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Policy, agency, and intercultural dialogue: Experiences of refugees from war-torn Yugoslavia in Italy

by
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Abstract

This article examines the process of policy and bureaucratic labelling of refugees and its intersection with race, ethnicity, class and/or gender, as well as with other exclusionary mechanisms operating in the places of their settlement. It critically examines the prospects and process of settlement of people who fled war-torn Yugoslavia and were granted the right to work and/or study in Italy based on a special Government decree, without any lengthy determination procedure. The analysis is based on the ethnographic research conducted in Rome, in 1999 and 2000. It explores mechanisms and processes that enabled them to benefit from the rights they were granted upon arrival. The discussion points to the connections between assistance strategies or policies, structural constraints they embody and the type of agency they encourage. It explores the role of co-ethnic, cross-ethnic, and minority-majority social networks in settlement. This article argues that if acquisition of formal legal and social rights to inclusion and equality are not accompanied by informal bridging, micro-level minority-majority contacts and ties the experience of minority groups will remain strongly shaped by their feelings of 'otherness', perceptions of inequality and exclusion. This is because the development of trust between minority (ethnic) and majority groups only partially depends on a set of rights that can be granted to the 'ethnic' or 'minority' groups.

'Most people in this [Roma] camp are refugees from crises in the Balkans. We are used as scapegoats when what we need are jobs, housing and status. We need to find our voice'
(Najo Adzevic, Roma Camp on Via Casilina, Rome, in Owen, 2008:4)

The voice of Mr Adzevic reached me in London via an article published in *The Times* on May 29 detailing 'the politics of fear' spreading over Italy where immigrants in general, and the Roma people in particular, are 'under attack from the resurgent Right' and also from 'vigilante mobs'. This immediately triggered a memory of the violent clash between Roma residents of the deprived Scampia neighbourhood of Naples and other local residents of the same district, in June 1999 (Sigona, 2005). Racist attitudes and practices towards the Roma people in Italy are

neither new phenomena nor they can be attributed solely to the re-emergence of the extreme Right on the Italian political scene. Rather, they are the result of years of the segregation policy towards Roma, legitimised by the political use of the cultural concept of nomadism in defining the group; the type of political manipulation that has also been reinforcing the popular idea that Roma, even if Italian citizens, are not Italians and do not 'belong' to Italian society (Sigona, 2005). This process of political, bureaucratic and cultural labelling of the Roma population, as Sigona points out, led to their spatial segregation in so-called nomad camps providing bolt hole for people with minimal legal and social rights; the policy that only reinforced their social exclusion (*ibid*.).

Mr Adzevic's explanation of who are the residents of the camp in Rome's Via Casilina uncovers an additional aspect of the process of labelling and yet another layer of its complex inner workings of power. A majority of the Roma living on Via Casilina are refugees, people who fled war-torn Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and this is not the only Roma camp in Italy 'hosting' refugees. Some 40 per cent of the Roma population in Italy come either from one of the Yugoslav successor states, feeling conflict and human rights abuse, or from Rumania (Sigona 2005: 743). How come that the Roma fleeing conflict ended up in *nomad* camps and not in *refugee* camps or some other type of accommodation provided for *refugees* upon their arrival? Why are they still living in camps after over a decade of their flight? Have they not got on with their lives, found jobs, places to live, and regulated their status? What were the situation and the experiences of other people who fled the same conflict(s), but did not identify themselves as Roma or had not been labelled as such? In other words, what happens when another powerful process of policy and bureaucratic labelling associated with those forcibly displaced and in need of protection intersect with race, ethnicity, class and/or gender, as well as other exclusionary mechanisms operating in the places of their settlement?

Referring to the consequences and gravity of some of these intersections for life prospects of the real people Sigona (2003) asked if a 'nomad' can be a 'refugee', and pointed out that those labelled 'nomads' upon their arrival in Italy, were not treated in the same way as others also displaced by the same conflict (p. 70). This is because of the way they were constructed (or defined) as a group and as individual people by labelling policies and processes, as well as because of the influence such policies and processes have on the public attitude towards the labelled (*ibid.*). How

were in fact people fleeing war-torn Yugoslavia (including Roma) treated legally or what type of rights they were granted upon arrival?

Humanitarian status in Italy: Temporary, but immediate right to work and study

People, who were fleeing the generalised violence and armed conflicts of the 1990s, including all those feeling Yugoslav war(s), were granted so-called humanitarian status or temporary resident permits to stay in Italy based on specific government decrees. Based on such an *ad hoc* measure effective between 1992 and 1997, some 77,000 people fleeing Yugoslav conflicts were granted temporary permissions to remain in the country, renewable on yearly basis.[1] This type of status is indeed problematic, because it implies a continuous threat of expulsion and hence creates insecurity and causes anxiety among people who hold such a permit. Moreover, those granted temporary, humanitarian status do not have the right to family reunification, the fact which only adds to their precarious situation. In this sense, there is no doubt that not allowing people fleeing war-torn Yugoslavia to claim asylum under the Geneva Convention caused serious problems for them (Vincenzi 2000; Sigona 2005).

Nonetheless, in considering the situation of people granted humanitarian status in Italy based on special government decrees it is also important to acknowledge that although temporary (i.e. renewable on yearly bases) this status was usually granted without any lengthy determination procedure associated with the Convention asylum claims. Very importantly it included the immediate right to work and study. These rights were critically important for the people fleeing Yugoslav conflicts, regardless of the fact that having the right to work was not a straightforward way to their empowerment (Korac, 2003; forthcoming). Indeed, for many, this meant becoming self-sufficient at a high cost, because they were forced to enter a niche of the labour market from which it is very hard to move up the economic and social ladder (*ibid.*). Nonetheless, working made these people 'feel better', as one of them put it, 'regardless of what kind of jobs' they had. That is what helped them 'keep their wits' about them and what kept them 'sane' since their arrival in Italy (Korac, 2003: 408). Organised programmes of reception and integration associated with the Convention

status in the Scandinavian countries or in the Netherlands or Germany, for example, were often also seen as disabling individual initiative, therefore, undermining self-esteem, or as limiting basic rights, such as the right to free movement or the right to work. Hence, these conditions were considered as often being detrimental to the wellbeing of people 'managed' by such programmes, because they become inward looking, preoccupied by their past and socially isolated (Korac, forthcoming).

The gravity of this type of permit to stay also meant that the vast majority has received no assistance to settle in the country. The government established 15 *refugee* reception centres for those fleeing the region, which could accommodate up to 2,000 persons at a time; their gradual closure began at the end of 1995 (Korac, 2003). Although the exact number of those accommodated at such centres is not known, research indicates that the number was not much grater than a couple of thousand (Losi 1994). In addition to this government initiated forms of assistance, the NGO sector with the mandate to assist asylum seekers and refugees also provided help, although most of these organisations were founded only at the beginning of the 1990s, at the time of the major influx of the people fleeing the neighbouring worn-torn country. The organisation *Consorzio Italiano di Solidaritá*, for example, was particularly active between 1993 and 1996 in providing first accommodation to some 2,000 people who initially stayed with Italian families in smaller industrial towns in northern Italy and who were also helped to enrol in language courses and in some cases to find jobs. The organisation's own network of local organisations or volunteers was essential in providing the assistance, which was financially assisted by the regional governments (Korac, 2003). Emergency accommodation, free meals and language courses, as well as in some cases some other type of assistance, were also offered by Church organisations, which were more numerous and have a long history of providing for the destitute in general, and are increasingly also offering help to refugees. The assistance these organisations were able to offer was scarce at the time, and not adequate to meet the needs of a growing number of asylum seekers and refugees in the country.

These *ad hoc* measures were put in place in response to the large influx of people fleeing war-torn Yugoslavia and because of the lack of a well-developed reception system in the country. Their *ad hoc* character also meant that overwhelming majority of these people encountered profound problems in achieving a minimal (financial) security, because very few actually received even minimal support in

finding first shelter and work. In their initial struggle for physical survival in places in which they were trying to settle, they had to turn to their own resources in the form of social networks, spontaneously formed, which served as alternative self-help 'reception system' dealing with their existential needs, such as finding accommodation and work.

Some faced more difficulties then others, elderly or those with (small) children, for example, were particularly affected by the lack of any initial support upon their arrival (Korac 2003; forthcoming). Also, finding accommodation or jobs on arrival was a gendered process, often favouring women. In cities like Rome, for example, which offer opportunities in domestic services, most of the women from war-torn Yugoslavia found work within matter of days as live-in-house keepers or nannies.[2] This type of job would not only secure them a modest salary, but also accommodation, food and an environment to learn Italian (Korac 2003; forthcoming). The situation for men in cities like Rome was different and much more difficult. The first work they were able to find were manual and low-paying such as building, painting, gardening and so forth. This kind of work is not only low-paid, but it also may not be paid at all, as many Italians employing immigrants informally, tend to avoid paying them after the completion of the work. This situation made the lives of many men miserable, because the vast majority did not have any savings and consequently, no means to sustain themselves. The fact that men had not only to find jobs immediately, but also affordable accommodation compounded the problem (*ibid.*).

Thus, the right to work and/or study granted with the humanitarian permit to stay in Italy, combined with the lack of an initial reception system, meant that those more resourceful in terms of their skills and social networks, or those with 'the right' demographic characteristics were more likely to *get by* and eventually to *get on* with their lives by finding way into Italian society and its structures. This resourcefulness, however, was not only a matter of having adequate and needed skills or of their age, gender, parental or marital status. In the case of some people fleeing Yugoslav wars, ethnicity had also become a powerful 'resource' in settlement, for others it had been detrimental. For Roma refugees fleeing these conflicts the need to develop an alternative self-reception system, because of the absence of a well-developed national one, meant that their only possibility of survival was to seek support from their relatives and friends already living in Italy. However, their relatives and friends led

segregated lives, living in so-called nomad camps around major cities. The consequence of this segregation, as Sigona (2003) points out, is that Roma are not perceived as individuals, but always as a group centrally defined by stereotypes associated with the label *nomads* implying a traditional lifestyle incompatible with (Italian) modern society. This tendency of labelling of specific groups as 'traditional' resulting in cultural bias leads to the perception of one's own culture and society as superior and is particularly dangerous. Because of its emphasis on *inferiority* rather than on *difference* there is the implication that cultures of those labelled as 'outsiders' cannot be negotiated (Tabbioni, 1995: 19). Consequently, by turning for support to those labelled 'nomads', Roma refugees from war-torn Yugoslavia settling in Italy have been confined to a segregated existence and extreme marginalisation, experiencing racism and social isolation, regardless of the (temporary) rights grated on their arrival.

What were the experiences and the situation of Mr Adzevic's compatriots also settling in Rome in the 1990s, at the time of Yugoslav conflict(s); of those who were not Roma and, hence, not pushed to settle in so-called nomad camps? How have they negotiated entry into the new culture, society, and unfamiliar urban setting? Which mechanisms and processes enabled them to benefit from the rights they were granted upon arrival?

The Right to Establish a 'Home' and the Process of Creating It

Negotiating entry and the adjustment to the new society, unfamiliar urban area and their structures is an integral part of refugee experiences. It involves a struggle to overcome or bypass the lack of rights and access, as well as a series of functional, cognitive, and value based fine-tuning. It also leads to shifts in skills, knowledge, attitudes, world-views as well as identities.

The process of negotiating entry is about *the right* to establish a 'home' in the receiving society, while the series of changes and adjustments mentioned is about *the process* of creating a 'home' and becoming 'of place'. Negotiating entry, as well as the process of becoming 'of place', are shaped by different forms of contact and social interaction established by refugees.

Through various forms of social interaction they struggle to fulfil their needs and aim to create a meaningful life and place for themselves in the receiving societies.

The contacts they establish may be *co-ethnic* networks established within groups originating from the same country, *cross-ethnic* created through inter-ethnic contacts among compatriots or between people originating from other countries, and *minority-majority* networks developed between members of minority groups or ethnics and majority groups. The latter groups, the majority, refer to those often also constituting the mainstream society, and more generally, to the groups not considered 'ethnic'.

Many of these interactions and social relations are initiated and tied through the institutional structures of particular urban settings (e.g. church organisations, community groups, NGOs, municipality). They can also be established through semi-invisible micro-links of sociability linked to informal contacts between diverse groups of people in urban areas in which they 'rub along together' and in some contexts and circumstances develop a positive web of support. Jane Jacobs, back in 1961, pointed to the importance of social networks developed through seemingly 'unpurposeful' and 'random' contacts of neighbours in cities through which they form social networks and relationships of trust. Some of these informal networks of support are embedded in *bonding* social networks, established among co-ethnics thus within the (ethnic) group boundaries. Social networks among co-ethnics are important not only for the development of survival strategies and securing livelihoods, but also often serve as a protective mechanism ensuring preservation of cultural norms and values of socially excluded groups in receiving societies (Gurak and Caces, 1992; Barnes, 2001). A positive web of support can also be created through *bridging* social networks, which are often a critical resource for re-establishing lives of refugees and other migrants. I argue that both of these types of networks, and bridging social networks in particular, are central to settlement outcomes and experiences of refugees in general. They were critical for settlement of people fleeing war-torn Yugoslavia who were of non-Roma backgrounds.

Co-ethnic and cross-ethnic networks among refugees in Rome and the importance of self-respect

In 1999 and 2000, I conducted an ethnographic study in Rome among refugees from war-torn Yugoslavia.[3] In this research, I examined their situation after up to ten years of life in the city in which they struggled to re-establish their lives.[4] People in my study were relatively young and well educated, from urban or semi-urban settings. At the time of my research, up to ten years after their arrival, the majority still had

temporary, humanitarian status, renewable on a yearly basis. Only those very few who were married to Italians had Italian citizenship.[5]

Their first years in Rome were characterised by a struggle for physical survival, because they were provided with hardly any assistance after arriving, as mentioned earlier. In dealing with their most pressing needs they engaged in intensive co-ethnic and cross-ethnic networking. As they were predominantly single or cohabiting, without children or family networks in the city or within Italy, these contacts were based on weak rather than family, kin or close friendship ties, and geared toward a fast mobilisation of resources (Granovetter, 1973; 1985). Upon arrival, they learned about places 'where the folks from our country meet', such as cafés or other public places and spaces. Most often they obtained the information from Italians they met during their first days in Rome or other people, often foreigners living in the city with whom they could communicate in English or French, the languages that many of the people I met spoke.

The absence of both a national integration strategy and a corresponding welfare structure of support have contributed to the situation in which both government organizations and the NGO sector in Italy have been continually dealing with emergencies. This lack of a national integration strategy as well as the underdeveloped NGO sector in the 1990s, have undermined the ability of organizations dealing with refugees to plan properly their activities and programmes. They were often unable to meet even the most pressing existential needs of refugees, such as accommodation, for example. As the result, those who arrived in search of safety were often forced to sleep on the streets of the towns in which they wish to settle experiencing the hardship and humiliation of being homeless in a literal sense of the word.

Most of the people I met in Rome had relatively good rented accommodation in the city (measured by Roman standards of rental accommodation). Single people, but sometimes also couples, often lived in shared accommodation. Some could afford to live on their own, which was not the case until years after their arrival. When they arrived, most found their first shelter in apartments of known and unknown refugees from the region. Dragan[6] explains how this self-help system worked:

> During the first five years [1993-1997] I'd been staying in a flat in central
> Rome, which became some kind of a 'cult place'. It was a huge flat where

there was always a lot of us [refugees from the war-torn Yugoslavia], known and unknown people. Five of us were sharing the place for financial reasons, to share the costs. There were five bedrooms, plus a living room. A whole bunch of people would hear about 'the place to stay' and would come by; some of them would stay for a couple of nights some much longer; we were from all ethnic origins.

Dragan's narrative of this past experience was unequivocally positive, at times even nostalgic for the type of solidarity this and similar arrangements entail. During my research I heard many accounts of and references to this and other 'cult flats' in Rome. I learnt how known and unknown people would come and go, contributing financially when and as much as they could. Most often their stay was short, but if it was longer, the 'lodgers' were contributing financially for day-to-day expenses, such as food, electricity etc. However, almost all the accounts revealed at least some difficulties caused by a 'huge telephone bill' left unpaid after a 'friend' had left or tensions because s/he did not want to leave. Regardless of these troublesome incidents, these past experiences were not narrated as memories of hardship but most often as accounts of victory over disempowering conditions of their lives when they first arrived in Rome, and they were told with pride.

Shared accommodation with other people from the region, immigrants from other countries, or at a later stage with Italians they happened to meet early in their stay became a housing model for many. There were some, of course, who spent their first nights at *Termini* train station, and others who could not think of any other solution but to spend their first nights and their last money in inexpensive hotels. Only two refugees found their first shelter in the dormitories of one of the church organizations or NGOs in Rome. These organizations usually also ran soup kitchens on their premises for destitute and homeless, including refugees. Those few who were helped with accommodation, obtained the information by a stroke of luck, rather than any organized effort on the part of the providers. Therefore, the small number of people provided with temporary shelter was not only due to the general lack of such provision in the city. It was also the consequence of the general lack of information about services available to refugees, as well as the lack of a well-established NGO sector at the time when most of the refugees interviewed for this study arrived, in 1991, 1992 and 1993.

Moreover, even those very few people who were lucky enough to obtain temporary accommodation through one of the NGOs, found that these organizations had very little or no time, financial and human resources to meet their other needs. Nermin, one of the two people I met who were helped in some way by the local NGOs, explained the problems he encountered:

> They [NGOs] tell you about all kinds of services they offer, but I haven't heard that anyone got a job, or that anyone got any other help but accommodation and food [a bed in a dormitory and a soup kitchen]. They have it all on paper. I know, for example, there's a possibility that the *comune* [municipality] pays half of your rent, but that's not what's happening in reality. They keep saying that they're in some kind of *emergenza* [emergency] and that's why they can't do it.

The absence of a systematic strategy for reaching out to refugees only intensified problems with assistance. Hence, the lack of information about (scarce) assistance available was a reoccurring problem. Similarly, a very few government run programmes for assisting refugees available at the time, such as financial assistance for those who would like to start small family businesses, were very hard to obtain. This was either because of the lack of information about this type of assistance or because of the highly bureaucratic procedure for applying and decision-making. Therefore, it was common for resources allocated by the government for such programmes to remain unspent at the end of a fiscal year.[7]

The experiences of hardship in finding shelter, learning the language, finding work and becoming independent without any assistance were interwoven with feelings of self-respect for being active in finding solutions and for being self-sufficient. The importance of maintaining self-respect was paramount among the people I met. So much so that even when some form of assistance was available, in the form of provision of free meals at *Caritas*, for example, the refugees tended to avoid relying on it. A typical explanation for such an attitude comes from Stipe, who when recalling his first year(s) in the city said: 'I was happier when I was hungry, I felt better with an empty stomach than to be among the crowd there [people frequenting the soup kitchen ran by *Caritas*].'

Although the refugees confessed to being on poor diets for months and some even for years upon their arrival and hence in dire need of food, they emphasised the

importance of dignity as the critical factor that kept them going. As they were allowed to work and, therefore, were permitted some level of *choice* as to whether or not to rely on aid, almost all of the interviewees have opted for independence, often regardless of the hardships involved.

The fact that they did not rely on aid, made them aware that this situation has potential benefits for their day-to-day interactions with Italians. Milka's account echoes the experiences and views of the many people I met; she said:

> There was nothing here, no assistance or any kind of support for us, and I'm glad about that. Everywhere they look at foreigners as people who the taxpayers' money is being spent on. I think that's one of the major issues in most EU countries today, and it's less so in Italy. We've earned [she and her husband] whatever we have here. If I'd gone to *Caritas* to ask for something, I'm sure my neighbours would be looking at me in a different way. This way, they respect me.

The perception of the problems they encountered in Rome was also shaped by the information about the experiences of their friends and relatives in exile in other European countries. These transnational networks and connections put their own experiences into perspective. There was a unanimous agreement among the refugees I interviewed that their compatriots who fled to the Scandinavian countries, Germany or the Netherlands, for example, enjoyed a better standard of living. Nonetheless, there was also a shared view that the policy systems in other countries have many negative effects, because they undermine agency and effectively enhance dependence.

Minority-majority networks of refugees in Rome

This process of intensive, informal and for the most part spontaneous networking between the people I met and Italians/residents of Rome also emerged soon after their arrival. Instrumental to this type of connections not mediated by service providers, were women who, as already mentioned, were initially almost exclusively employed as live-in housekeepers and nannies. Catholic Church and Croatian Catholic Church in Rome in particular were very helpful in assisting women to find their first jobs. This help was offered to all women who arrived with the first influx of refugees from Yugoslav war(s), irrespective of their ethnicity of religion. The Church was an important intermediary in finding this type of jobs, because Italian

families in need of domestic help and/or child care would usually contact the nuns in search of reliable help.[8] Although the women I met described this initial period and type of work as 'difficult' and as a 'prison-like' experience, their contacts with Italian families, their employers and networks of their friends, were central to facilitating further their *functional* adjustment. These bridging contacts were very often giving encouragement to women to enrol in language training courses; they were also often instrumental in guiding them through the labyrinth of regulations concerning diploma recognition, or in finding information about additional skill or knowledge training. Women's bridging contacts with Italians helped many men to *get by* too, by helping them find first jobs or accommodation.

Spontaneous, informal contacts with Italians, residents of Rome, were also often initiated in different social situations and urban settings, ranging from their neighbourhoods, local markets, shops, and cafés to work places, educational and other institutions while these people were in search for vital information or some kind of help. Through these day-to-day encounters they met many Italians who made many generous gestures of support and were willing to help. Hence, these initial links were material-aid ties lacking reciprocity and equality. Gestures of kindness, support, and solidarity with 'a stranger in need' were important to all, but such gestures were critical for the survival of those (few) with families, as well as for men, as these were the categories of people who had particular difficulties in finding first jobs and accommodation, as discussed earlier. Stipe's account of his first days and months in Rome, after he found his first job in a restaurant through 'a Montenegrin guy', reveals the importance of contacts and connections with Italians for getting by during this difficult period filled with existential insecurities and uncertainties:

> I was very well accepted at the place I'd worked in the beginning. I had no problems at all; everyone accepted me as if I were one of their own. Everyone was terribly nice to me. No harassment, no insults, everyone was trying to be helpful. For example, the cook from the first restaurant I'd work in offered me to stay with him as soon as I said that I had no place to stay. It was as if I'd walked into his house from the street. Who'd invite you into their house [apart from Italians]? I'd stayed with him for about a week, until they [friends, also refugees from war-torn Yugoslavia] found me a place to say.

The main obstacle in making closer social contacts with Italians during their first years in Rome was the lack of opportunity to become acquainted with people who are of a similar educational and social background as they were (used to be before flight). During their first years they were primarily in touch with the Italians with whom they worked. As most of them were underemployed and did work for which they were overqualified, Italians of different interests and life aspirations overwhelmingly made-up their social milieu. In this respect too, during their first years in Rome men were more disadvantaged than were women. As women were initially primarily employed in domestic service, as mentioned earlier, they had access to the social world of middle-class Italian families. Although not all the women I met developed supportive or friendly relationships with their employers, this type of work provided many of them with valuable initial contacts with Italians. In many cases these hierarchical, non-supportive ties gradually developed into supportive ones, described as friendships, regular outings, joint holidays and also marriages. Wellman (1981: 181) suggests that non-egalitarian and non-reciprocal social ties can be significant for this process, because non-supportive ties often provide access to other, potentially supportive relationships.

In the few families with children that stayed in Rome,[9] children were often instrumental in developing networks and friendships with Italians through their contacts with Italian children at school. Many of these contacts were critical for finding employment for their parents. Milan was one of them; he details how he got his first job after almost five years of unemployment:

> There wasn't anything for us here, no help at all. My wife got a housekeeping job soon after we came here [...]. But I couldn't find a job for years. We were lucky to meet some nice Italian people who were willing and able to help us. One of our sons became friends at school with an Italian boy and they would visit each other at home. The boy told his mother that I was unemployed so she talked to a man who was the manager of the company I'm working for now. That man came to our house to meet us and told me to come and work for him. For the first two years, it was illegal work. After that, I'd signed a one-year contract, and this year they've given me a steady job.

At the time of my research, over a half of the group I met in Rome had more contacts with Italians than with their compatriots, explaining this communication as their effort to learn about and understand the culture, but not as their attempt to

assimilate or lose their distinctive identity and culture. Although often described as confrontational or leading to misunderstandings these bridging connections enhanced the openness of people toward Italians, as well as towards the 'rules' and norms underpinning Italian society, its culture, and day-to-day life in Rome.

Because these social encounters were spontaneous and individualised they were perceived as the process of learning and mutual adjustment. Alija, recalling many instances of confrontation or disappointment since he arrived in Rome, said: 'I've been kicked around by Italians myself during these six-seven years, but I figure it was inevitable. It was inevitable as well as normal, because you have to get to know their character.' These informal interpersonal relationships were also perceived as the way to confront bias among Italians and the newcomers alike. Having Italian friends who can get to know you 'as you really are' was frequently mentioned as the best way to challenge the prejudice about immigrants in general, as well as a more specific bias in relation to the people coming from war-torn Yugoslavia. These bridging, spontaneous and individualised contacts also made many people I met cautious about labelling and judging all Italians as representatives of a 'culture' or a 'nation'. Additionally and very importantly, the experience of the identity politics of war in Yugoslavia and the process of labelling they encountered as a consequence, made some of the people I met aware of its dangers. Marko was one of them; he said:

> I don't have a general impression of Italians, because I'm aware of what had happened to us [people from war-torn Yugoslavia] when we started looking at each other in general. There are wonderful people and there are bad people. There is no general Italian characteristic that I'm specifically fond of or that drives me crazy. Every person's got characteristics of their own.

Such attitudes as well as the scope of opportunity to establish interpersonal, spontaneous contacts with Italians enhanced the openness of the refugees towards Italians and vice-versa. Vera's account summarises the attitude of many of the people I met in Rome:

> We're here and we must learn how to live with Italians. We must find what we have in common with them, although we're different. Many Italians managed to learn a great deal from us too, especially those who work with our people. We are more precise, for example, we're some kind of 'Germans' to Italians. Perhaps we've changed them a bit, too.

Contacts with Italians were seen not only as a way of learning about the receiving society and its culture. They were also shaping their awareness that the process of learning, shifting and shaping attitudes is mutual, that it affects Italians too.

Thus, bridging contacts and networks did not only help them to *get by* or *ahead,* they also helped them to 'make sense' of their new social and cultural environment and to feel 'of Rome'. These bridging networks were helping them to *get inside* and feel part of the social fabric of life in the city. Because they were spontaneous and informal, these contacts were experienced primarily as two-way encounters of individual members of diverse groups living and rubbing along in the city. They were not perceived as threatening to their identities provoking the need to 'entrench a symbolic boundary' (Bauböck, 1996) between groups and cultures. In this sense, bridging networks were perceived as a two-way communication central to the process of mutual adjustment and change that is *sine qua non* to developing diversity.

The bridging contacts with Italians spontaneously formed, did not only strengthen their adaptability to the new environment, and encouraged their openness to differences between the cultures and the people. Because they did not feel socially isolated and excluded at a micro level in any profound way, they also felt more at ease about their uncertain legal status. In other words, bridging networks also enabled them to deal better with the mechanisms of exclusion at the state institutional level. They felt 'good and safe', because most Italians they knew were 'good and emotional', despite existing xenophobia in Italy, which is an issue that 'politicians keep up their sleeve when they need someone to blame', as Lepa put it. There is no doubt that the negative public notions associated with people who do 'not belong' were causing frustration. Ana articulated these feelings in the following way:

> I'm *extra-comunitari* here [non-EU citizen]. That has this unpleasant ring to it - as if you've just climbed down a tree or as if you're some kind of criminal, who came here in a *gommone* [rubber dinghy] at night. That feeling and the constant reminder of it bothers me very much.

The discrepancy between the experiences of inclusion at one level, and exclusion at the other, shaped the notions of belonging among the people I met in Rome. Dule explained the way he felt in Rome:

> I feel at home in Rome. The only time I don't feel at home is prior to the expiry date of my residence permit to stay. Then I really feel a foreigner.

Otherwise, I feel at home. My social contacts have always been almost entirely with Italians, except that my partner is also from Bosnia. I feel that I belong here in many ways and Italians accept me as such. But when I am faced with state institutions, I feel humiliated and that is when I feel that I don't belong here.

Although the temporariness of their stay caused frustration and bitterness at times, their experiences of social inclusion and acceptance at the level of day-to-day contacts and communication with Italians had a tendency to compensate for the exclusion they experienced at state level. While their formal legal and social rights were very limited, their day-to-day life and lived experience was one of increasing social acceptance and inclusion, measured by their bridging contacts with Italians, residents of Rome. People fleeing the same conflict(s) of Roma background lack this type of contacts and experience. If acquisition of formal legal and social rights to inclusion and equality are not accompanied by informal bridging, micro-level minority-majority contacts and ties the experience of minority groups will remain strongly shaped by their feelings of 'otherness', perceptions of inequality and exclusion. This is because the development of trust between minority (ethnic) and majority groups only partially depends on a set of rights that can be granted to the 'ethnic' or 'minority' groups.

Lack of reception system: Questions of security and agency

Because their status, for the most part, was temporary, and because most of the people I met in Rome were underemployed, with low-paying jobs, none felt that they had succeeded in making a secure place for themselves in Italy. They felt that they lacked a sense of stability that would allow them to plan their future. When defining the losses involved in their flight and exile, they characterised them as losses of economic welfare or uncertain prospects for their future, but not so much as loss of personal agency. The opportunity to exercise agency was the aspect of their situation in Rome and Italy, which they regarded very highly, gives support to earlier research and arguments that the prime determinant of subjective wellbeing of refugees during the process of settlement is not the degree of discrepancy between goals and actual conditions of settlement. Rather, their subjective wellbeing is determined by 'the

extent to which agency can be exercised in the resettlement situation' (Valtonen, (1998: 57).

The settlement 'rules' characterising the Italian reception process meant that the people I met in Rome were prompted to take initiative in creating their own local support systems and solutions to their precarious situation. These systems were importantly based on networks of support developed by compatriots, within and across ethnic lines. They were also centrally linked to numerous informal and spontaneous contacts with Italians they established in various social settings. Through such spontaneous and informal webs of support they actively participated in regaining control over their lives. However, a desire and strategies to achieve this type of two-way communication, expressed and developed by people in my study, are very often blocked by the lack of opportunity to establish a creative cultural dialogue.

Clearly, the absence of experience of reception centres and contacts with professional or voluntary refugee workers associated with an organized assistance programme meant considerable hardship in settling in Rome. However, it also saved this group of people from a systematic bureaucratic labelling, ascribing them a common identity associated with the role of a victim or of sick/traumatised persons. The process of forming such a bureaucratic identity, as Zetter (1991) emphasises, is deeply non-participatory in nature and usually renders refugees powerless. As my discussion reveals, the lack of integration policies and of rigidly mapped settlement rules affects the way in which people employ their agency. At one level, the Italian system formalised their liminal condition by granting them temporary legal status; in doing so it denied them security. At another level, the same system allowed them a scope of initiative in their struggle to become functional and self-sufficient. Their active search for opportunities to improve their precarious situation and better their lives helped them to cope with the insecurities of their status in an active and constructive way. Although difficult, the process allowed them a sense of agency and dignity.

Concluding remarks

The way in which the labels 'nomad' and 'refugee' are juxtaposed here is not to imply that the latter label is not detrimental and exclusionary. The processes of

labelling people forced into decisions to flee their homes associated with institutional and legal systems, public discourses and professional settings surrounding them are indeed both disadvantageous and prohibiting (see Zetter 1991; 2007). Because of the international, national, transnational, and global character of the socio-political causes of refugee movements (Zolberg et al. 1989) and resulting processes of (mass) victimisation of local populations, people who flee conflict are most often approached and represented as victims, traumatised and helpless, rather than people who actively struggle to overcome their victimisation. This has been reinforced by the conflicts of the 1990s that produced many unselected victims of generalised violence characterising these 'new wars' (Kaldor, 2007**).** Additionally, a longstanding, highly politicised, and often heated debate on asylum rights in many parts of the world revolving around the issue of 'bogus' versus 'genuine' refugees seems to generate further the need to essentialise refugees and represent them as 'ultimate victims', hence, deserving international (state) protection. Refugeehood and victimhood are consequently often seen as one and the same (Korac, forthcoming). However, denying agency to those labelled 'refugees' effectively dehumanises people who are forced into decisions to migrate.

The concept of protection mentioned here as associated with people labelled 'refugees' also implies their right to it, although individual states are not obliged to provide it. Linked to this right, forced migrants enjoy (minimal) assistance with accommodation and other basic needs upon arrival in most EU member states. Their basic social citizenship rights, such as the right to work or reunite with their families are, however, often denied for prolonged periods of time; individual cases vary from over a year to few years. Reception systems in an increasing number of EU member states also keep these people in special 'reception' centres effectively segregating them from the rest of the local population. Consequently, labels such as 'refugee', 'asylum seeker' or 'forced migrant', are markers of difference often associated with powerful social mechanisms of exclusion, because they relate to the legal process of granting or denying certain aspects of citizenship rights, as well as imply an imposition of spatial and other segregation, not experienced by other types of migrants (or indeed, citizens).

The 'refugee' label is, hence, also exclusionary, leading to or reinforcing bias, prejudice and marginalisation. Far from being passive victims, dependant on government handouts, refugees are survivors, actively seeking solutions to an

existence made liminal by displacement, as the discussion in this article reveals. Central to this process is their active search for opportunities of support that allow them dignity, by letting them make (informed) decisions about their own lives.

The Italian settlement context of the 1990s and early 2000, examined here, embodied specific structural constraints causing difficulties for refugees. It opened up a space for individual initiative and active participation, hence it did not undermine agency. It did so by virtue of not having any systematically implemented assistance strategies or integration policies, not because the system in Italy was intentionally developed to challenge non-participatory character of existing models of assistance/policy or was concerned with matters of equality. The way refugee assistance was approached in Italy was congruent with the government's intention of minimising their assistance and making it fit the character of Italian welfare system, at the time. It also mirrored the then still widespread belief that Italy was not a country of immigration and the society in which people come to settle. The absence of assistance created a fracture within the existing exclusionary structural systems, such as refugee temporary status or barriers to employment in specific niches of the labour-market.

This fracture created by the lack of policy within an otherwise exclusionary system, gave some refugees, those more resourceful or of the 'right' ethnic, gender or class background, more space to engage actively in the process of gaining control over their lives. Consequently, the Italian system did not address at the time fundamental questions concerning refugee assistance: How to provide types of support that can help refugees in their quest to help themselves? How to enhance their agency, make the full use of their human capital, and support the establishment and further development of their social capital? Very importantly, it did not aim to create a system that would enhance the opportunity to establish a creative cultural dialogue leading to two-way communication between minority and majority groups. This type of dialogue occurred between the group I studied and citizens of Rome, because of the efforts of refugees and their strategies to achieve such communication. This type of communication was also possible because there are many locals (Italians) open to engage with individual people and approach them as 'a stranger in need'. Openness and engagement characterising these contacts go beyond stereotypes, biases and labels constructed about specific groups defined by their ethnicity, culture or type of migration. The establishment of these contacts was facilitated by demographic and

other characteristics of the refugee in my study making them 'tolerable' if not 'desirable' 'Other'. Bridging networks were also formed because the lack of a developed reception system was conducive to creation of spontaneous and non-institutionalised links between individual people, refugees and locals, rather than linking groups of newcomers to different service providers.

For all these reasons it is important to emphasise that the discussion in this article is not an argument against provision of assistance to refugees. Nor it means that welfare programmes of assistance to refugees in some EU member states necessarily create lasting reliance on government support. It aimed to point to the connections between assistance strategies or policies, structural constraints they embody and the type of agency they encourage. This discussion also pointed out that it is difficult to talk about a 'good' or 'successful' model of settlement policy. Policy systems tend to be 'one fits all' programmes, while refugees are a heterogeneous group. Thus, the proper understanding of assistance strategies and policy interventions should be centrally linked to examination and understanding of this heterogeneity allowing for flexible policy measures that would provide support without denying people their agency, identity or human capital. Very importantly, while it is clear that structural and institutional support for refugee needs cannot be replaced by generosity and 'good heart' of the local people, legal and other policy measures alone cannot solve the problems of (in)equality and inclusion. In this sense, leaving space for individual involvement and initiative is paramount, as is the need for raising awareness and knowledge among local populations about refugees as 'ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances' (Harrel-Bond 1999: 158).

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Appendix

Table 1

Table 2

Notes:

[1] Data provided by the Ministry of the Interior during research visit to Rome, September 1999.

[2] For more information on the character of the labour-market in Italy in the 1990s, and the opportunities immigrants have in domestic services see Reyneri (1998).

[3] This article is based upon some findings of my research entitled 'Dilemmas of Integration: Two policy contexts and refugee strategies for integration', carried out at the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, between 1999 and 2001. The research was funded by the Lisa Gilad Initiative, the European Commission through the European Council for Refugees and Exiles, as well as The British Council, The Heyter Travel Fund, and The Oppenheimer Fund. The Lisa Gilad Initiative is a charitable trust, set up in 1998, to commemorate the life and work of the late Lisa Gilad, an anthropologist and a founding member of Canada Immigration and Refugee Board.

[4] Data for this qualitative study was collected during 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Rome (1999-2000) and Amsterdam (2000-2001), where there was a considerable concentration of people who were forced to flee the war-torn country. The study is based on different kinds of data obtained from: refugees, NGOs, governmental and community organizations, matched by participant observation in various contexts of social interaction. During the fieldwork in Rome I established around 120 informal contacts with people who fled one of the successor states of Yugoslavia. These contacts were useful for collecting general information about their situation in Italy. As these interactions were usually not on one-to-one basis and, therefore, not suitable for collecting more personal data, I chose 40 refugees in Rome for formal, in-depth interviewing. In addition, I tried, as much as possible, to share day-to-day lives with refugees in both study-sites and made every effort to participate in their social life. When the circumstances permitted, I visited them at work, at home, and took part at many social gatherings involving my respondents and their friends, who were either also refugees or people they met in exile. This enabled me to gain a more in-depth understanding of their social situation.

[5] Ethnic background of interviewees is presented in Table 1; social characteristics and legal status of the refugees are presented in Table 2 (Appendix).

[6] All names mentioned in this article are pseudonyms.

[7] Information obtained from a UNHCR representative during my research visit to Rome in November 1999.

[8] The role of the Church in assisting immigrants to find this type of job is also discussed by Reyneri (1998).

[9] Because of the lack of any organised system of reception and the difficulties that was causing to people with children, especially to families with small children, as already mentioned, by the time of my research in 1999 and 2000, most people with families left Rome and either moved on to other parts of Italy where it was easier to find employment and accommodation or undertook secondary migration and went to other European countries or resettled to the US, New Zeeland, or Australia.