



# Valencia

## Developing an ambitious approach to migration from scratch

### Content

#### 1. Abstract & Takeaways

#### 2. Local background and context

#### 3. Selected local approaches

##### 3.1 Valencia: Refuge City.

Civil society and the institutions, working hand in hand

##### 3.2 The Speak Loud Against Racism Project.

(Apuja el to contra el racisme).

Working hand in hand with Valencia's Education System

##### 3.3 Valencian Programme for the Integral Protection and First Reception of Migrants and Refugees (Programa Valencià de Protecció Integral i d'Acolliment de Defensors i Defensores de Drets Humans)

##### 3.4 The Valencia inclou project (Inclusive València)

##### 3.5 Agermanament Comunitari Valencià (Valencian Community Twinning). An example of multilevel and multi-stakeholder cooperation

#### 4. Advocacy and network activities

#### 5. Update: What is new in 2023?

# 1. Abstract & Takeaways

## Key Takeaways

### 1

The creation of the first ever Migration Department in Valencia in 2015 enabled strong political support and coordination on migration issues.

### 2

Migrants, migrant associations, and NGOs are not just passive 'beneficiaries,' but involved as key, active stakeholders thanks to newly created participation structures.

### 3

The new administration established multi-level and multi-stakeholder cooperation between the regional government, local government, and civil society organisations.

## What is unique about the city

**From zero to one:** With a new progressive government elected in 2015, Valencia developed an ambitious approach to migration policy from scratch. The city simplified bureaucratic procedures and improved the participation of civil society organisations and migrants in policy processes. Rather than one specific policy, it is the entire approach that is interesting and inspiring, especially because there was no real migration policy before 2015—due to a lack of initiative from the previous conservative government.

## What is the focus of local migration policies?

**Reinventing the municipal administration:** Three elements characterise Valencia's approach to migration:

- ◆ After decades of conservative local politics (1991-2015), the new progressive city government created the Social Rights and Inclusion Department. For the first time, this included a migration portfolio aimed at setting a single 'entry point' to the complex and bureaucratic world of migration and integration. It was also a way to increase social visibility and political support for migration.
- ◆ A new participation structure was created in 2016 – **the Local Council on Immigration and Interculturality** – conceived as a consultative, advisory and representative body. It aims at incorporating the voices of migrants into the policymaking process.

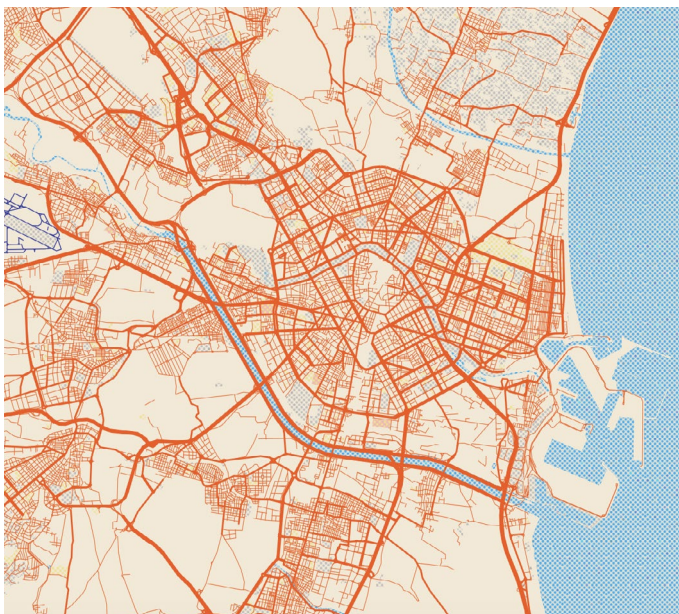
- ◆ A new multi-level and multi-stakeholder approach was adopted, enhancing cooperation between the regional government, city of Valencia, civil society organisations and NGOs. This represents a single voice in demands of the national government—and calls for more competencies and resources at the local level to manage migration issues effectively.

## What can other actors learn from it?

**Involving all stakeholders in policy processes:** Valencia's approach to migration must be analysed from a multi-level perspective. There is a constant and fluid cooperation between the regional government (Generalitat Valenciana) and the local level. The city actively participates in regional programmes, projects, and initiatives aimed at strengthening the voice of the local level in all aspects of migration management. Civil society organisations are increasingly involved as key actors in the design and implementation of migration policies. Immigrants are active agents at the local level, through **the Local Council on Immigration and Interculturality**. At the regional (Catalan) level, they are involved through the **Mixed Commission** for the development of the **Valencian Strategy on Migrations 2021-2026**.

## Political activities and advocacy beyond the city level?

Valencia's official declaration of '**Refuge City**' in 2015 involved a visit by the regional Vice-president and Minister for Equality and Inclusive Policies to refugee camps. Civil society's strong support of refugees with numerous NGOs, activists, individual families offering houses at the peak of the refugee crisis in 2015, and a virtual community of more than 8,000 people, exemplify the city's stand vis-à-vis refugees and migration. Together with other progressive cities like Barcelona and Madrid, Valencia has become one of the key actors in opposing restrictive Spanish national migration policies. Together, these cities have formulated multiple requests of the national government, requesting more resources and competencies to deal with the situation on a local level.



### Population

800,180

### Location

Valencia is located on the coast, in the Eastern part of Spain

### Mayor

Till May 2023 Joan Ribó, Mayor of Valencia (progressive regional party Compromís) in coalition with the Socialist Party.

## 2. Local Background and Context

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*On June 17 2018, the city of Valencia made the front page of main newspapers across Europe after opening its port to Aquarius, a rescue ship carrying 629 migrants and refugees rescued off the coast of Libya, previously refused by Italy and Malta. Their refusal revealed the extent of the fault lines in the EU's migration policy, showing the deep divisions over migration within the EU.*

While the EU was entangled in yet another migration crisis, immigrants and refugees were welcomed to the city of Valencia by a team of more than 2,000 people, including 470 volunteer interpreters, 1,000 Red Cross volunteers, the city's Social Services and city, region and State representatives. Different government levels acted in coordination, especially the city and the region of Valencia (Generalitat Valenciana). Civil society, NGOs and a wide array of associations were also active. 'Valencia is a Refuge City...It is absolutely inhumane to leave a boat stranded in those circumstances. We will do what is necessary for Valencia to become the port where the ship will dock' – **stated** Joan Ribó, mayor of Valencia.

Headlines across Europe included: **Valencia gives an example of humanity and solidarity** (Euractiv EU Newspaper); **Aquarius in Valencia: Spain welcomes migrants from disputed ship** (BBC News); **Valencia, an example for Europe** or **Valencia gives a lesson to the world** (La Vanguardia Spanish newspaper); **Valencia, a port of humanity** (Levante, regional newspaper).

### A progressive approach to migration since 2015

The migrant/refugee crisis of 2015, with thousands of people arriving to Europe from across the Mediterranean and overland through Southeast Europe, coincided with the election of a new progressive government in both the city and the region of Valencia. Both levels of government took a firm political stand in support of the refugees coming into Europe. The Mayor of Valencia Joan Ribó, right after coming to power in 2015, declared Valencia a '**Refuge City**' 'to support people who try to come to EU countries escaping a deep humanitarian crisis for political, economic and war reasons'.

Along the same lines, the Vice-president of the Region of Valencia, Mónica Oltra, **stated** in 2016: 'the Region of Valencia has the necessary facilities to host 1,400 people (...) We are just waiting for the Government of Spain, which has exclusive responsibility for foreign policy, to authorise the Government of Valencia to host the arrivals...'

These statements represented a new approach to migration and refugee management, initiated in 2015 by a new progressive coalition government both at regional and city levels. Three features characterised the new approach to migration and integration in the city:

**1.** The creation of the first-ever Migration Department at city level. This move represented a quantum leap from the previous approach to migration. It granted a new symbolic importance to migration and created a new administrative structure and single 'entry point' (the Immigrant Attention Centre (CAI)) for managing all issues related to migration and integration (housing, training, linguistic integration, etc). It also greatly eased the bureaucratic burden on migrants, as they no longer had to address different immigration/integration aspects separately. The Migration Area is divided into three main areas: The CAI, the Interculturality Section, and the Planning & Research Section.

- ◆ **The Immigration Attention Centre (CAI)** is a specialised 'single entry point' centre offering a wide range of services such as legal advice, language courses, training, and advice on the steps needed for residence and/or nationality (reports, permits, documentation). The service is offered both to migrants and associations working with migrants.
- ◆ The **Interculturality Section** includes two areas. The Socio-educational aims at creating spaces for interaction between the local and the migrant communities, combating stereotypes and raising awareness. And the Participation and Diversity promotes the participation and institutional recognition of all groups in society.
- ◆ The **Planning & Research Section** involves two lines of work: the setting up of an observatory to monitor and plan the different aspects of migration, and the drafting of the Migration and Development Cooperation City Plan.

**2.** Migrants and migrant associations are no longer considered mere beneficiaries of public policies: they are also active stakeholders and policy shapers, on a par with NGOs and civil society organisations. To this end a new political participation structure was created in 2016, the Local Council on Immigration and Interculturality, conceived as an advisory and representative body aimed at including migrant voices in policy-making. The main criticism of this new structure, as stated by a Valencia City Council officer, is the underrepresentation of migrants and overrepresentation of NGOs.

**3.** A new multilevel, multistakeholder cooperative approach has been adopted between the different levels of government – region and city – and NGOs and associations. Regional and local governments, as closest to citizens, have been granted greater responsibility for migrant and integration policy. Three elements must be highlighted here:

- ◆ The **Local Council on Immigration and Interculturality**, a consulting body for amplifying migrant and civil society voices, was created in 2016. This was a positive achievement in terms of migrant participation in policy making, but an interview with

city officials confirmed that migrants are still underrepresented in the Council and have difficulties in having their voice heard. NGOs and associations tend to take the leading voice in this platform, something that needs to be reconsidered, officials claim. An overarching **participatory study** was conducted on Valencia's increasing diversity and its characteristics and needs between 2006-2016 (published in 2019). As a consequence of the participatory processes involving immigrant associations, NGOs and researchers, a new 2019-2022 **Local Immigration and Interculturality Plan** was adopted.

## Change in two steps

The new approach to migration initiated in 2015 can be divided into two periods: one devoted to laying the structural foundations of the new strategy (2015-2019) and a second during the second term in office of the same left parties coalition (2019-present).

The 2015-2019 period was characterised by strong political support for migration achieved by creating a new Department on Migration, with a new structure, to facilitate access to migration and integration services by concentrating them into a single 'entry point'. This period also incorporated immigrant voices and associations into policy-making for the first time through the Local Council on Immigration and Interculturality. The foundations for a local migration policy were laid.

The second term (2019-present) was an extension of this approach. A new overarching Local Immigration and Interculturality Plan (2019-2022) was created. Special attention was given throughout the plan to migrant women and young migrants.

## Multilevel cooperation

The city of Valencia's approach to migration cannot be fully understood without taking into account the close cooperation between the Regional government (Generalitat Valenciana) and the city. As indicated by the Director-General for Equality in Diversity of the Regional Government, 'one of the goals of the recently approved Valencian Strategy on Migrations 2021-2026 is to strengthen and extend the PANGEA Network: a network developed by the Regional Government of Valencia aimed at coordinating migration and integration policies with the local level to give stronger support to social organisations, especially those working with housing and integration'.

## List of main stakeholders involved in conceptualising and managing migration policies

### Institutional

- ◆ Regional government (Generalitat Valenciana)
- ◆ **Regional Ministry of Equality and Inclusive Policies**. Directorate-General of Equality in Diversity
- ◆ Current policy framework on migration: **Valencian Strategy on Migrations 2021-2026**

### Local government

- ◆ **Department of Development Cooperation and Migration**. City of Valencia
- ◆ Current policy framework on migration: **Local Plan for Immigration and Interculturality (2019-2022)**

### Political participation structure

- ◆ **Local Council on Immigration and Interculturality**, an advisory body aimed at giving voice to migrants and civil society associations. There are 81 members and two observer associations. The full list is available [here](#).

### Civil society associations and NGOs:

Cear-pv, Accem, Creu Roja València, Atelier Ongd, Cedsala, Col·lectiu Sud-cacarica, Entreiguals-València, Entrepobles, Col·lectiva de dones Refugiades, Exiliades i Migrades a Espanya, Mundubat, Perifèries, Intersindical Valenciana and Sodepau

## 3. Selected local approaches

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### 3.1 Valencia: Refuge City. Civil society and the institutions, working hand in hand

On 25 September 2015, the Mayor of Valencia Joan Ribó declared the city a '**Refuge City**', an initiative led by the **city of Barcelona** aimed at developing local policies in support of the increasing number of refugees arriving in Europe.

Before the city's declaration, civil society had already organised a response to the increasing number of refugees arriving in Spain: more than 150 activists constituted an Assembly with work areas, 400 families opened their houses to host refugees and a virtual community with more than 8,000 people was created through the hashtag #Valencia-

CiutatRefugi on Facebook. **The civil society initiative** was not allied to any political party, constituted a Civil Society Platform, and requested a meeting with the Mayor of Valencia to coordinate actions.

The city of Valencia soon joined the initiative and became part of the Spanish Refuge City Network (Xarxa de Ciutats Refugi), led by Barcelona, which meets on an annual basis to share initiatives, projects, and practices. The Network speaks as one voice to the state to request more **resources at local level** as the level closest to the people.

As it was put by a Barcelona city officer (in charge of coordination) in an interview: ‘the Network reduced its activities after 2018 due to some contextual changes. However, it became highly active again at the end of 2020, as the State Budget for 2021 did not earmark a budget for the Integration and Reception Funds for asylum seekers. This, alongside the refugee crisis in the Canary Islands, led to the Network once again requesting more financing at the local level in a joint **letter** addressed to the Spanish Government (December 2020).’

This request for more action at the local level is also supported by some of the most prominent NGOs working with refugees such as CEAR, as confirmed in their latest **2021 report**.

One example of cooperation between the city and NGOs is the **My City, your Refuge** (La meua ciutat, el teu refugi) project. This initiative aims at providing support (legal advice, financial support, housing facilities, paperwork assistance) to vulnerable people. It also offers training and awareness-raising in human rights and international protection laws to associations, civil servants etc. It is managed by two NGOs, ACCEM and CEAR-PV, with the financial support of the Valencia City Council.

An app, **València Ciutat Refugi**, was also created to provide basic information in five languages regarding services provided by the city.

## A public network of accommodation for migrants

In 2019, the city initiated a **campaign** to provide access to housing for refugees, aimed at finding a home for more than 582 people in the city – crucial given the increasingly high rent prices in the city of Valencia. Director-General for Equality in Diversity of the Regional Government of Valencia, José de Lamo, indicated in his interview that one of the primary goals of the current government is to consolidate a public network of shelters/houses for migrants and refugees, managed by different NGOs through pluriannual agreements with the Regional Government.

This project is exemplary for several reasons:

- a)** It combines civil society demands for more support for refugees with the strong political support of the city of Valencia. The support is not only rhetorical. It includes concrete actions on the most urgent needs such as housing for refugees.
- b)** It links the local approach to refugees in Valencia to a wider network of local approaches within Spain through the Spanish



Refuge City Network, which presents a unified front towards the national government, which still holds exclusive power on asylum and refugee issues.

### 3.2 The project “Speak Loud Against Racism” (Apuja el to contra el racisme). Working hand in hand with Valencia’s Education System

One of the main areas of action of the progressive coalition government in Valencia is combatting stereotypes, racism and xenophobia.

The **Speak Loud Against Racism** Network is being implemented in an increasing number of schools. It is inspiring for various reasons:

- a) It brings a very salient topic – migration, refugees, integration – to primary and secondary education students.
- b) It combats stereotypes through games, films, music interactive projects, raising awareness and providing real facts and figures (against an increasing amount of fake news) on migration/refugees.
- c) It provides an intercultural approach to the students’ learning process (local students become acquainted with the new realities of the city – new languages, new cultures, new flavours – and the newly-arrived learn about the local society). The intercultural focus involves a two-way approach to learning. Adaptation comes from both sides. It includes workshops for teachers and students.
- d) It is the result of a collaboration between civil society organisations (MCI (Moviment contra la Intolerància), MPDL (Moviment per la Pau), València Acull, Associació La Casa Gran); primary, secondary and vocational training schools and the Valencia City Council.
- e) It is a highly successful initiative: an increasing number of schools across Valencia are joining the project. It is easy to join: a phone number, e-mail address, twitter and Instagram accounts are provided to know more about the project. The School Board must commit to including the project into the school’s activities.

### 3.3 Valencian Programme for the Integral Protection and First Reception of Migrants and Refugees (Programa Valencià de Protecció Integral i d'Acolliment de Defensors i Defensores de Drets Humans)

The **Valencian Programme for the Integral Protection and First Reception of Migrants and Refugees** is a project financed by the city of Valencia and managed by the NGO CEAR-PV in collaboration with a number of NGOs working in the field of human rights and refugees (Atelier Ongd, Cedsala, Colectivo Sur-Cacarica, Entreiguales-Valencia, Entrepobles, Colectiva de Mujeres Refugiadas, Exiliadas y Migradas en España, Mundubat, Perifèries, Intersindical Valenciana and Sodepau).

Its main goal is to offer a safe environment for human rights advocates that have had to flee their country of origin due to their activism and commitment to human rights. The programme specially targets those activists working in the field of Indigenous People's protection, LGBTBI rights, protection of women and rural communities protections, especially those coming from Latin America.

For 6 months in Valencia those participating in the programme are psychological-social attention and training. They participate in awareness-raising campaigns with public and private institutions and with civil society organisations aimed at building a solidary network, giving public visibility to human rights and strengthening cooperation between the different stakeholders involved. The programme runs on an annual basis.

This project is exemplary for various reasons:

- a) Refugees are given the opportunity to describe their experience as refugees/asylum seekers to local authorities and populations. The project becomes a powerful awareness-raising tool for the local population to become acquainted with the difficult realities in other parts of the world.
- b) Refugees participating in the programme become 'ambassadors' for other refugees/asylum seekers suffering the same type of situation in their countries of origin, increasing their visibility from a human rights perspective.

### 3.4 The Valencia inclou project (Inclusive València)

Valencia inclou is an agreement and collaboration, signed in November 2020 by the Regional Government of Valencia and the city of Valencia, aimed at facilitating the integration of migrants and refugees in the city. As put by the region's Vice-president and Regional Minister for Equality and Inclusive Policies, Mónica Oltra, and the Mayor of Valencia Joan Ribó,

'It is an example of collaboration between different administrations to improve the lives of migrant people.'

The project pays special attention to housing for migrants and refugees. It also advises and trains newcomers to function independently in their new city. Valencia inclou includes 68 places in shelters and houses. The budget for this project is € 220,000 for its first year (2021).

This project is inspiring for several reasons:

- a) Housing prices are one of the main problems for all residents in Valencia – despite shelter being a basic need. So the city and the region developed a joint project with a budget devoted entirely to housing.
- b) It is another example of collaboration between different levels of government.

### **3.5 Agermanament Comunitari Valencià (Valencian Community Twinning) An example of multilevel and multi-stakeholder cooperation**

The Agermanament Comunitari Valencià is a project initiated by the Regional Government of Valencia aimed at hosting refugees in the region by involving host families in the settlement process. The project is a collaboration between the Valencian Regional Ministry for Equality and Inclusive Policies, the Spanish Ministry for Social Security and Migrations, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the social organisations Servei Jesuïta a Migrants Spain and Càritas Diocesana Segorbe-Castelló, Orihuela-Alacant and València.

The project is to be piloted in five cities in the region of Valencia, including Valencia itself. Its goal is for the local community to accompany refugees in their day-to-day lives, from learning Spanish to preparing a CV and finding a job, and to eventually create spaces for cohabitation for the locals and the newly arrived. It has the support of two local NGOs and the financial support of the Regional Government.

The project was first initiated by the UNHCR in 2016 in Canada and has also been implemented in the Basque Country. Given the positive results in these pilots, it is being implemented in other regions.

This project is inspiring for various reasons:

- a) It involves international, regional and local administration, NGOs, and local individuals.
- b) Migration is conceived as two-way: the newly arrived are offered the possibility to live in a host family and learn the culture, language and values of the host society; at the same time, the local population actively participates by hosting, becoming 'local guides', and learning more about the new migrants. Cohabitation

spaces are created thanks to the synergies of different levels of government.

One way to improve the city and region's migration policy – as suggested by interviews with the CEAR-PV NGO – would be through the adoption of a more long-term approach in all projects and initiatives developed jointly by the authorities and the NGOs. Rather than subsidising projects on a short-term basis, for which NGOs must submit excessive paperwork to compete for funding on a regular basis, NGOs request more pluriannual agreements between the different stakeholders (regional/city authorities and NGOs) to work more efficiently and to use the expertise of those organisations that have been working for years in the field.

This is one of the issues raised by some NGOs and acknowledged by the regional authorities. The NGOs interviewed also said that the new coalition government cooperates closely.

Another element needing improvement – as mentioned in the interview with the Valencia City officer – is the coupling of increased support and budget for migration with an increase in personnel. The Valencia City Council is understaffed and cannot develop all projects as swiftly as expected. This was confirmed by policy officers.

## **Migration and refugee management in times of COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic was a major challenge for the city and regional government. As the city does not have public shelters, residences and new facilities such as sports facilities had to be converted into hosting facilities, managed by NGOs and with the financial support of the regional and local governments. Both the regional and the local representatives interviewed acknowledged the complexity of this task.

## **4. Advocacy and network activities**

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*Valencia's position towards refugees and migration operates on many levels: its official declaration of being a 'Refuge City' in 2015; the visit of the regional Vice-president and Minister for Equality; Inclusive Policies regarding refugee camps in Lesbos in 2016; civil society's strong support for refugees with numerous NGOs, activists, individual families offering houses at the peak of the refugee crisis in 2015; and the setting up of a virtual community of more than 8,000 people.*

Also important: increasing political visibility at local and regional level; participation of the main stakeholders (NGOs, immigrant associations, civil society) in the local and regional policy-making process; an increasing budget for managing migration-related programmes; and the increasing demand for economic resources to be transferred to the local level to manage the increasing number of migrants arriving to the city.

Some statements in support:

'We have to articulate a response to manage this (refugee) situation. Knowing what to do with refugees is a very important task. The cities of Valencia or Barcelona cannot work alone', **stated** the Mayor of Valencia Joan Ribó in 2015, asking the state for a 'firm commitment vis-à-vis refugees'. Along the same lines, Mayor Ribó addressed the same issues within the framework of the **European Summit on Refugee Cities** at the Vatican, in a meeting with the Pope in 2016, advocating for the need to create a solidaristic network of cities working with refugees from a human rights perspective.

## The Spanish alliance of progressive cities

Madrid, Barcelona, Zaragoza, and A Coruña all advocate for a more human rights-focused approach and the devolving of power to cities. Their five mayors addressed a **letter** to the Spanish government to establish collaborative mechanisms at different levels to manage the 2016 humanitarian crisis, highlighting the importance of the local level, as the level closest to the citizen, for delivering effective policies.

This request was made by the Spanish Refugee City Network. In 2017, the Network approved the so-called **Barcelona Manifesto** on cities and the refugee scenario in Spain (Declaració de Barcelona. Les ciutats davant de la realitat del refugi en l'Estat espanyol). The network urged the State to take cities into account as 'it is at the local level where the most immediate needs are covered: housing, clothing, health, education, training, linguistic Integration, etc.' Within this framework, and to give higher political visibility to the role of cities in refugee and migration policies, the Refugee City Network decided to host their 2018 meeting at the Spanish Parliament (Congreso de los Diputados), requesting more resources and responsibility. This request has recurred from all cities belonging to the Refugee Network over the years.

The latest initiative was a **joint request** by twelve cities to the Spanish government in December 2020, against a backdrop of an increasing number of migrants, refugees and unaccompanied minors arriving to the Spanish coast.

Along the same lines, NGOs such as CEAR-PV have repeatedly denounced the State and the EU for adopting a border-control and 'fortress' approach to migration and refugee management and for accepting very few asylum demands – only 1 out of 20, as indicated in their latest (2021) **CEAR-PV report** on asylum and migration.

The key messages of Valencian refugee and migration politics:

- ◆ A more humanitarian-based approach and less security/border protection focus on asylum and migration
- ◆ More powers for regions and cities, as they are closest to the day-to-day activities of migration management
- ◆ More financial resources transferred to regions and cities to manage current migration realities

## 5. Update: What is new in 2023?

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- ◆ In June 2023, María José Catalá (PP) was elected as the new mayor of Valencia. Her conservative party (PP: Partido Popular) won the most votes in the municipal elections<sup>1</sup>. At regional level, the conservative PP also won the 2023 elections and is entering into a governing coalition with the right-wing populist party Vox.<sup>2</sup> Valencia's left-wing alliance, which has been in government since 2015, will thus be replaced at both municipal and regional level. Vox plans to expel immigrants without regular residence status and to stop subsidising associations that work with migrants.<sup>3</sup> The previous multi-level and multi-actor approach with the aim of a solidary, communal reception and inclusion policy for refugees, which was made possible by the close cooperation between the regional government, the city of Valencia and civil society organisations, is therefore endangered.
- ◆ Valencia, as 'Ciutat Refugi', together with Castellón and Alicante, received 39,000 Ukrainian refugees in the first year after the start of the Russian invasion war. Measured by the number of inhabitants, the Valencian region has accommodated the most Ukrainian refugees in Spain. With an increased budget for the Municipal Migration Centre (Centro de Atención a la Inmigración, CAI), about 13,000 children were enrolled in the Valencian education system by the end of 2022.<sup>4</sup>
- ◆ The 'Community Sponsorship Model' from the project 'Agermanament Comunitari Valencià' (see Inspiring Approach) was introduced as an admission programme in Valencia after a successful pilot phase (2020-2022). It supports migrants in settling in their new environment with the help of close support and host families.

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The **Moving Cities** project provides an in-depth research of progressive cities in Europe, exploring their most inspiring and successful approaches to migration policies. Find more city reports at [www.moving-cities.eu](http://www.moving-cities.eu).

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