Article

New scales of migration governance in the Mediterranean: Regional cities in the spotlight

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Abstract

Within the framework of Mediterranean migration studies and as a contribution to the emerging debate on the 'local turn', and on multiscalar approaches of region-making from different disciplines, the main objective of this article is to analyse an empirical trend that theoretically reinforces the view that cities can shape new regional domains. This city-region interface delimits the article's two-sided argument. On one hand, the article argues that because of the increase of trans-Mediterranean relations, cities are contributing to regional-making; and, on the other hand, that this occurs through a critical process of State disengagement from the way in which the Mediterranean is configured today. After arguing for a Braudelian view of the Mediterranean as *région de villes*, the article conceptualizes the category of 'regional cities' within current geographical and international relations literature. Drawing on three examples of external city practices (city-to-city networks, city involvement in international non-governmental organization and city bilateral diplomacy with other cities), the article empirically illustrates, as a third step, the relevant different functionalities of the city that shape region-making. Finally, the article sets this empirical and theoretical focus within current European Union and State-based geo-migration politics as a top-down region-making failure. The purpose is to highlight the dissonance between the top-down region-making blockage and the historical bottom-up construct of the Mediterranean as a region of interconnected cities. This invites us to visualize regional cities as the basic component for a paradigm shift in Mediterranean migration governance.

Introduction: new scales of region-making in the Mediterranean

The process of recognition of cities as agents of migration governance was consolidated during the early part of the 21st century. This trend implies bypassing hegemonic methodological nationalist views of governance while embracing the 'local turn' proclaimed in migration studies (Zapata-Barrero et al., 2018), or the 'new localism' trend according to leading urban researchers (Katz and

Nowak, 2018). The basic rationale is both epistemological and political, and it involves many disciplines and studies, including political geography, international relations, migration and urban politics. Epistemologically, the local turn implies the need to resize the production of knowledge on

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migration from the city scale, and with a critical mentality that overcomes the State-centric approach that has monopolized the migration political agenda. Politically, this scale shift means that cities are now seen not as a simple unit of States, but as actors that can autonomously elaborate their own migration agenda. The new pattern is that, in the legally and politically constrained environment in which they normally operate, most cities are increasing their governance capacities through multi-scale relationships with other cities and civil society organizations (CSOs), often taking their own upper scales of governance as infrastructure. Today, this debate (Caponio, 2022; Lacroix, 2021; Oomen, 2019) needs to work on one of the by-products of these emerging multi-scalar practices: how this pattern contributes to the creation of new geographical spaces of relations, or what this article calls 'regional cities'.

The concrete analysis of the transnational cities' practices has both a theoretical and practical impact in one of the key geographical areas of migration today: the Mediterranean. In recent decades, the Mediterranean has shaped most of the global migration agenda. In the context of the scenario of mass migration, this uprooted geographical space (Chambers, 2008) is the place where three continents are connected through the Sea. This regional area is considered the most diasporic region in the world (Gallant, 2016: 205), and according to the Global Peace Index (2018), it remains the world's least peaceful region, and by far the world's deadliest zone (Fargues, 2017). As a geographical category, the Mediterranean is a 'Thalassa/aquatic territory' which constitutes both a bio-region and a spatial complex system of interaction between the Global North and the Global South. It is also a geopolitical space dominated by the European States and their association, the European Union (EU), which delimits, through a multi-layered system of channels and filters, the forms of human mobility.

As a contribution to the emerging debate on multi-scalar approaches of region-making from different disciplines (Harding, 2007; Hooghe and Marks, 2016; Jonas and Ward, 2007; Neuman, 2007; Scott, 2019), the main objective of this article is to analyse an empirical trend that theoretically reinforces the view that cities can contribute to shape new regional domains. This city-region interface delimits the article's two-sided argument. On the one hand, because of this increase of trans-Mediterranean relations, cities are contributing to Mediterranean regional-making, and, on the other hand, this occurs through a critical process of State disengagement from the way in which the Mediterranean is configured today. European States view the Mediterranean as a space of security and crime in which control and bio-politics are imposed to create a hostile environment as the only viable remedy to 'protect' the European population. In this case, the region-making process of Mediterranean cities also contributes to a critical reflection by proposing other ways of understanding Mediterranean cooperation and coordination. New cities' functionalities are creating a different way of shaping the Mediterranean region originally proposed by the EU–Mediterranean partnership in 1995.

This article's contribution will follow a normative perspective, and less a resource-based path of the well-known Global Cities debate first promoted by Sassen (1991). It is normative since what this article will analyse is a new emerging space of political practice and territorial arrangement (Murphy, 2008), still without definitive structural contours in terms of political and social institutionalization, but that advance some first functional strategies (Rodríguez-Pose, 2008) that may influence what Harding (2007) refers to as new geographies of governance, or Painter (2006), more specifically as 'prosaic geographies of stateness'. This is also close to what Jonas and Ward (2007) point to as the emergence of much more creative and innovative functionalities that bring cities together, most of the time motivated by deep convictions of urban justice (Oomen et al., 2016).

The category of 'regional cities' best portrays the argument that cities contribute to a new understanding of an existing geographic region, with obvious economic, political, cultural and social strands. This may provide new critical paths of exploration on how cities are themselves challenging State agency towards regional building. As this article will clarify in the second section, this notion of 'regional cities' is much closer to international relations and geographers and even as a geo-political notion (Jones and

Paasi, 2013), rather than to urban planners and economists, which have their own literature on metropolitan regional cities (Scott, 2001). What this article would like to offer as a topic of discussion is how the category of 'regional cities' can be a framework of analysis that contributes to examine the process of changing the scale of power distribution of Mediterranean migration governance, bringing together the debates on region-building ('region-thinking') and urban governance ('urban-thinking') into an already Euro-Mediterranean state-based agenda. This article will also situate this analytical effort within the 'scale thinking' approach put forward by political geographers, and particularly Brenner (2001) and Marston and Smith (2001).

This article will first argue for a Braudelian understanding of the Mediterranean as 'region of cities' (*région de villes*). Second, it will conceptualize the category of 'regional cities' combining the view of region-making coming from international relations (as relational thinking) and geography (as spatial thinking). The analytical purpose will be to show how we can interpret the growing system of translocal relations as grounding a region-making process from below. Drawing on three examples of external city practices (city-to-city networks, city involvement in non-governmental organization's (NGO) networking practices in the Mediterranean and city bilateral diplomacy with other cities), this article will illustrate empirically, as a third step, the relevant different functionalities of cities that shape region-making. Theoretically, the concrete purpose bridging these three steps is to outline 'regional cities' as both a category of analysis and a category of practice (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). Finally, in the fourth step, this article will contextualize this empirical and theoretical endeavour within the current EU and State-based geo-migration politics as a top-down region-making failure. The purpose is to highlight the dissonance between the top-down region-making blockage and the historical bottom-up construct of the Mediterranean as a region of interconnected cities. The concluding remarks will provide comments for further discussion that challenge the reader to visualize regional cities as the basic component for a paradigm shift in Mediterranean migration governance.

The local turn in the Mediterranean migration landscape

Mediterranean cities have developed through the influence of the diverse people and cultures that have arrived in its territories over the centuries. Trade and colonialism nurtured Mediterranean cities in the past. Nowadays, globalization, political instability, wars and the growing socioeconomic disparities between countries provoke human mobility with the consequence of placing migration and refugees at the centre of the cities' political agenda. The duration and the intensity of the current human mobility, the frequency of contacts, the variety of cultures, religions, languages and traditions shape these cities and reflect the uniqueness of the Mediterranean. This article shares the Braudelian view of the Mediterranean as *région de villes* (Braudel, 2017: 269), which is today largely reshaped by the so-called migratory corridors, creating a relational topography which is at the grassroots of a new Mediterranean urban-system of city hubs (Gottmann, 1990). In pre-modern times, this may have referred to a grouping of cities within a trade network, empire or local production area (Sigler et al., 2020: 28). Today, Mediterranean cities are arrival, departure and transit hubs of mixed migrations.

In fact, Braudel already tried to establish a typology of Mediterranean cities following their functionality in the Mediterranean trade economy, with a distribution of specializations. Today this historical view of the Mediterranean remains as a 'crossing relational space' (Chambers, 2008). The current human movements give a new layer to an already urban migratory heritage, and Mediterranean cities can be considered as potential new actors in the Mediterranean geo-political space of relations.

It is striking that in any cartography of migration corridors in the Mediterranean, the visibility of cities is evident (see, for example, UNHCR, 2019), and yet there is no deep city-region spatial analysis of these geographical migration dynamics. To provide some illustrations, one of the last International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2020) world reports or the regional IOM (2015b) report on the Mediterranean speaks about corridors, yet it continuous to do so with a methodological nationalism analytical lens. This could be again a clear example of how the

knowledge produced about Mediterranean Migration is still too national- and State-centred, ignoring other scales of knowledge production. This is even more surprising as it seems the city scale is very present in the mind of migrants circulating through humanitarian pathways (Gois and Falchi, 2017).

This urban-thinking of migration pathways in the Mediterranean connects two trends. The first lies in the fact that cities are connected through migratory processes by the same migrants; the second is that cities today tend to spatialize migration-related issues within a broader Mediterranean regional area. Cities normatively assume that they cannot resolve challenges on their own or only with their respective State, but require coordination and cooperation with the cities that are clustered by migrants' journeys. It is at this juncture that the exploration of a process of construction of emerging regional cities captures our research attention.

Entangling urban thinking and migration pathways invites us to analyse cities' connections through their mutual functionality, such as, for instance, between Algiers and Marseille (Clochard and Lemoux, 2017). The Mediterranean as a canvas of urban crossroads and crossing routes helps us to better enter in the mind of a migrant during their journey and to map the complexity of inter-city connections. It is also a way to understand how migrants are shaping the Mediterranean as a system of city hubs and nodes, as 'regional cities'.

Most cities have even developed a migration industry that impacts their urban development (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sørensen, 2013). For instance, in Algeria, there are city hubs such as Tamanrasset, which is the entry door for migration coming from Mali and Niger (IOM, 2015b: 29). Then from Tamanrasset, migrations are 'dispersed' to other cities on the coast, most of the time through Ghardia and Ouargla. For migrants coming from East Algeria there is a city entrance in Constantine. Also depending on where you want to migrate, you have different city hubs. For example, during my visit to Algeria in February 2020 at Centre de Recherche en Économie Appliquée pour le développement (*CREAD*, University of Algiers), I learnt from primary sources that if you want to go to Italy, then the last Algerian city stop is Sidi Salem; to

Spain, then it is best to stop at Beni Saf. Furthermore, Djanet and Amenas are two gateways from Libya, and Béchar plays the same role at the Moroccan border (Chena, 2018: 53). Furthermore, Oujda and Maghnia are also two cities that are linked through migratory routes in this North African region. My visit to Oujda in July 2022 was an opportunity to see from primary sources how Algeria often 'opens' their borders to allow migrants to pursue their migratory journey into Morocco and from them head to Nador and the border of Spain in Melilla. Most migrants coming from Tunisia make a first stop in Annaba. These cities' reliance on concrete functionality is wide-spread in the Mediterranean, creating a regional topography, which may fluctuate with the enforcement of migration control. For instance, in Turkey, between 2014 and 2016, the city of Izmir was considered the last stop in Asia for many refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan seeking to reach Europe along the Western Balkans route (Turhan and Yıldız, 2022). In 2016, Balkan police, Greek and Turkish Coast Guards began cracking down on smuggling (Crawley and Jones, 2021). As a result, Izmir became a relay city where thousands of migrants were stuck, unable to afford the escalating cost of being smuggled to Europe (Ogli, 2019; Tan, 2016). The notion of 'regional cities' is first a way to picture these functional inter-cities regional spatialization.

Regional theories and Mediterranean migration cities

Regional building theories originally come from geography and international relations. They are often based on several common markers and a set of assumptions under which a 'region' makes sense and is thus given a shared meaning (Pace, 2005: 27). The premise is that a region is not a natural entity, but rather a political and social construct. In this scholarly constructivist literature, there are, broadly speaking, two different ways of explaining the making of regions. This article will combine both. Materialist theories emphasize the resource basis such as commonly shared characteristics, like geography, language, religion, economic ties and institutions. Ideationist scholars, however, have argued

that although material factors matter, regions are above all 'imagined communities'. This means that regions are socially created entities by common narratives and shared spaces that may drive a sense of belonging.

Sympathizing with most of Pace's focus on regional identity building, ideationists hold that structures of human associations are determined by shared ideas rather than material forces. Hence regions are determined by shared discourses and narratives. The fact is that material factors become intelligible only when considering ideational factors (Pace, 2005: 10). The urban-regional systems that are emerging through the pressure of migration governance empirically illustrate these theoretical designs. The pattern of city external relations in the Mediterranean combines resource needs (economic, legal, political), practices and narratives, often taking the form of claims against State restrictions and solidarity with humanitarian NGOs operating in the Mediterranean.

This article is in debt to the geographers' debate conceiving region-making as the sum of space relations/connections/embodiments/narratives and practices, involving a large series of different scales of actors (Jones and Paasi, 2013; Paasi and Metzger, 2017). This spatial view of region-city interface usually links politics, territory and power (Martin, 2009). This article takes from this stimulating debate the key-focus that the region is a relational concept (Jones, 2009; Varro and Lagendijk, 2012 even speak about 'the relational turn') made by different territorial networks that belong to different State jurisdictions and even political regimes and religious/nationalist ideologies. From this perspective, the complexity of the Mediterranean lies in that most of the differences in ideologies and political regimes take the configuration of different ways of living, dominated by different collaborative and often conflictive interactions with religions in public life, and also with different national ideologies that most often restricts cities' external actions. This makes the Mediterranean a complex web of spatial connectivity through mobility, of encounters and disagreements, most of the time dominated by State-hegemony of space and clash of interests.

Within this regional cities' trend there are some researchers that analyse what normative dimensions these city links are developing. This debate is meaningful and under-developed. One of the few works that investigates this normative concern is the stimulating article by Agustín and Jørgensen (2019). These authors argue that city networks contribute to cosmopolitanism, in the sense that they endorse universal values beyond national-interests and the State's narrative content. This axiology is substantial to conceptually delimit the notion of 'regional cities'. This shows, moreover, following the Med-thinking approach (Zapata-Barrero, 2022), that the debate on the Mediterranean cities cannot be separated from the general discussion on Mediterranean peculiarities (Minca, 2004). This is a conceptualization of Mediterranean universalism that needs to be assessed (Salvati, 2014). The category of 'regional cities' belongs to this strand of the debate that seeks to analyse the dividend of these external relational practices in the Mediterranean.

These connections are often driven by the need for improving their own urban governance capacities, as informational nodes, but also as mobilization nodes against State narratives, and as organizational nodes. This follows an understanding of the Mediterranean as a multiple interconnected virtual/physical space. Cooke (1999) does not hesitate to talk about cyberspace when referring to the Mediterranean. From this approach, we can state that, if there is a system of filters, channels and restrictions of connectivity, this has a direct negative consequence in the making of the Mediterranean region. This follows that the best way to reconceptualize the Mediterranean is to view it as a dynamic plurality of spaces that are interconnected with huge human networks and city nodes.

To summarize this focus, the Mediterranean can keep its regional-making expectations if it has the means to maintain and reproduce (to institutionalize) city-links across its geographical space. A view of the Mediterranean as a cyberspace is also a way to simultaneously connect the near and the far. This Mediterranean Net-thinking also invites to change the ways of knowing and producing knowledge, forcing what Cooke (1999: 296) calls a 'deterritorialized consciousness of place'. This de-spatialization of interaction erodes, then, the traditional symmetry of State, place and belonging, as some transnationalist scholars argue (Kastoryano, 2022).

The notion of 'regional cities' applied to the Mediterranean assumes that the city is a repository of regional concerns and may play a decisive role for potential solutions. Regional cities are cities claiming for a regional outreach, cities undertaking external practices and voicing a new regional agenda on migration. In addition, there is extensive Mediterranean-related literature, particularly on urban policy narratives, border cities, refugee cities, gateway cities, colonial cities, transit cities, sanctuary cities, intercultural cities, solidarity cities, welcome cities, that illustrate how urban systems (Van Meeteren, 2018) are shaping new and specific forms of thinking about the Mediterranean region.

Finally, this category of 'regional cities' applied to the Mediterranean is sympathetic to the view that mobility involves juxtaposition of personal spaces and it is done among cities, which is often captured in particular debates of transnational urbanism (Schiller, 2005; Smith, 2001) and trans-local spatial geographies (Brickell and Datta, 2011) applied at city levels (Christou, 2011), or simply trans-locality (Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013), which this article understands as both physical and virtual, spatial-city connections. This follows the specific trend within this literature that focuses on translocalism as a driver for the new values-making, and the promotion of a new sense of belonging based on diverse place and city-attachments (Smith and Eade, 2008).

The core idea of regional cities is then straightforward. It is, first, a way to regionalize inter-cities external relations and then to regionalize their motivations and concerns, their principles of agency. The significance of Mediterranean cities as regional cities derives not simply, or even primarily, from their positioning within the Mediterranean space, but also from the political and ideological endeavours to find a space for policy-making, overcoming State's constraints and shocks provoked by the unexpected arrival of migrants and refugees. 'Regional cities' carve out their distinctive place within the geo-migration space of the Mediterranean by generating joint strategies, counter-narratives and claiming space for implementing them, such as sanctuary, solidarity or welcoming cities.

After introducing regional cities as a category of analysis, let me also incorporate the notion as a category of practice (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). The following section will focus on illustrating, through the practices of relevant cities, how external actions operate in the Mediterranean contributing to an emerging region-making from below.

External Mediterranean cities' practices as drivers for region-making and new forms of understanding regional governance

The literature developed by international relations scholars and policy analysts (Taylor and Derudder, 2016) can help us delineate the first empirical contours of 'regional cities'. The point of departure is that the capacity of cities to develop their own external policies is growing (Kerr, 2015). Among their aspirations, there is an effort to re-make the Mediterranean as a bridge (Leontidou, 2019), as a space of solidarity and humanity, against the hostile environment framing today's geo-migration politics in the Mediterranean. Local decision-makers are aware of the Mediterranean dimension of their migration management governance, and many are ready to take innovative action bypassing their own national governments.

This section seeks to provide empirical evidence that grounds the main argument: how cities are contributing to a new way of understanding the Mediterranean region as well as to ground geographical and international relations theories of region-making. This section will allow us to use regional cities as a category of practice rather than a category of analysis (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). A category of practice is laid by actors and traces a practical pattern that can be observed. We can list at least three kinds of Mediterranean cities external practices that contribute to region-making: (a) city-to-city networks, (b) city-to-CSO networks and (c) city bilateral partnerships. There are probably more inter-city activities we can list as examples of new city relational patterns in the Mediterranean, such as alliances with private firms and other types of actors, such as international organizations, or the trans-local economic, political, social and cultural practices

sustained by migrants. This article will approach these practices rather analytically. This means that this article will select relevant practices, leaving aside a deeper and more detailed empirical exploration.

City-to-city networks

There are emergent urban systems that have, directly or indirectly, a Mediterranean dimension. These first patterns are being analysed through different preliminary works (Caponio, 2018; Heimann et al., 2019; Lacroix et al., 2020; Oomen, 2019): combining materialist and ideationalist regional building dimensions (Pace, 2005), and evidencing the 'relational turn' put forward by Varro and Lagendijk (2012). These networks are categorized according to their key activities. Some are narrative-focussed, others are engaged in lobbying and claim-making, or simply knowledge and practice exchange, or a combination of all of these. Going beyond these multi-varied inter-city links, this article is very sympathetic to the particular debate of the Mediterranean scale of governance, putting city networks at the core (Kramsch, 2004), transnational urbanism (Smith, 2001) and translocal spatial geographies (Brickell and Datta, 2011) applied at city levels (Christou, 2011), or simply translocality (Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013).

The first studies on city networks in the migration field highlight the clear multi-scalar dimension of city practices in migration governance, which was already noted by the seminal work of Çaglar and Schiller (2018). This takes the form of scaling out and scaling up (Heimann et al., 2019), that is, the horizontal network building process among cities and also how cities establish vertical relations with an upper level of governance (region, States, EU, international organizations). This is a strategy that has been nicely characterized as teaming-up by decoupling from States (Oomen, 2019). Networking is a way of sharing and exchanging, but also of placing the city within a regional map, strengthening practices, narratives and lobbying capacities through alliance building strategies in a given space of relations: the Mediterranean. The work of Oomen (2019), for instance, analyses 20 transnational municipal networks in Europe in the field of

migration. She observes that 29 cities participate in three or more networks and that Barcelona is the most networked city in the field, as it is part of seven networks, followed by Athens with six. Networking becomes a strategy for city's empowerment and capacity-building for most Mediterranean cities. Networked cities use these types of strategies to demand increasing competences and resources not only in integration, but also in migration policies (Heimann et al., 2019: 2015).

Let me illustrate this dimension with two relevant Mediterranean networks with a migration portfolio, including cities in the northern/eastern/southern Mediterranean. The first one, the Mediterranean City-to-City Migration Project (MC2MC)[1] emerged in 2015 and today comprises 20 participating cities, most of them Mediterranean.[2] This network focusses on dialogue, knowledge and action, and it is certainly contributing to region-making by sharing Mediterranean migration concerns. The second one is a network promoted by the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and established by the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), which has a migration dossier. The Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM)[3] is a permanent, joint assembly, bringing together local and regional authorities from the three shores of the Mediterranean. ARLEM was launched in January 2010 with the purpose of playing an integral role in a new urban agenda for the Mediterranean.

City-to-CSOs networks

Regional cities can also be interconnected through CSOs. These alliances mix claim-making and concrete practical objectives, most often with a humanitarian engagement. For instance, the Charter of Palermo (2015), signed with the active support of the city of Palermo, defends mobility as an inalienable human right. Its mantra also includes the right of protection and the right to hospitality, among other claims. This platform presents itself as a 'new transnational alliance for freedom of movement and equal social rights for everybody', a way 'to build a progressive counter-pole of solidarity against the dominant right-wing policy of deprivation of rights, of racist agitation and of criminalization of migration'

(May 2018). This social charter has been widely endorsed by the city of Palermo involving NGOs and activists (including Sea-Watch, Borderline Europe, Open Arms and others), as well as the representatives of several European cities, such as Naples and Barcelona. All components are united under the Mediterranean favoured slogan 'From the Sea to the Cities!'. This mobilization had a clear 'regional cities' focus from the very beginning. Their claims-making definitively contributed to strengthening a new way of understanding the Mediterranean, with an increased humanitarian lens.

Within the same activist line, there is a new platform 'from Sea to City, a conference of cities welcoming Europe' (www.fromseatocity.eu) (July 2020).[4] This is an initiative of several NGOs who managed to get Mediterranean cities to 'join forces to reimagine the European stance on migration with cities and human rights at the centre'. Such a network seeks to increase the visibility of welcoming municipalities at the EU level, encouraging other cities to act and build stronger alliances with CSOs. In fact, the rise of a variety of new CSOs engaged in the rescue of people undertaking dangerous journeys across the sea in the attempt to reach southern European shores is an important pattern of region-making process in the Mediterranean (Cuttitta, 2018; Esperti, 2020).

These emerging Mediterranean urban systems reinforced by CSOs, stakeholders and private actors are contributing to inform new regional narratives, most often engaged with humanitarian claims and even going as far as challenging State legal restrictions on mobility, which receive cities' strategic support and adherence. For instance, the Centre for Cooperation in the Mediterranean (CCM),[5] which gives support to the Red Cross and the Red Crescent national societies, receives Mediterranean cities' support for their local activities. Furthermore, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) are big players in influencing the Mediterranean humanitarian agenda.[6] This can be observed through Maria Alcázar Castilla's speech, the spokesperson for the CCM, who said that the humanitarian issues faced by the Red Cross and the Red Crescent National Societies in the region are interlinked, so common analysis and approaches are needed.

City bilateral partnerships

There is also another type of external practice that this article includes as a driver for region-making from below: formal and informal bilateral city partnerships. This allows us to move the debate towards another theoretical path. It is no longer networking but city diplomacy or the fact that cities take an active role in foreign policy, as geo-political entities, a role that is usually seen as the exclusive competence of the State. This trend has already been noted by seminal works, which examine the global relations of cities, mainly from international relations and urban studies (Acuto et al., 2021; Leffel, 2022; Ljungkvist, 2014; Pluijm, 2007), but has received very little attention in the Mediterranean region. The cities make use of their external relations with other cities for cooperative purposes, building bilateral agendas and coordinating activities on migration issues for helping capacity development and human security purposes. These partnerships also combine practices and narratives, but they do it more pragmatically to influence their own public opinion and attitudes towards migrants and refugees (IOM, 2015a).

One example of such independent partnership is the link between Palermo in Sicily and Izmir in Turkey, where two very popular Mayors are endorsing similar solidarity politics of discourse. This shows that Mayors can play an important role in shaping new regional thinking. In a suggestive debate between both, it is said that the 'visit of the Mayor of İzmir to Palermo is a further illustration of the centrality of municipal diplomacy, and its ability to perhaps bridge the gaps where the national dimension sometimes causes trouble' (Orlando et al., 2020: 88). Later, the Mayor of Izmir highlights that

> If you agree on values, the only thing you need is solidarity between the cities who believe in those values, and believe in creating a synergy based on those values. For this reason, I am inviting Mayor Orlando to İzmir, to go on further with the solidarity of our cities. If we create solidarity between our cities, the resulting synergy will be greater than anything we can produce just in our own cities. (Orlando et al., 2020: 93)

Thus, city partnerships seem to be viewed as a strategy for solidarity narrative building, with a high degree of region-making awareness.

Contextualizing regional cities within the Euro-Mediterranean partnership: from a top-down blockage situation to region-making from below

In 2020, as we celebrated the 25th anniversary of the first EU regional partnership in the Mediterranean, the initial geo-migration governance scenario seems to be in a deadlock given the current region-making blockage. The 1995 the Mediterranean Partnership Framework process (the so-called Barcelona process) was an intentional and political EU initiative of region-making, which has always been State-centred, even treating cities at the same level of CSOs. The view of the Mediterranean as a dynamic region seems to be reduced to a 'romantic yearning' of the present and past of this geographical area. The 'imaginary' of peace, stability, prosperity and common values, free movement of people, as well as of goods and information, is of great importance, since it constitutes the normative horizon of the region-making mechanism. The fact is that, on this 25th anniversary, the failure diagnosis prevails. Thus far, the Mediterranean has not created an environment in which people, goods, ideas and services can move freely. At present, there are too many bottlenecks in the system. Human mobility is still seen as a negative construct for region-making, as it is always placed in the basket of security by most European States and even the EU. Cities are still absent in EuroMed agendas, which remain State- and Euro-centric. Today a geo-political resource-based approach of the Mediterranean still guides the UfM and it continues to shape the horizon of the neighbourhood Med-governance and the externalization of policies (Schumacher et al., 2018), but the concentration of State-power stills remains. This basically means that the regional mechanisms are today placed within clear geo-migration politics dominated by a conditionality of logic, with democratization and development programmes being reduced to a means to tackle root causes rather than primary ends (Pace et al., 2009). The surge of Mediterranean cities as new geo-political Mediterranean actors can today be considered as renovated potential drivers for rebooting a new region-making from below.

For regional geographical and international relations theories, this city-based approach of region-making has innovative but also critical dimensions that this article has tried to outline. The fact that cities are becoming new geo-political entities in the Mediterranean is contributing to reinforcing the 'relational turn' proclaimed by regional theories. The advent of 'regional cities' provides the opportunity to relaunch the Mediterranean mechanisms of cooperation and coordination, changing the scale from States to cities. It is true that there has been some attempt to scale Med-governance at the city level, but it has always failed to reach EuroMed architecture.[7] This timid city agenda began with Med-programmes as a cooperation mechanism in the field of urban development. A sub-programme, Med-Urbs Migration, opened in 1995 with the aim to address the problems linked to migratory flows. Its basic objective was to strengthen municipal powers and improve policy-makers' exchanges on common concerns. But Med-Urbs had a short life and was suspended by the European Community on the grounds of management difficulties (Sole i Lecha, 2005: 118). The same Barcelona declaration included a section called municipalities and regions in these terms:

> Municipalities and regional authorities need to be closely involved in the operation of the EuroMed Partnership. City and regional representatives will be encouraged to meet each year to take stock of their common challenges and exchange experiences. This will be organised by the European Commission and will take account of previous experience. (Barcelona Declaration, 1995)

But these promising words were never implemented. The process even took a clear secondary route by incorporating cities within social partnerships, at the same level as civil society.

Another failed attempt occurred during the tenth anniversary in November 2005 as a Barcelona City Council's initiative in collaboration with Eurocities and UCLG (United Cities and Local Governments) with a much clearer autonomous claim for a decentralized mechanism of cooperation.[8] But no more steps were taken after this second attempt, and no official statement explaining why this initiative did

not have continuity was issued. Yet, it was probably due to the reluctance of the States, like that of the first attempts. This lack of urban-thinking of EuroMed is even more striking today while the voices supporting city initiatives and the recognition of the urban role in migration governance are almost always present in all the leading-forums on migration, and at all the levels of decision-making. The only argument we can lay out is related to power concentration in the Mediterranean, as it remains in the hands of European States. This clearly portrays Abulafia's (2014) notion of Thalassocracy, or a vision of the Mediterranean as a specific geographic space of maritime power in which relations of domination shape the region and which can still be seen today as a renewed vision of the control over the Sea or European maritime imperialism. This geo-migration landscape of the Mediterranean as a chess game between multiple and contradictory State interests is in fact the current Mediterranean flagship, and emergent regional cities are trying to engage with this hegemonic border-system between three continents.

Concluding remarks for further discussion: are we at the threshold of a new Mediterranean migration governance paradigm from below?

The notion of 'regional cities' helps us denationalize the understanding of Mediterranean dynamics, so far highly dominated by the EU's thalassocracy. In terms of power, and inspired by the focus of the seminal work of Çaglar and Schiller (2018), the study of Mediterranean cities invites us to change the gravity centre of authority and envisage the possibility of a decentralization of power in the Mediterranean. This regional focus of inter-city relations may also help to move away from a perspective dominated by security concerns and an increasingly xenophobic atmosphere that pushes most States and even the EU to infringe on basic human rights and basic universal values, building a hostile Mediterranean environment.

Given the length limitations, this article has assumed why cities are more active today. This central question can receive many answers and could itself be a line of research. The ensuing

urbanization processes (He, 2013; Kashkovskaya, 2019; Smart and Smart, 2003) urge cities to establish multi-scalar alliances with international CSOs and transnational ties with other cities, sharing aims, concerns, practices and knowledge. This creates an urban system of interconnected city actors in the Mediterranean. This current bottom-up region-building process calls for a paradigm shift in migration governance, readjusting the dissonance between the historically entrenched construction of the Mediterranean as a geographical area of interconnected regional cities, and the current Euro-Mediterranean association of State governments.

The starting assumptions of this article are that nowadays, in this second decade of the 21st century, Mediterranean cities externalize their migration agenda. They build relations with other cities and other social/international actors, they join networks focussed on migration issues, promoting alternative narratives and practices, they engage in bilateral partnerships with other cities linked together by some migratory cluster. At the grassroots level, cities constitute the building blocks of a relational topographic system, connected via the corridors of migrants' journeys. This rescaling programme of migration governance (Zapata-Barrero, 2020) invites us to connect the local and the regional, urban-thinking and Mediterranean-thinking.

This scaling debate, taking again Brenner's (2001) suggestive research initiative, sheds new light on current dynamics and trends in Mediterranean migration governance. Findings may provide new impetus to the gridlocked scenario of the current Mediterranean Partnership Framework process, understood as a process of Mediterranean region-making. This regional city category may also contribute to the better articulation of new rationales and directions for Mediterranean migration research. Following most of the critical thinking grounding city-regionalism debate (Scott, 2019), this regional cities building process may have radical politics and radical democratic insights, even a rebellious mood towards the current status-quo led by States or the alliance of States under the EU umbrella (an example is the new EU Migration Pact, resealed in October 2020).

Ultimately, the empirical evidence is that there are a growing number of Mediterranean cities that begin

to team up, joining their soft power to become more visible in the regional narrative landscape and take on the vanguard of problem-solving. It is of course a matter of concern whether this city-regional building process can be sustained over time and be institutionalized and recognized as shaping a new Mediterranean space. Contextualizing Barber's (2014) provocative expression of 'cities ruling the word', we are witnessing a process by which Mediterranean cities are creating new spaces of power for countervailing its concentration on Mediterranean States and, by this practice, inviting us to think that more decentralized Mediterranean migration geo-politics is possible. Can we envisage a short-term scenario where Mediterranean cities begin to influence Mediterranean Migration governance? Can there be a Mediterranean cities migration agenda taking over from the State's failures in region-making? These and other similar questions may help to guide the normative thinking that needs to be explored.

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Notes

1. Initially, there were nine cities: Amman, Beirut, Lyon (City and Metropolis), Lisbon, Madrid, Tangiers, Turin (metropolis), Tunis, Vienna. In the second phase, more cities joined: Casablanca, Dortmund, Grenoble, FAMSI ('Andalusian Fund of Municipalities for International Solidarity' represented in the project by the cities of Seville & Cadiz), Naples, Oujda, Rabat, Sfax, Sousse, Tripoli, Tajoura
2. Retrieved from: https://www.icmpd.org/our-work/migration-dialogues/mtm-dialogue/city-to-city-mc2cm/
3. Retrieved from: https://cor.europa.eu/en/our-work/Pages/ARLEM.aspx
4. On June 2020, the Conference 'From the Sea to the City' was scheduled to be celebrated in the city of Palermo bringing together mayors, city representatives, European civil society actors, search and rescue nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and representatives of the European institutions, with the objective of advocating for an active role of cities in European migration politics. Due to the health emergency crisis across the world, the conference will be postponed until 2021.
5. Retrieved from: http://www.cruzroja.es/portal/page?_pageid=174,13191825,174_13191919&_dad=portal30&_schema=PORTAL30
6. Retrieved from: https://www.ifrc.org/en/who-we-are/the-movement/
7. In November 1995, following a European Council decision, a Euro-Mediterranean Conference of Foreign Affairs Ministers was held in the Spanish city of Barcelona. It marked the launch of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EuroMed), also known as the Barcelona Process for short, after the name of the city in which the decision was taken. It was the European Union's (EU) first comprehensive policy for the region.
8. Retrieved from: http://www.bcn.cat/barcelona+10/pdf/full_presentacio_eng.pdf

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