ROSA
LUXEMBURG
STIFTUNG

MARTA CASTRO/MAURA MAGNI

Solidarity Cities: Pioneering Alternatives in Migration Policy

The 2015 Summer of Migration was a pivotal moment that revealed a deep solidarity with refugees in Germany. Now, ten years later, the EU and the German government are pursuing an increasingly restrictive migration policy. The solidarity we once practised is in danger of being lost. Yet it lives on at the local level in some places. Based on inspiring examples, this Policy Brief presents action areas, strategies, and tools that municipalities can use to practically implement and encourage refugee inclusion and participation. In the current era of political danger, solidarity cities remind us that a different kind of migration policy is not only necessary, but is also eminently possible.

From "Summer of Migration" to the Politics of Isolation: Cities Fight for Solidarity

In the space of just a few months in 2015, more than a million refugees, primarily from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, arrived in Germany (Pro Asyl 2016a) in search of a dignified life. **Through their courage and perseverance, it was the refuge-seekers themselves who broke through borders and, for a short time, shook the very foundations of "Fortress Europe"** (Pro Asyl 2016b). In Germany, they were met by volunteers at train stations and in cities. A widespread *Willkommenskultur* (welcoming culture) took off, which so affected then chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) that it prompted her famous utterance "We can do this" (Pro Asyl 2016c). This occurrence marked an important moment of solidarity in Germany and in Europe more broadly — solidarity that is now in peril.

That is because far-right parties were gaining strength throughout Europe at the same time — partially in response to the widespread solidarity with refugees. **Right-wing forces are gaining hegemony in public discourse and driving EU and German asylum policies.** After four years of negotiations over a reform to the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), the European Parliament passed the Pact on Migration and Asylum in April 2024. These rules make the border regime stricter and increase member states' ability to apply accelerated border procedures. However, they fail to create a fair mechanism for distributing responsibility among member states. They also facilitate collaboration with non-member states in the field of migration management and advance the externalization of European migration policy further (Pro Asyl 2024).

What was known as the traffic-light coalition of Social Democrats, Greens, and Free Democrats supported the Pact, which marks the most intensive tightening of asylum law at the European level in history. **Today, the migration policy of Friedrich Merz's CDU is even more heavily invested in turning migrants back and keeping them out.** One central element of its policy is introducing pushbacks at Germany's borders, whereby people seeking refuge are turned back without regard for their individual asylum claims — a clear violation of human rights as well as current EU law (DIMR 2025). The government has simultaneously suspended the right to family reunification (Deutscher Bundestag 2025) and scaled back humanitarian reception programmes for migrants (Ärzte ohne Grenzen 2025).

How can local municipalities respond against this backdrop of increasingly restrictive policy at both the European and the national level — especially those municipalities that want to maintain or develop migration policies based on solidarity?

From Sanctuary Cities to Solidarity Cities

Despite the limitations on their room to manoeuvre within the law, municipalities throughout Europe have taken their responsibility seriously over the last decade and shown that **another approach to migration is possible.** Solidarity cities emerged as a direct response to humanitarian

crises and tightened asylum policies. The roots of the movement can be traced back to North America in the 1980s, with cities like San Francisco serving as pioneers of immigration sanctuary policies (Houston and Tucker 2024). Such sanctuary cities aimed to protect refugees from deportation and exclusion.
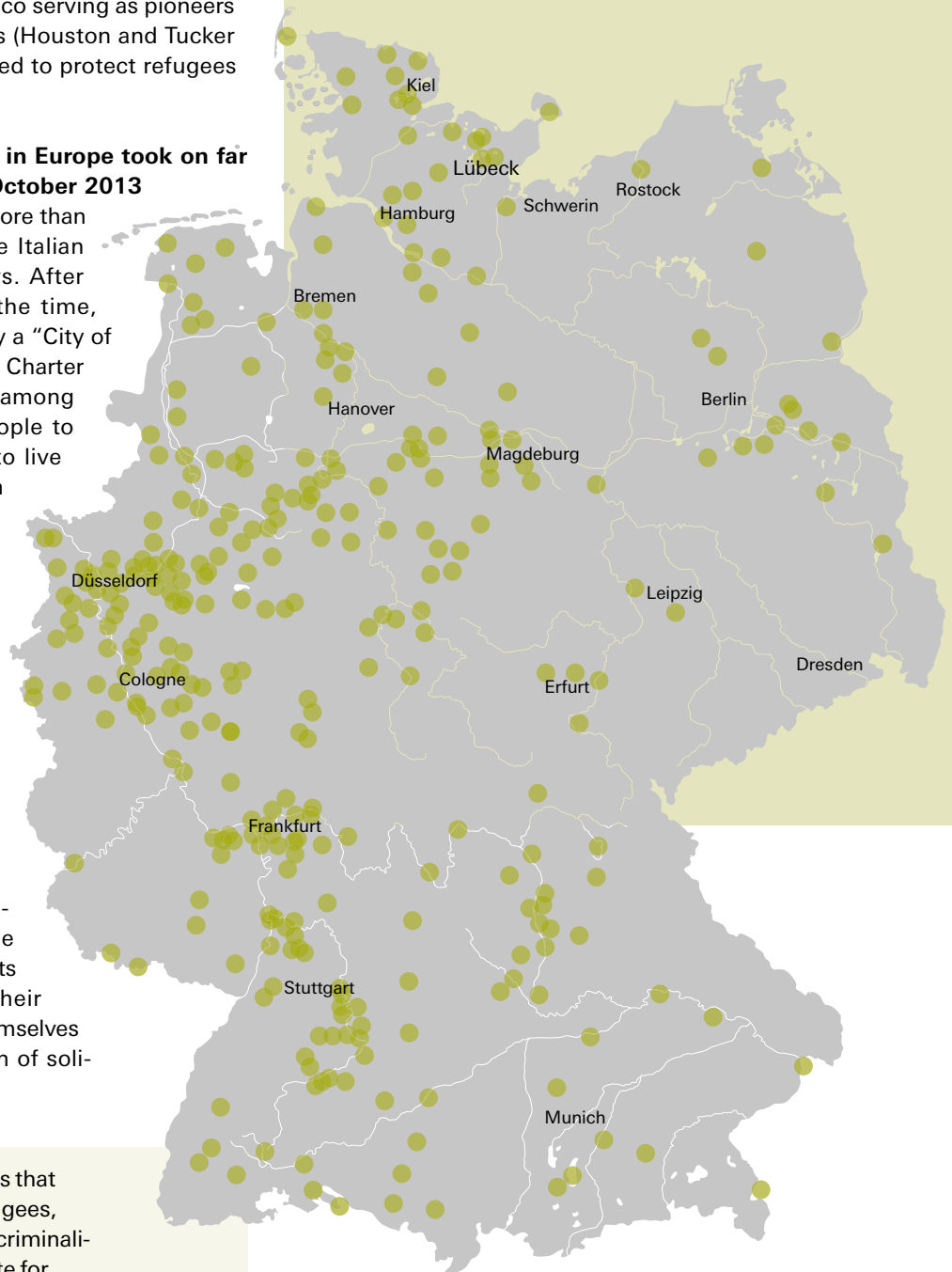
The solidarity cities movement in Europe took on far greater significance after the October 2013 Lampedusa shipwreck, when more than 600 people drowned just off the Italian coast in the space of a few days. After that, the mayor of Palermo at the time, Leoluca Orlando, declared his city a "City of Welcome" in 2015, instituting the Charter of Palermo, which championed, among other things, the right of all people to freely decide where they want to live (Città di Palermo 2015). When Interior Minister Matteo Salvini closed the country's ports to civilian rescue boats in the Mediterranean in 2018, other cities (including Naples, Reggio Calabria, and Messina) joined Orlando's initiative, declaring themselves "Safe Harbours" for people rescued at sea (Braun and Wandler 2018).

In Germany, the civil society-based Seebrücke ("pier") protest movement took shape simultaneously. Tens of thousands of people across the country took to the streets in June 2018 to demand that their municipalities similarly declare themselves "Safe Harbours" in an expression of solidarity with newcomers.

Safe Harbours are municipalities that publicly act in solidarity with refugees, support safe passage, reject the criminalization of sea rescue, and advocate for rescue at sea.
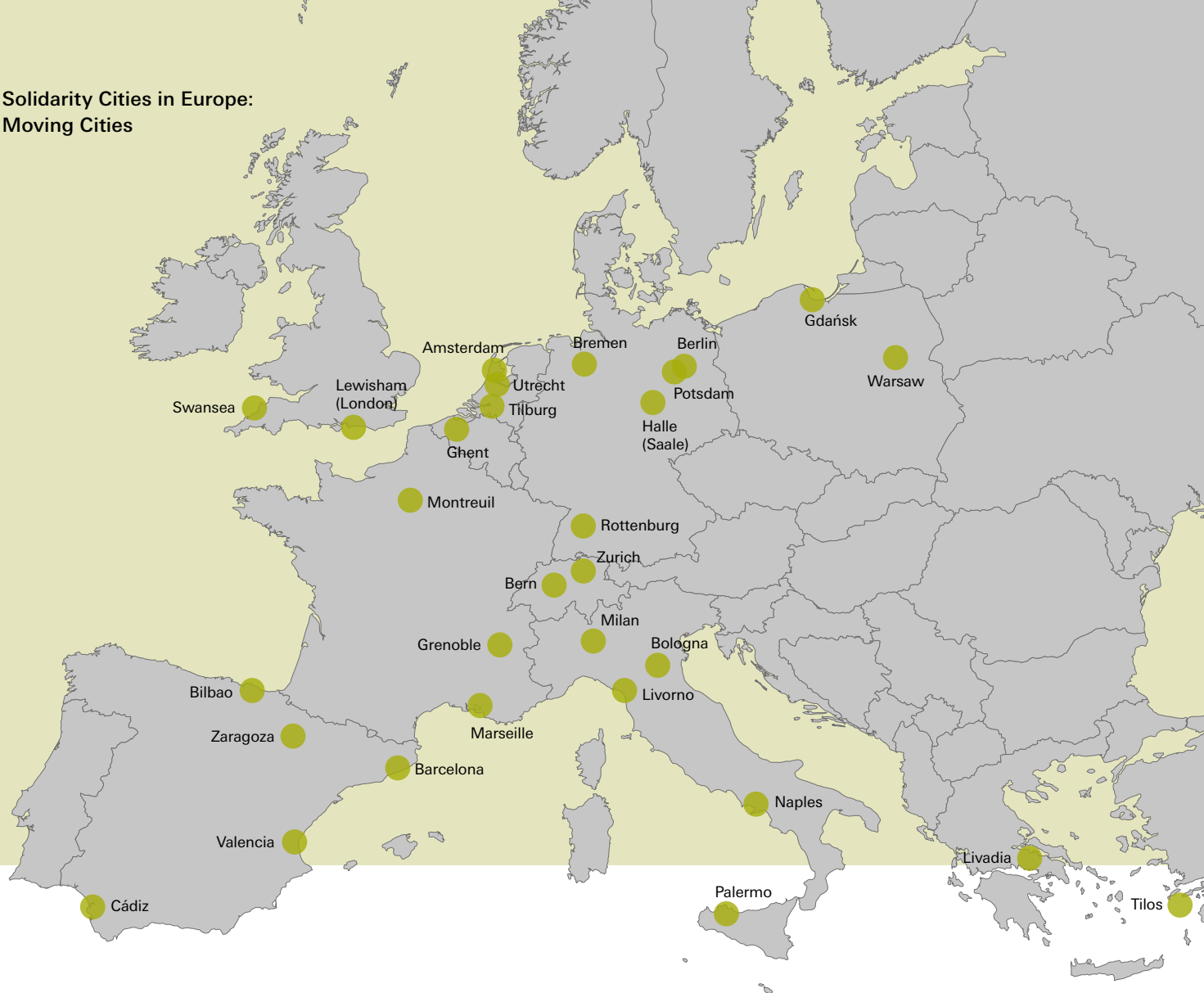
In the summer of 2018, the first German cities — including Cologne, Düsseldorf, and Bonn — responded to the humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean. In a joint letter to then chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU), these cities' mayors demanded that people rescued at sea be taken in and offered to accommodate refugees in their cities (Fröhlich and Funk 2018). This provided the political stimulus for other municipalities to join in: since then, over 320 cities and municipal districts have joined the movement and declared themselves "Safe Harbours".

A year later, in the summer of 2019, Seebrücke, together with the city of Potsdam, set up the Safe Harbour Cities alliance in order to more powerfully represent municipal interests at the national level. The alliance is formed by a network of 120 particularly active Safe Harbour Cities that advocate for more humane migration policies in Germany.

At the European level, Seebrücke joined a network of other initiatives and activists from other countries in the FromSea2City alliance. **Together they founded the International Alliance of Safe Harbours (IASH) in 2021, which currently encompasses 34 cities,** including Berlin, Barcelona, Athens, and Potsdam. These cities have emancipated themselves in the last few years, taking independent action and a public stance on migration policy.

Alliance of "Safe Harbour Cities" in Germany

Source: https://www.seebruecke.org/en/safe-harbours/all-harbours

Solidarity Cities in Europe:
Moving Cities

Amsterdam
Bremen
Berlin
Gdańsk
Utrecht
Warsaw
Lewisham
(London)
Tilburg
Potsdam
Swansea
Halle
(Saale)
Ghent
Montreuil
Rottenburg
Zurich
Bern
Milan
Grenoble
Bologna
Bilbao
Livorno
Zaragoza
Marseille
Barcelona
Naples
Valencia
Livadia
Cádiz
Palermo
Tilos

The Moving Cities digital mapping project provides an overview of active city networks in Europe. It offers a detailed presentation of 30 solidarity cities and over 70 of their inspirational approaches to a different kind of migration policy.

Solidarity Cities in Germany

What concrete political, legal, and practical tools are local municipalities already using to implement human rights-based reception and integration policies? Using the examples of Berlin, Rottenburg, and Potsdam, we will look at the paths these municipalities have taken to becoming solidarity cities.

Berlin Uses Its Leeway

In 2016, a newly elected governing coalition in the Berlin Senate made up of Social Democrats, Die Linke, and Greens tasked a group of lawyers and representatives of anti-racist organizations with examining **how national migration laws could be interpreted so as to benefit migrants.** As a result, local authorities and government agencies began using their discretionary legal powers to

protect particularly vulnerable refugees by interpreting existing regulations in ways that are more supportive of integration (see Jakob 2021a).

In the years that followed, the city of Berlin continued to develop asylum policies that showed alternatives to national policies. While Germany's federal government curtailed financing of independent counselling for asylum procedures in 2019, instead delegating this service to the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), Berlin developed a model of independent counselling at "arrival centres". It is provided by a social organization and guarantees timely support independent of political parties. The city also continued to finance informational offerings so that asylum seekers continued to have access to independent counselling, despite the fact that it has been curtailed at the federal level.

However, the city did not limit itself to local-level action on migration policy. **In its specific role as both city and state, Berlin also took political steps to secure the right of German states to take in refugees directly.** In response to the humanitarian crisis created by the fire in the Moria refugee camp on the island of Lesbos in 2020, Berlin and the state of Thuringia introduced a Bundesrat initiative

to change Paragraph 23 of Germany's Residence Act. The proposal aimed at allowing states to accept refugees independently and without the advance approval of the Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI) in order to be able to act more quickly in humanitarian emergencies. However, the proposal met with resistance in the Bundesrat and did not pass (see Podolski and Suliak 2020).

Rottenburg Shows That There Is Another Way

In 2019, a small town with a conservative government in the state of Baden-Württemberg became a national symbol of municipal humanitarian action: **Rottenburg am Neckar demanded the immediate acceptance of refugees from the Mediterranean** (see Jakob 2021b). Mayor Stephan Neher (CDU) even suggested sending a local bus driver to pick up asylum seekers in Italy. Despite its relatively small size, Rottenburg took the lead in building the Safe Harbour City alliance and became the co-ordinator for Baden-Württemberg. The city of Rottenburg was also an active member of the programme known as Neustart im Team (new start with a team, or NesT).

> NesT is a reception and mentorship programme for particularly vulnerable refugees. A group of volunteers from Germany provides support for a refuge-seeking person or family as they look for housing, go to official appointments, or the like.

The city of Rottenburg urged its citizens to participate in the NesT programme and **took on a co-ordinating and supporting role:** the city assists with choosing and supporting groups of mentors, places people in housing, and cooperates closely with the greater administrative district and civil-society actors. Through these actions, Rottenburg and its dedicated citizens enable safe intake and sustainable integration for refugees coming to Germany through humanitarian resettlement programmes.

While the CDU-led government has thus far managed to quash such ventures at the federal level, Rottenburg's mayor has remained undeterred. His actions show that a different kind of migration policy is eminently possible, even under CDU leadership.

Potsdam Organizes to Represent Local Interests

From the first months of the newly created Safe Harbour Cities movement, the East German state capital of Potsdam led by example, making clear that its designation as a "Safe Harbour" was not merely lip service (see Jakob 2021c).

Beginning in 2018, Potsdam set to work reforming its immigration office, which previously had not provided migrants with suitably even-handed treatment. Alongside civil society, representatives from migrant communities, churches, and legal professionals, **the city developed new guidelines for combatting discrimination.** These directives instructed employees to grant residence permits whenever legally possible, to prioritize family reunification, and to improve their communication and intercultural sensitivity by attending trainings. Other measures taken by the city included providing interpreters for phone and video calls and prioritizing applications for work permits.

But the state capital was not satisfied with action at the local level. With the Potsdam Declaration and subsequent establishment of the Safe Harbour Cities alliance in 2019, the city worked with the Seebrücke movement to set up **a German network of engaged municipalities.** The city alliance encouraged municipalities across the country to take in refugees, exerted political pressure on the federal government, and established regular dialogue with the Federal Ministry of the Interior. Potsdam remains the federal co-ordinating hub for the alliance today.

Utilizing Legal Latitude and Making Political Demands: An Action Guide

The examples provided by Berlin, Rottenburg, and Potsdam show that cities can contribute in many different ways to the promotion of policies that show solidarity with asylum seekers and migrants. But aside from individual flagship initiatives, there are also other ways for municipalities to **facilitate acceptance of refugees** beyond their stipulated obligations. The following section highlights some areas of legal latitude that municipalities can make use of.

> If you would like to learn more, the action guide for solidarity cities created by the Moving Cities project (How municipalities can protect people — Legal options for the local reception and relocation of refugees) presents 20 concrete (legal) ways in which solidarity cities can make a difference in accepting refugees. Available online at: https://moving-cities.eu/de#handlungsleitfaden-kommunale-aufnahme

Choosing Solidarity in Visa Processing

Municipalities in Germany bear official responsibility for the immigration offices within their jurisdictions. As such, there are various ways they can **influence how visas are processed** for people seeking refuge. For example, they can:

- *Factor in the willingness of the community to accept migrants when awarding visas.* Since migration law grants local immigration offices broad discretion when it comes to visa processing, Safe Harbour communities can assert their declared willingness to accept migrants when they approve visas;

- *Facilitate and expedite the awarding of visas through pre-approval.* Municipalities can actively help refuge seekers get visas faster when local immigration offices issue pre-approvals, which significantly expedite the granting of visas or, in some cases, make them possible in the first place;

- *Make use of administrative discretion in issuing human-itarian visas.* Immigration offices have even more decision-making latitude when it comes to humanitarian visas as compared to other visa types. Short-term stays on humanitarian grounds and political visas do not even require an approval process, so even simple letters of support can be of significant assistance in the applications of those seeking refuge;

- *Guarantee favourable decision-making standards through administrative directives.* Municipalities can issue internal guidelines or administrative directives making decisions in favour of refuge-seekers the rule (which also eases the burden on local government employees).

Directing Demands to the Federal Government

Additionally, municipalities in Germany can address **political demands to the federal government.** Possible starting points:

- *Declaring the city a "Safe Harbour"* and in the process taking steps such as publicly showing solidarity, supporting rescues at sea, promoting refugee reception programmes, ensuring humane conditions, and engaging in advocacy nationwide and across Europe;

- *Demanding an end to the federal unanimity requirement for localities to accept migrants:* This would allow municipalities to independently organize additional intake of asylum seekers and thus to act quickly and non-bureaucratically, especially in acute crisis situations;

- *Requesting regular summits involving federal, state, and local representatives to improve co-ordination:* The needs and demands of municipalities in solidarity should be more deeply integrated in national migration policy. A starting point for this could be what is known as a refugee summit; this type of meeting has been held since October 2022 in order to support municipalities taking in refugees from Ukraine;

- *Ensuring safe passage for refuge seekers with an asylum visa:* Municipalities can call on the federal government to introduce an asylum visa that refuge-seekers could easily apply for at German agencies abroad and that would allow them to travel safely to Germany. Additionally, municipalities can demand that the barriers for acquiring supplementary visas (such as education or work permits) be lowered in humanitarian cases;

- *Demanding better funding for municipalities that are willing to accept refugees:* Cities that are prepared to shoulder a larger responsibility for taking in refugees should receive more financial support from the state and federal governments.

Rediscovering Room for Local Action

Hand in hand with social movements and initiatives, solidarity cities across Europe have created new political realities over the last decade, restructuring Europe's migration regime. Through the Safe Harbour movement, they have transformed their role from simply implementing refugee-intake policies to creating transformative change in migration policy. **And despite the current political backlash, solidarity lives on at the local level** — if sometimes in small and obscure ways.

Especially now, as borders are being closed and daily pushbacks carried out in and around Europe, solidarity cities can and must reactivate more intensively. In the spirit of 2015's welcoming culture and the subsequent Safe Harbour movement, they must (once again) make their voices heard in migration policy and make use of the discretionary power at their disposal. It is solidarity cities that showed us that another migration policy is possible, and they can do so again.

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Marta Castro has worked as a project assistant at Moving Cities since August 2024. She previously served as an independent advisor, accompanying organizations such as Ayuda en Acción and the Norwegian Refugee Council in developing their migration programmes. As co-founder of the platform Mar Abierto, she promotes better visibility and understanding of the migration movements on the Canary Islands.

Maura Magni holds a master's degree in political science and her thesis analysed the role of cities in Europe's migration regime. As an activist, she contributed to building the Seebrücke movement and initiating the Safe Harbour Cities alliance. From 2022 to 2025, she worked at the United4Rescue association, where she directed the Moving Cities Project.