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Panel: Cultural practices as inclusion. The role of cultural urban initiatives for the migrant challenge

The impact of cultural projects on the discursive normalization and integration of refugees in Belgium's society and policy system: problems and issues from two cases in Wallonia

Since 2015, similarly to other European countries, Belgium set up a number of reception centres and a framework of support for asylum seekers, de facto refugees and undocumented migrants. Civil society organizations involving migrants and residents have a key role in this network, as they organize and implement projects for reception and integration. These initiatives integrate—and fill the void of—the agency of public institutions and local governments, and are often centered on art and cultural projects.

In this paper, the author will present two different cases in Wallonia (French-speaking Belgium) where cultural projects are implemented with the aim to integrate diversity in the local urban setting and to fight xenophobia and racism, but also to contribute to the political representation of refugees and asylum seekers, and to have an impact on the migration policy system in Belgium.

On one hand, the case of *Collectif Citoyens Solidaires*, a group of citizens mobilized around a reception centre in the city of Namur, providing asylum seekers with a series of services and activities including art-based projects. On the other hand, the case of *Voix des Sans-Papier*, a group of irregular migrants who occupy a public building in the city of Liège and set up a theatre company to represent their issues and claims.

While acknowledging the importance of these initiatives, the aim of this paper is to discuss some problems concerning the relationship between participants residents and newcomers, and the way the initiatives interact with the different level of governance (the local and the federal) existing in Belgium. The author will argue that, while opening important spaces for residents and newcomers to come into positive contact, the outcomes of cultural projects might not be always positive for the normalization of the refugee issue in the public discourse, and for the improvement of the policy system concerning migration and asylum.