



Book Review of Lidén, Gustav and Nyhlén, Jon 2022. *Local Migration Policy: Governance Structures and Policy Output in Swedish Municipalities*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 320 pp.

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Local Migration Policy: Governance Structures and Policy Output in Swedish Municipalities by Gustav Lidén and Jon Nyhlén addresses the changing character of refugee settlement and integration policy in Swedish municipalities over a 10-year period, before and after the 2015 so-called ‘European migration crisis.’¹ Theoretically grounded in the political science literature on central-local state relations, the monograph follows the ‘local turn’ in migration research. More specifically, it is framed as a study of migration policy dynamics following the implementation of the Swedish Settlement Act (SFS 2016: 38).

The Settlement Act is a framework for refugee settlement in Sweden that was introduced following the 2015 ‘long summer of migration’ to facilitate a more equitable distribution of newly arrived subjects between the country’s municipalities. For Lidén and Nyhlén, the policy reform represents a ‘critical conjuncture’ that has significantly reshaped central-local state relations in the field of migration and integration policy. While previously the municipalities were free to decide if and how many refugees they would receive, the central government now allocates refugees through a quota system based on demographic and labour market factors. Treating the reform as a ‘cut-off point,’ the authors examine central-local state governance structures and policy outputs before and after its implementation. In short, they show how the reform, which centralised decision-making power over the distribution of refugees between different municipalities, has provoked diverse and sometimes counteractive municipal-level policy responses.

Methodologically, the study is organised as a mixed-method study, combining quantitative analyses of nationwide statistics with qualitative case studies of policy developments in three selected municipalities: Avesta, Vallentuna and Östersund. The municipalities of Avesta and Vallentuna are included in the study as ‘extreme cases.’ Their respective levels of refugee reception changed dramatically post-2015. Avesta, an industrial working-class town that has long had an active and inclusionary policy of migrant settlement now receives fewer refugees compared to before 2016. In contrast, Vallentuna, an upper-middle-class suburb of Stockholm, which previously avoided (almost) any responsibility for refugee settlement and integration, has been forced

BOOK REVIEW

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to increase admissions. Östersund, a mid-sized municipality in the northern interior, is included as a typical example of a municipality where the number of migrants admitted for settlement appears to be unaffected by the 2016 policy reform.

The monograph consists of nine chapters, including an introduction and conclusion, followed by three methodological appendices and an index. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework. This is centred on three ideal-type models of central-local state governance structures (vertical, horizontal and multi-level) and a typology of liberal *versus* restrictive 'local immigration policies.' Lidén and Nyhlén also adapt Michael Alexander's (2007) model of host-stranger relations and local integration policy, focusing on the temporal horizon of such policies. More specifically, the authors distinguish between integration policies that either see migrants as transient and temporary visitors or as (potential) long-term residents. Chapter 3 gives an account of the post-1970s history of Swedish immigration and integration policy, charting the shifting configurations of central and local state powers in this period. Chapter 4 introduces three case study municipalities and contextualises their settlement and integration policies with regards to their economic and social geography and their recent political history. The structure of the analytical portion of the book (Chapters 5–8) reflects the authors' mixed-method approach, which combines statistical analysis and case studies of policy developments in three selected municipalities. Chapters 5 and 7 are thus based on quantitative analyses of settlement patterns and, respectively, integration policy output variables in Swedish municipalities before and after the implementation of the 2016 Settlement Act. Chapters 6 and 8 are based on a qualitative analysis of the same themes, including situated accounts of developments in the three case study municipalities. The final chapter, entitled 'Bringing the Pieces Together,' attempts to precisely do that. Here, the authors summarise their main empirical findings and comment on their theoretical and policy implications.

On the whole, *Local Migration Policy* is an empirically rigorous study and a valuable contribution to research on the 'local turn' in European reception, settlement and integration policies. In particular, I appreciate the detailed, inductive approach and believe that it serves as an instructive example of how to empirically examine the complex interactions and relations between various levels of government in the field of migration management.

Lidén and Nyhlén call attention to the fact that housing policy has become an important arena for the municipal-level governance of settlement and integration, and that the years since the 'migration crisis' and the subsequent implementation of the Settlement Act has witnessed an increasing politicisation of the policy issues at hand. They show that prior to the introduction of the Settlement Act, levels of refugee admission varied significantly between Swedish municipalities, with 'local migration policies' ranging from 'liberal' to 'harshly restrictive.' The municipalities that received relatively large shares of refugees prior to 2016 were generally smaller ones (i.e., with comparatively low population numbers) and challenging labour market conditions. For the most part, these were also municipalities that were led by centre-left coalitions, with low levels of voter support for the right-wing nationalist

1 A note on terminology is warranted. Lidén and Nyhlén limit their study to the reception, settlement and integration of accepted asylum-seekers, quota refugees and their families (hereafter, refugees), excluding (local) policies on labour and irregular migration. They use the term 'local immigration policy' to refer to municipal policies related to settlement. This is arguably a bit of a misnomer, as the analysis concerns a specific policy field, namely the distribution and settlement of refugees.

party, the Sweden Democrats. The 2016 policy reform has had an ‘equalising effect’ as the distribution of refugees is now tethered to demographic and labour market factors. Indeed, Lidén and Nyhlén emphasise that the implementation of the Settlement Act has involved a shift towards a vertical governance structure in the field of settlement policy. Yet, as they also stress, this centralisation of power has not precluded efforts by municipalities to assert their autonomy by attempting to negotiate with the central state. Some municipalities have also attempted to evade their responsibilities to house newly arrived migrants, enacting various strategies to circumvent current regulations. For example, some municipalities who are unwilling to assume any long-term responsibility for housing refugees have made it a rule to limit access to accommodation and integration services to an initial 2-year period after which the affected persons are cut off from this specific support system.

My main criticism of *Local Migration Policy* is that it takes the notion that the 2015 putative ‘migrant crisis’ was an ‘exogenous shock to European societies’ (p. 3) at face value without critically interrogating the language of ‘shock’ or ‘system collapse’ and how it serves the ends of authoritarian and exclusionary governmental interventions. The authors also gloss over many of the restrictive changes to asylum and migration policy that have been implemented since 2015. Given their interest in the temporal horizon of local integration policy, I would have expected them to address the post-2015 erosion of residency rights and how this has reshaped the conditions for refugee integration in the years following the ‘crisis.’

That said, *Local Migration Policy* is the most comprehensive analysis of the implementation of the 2016 Settlement Act to date and a useful complement to ethnographic studies on the same topic (e.g., [Herbert 2023](#); [Jansson-Keshavarz & Nordling 2022](#); [Rogat 2022](#)). This makes it an important read for researchers, policymakers, and students with an interest in the contemporary politics of refugee settlement and integration. The monograph is also an important addition to the international literature on local-level migration and integration policy, not least as it challenges the common assumption that newly arrived migrants tend to cluster in metropolitan cities and suggest a need for renewed scholarly attention to rural and otherwise provincial localities as spaces of migrant reception and emplacement.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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