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Inside Municipalities: Considering Politicians as Significant Actors of Local Practices on Migration

Comment on Homberger et al. (2022)

In their article, Homberger et al. (2022) propose an analysis of dynamics *within* municipalities, municipal departments, and civil society organizations (CSOs), leading to an understanding of the complex negotiations around migrants with precarious legal status in cities. This exciting perspective goes beyond the vertical and horizontal migration-management dimension that has been at the heart of the recent literature (e.g., de Graauw and Vermeulen 2016; Caponio and Jones-Correa 2018; Ataç et al. 2020). They focus on negotiations within municipalities and raise the question of how local authorities perceive their role concerning precarious migrants. This stimulating article appeals to comments linked with my perspective on migration governance centered on the French case (e.g., Flamant 2020). I argue the necessity to focus on politicians that can play a significant role in the negotiations around vulnerable migrants.

First, my research reveals the importance of political conflicts in the municipalities to understand some municipal choices and the endorsement of migration policy by some political figures (Flamant and Lacroix 2021). In fact, in the case of an inclusive approach, municipal councilors of the same political coalition can conflict over which policies to adopt. In municipal alliances formed by two or three parties, the dialogue over migration often differs between municipal councilors. It is often the case that the question under discussion regards which kind of migrants should be supported. On that point, it echoes what the authors of the article point out concerning the idea of ›deservingness‹ and the role of street bureaucrats. In my research, ›deservingness‹ is a debate between municipal councilors. There is the case of one

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deputy mayor in Nantes who prefers not to mention «unconditional welcome» to migrants. The deputy mayor is willing to maintain good relations with national authorities and remind all of the absence of legislative competencies for cities. In the same Nantes municipal majority, another deputy mayor refers to «exile» in his speeches, stressing his disagreement with selecting migrants to support.

These political conflicts are rarely open-air confrontations. Nevertheless, a close look at the discourse and the actions adopted reveals different positions on answering the needs of migrants with precarious legal status. It has significant consequences over implementing local policies in favor of migrants. First, it takes longer than expected to adopt local policies in favor of migrants with precarious legal status. As Homberger et al. (2022) pinpoint, one department can take a more inclusive approach than others, and this is also the case of municipal elected representatives. In the case of Lyon, the deputy mayor took two years to build a municipal action plan. That was the time needed to exchange views with civil society organizations and convince her colleagues of the new municipal strategy, a broader inclusive and visible strategy. Besides, it leads some political leaders to adopt nonvisible and covert policies for migrants with precarious legal status. According to these leaders, this strategy allows them more capacity to design a broader approach. In the case of Lyon, municipal and metropolitan actions target homeless people without mentioning explicitly their migrant background. In Nantes, one vice-president of the metropolitan authority fought to get a dedicated budget for the right to shelters without mentioning the migrant experience of most potential beneficiaries. On top of that, some local activists are reluctant to allow policies toward vulnerable migrants weaken their case-by-case discussion with the *Préfecture* (the national administration at the local level) to regularize migrants. As in the city of Nantes, these local activists remind us that the management of migration policies is a national issue and do not question the role of cities in this process.

Secondly, local authorities can debate when they share competencies over migrants with precarious legal status. Thus, we can draw a parallel on the different inclusive frames that officials may follow, as Homberger et al. (2022) remind us. In France, this is the case for unaccompanied minors who should benefit from child protection legislation even if the migration legislation reduces their children's rights. Consequently, some cities offer protection to these unrecognized minors. At the same time, other local authorities – the *départements* or county authorities – neglect their specific child protection and leave them in a precarious situation or even ask for their deportation. The plurality of local authorities dealing with migrants with precarious legal

status contributes to the blurring of the rights of all migrants and the development of ›welcoming‹ policies for all.

Thirdly, in the article of Homberger et al. (2022), the authors plead for a focus on CSOs and their relations with local authorities. I share this perspective while being attentive to the high degree of plurality between CSOs and citizens' organizations. In some cities, coalitions of CSOs have been set up to be heard by municipal authorities, as in Nantes with ›Collectif nantais pour les migrants‹. Some refer to ›migrants‹ in this collective organization, while others evoke the ›unconditional right of sheltering‹. Nevertheless, the CSOs endorse different views on the degree of collaboration they want to promote with public authorities, as in Nantes or Strasbourg. Some of them, mainly CSOs close to churches or political parties and partners of social policies, accept with acknowledging its limits the various administrative categories of migrants. They are keen to work with all the public authorities and benefit from national or municipal public funding. Other CSOs, mainly small organizations with activities in only one municipality, clearly distinguish between local and national authorities and support the municipal strategy. Some CSOs or citizens' movements, claiming their proximity with leftists' movements, endorse a more critical stance that considers public authorities as actors of harsh migration policies. Consequently, this view can provoke tensions between CSOs at the local level, weakening their capacities to be taken into consideration by municipalities, especially the more critical ones.

Beyond the factors of urban diversity, political orientations, or urban economy, analysis of migration management necessitates looking after relations within the municipal majority and between municipalities and urban local actors. In that sense, Homberger et al.'s article offers a first theoretical perspective to systematize local practices' analysis in an empirically and compared perspective. It will help us to understand better the diversity of policies adopted and the consequences on municipal actors, CSO actors, and migrants themselves.

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