Current research project:
Realising EU migrants' access to a social minimum at street-level: Trapped between national politics of membership and free mobility? - Opening the black box of daily practice of (in)equality of access in German jobcentres

Who belongs to the European 'We' is not decided by our parents' place of birth but by our imagination of the present. (Navid Kermani)

Thanks to the mobility bursary of visiting fellow partnership between the French FMSH and the German WZB I was able to spend the month of April in Paris, at the Centre d’Etudes Mondiales. This stay was part of my current PhD research which will finished and published in 2019. The project examines the (in)formal barriers to accessing a social minimum in Germany for migrants, with a focus on the group of European Union (EU) claimants. Aim is to explore how EU migrants' basic social security entitlements, as derived from the EU freedom of movement, are realised in daily practice within German jobcentres, asking why and for whom formal rights might not map onto substantive benefit take-up. The research project hence relates to several dimensions of the FMSJ-WZB cooperation seeks to address: it touches upon broader questions around institutionally rooted inequality, relating to the difficult balance between redistribution and recognition, as well as on migration, integration and participation. The analysis draws on a wealth of 104 qualitative interviews – with the three subgroups of (i) key informants (including policy-makers, experts and social partners in their role as migrant advice agencies), (ii) local jobcentre employees and (iii) intra-EU migrants – and participant observation in three Berlin-based jobcentres, which allow delving into the various actors' ambiguous, multi-layered accounts of their reasoning, moral judgements and categorisation processes.

I arrived in Paris on March 26th, where I was received by the Maison Suger and the co-director of CEM, G. Lieppe, and provided with access to all resources, including an office and library access. The conducive work environment at FMSH enabled me to substantially advance in the writing of my findings chapters. I finished my first empirical chapter which provides a typology of pathways of administrative inclusion and exclusion for EU migrant claimants of basic social subsistence benefits, as well as applicants’ mediation strategies in response to the informal barriers they may encounter at local jobcentre level. I furthermore drafted the second empirical chapter on deservingness perceptions of EU migrant claims to such benefits, which now needs a final editing.

As I came during a period of public holidays in France, not many researchers were present at CEM during my stay. Thus, there were more limited possibilities for exchange and networking than originally anticipated. I however had several meetings with the postdoc Nina Sarahoui who works on access to health coverage for migrant populations in France, which whom I exchanged on literature and theoretical frameworks to draw on. I furthermore had the
possibility to participate at a roundtable on the topic of “the hate of migrants” which was led by Alexis Nous, the Chair of the Programme Migration and Exile at FMSH. Furthermore, informal contacts with other researchers such as Laure Hadj, who work on related questions, were established.

As Nancy Fraser, the Chair of Global Social Justice, will be in Paris during the month of June, it was agreed with FMSH to return from June 11-15th. At this moment of time, I will present my research at their colloquium to receive feedback on my work. Furthermore, a meeting with Nancy Fraser, as well as with the OCED Migration Programme, is programmed to take place.

Due to general Air France strikes, where all flights were cancelled during both days, I unfortunately had to cancel my participation at the Final Conference of the “Changing Society” Programme, where I was meant to present my research at the third roundtable discussion on regulation and to chair the final panel between researchers and policy-makers. I thus would like to use this report to outline some of the main points I would have made during the intervention: The two main regulatory discourses I see emerging in my data relate to both social and migration policy. First there is the question of “who belongs”; how policy defines the “legitimate” community of welfare receivers in Germany, of who has access under what conditions. The currently restrictive conditionality of access to basic social subsistence benefits effectively regulates which migrants are able to stay and settle in Germany, and indirectly filters out the most vulnerable who are not “profitable” to the German economy. Such policy indirectly builds on two meta-discourses, of seeing migrants solely through the lens of productivity, as guest workers, and of neoliberal human resource paradigms which value individuals in terms of what they can bring to the economy. The effect of such discourses and policies is that part of the (EU) migrant resident population, which is considered “unproductive”, because they are (transitionally) unemployed, are left without access to a social safety net. Such discourses build on legacies of culturalisation of poverty, which disregards any underlying structural drivers. The second main discourse I see within my data is the current New Public Management regulatory paradigm which has been embedded into the functioning of jobcentres. Accountability logics focus on economic, quantitative indicators of labour market integration quotas, which create perverse incentives of quick wins rather than sustainable long-term employment creation. Thirdly, the discourse of unemployment as seen resulting from behavioural defaults of laziness and unwillingness to work create the policy imaginary of the “social hammock” and the “transnational welfare tourist” which can not be backed up by empirical data. Current policy outcomes of restricted rights for EU citizens to German jobcentre benefits and services are, in short, a result of these three discourses which lead to formal, legislative restrictions and informal barriers created during the implementation phase.

I see the role of academics as one who can uncover such dynamics and who can give voice to the experience of otherwise silenced voices, such as in my case of vulnerable EU citizen groups who cannot simply return home because they either lack the means or because home means being deprived of any opportunity to make a living. An academic can also assume the role of a broker, bringing the by times unintended dynamics of policy implementation at street-level to the attention of federal policy-makers. I am therefore more than thankful to both WZB and FMSH who enabled me pursuing my current research and in getting to closer to the publication stage. Without the productive work environment in Paris and the informal exchanges I would not have been able to progress as quickly, and I am convinced that the feedback I will receive in June will further substantially advance and improve my work.