

Panel: Citizenship, Legal Status, and Welfare Policies: Assessing the Boundaries of Social Protection for Mobile Individuals

Regularisations as social policy tools: bottom-up claims and policy responses in Italy and Spain

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With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to ensure that all migrants, including undocumented ones, have access to social protection and healthcare has been largely stressed by international actors and pro-migrant organisations. In spite of these pressures, national responses have differed widely. Focusing on the cases of Italy and Spain, this paper analyses the measures adopted in these Southern EU countries in response to similar pro-regularisation mobilisations emerged in 2020, focusing on the institutional and political factors that may explain opposite policy outputs. Accordingly, the Italian government took advantage of this exceptional crisis to implement a regularisation measure invoking public health principles while limiting its scope to those groups that more directly responded to the country's economic needs. Contrary to that, the Spanish government openly discarded to adopt a collective measure, while it introduced less openly visible procedures to facilitate individual-basis regularisations and access to social rights. Understanding regularisations as social policy tools, this paper ultimately suggests that the ways in which political actors frame and mobilise around the regularisation issue may result in different patterns of social in/exclusion, depending on the underground logic that justify a regularisation: utilitarianism or deservingness of membership.

The dramatic impact of the pandemic on migrants' lives has been stressed since the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic (EUPHA 2020; Lancet Migration 2020a; OECD 2020; PICUM 2020a; WHO 2020), highlighting the vulnerability many migrant groups had to face due to job loss, occupying jobs without possibilities for telework, poor housing conditions, and access barriers to social and health measures.

Recognising this precariousness, several actors called for ensuring that all migrants, regardless of their administrative status, had access to social and health protection (Orcutt et al. 2020). International agencies such as the WHO Regional Office for Europe, or the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, published a series of recommendations for governments to quickly and effectively respond to the specific needs of the migrant population with respect to the disease and its consequences (WHO 2020; ECDC 2020). Among other aspects, they stressed the need to provide for specific measures to reach out to the most vulnerable and marginalised groups of this population.