur between *individuals* rather than *institutions*, combined with municipal staff being constrained by their elected superiors' political concerns, has further escalated communication gaps among competing government levels and hindered coordination in migration policy. In some instances, international networks can be catalysts for indirectly creating spaces for communication. An NGO member explained how international donors could facilitate engagement among national and local bodies:

> IOM, GIZ, UNHCR, and similar donors insist on our active engagement and attendance in meetings with public institutions. You know, governorates and district governorships hold various meetings related to migration. They explicitly tell us to attend these meetings, and if we don't, they inquire why we weren't present. After attending, they ask for meeting notes from us, which we share. They want to see which NGOs are working in the field and how we establish relationships with municipalities or public institutions, wanting to understand the strength of our connections. (Interview 12)

Consequently, as discussed under the legal framework and political challenges, Istanbul's "local turn" in migration has been significantly driven by city-level actors, particularly municipalities, resorting increasingly to international networking through diplomacy and international organizations. This strategic move has largely been a response to growing administrative, financial, and political pressures from the central government since 2019, when the opposition party, after decades, managed to win the majority in Istanbul's local governance. In recent decades, the expansion of vertical and horizontal networks within urban migration governance in multi-governance settings has become a growing phenomenon. Cities, constrained by institutional, financial, and legal limitations on one hand, and confronted by pressing global issues on the other, are compelled to enhance their governance capacities by becoming "resilient" and asserting autonomy (Zapata-Barrero 2023b). Furthermore, cities often lack the ability to collect their own taxes, independently set budgets, or deviate from state-level legal frameworks. Consequently, they must balance collaborative, networked efforts with local needs to maintain economic vitality and global competitiveness (Curtis and Acuto 2018, 14). As a result, cities face pressure to attract capital and promote urban prosperity to achieve higher rankings in various indicators (Çağlar and Schiller 2018, 6).

The particularities of Istanbul, however, relate to its push for a local turn through international networking. Hence, its conceptualization as maneuvering practicality, creating autonomy within a centralized system. This process captures the dual nature of city diplomacy: On one hand, it is pragmatic, addressing immediate governance needs such as funding and service delivery, while on the other, it is strategic, building governance capacity to counterbalance the limitations imposed by national structures.

This maneuvering is not merely reactive but proactive, enabling Istanbul to integrate new actors, access international resources, and redefine its role in migration governance. However, it must be noted that existing research reveals that cities involved in international city diplomacy often face obstacles such as limited municipal resources, restricted institutionalized access at the global level, and nationalist resistance from central governments (Davidson et al. 2019, 3546; Stürner-Siovitz 2022, 185). Similar concerns were raised by local actors in Istanbul. These included municipalities' limited expertise in international relations, difficulties in balancing electoral concerns with universal goals, and an increased reliance on project-based agendas funded by international donors, which hinder the development of long-term strategies. Yet the challenges of city diplomacy are beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, the point made here is that the city's local turn through international networking should be viewed more as a pragmatic maneuver to enhance its autonomy in the face of intensified domestic constraints, rather than as the outcome of a consistent, long-term urban migration policy.

Conclusion

In contexts like Turkey, where centralized governance restricts municipal autonomy, city diplomacy offers not only a means to address immediate challenges but also a pathway to reconfigure power dynamics and innovate in migration governance. Ultimately, this study suggests that while city diplomacy empowers Istanbul to act beyond its traditional constraints, the central-local dynamic fundamentally influences how urban migration governance is structured, enacted and re-shaped by continuous interactions. This duality underscores the need to view city diplomacy not as an isolated mechanism but as an integral part of the broader multilevel governance system that defines urban migration policy outcomes. In this context, Istanbul offers a compelling case study to examine how city diplomacy operates within a centralized governance system. This research positions city diplomacy not merely as a tool for international collaboration but as a strategic response to national constraints. By focusing on Istanbul, the study sheds light on how cities balance domestic pressures with global opportunities, contributing to the theoretical discourse on resilience, the local turn, and multilevel governance. This analysis underscores the transformative potential of city diplomacy as a mechanism for advancing local autonomy and addressing migration challenges in centralized systems.

The findings show that while city diplomacy enables local governments to address immediate challenges such as funding, service delivery, and international collaboration, it also serves as a broader strategy for reconfiguring power dynamics in urban migration governance. Istanbul's engagement in city networks and its ability to integrate international resources and practices show how cities can balance local needs with global opportunities, enhancing their governance capacities. However, it must be noted that this article does not aim to frame city diplomacy as an ideal form of migration governance without accounting for context, particularly when long-term

strategies and institutionalized frameworks are lacking. Istanbul's reliance on project-based funding and the politicization of migration governance reflect the ongoing challenges faced by local actors in sustaining meaningful and impactful international engagement. These limitations underscore the need for more sustainable and integrated approaches that strengthen the role of cities as resilient and strategic actors in multi-level governance frameworks.

By bridging insights from migration governance, resilience theory, and city diplomacy, this study contributes to the emerging discourse on the role of cities as international actors. Istanbul's case illustrates the dual nature of city diplomacy as both a pragmatic tool for addressing local challenges and a transformative strategy for enhancing autonomy. Yet, to what extent such a transformative strategy translates into practical, effective outcomes that align with policy objectives remains an open question and can be empirically investigated. Additional future research should also explore the intersections of local and international governance, focusing on how cities can institutionalize their diplomatic efforts to achieve sustainable migration governance in the face of centralized constraints.

ORCID iDs

Pelin Kılınçarslan https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2534-8444
Birce Altıok https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7307-6589

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Notes

1. As of March 2025, Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoğlu and several opposition municipal officials from Istanbul and other cities in Turkey have been arrested through politically contested procedures and removed from office. While this development underscores the broader political tensions discussed in this study, these detentions and removals occurred after the fieldwork and writing of this article and are therefore outside the scope of the study.
2. However, it must be noted that the engagement of substate and nonstate actors in diplomatic affairs has been defined in various terms, including "paradiplomacy" (Tavares 2016), "municipal foreign policy" (Leffel 2018), or "sub-state diplomacy" (Criekemans 2010). The choice

of terminology reflects differing theoretical perspectives on whether cities are seen as mere parallel actors to states or as agents in international affairs (Acuto 2013). This latter scholarship challenges the state-centrism of international relations by addressing cities as global actors with agency (Acuto 2010, 2013; Curtis 2016; Davidson et al. 2019; Kosovac and Pejic 2021).

3. The fieldwork was conducted as part of the European Commission-funded BROAD-ER (Bridging the Migration and Urban Studies Nexus) project. The research in Istanbul was reviewed and approved by Koç University's Ethics Committee. The researchers used networks from their affiliated research center, the Migration Research Center at Koç University, to access initial interviewees and then employed snowball sampling to reach others. To ensure confidentiality, institutional affiliations and names are not disclosed in this study.

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