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Urban resilience and migration governance in Tunisia's unstable political environment

Ricard Zapata-Barrero 

Social and Political Science Department, GRITIM-Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain



ABSTRACT

Tunisia is discovering a new migration pattern, with new arrivals staying rather than transiting, given the agreements between the EU and Tunisia to secure their borders. And this is happening in an extremely unstable environment that oscillates between democracy and autocracy. In this scenario, Tunisian cities are becoming catalysts for migration governance resilience. Drawing on the extensive literature on urban resilience but applied to pressures caused by human factors, this article proposes in the first section to use this category of analysis in the under-researched field of urban migration governance. In the second section, the main sources and methodology of the fieldwork conducted in July 2021 will be briefly presented before reviewing the Tunisian context from a city perspective. Then, in a third section, we will turn to the main findings that establish that migration governance and urban resilience go hand in hand for the ongoing transformative democratic process in Tunisia, or its stagnation. Concluding remarks will assess the empirical potential of the urban resilience approach for the analysis of similar processes in this Mediterranean sub-region.

KEYWORDS Democratization; autocracy; migration governance; urban resilience; Tunisia

Introduction

The process of recognition of cities as migration governance actors is a phenomenon of the 21st century. This 'new localism' trend according to leading urban researchers (Katz & Nowak, 2018) and 'local turn' for migration researchers (Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017) has only recently been incorporated into the global migration agenda (2017; Habitat III, 2017; IOM, 2015; UN Sustainable Development Agenda, 2022). Migrants arrive in urban areas (often moving from one city to another in a long migratory journey) under conditions that are largely shaped by both national and international migration policies. This represents a chronic stress on policy infrastructures (health care, housing, education, employment, etc.) to ensure human rights conditions and a livable environment. It is now widely recognized that for many

CONTACT Ricard Zapata-Barrero  ricard.zapata@upf.edu  Social and Political Science Department, GRITIM-Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain

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cities, international migration has even become a more important determinant of population growth than native age structures, fertility, and mortality (Skeldon, 2013).

In migration studies, most of the recent literature mentions constraints that cities must face in building their migration governance (Caponio et al., 2019), but very few try theorizing an approach to better grasp these challenges. This city agency is pushing towards governance from different avenues: from the upper level of governance, from the same urban context, from the international and national policies, often obsessed with national security. There is a need to analyse this multilayered pressure system because it often determines decision-making and policy officials' behaviour. The focus of this article lies within this research area. There is a need to articulate the first premises of these resilient practices, which have an empowering (Curtis, 2014) and transformative dimension (Yamagata & Maruyama, 2016) for cities (Resilient Cities, 2017; Habitat, 2015). This approach invites us to look at the place of city agency within a regional, national, and global context (European Commission, 2015). This article will take Tunisian cities as a case study and engage in the urban resilient literature by applying this category of analysis to examine pathways towards democratization or autocracy in socially and politically unstable environments.

The vast literature on urban resilience (Brantz & Sharma, 2020; Burayidi & Allen, 2020; Galderisi, 2014; Hamstead et al., 2021; Meerow et al., 2016; Wilkinson & Remøy, 2018; Yamagata & Maruyama, 2016) deal with topics such as climate change, natural disasters, including terrorism, poverty, and even revolutionary movements. But immigration, as a social stressor for cities, has not been investigated in depth, despite being a determining global phenomenon for the future of cities. In addition, the main focus of much of the scholarly debate is on resilience-building processes (how to build resilient policies) and drivers (what factors trigger resilience), but here too there is no direct discussion of the normative foundations of urban resilience, namely a deep sense of urban justice and human rights-centred approach (Zapata-Barrero, 2023). There is also a gap in the impact of urban resilience in given ongoing extremely unstable social and political environments.

This article will shed light on these gaps and argue that the urban resilience approach can help to understand how an unstable system can speed up or slow down the democratization process in Tunisia, as urban resilience on migration governance definitely has an impact on the relations between cities and upper levels of government. In the case of Tunisia, the recent autocratic process headed by President Kais Saied, whose mission was to champion the democratic process, froze the activities of the democratically elected legislative body in Tunisia, by concentrating the political system on the presidency and reducing the governance capacity of cities (Bouhlet, 2022). In this unstable political and social environment, urban resilience and

migration governance become decisive factors for the political future of Tunisian society.

In the first section, the urban resilient category of analysis in the study of urban migration governance will be briefly reviewed. At this stage, the article will underline how this category of analysis can contribute to understanding the Tunisian current conundrum towards more autocracy after a decade of democratic process, which took the decentralization of the state, and the cities election, the epicentre together with civil society (Gallien & Werenfels, 2019; Yerkes & Muasher, 2018; Yerkes et al., 2022). In the second section, the main sources and methodology of the fieldwork conducted in July 2021 will be succinctly introduced before overviewing the Tunisian context from the city lens. Then a third section will jump towards the main findings that clearly state that urban migration governance and urban resilience go hand in hand and can be a decisive factor for the ongoing transformative democratic process in Tunisia, or its stagnation, as it happened during the last year, with Tunisia going towards a more autocratic system of governance. The concluding remarks will assess the empirical potentialities of the resilient cities approach for the analysis of urban migration governance in unstable social and political environments in other surrounding countries of the Global South (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2020). This may leave us with a debate, which can also be extended to other countries experiencing similar processes, such as Morocco, on how migration governance and resilience of cities could be a driver for the strengthening or weakening of ongoing democratic processes.

Theoretical part: resilient cities and governance innovation

The term 'resilience' was first coined in physics and mathematics to describe a material's ability to regain equilibrium following a disturbance (Norris et al., 2008). In the 1970s, Holling (1973) applied the resilience metaphor to ecological systems and their capacity to adapt to adverse conditions. Since then, probably due to its metaphorical origin, a huge debate arose inside and outside disciplines (Brantz & Sharma, 2020; Burayidi & Allen, 2020; Hamstead et al., 2021; Wilkinson & Remøy, 2018; Yamagata & Maruyama, 2016) and even a more policy-oriented discussion at the global level (Resilient Cities, 2017; Habitat, 2015; IOM, 2017; OECD, 2014; World Bank, 2015). Recently, even the security approach has been applied at the local level in terms of urban resilience (Svitková, 2021). An overview shows that resilience is based on nonlinear dynamics, buffering capacity, self-organization (and self-regulation for ecosystems), and learning (Walker & Salt, 2012). As a boundary concept (Brand & Jax, 2007), it designates a perspective and a way of thinking about how a system reacts to pressures. Inspired by the core debates around the concept (Biggs et al., 2016; Da Silva & Morera, 2014;

MacKinnon, 2015), resilience building is understood as a policy strategy for empowering cities and developing urban capacities in extreme situations where the identity of their system is threatened by internal or external factors. Urban resilience is also a learning process to govern the spectrum of uncertainties, hazards, and risks related to migration-related stresses. Resilient cities look for ways to face pressure in their legal, institutional, and policy infrastructures.

For the Tunisian case, Bouhlet (2022) describes the current scenario marked by 'extreme political uncertainty'. In the Tunisian fieldwork, most city policy officers assume that there is a real atmosphere of insecurity in the society that directly affects the stability of the urban system. These stressors can have many sources: institutional pressures or juridical and political limits, often coming from the upper level of governments and the same multi-level structure of the state; social stresses, such as discrimination and racism, precariousness (unemployment, lack of income, poverty), legal status (refugees, undocumented, etc.). The last COVID-19 pandemic even functioned as an accelerator of these current stressors in Tunisian cities, and in most cases, it worsened the current vulnerable situations of most migrants elsewhere (European Commission, 2020). One influential report pioneered by the Rockefeller Foundation (Resilient Cities, 2017) illustrates the importance of re-conceptualizing the urban landscape to include the shocks and stresses of the 21st Century, as well as the need to build overall resilience that can ensure cities thrive amid the uncertainties of the years ahead.

In the framework of this article, resilience is a category that may help to analyse how Tunisian cities construct their own agency based on deep urban justice concerns in an adverse and uncertain environment. This article is particularly interested in examining how this resilience acts as a catalyst for the democratization/autocracy processes in Tunisia. Etymologically 'catalyst' is a person or thing that precipitates an event or change, whilst in chemistry is a substance that causes a chemical reaction to take place more quickly.¹ Exploring a dynamic and unstable political system such as that of Tunisian cities could also have, as an added value, the argument of how city resilience could significantly contribute to the process of democratization/autocracy of the Tunisian system.

Resilient cities often look for innovative ways to face pressure in their legal, institutional, and policy infrastructures, with interconnected cultural, economic, territorial/demographic, political, and social dimensions (IOM, 2017). Taken broadly, the World Bank (2015, p. 19) describes resilience as the ability of a system to adapt to a variety of changing conditions and to withstand shocks while maintaining its essential functions. Habitat (2018) points more to the transformative dimension that follows resilience building and provides an initial workable definition:

Urban Resilience is the measurable ability of any urban system, with its inhabitants, to maintain continuity through all shocks and stresses, while positively adapting and transforming toward sustainability. A resilient city assesses, plans, and acts to prepare and respond to hazards - natural and human-made, sudden and slow-onset, expected and unexpected—to protect and enhance people's lives, secure development gains, foster an environment for investment, and drive positive change.

In this article resilience applied to urban migration governance refers to the capacity of a system to resist but also to process the pressures they have and that provoke stress through determinate mechanisms. The main objective is both survival and to keep the functioning of the system. This especially affects Arab Mediterranean cities today (UN Development Programme, 2018).

The driving force of resilience action for many cities is that if they do nothing, the current circumstances may lead to increased spatial slums, precariousness, territorial segregation, discrimination, racism, and increase coexistence uncertainty (Turki, 2014). There are also some unintended consequences, such as xenophobia and urban hostility towards migrants (Da Silva & Morera, 2014). In general, resilience is a category of analysis that allow us to frame extreme human situations produced in extremely unstable political and social environments. The premise is then that building resilience governance is not an isolated practice, since it necessarily entails claiming power and autonomy, often breaking current political and legal boundaries giving rise to multi-level governance tensions/cooperation, and multi-scalar alliances with a multiplicity of public (mainly Civil Society Organizations, CSOs) and private actors, networks, and trans-local ties with other cities (Zapata-Barrero, 2022). Concurrently with a multiplicity of intentions, articulating claim-making and activism as new practices in their governance routine. It is remarkable how the governance concept encompasses the simultaneous mobilization of public authorities, as well as of CSOs and social movements (Piattoni, 2010), and international organizations.

The Tunisian case study is a good example of how urban resilience building is playing a decisive role in assessing the democratization/decentralization process, but also how the autocratic recent wave in 2022 is both an effect and a cause of more resilience. This empirical argument will cluster most of the analysis. For conceptual needs, we will analyse how two main layers stress urban migration governance. 'Social resilience' paints the current scenario of most Tunisian cities, mainly from the coastlines, which are shifting from being transited to also consolidating the process of becoming cities of migration. This variation means that most cities are becoming aware they are being transformed into buffer cities, blockade cities for most migrants that are forced to stop and reconsider their migratory process towards Europe, given the strong controls Tunisia is deploying following its EU-Tunisia agreements on controlling borders. There is also, pressure from above, that will be

categorized as 'political resilience' and it is directly related to the upper level of governance, which provokes additional pressures on cities, with a lack of immigration governance orientation, legal instruments, and political will, as it has been depicted by interviewees.

There is also an assumed view that links the autocratic (tradition and continuity) and democratic (modernity and change) binomial with the national/city divide, being the local level the catalyst of change, innovation, and democracy. This leads to interpreting the lack of competence definition, the ambiguities and struggles regarding the power distribution between national, regional, and local levels as a clear illustration of the ongoing process of decentralization (Diehl, 2020, p. 242; Natter, 2021). There is an undefined but rigid competence system. Beyond the frontline of assistance/care, cities are always forced to request permission at the national level. This dependence is contradictory to the decentralization process and faces cities with a democratic paradox. It is one of the key issues nurturing the public and scholarly debate. The question that remains in the public Tunisian debate is: 'For whom does the bell ring? Who benefits from such instability?' (declaration quoted by Ferchichi, 2021, May 29).

Sources and method

The main sources of information come from scholarship works on Tunisian political processes in general, on migration governance in particular, and desk review, which includes institutional writings, reports, and leading French-language Tunisian newspapers. In addition, a substantial source of information comes from six semi-structured interviews with nine participants (two interviews were held with two people together, a politician and a policy officer), in the form of a conversation.² The five guiding questions were: 1. What is the current social and political situation regarding the governance of migration in your city? 2. What are the main challenges you encounter in implementing your policies with respect to the Tunisian democratic process? 3. How do you develop strategies to deal with these challenges? 4. How do you think your activities may affect the same democratic process? 5. How do you define your relationship with other NGOs, other public/private actors, and other authorities to face these challenges?

The profile of the interviewees was elected representatives with responsibility over migration policies. Each one represents one city (Sousse, Sfax, La Marsa and Zarzis). Also, two experts were able to do an initial diagnosis of migration governance.³ When talking about the governance of migration and the new changing urban scenario that most cities are experiencing, from transit cities to becoming buffer cities for most of the migrants initially willing to cross the Mediterranean, the notion of resilience always crossed our narrative frames, even if the concept was explicitly absent. The participants

spoke directly about pressures, resistance, and even psychological stress and always pictured an urban environment surrounded by uncertainties, risks, concerns about the behaviour of their own citizens, fears towards the changing urban landscape with increasing migrants occupying the streets and the basic city public spaces, without any resources and political support from upper-level powers. All the interviewees signed an ethical consent for the use of information and identification of names, given they acted as institutional representatives. All the interviews were transcribed and returned to the participants to have their consent and give them the possibility to modify/improve the information. Content analysis has been done following patterns of identification of main narrative frames and for the overall interviews, information complementarity was followed as a rule, but also taking into account contextual urban specificities, such as the city of Zarzis, where most of the corps of migrants reached their coastline. Methodologically, a saturation of information has been reached since these cities are the most active in the development of an urban migration agenda, interlinked as participants in international networks such as the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), UN-Habitat and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) Networks.

Context: Tunisian cities discover migration under an extremely political and social unstable environment

Tunisia is one of the Middle East and North Africa's most urbanized countries. Roughly 70 per cent of the country's 11 million citizens live in towns and cities (World Bank, 2014). Today, after the Tunisian crucial task of transferring power from the national to the local level, since 25 May 2022, there is a new process of power concentration, leaving the cities in a completely 'abandoned' situation. President Kais Saied, who moved to rule by decree after shutting down Parliament last year and expanding his powers with a new constitution passed in a 25 July 2022 referendum, has said the measures were needed to save Tunisia from years of crisis. The referendum result accepted the new constitution, significantly strengthening the presidential power. What becomes significant is that both the previous deconcentrating of power and now the new concentration is justified by similar arguments, such as the potential to solve structural acute problems of territorial disparity issues (Yerkes & Muasher, 2018), which is one prominent factor of an internal exodus. At the national level the migration agenda penetrated the public debate only after 'the Jasmine Revolution' (Boubakri & Potot, 2013; Dini & Giusa, 2020), and as a symptom of democratic change since before it was a taboo issue (Geisser, 2019). But the expansion of citizens' political freedoms did not result in pro-migrant rights reforms. It instead led to the continuation of restrictive migration policies inherited from the authoritarian past (Cassarino, 2018; Natter, 2022). The basic guideline for cities to build their governance system was the Local Authorities Code (May 2018),

regulating the responsibilities of the municipalities concerning the region and central state. This framework for decision-making has been also cut by the current autocratic situation, leaving city resilience in a much more critical situation. In any case, as the interviews were conducted before the concentration of power and in a full process of democratization, interviewees also regretted that migration issues were absent in the Code. Migration enters into the local agenda basically under the 2020 health pandemic crisis, as a natural shock.

In the absence of an official structure for the reception and assistance of migrants and refugees, Tunisian and international CSOs play a decisive role in the protection of migrants and refugees (Pastore & Roman, 2020; Rekik, 2020, p. 24). Interviews show that there is public awareness to be at the preliminary phase of constructing a migration policy architecture, without a previous policy paradigm. As the Vice-mayor of La Marsa said 'roads are made by walking'. This constructivist policy approach is probably one of the general trends of a resilient environment. Cities are shaping policies following urgent needs, oriented by pragmatism and human values, and highly stressed by extreme human and social situations. In this embryonic policy laboratory, resilience frames every governance decision. The feeling of being isolated, without active support from the central government, was a recurring interview theme. There is consciousness of what the city mayor of Zarzis said: 'taken globally, we become a "blocking corner in the Mediterranean", and this means that we are forced to act and do something'.

The municipal elections on 6 May 2018, were the first ones after the 2011 Revolution. They were publicly framed as being the root of the democratic process, closely linked to a commitment to decentralization given the centralization of the former Ben Ali's authoritarian regime. This aimed at implementing chapter 7 of the 2014 Constitution and laying the foundation for local authority. This Constitution has been praised as one of the most progressive in the history of the region (Diehl, 2020, p. 218), providing opportunities for political parties to reconsider their proximity to voters (Nouira, 2018). Probably the best way to define the current Tunisian situation is that it is a hybrid political object (Diehl, 2020; 244Gallien & Werenfels, 2019; Geisser, 2019), between continuity (centralization and autocracy) and change (decentralization and democracy). Since 2022 Tunisia is undergoing a period of transition and evolution of its political system: after a decade of decentralization and democratization, the country is moving again towards a unitary regime, in which the central government reconcentrates the powers that it had previously decentralized, among which are those of the local governments. Municipalities are losing part of the few autonomy they win after the Jasmine Revolution and then today they become even more resilient towards migration governance. Hence the back and forth between traditional power and policy innovations shape city resilience. Interviews show us that

there is awareness that the real political change in Tunisia, if it comes, will be from local governance. This highlights the importance of how cities are related to CSOs and are working together on migration issues. In fact, this interface is evidenced when most of the elected representatives come from independent lists and human rights/activist CSOs (Rekik, 2020). This pattern is extremely important, since most city representatives have experience in lobbying, using their voice option as activists.

During conversations with city representatives about migration governance the main concern was that this democratic/decentralization national engagement is being made without corresponding power deconcentration in terms of financial and competence resources. Most scholars and reports often signal that only 3 per cent of the national budget goes to the 350 local authorities in Tunisia and that most competencies, such as the migratory one, are still undefined (OECD, 2019). The elected mayors do not have a leeway giving the means to meet the expectations of the inhabitants and most of the time they govern migration within a legal grey zone and political limbo. In practice, the national executive gives authorization for most local decisions and then the upper-level politicians continue to govern indirectly through representatives, governors, and delegates (Mohsen-Finan, 2021, p. 202).

The migration folder is entering the national agenda under this urban politically resilient atmosphere. Almost all the interviewees shared the legitimate complaint that there were no national guidelines that can help them to frame their own migration policies. This situation of uncertainty has become today -after the 2022 referendum legitimating more concentration of power- a great stressing factor (Bouhlet, 2022). As most participants recognized, the pandemic made visible what was previously hidden: the existence of irregular migrants overstaying in Tunisian towns involuntarily since the Mediterranean crossing conditions became very difficult given EU-Tunisian agreements on controlling borders (Dini & Giusa, 2020; Jendoubi, 2017; Narbone, 2020). This natural acute shock, as it is labelled in the resilience literature (OECD, 2014), has forced most cities to take migration governance seriously.

If the health pandemic crisis were the catalyst driver, some national contextual factors also contribute to pushing migration into the local agenda. First, the Libyan civil war prompted several hundred thousand Asian, Arab, and sub-Saharan African migrant workers as well as Libyan families to cross into south-eastern Tunisia (IOM, 2012) and live within chronic insecurity (Alcaraz, 2018). As they mostly live irregularly, statistics are unreliable, but estimates range from 8,800 (in the 2014 census) to over a million Libyans residing in Tunisia (Boubakri, 2015). This 'Tunisian route' ceased for most migrants to be stepping-stones to the European continent and became a destination itself (Report, 2018), giving cities a new reality as arrival cities (Salem, 2021). Visa-free access for several West African countries plays a driving role in personal country/city selection (Aouani et al., 2020, p. 8).

Then after 90 days in Tunisia, they begin to automatically live with an irregular status and accumulate debt with national authorities since they cannot pay fines. This system represents a significant barrier to mobility (Aouani et al., 2020, p. 16). An additional and prominent factor is that the EU has begun to outsource the responsibilities of migration and refugee processing to Tunisia (Ketchum, 2019, p. 3). Even after the national authorities have publicly expressed their refusal to become a 'guardian' of European borders (Boubakri, 2013, 2021; Dini & Giusa, 2020, chap. 6), EU conditionality and the EU step-by-step policy (Bisiaux et al., 2020, pp. 37–43) forces Tunisia to control borders (2014; European Commission, 2014; European Union, 2012) and contribute to shaping the EU containment policies in the Mediterranean (Parks & Bakir, 2021). And this is happening with a known systemic violation of human rights (Badalic, 2018, p. 97), in exchange for financial benefits (Ketchum, 2019), which do not reach the cities. This situation forces cities to be 'a blocked corner in the Mediterranean', as the city major of Zarzis labelled, and become 'buffer cities'.

The stressful constraints suffered by municipalities are recognized by the media, especially during the pandemic (Ferchichi, 29 May 2021). Within the public agenda, there is also a reiterated denunciation of instability, and its lack of transparency (Dridi, 24 January 2020b). The general view is also that it is necessary to change mentalities (Dridi, 8 January 2020a). This argument matches the position of interviewees without embracing full optimism. They have stressed their difficulties in implementing their migration-related decisions and how they manage to face challenges without resources, combining will, humanitarian convictions, and 'imagination', for a great resilient psychological cocktail.

Discussing with the main local policymakers and politicians (La Marsa, Sfax, Sousse, Zarzis) where their everyday pressure lies and how they solve these challenges, the general pattern is that their 'discovery of migration' is full of uncertainties about the future of the same democratic process. Most of the interviewees drew a scenario of extreme instability if nothing is done to reduce pressure. Moreover, these hard-structural situations are performed mostly by independent politicians under individual benevolent work, since most of them insist that they are not paid. For most, the municipal code is a great democratic milestone, but as most remind us, democracy cannot be performed without resources and with huge legal deficits. Denouncing that migration is simply not present in the national political agenda, goes together with results of interviews showing how most of the local policymakers and elected politicians' motivation have a deep personal urban justice conviction of working for the common good and ensuring migrants the 'rights to have rights' (Arendt, 1976, p. 298). This is not surprising when most of the members of the local government come from human rights movements, with a clear

humanitarian vocation, and an understanding of democracy as a normative process of urban justice.

Under these specific stressful circumstances, the greater concern is that with the increasing arrival of migrants, primarily from sub-Saharan (mainly Somalia, Erythrite, and Côte d'Ivoire), but now also from other Arab countries (mainly Algeria, Morocco, and Libya) and Asia, and with added Tunisian migrants coming from rural Southern areas (Sobczak-Szelc & Fekih, 2020), if the 'non-welcoming national policies' (Bisiaux et al., 2020) remain, the tensions will grow. For all of them, political and legal reforms are compelling to reduce the current resilient environment. The overall diagnosis for most is clear: having more autonomy for decision-making cannot be a factor of democratization if the resilient circumstances in an extremely unstable environment remain.

Tunisian cities are governing immigration by groping on the dark side of the democratic/autocratic process

The literature often highlights the importance of CSOs in shaping the form and dynamic of the democratization process in Tunisia (Weilandt, 2022), reinforced by the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 to the National Dialogue Quartet.⁴ But there is also a lower-level governmental actor that is also recognized as a central actor in the current literature on democratic learning (Mohsen-Finan, 2021). The cities are shown to have a decisive role in the post-revolutionary era, especially since the 2020 pandemic when irregular migrants became visible to public authorities. According to Geisser (2019, p. 6) most CSOs, such as the Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Économiques et Sociaux (FTDES, Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights) or the same UGTT played a major role in denouncing security policies for the management of migration. They directly contributed to linking democratic governance with migration governance. Tunisia is a stimulating laboratory because a resilient political environment tests the ongoing 'decentralization experiment'. The country is a very important reference model for most of the surrounding Arab countries (Kherigi, 2020, p. 6). The fact that today there is one decade stagnation-period of democratic process, and that this is done by a re-concentration of power, is an illustration of the validity of this argument of urban resilience in migration governance.

In this context, urban migration resilience has three substantial challenging areas: a) the same situation of migrants. According to one interviewee and confirmed by key reports (Bisiaux *et al.*, 2020) 95 per cent of migrants lives in hiding. Irregularity has been routinized given the rigid legal and political restrictions (Rekik, 2020, p. 31); b) the same re-centralization process suddenly stops the previous policy frame of the Local Authorities Code passed on May 2018⁵ c) and the global/regional geo-migratory system,

layered by bilateral agreements, economic/political instability, but also the migratory consequences of the Libyan war since 2011.

Tunisian cities recognize that migrants are becoming aware that they must stay in urban surroundings, given the difficulties of crossing the Mediterranean through safety routes. But special psychology is transformed into frustration and aggressiveness with the local population, as has been pointed out by the Major of Zarzis. Hence, the first social riots begin to fill the local agenda (Boitiaux, 2018; Carretero, 2018). With latent racism (Boubakri, 2020), Tunisia has been the first country to enact pioneering anti-racism legislation in the region on October 23rd, 2018, but without a national strategy (Fassatoui, 11 February 2021). Cities use this deficit to press central authorities and request to them urgency to deploy mechanisms for its implementation (Rekik, 2020). Although public authorities have difficulties recognizing it, CSOs always alert that racism is not only social but has a structural origin (Parikh, 2021; Slim, 2021). AB informed that most Arab people and sub-Saharaners arrive or are transferred to big cities and then they settle down in the streets. Coastal Tunisian cities use to be real migration hubs but are now becoming trapped cities.

The main resilient arena for Tunisian cities is clearly a legal deficit, and the lack of political support from upper levels of government. It currently seriously curtails a fluid relationship between migrants and the same local authorities. Moreover, the few legal resources are often used by national authorities to limit the local governments' power seeking to manage housing, labour, and legal issues related to migrants' urgent needs. The situation of the cities is well summarized by MWA: 'We do not have the legal framework to deal with it, because it is not our competence. We do not have the human resources to take action and help out or the financial resources. We do not have anything at all. This is a problem that has been imposed on us'. The lack of democratic coordination between different levels of government and the lack of data to understand the current situation could be added to the list of pressing factors, following IO's assessment. A review of the main resilient stressors that affect the democratic process can be made through interviews. These are mainly contextual and could be external or internal to the same city system.

Let's begin with *external stressors*. Throughout the interviews, emerged that three basic stressors put pressure on cities and demand more democratic means for migration governance: the pandemic, the Libyan war and its migratory aftermath, and the European politics of containment, making the cities a 'blocked area' for more migrants as stated by the Major of Zarzis. A fourth factor can also be included, which is the African countries' political and economic instability, that force most migrants to move, as was pointed out by HB. The territorial socio-economic cleavage within Tunisia itself is also

permanently referred to since it forces most Tunisians to an exodus towards richer coastal cities.

Internal factors also become very important, pushing most cities to more democratic claims. These can be divided into temporal, spatial, resource-based, and law/norms-based stressors.

There is a general consensus that the city hall cannot leave things to happen without intervention. Urgency is a key resilient driver for most Tunisians. As ML states 'in Zarzis, when there is an announcement of a corpse on the coast, we cannot leave it for another day'. This *temporal stressor* crosses most of the participants' narratives at different areas of action. There are also specific needs by sub-Saharan and other migrants staying in improvised locations by the city council, since Tunisia does not agree to build migrant camps or hotspots, even with the EU budget. Migrants usually occupy local building infrastructures and live in concentrated sports centres and/or abandoned buildings. According to national legislation, migrants can only be concentrated for two months, then if there is no solution for them, they are 'free to leave', which means occupying the city's streets, as irregular migrants. There is also another type of temporal stressor pushing for more stable democratic intervention since most interviewees warn that it is very difficult to govern without never knowing how long the measure will be adopted or restricted by national authorities. MWA leaves this point over as follows: 'the municipality [...] meets up to coordinate and look for solutions that are not definitive because we do not have the necessary competencies to regulate their situations'. There is also another mentioned temporal stressor: The recognition that policy-makers face these challenging situations without any signal anticipating it, being the pandemic an accelerator of resilience. This lack of prevision, these unforeseen consequences of social dynamics within an unstable democratic process, is also one source of a resilient environment. This is probably a specific feature of resilient-mindedness, challenged by short-termism. NH expresses this pragmatism perfectly when she confesses that 'we had to put into place strategies to ensure the survival means of migrants that were going to be deported'.

As we have seen, the arrival of migrants poses serious public space problems in most Tunisian cities. The sprawl of slums and the territorial concentration of groups of migrants, without any housing, can be seen as spatial stressors because most of the time the living conditions are unhealthy. This spatial stressor becomes obvious when some interviewees confess that their first task is to take migrants off the streets where they usually sleep and eat. The Major of Zarzis reiterates that 'at some point, people begin to become aggressive in the streets', because most migrants are disappointed in their migratory journey, and forced to stay in Tunisian coastal cities. There is also spatial stress when cities must decide where to bury corpses that come

to their shore. This creates a stressful situation that presses most cities to request more democratic tools to overcome these problems.

But apart from these temporal and spatial stressors, the absence of democratic mechanisms to implement a few current laws and the rigidity of the existing Tunisian norms preventing cities from acting on migration issues is one of the main limits for a democratic city migration governance (Veron, 2020). This absence of a clear jurisdiction, laws, and norms for governing migration is a real pressure for most city officials. There is full awareness of the importance of the code of local collectivities, which is interpreted as an instrument for both decentralization and democratization, but also the difficulties to use it for migration issues. Since there is no national plan on this issue, but rather legal constraints, much of the time the city is forced to leave most actions to national and international CSOs, and build alliances with them, as we will see below.

Regarding the overview and the basic features of a Tunisian resilient governance environment, it is certainly pushing most cities to claim for more democratic tools to govern migration. As was already pointed out, the governance of migration enters the local agenda with the first generation of elected politicians, but economic and legal resources remain almost the same as in the old regime. So, there is some psycho-social driver, combining personal motivation with first frustrations limiting power and autonomy for decision-making. For most participants in the interviews, the four main issues in their agenda, well expressed by IO, leaves clear this lack of democratic instruments. First, there is a lack of national legal instruments for the protection of migrants. The unique instrument related to migration is the pioneering anti-racism legislation (October 2018), but it lacks a normative for its implementation. This legislation was incorporated into the national democratic process as a condition from the EU, but cities cannot make use of it. Second, there is a deficit of economic and human resources, as we already signalled. There is a lack of budget and resources to cope with the resilient situations cities are experiencing, becoming cities of migration receiving always limited resources that strictly require authorization from national authorities for their usage. The third issue, which might be already included within the first two, is the lack of coordination between local and central national authorities. Cities are constrained by the absence of legal and democratic resources for managing migration, but when they claim debates and meetings, they often meet the door closed for these issues. One of the issues that are directly related to the resilient environment and push cities to claim more democracy is the lack of data. This question is certainly important since without the possibility to gather data from national authorities, it is very difficult to build policy scenarios for governance, and work prevention.

This also leads to a new feature of Tunisian resilient cities. The situation of permanent (and 'structural') *political and social uncertainties and a multi-risk*

system. The Mayor of Zarzis expressed this over and over again: 'we live in a permanent tension', 'we are not ready for that [...] it is a cumulative problem'. ML uses a French expression 'On est placé entre le marteau et l'enclume' ('we are between the hammer and the anvil'), which means that cities are between two opposing camps and exposed to receiving blows from both sides, between two conflicting interests: immigrants needs and lack of national democratic support.

This sheds light on a substantial pattern, directly related to democratic values. All city officials are motivated by deep normative principles of urban justice. We just quote ML, the mayor of Zarzis: 'We make humanitarian decisions because when we see those people, we see our children who have also been left by the sea and passed away'. This statement perfectly summarizes how cities must face extreme situations. Gathering from interviews the values and moral principles motivating them to face the social and politically resilient environment, we found social cohesion, human rights, and personal dignity, together with a firm approach to inclusion of all vulnerable people. Some religious values come through in most interviews, such as solidarity, a cultural feature of Muslim society demonstrated by the burying of dead migrants, as the same ML highlighted.

The four main resilient areas that cities must face, and that push them towards more democratic tools are, firstly, the *irregularity of migrants is becoming the norm rather than the exception*. One specific circumstance that adds more pressure to cities, is that most migrants are irregular. According to the Tunisian legislation, there are few possibilities for a migrant to become regular since there is a clear 'national preference' policy in the labour market leaving migrants to extremely inhuman conditions of vulnerability and victim of mechanism of exploitation (Aouani et al., 2020; 10Sedrine, 2018), comparable to the situation of migrant workers in the Middle East (Geisser, 2019, pp. 13–14). This 'routinization' of irregularity and the rigidity of norms to change this status contributes to social pressures and intergovernmental tensions (Rekik, 2020). A second resilient area is the so-called structural *necropolitics scenario*. Coming from Mbembe (2019) this study takes the name of this category in a wide sense. It means the management of cemeteries and bodies that reach Tunisian coastal towns. The geographical particularity of Tunisian maritime currents is that most migrant bodies reach Zarzis and Djerba coasts in all the Central Mediterranean routes. In 2019, around a hundred bodies washed up on the beaches of southern Tunisia, where luxury hotels are lined up. If for a long time, the bodies were buried in mass graves dug in the municipal landfill, since 2003, this is done in individual graves. Created on the initiative of a former Red Crescent volunteer the 'Cemetery of the Unknowns' was set up next to the mass graves to offer, in his words, 'a dignified burial' to migrants dead at sea (Bisiaux et al., 2020). About 400 bodies were piling up in these places. While corps continued to

wash up on beaches another cemetery was opened (summer 2019), near one of the UNHCR centres in Zarzis: the 'Jardin des Africains' (Boitiaux, 9 June 2021; AFP, 10 June 2021). According to YB, it has a capacity of 500 and during my visit, there were almost 275 occupied graves. So, YB says, it will be quickly full. For YB the situation is evident: 'You cannot leave dead bodies in front of tourists even if the municipality or whoever does not have ambulances, lorries, or whatever. We must find something to collect them'. The resilient frustration pushes him to jump against any upper-level international authorities and other high-level responsible: 'Everybody talks, and nobody does anything'. 'We put the bodies in trash containers. We do not have enough shovels to dig a hole in the ground! How are we supposed to work properly without adequate materials?'. Speaking about lorries to collect corps, he adds 'in the morning they collect the garbage, in the afternoon the bodies!'

According to resilient thinking, there are social and natural shocks (IOM, 2017). One natural shock has been the past pandemic period. Migration enters the local agenda basically under the 2020 health pandemic crisis. Before migration was hidden, as most interviewees remind. COVID-19 represented a major shock to the lives of refugees and migrants, eroding livelihood opportunities, pushing migrants to resort to negative coping mechanisms, and increasing pre-existing vulnerabilities. As IO highlights, the pandemic has shown the frontline role played by local authorities. It has provoked awareness of the resilient social and political environment. It accelerated housing insecurity and pushed tenants to less secure neighbourhoods. The pandemic has had a risk-multiplying effect on refugee and migrant populations (Aouani et al., 2020; Z20ECD, 2020). It has revealed the complexity of migration dynamics to the municipality personnel. From the point of view of migration, cities, and the democratic process, the pandemic has shown the democratic deficits in the way of managing migrants in the city, since all the activities that were done were performed by many international CSOs working in most of the grey zones where the democratic process does not reach.

Finally, but not the least important factor that accelerates the claims for democracy but also an autocratic reaction from upper levels, as currently happens in 2022, is the need to build *trust through data protection*. There is a general fear that the few data that the local authorities have, to better manage their needs -basically distributing food and clothes- goes to national authorities for security and control purposes. At this point, most local governments in Tunisia have practiced 'their right to say no' (Natter, 2022, p. 10) and the 'don't ask and don't tell' in relation to migrant status. This is a clear reaction featuring these new democratic times, to protect irregular migrants and to continue to build trust with them. The process has not been easy, since most undocumented migrants are wary of local authorities. The strategy followed has been mediatized through migrant associations and local CSOs

such as UGTT, Tunisian Union of Social Solidarity (Union Tunisienne de Solidarité Sociale), and most other international actors such as IOM (International Organization of Migrations) and the UNCHR (the UN Refugee Agency). IO relates this achievement: 'We are proud to have established direct relationships of trust with migrants to the point that now migrants are heading towards the municipality and not through associations. And even for requests other than health or social assistance!'

Regarding the multi-level actions and policy responses to political resilience, it is where the most direct tensions affecting the democratic process arise. There is a clear *lack of transparency and trust in State-city relations*. In general, interviewees showed that there is a real need for democratic trust-building. MWA also makes it clear "we cannot act without governments' coordination". This lack of a dialogue platform between local and state authorities on shared concerns regarding migration, as the Deputy Mayor of Sfax highlighted, is one of the permanent democratic concerns. Interviews show us that the relationship continues to be hierarchical under a centralist logic of action. MWA paints a good example of a resilient situation: 'This [Local Municipal Code] depends on ordinance laws that must be approved by the government. We tried to promulgate 37 ordinance laws and only 5 made it so far. So, 32 ordinance laws are still waiting to be presented'. But there are also good achievements after a previous local claim-making. MWA reports, for instance, that:

we have been able to convince the state of granting the services that migrants needed for free. In May [2021] a public statement was adopted to request the governor and the health director to accept migrants into the social and health services of cities.

Cities' resilient claims are not only related to competencies and resource limits, and political dependence on their innovative resilient actions, but also the fact that there is no official national strategy for migration governance. Hence there is a kind of centrifugal political ideology to keep migration issues at the local level. This circularity is a direct factor of resilience for cities and directly affects the democratic process.

But one factor that has a direct effect on the democratic process is certainly that most cities build *alliances with social actors* and most of them with an international umbrella. Solidarity networks with CSOs and Tunisian citizens have reportedly had a positive impact on alleviating the political and socially resilient environment. IO summarizes a great part of resilient actions: 'Sousse has developed a program to assist migrants and refugees in the region that includes the municipality and public administration, private sector and the CSOs and migrants themselves'. One of the features of resilient cities is that they build alliances with a large number of actors for information sharing, cooperating, and coordinating actions against the adverse

environment. In fact, most policy-makers and elected representatives come from civil society, such as the case of the Deputy Mayor of Sfax, a Lawyer working on Human Rights, or the same NH from La Marsa, a former activist in the defence of women and human rights. Since the pandemic, most Tunisian cities are networking together and organizing formal and informal meetings, sharing resilient strategies against political and social pressures. They are also involved in international networks with UN-Habitat and Mediterranean City-to-City Migration Project (MC2CM) from the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD). At the practical level, the IOM and the UNHCR are key actors in building joint resilient strategies. Not only for the distribution of food and supermarket vouchers for migrants, giving migrants first locations for sleeping and legal assistance, but also as allies in city claim-making with their own national authorities. IO reported, for instance, how the municipality protects irregular migrant data:

“because at a given moment, there are the central authorities, - here I am talking about the Foreigners’ Office or the Police — who asked for this database and as there was not a clear text, and that these are two public administrations, we thought about how to fix that and be able to share this database and we decided to transfer this to the IOM, in the absence of a legal or regulatory framework [. . .], which protects us. Because we are not going to protect people and then report them!”.

Definitively, an important city pattern is how municipal resilient strategies are deployed with a close connection with CSOs alliances. This is significant in the context of Tunisia since we know their importance during the Revolution and the role they are still playing in the democratic process. Most of these organizations benefited from international recognition, winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 (see note 3). The fact that cities and CSOs work together is additional evidence that democracy is done *from below*. Solidarity building networks follow in all the cities’ case studies. In La Marsa, for instance, they built a donation system from the same civil society. The call made to help migrants ‘even if municipalities do not have the right to receive donations’, created a large solidarity movement. This system was implemented with local CSOs and according to NH ‘that was extraordinary’, this was, as she calls it a ‘crisis call [. . .] and we opened a stadium to host migrants, organized solidarity meals’. With similar emotions, these solidarity movements are reproduced in Sfax and Sousse. AS from Sousse mentions national CSOs that have had a key-role in the Tunisian Revolution such as UGTT, the Tunisian Union of Social Solidarity (Union Tunisienne de Solidarité Sociale), and MWA highlights how they work together with Terre d’Asile Tunisie (Land of Asylum Tunisia) and Red Cross, which provided food and medical supplies from March 2020 until now. Doctors of the World (Médecins du Monde) and the National Federation of Tunisian Communes (Federation Nationale des

Communes Tunisiennes), which is a kind of trade union for municipalities, are also often mentioned.

Cities are building resilient alliances with CSOs not only for urgent care services, legal or suchlike information service and protection but also doing strategic democratic activism and claim-making against national authorities. This activism is maybe not distinctive for Tunisian cities since it also happens in most European and Mediterranean cities (Lacroix et al., 2020; Oomen, 2019), but human rights associations and other humanitarian CSOs claim more services, competencies, and more resources, as it has been reported by MWA, within a narrative democratic frame. This is probably distinctive to the Tunisian case.

Concluding remarks: urban migration governance resilience in an unstable Mediterranean subregion

Tunisian cities are experiencing a shift from being transit to becoming buffer cities. This new pattern means that they are discovering that they are cities of migration under a strong multi-layered urban resilience framework, given the unstable political and social environment. This situation has become even more pressing today, as the democratization process stagnated, and a more autocratic process shape the future Tunisian system. This does not make Tunisia unique. Global-South comparative analysis on city governance and how this city lens affects city-state relations is much needed. In fact, most democratic processes in the Global South can be difficult to understand without taking into consideration the cities as the main actors. Morocco, for example, is also experiencing a similar process of decentralization in a new period where it is also becoming aware of being a country of migration (Kutz & Wolff, 2020). This certainly shapes their policies and determines the orientation of their governance. The resilient approach helps to better theorize this pressure system and gives us clues about the democratic or autocratic orientations that the same political process may take. In this unstable environment, resilience plays an important role in understanding the oscillation between change and stability in a weak democratic system that is currently experiencing an autocratic wave.

The Tunisian case study provides most of the first dimensions that are needed since this is an extremely unstable environment. What becomes clear is that this resilient context tests the democratic strength and deficits for cities' migration governance and illustrates how resilience building can become both a driver for the democratic process and its stagnation. As this is a first scan-analysis, further empirical and comparative studies are needed to explore how urban resilience can be a useful category of analysis and may inspire future research on urban migration governance in other socially and politically unstable environments

Notes

1. See the definition in [Merriam Webster Dictionary](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/catalyst). Retrieved: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/catalyst>.
2. The interviews were held between 17th and 23rd of July 2021, and with an average of 1 hour. Hence, the answers do not contain references to the recent autocratic process lead by the same president. But references to the autocratic/ democratic unstable frame was constant. The interviews were performed in French. All quotes are translated by the same author.
3. Imen Ouardani [IO] (1st Deputy Mayor, Sousse). - Adnen Sass [AS] (Policy officer, in charge of international cooperation, Sousse) - Nabila Hamza [NH] (Deputy Major, La Marsa) - Mohamed Wajdi Ayd [MWA] (Deputy Major, Sfax and Chairman of the Commission for Decentralized Cooperation and External Relations) - Mekki Larayedh [ML] (Major of Zarzis) - Hassan Boubakri [HB] (Professor at University Sousse) - Chiheb Hafi [CH] (General Secretary for international cooperation, Zarzis) - Youssef Boucaniers [YB] (Cemetery Manager, Zarzis) - Adel Brough [AB] (Researcher on migration at Zarzis, University Sousse).
4. The Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet is a group of four CSOs, representing four main sector that were central mediators in the effort to consolidate the democratic process following the 2011 Jasmine Revolution. These were: The Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT, *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail*), the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA, *Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Artisanat*), The Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH, *La Ligue Tunisienne pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme*), The Tunisian Order of Lawyers (*Ordre National des Avocats de Tunisie*).
5. Organic law n° 2018–29 of May 9, 2018, relating to the code of local authorities. Retrieved (in French): <http://www.collectiviteslocales.gov.tn/fr/code-des-collectivites-locales-2/>.

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ORCID

Ricard Zapata-Barrero  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3478-1330>

Data availability statement

All data used from fieldwork (interviews) have followed standard ethics and consent with signatures.

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