

The International Alliance of Safe Harbours: When Cities and Civil Society Join Forces

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As the EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum enters application in 2026, a network of 36 European cities and several civil society partners is making the case for a radically different approach — one built on solidarity, municipal agency, and local inclusion.

In 2026, the New Pact on Migration and Asylum becomes operational across the European Union. With mandatory border screening procedures, accelerated asylum processing, and a solidarity mechanism that allows member states to pay their way out of relocating refugees, the Pact cements what critics call a security-first approach to migration governance. For many solidarity cities across Europe, the message is clear: national and EU-level politics have moved further away from their vision of welcoming communities. Against this backdrop, a transnational network continues to argue that cities and civil society should have a stronger say in how migration is governed in Europe. The **International Alliance of Safe Harbours** (IASH) brings together a growing number of municipalities from various European countries in a unique partnership with the **From the Sea to the City** (FS2C) civil society consortium. Together, they represent one of the most distinctive experiments in European migration governance: a deliberate fusion of municipal politics and grassroots activism.

From the Mediterranean to the European Parliament

The story of IASH begins in Palermo. In 2015, the city's then-Mayor Leoluca Orlando published the **Charter of Palermo**, a bold document declaring international human mobility an inalienable right and calling for the abolition of the residence permit. The Charter drew on Palermo's long history as a Mediterranean crossroads — a city shaped by centuries of cultural exchange between Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. Orlando's vision — the freedom of international mobility for migrants — inspired a coalition of civil society organisations: among them the international solidarity movement **Seebrücke**, sea rescue organisations like **Sea-Watch** and **Mediterranea**, and advocacy networks like **Europe Must Act** — to start shaping the **From the Sea to the City** (FS2C) consortium in 2018 through the Palermo Charter Platform Process, resulting in its formal formation in 2020. FS2C set out to connect the dots between rescue at sea, reception on land, and political advocacy at the European level.

The decisive moment came in **June 2021**, when FS2C, together with the cities of Palermo and Potsdam, convened the conference “*From the Sea to the City: A City Conference for a Welcoming Europe.*” There, **33 mayors signed the Palermo Declaration**, founding the **International Alliance of Safe Harbours** (IASH). The Declaration set out five demands: a guaranteed right to asylum without transit zones at external borders, the facilitation of direct municipal refugee admission, direct EU funding for host cities, a binding solidarity mechanism based on fair responsibility-sharing, and legal migration pathways.

Nearly five years later, Orlando sits within the Greens/EFA group as an independent MEP in the **European Parliament**. In September 2025, he co-hosted a high-level IASH advocacy event in Brussels alongside MEPs from the Left (Estrella Galán and Damien Carême) and S&D (Cecilia Strada) groups, organised in collaboration with FS2C. Municipal representatives from 9 countries across Europe (including non-EU municipalities, in arrival, transit, and destination contexts) presented their demands directly to European Commission officials. It was the network’s most institutionally significant moment to date, and a vivid illustration of its scalar ambition: from city halls to the EU institutions in Strasbourg and Brussels.

A civil-municipal tandem

In the growing landscape of European city networks addressing migration, IASH stands out for a structural reason: it was **co-created by civil society and municipal actors** from the outset. This dual composition — where grassroots organisations and local governments are not just allies but co-founders — gives the network a distinctive character that shapes both its activities and its political voice.

FS2C and other civil society actors, together with dedicated municipal officers, provide much of the network’s operational infrastructure: organising conferences and webinars, facilitating knowledge exchange between cities, connecting activists with local administrations, and maintaining the network’s day-to-day activities — often with minimal resources. IASH, in turn, offers the institutional legitimacy that civil society actors alone cannot access: city council resolutions, mayoral signatures, and formal channels to EU decision-makers. As the academic researcher Federico Alagna has argued, this civil-municipal tandem constitutes a genuinely new form of multi-scalar alliance-making in European migration politics.

The division of labour is practical as much as strategic. When IASH secured EU funding through the **Cities4Refugees project** (2022–2024), civil society organisations and participating member cities jointly administered the funds and organised the events — from a conference in Zagreb to major Brussels lobbying events. Another project called Impact Cities (2026–2028) officially started in April and is set to kick off in Athens in July 2026. Because municipal officers in member cities are typically stretched by more urgent responsibilities than transnational networking, civil society partners play an important role in maintaining networking activities and preparing policy positions. This flexible collaboration has proven essential for a network operating with limited resources amid a deteriorating policy environment for rights-based migration governance in Europe.

Growing reach, persistent challenges

Since 2023, the alliance has steadily expanded its activities. A series of conferences — in Zagreb, online, in Brussels, and in Villeurbanne — brought together hundreds of participants from across Europe. The **Villeurbanne Declaration** (November 2023), signed by 21 cities and the French ANVITA network representing over 90 municipalities today, reinforced IASH's founding demands and introduced the concept of a **City-ID card** as a tool for inclusive urban citizenship.

More recently, FS2C has begun **building relationships with organisations in Southeast Europe and the Balkans**. In autumn 2024, the consortium spoke with eight organisations from across Southeast Europe — from Sarajevo and Sofia to Zagreb, Skopje, Belgrade, and Ljubljana, as well as the transnational network No Name Kitchen — to get an overview of the situation of people on the move and the civil society work being carried out on the ground. This outreach responds to shifting migration routes and the impact of the EU Pact's externalisation policies on transit countries — but it also responds to the network's ongoing effort to better represent the diverse realities of the different territories and political agendas.

Other challenges are structural. Cities that declare themselves “safe harbours” face fundamental **legal tensions**: across the EU, municipal and regional governments lack the authority to independently accept refugees — national governments retain control over asylum and residence decisions. IASH membership requires only a city council resolution signing the Palermo Declaration, with no binding policy commitments attached. This keeps the barrier to entry low but also limits the network's concrete impact on the ground.

And yet, the practical and discursive power of solidarity cities should not be underestimated. In a political climate where the dominant migration narrative centres on deterrence, externalisation, and border control, IASH and its member cities insist on a counter-narrative and alternative approaches: cities are ready and willing to welcome people, and local communities have functioning models of inclusive local governance that are shared and diffused across cities.

Reaffirming municipal voices in migration governance

As the EU Pact takes effect, its implementation will play out locally — in the very cities that make up networks like IASH. How border procedures are conducted, how solidarity contributions are distributed, and whether civil society is meaningfully consulted in national implementation plans will determine whether the Pact's promise of “fair and efficient” asylum governance holds up in practice. Early assessments by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) suggest that civil society engagement in implementation planning has been limited in most member states.

A recent policy brief by the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung — co-authored by Moving Cities researchers — calls on solidarity cities to re-activate and amplify their migration policy voice in this pivotal moment. With hundreds of European cities actively supporting

solidarity-based approaches to migration, the potential constituency is vast. But translating municipal goodwill into political leverage at the EU level remains the central challenge.

For IASH, the path forward lies in what it has always done best: bridging the gap between civil society and municipalities, and carrying their shared perspective into European politics. The obstacles are significant — constrained funding, the continued dominance of EU and member state actors over migration governance, and the deterioration of human rights and international law frameworks leave little room for alternative voices. What is clear is that, in a Europe increasingly defined by fortress politics, the alliance offers one of the few spaces where cities and civil society are thinking about migration not as a threat to be managed, but as a shared reality to be governed with solidarity and dignity.

The International Alliance of Safe Harbours (IASH) was founded in 2021 in Palermo, Italy. It currently comprises 36 member cities from seven European countries and works in close partnership with the From the Sea to the City civil society consortium.

More information: iash-eu.org / fromseatothecity.eu

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