

**Prof. Barbara Oomen, University of Utrecht**

## **Cities of Refuge**

When the Italian national government barred the Seawatch III from boarding on its shores, the mayors of Palermo, Naples and Barcelona indicated that they were willing to welcome the ship filled with migrants from Africa. This forms just one illustration of a trend discernible since Europe's 'migrant crisis' in 2015: the rise of what could be called 'Cities of Refuge'. Such cities actively take a more welcoming stance towards refugees, and put more effort into their integration, than what is expected by the national government. They can be found all over Europe, organizing a warmer welcome, putting extra effort into housing conditions, providing specific services for irregular migrants or actively setting up far-fetching integration programs.

The reasons for this development are manifold. For one, there is the way in which many cities are confronted directly with the refugee influx – be it transit cities like Milan and Athens who saw hundreds of thousands of people pass through in 2015 or small towns receiving newcomers as part of dispersal policies. This calls for pragmatism and direct action, and leaves less room for the more symbolic politics found nationally. Cities also have unprecedented power to act: the decentralization and devolution trends of the past decades have left often them with direct responsibility for key policy domains, like social affairs, housing or even education and labour market integration.

Research on why it is that certain cities are prone to 'decoupling' their local policies from the national standard points at the importance of political, social, economic but also personal factors. Left-leaning local authorities, with agenda's that differ from that of the national government, are not the only Cities of Refuge but definitely more prone to joining the ranks. A city that already has a diverse urban population, well-filled coffers and a need for workers will be readier to open the doors to newcomers as well. Those cities in which coalitions of politicians, civil servants, migrant organizations and other civil society work together well also stand out in this regard. Still, individual personalities often make all the difference here, whether it is a mayor showing moral leadership or a very active civil servant or church leader.

The policies which cities develop subsequently can differ, and range from creating a type of urban citizenship with identity cards offering services to all migrants to specific programs in the field of housing, education, work or general integration. One striking element is the importance of discourse and of arts and culture in processes of welcoming and integration. Weaving a narrative that shows how welcome and inclusion are part of the identity of the city concerned is key to becoming a City of Refuge.

One could argue, of course, that such policies are nothing new, as some cities provided those on the run with shelter long before nation states were formed, recognizing how the social and cultural capital of refugees could help their city flourish. There are, however, some deeply innovative aspects to recent developments. This, for instance, includes the way in which cities work together in transnational city networks, with names such as Solidarity Cities, Sanctuary Cities or Integrating Cities. These networks do not only exchange best practices, but also actively seek to change European and international policies. Eurocities, for instance, successfully lobbied for emergency funds to be given directly to cities.

Of course, there are drawbacks to this development. For one, the openness of some (large, cosmopolitan) cities sets them even further apart from other (small, rural) 'Cities that Refuse'. By and large, however, the Cities of Refuge contribute to how people forced to leave their own countries to seek refuge far away do end up feeling at home away from home, thus providing them with a safe harbour.