

CITY REPORT

Marseille

Reviving the legacy of Mediterranean hospitality.

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1. Abstract & Takeaways

Key Takeaways:

1

Since the city elected a left-wing coalition in 2020 after decades of conservative administration, municipal officials and civil society are working together more closely.

2

Marseille committed to an open harbour policy, with officials referring to the city's history as capital of the Mediterranean: "When someone is drowning, we do not ask for papers, we take them out of the water."

What is unique about the city?

Open harbour again after years of stagnation: Marseille, as one of the historical port cities in the Mediterranean, has a longstanding heritage of migration. However, local governments in the last few decades did not promote inclusive approaches towards newcomers. Numerous civic initiatives since have been helping the migrant population in finding accommodation, offering basic support, and in leading campaigns for migrant rights. The 2020 election of Mayor Rubirola, head of a left-wing coalition led by the Europe Ecology (Green Party), gave a progressive twist to local politics and set Marseille up to be one of the most vocal solidarity cities in opening its harbour and engaging in international city networks.

What are the key factors?

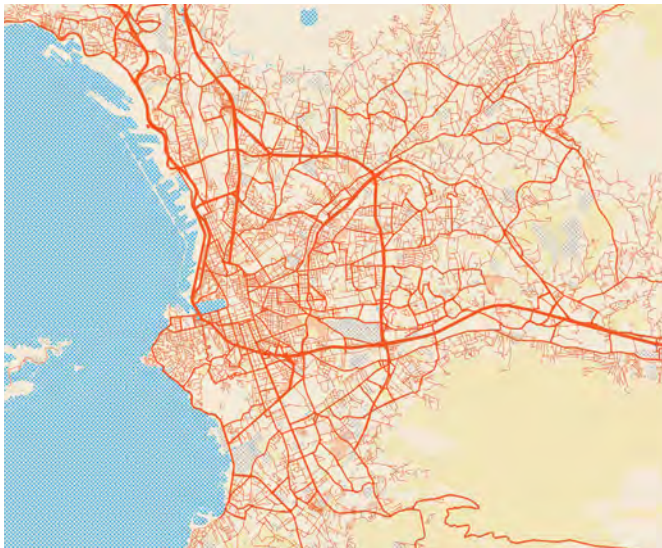
Long-standing activism meets a new administration: Collaboration between public authorities and civil society in Marseille is quite recent, despite the long-term experience of civil society initiatives and NGOs in providing services that welcome newcomers to the city. 2020 marked a breaking point in local politics. The new municipal administration committed to reframing migrant and inclusion policy, an approach that local media described as the "Marseille spring."

What are the most outstanding results so far?

City officials speak out in favour of unconditional welcoming: The commitment to an open harbour policy and the mayor's public interventions arguing for unconditional welcoming is one of the most visible changes the new city government has achieved. The less antagonistic relationship between the city and civil society has allowed for more participation by both in national and international solidarity city initiatives.

Political activities and advocacy beyond the city level?

Marseille reinforces its position as a welcoming city at both national and international levels. The new administration has entered networks with other cities, for example, by joining the ANVITA (Association Nationale des Villes et Territoires Accueillants, or the National Welcoming Cities and Territories Association) and the Solidarity Community Network in support of SOS Méditerranée. In June 2021, Marseille also joined the From Sea to the City alliance.



Population

1,590,867

Location/ region

Marseille is the capital city of the department of Bouches du Rhône and the region of Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur in Southern France.

Mayor (party)

Mayor Benoît Payan (Socialist Party)

2. Local background and context

After more than twenty years of conservative local government, the election of a left-wing coalition in 2020 led to what was called by local media the “Marseille Spring.” Since then, migration policies are changing in a more progressive direction. Longstanding civil society now finds a political partner rather than an opponent in the city government.

The oldest city of France, founded around 600 BC, Marseille has always been a “melting pot” due to its geography. The city’s openness to the Mediterranean has made it a cosmopolitan city marked by cultural and economic exchanges with Southern Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia. The early twentieth century and the second postwar period witnessed the biggest waves of migration in Marseille. The presence of a migratory population still characterises the social composition of this city. In 2017, the foreign population in Marseille represented 10.1% of the city’s population compared to a national average of 6.9%.

The city was governed by Mayor Jean-Claude Gaudin, a member of a right-wing coalition, from 1995 to 2020. During this period, integration policies for migrants and refugees were slow and poor, deepening the gulf between the city’s richer south and northern neighbourhoods (arrondissements), where many immigrants lived in substandard housing,

underserved in education and public transport. During the same period, however, it was civil society and third sector actors that operated antagonistically towards the public administration and actively engaged in shaping complementary public services for migrant communities in Marseille.

Change of course in 2020 with a left-wing coalition

The year 2020 marked a change in local politics. Mayor Gaudin decided not to run for another mandate and Michèle Rubirola, head of a left-wing coalition led by the Europe Ecology, won the city election. The new Municipal administration committed to reframing migrant and inclusion policy, an approach that became described by local media as the “Marseille spring.”¹ On 31 August 2020, the new administration made world headlines by accepting 250 refugees who had been picked up by the Banksy-funded rescue ship the Louise Michel. In addition, the new administration currently led by Mayor Benoît Payan, (under the same coalition, after Rubirola resigned in December 2020 for health reasons) is starting to engage in a fruitful conversation with the city’s civil society on integrated actions benefitting migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.

At a national and international level, Marseille has reinforced its position as a welcoming city. The new administration has signed collaborations and networks with other cities, and by joining ANVITA (Association Nationale des Villes et Territoires Accueillants - National Welcoming Cities and Territories Association)² and the Solidarity Community Network in support of SOS Méditerranée.³ In June 2021, Marseille also joined the From Sea to the City alliance.⁴

3. Selected local approaches

3.1 Welcome services

Before the change of local politics in 2020, an active civil society compensated for lack of municipal. An evolving network of solidarity with migrants provided both social services on the ground and raised awareness about the difficult situation for migrants and asylum seekers in public discourse.

Previous to the Rubirola’s election in 2020, when the city was governed by a center-right coalition, actions in favor of the migrant population and asylum seekers were mostly covered by actors in civil society. In 2006, a Sanctuary Network (Réseau Sanctuaire) was created in France under the initiative of several actors in the voluntary sectors. The initiative’s manifesto focuses on three main considerations: (1) defending the rights of foreigners could no longer be limited to explaining the laws that concern them;

¹ https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/political-spring-in-marseille

² <https://villes-territoires-accueillants.fr/>

³ <https://www.sosmediterranee.fr/journal-de-bord/cp-plate-forme-collectivites-solidaires>

⁴ <https://fromseacity.eu/>

⁵ The Sanctuary Network manifesto (in French): https://www.lacimade.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/manifeste_sanctuaire.pdf

(2) democracies should be based on the defense of fundamental human rights regardless of their administrative situation and nationality; (3) civil disobedience as an active and constructive way of resistance.⁵

An evolving Network of Solidarity

Through this initiative, the Network Hospitality (Réseau Hospitalité),⁶ a collective bringing together different groups and civic initiatives, has campaigned for an “Unconditional Welcome System” in Marseille. Consequently, out of this collective, in September 2017 the ‘Observatoire Asile’⁷ (Asyle Observatory), was founded. It brings together various individual and collective actors (social workers, associative members, volunteers, activists, doctors, lawyers, etc.) to provide a critical space for discussing issues related to the reception system for asylum seekers. Between 2016 and 2017, Réseau hospitalité began an analysis of the administrative, social, work and housing situation of asylum seekers in Marseille, later published in 2019.⁸

Inclusion activities in the absence of institutional efforts

The “Welcome Map” is a new mobile app meant to coordinate voluntary-based actions at the city level, and to provide a wide range of services including accommodation. The Welcome Map was part of the QX1 project of the Collectif Transbordeur⁹ structure partenaire de l’Observatoire Asile Marseille,¹⁰ in collaboration with the Réseau Hospitalité and the Manba social centre.¹¹

In the past, there have been various moments of tension with the municipality due to a lack of adequate services and depreciable living conditions for migrant populations, who found shelter in dilapidated housing estates (e.g. Kalliste in the North of Marseille). Adequate housing remains extremely problematic today.

3.2 A new political commitment: “Ecouter, rassembler, agir, défendre”

The new administration has officially committed itself to improving the conditions of reception and integration of refugees. It adopted the slogan “Listen, gather, act, defend” during the municipal elections. Among the most visible actions is the financial, administrative, and symbolic support of the SOS Méditerranée association as part of its open harbour policy.

The approach, explains Mme Polidano of the Municipality of Marseille—has at the moment achieved some important main milestones over the new administration’s initial period: “We are working very hard to design all the city policies to guarantee citizen rights regardless of their background and origins.”¹² In the following paragraphs, the milestones of this new political stance (recorded from the election in June 2020 until February 2021) are presented.

6 <https://www.reseauhospitalite.org/>

7 <http://www.observatoireasile-marseille.org/>

8 <http://www.observatoireasilemarseille.org/lasile-en-exil/>
<http://www.observatoireasile-marseille.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Asile-en-Exil-Reimpression-1.pdf>

9 <https://collectiftransbordeur.wordpress.com/>

10 <http://www.observatoireasile-marseille.org>

11 https://qx1.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/A2-QX1-Welcome-Map-Marseille_fev21.pdf

12 Interview to Mme Polidano Jan. 2021

Solidarity platform: health and social support

During the municipal council of 23 November 2020, the city relaunched the Solidarity Platform “Entraidons nous” (Let’s help each other), which was activated during the first COVID—19 lockdown. The platform is also expected to offer food aid, clothing donations, hygiene products, or a remote listening platform to particularly vulnerable populations.”¹³ Over the same period, the municipal council voted in other measures in response to the health and social crisis:

- Award of an additional subsidy to the Marseille CCAS¹⁴ of 200,000 euros;
- Doubling of meals distributed by Samu social¹⁵ to reach 1,000 daily meals (and 2,000 masks);
- Creation of a listening and response unit to the health crisis;
- Identification of school accommodation that can be made available to vulnerable people;
- Public Domain Occupancy Fee Exemption in November 2020 for sedentary businesses with a Public Domain Occupancy Authorisation;
- Construction of an Emergency Accommodation Unit (UHU) of 120 housing units in the 15th arrondissement;
- Awarding of grants to more than 20 associations of Solidarity, the Fight against Exclusion and Integration.

Membership of Solidarity Network ANVITA

By joining the ANVITA network, Marseille stands on one hand explicitly in favour of the “unconditional” reception of migrants. It has also entered into a dynamic collective policy process aimed at sharing good practices and developing an organic strategy for local reception in France.¹⁶

Marseille Open Harbour

Marseille has also acceded to the solidarity association SOS Méditerranée. “Marseille now affirms that it is and will remain the unconditional prince of assistance to people in danger. Marseille will never stop its port for refugees who have endangered their lives at sea.” With around thirty other local authorities, the aim is “to give logistical, financial, and human support to the SOS Mediterranean association,” she specifies. “This membership is necessary if Marseille is to remain faithful to its history.”¹⁷ A grant of 30,000 euros to SOS Méditerranée was planned for 2021.

The case of Marseille is interesting as an active and open relationship is evolving between institutions and third sector actors for a common migration and inclusion policy. Even if it is a relatively recent process and still a work in progress, possibilities for joint action are foreseeable.

¹³ https://docs.google.com/document/d/1mLqAS28tG5NZGfZ-TWboFJCh_BMSKkLp7pjxV_F1j7B4/edit?pli=1#

¹⁴ CCAS Centre communal d’action sociale: a public establishment with the goal to organise general prevention and social development action within the municipality, in close collaboration with both public and private institutions. https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Centre_communal_d%27action_sociale

¹⁵ Samu social is a set of non-governmental associations helping the poorest in society. These associations operate a free telephone number which receives calls from homeless people.

¹⁶ <https://www.anvita.fr/index.php/nos-actualites/view/la-ville-de-marseille-adhere-a-lanvita>

¹⁷ <https://toussauveteurs.org/Collectivites>

4. Advocacy and network activities

Elected in June 2020, the new administration led by Michèle Rubirola has adopted a dialogue approach with local associations and NGOs.

Besides articulating reception policies at the local level through the involvement of civil society, the new government is finding a new stage in the solidarity cities discourse at both national and international levels. A few weeks after the election, on 28 June 2020, Mayor Michèle Rubirola publicly declared that the city would open its port to the Louise Michele boat.

The tweet was followed by another one from the first Deputy Mayor, Benoît Payan (subsequently elected Mayor of the city after the Rubirola's resignation for personal issues in December 2020). Both Rubirola and Payan addressed the national government's responsibilities and state competencies in port management, referring to a pre-agreement discussed in Malta in September 2019 to redistribute people rescued at sea between Malta, Italy, France, and Germany.

“These are not refugees or migrants, but shipwrecked people who must be helped. We are not Paris, Bourg-en-Bresse or Grenoble, but Marseille, the capital of the Mediterranean. Throughout our history, the city has had the duty and the responsibility to open its port to all women and men who are in danger of death. When someone is drowning, we do not ask for papers, but we take them out of the water.”¹⁸

¹⁸ <https://www.laprovence.com/article/edition-marseille/6092486/marseille-prete-a-ouvrir-son-port.html>

¹⁹ <https://www.sosmediterranee.fr/journal-de-bord/cp-plate-forme-collectivites-solidaires>
²⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IhJl_imvxZk&feature=youtu.be

²¹ Interviews conducted in January 2021 with representatives of the local administration and civic society.

To reinforce its position as a welcoming city, the administration has entered into collaborations with other cities by joining ANVITA and by joining the solidarity community network in support of SOS Méditerranée.¹⁹ Concerning the declarations on the opening of ports, the debate has remained exclusively political.²⁰ In practical terms, the administration has developed solidarity and hospitality policies and practices, and the data confirms this as of the beginning of 2021.²¹

The **Moving Cities** project provides an in-depth research of 28 progressive, solidarity-based cities and their strategies in Europe, exploring their most inspiring and successful local approaches to their migration policies.

Moving Cities is a project from Seebrücke, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung and Heinrich Böll Stiftung, funded by Robert Bosch Stiftung and Stiftungsfonds Zivile Seenotrettung and supported by many more initiatives.

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