

Migrant integration in the EU. The role of place-based policies

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Abstract

This special issue examines the integration of migrants at the local level by investigating the European Union's role in this context through place-based policies. Traditionally, migration policy has Europeanized, while migrant policy has become more local. This special issue explores also how local authorities contribute to the governance of migrant integration policies beyond mere implementation. It highlights the EU's recognition cities in this process and investigates EU-funded policies for urban and local development that foster migrant inclusion. The contributions feature case studies from various territories and underscore the role of place-based policies in promoting migrant integration, agency and citizenship. These insights are particularly relevant in the context of Southern European countries, which have unique migration dynamics.

Keywords

Integration of migrants, European Union, place-based policies

Introduction

The special issue deals with the current debate on the integration of migrants at the local level and focuses on the role the European Union has in it.

Traditionally, the national level has been considered the natural context for both migration and migrant policies (Campomori and Caponio, 2017), as in the distinction made by Hammar (1990) where migration policy is the one dealing with fluxes regulation and border control, while migrant policy is the one aimed at the integration of migrants. More recently, on the one side migration policy has been characterised by a trend towards Europeanisation, while on the other side, migrant policy has become increasingly more local (Glick-Schiller and Çağlar, 2009).

While the importance of local communities as the dimension where integration takes place has always been acknowledged, the role played by local authorities in the multilevel

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governance of migrant integration policies has become more central only recently (Hackett, 2017, OECD, 2018). Their role has not been limited to the implementation of policies. Their agency has grown to conceive measures and policies, set agendas and shape discourses around migration-related challenges with an outreach that in some cases extends well beyond local or national contexts, and engages at international and global level (Caponio and Borkert 2010; Schiller, 2017; Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, and Scholten 2017).

Within this framework, the European Union plays an important role, recognising the centrality of regions and cities (along with Member States) in the multilevel governance of integration policies. A signal of this recognition is the fact that in March 2021, the European Commission launched a new partnership with the Committee of the Regions to start a political dialogue and promote learning and exchanges on migrant integration for local and regional authorities (Committee of the Regions and British Institute of International and Comparative Law 2020; Committee of the Regions and LSE Enterprise Limited 2018). Another milestone in this sense is the creation during two programming cycles (2016-19 and 2021-22) of the 'Partnership on Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees' of the Urban Agenda of the European Union, a platform that has gathered cities, member states, scholars, key urban networks and the European Commission to set up an action plan fostering urban policies aimed at the inclusion of migrants¹.

This special issue was born in the framework of an Exploratory Research Activity promoted by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission and aimed at understanding if strategies of urban and territorial development supported by the EU cohesion policy and focusing on functional urban areas can foster migrant integration (Fioretti, Proietti and Tintori, 2021). With its basis in that study, the special issue contributes to the well-established literature addressing the 'local turn' in migration and integration policy, by adding a novel perspective. It shifts the attention from policies targeting migrants (people-centred approaches) to policies targeting places where migrant agency takes place (place-based policies). This is done in line with a strand of sociological research focusing on urban topics that shifted its target from social class to places, and to the role played by spatial factors on social dynamics (Body-Gendrot and Martiniello, 2000). Within this framework, research focusing on specific localities has shown that migrants often tend to be over-represented in disadvantaged areas characterised by inadequate housing conditions, lack of public spaces and services, and high levels of socio-economic difficulty (Tintori, Alessandrini, and Natale 2018). The multiple facets of disadvantage present in these areas can trigger downward spirals, hindering migrants' integration and upward mobility (Malberg et al. 2018; Skifter Andersen 2002). For this reason, policies that aim to transform disadvantaged areas into areas of opportunity by addressing the factors of neighbourhood deprivation that perpetuate migrant exclusion, such as unaffordable housing, inefficient and unsustainable transportation, and

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/system/files/ged/action_plan_inclusion_of_migrants_and_refugees.pdf

limited accessibility to public spaces, can indirectly foster migrant integration. Simultaneously, recognizing the role of migrant populations in territorial transformations allows for a better understanding of place-based strategies, capitalizing on the potential contributions migrants can make to local development (Buhr 2017).

In particular, the special issue explores the role that local place-based policies play in migrant integration, reflecting on the role of the European Union as a (potential) contributor of these policies, in this way also bridging the governance of migration with migrant policies.

The main questions behind the papers collected in the special issue are the following. To what extent EU-funded policies and projects for urban and local development can foster the inclusion of migrants that live in the targeted places? How the policy instruments promoted by the EU are declined at the local level, and how do they impact domestic policy background and discourses? Which types of local experimentations and innovative practices could feed the EU discourse on place-based policies for the inclusion of migrants?

The final aim is to contribute to strengthening the reflection on place-based integration at EU level. Recently, the European Commission has increased its support both for the integration of migrants and for territorial development. On the side of migration, it is worthwhile mentioning that the Commission launched in September 2020 the New Pact on Migration and Asylum², followed by the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021-2027)³. On the side of territorial development, the Cohesion Policy 2021-2027, which is one of the main investment policies of the EU, has strengthened its support to urban and rural areas through integrated territorial strategies⁴. However, these two policy discourses are often considered separately. The special issue argues that connecting them would align better and more fruitfully the academic discussions with the policy developments.

Summary of contributions

In line with the scope of the journal, the special issue is interdisciplinary, and it gathers articles authored by scholars in geography, sociology, political science and urban planning.

All the contributions respond to the research questions, looking at different types of urban and territorial policies, projects and instruments promoted by the EU, and exploring their direct, indirect and potential role in fostering migrant integration.

Articles present case studies from different geographical areas, focusing on different types of territories: large city-regions, medium-sized urban areas, rural and mountain areas.

The first contribution focuses on a pilot project on Basic Income (B-INCOME), an experiment aiming at eliminating poverty and social exclusion in low-income neighbourhoods

² https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/new-pact-migration-and-asylum_en

³ https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/legal-migration-and-integration/integration/action-plan-integration-and-inclusion_en

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/what/investment-policy_en

of Barcelona, Spain. The project, co-funded by the European Union's Urban Innovative Action programme and tested between 2017 and 2019, targeted a sample of the population living in specific neighbourhoods and below the poverty line, regardless of their status and eventual migration background. The article shows how the combination of EU and Municipality funds fostered experimentation in terms of service design and in particular led to the creation of a project combining passive economic support of cash-transfer with active labour market policies. The initiative ultimately contributed to reduce gender inequalities and created benefits also to migrants, such as indirectly aiding the regularisation of those undocumented and enhancing their participation to the local economy.

The second article looks at whether and how the application in Athens, Greece of a place-based policy such as Sustainable Urban Development Strategies in the 2014-2020 period contributed to the integration of migrants and refugees in the Functional Urban Area. Results show that the strategies, although not specifically designed for that, often targeted areas with high immigrant concentrations and addressed several issues of significance to migrants and refugees as part of a more general effort to tackle vulnerability for the entire population. Besides this, the strategies mostly benefited people well-established in the country, who could benefit from business opportunities or skilled job growth, while most of the time undocumented immigrants were not entitled or did not have the necessary language skills to access the services. In addition, the analysis uncovers how official representation, by immigrant and/or refugee organizations, in the strategies' elaboration and implementation was very limited.

The third contribution builds upon the second one, as it also deals with Sustainable Urban Development strategies in the framework of the EU cohesion policy 2014-2020, but it focuses on another Metropolitan area, that of Venice, Italy. The objective of the paper is to explore the use of the area-based approach to promote the inclusion of migrants from a spatial perspective. In particular, the paper highlights the advantages of complementing the attention to broader scales 'beyond the neighbourhood' that frames current EU policies for urban areas, with the area-based approach. Results confirmed that the area-based approach was useful in several respects, particularly in engaging with the local community as demonstrated by a specific project, the crowdfunding platform. This was created to engage with citizens but also, bringing the area-based approach to an extremely granular level, it helped detect places of citizens' mobilisation and at the same time pockets of exclusion at the micro-scales, both not acknowledged by the public administration.

Finally, the fourth article focuses on rural and mountainous areas and tries to go beyond migrant access to housing and employment to focus on migrant agency at the local level or migrants' capacity to act, exercising citizenship rights in the communities where they live. The article does so by presenting the results of action-research activities carried out in 2020-22 by the Horizon2020 project MATILDE in the Alpine areas of South Tyrol and the Metropolitan

City of Turin, in Italy. Evidence from this work stems from a process of place-based co-production of knowledge between researchers and participants. It demonstrates that the opportunity of “living a territory” outside the domestic or commuting dimension, and the recognition of individual skills overlooked by formal evaluation systems, appear as fundamental in the integration process. This approach fosters an integration that goes beyond mere aspects like ‘finding an apartment’ or a ‘job’, instead supporting the growth of migrants as active citizens.

Concluding it is worthwhile mentioning how all the cases collected in this special issue are located in Southern European countries. Although not a specific objective of the special issue, it is anyway important to acknowledge the specificity of this geographic region. Traditionally, Southern European countries have stood out for the distinctiveness of the migration phenomenon (e.g., King, Lazaridis and Tsardanis, 2000; Fonseca et al. 2002; Ribas-Mateos, 2004), and more recently, they all have been strongly affected (although with different outcomes) by the so-called migration crises (Fellini, 2017). Moreover, a particular strand of research has highlighted the specific spatial pattern of migrants in Southern European cities (Arbaci, 2019).

In light of that, the cases collected in the special issue can contribute to the Europeanization debate in the juncture between migrant integration policy and territorial development policy, from the distinctive perspective of Southern Europe.

Finally, more opportunities exist for further research. These may include analysis of the role of place-based policies in favouring other potential vulnerable groups as well as new analysis in other European contexts. We hope the papers in this special issue will inspire more work on these topical and important issues.

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