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Ignorance As Political Instrument? Integration Discourses on Migrant Welfare Recipients in Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

Agnotology, the study of doubt and ignorance in areas where knowledge can be possessed, altered, hidden, and reclaimed, offers multiple insights into the working of states. This article explores the role of 'ignoring' as an active strategy of ignorance; a practice used by local governments to disregard certain knowledge and the production of alternative framings. Studying the intersection of welfare and migration policy based on an example of policy making and implementation in Switzerland, this work shows how resistance can be built by not paying attention, thus ignoring certain rules and policies, while actively shaping alternative frameworks to increase migrants' rights. The cases build on the newly introduced Federal Act on Foreign Nationals and Integration, in which integration requirements exclude social assistance reception for foreign nationals in case they intend to retain or stabilise their residence status. Any financial dependence will thus cause a potential loss of residence or settlement permit. Focusing on the deficit of migrants individually and as a collective, therefore allows governments to exclude them, making 'knowledge production' and 'ignoring' fruitful concepts to explore such bordering processes. Yet, two city initiatives contested these restrictions, developing alternative financial support for foreign nationals, even if one of them was ruled unlawful. The examples show how authorities create sanctuary policies and choose to circumvent laws through an active ignoring of national policy intentions, reframing them on the local level. Linking ignorance to such local scales and their sanctuary support provides an asset in understanding local and practical endeavours of municipalities to secure political autonomy and increase resistance strategies. Hence, a restrictive understanding of integration at the national level foregrounds a one-sided view of non-citizens as costly and potential abusers of allegedly generous welfare support. Migration and social policy laws support such a one-sided perspective by allowing assessments to consider mainly economic integration, thereby excluding those who are not active in the labour market. However, local responses can challenge this one-sidedness by choosing to ignore an overly restrictive framework and try out potentials to resist.

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Introduction

Swiss governmental practices on migration are often driven by the right-wing Swiss-People's Party (SVP), which has tried to limit the access of foreign nationals to Swiss territory, as well as access to rights, such as social assistance, once residing in Switzerland. Various federal popular initiatives have clearly positioned themselves against foreign nationals reproducing a fear of the other (Foundation against Racism and Antisemitism, GRA 2015; Houtum and van Naerssen 2002). In 2009, the Federal Popular Initiative 'against the construction of minarets' underlined a tendency towards islamophobia and fear of cultural loss, which was once again supported by the accepted initiative in 2021 called 'yes to the ban on burqas (covering)'. In 2010, the Swiss population voted 'for the deportation of criminal foreign nationals (Deportation Initiative)', and again, in 2014, 'against mass immigration'. At the same time, integration is often framed in both public and right-wing political discourse as a personal motivation, depending entirely on the individual (Hablützel 2022). Nevertheless, this differs from legislation which explicitly defines integration as contingent upon the collective involvement of the entire society, encompassing the obligations of Swiss society as a whole.

Given this rather restrictive stance on migration matters in Switzerland, the article sets out to study the way integration is discussed and practiced at the intersection of migration law and social policy, particularly looking at the discussion and practices around social assistance reception at the local level. Foreign nationals who rely on welfare support, also called 'social assistance', may face the loss of their residence permit, due to an alleged lack of integration. Drawing upon research on scaling (Valverde 2010; 2015) that I see as deeply connected to sanctuary policy practices (Mourão Permoser and Bauböck 2023), I argue that works on agnotology (Aradau, Canzutti, and Perret 2023; Proctor and Schiebinger 2008), offer an insight into the migration and social policy nexus. Importantly, it is 'ignoring' that uncovers discourses and tensions between the national level that advances bordering through welfare (which highlights the fluidity of borders beyond territorial boundaries; see Houtum and van Naerssen 2002) and the local level that tries to support foreign nationals against such exclusion.

First, the analysis takes up how the Swiss legal framework is characterised by a restrictive and one-sided understanding of integration that allows for migrants to face negative outcomes regarding the prolongation of their residency assessment if depending on social assistance. Recently, the Swiss government has looked into further possibilities to curb the reception of social assistance for foreign nationals (Borrelli et al. 2021). This is related to restrictive policy tendencies and a rise in neoliberal welfare chauvinism that – as argued – function as bordering practice and blind out socio-cultural notions of

integration, individual life trajectories or structural inequalities, instead mainly focusing on economic integration. Social assistance dependency becomes a tool of internal bordering. In contrast, some political debates and scientific, as well as governmental reports try to resist this selective assessment (of integration), to highlight complex, structural factors that cause such dependency.

Second, I argue that this pushes local administrations who wish to counter-balance restrictive migration policies to come up with 'sanctuary policies' (Darling and Harald 2019; Mourão Permoser and Bauböck 2023) that inherit a tactical ignoring of national legislation. The reaction of two cities in Switzerland (Zurich and Bern), which established or plan to establish financial support that circumvents the take up of social assistance of foreign nationals, will function as analytical examples. Their alternative support allows them to reduce the risk of residency loss for foreign nationals, while actively ignoring national legal frameworks that challenge such support. Importantly, Bern launched its initiative after Zurich's alternative path was declared unlawful by the district council. Given that the practice was once disallowed, Bern thus ignored the existing laws and decisions, trying to establish alternatives (of knowledge) to resist restrictive policies (see Aradau, Canzutti, and Perret 2023). Such an action highlights how policy-making and contestation happen at different scales and in relation to each other (Valverde 2015) and can be read through notions of ignorance (Borrelli 2018; Proctor 2008) or a choice to deliberately unknown (McGoey 2019). By using the verb 'to ignore', the analysis attempts to create a relation between knowledge creation and ignorance that looks at deliberate reshaping of practice through ignoring others. Such practices become relevant at the local and national levels, especially when certain legislative and policy practices rest upon the cantonal level, thus allowing for a diversity of practices that potentially try to alter original national policy intentions. This resistance towards restrictive national laws can thus partially be explained by Switzerland being a federal state where cantons and municipalities retain certain abilities to self-govern (Debela 2020; Felder 2023).

In this case study of Switzerland, ignorance is a fruitful concept as it can become a political instrument in the negotiations of rights and belonging (see introduction to the special issue). It adds nuances to local resistance as it provides details on how such resistance comes about and how it is argued for. It also offers an analysis of regional integration and inner-state relations on various levels, from national to local. Simultaneously, the case study links to a more general and geographically widespread political discussion, as within Europe various countries discuss the rightfulness of welfare reception for foreign nationals, trying to reduce it based on welfare chauvinistic attitudes (Ataç, Schütze, and Reitter 2020; Harris and Römer 2022).

Ignorance in Migration Governance

Agnotology has been examined through various lenses with the goal to explore its production or its consequences (Proctor and Schiebinger 2008). In consequences, ignorance also interest migration scholars who take it as a productive lens to study the shaping of knowledge and the governing of the unknown in different contexts (Boswell and Badenhoop 2021; Mica et al. 2021; Scheel and Ustek-Spilda 2019). Ignorance has been explored from a migrant individual-perspective (Gershon 2000; Stel 2016), as well as from a state-perspective (Boswell and Badenhoop 2021; Mica et al. 2021). Here, agnotology is described in multiple ways, encompassing moments in which knowledge is blinded out or unclear, to situations where the unknown is tentatively reduced, filled, or contested. Since states retain two main interests related to migration, encompassing the processing of data of their citizens, as well as identifying those who are not citizens (Scheel and Ustek-Spilda 2019), ignorance in the field of data use and production has received particular attention (Leese, Noori, and Scheel 2021), as well as moments in which public authorities deal with the unknown (Boswell and Badenhoop 2021). Boswell and Badenhoop (2021) particularly focus on what they term 'state ignorance', a situation in which public authorities are aware that they lack knowledge that is relevant to address social problems, such as unauthorised migration (Boswell and Badenhoop 2021). Some strategies to respond to such ignorance include elucidation, often including an attempt to gather more knowledge on a subject. This, however, contributes to knowledge production that can in itself be faulty (Leese, Noori, and Scheel 2021; Scheel and Ustek-Spilda 2019). Denial is a further strategy that tries to downplay the relevancy of a problem, while resignation addresses the acceptance by authorities of the inability to address the problem sufficiently (Boswell and Badenhoop 2021).

In summary, ignorance, like knowledge, has a political geography and does not happen in a vacuum, but is instead encouraged or discouraged (Proctor 2008). This allows us to study power/knowledge hierarchies that are often gendered (Tuana 2008), classed, or racialised (Mills 2007). Ignorance can be actively produced and functions as moral resistance (Aradau and Perret 2022; Proctor 2008). Within state research, agnotology is an analytical perspective, encompassing doubt and ignorance in areas where knowledge can be possessed, altered, hidden, and reclaimed, and therefore offers multiple insights into the workings of governance.

Yet, ignorance can also serve as a productive asset (McGoey 2012) and does not always need to be pernicious. Following Gross (2007), who argues that many of the terms describing non-knowledge, such as ignorance, negative knowledge, unknowledge (and more) are often more theory driven and thus not grounded in concrete examples, I aim to emploi the specific term 'ignoring' to potentially initiate a discussion about the dynamic

relationship between knowledge and ignorance. In this contribution, ignorance is understood as a particular type of non-knowledge that 'involves the obfuscation or suppression of otherwise available knowledge' (ibid. p. 6), used both in order to reduce non-citizens' rights to remain on the territory and to increase their chances of residency. Yet, I add the perspective on how actors ignore available facts and instead rely on the production of alternative, local knowledge and make competing knowledge claims to circumvent national law. It will allow us to study how policies are ignored at the local level and support our understanding of the functioning of policy scales and hierarchies, as well as sanctuary policies. Since this is an active navigation and negotiation process (Eule, Loher, and Wyss 2017; Rozakou 2017), exploring knowledge and ignorance dynamics through the way actors ignore certain information, allows for a dynamic, relational approach.

In contrast to the broader conception of ignorance that 'points to the borders and the limits of knowledge, including the intentional and the unintentional bracketing out of unknowns' (Gross 2007, 749), the focus in this article will thus remain on the bracketing out, blinding out and wilful negligence, both causing negative and positive consequences of foreign nationals. This take has the 'potential to reveal the role of power in the construction of what is known and provide a political lens for the political values at work in our knowledge practices' (Tuana 2008, 109f.).

Scales of Migration Governance and the Productive Ability of Ignorance in Sanctuary Policies

While the layered processes of governance are difficult to grasp (Valverde 2015), I argue that ignorance can function as a productive lens. Looking at how it is structurally implied (in national laws and political discourses), as well as 'individually' or rather locally applied (in municipalities), it offers an understanding of how different governance scales are related and where tensions come up. The exploration of different policy scales offers an understanding of how, e.g. migration governance is less fixed in specific political and spatial layers but constructed and contested through multiple interactions (Bürkner 2017). A national order can be easily given to the municipal level to, e.g. take measures that have a negative effect on foreign nationals (e.g. see the need to communicate social assistance dependency), yet they can also be contested at the local level (e.g. through sanctuary policies). Together, these diverse scales influence the migration experience, where national and localised interactions matter (Chacko and Price 2021). Making use of 'ignoring' as a tool of analysis at the intersection of welfare and migration policy enables research that takes up potentially diverging discourses, thereby explaining why certain aspects are highlighted more than others.

One resistance strategy towards nationally restrictive laws is the creation of so-called 'sanctuary polices'. Despite their diverse definition (Bauder 2016), several works summarise them under three categories: 'don't enforce' (local actors do not assist federal authorities); 'don't ask' (policies bar state or local officials to, e.g. inquire on a migration status; O'Brien, Collingwood, and Omar El-Khatib 2017) and 'don't tell' (policies restrict information sharing between state and local enforcement and federal authorities; Peck 2019). 'Sanctuary practices create safe spaces for irregular migrants (I) by blocking or suspending state action against them, (II) are limited in space and time, (III) are enacted at the sub-national level in opposition to national policies, and (IV) are motivated by a combination of humanitarian and political reasons' (Mourão Permoser and Bauböck 2023, 3555). As such, these 'policies and practices involve legal, discursive, identity-formative, and scalar aspects' (Bauder 2016, 182). At the heart of the debate lies the question to what extent states may decline to assist federal efforts to enforce immigration law (see examples in the analysis).

Given that sanctuary policies already underline the scalar governing of migration, ignorance as a strategy seems directly linked to how various actors find alternative ways to frame policy actions in order to create support. Indeed, the actions stand in contrast to national intersections of migration and social policies that serve as an 'administrative border' (Gargiulo 2023). As such, border work can take place at different points in society (Rumford 2006). Due to the retraction of the welfare state and an increase in welfare chauvinism (Kros and Coenders 2019) that wishes to reduce support to those 'belonging' (thus citizens), exclusionary policies need to differentiate and select among those who are deemed functioning enough for society (Barker 2018). A bordering perspective as an analytical tool (Persdotter, Lind, and Righard 2021) in combination with studying ignorance therefore allows to study how belonging is assessed and discussed both on the political and implementation level through discourses on knowledge – or rather the blinding out of it.

Welfare states are in themselves tools that strengthen borders of the nation state (Persdotter, Lind, and Righard 2021). While foreign nationals with residence permits have the right to apply for and receive social assistance, migration policies create a double bind as a take-up in the field of social policies affects the legal residence status (Borrelli et al. 2021). While Gargiulo (2023) describes such administrative border within registration practices, this work shows how a differential inclusion and precarity of membership can also be reached through defining economic independency as a prerequisite to remain on the territory. It further broadens the perspective on sanctuary policies as these policies are not directly visible or identifiable as control mechanisms (e.g. unlike control at borders or of papers).

Neglecting the actual attempts at integration beyond the economic labour market participation allows for an increased internal bordering that selects

'good' migrants from a pool of 'unworthy' ones. It allows for a reproduction of the 'poor' welfare migrant that ends up being in need (Demetriou 2018; Hayden Foster 2008; Runfors, Saar, and Fröhlig 2022), making ignorance a political instrument that pervades migration and welfare systems. Neoliberal and welfare chauvinistic practices therefore need to be understood as a combination of bordering work through deliberate and undeliberate lack and blinding out of knowledge that becomes powerful drivers of welfare and migration regimes.

The Swiss Context: Migration Law and Its Intersection with Social Policies

As a federal state, Switzerland is divided into cantonal structures that function as federal states with a certain autonomy (Felder 2023). It fluctuates between national laws that need to be 'fleshed out' and implemented on the cantonal and local/municipal level (e.g., migration laws) and laws that remain cantonal (e.g. social policies in general or the amount of social assistance more specifically) and in which greater differences can be seen. Migration policy lies at the national level and is regulated under the Federal Act on Foreign Nationals and Integration (Foreign Nationals and Integration Act, FNIA, of 16 December 2005, status as of 15 October 2023), as well as the Asylum Act (AsylA 1998, status as of 1 January 2024). While the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) processes asylum applications, family reunifications and visa, cantonal migration offices deal most often with the organisation of deportations and take over responsibility for all foreign nationals that arrive via other venues, such as work, studies or similar. Municipal registers function as their prolonged arm and allow for citizens and non-citizens to register, e.g. a move to or from another municipality (or canton) and inform migration offices of these changes. It is these registers that have direct and personal contact with non-citizens, while cantonal migration offices often communicate via mail with their 'clients' (with the exception of the three city migration offices (Bern city, Thun, Biel) that have combinen migraton offices and and municipal registers in the canton of Bern).

When it comes to social policies and laws, we leave the national level, since welfare and the distribution of social assistance is a cantonal competence. Without a national law on social assistance, all cantons broadly follow the suggestions and recommendations of the Swiss Conference for Social Assistance (SKOS/CSIAS 2020), a national professional association for social assistance whose members are all cantons, many municipalities, various federal ministries and private organisations. While the federal and cantonal courts also follow their guidelines in their judgements, these are in no way binding.

This allows for differences in how social assistance and other welfare support are categorised (named) and for different practices on the ground (Andreetta and Borrelli 2022). Further, and as shown in the analysis, this national-cantonal separation of competencies allows for tensions to arise when one field of policies affects the other (or vice versa).

One of these tensions becomes apparent in the FNIA and the related Ordinance on admission, residence, and gainful employment (OASA, VZAE Verordnung Über Zulassung, Aufenthalt Und Erwerbstätigkeit 2019), which regulate and specify that social services are obliged to automatically report any non-citizen who receives social assistance to migration offices. They are required to share the registration and the amount proactively, without waiting to be asked. Given that social assistance is a cantonal competency, migration policy undermines this and makes it a matter of national concern. Furthermore, migration offices can ask social services for more detailed reports on the level of integration and measures that are being taken to reduce the dependence. Prior work has highlighted how such intersection leads to a professional dilemma for social workers within social welfare offices, also beyond the Swiss context (Andreetta 2019; Andreetta and Borrelli).

Neoliberal Activation Logics As Legitimizers of Ignorance?

In 2019, Switzerland introduced a partial revision of their Federal Act on Foreign Nationals (Foreign Nationals Act, FNA), which was renamed FNIA, now paying more emphasis on aspects of integration. Two of the main changes specifically target foreign nationals depending on social assistance and contribute to an erosion of security for those, who have been living in Switzerland over a prolonged period.

First, the revision now allows for the possibility to downgrade settlement permits (also called permanent residence permits or C-permits) that are usually handed out for an unlimited period back to residence permits (or B-permits) that are temporary. A 'settlement permit may be revoked and replaced by a residence permit if the residence criteria referred to in Article 58a are not meet' (FNIA Art. 63, 2), which include specific integration criteria. The latter will be prolonged if the expected level of integration is met. This is assessed by cantonal migration offices, yet often through third parties' reports, including social services that work on the municipal level and that provide information on the length and amount of dependency and whether clients 'behaved' (e.g. were on time, participated in work programs and courses, etc.), employment offices, or language course providers to name a few (Achermann, Borrelli, and Pfirter 2023). The law specifies integration criteria under Article 58a, asking for the respect for public safety, security, and order, to respect the values of the Federal Constitution, language skills and the participation in

working life or efforts to acquire an education. This allows for a rather one-sided focus on economic integration and ignores other forms of integration that may exist (social integration through, e.g. volunteering or political interests).

The existing legal definition of integration supports a neoliberal understanding of participation, blinding out and nullifying achievements of non-citizens outside the realm of wage labour. Instead, integration is market-oriented and interested in the active labour market participation of non-citizens, who only then can maintain a secure residence status. This allows migration offices, which assess the level of integration of non-citizens who depend on social assistance, to focus much of their assessment on work only, thus weighing the amount of social assistance received rather high. Engagement in the secondary labour market that is state-funded is thus not supporting claims for the right to stay. As such, the Swiss integration discourse is increasingly standardised (see also Nordling and Persdotter 2021 in the Swedish context with similar results), meaning that the assessment of integration follows pre-defined rules with little room for discretion (e.g. the need for specific language certificates for certain permits). This leads to a one-sided case assessment that ignores how structural factors might impede integration success.

Since there are no fixed monetary levels when a downgrading of a permanent residency permit (or also a withdrawal) can take place, the Federal Court suggested certain thresholds, ranging around 25.000 CHF for withdrawals or non-prolongation of residence permits and around 60.000 CHF for settlement permits. This would potentially allow migration offices to be more lenient, given that no mandatory levels exist, yet current political debates underline the undeserved neediness of foreign social assistance recipients, already pushing for more control mechanisms to advance permit withdrawals (Federal Council, Switzerland 2020; SEM 2020).

Second, the partial revision of the FNIA has nullified a guarantee that, after 15 years with a settlement permit, social assistance can no longer be a reason to lose this permit. In summary, residence permits can (and for a long time could) be revoked if the foreign national or 'a person they must care for is dependent on social assistance' (Art. 62 e) or 'does not comply with an integration agreement without due cause' (Art 62 g), while settlement permits can only be revoked if social assistance is permanent and to a large extent (Art. 63 c). This causes an erosion of permanent settlement again based on the economic dependency of individuals.

Third and finally, the revision further clarified integration criteria and underlined that it is no longer the 'willingness to participate' in the labour market or education but the actual participation that shows integration. While these decisions must take the individuals' situation into account, balance and assess private versus public interests, the

erosion of rights clearly presents a moment in which some knowledge is discarded, while other is valued more (understanding and definition of integration). Such views can be linked to negative attitudes towards migrants in general (van Oorschot 2010) and migrant welfare recipients (Mewes and Mau 2013). Restrictive laws often allow for a politicisation of specific aspects (e.g. see debate of 'welfare scroungers') that allow certain fields of knowledge to come up (fear of misuse), while other fields of knowledge are neglected.

Importantly, right after the partial revision that introduced the FNIA in 2019, the Federal Council already ordered a study in which possibilities to restrict rights for social assistance of third-country nationals were asked to be assessed. In consequence half a year later, the final report of the office in charge suggested several ideas, of which six were chosen and could be implemented right away and two more were decided to be assessed. Most of them included limitations, such as restricting the access to social assistance for the first 3 years of residency in Switzerland. They also increased the audit, allowing the SEM to control migration offices who prolong residence permits for people receiving social assistance, as well as checking whether a downgrading would really be the most feasible measure (if a withdrawal would be possible).

At the national level, neoliberal aspects of capitalist accumulation enable the one-sided validation of integration. Switzerland, as many other countries, has seen a rise in New Public Management logics that highlight the individual responsibility of welfare users (Pfirter 2019). The creation of an individual that is objectively – based on measurable criteria – not able to integrate and cause public expenses can therefore be easily discarded. Such individualising tendencies cover exploitative working conditions that many migrants face, as well as their often-lower wages, issues with accessing better positions and more stable incomes, as well as discrimination. With the Council trying to further curb state support, we find a conscious process that shapes ignorance and that sends a message to cantonal authorities. Since measurable data allow us to ignore 'soft indicators' of integration (see also Scheel and Ustek-Spilda 2019), socio-political integration becomes blind-sided (see also Akin and Banfi 2019).

Another way of using ignorance as a tool is through the incentivisation of 'hard work' and individualising the discourse on welfare support. When receiving social assistance, individuals are expected to show motivation and reduce the potential 'self-inflicted unemployment', while media and political discourse depict any failure as personal fault. Dependency is regularly seen as relying on welfare due to a 'lifestyle choice' made by dysfunctional families despite counter evidence of research (Slater 2012). Here ignoring reasons for a 'lack of integration' and favouring one discourse over the other supports the active construction and ploy that positions punitive welfare reforms in a positive light, moving away from structural failures as reasons for poverty.

Much like ignorance and strategic ignorance more specifically, ignoring can be read as a functional tool of control that preserves privileges and reinforces traditional values (in the following context, the privilege of citizens to receive state support), while preserving unfair hierarchies and stereotypes (e.g. restricting access to rights for non-citizens; see Moore and Tumin 1949).

Municipal Resistance Through Ignoring Restrictive Social Policy and Migration Laws

If ignorance, as Proctor and Schiebinger (2008) argue, is the outcome of cultural and political struggles, then what are the cultural and political struggles over 'integration' within and in relation to the state apparatus in present-day Switzerland?

The criticism that was addressed towards the changes in the FNIA, by the SKOS and other actors, included a political motion ('poverty is not a crime') asking to reinstate an adaptation of the 15-year clause securing those with a settlement for more than 10 years to not face a withdrawal due to social assistance reception. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit shortly after the FNIA was introduced, Swiss media further captured the long queues at food banks for free meals and groceries. This came to a surprise for politicians and the public, given that the Swiss unemployment rates did not match the vast number of people asking for support (Götzö et al. 2022). Given that several studies already warned about the increased non-take of social assistance by foreign-nationals due to their fear of losing their residency (Hümbelin 2019; Lucas, Bonvin, and Hümbelin 2021), this surprise seems like another field of work that was ignored on the national level.

In response, the social services department of the City of Zurich took an interest in the people standing in line and commissioned a study by the Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW) to find out about their background (Stadt Zürich 2021). Raphael Golta (Social Democratic Part of Switzerland), head of the Department of Social Welfare in Zurich, underlined that this high number of people in need could not be acceptable in a wealthy city as Zurich is (Minor 2021; SRF, Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen 2021; Stadt Zürich 2021). The study found that it was primarily foreign nationals in precarious work arrangements who felt an increased financial burden. Yet, they did not want to receive social assistance because they either were so-called Sans-Papiers (irregularized individuals without a legal status and thus without a right to receive any support) or those with a regular residence or even settlement permit who feared losing their permit.

'Supporting people in need who do not have access to social assistance without risking deportation in the worst case is the absolute minimum. Basic economic assistance is an important step in this direction'. (municipal

councilor Patrik Maillard of the Alternative List (AL party), own translation, in SP Stadt Zürich 2023)

Arguing that the city's task of support with the given measures is hindered by migration policy on national level (which was a wilful purpose of the introduced FNIA, see above), the city of Zurich thus decided to start a project that was later argued to circumvent migration control measures. The project entitled 'economic basic aid' (*wirtschafltiche Basishilfe*) launched with the idea to try out an aid system which specifically targeted the two groups mentioned above to provide them with a temporary (about six-month-long) financial aid package, supported by NGOs, including Caritas, the Swiss Red Cross, the Sans-Papiers contact point (SPAZ) and Solidara Zürich. The plan included 2 million CHF – the first time that sans-papiers receive more than simply emergency aid – and the project was planned to run for 18 months, with a potential for prolongation (Stadt Zürich 2021). Receiving welfare support was anonymous (Koponen 2021) and the amount of support individually decided by the partner organisations. Recipients needed to be anchored in the city of Zurich (at least 5 years in Switzerland and 2 years in Zurich, with a possibility to make exceptions) and the organisations needed to do a subsidiarity control. This includes a check-up to see if there are any other forms of support, such as unemployment benefits that people had the right to. An eligibility check-up regarding social assistance was also carried out, yet if foreign nationals would risk losing their permit upon take-up, they would remain eligible for the economic basic aid (Zürich 2021).

Such policies can be defined as sanctuary, bounded by space and time (Bauder 2016; Darling and Harald 2019). Their scale is located at the cantonal or municipal level and 'outside the bounds of sovereign authority and legal redress' (Darling and Harald 2019, 8), while depending on the toleration of the national level. This was, however, the case, yet it was an internal contestation. Critical voices from liberal and right-wing parties complained that this project takes a conscious and purposeful detour to circumvent laws without repercussions (thus ignoring national laws and intentions). The Swiss People's Party (SVP) called the practice a scandal as laws were openly 'broken', so a municipal council from the SVP, claiming that the administration granted itself the right to 'reformulate the [legal] rules of law' (SRF 2021). It was further claimed that the project had political intentions and ulterior motives against the restrictive migration policies in place. In a public statement, Golta denied this, remaining unaware of migration policy-related obstruction (or maybe pretending to not know), rather highlining that if these are counteracted then for the purpose to stop poverty – something that clearly lies in cantonal responsibilities. Through this argument, he underlines the local competencies that the Swiss federal state legally allows for its cantons:

'Basic economic assistance […] is intended for people who have no or no risk-free access to social assistance. This is a legislative problem. There is a right to assistance in emergency situations in this country, and we must ensure access to it'. . . . 'That's why it's important that we already make a difference at the municipal level. For federalist reasons alone, we have to fight for our leeway, especially since we are ultimately responsible for preventing poverty. And despite everything, we keep our measures within the applicable laws'. (own translation; Golta, Götzö, and Herzig 2021)

While criticism towards the generous support claims an active circumvention of migration law, the project's initiators reclaim the discourse by highlining the fight against poverty, in which the pandemic increased. The need to act is therefore anchored in the increased visibility of precarity that already existed (Regionaljournal, Zürich Schaffhausen 2021; SRF, SRF2021; Stadt Zürich, Sozialdepartement 2021; 2022). Until October 2021 49 adults and 24 children were supported, half of them with a valid residence permit (Stadt Zürich Gemeinderat 2022b) – but again also highlighting that much support is given to children who make up a significant part of social assistance recipients. The external evaluation conducted by the ZHAW after the 10 months the project was running shows how gaps in the social security system could be decreased for people without Swiss nationality, especially those who only recently became dependent on support (Götzö et al. 2022). The two main groups who made use of the support included people who under normal situations have scarce resources and thus depend on support in emergency situations when unexpected expenses occur. The project thus provided a crucial stabilisation for them, during a specific time frame. The second group of people consisted of those who have already lived in hardship for a longer time, even several years. Their situation could not entirely be changed with the six-month support, but due to the often first contact with counselling centres and other assistance services first steps for an amelioration of their situation could be achieved.

Finally, the Liberals (FDP) launched an official complaint with the district council (*Bezirksrat*), arguing that the project would become a second pillar of social assistance, after which the payments needed to be stopped (SRF 2021). In the district council's decision, the summary of the complaint repeats what has publicly been stated. The complaining party argues on a twofold level: first, it assessed that 'with [the city council] decision, he intentionally circumvented the correct application of federal migration law […] and the cantonal laws of Zurich' (own translation; Zürich 2021). Second, the project showed a 'wrong understanding of the constitution' and that individuals not taking up social assistance should be allowed to refrain from it, even stating that it was not a gap of non-take up, but a free choice to waive their rights as part of their 'right to self-determination', which again is based and protected by the constitution (Zürich 2021). This discloses a neoliberal framing and individualisation of dependency that suits the national narrative. The complainant further

argued that the project undermined the public interest to handle migration restrictively and to curb the number of migrants on the territory, supporting it with Art. 121a para. 1 of the Swiss Constitution, regulating immigration. As such, the complainant accused the City Council of openly ignoring and even circumventing laws, as well as having the 'wrong' knowledge or understanding of it. As such, ignoring laws and misunderstanding them for the sake of an alternative way, is strongly intertwined. It is further contested not only between different governance scales but also at the same level and hierarchy. For the City Council to act upon the idea of support they needed to be willing to go against a set of established rules that to the complainant seem obvious, thus establishing a limited legal view on the issue of welfare support for non-citizens. In consequence, the opponent states that they do not see a migration-related legal clause but rather a financial support that has been taken within the rights of municipal autonomy:

> The fact that, thanks to the economic assistance, precarious groups avoid or at least delay going to the social services, does not violate any legal norm, let alone are violations of the law evident. This is all the less the case since the obligation to report the receipt of social assistance by the social assistance authorities to the migration authorities only applies to persons with a right of residence if they receive more than the current amount of CHF 25,000.00 and to permanent residents if they receive more than CHF 60,000.00. The fact that recipients of basic economic assistance take advantage of this assistance in ignorance (*Unwissenheit*, lack of knowledge) of these limits does not make basic assistance an illegal act, especially since it serves to combat poverty and does not follow a migration policy agenda. (own translation; Zürich 2021, 6–7)

Since the legality of the practice is questioned, the City Council explains that a lack of knowledge on side of recipients regarding when social assistance (level of support) can cause a permit withdrawal does not make basic economic aid illegal. While in theory applicants could apply for social assistance and – once it reaches the respective level (see above) – drop out, instead applying for basic economic aid, the City Council argues that applicants do not often know about this. Furthermore – as own research has shown – some social services inform migration authorities already upon the first registration, when no support has yet been paid out (Borrelli et al. 2021).

The denial of taking an interest in migration-related questions on the national level can be read as a technique of governing through ignoring set laws, commonly used in political discussions and interactions (c.f. Aradau and Perret 2022). Yet, the final decision of the federal council argues that the support is given to foreign nationals who actually fall both under the FNIA and the Asylum Act, which is on the national level, not cantonal. It is further highlighted that the basic aid project would undermine the obligation to report – as requested by the FNIA (Art. 97 para. 3 section d) and the VZAE (Art. 82b), both circumventing the obligation to report and causing a lack of transparency, which is not wanted by the legislator. As such, the final verdict

of the district council is that the project tried to purposefully circumvent migration law on a national level and is therefore illegitimate, needing to be stopped without further ado.

The economic basic aid project was thus read as ignoring national law for the purpose of circumventing restrictive migration policies, as well as pushing for more municipal autonomy, where there was little to no room for it. It is not ignorance (i.e. absence of knowledge) but ignoring something that is known. The law in place is known, the City Council does not produce ignorance, but circumvents laws in practice. At the same time, this strategy brings forward a productive side of power in which ignoring is enacted to deny and dilute a specific goal. Instead of actions that 'mobilize, manufacture, or exploit unknowns in a wider environment to avoid liability for earlier actions' (McGoey 2019, 3) and that make-up strategic ignorance, the City Council simply discards the accusations and ignores laws that have so far been interpreted differently. Reframing certain laws and discarding other understandings of them then becomes a form of ignoring that broadens our understanding of ignorance. Where strategic ignorance comes up in 'situations where people create or magnify unknowns in an offensive rather than a defensive way, to generate support for future political initiatives' (McGoey 2019, 3), it is also the ignoring of known aspects that support resistance.

Despite the decision by the district council that the project was unlawful, the parliament of the municipal council has now supported two parliamentary initiatives launched by the Social Democratic Party of Switzerland (SP), the Green Party of Switzerland (Grünen) and the Alternative List (AL) which were handed over to the commission who is now in charge of preparing a bill to be finalised within a year (Schweizerischen Depeschenagentur, SDA 2022a, 2022b). Both of these initiatives take up the content of the basic economic aid project and request 1) a funding framework for a 3-year-long pilot project 'economic basic aid for foreign nationals with valid resident status, wo do not have a risk-free access to social assistance' (Stadt Zürich Gemeinderat 2022b) and 2) a funding for a 3-year-long pilot project for the creation if interim aid for foreign nationals without legal resident status (Stadt Zürich Gemeinderat 2022a), which specifically addresses sans-papiers. The second request underlined their acknowledgement of the indispensable work that irregularized individuals do in often exploitative working conditions (Stadt Zürich Gemeinderat 2022a) and both initiatives have easily passed through the parliament. Both initiatives also mention a belief that it is necessary to act and that they could withstand another recourse in case a complaint should be launched against them.

This aim to neglect prior failure and to potentially ignore the district council's decision on a very similar project also shows how resistance strategies can be based on a stoic position taken by political actors. Ignoring can thus be productive and repetitive at the same time. The two

initiatives try to enforce a very similar program that was prior to being shut down. Yet, the involved parties continue, potentially going against national laws and political intentions. This stands in stark contrast to what Davies, Isakjee, and Dhesi (2017) witness in relation to the state's violent inaction in refugee camps – where they observe a multi-scalar withdrawal and state inaction. In their context, state authorities are 'mobilised into inaction, or to calculatedly limited form of involvement', therefore 'deliberate[ly] ignoring […] glaring humanitarian problem' (Davies, Isakjee, and Dhesi 2017, 1276). This is understood as 'an agnopolitical expression of power: intentionally maintaining ignorance of a situation for political ends' (Davies, Isakjee, and Dhesi 2017, 1276).

The Swiss case becomes particularly interesting, due to the tension between national and cantonal 'sovereignty', due to the differentiated responsibilities that are regulated at either the national or cantonal level. Here, strategic ignorance takes yet another shape. In early 2023, the City of Bern announced a very similar project – called 'interim aid' (*Überbrückungshilfe*) to support poverty-stricken individuals. It is not yet clear if there will be a backlash, but for now the project is envisioned for 1 year and works in collaboration with the social work competence centre (Fachstelle Sozialarbeit, also FASA) of the general association of Catholic parishes in Bern and the region. Like the project in Zurich, actors, including the Migration Office, acknowledged that it became obvious that a far greater number of individuals faced precarious living conditions, including irregularized migrants (so-called Sans-Papiers) and non-citizens who feared repercussions if applying for social benefits (Teuscher 2023). The project has been approved by the municipal council, setting up a service contract with FASA and a supporting evaluation by the der ZHAW. Roughly 220,000 CHF will be available for pilot project between 2022 and 2025 to which the city council has already agreed (Gemeinderat der Stadt Bern 2023). Again, irregularized migrants would receive support based on the level of asylum social assistance and thus higher than emergency aid, which is inadmissible according to cantonal law. This known obstacle is, however, ignored, as is the prior ruling that happened in Zurich. The project further offers demand-oriented short-term counselling, economic support for food, clothes, health, and accommodation, as well as daily livelihood and targets particularly foreign nationals with valid permits, residence, settlement but also short-term permits (L), temporary (F), sans -papiers and sex workers.[1]

Exercising power through these decisions creates knowledge as much as it discloses the exercise of ignorance through blinding out certain laws and practices or reframing them in a way that fits the local political will. In contrast to the legal restrictions that ignore much of integration aspects but those based on economic participation, resisting municipalities ignore given regulations and laws that wish to curb migration flows. Much as Sullivan (2007) argues on

strategic ignorance also ignoring functions 'as an active production of particular kinds of knowledge for various social and political purposes' (Sullivan 2007, 154).

Conclusion

This article builds on an interconnection of different, but strongly interlinked theoretical frameworks. It argued that neoliberal and welfare chauvinistic ideas support bordering processes through structurally neglecting the diverse range of integration practices at the national level. In contrast, the local scale tried to practically resist this one sided view by ignoring legislation. The current national legislative framework emphasises financial autonomy as one of the main characteristics of the right to remain. This legal framework supports structural ignorance, as personal ties and socio-political participation become secondary to labour market participation. The structural blinding out of the diverse potential to show integration (indicated by the FNIA) and an active preference in producing negative discourse on welfare clients is then put into practice at the local level (via migration offices) and produces an active ignoring of individual trajectories. Such connections uncover the scalar nature of governance (Valverde 2010). The merging of government functions and legislation (here migration and social policies) allows national and cantonal migration administration to ask local levels (social services) to do work for them. At the same time, it allows for the emergence of sanctuary policies by municipalities that question the one-sided assessment of integration. These policies also use ignorance but in a productive way, as financial support is provided through alternative means (instead of social assistance) as a way of resistance. Here, ignoring happens in the framing and purpose of the established support. Denial of knowledge and strategic blinding out contribute to local strategies of ignorance and alternative knowledge production that can be very often productive and that stand in contrast to neoliberal bordering mechanisms that blame individuals for welfare dependency, criticising their lack of labour market participation. The production of (alternative) knowledge can lead to the production of new areas of ignorance (Aradau, Canzutti, and Perret 2023), but also discloses ways in which state actors navigate restrictive policy systems. Here, they resist otherwise narrow sets of understanding integration and try to find ways to support non-citizens in need of support. As such, the presented case can disclose entanglements of power, knowledge, and non-knowledge, showing how knowledge and ignoring it become a negotiation process involving various actors. The resulting different forms of knowing and not-knowing help to contextualise power relations (Aradau, Canzutti, and Perret 2023).

I show how the broader political movement towards excluding foreign nationals from the welfare state is contested by certain municipalities, by

ignoring prior rulings and decisions and creating alternative ways of support that undermine restrictive laws. Here the act of ignoring plays a major role, as it underlines the relation between working with uncertainties and different knowledges. Within the contested field of migration control (and at the intersection of social policies), actors contest each other's understanding of policies and may ignore each other's interpretations. This perspective allows us to take up resistance strategies that can be very well read as acts of ignoring are not only taken up by migrants themselves (Stel 2016) but by state actors in the context of restrictive policy making.

Note

1. In Geneva the support goes further than Zurich (Minor 2021). Here 15 million CHF were handed out as Covid Support to those who were in precarious labour situations; including irregularized individuals. A referendum launched from the right-wing political parties in march 2022 resulted in a majority of 68% that supported this retroactive and temporary financial support.

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