PUMOMIG project

The imaginary invasion: as the discourse on the "refugee crisis" has impacted on Italian politics and society

1. The context: immigration in an historical country of emigration

Italy has been a reception country for international immigrants for only thirty years, like the other countries of Southern Europe. This important transformation has occurred mainly in spontaneous and informal ways, driven by the labour market, ethnic networks and civil society. National policies have mainly followed the process, trying to give a legal framework to the practical inclusion of foreign citizens in the economic system and local societies. Despite the approval of several laws, the main pillar of Italian immigration policies has been the amnesties for irregular immigrants and their employers: seven in 25 years, to mention only the most important and explicit measures, beyond other minor or hidden regularizations (Ambrosini 2018). The four amnesties enacted between 1986 and 1998 regularized the positions of 790,000 immigrants; the amnesty of 2002, following approval of the Bossi/Fini Law, regularized 630,000 immigrants. In 2009, the Maroni Law, which applied only to the domestic and care sector, prompted nearly 300,000 applications for regularization. In 2012, during a profound economic crisis, the Monti government enacted another amnesty; although it fell short of expectations, this amnesty yielded approximately 120,000 new regularizations. To be stressed is that Italian amnesties are conceived as the granting of permission to employers to legalise workers previously hired in informal ways. This means that behind every legalized immigrant there is an employer, and in the overwhelming majority of cases, it is an Italian one.

Family reunifications followed, and they have triggered the formation of a second and even a third generation of people of immigrant origin. In total, at present there are about 5.3 million foreign

nationals regularly residing in Italy. They are mainly women (52.0 percent), mainly Europeans (50.9 percent, and 30.4 percent are EU citizens) (IDOS 2018), and they come mainly from countries with a Christian religious tradition (57.5 according to estimates, in comparison with 28.2 percent of Muslims) (Caritas-Migrantes 2018) (Table 1). Furthermore, the numbers have been stable in past four years. In previous years, arrived immigrants found informal jobs, and sooner or later reached a possibility of regularization; however, the lack of job opportunities, even in the informal economy, has heavily impacted on the new flows in recent years.

Statistical data do not confirm what most Italians have believed in recent years: that the country has been invaded, that the immigrants arriving are overwhelmingly African males and Muslims, and that they primarily arrive by sea to apply for asylum (Allievi and Dalla Zuanna 2016).

Moreover, despite the obstacles created by the citizenship code (see below), the number of naturalizations has rapidly increased in recent years: 129,887 in 2014, 178,035 in 2015, 201,591 in 2016.

Tab. 1. The composition of the immigrant population in Italy (2017): the ten main nationalities

Rank	Country	Residents (in thousands)	% of the immigrant population
1	Romania	1,190	23.1
2	Albania	440	8.6
3	Morocco	417	8.1
4	China	291	5.7
5	Ukraine	237	4.6
6	Philippines	168	3.3
7	India	152	3.0
8	Bangladesh	132	2.6
9	Moldova	132	2.6

10	Egypt	120	2.3

Source: IDOS, *Dossier statistico immigrazione 2018*

The economic insertion of immigrants is the crucial aspect of the settlement of the immigrant population in Italy. Despite the country's economic difficulties, the long recession of the period 2008-2014 and the weak recovery of recent years, 2.4 million immigrants have regular jobs. They represent 10.5 percent of total employment, with a remarkable concentration in some sectors: 16.6% in the construction industry, 16.9% in agriculture, 18.5% in hotels and restaurants, reaching the peak in domestic services: 71% (Ministero del Lavoro 2018).

In comparison with North-Western Europe, the unemployment rate is lower, but the quality of jobs is worse (Fullin and Reyneri 2011). Only a few immigrants obtain white-collar jobs, also because of the barriers against their insertion in public employment and the scant recognition of their qualifications.

The possibility of self-employment, which has grown also during the recession, now reaching the volume of almost 600,000 people involved, 9.4% of the total, is relatively more accessible. For instance, at present about half of the street vendors in Italy were born abroad (IDOS 2018).

While the economic insertion and settlement of immigrant families have largely occurred, the political acceptance of this demographic and social change has always been difficult. The citizenship law is clear testimony to this difficulty. It was approved almost unanimously by Parliament in 1992, at a time when immigration to Italy began to increase on a large scale, and it was intended to maintain a strong link between citizenship and Italian descent: it enables the grandchildren of former Italian emigrants to maintain or to acquire citizenship, and remains very strict towards non-EU foreigners who want to access Italian citizenship. The law requires 10 years of residence; processing time can take up to four years (following a recent disposition of the new government).

In contrast, becoming Italian by marriage is easier than in most other developed countries, which is why, until some years ago, the majority of naturalizations were awarded following a marriage. Zincone (2006) cites a "familial" concept of citizenship.

The right to vote has shared more or less the same fate. Since the national elections of 2006, Italian emigrants have been able to vote without returning to Italy, and to elect members of Parliament to represent them; by contrast, long-term foreign immigrant residents have not yet gained the right to vote in local elections.

Furthermore, Italy hosts one of the oldest and strongest anti-immigrant parties, the (Northern) League, which in the past was a strategic partner of centre-right governments headed by Mr. Berlusconi, holding from 2008 to 2011 the Ministry of Home Affairs. As we will see, this party occupies a leading position in definition of the migration policies of the present government, again holding the Ministry of Home Affairs.

2. The "refugee crisis" in Italy

It is necessary to specify that the maritime borders were never the main gateways for immigrants into Italy. Most of them entered in regular ways, mainly with tourist visas if necessary, then overstayed, especially if they found a job in the hidden economy. The length of Italian coasts, contrary to popular wisdom, is not the main reason for the formation of an irregular immigrant population in Italy. The labour market and the labour demand by Italian households have been much more important (Ambrosini 2018).

It is true, however, that in recent decades Italy has also been the gateway to Europe for inflows of asylum seekers and other kinds of immigrants arriving on its shores from the South of the Mediterranean Sea. The so-called 'North Africa Emergency' (*Emergenza Nord Africa*) in 2011, when more than 62,000 boat people from African countries arrived in Italy by sea, was a turning point in public discourse. Mass-media, public opinion, governments in office and political forces began to

emphasize landings as the source of immigration. They interchanged the terms "migrants" and "asylum seekers", so that it was believed that people arriving by sea wanted to settle in Italy. A deep divergence between perception and statistical evidence has marked the Italian debate on immigration and asylum in recent years.

As already stated, in that past four years the volume of foreign population in Italy has been stable overall, and (the few) new entries from non-EU countries for familial reasons have always outnumbered entries for asylum (Table 2).

Table 2. Residence permits granted to non-EU citizens in Italy (percentages, 2015-2017)

Reasons	2015	2016	2017
Family reasons	43.7	45.8	44.3
Work	6.3	4.3	3.2
Asylum, humanitarian reasons	27.3	34.3	38.3
Other reasons	22.7	15.6	14.2
Total (in thousands)	226	227	263

Source: Ministry of Home Affairs

A research institute (Istituto Cattaneo of Bologna), drawing on data from Eurobarometer, shows that EU citizens in general overestimate the rate of non-EU citizens living in their country (16.7 per cent against 7.2). In the Italian case, however, the gap between perception and reality is much wider, the highest indeed among all the countries of the EU, with a perception of 25 per cent against a data of 7 per cent.[1]

It is not only a problem of inaccurate information or the lack of it. The Istituto Cattaneo also takes into consideration the "NIM index", elaborated by the Pew Research Centre and measuring the hostility against immigrants and religious minorities. Also in this case, Italy occupies the leading position among 13 countries of the "old" EU. Furthermore, the two indicators are related: those with

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[1] https://www.cattaneo.org/2018/08/27/immigrazione-in-italia-tra-realta-e-percezione/. Accessed on 13 December 2018.

a hostile attitude towards migration tend to overestimate the number of immigrants. This does not come as a surprise, but what is striking is that in Italy this way of thinking has become the conventional wisdom and the hegemonic narrative, also in the mass media, in culture and politics. The chapter by Van Hootegem and Meuleman (this book) confirms the rapid rise of a hostile attitude among Italian citizens.

In fact, the number of people rescued at sea is not only less than imagined, but most of them until 2015 preferred to continue their journey towards Northern Europe by crossing the Alps as well. Thus, the implicit role of Italy was that of a bridge, favouring their passage and not strongly enforcing the Dublin rules on asylum seekers' identification at the arrival point. Only a minority of people landing in Italy claimed asylum in the country and, therefore, there was a gap between the number of landings in Italy and that of applications for asylum.

In 2015, however, the EU partners imposed the establishment of the so-called "hotspots" on Italian soil and made clear that the fingerprints of asylum seekers had to be taken immediately, even against their will. The European agreement envisaged also the resettlement of asylum seekers in other countries, fixing precise national quotas; but the national governments of other EU countries, explicitly or implicitly, rejected enforcement of that agreement, or its application was slowed down. Only about 13,000 asylum seekers were relocated, and in the end, the project was abandoned.

Consequently, the rate of applications for asylum in Italy on the total number of landings has rapidly increased, rising from 37 per cent in 2014 to 56 per cent in 2015, to 68 per cent in 2016. In 2017, it surpassed 100 per cent, because of arrivals by land through North-Eastern borders and rejections of people to Italy as the first country of arrival, according to the Dublin conventions.

Then the number of asylum seekers hosted in Italy grew until July 2017 (Fig. 1), when the government (centre-left coalition, headed by Mr. Gentiloni, with Mr. Minniti Minister of Home Affairs) signed new agreements with the Libyan government and local forces and began to hinder the operations of search and rescue by NGOs' ships. The consequence was a sharp reduction of new inflows from the

Libyan coasts. Most asylum seekers were blocked or intercepted by the Libyan navy, and held in detention centres where there was a stark absence of international control.

At the end of 2017, the number of arrivals by sea dropped to 119,310 (Fig.1), as a composition between a first period, until July, much more intense, and a second period, after July, much more scarce.

In 2018 the new government (Five Stars Movement and League, with Mr. Salvini, League, minister of Home Affairs) had from the beginning a hostile attitude towards asylum seekers, immigrants and NGOs rescuing people in the Mediterranean (see the following section). As a consequence, the number of people arriving by sea dropped dramatically in 2018: 23,370, less than in Spain or Greece.
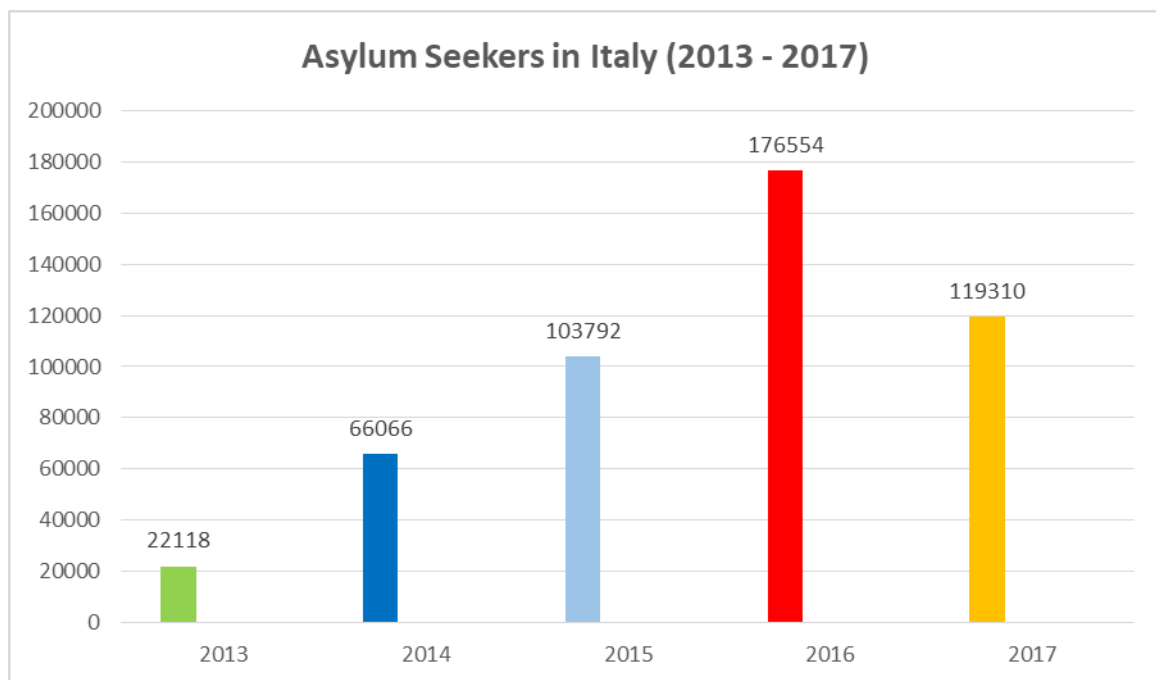

Fig.1. Asylum seekers in Italy (applications), 2013-2017. Source: Italian Ministry of Home Affairs.

Over the years, the recognition rate of a legal form of protection has decreased, from about 60 per cent in 2014 to 41.5 per cent in 2015, 39.4 per cent in 2016, with a slight recovery in 2017: 40.0 per cent. Some other asylum applicants received protection after appealing against the negative refugee decision: there are no official data, but some estimates claim that about 50 per cent of appeals succeed.

Overall, Italy is less generous than the other main Western European countries, with the exception of France. The rate of recognition in 2017 was 64.6 in Belgium, 53.0 per cent in Germany, 46.9 in Sweden (AIDA 2018).

Moreover, in Italy the most common formula adopted to grant legal status to asylum seekers is "humanitarian protection", the weakest and temporary form of asylum. Only 5.0 percent of applicants in 2015, 5.3 per cent in 2016, 8.4 per cent in 2017 received full refugee status; 14.4 per cent (2015); 14.1 per cent (2016); 8.4 per cent (2017) obtained subsidiary protection; 22.2 per cent (2015), 20.8 per cent (2016); 24.7 per cent (2017) humanitarian protection (Fig. 2).
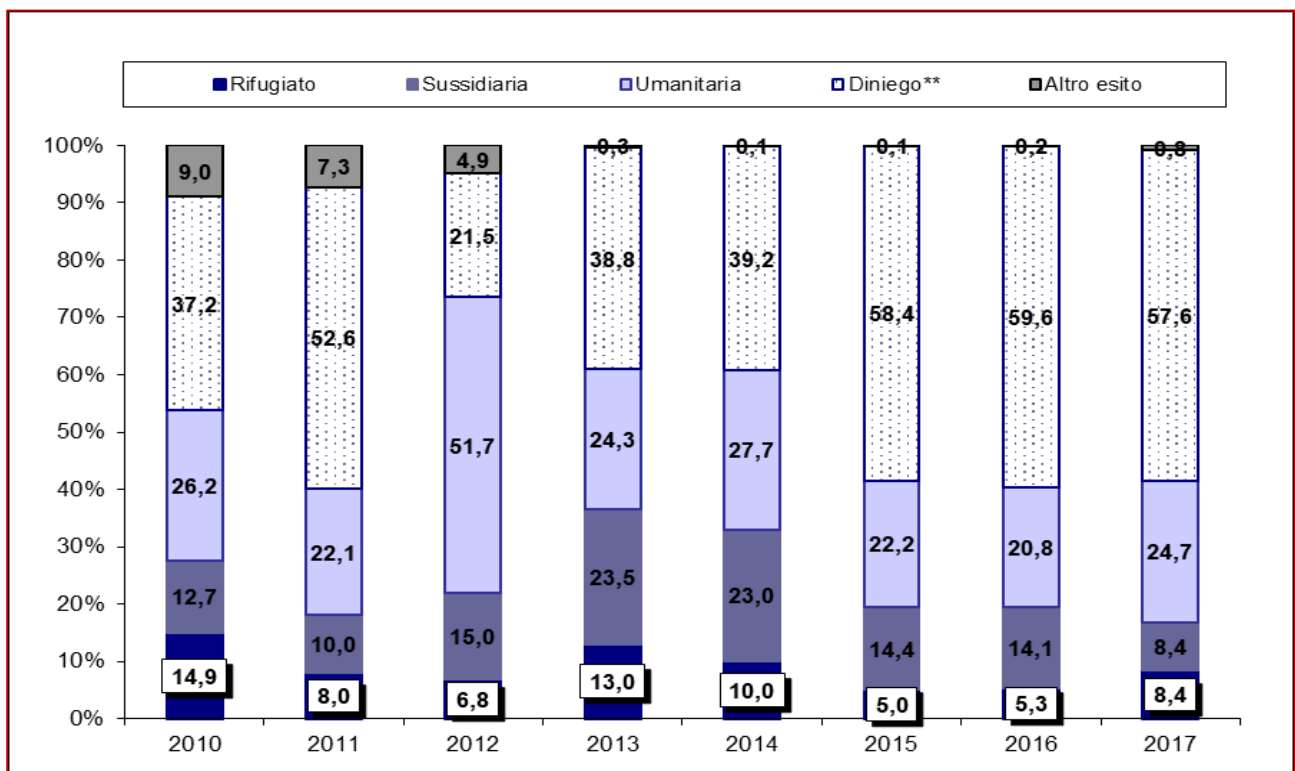

Fig.2: Outcome of asylum applications in Italy: 2010-2017. Source: Italian Ministry of Home Affairs.

The new government, furthermore, has abolished "humanitarian protection". Only a few special cases will be admitted (people with serious diseases, victims of natural disasters or people who have performed "acts of exceptional civic value"). The estimate is that among the 150,000 applicants under examination, about 100-120,000 will be rejected. Since the capacity to repatriate them is very

low, the huge majority will remain in Italy, without the possibility of working legally or finding accommodation, thus raising fears and hostility among the native population.

The overwhelming majority of asylum seekers are men; women represented only 16.2 per cent in 2017, even if there was an increase from 15.0 per cent in 2016, 11.5 per cent in 2015 and 7.7 per cent in 2014. The three main countries of origin in 2016 were: Nigeria (27,289 applications), Pakistan (13,660) and Gambia (9,040); in 2017 Nigeria was again in the first position (25,964), but followed by Bangladesh (12,731) and Pakistan (9,728). For 2018, the Ministry of Home Affairs has provided only the number of people landed in Italy by sea. With much reduced numbers, the ranking is now: Tunisia (5,181), Eritrea (3,320), and Iraq (1,744).

In dealing with this unexpected inflow, the Italian authorities have mainly adopted an emergency approach. While a national system of reception, SPRAR (Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees), has been in place since 2003, the emergency has always been the prevailing frame of management of asylum issues. In accordance with this logic, a leading role has been allocated to the Civil Protection system in the management of the so-called 'North-African Emergency' (2011-2013).

The 170.000 asylum-seekers disembarked on Italian shores in 2014 led to an Agreement among State, Regions and Local Authorities (*Accordo conferenza Unificata*, 10 July 2014[2]) and to the approval of a law (Legislative degree no.142/2015)[3] which tried (not always successfully) to overcome the emergency logic hitherto dominant. The two main issues were: reaching, through a quota system, a homogeneous distribution of asylum-seekers in all the regions (until 2014 there were huge imbalances and 70% of asylum-seekers were hosted in three Southern regions, i.e. Sicily, Apulia and Calabria) and achieving an effective institutional cooperation among different levels of government.

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[2] http://www.prefettura.it/FILES/AllegatiPag/1247/Accordo%20Conferenza%20Unificata.pdf, accessed on 28 of December 2018.
[3] Most Italian legislation on asylum originates from the transposition of EU directives. Legislative decree no.142/2015 is not an exception, since it implements directives 2013/32 and 2013/33.

The second point includes the designing of a reception system where the national level assumes the role of coordinator (Campomori 2018). This system consists of two phases: from first aid to a second level of welcome and integration (the SPRAR,), which should have become the mainstream for all the asylum-seekers. Local authorities play a crucial role in the institution of a SPRAR project because they are requested - on a voluntary basis - to launch the reception project in collaboration with NGOs and associations. The Home Affairs Ministry has encouraged implementation of the SPRAR, which is conceived as a structured means to achieve a widespread reception, overcoming extraordinary solutions, and taking into account, at the same time, diverse local situations, avoiding imbalances and non-homogeneous distributions. The resistance of local authorities, however, has led to a lack of reception facilities, and a concentration in Southern regions. Only 35,881 places are provided (July 2018), since only 1,825 municipalities out of more than 8,000 have agreed to take part in the system.[4] Furthermore, almost half of the places are located in Southern regions and Latium, where local authorities more clearly perceive the benefits of hosting asylum seekers, in terms of job creation and stimulus for the area's economic system. The richer regions, in which the possibility of refugees' employment should in theory be higher, are less willing to cooperate. In recent years, only refugees who have received legal protection (but not all of them), unaccompanied minors, families, and frail people are hosted in the SPRAR system.

The government has responded to this lack of reception facilities by creating a parallel system based on the Centres of Extraordinary Reception (CAS): again an emergency response to a recurrent structural problem. Indeed, the huge majority of asylum seekers have been hosted in the CAS. In this case, the national authorities by-pass local governments by assigning to private actors (mainly, but not only, NGOs: also hotel owners and other conventional employers) the task of establishing and managing various kinds of reception facilities: often large, with large numbers of guests, and with uneven levels of professional competence, experience in and commitment to the integration of hosted

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[4] https://www.sprar.it/i-numeri-dello-sprar, accessed on 20 December 2018.

people, relations with the territory and its services.[5] In some cases, the infiltration by criminal organizations has been identified, while in others unscrupulous providers have been detected, discrediting the whole system of reception.

The number of asylum seekers hosted in reception facilities was 138,858 at the end of 2018, and their distribution across the country, mainly through the CAS system, is related to the population of Italian regions: Lombardy, the largest Italian region, hosts 14 per cent of asylum seekers; Latium and Campania 9 per cent; Emilia-Romagna, Sicily and Piedmont 8 per cent.[6]

The new government recently decided to exclude asylum seekers from the SPRAR, hosting them only in the CAS. In these centres furthermore several services have been cancelled (psychological and medical assistance, Italian lessons, orientation to the labour market) because the daily rate paid to the managing institutions has been reduced from 35 to about 20 euros. The underlying logic is that most applications for asylum will be rejected under the new legal regime, so that it is pointless to invest money to teach Italian or to insert into the labour market people who will not be authorized to reside and work in Italy.

3. *The anti-refugees wave in Italian politics*

As widely recognized, the asylum/immigration issue played a major role in the last Italian general elections (March 2018), contributing to the collapse of the Democratic Party and to the victory of the anti-establishment parties, Five Stars Movement and the League. In May 2018, they signed an agreement and established the new government. For the first time in Western Europe, the so-called 'populist' parties won a democratic election and achieved political power at the national level.

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[5] Conversation with Chiara Marchetti, researcher and expert on asylum seekers' reception
[6] http://www.interno.gov.it/it/sala-stampa/dati-e-statistiche/sbarchi-e-accoglienza-dei-migranti-tutti-i-dati. Accessed on 2 January 2019.

To understand this dramatic change, it is necessary to observe that, according to Amnesty International Italy (2018), hate speech has invaded the information system (newspapers, TVs, social media) with growing force, raising arguments that are "openly racist and discriminatory" (p. 2). In Italy hate speech, in particular against asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants in general, is not limited to marginal groups of the far right or anonymous trolls on the internet; it is openly employed in the political arena by candidates and political parties, particularly so during the last campaign for the general elections. According to Amnesty International Italy, hate speech was exposed consistently during the three weeks of monitoring of the electoral campaign. In 23 days, 787 highlightings were collected, more than one demeaning or racist or discriminatory message every hour, posted on social networks. These messages referred to 129 candidates, 77 of whom were elected, and 43.5 per cent were political leaders. They belonged mainly to the League (51 per cent), followed by Fratelli d'Italia ("Brothers of Italy", right wing, 27 per cent), Forza Italia (Centre-right, 13 per cent), CasaPound (far right, 4 per cent). 91 per cent of hate declarations referred to asylum seekers and migrants, 32 per cent conveyed fake news and counterfeit data, another 37 per cent employed data that were imprecise or hard to verify. Facebook (73 per cent) was the social media on which most messages were posted. The League was the leading party in this exploitation of the asylum issue. The party is the oldest political party in the Italian system. In the past it had important government responsibilities in the governments headed by Mr. Berlusconi. It fell into deep crisis between 2011-12, after the collapse of the last Berlusconi government and a corruption scandal that involved Mr. Bossi, the historical leader of the Northern League, his family and his more faithful co-operators. The party lost many votes in local elections and it seemed close to disappearing. But under the new leadership of Matteo Salvini it has changed its political message and presented itself as a "new" actor. It has softened its regional identity, removing the term "Northern" from the name of the party, and abandoned its traditional adversarial language against Rome and Southern Italy, making nationalism its flag. Furthermore, Mr. Salvini has established internal connections with leaders of the populist-nationalist right wing: Marine Le Pen (Front National) in France, Viktor Orban (Fidesz) in Hungary, Jarosław Kaczyński (PiS) in

Poland. In addition, he has repeatedly praised the Russian President Vladimir Putin and the US President Donald Trump.

The hostility against immigrants was a key point of the League's political message at the outset, but under the new leadership it has been emphasized, linking it with sovereignty, security, priority for the needs of Italians, strong criticism against the EU and the traditional European partners of Italy. All in all, Mr. Salvini has moved the position of his party to the right wing - indeed, in several respects to the far right - by connecting populist and anti-establishment arguments with more traditional issues of the political (far) right: more freedom to use weapons for private citizens, more resources for the police, more emphasis on national borders and interests, lower taxes and fiscal tolerance for independent workers. A recent book has defined Salvini's League as the "far right of government" (Passarelli and Tuorto 2018). This message has obtained political success: the League has widened its electoral constituency, gaining votes and winning local elections in the Centre and also the South of Italy. Recent polls show that more than 30 per cent of Italian electors would vote for the League at present, and the League would become the first Italian party.[7]

Another actor that has overtly employed an adversarial language against asylum seekers and immigrants (the two categories are in general overlapped) is Fratelli d'Italia. It was founded in 2012, from a secession of Forza Italia, as a consequence of the decline of that party and of Mr. Berlusconi's leadership. Headed by a young woman, Giorgia Meloni, coming from the traditional Italian right, the party has tried to recover the heritage of the old Movimento Sociale-Destra nazionale (the post-fascist party of the period 1946-1994), whose symbol appears in the flag of Fratelli d'Italia. Also in this case the hostility towards asylum seekers and immigrants has been widely employed to claim the political identity of the party, but with less success. This political space is already occupied by the League; and Fratelli d'Italia will probably be absorbed by Mr. Salvini's party.

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[7] See for instance: http://tg.la7.it/politica/il-sondaggio-politico-di-luned%C3%AC-3-dicembre-2018-03-12-2018-133769. Accessed on 3 January 2019.

A third highly vocal actor in campaigns against the reception of asylum seekers is CasaPound. It was established in Rome in 2008, after the occupation of a building that became the first "social centre" of the Italian far right. Even if it has competed legally in general elections since 2013 and in some local elections, CasaPound is mainly an Italian version of far-right movements. It has squatted several buildings in Rome, and it has often been involved in riots with leftist militants and the police. Violence is part of its culture, but it has also a pop side, having created a musical group, a theatrical company, a web radio. A recent book terms CasaPound "Fascists of the Third Millennium" (Rosati 2018). The party has been very active in organizing demonstrations against asylum seekers, NGOs and also Catholic institutions hosting refugees: something new and unusual in Italian politics.

To be mentioned is also the convergence among the League, under the leadership of Mr. Salvini, the "Fratelli d'Italia" party, and also far right groups such as CasaPound. A party with governmental responsibilities, and another party represented in the Italian Parliament, do not hesitate to share attitudes, claims, and political actions with the radical right. Reciprocally, in the last general elections (March 2018), Simone Di Stefano, leader of CasaPound, made public his support for Salvini and the League.[8] In May, he expressed his "sympathy" for the new government of the Five Stars Movement-League coalition. [9] Hence the fight against the reception of asylum seekers has been the opportunity for a recomposition of the various segments of the Italian right, with the League (no longer only "Northern") assuming the leadership of that coalition.

The position of the Five Stars Movement, now the main Italian party, is less clear. In this party different positions stay together. As a matter of fact, however, leaders of the movement repeatedly took positions against asylum seekers, NGOs and the reception system before the elections, and later shared the programme of the League on this issue and voted for its proposals in Parliament. The moral leader of the movement, the comedian Beppe Grillo, has on several occasions posted messages

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[8] https://www.corriere.it/elezioni-2018/notizie/elezioni-2018-casapound-si-sostegno-governo-salvini-ac7b09e2-1b14-11e8-b6d4-cfc0a9fb6da8.shtml. Accessed on 3 January 2019.
[9] https://www.giornalettismo.com/archives/2661624/casapound-ok-governo-m5s-lega. Accessed on 3 January 2019.

against immigrants and asylum seekers on his influential website. Many spokespersons, members of Parliament and activists of the movement raise doubts on the NGOs' role, talking about "taxis of the sea".[10] The political leader Luigi Di Maio has published several messages on social media, accusing NGOs of being connected with human traffickers[11], and spreading suspicion about the "business of immigration"[12], even if he later denied such accusations. Even recently (April 2019) he emphasized "migration policies", i.e. the harsh closure of Italian borders against asylum seekers, as a key point of convergence with the League of Mr. Salvini.

In more formal terms, the agreement between the Five Stars Movement and the League for the new government programme (May 2018), includes a section on immigration, whose title is: "Immigration: repatriations and a stop to the business"[13]. Immigration (but in reality asylum) is described as "an unbearable issue for Italy, considering the costs to sustain and the related business". All the section talks of removals, controls, criminal infiltrations, threats to security, detentions, whereas the references to human rights are few and marginal.

The implementation has been even harsher: NGOs ships have been prevented from disembarking rescued migrants in Italy, and also a ship of the Italian Coastguard, the Diciotti, was for many days refused permission to disembark a group of Eritrean asylum seekers. Only the intervention of the Italian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CEI), which took in charge the asylum seekers, resolved the situation.

Only in the last "crisis" (January 2019), when the ships named Sea Watch 3 and Sea Eye were denied permission to disembark 39 migrants rescued at sea, did the Prime Minister Conte overtly challenge his deputy Prime Minister Salvini, and decided to open the door to 15 migrants, who were taken in charge by the Waldensian church.

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[10] https://thesubmarine.it/2017/04/25/di-maio-ong-razzismo/. Accessed on 4 January 2019.
[11] http://www.vita.it/it/article/2017/04/26/accuse-alle-ong-sui-migranti-un-esempio-lampante-di-post-verita/143141/. Accessed on 4 January 2019.
[12] https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2017/04/23/news/di_maio_saviano_ong-163704617/. Accessed on 4 January 2019.
[13] https://www.quotidiano.net/politica/contratto-governo-1.3919012. Accessed on 4 January 2019.

4. *The opposition of local authorities against the settlement of asylum seekers and reception facilities*

This national policy reflects also what has happened at local level in recent years. Many local governments, after having rejected the invitation to manage a SPRAR project, have protested against and tried to resist the settlement of refugees on their territory through CAS centres, when the Prefects identify a suitable facility or a private organization responds to the public tenders for the management of such centres.

The opposition openly targets asylum seekers, and the public policy of reception, even if it often fosters a confusion between refugees and other immigrants. For instance, mayors often claim that they already host a huge number of immigrants on their territory, and they cannot afford to receive other Third Country nationals.

Second, the policy of reception through CAS centres favours a framing of local policies of exclusion in which mayors and municipalities protest against the imposition of refugees by national powers on local communities. A frame of contrast between overbearing central powers and peaceful local communities, which are obliged to host unknown and dangerous aliens, is recurrent.

Connected to this is the victim complex: local communities present themselves as the "victims" of an "invasion". This frame permits the political construction of an opposition between "us", the peaceful and integrated local community, and "them", the aliens, who are the bearers of danger, insecurity and the diminishment of welfare resources. Furthermore, this view promotes the idea that "we" are under attack and have the right to defend ourselves, our families, our homes and our properties. Historically, this kind of victim complex has triggered the persecution of ethnic and religious minorities: the majority feels itself threated by the presence of aliens, and it depicts its reaction and even the recourse to violence as a legitimate defence against this deadly danger.

In addition, the local territory is conceived as a private property, or an extension of home. A famous slogan of the (Northern) League against immigrants declares "Masters in our own home" (Ambrosini 2018).

An important aspect is that the protests have involved many regions and municipalities, and not only the Northern regions of Italy, where the anti-immigrant party (Northern) League has its strongholds, as occurred in the past with previous waves of local policies of exclusion (Ambrosini 2013). As a consequence, more than in the past, also municipalities ruled by centre-left coalitions are involved.

Following Faist (2002), this could be seen as an example of "symbolic politics" or "meta-politics", in which "real world issues" are connected with "fears around international migration" (ibid., 11-12). In particular, "through meta-politics, low-level threats usually gain out-of-proportion significance" (ibid., 12). An important aspect is that, by establishing a sharp dichotomy between "us" and "them", local authorities and their supporters in some way recreate a meaning of community, reinforcing the bonds between local residents who feel and share a common threat. They find an explanation of and an actor responsible for their problems: their impoverishment or economic decline, feelings of insecurity, lack of prospects, are connected to the arrival of these unknown aliens. Paradoxically, fragmented local communities experience a new sense of unity in protesting against the settlement of a few asylum seekers.

More specifically, a mix of old and new reasons has been employed by local governments in order to justify the resistance against the reception of asylum seekers. A general reason is "inconvenience for citizens", for instance, "the transformation of a green portion of our territory", and the worries by citizens about the numbers (mayor of Bagnolo, province of Brescia, 10 July 2015).[14]

Security is obviously a major issue, and it can be expressed in many forms: not only as a fear of terrorism or common crimes, but also as a worry about public health. In a village of the Veneto region (Albettone, province of Vicenza) the local council adopted a resolution against the settlement of a

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[14] http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/sindaco-non-vuole-i-profughi-e-prefetto-deve-arrendersi-1150548.html. Accessed on 9 December 2018

CAS, demanding that the mayor "protect the community" against "risks connected to the security and the possible spread of diseases or plagues".[15]

Another recurrent message is that of the priority of citizens' needs; a message that traverses the entire country and easily obtains consensus in times of crisis and reduced welfare provisions. For instance, the mayor of Bagnoli (province of Naples), claimed: "Social conditions would lack. I think that the demands of local residents should prevail. It is better to help them in their own country" (4 March 2017)[16].

Another reason given in many instances by local authorities is that of possible negative consequences for the town's attractiveness to tourism. This is the case of Capalbio, on the Tuscan coast, a well-known holiday resort for leftist politicians, intellectuals and managers of public companies.

Here the mayor declared: "We must welcome [asylum seekers], of course. But here there are villas. And very luxurious ones. With gardens. Finely furnished. In the historic centre" (14 August 2016). Some intellectuals and affluent holidaymakers supported this position more or less overtly.[17]

The mayor of Positano, a village on the beautiful Amalfi coast, has expressed a similar reason: "The reception [of asylum seekers] is not compatible with our distinctive features. This is not racism, but protection of a place, and there are also reasons of public order and security" (22 February 2017).[18]

Local authorities do not limit themselves to declarations and verbal protests. In Saronno, Lombardy, at town with 40,000 inhabitants, in October 2016 the mayor managed to block the opening of a reception centre for 32 asylum seekers. The property (a former school) belonged to a congregation of nuns and was restructured with significant expenditure by the catholic organization Caritas Ambrosiana, following a request by the Prefect. The mayor employed legal impediments to deny the transformation of the school into a reception centre, but his motivations were made clear by his

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[15]repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2015/07/20/un-muro-in-paese-per-bloccare-i-rifugiati-lultima-sceriffo14.html. Accessed on 9 December 2018.

[16] http://www.palazzotenta39.it/public/rifugiati-a-bagnoli-il-no-e-i-dubbi-del-sindaco/. Accessed on 9 December 2018.

[17] http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2016/08/14/capalbio-larrivo-di-50-profughi-fa-discutere-la-sinistra-alcuni-territori-sono-speciali-le-accuse-ipocriti-radical-chic/2974710/. Accessed on 10 December 2018.

[18] http://www.caprinews.it/leggi1.asp?cod=8084. Accessed on 10 December 2018.

declarations: "The citizens of Saronno do not want clandestines, and national sovereignty belongs to the citizens of Saronno, not to the refugees (…) It is an administrative act, not a political one. Anyway, citizens who elected me demand me to do it. When they meet me in the street, the huge majority insist that I remain firm on asylum seekers"[19]. In another interview, he declared: "I do not want African males in proximity to schools attended by our girls".[20]

As in other cases, there also local actors who dissent. In Saronno a network of associations, "Quattro passi di pace" ("Four steps of peace") mobilized in favour of the reception centre, but without achieving the purpose of changing the mind of the local administration. What they obtained was a condemnation of the League (10,000 euros, as well as 4,000 euros of legal expenses) for having described as "clandestines" the 32 asylum seekers to be hosted, in posters that they exposed in the town.[21]

A radicalization of the fight against the settlement of reception centres for asylum seekers was expressed also by the resolution adopted in August 2017 by the mayor (League) of San Germano Vercellese, a small town in Piedmont, which obtained wide coverage in the national press and in the political debate. The mayor wrote literally, in the title of the resolution adopted by the municipal council of **"**Protection of the territory against invasion/immigration by populations coming from Africa and not only"[22]. She threatened with fines (from 150 to 5,000 euros) people who rent out properties to host asylum seekers, including non-profit and religious organizations. The resolution explains the reasons: "It is not possible to tolerate that the authority of the Mayor elected by citizens is trespassed as regards the hospitality of migrants; that the hospitality, given hypocritically and at all costs, has an end dumping on the shoulders, on the budget and on the responsibility of municipalities

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[19]https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2016/10/01/migranti-sindaco-leghista-blocca-il-centro-accoglienza-delle-suore-ma-non-ha-fatto-i-conti-con-il-viminale/3067047/. Accessed on 29 December 2018.

[20] https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2017/02/23/news/clandestini_lega_condanna_discriminazione_profughi-158956059/. Accessed on 29 December 2018.

[21] https://milano.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/17_febbraio_23/lega-condannata-discriminazione-profughi-non-sono-clandestini-949736fa-f9b1-11e6-9b43-a08eac6546a0.shtml. Accessed on 29 December 2019.

[22] http://www.vita.it/it/article/2017/08/29/la-delibera-del-comune-che-si-tutela-dallinvasione-delle-popolazioni-a/144335/ . Accessed on 5 January 2019.

(especially the small ones) the presence of hundreds of people who are alien to the local context and who, after a few months, will come to knock on the Mayor's door to demand assistance which very probably it will not be possible to provide." The regional ombudsman of Piedmont wrote a letter inviting the Mayor to revoke the resolution, but she refused, saying that she did not even read the letter and that she was proud to have prevented the settlement of reception centres in her municipality. A different type of conflict occurred in Ventimiglia, a key transit point on the border with France. Here hundreds of asylum seekers arrived, after having landed in Southern Italy, with the purpose of crossing the border and applying for asylum in France. French authorities enforced the border, and asylum seekers were blocked. Some of them were assisted in a Red Cross camp, others by the local Caritas, but many others remained without any shelter, living and sleeping outdoors along the River Roja. No borders' movements and other activists came to support them, providing tents and some food: an informal camp grew, a situation similar to other border zones, such as the so-called Jungle of Calais (Sandri 2018). After some months, the residents began to protest, and in August 2016, in the peak period of the tourist season, the local mayor (Democratic Party, centre-left) issued an ordinance forbidding the distribution of food outside the Red Cross camp or the Caritas facilities.[23] While covered by alleged hygienic reasons, the meaning of the ordinance became clear when the public fountains near the train station were closed. Some activists were fined for having infringed the ban. This disposition lasted some months, raising many protests, by Amnesty International, MSF, Caritas, among others. A public demonstration in Ventimiglia was announced. At that point, in April 2017 the mayor withdrew the ordinance.[24]

Only in some cases have the inhabitants mobilized against asylum seekers spontaneously. A relevant case is that of Gorino, a hamlet with about 600 inhabitants in the province of Ferrara (region of Emilia-Romagna), with a long-standing leftist tradition. Here in October 2016 about one hundred

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[23] http://www.ansa.it/liguria/notizie/2016/08/12/ventimiglia-stop-a-cibo-non-autorizzato_1f8c7a35-78fa-435d-8ce1-b4fc1dfdb2a7.html. Accessed on 5 January 2019.
[24] https://genova.repubblica.it/cronaca/2017/04/23/news/ventimiglia_revocato_il_divieto_di_distribuire_cibo_ai_migranti-163684319/. Accessed on 5 January 2019.

residents blocked with barricades the three accesses to the hamlet, protesting against the settlement of 12 refugee women with eight children in a local hostel, in which five rooms had been requisitioned by the Prefect. The coach with the women was forced to go back, the Prefect had to change his decision, and the refugees were hosted in other facilities of the province. The political parties were apparently not involved at the beginning, but immediately afterwards the right wing supported the protest. The local secretary of the League spoke of "new heroes of the Resistance against the dictatorship of reception", while the mayor (Democratic Party) expressed understanding for "the fear of citizens"[25]. At the general elections of March 2018, the League achieved locally 43 per cent of votes in the Lower Chamber, the centre-right 68 per cent.[26]

5. The far right and the mobilizations against asylum seekers

Protests by local authorities and mobilizations of far-right movements intersect and support each other. Castelli Gattinara (2017) has analysed the political discourse of such movements, highlighting some key points. In general, far-right movements build their identity *ex negativo*, targeting a set of enemies and distinguishing between friends and foes. While in the past they emphasized racial superiority or inferiority, now they focus on "incompatibility", reframing heir racism in cultural, rather than biological terms. Furthermore, they present themselves as the defenders of traditional (Christian) European values against Islam as the historical enemy of the European civilization. Consequently, they act upon a loyalty to liberal values and democracy, as a way to reject the demand for basic rights by Muslims and asylum seekers.

Beyond this general framework, in the case of asylum seekers in Italy the far-right discourse refers to other arguments that can attract broader consensus, even "invading the linguistic territory of their

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[25] http://temi.repubblica.it/micromega-online/le-barricate-caserecce-di-gorino-e-gli-imprenditori-politici-del-razzismo/ . Accessed on 5 January 2019.
[26] https://www.ilrestodelcarlino.it/ferrara/politica/elezioni-4-marzo-risultati-gorino-1.3769292. Accessed on 5 January 2019.

opponents" (ibid.: 87). Some examples follow: the need to respect the human rights of refugees; accusing aid organizations of hosting asylum seekers in degraded facilities; "fake solidarity"; corruption in the third sector; the infiltration of private interests in reception activities; the accusation of "fake refugees", or disguised "economic migrants" to exploit the asylum system. Overall, "the idea is that corrupt NGOs, the mass media, and multiculturalist elites have strategically constructed the concept of 'refugee crisis' to generate a moral panic, softening public opinion and legitimizing the 'invasion' of Italy by economic migrants" (ibid.: 88)

An example of the mobilization of far-right groups, together with local residents and elected authorities, occurred near Verona. Here in 2017 an anti-immigrant movement ("Verona ai Veronesi", "Verona to its citizens"), for many days and nights surrounded a reception centre in which 25 asylum seekers were hosted, insulted and intimidated refugees and social workers, damaged properties, without any intervention by public authorities. Some mayors in the area, including the mayor of the village of Roncolevà in which the reception centre was located, supported the protest. On the other side, a network ("Verona che dialoga", "Dialoguing Verona"), in which about 100 local associations took part, mobilized (July 2017). Pro-immigrant associations threatened to boycott the products of a firm which backed the protest, offering logistical support, and declared: "We also ask those who have the responsibility, first the Prefecture, which is responsible for the reception, to put an end to such acts of violence and to prevent new ones, and to engage seriously in an appropriate management of reception which protects the rights of all".[27]

The opposition against asylum seekers and the establishment of reception centres has often been a source of legitimization for far-right movements, such as CasaPound. They could demonstrate together with local residents and sometimes also with mayors, finding support for their rallies, traffic blocks and riots, as happened in Casale San Nicola, a neighbourhood of Rome[28].

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[27] http://www.radiopopolareverona.com/old/?q=content/fermare-subito-la-violenza-razzista. Accessed on 10 January 2019.

[28] https://www.leggo.it/news/roma/roma_protesta_casale_san_nicola_casapound_immigrati-1148232.html. Accessed on 10 January 2019.

Another relevant example is provided by Spinetoli, a little town (about 7,000 inhabitants) in the region of Marche, with a leftist tradition. Here the mayor (Democratic Party, centre-left) in November 2017 demonstrated together with the League and CasaPound against the establishment of a CAS centre, hosting 37 people. The mayor called them "an enormous number"[29]. About 300 people took part in a torchlight demonstration. Then CasaPound distanced itself from the mayor, leaving the hall during his speech. Before the arrival of the asylum seekers, the house in which they would have to reside was burnt. The police never found the authors of the crime.

As in other countries, the issue of asylum has been the opportunity for the radical right to find a new political space, to reach a larger public and to acquire new supporters.

A report by Lunaria, an anti-racist organization, has highlighted this convergence, and underlined the resonance that such demonstrations have achieved through the social media.

While initially the extreme right-wing and the Northern League operated in substantial autonomy and at local level, carrying out single actions and events with few participants, eventually their initiatives became structured in a more organized and transversal manner, linking to spontaneous protests on the territory, also thanks to the use of social media. On many occasions, political groups have joined emerging committees organizing against the reception of refugees. Nocturnal raids, daytime assemblies, demonstrations and street protests, have been amplified thanks to the increasingly frequent use of "virtual squares" (Lunaria 2017: 65).

There were relatively few participants in the demonstrations, even if sometimes in small villages a substantial part of the population was involved; but the audience they reached, through new and traditional media, was much wider.

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[29] http://www.osservatoriorepressione.info/spinetoli-ap-sindaco-pd-sfila-casapound-linvasione-37-profughi/. Accessed on 10 January 2019

6. *Mobilizations and initiatives in favour of refugees*

As already observed, protests and mobilizations against reception centres and asylum seekers have not only met consensus from public opinion; they have also been an opportunity of activism and visibility for a multi-coloured set of pro-immigrant actors, ranging from the radical left of the social movements, No-borders type, to Catholic institutions: an advocacy coalition that recalls the "strange bedfellows" identified by Zolberg (2006) in US immigration policy.

Here four main categories of actors can be distinguished. First, NGOs, or Third Sector Organizations (TSOs), which provide services to migrants and asylum seekers in mainly professional ways, and often in agreement with public bodies. This is the case of SPRARs and CASs, which are mainly managed by NGOs receiving government funds. But, in other cases, as in the dispute on NGOs rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean Sea, they can act with some independence from public policies, and even against the will of governments.

Second, we can identify other organised actors, including trade unions, churches and associations, which often combine practical support with political and cultural activity. They employ professionals but also many volunteers. They can cooperate with public powers but also act beyond the law, for instance by providing help to people with a dubious or irregular legal status (for a comparison with the US, see Hagan 2008). This side of their activity is likely to grow, as a consequence of the new rules on asylum which will very probably create a huge amount of migrants remaining in Italy without legal status. The activism of civil society in favour of immigrants has been a constant feature of Italy's experience as an immigrant receiving country: many gaps in the provision of services to immigrants are filled in various ways by non-state actors (Ambrosini and Van der Leun 2015). The new issue of asylum seekers has reaffirmed this long-standing aspect.

Third, there are social movements, which place the defence of immigrant rights alongside other battles against the state and the capitalist system. However, they provide also more and concrete services to migrants and asylum seekers: what Zamponi (2017) has called "direct social actions",

defining them as "actions that do not primarily focus upon claiming something from the state or other power-holders but that instead focus upon directly transforming some specific aspects of society by means of the action itself" (ibid.: 97). The difference between these activities and more traditional forms of volunteering is an issue under discussion, but to be stressed is the connection between political protest and practical support to asylum seekers.

Fourth, there are support groups that spontaneously coalesce, especially around refugees settled in particular localities, for instance providing help for people in transit at the railway station of Milan, or in the border zone of Ventimiglia-Val Roja (Giliberti 2017); or organizing sport and leisure activities at reception centres. In this category, individuals who offer specific assistance with food, money and accommodation (Fontanari and Ambrosini 2018), or language lessons may be considered as well, integrating those provided by law in reception centres.

As regards the forms of support that such actors develop, it is possible to identify four types of activity. The first can be labelled "networking": as in the cases presented above, mainly at local level but not only, pro-refugees groups try to connect, mitigating their differences, sign joint pleas, in some cases integrate their services.

A second relevant aspect concerns assistance with legal procedures. Often through volunteer lawyers, many pro-refugee actors help people in compiling their applications for asylum or appeals against a refusal. An extension of this activity consists in pro-bono legal advocacy for both civil and criminal matters, which is often provided, in the Italian case, by associations of socially committed lawyers.

A third and crucial type of activity is the provision of services, particularly educational and social welfare services, such as language courses, basic health services, clothing, food, and shelters for the homeless; a category in which many rejected asylum seekers, but also recognized refugees, fall. These services are mainly supplied by volunteers and are often funded by private donations along with support from other social institutions. Overall, these activities provide what Leerkes (2016) in the Netherlands has called "secondary poor relief" and Belloni (2016) describes more positively as "welfare from below". Another type of service is the provision of moral support by some civil society

actors, particularly faith groups (for a comparison with the British case, see Bloch, Sigona and Zetter 2014).

Fourth, there are activities associated with political and cultural opposition to the criminalization of asylum seekers, protest activities against policies of exclusion, support for the free movement of asylum seekers, and the promotion of views alternative to dominant representations of the issue. These actors have tried to influence public opinion by organizing many conferences and debates at local level. They have not obtained much success, in political terms, but they have succeeded in reinforcing the opposition against xenophobic policies and in showing that active minorities do not share the xenophobic policies of the present political majority.

The typology in Table 3 also describes for each category of supporters the level of political engagement, the degree of formalization of the various actors and activities, and the kind of human resources committed (if professional or volunteer).

Table 3 Typology of supporters to asylum seekers and migrants in irregular condition

	NGOs and specialized organizations	**Other CSOs (associations of volunteers, churches, trade unions…)**	**Social movements**	**Citizens**
Main activities	SAR in the sea Reception on the territory	Language schools; Medical services; Legal advocacy; Bureaucratic assistance; Provision of basic assistance: bed and food	Political protest, but increasingly provision of services (e.g. accommodation in squatted buildings; legal and bureaucratic assistance; leisure activities)	Donation of food, clothes, money; Italian language lessons Leisure and socialization

Political engagement	Variable, higher recently against harsher closure of borders	Variable, but increasingly coupled with the provision of services	Main focus (No Borders movements)	Variable, often relevant as the reason to mobilise
Formalization	High (formal organizations, contracts with public authorities)	Mix of formal structures, volunteering and informal activities	Low, but self-organization	Low (spontaneous mobilization)
Human resources	Mainly professionals, volunteers as supplementary resources	Variable, but often volunteering is relevant	Militants/volunteers	Only volunteers

7. *Three examples of pro-refugee mobilizations*

A number of civil society actors have launched innovative initiatives of refugees' reception. Two of them warrant particular mention: a scheme for domestic hospitality of refugees in Italian families and the project of the so-called "humanitarian corridors". As regards domestic hospitality, this was introduced for the first time in 2008 in Turin within the SPRAR project and since 2015, it has been implemented in other cities, especially in the North and Centre of Italy (Campomori and Feraco 2018; Marchetti 2018).

These schemes display differences in their actual implementation as regards the economic contribution that the families receive or the length of the project. A common denominator, however, is apparent: on the one hand, it is believed that a (temporary) stay of refugees in a family –including the possibility of sharing the family's relational resources - could enable the building of networks useful for both labour market and social integration. On the other hand, these projects try to achieve

a cultural purpose: they gamble on the idea that the example given by the hosting families could contribute to reducing people's prejudices and fear related to immigrants and refugees and in generating trust at the local level.

As regards the results, the Refugees Welcome Italia network (the national branch of a wide European network) has promoted 120 experiences of familial reception (January 2018), in 18 Italian towns, mainly located in the Centre-North of Italy. Almost 1,200 Italian households have registered their willingness to welcome a refugee on the website of the association. Caritas Italiana in turn, through the project "Protetto. Rifugiato a casa mia" ("Protected. Refugee in my home") has hosted 118 refugees in Italian households, in various Italian cities. Furthermore, 218 refugees have been hosted in parishes, 72 in religious institutes. Almost 300 have been provided with autonomous accommodations, but in any case, a local family, named "tutor-family" has been entrusted with the task of following the refugees, giving them information, advice and support (Marchetti 2018).

While positive feedbacks have emerged in relation to the integration objectives, the number of refugees hosted in these projects is still low, in comparison with the size of the country and the number of asylum seekers. Another weakness is the relation between public and private actors: in the case of Caritas Italiana (and partially the Refugees Welcome Italia network), no official relations are envisaged; while in other cases the project is officially part of a SPRAR or CAS.

The second relevant practice - humanitarian corridors - aims at innovating both asylum policies and asylum seeker integration. Human corridors organize the arrival of people in need of humanitarian protection from the regions of immediate reception at the borders of war zones. Asylum seekers receive a permit and they can reach a safe country through regular flights, without dangerous journeys and profits for human smugglers. In Italy humanitarian corridors started at the end of 2015 after the signing of an agreement among the catholic S. Egidio community, the Evangelical Churches Federation, the Waldensian Church and the Italian government. Around 1017 persons arrived safely in Italy through these corridors from Lebanon. In 2017 another corridor opened from Ethiopia,

promoted by the Catholic Church (Caritas, Fondazione Migrantes and S.Egidio community), and 500 persons legally entered Italy (January 2019).[30]

After their arrival, asylum seekers are hosted in parishes, religious institutes or apartments in various towns and regions, according to the idea of a "scattered reception". They follow a 12-month integration process entirely funded by the private actors who have promoted the project, with the support of volunteers. In particular, in the second case (humanitarian corridor from Ethiopia) every asylum seeker or family is accompanied by the "tutor-family" cited above, in acquiring knowledge of the local society, accessing services, attending Italian language courses, building social networks, looking for employment.

This is a clear example of the activism of civil society in accordance with the state. France and Belgium have followed the example, signing similar agreements with religious actors. Notwithstanding the strong innovative potential for asylum policies, also for humanitarian corridors some critical issues emerge, such as the actual time required for integration (12 months may not be enough for every person) and the difficult balance between the need to support these persons and the need to foster their autonomy. Moreover, the selection of beneficiaries is a process that raises many dilemmas related, for instance, to who takes responsibility for choosing the beneficiaries, and to the categories of people who should be given priority: the most vulnerable persons or those with a higher potential to enter the labour market.[31]

The third relevant initiative has emphasized the political character of the movement. A large demonstration "Insieme senza muri" ("Together without walls") took place in Milan in May 2017, with the participation of 80,000-100,000 people. On that occasion, diverse components of the pro-immigrant front took to the streets: political forces, associations, social movements, people who work in services to immigrants. Nevertheless, what many observers emphasized was that also many immigrants were involved, probably for the first time. Among the speakers were the President of the

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[30] Conversation with Daniele Albanese, Caritas italiana
[31] Conversation with Paolo Naso, head of "Mediterranean Hope", Waldensian Church

High Chamber and the Mayor of Milan (Democratic Party), while the promoter was the local councillor for Social Policies (Democratic Party)[32]. Furthermore, "Insieme senza muri" has become a permanent label, giving life to a month of events held once a year: meetings, debates, festivals.

Milan is at present the only large Italian city ruled by the Centre-Left, and tries to give an image of open and welcoming city to refugees and immigrants. In the presentation of the programme of events for "Insieme senza muri" 2018, the local administration claims: Milan is "a metropolis integrating through work, knowledge, the will to get busy. As a consequence, Milan is a city without walls (…). A city which wants to continue to be a capital of rights and of the construction of a new culture of citizenship".[33]

8. *Conclusions. How the "refugee crisis" is changing Italian politics*

Italy is a significant case in the European landscape of refugee policies for two main reasons. First, it has faced the so-called "refugee crisis" with growing difficulties and anxiety (see Van Hootegem and Meuleman 2019). The establishment of the "hotspots", as required by the EU has been a turning point, also because the enactment of tighter controls at the Alpine borders by the neighbouring states followed the new regulation. The Italian government was compelled to abandon its traditional, albeit implicit, policy of allowing the transit of the asylum seekers towards North-Western Europe.

Not only was Italy closely involved in search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea, but it also had to increase rapidly its commitment to asylum seekers' reception on the national territory. The Italian system of asylum was not adequate, and extraordinary solutions became necessary, under the label of a permanent emergency. Last but not least, all this occurred in a period of deep financial

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[32] https://milano.corriere.it/cronaca/diretta-live/17_maggio_20/marcia-milano-dell-accoglienza-in-piazza-saremo-oltre-diecimila-aa10b920-3d4f-11e7-a425-2bf1a959c761.shtml. Accessed on 12 January 2019.
[33] https://www.insiemesenzamuri.it/. Accessed on 12 January 2019.

and economic crisis, when the government was obliged to cut social expenditure, to raise the age of retirement, and to deal with growing unemployment.

The second aspect concerns the cultural and political consequences of this unexpected entanglement in the refugee issue. Most Italians were convinced that they were being invaded by asylum seekers coming from Africa by sea. Anti-establishment and xenophobic political forces reached a wide audience, spreading fears and accusations against asylum seekers, the NGOs rescuing them, and the cooperatives providing reception services. Local authorities played a key role. After in most cases having refused to take part voluntarily in the ordinary reception system (SPRAR), they often protested against the establishment of extraordinary reception centres (CAS) by the Prefects.

The final act was the electoral victory of anti-establishment parties in the general elections of March 2018. Italy has become the first large country of Western Europe with a populist government. In the electoral campaign, in the government agreement, and in the following actions the new political majority has taken vocal anti-refugee positions, denying access to Italian ports to NGOs ships, disputing with the traditional European partners, expressing support for the Visegrad group, rejecting the signature of the Global Compact for Migrations. The landmark of the new approach has been the approval of a new bill under the label of "Security package". This new law almost completely abolishes "humanitarian protection"; excludes asylum seekers from the SPRAR; sharply reduces the services provided by the CAS; and transfers European funds addressed to policies for integration to that of deportations.

This hardening of asylum policies appears to be supported by the majority of Italian citizens at present, according to several polls. The xenophobic League, after shifting to a far-right position, experienced a sharp increase in virtual preferences by the interviewees (more than 30 per cent at present), and its leader Mr. Salvini enjoys much popularity.

This trend, however, does not go without opposition. Civil society is at the forefront, whereas the political opposition, after the serious defeat in the general election, is struggling to find a new identity.

As highlighted in this chapter, the activities developed by the civil society in favour of refugees are manifold, ranging from political protest to the provision of services.

According to many observers, the main opponent of the Italian government in the field of migration policies is the Catholic Church headed by Pope Francis. The issue is in fact more complex, because also within the Catholic Church many participants and also a part of the clergy share a restrictive approach.

The analysis leads to two final observations. First, the restrictions enacted by the State are giving more space to alternative providers of services. This is the case of refugees who are legally authorised to reside in Italy, but do not receive any assistance; of rejected asylum seekers, now growing in numbers as a consequence of the new legislation, but still remaining in Italy. It is also the case of humanitarian corridors allowing the entrance of asylum seekers; and even the case of new arrivals by sea, when the hospitality supplied by religious actors has by-passed the opposition by the government. Second, the radicalisation of the struggle on asylum and migration policies is giving a political meaning also to ordinary actions of help and support. Anti-immigrant groups contest NGOs rescuing people at sea, cooperatives managing reception facilities and religious institutions hosting asylum seekers. On the other side, social movements now provide various concrete services to asylum seekers; social workers take part in demonstrations together with political activists; and volunteers claim the political significance of their activity.

Immigration and asylum are crucial issues in the present political debate in Italy. They are defining political and cultural identities, fostering militancy and social engagement, generating new actors and changing the attitudes of the established ones. It is not certain that this is the best way to find pragmatic solutions to the problems at stake, but there is no doubt that Italian politics and society have changed as a consequence of the so-called "refugee crisis".

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