

# European

# POLICY BRIEF

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## POLICY BRIEF ON THE ASYLUM MANAGEMENT PROCESS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

This document is a policy brief of a research on the asylum governance in Italy. It looks at narratives of experts active at different levels, analyzing how they make sense of conflictual situations related to the arrival and settlement of asylum seekers and refugees in local communities.

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### Introduction

Immigration in Italy, as in Western Europe, is a complex and stratified phenomenon. In 2019, the migrant population was more than 5 millions, with the majority of them (1) being females (52%), (2) coming from European countries (50.9% of the total immigrant population of whom 30.4% being EU citizens) (3) with a Christian religious tradition (Ambrosini, 2019; Dimitriadis et al., 2020; Marchetti, 2020). Out of them more than one million migrants have obtained the Italian citizenship, while asylum seekers and refugees have constituted a growing legal status category since 2012. However, asylum seekers' and refugees' arrival and settlement became a hot topic since 2012, monopolizing the political debate around immigration (Ambrosini, 2019; Dimitriadis et al., 2020; Marchetti, 2020).

Looking at the events connected to refugees' and asylum seekers' (RAS) arrival to Italy in the last years, academic works on the framing of media and political discourses of asylum have revealed the use of two main frames<sup>1</sup>. On the one hand, the *humanitarian frame* focused on tragedies that occurred in the Mediterranean Sea and the obligation of Europe to offer reception

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<sup>1</sup> Reviewing various typologies of frames referring to the immigration and asylum questions (Dimitriadis and Ambrosini, 2021), we identified six more frames: *economic* (emphasizing the economic losses or gains for host societies linked to immigration; arguing about who deserves to stay on the basis of one's contribution to the host society); *managerialist* (discussing governance and consequences of immigration in apolitical terms); *genuineness* (distinguishing refugees from economic migrants and talking of who deserves asylum); *return home* (refugees' settlement should be temporary); *socioeconomic* (seeing exclusion of migrants as hindering local policies); *efficiency* (arguing that exclusion of immigrants is more cost-effective than inclusive policies).

and asylum to people, thus guaranteeing the protection of human rights. Calls for intra-EU solidarity and citizens' empathy towards refugees were frequent. On the other hand, media and policy actors often adopted a *threat/fear frame*, depicting the arrival of migrants as an invasion, and emphasizing its costs and negative consequences for the Italian society. Building upon the juxtaposition between us (natives) and them (migrants), in particular, media and politicians claimed that big numbers of migrants abuse welfare provisions (*economic frame*), deprive Europeans of job opportunities (*economic frame*), put at risk liberal values and democracy (as African Muslim or Arab new arrivals' cultural traits are portrayed as incompatible with those European), threaten Italian cultural identity, and "spread diseases or plagues" (Marchetti, 2020). Confusion between refugees and other immigrants were also common in the Italian case, when considering cases of local authorities which often claimed that they cannot afford to receive more Third Country Nationals, because there was already a huge number of immigrants in their localities (Ambrosini, 2019).

When number of arrivals to Italy significantly decreased, media and political actors at the national level shifted attention to conflictual situations of RAS' settlement across the national territory. These events have been often represented as an imposition to peaceful local communities and risky for their cohesion. Social actors opposing immigration claimed that migrants' represent a threat against public order (e.g. through criminality, terrorism), as well as social order (e.g. weakening identity, territorial / social cohesion) (Ambrosini, 2019; Dimitriadis et al., 2020; Marchetti, 2020). At the same time, accusations against NGOs operating rescues ships in the Mediterranean became common among those opposing immigration, as these NGOs were blamed for violating national borders and sovereignty (Vosyliūtė & Conte, 2019). Third Sector Organisations (TSOs) have also been accused of making profits out of the reception of RAS. Contrarily, pro-migrant actors defended the rights of people in need of international protection, as well as TSOs' contribution to asylum governance.

Although much research has been done on such conflictual framings of immigration and asylum at the national level, we are shifting attention to how refugee reception is represented, framed and managed at the local level. On the one hand, the analysis is based on interviews to experts active at the national level (PENs), who were asked to express their opinions in relation to conflictual cases of refugee reception across local communities in Italy. On the other hand, we selected a city in Northern Italy (Busto Arsizio) where refugee reception since 2014 became a hot issue at the local level. In this case, we interviewed locals with expert knowledge (LEKs) asking them to reconstruct what happened in that case. Within the Work Package 3 of the MAGYC project (Cantat et al., 2020), this policy brief presents the main findings of the research conducted in Italy, it states policy implications and offers some recommendations.

## Evidence and Analysis

Our results show that professional experts active at the national level (PENs) used five frames to refer to what happened in local communities where the arrival and settlement of RAS shared conflictual characteristics: *fear, economic, human rights, deservingness and managerialist*.

1. *Fear frame*. Experts opposing immigration use a *fear frame* to refer to new arrivals to small villages with few residents. According to them, this can be perceived as invasion due to the cultural differences between migrants and local population. This frame also relates to anxieties, fears and discomfort that local residents feel due to the presence of immigrant population. Experts with favourable or neutral attitudes towards immigrants may link such arrivals to anxiety or discomfort, but they see locals' reactions

exaggerated (e.g hostility towards immigrants, feelings of invasion). This is a telling example of this frame:

*“When the local density increases, neighbours from ten become twenty; population doubles [...] (New arrivals) are perceived as different. There is a cultural impact, there is an impact of discomfort, certainly from a perceptive, cultural and relational point of view[...] fears emerge due to the cultural distance (between locals and migrants)” (Scholar opposing immigration)*

2. **Economic frame.** PENs opposing immigration frame conflictual asylum governance in economic terms, claiming that new arrivals deprive locals of job opportunities and create wage dumping, as the former accept poor employment conditions. A journalist opposing immigration related: *“They (Italians) have to compete with those (RAS) who accept poor conditions in the labour market... My speech is not sovereign now, it is Marx! Karl Marx in 1850, he described in the "Capital" an equal situation when it came to talking about English workers... This is what is happening here”*. Another element of this frame regards cases of mismanagement among TSOs operating in reception facilities. All research participants agreed that there have been cases of dishonest TSOs that made money off the reception of refugees. However, those opposing immigration generalize this view and blame the whole no profit world for being corrupted.
3. **Human rights frame.** Regardless of their attitude towards migrants, PENs frame asylum discourse in humanitarian terms, arguing that people who flee from wars and are in need of protection from persecution have the right to reception and asylum. Trying to gain sympathy in the public discourse, people on the ideological (far)-right have abandoned racial references in their discourses and have adopted a more politically correct language, borrowing arguments of their ideological opponents. For instance, they present themselves as defenders of liberal values and democracy to highlight that European values are not compatible with those of Muslims, and, as such, the latter cannot integrate into European societies (Castelli Gattinara, 2017). These findings are confirmed in our work as far-right representatives often avoid extreme-right discourse and tend to invoke liberal values, claiming to defend democracy. This is also a way to gain sympathy in the public discourse. A journalist opposing immigration stated:  
*“Integration policies have been largely bankrupt because they address to Muslim populations that historically cannot be integrated into societies which are based on human rights, that is the Universal declarations of the Human rights... They cannot be integrated into a cultural model like ours which is based on the fact that you and I (two men) and that girl sitting there, we all have that same rights. For them (Muslims) it is not like this.”*
4. **Deservingness frame.** Experts at the national level with neutral or hostile views towards migrants adopt a *deservingness frame*, differentiating between genuine and bogus asylum seekers. These claim that there are only few countries in a war situation, which does not justify the big numbers of asylum seekers arriving to Italy and Europe. They also claim that the Italian legislation provides international protection to people who should not have this right, according to the 1951 Refugee Convention. Therefore, only a small part of those arriving to Italy deserve asylum according to those opposing migration.
5. **Managerialist frame.** Independently of their stance towards immigrants, PENs portray conflictual situations at the local level as the result of mismanagement by national and

European authorities. On the one hand, they find that migration policy in Italy has been based on emergency logics, in the sense that policies have rarely adopted a long-term planning taking into consideration actual needs and predictions about future. A pro-migrant journalist argues:

*“When the State does not decide to manage reception management in a structured way... once again Italy has an emergency approach and, therefore, some TSOs have been assigned to (run reception centers), even if they shouldn’t have been allowed to.”*

On the other hand, European migration policy is considered as opportunist and inadequate, as it reflects the interests of Northern European countries and neglect those of Southern Europe. Lack of solidarity among EU countries is another point raised by all participants. There is also an agreement among interviewees around the decisions imposed by state authorities (Prefectures) to local communities and the lack of dialogue between different tiers of governance. In addition, PENs with favourable and neutral stances towards immigration use a *managerialist frame* to emphasize that it is also problematic for new arrivals to settle into isolated (mountainous) places in terms of integration opportunities. These participants also referred to lack of interest among local authorities to assume an active role and responsibilities for the reception of RAS.

This frame confirms earlier research (Rea et al., 2019) claiming the existence of an ongoing crisis of the reception system rather than a “refugee crisis” or a “migration crisis”. In other words, it is about governments’ inefficiency to plan and implement adequate policies for both RAS and host societies. This finding is also recurrent in the discourses of LEKs, as argued below.

After looking at discourses among PENs talking about conflictual situations at the local level, we now turn attention to narratives among LEKs in Busto Arsizio (Northern Italy) in which the settlement of RAS in a privately managed reception center (*Via dei Mille CAS*) generated conflicts. Four out of five frames identified in PENs’ discourses were common among those used by LEKs: *economic, human rights, deservingness and managerialist*. Instead of using a *fear frame*, though, those opposing immigration used an *inconvenience frame*. The following points report evidence in which LEKs’ narratives differ from those of PENs which are presented above.

1. *Inconvenience frame*. This frame differs from the *fear frame* that has been identified in the discourses of PENs and also in previous works (Cantat et al., 2020). LEKs opposing immigration use this frame to identify the problems connected with the arrival and settlement of RAS in Busto Arsizio and to make moral evaluations. Instead of being fear or anxiety generated by the presence of RAS in this city, this frame relates to those narratives concerning RAS grouping together in public spaces and doing nothing all day long. Participants against migrants claimed that “RAS were often drunk and might become beggars wandering around the city”. In the same vein, RAS are also portrayed as people creating discomfort to locals, when the former protest for their rights. A citizen opposing migrants recounts the birth of a local anti-refugee committee due to the presence of RAS:

*“The Committee was born after the protest of the guys (RAS) of that CAS reception center. They poured into the squares making a bit of mess, complaining about various things, including why the Municipality did not issue identity cards. [...] They also group together and spend their time in public spaces chattering and doing nothing”.*

As regards the settlement of RAS in the *Via dei Mille* CAS, this was portrayed as generating problems both for the Italian families living at the same building as almost two hundred RAS did and for the neighbours who “got annoyed by RAS’ presence”.

2. *Economic frame.* In this frame, RAS are seen as receivers of generous benefits by LEKs opposing immigration. According one of these respondents, “*it is unfair that 35 euro is destined for the reception of RAS, insofar as there are Italian citizens facing economic hardships*”. As concerns penalization of locals in the labour market, LEKs opposing immigration add that even volunteering among RAS damage local economy (e.g. when RAS volunteers paint public buildings or clean streets). Regardless of research participants’ attitude towards immigration, this frame also consists of accusations against the organization that managed the local CAS reception center of being corrupted and making big profits, providing very poor services to RAS. Although research participants share negative views on the association which managed the *Via dei Mille* CAS, such results should not be generalized and stigmatize the whole no profit sector.
3. *Human rights frame.* Apart from the general framing of the respect of refugees’ rights to asylum and good living conditions, LEKs who are favourable to immigration use this frame to put emphasis on the right of RAS to obtain identification documents and protest for this. Since these protests and mobilizations seemed to bring fruits, this finding suggests that RAS can be active actors in the local governance of asylum, thus contributing to the typology of different actors who take part in the ‘battleground’ of migration governance. Next to NGOs, voluntary associations, trade unions, religious institutions, social movements, spontaneous mobilizations by common citizens, or even migrant associations (Campomori and Ambrosini 2020), RAS can also be engaged with their own interests, values and frameworks in the ‘battleground’ of asylum governance.
4. *Deservingness frame.* In a very similar way as it argued above, LEKs opposing immigration differentiate between genuine and false asylum seekers.
5. *Managerialist frame.* Most LEKs make sense of what followed the arrival and settlement of RAS in Busto Arsizio through a *managerialist frame*. Although using different language or vocabulary, LEKs agree upon three issues related to the conflictual situation in Busto Arsizio. First, the TSO which was responsible for the management of the *Via dei Mille* CAS is seen as a case of mismanagement. According to participants’ narratives this cooperative showed practically no interest in providing good conditions to RAS and services aiming at the latter’s integration. Second, LEKs consider that the Prefecture managed this issue in an opportunistic way, assigning the management of that structure to a cooperative which members had been accused of being involved in frauds and irregularities in the past. Third, all participants agreed upon the fact that facilities hosting big numbers of RAS do not favour their integration in local communities. LEKs who are favourable towards immigrants added that local authorities remained rather inactive, adopting a ‘passive opposition’ stance. Municipality delayed the issuing of identification documents for RAS, thus feeding tensions and hindering migrants’ integration. We argue that this stance may be particularly harmful to RAS, as public authorities opposing immigration deprive public support of a vulnerable population.

## Policy Implications and Recommendations

- The analysis of experts' narratives confirms views suggesting that the events linked to the arrival and settlement of RAS in local communities should be seen as a crisis of the reception system both at European and national levels. On the one hand, European countries should demonstrate more solidarity towards Italy (and Greece) where RAS arrive to request asylum. It is suggested to reactivate of relocation programs and sharing responsibility of asylum governance among EU members. On the other hand, Italian policy makers should pay more attention to the coordination of different layers of governance and put efforts to involve local authorities in the reception of RAS more actively.
- Distorted opinions on the benefits going to RAS as pocket money shape public opinion and feed hostility towards migrants. European states should invest more on the information of their citizens on the ways in which resources are allocated for the reception of RAS.
- Narratives on the differentiation between genuine and bogus asylum seekers are almost exclusively based on the existence of war situation in RAS' countries of origin. This impacts on the views of majority groups which see funds spending for RAS as an injustice. Campaigns are needed aiming to inform citizens on the changes in categories who need and have right to international protection.
- Conventionally, the arrival and settlement of RAS in local communities have been connected to fears related to threats to public and social order. This research reveals that big threats are replaced by 'inconvenience', and problems are conceived as regarding RAS who group together, wander around the city or do nothing all day long sited on benches and parks.
- It can be argued that reception facilities that host big number of refugees penalize RAS' integration, and feed hostility towards immigrants. Saying this, it can be argued that facilities with small capacity or private apartments can be less visible, thus attracting less attention by those opposing immigration. At the same time, isolated and mountainous areas are not considered as appropriate for RAS because access to services is scarce and integration pathways become hard (e.g. few job opportunities).
- On the one side, it is important to establish a more efficient mechanism of selection and monitoring of TSOs operating in reception facilities. On the other, public institutions should be better prepared in relation to the reception of RAS.

## Research Parameters

This policy brief is a research digest of the work within the WP3 which explores interpretations of the migration/refugees crisis. It draws on 35 in-depth interviews with experts<sup>2</sup> on questions related to immigration and asylum in Italy (Table 1). The aim of this work is to explore whether experts' discourses around conflictual events and civil society's initiatives in relation to migration issues reflect frames that have been already found in previous works (Campomori and Caponio, 2013; Scholten 2013; Spencer, 2018). We elaborated a qualitative analysis of frames that consists in selecting "some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993: 52). We coded empirical data using MAXQDA software that facilitates analysis of themes in a text.

We contacted most participants through personal acquaintances or directly via email, whereas some LEKs were also introduced to us through other participants. All interviewees were informed about the objectives of the research, risks and potential benefits, responsibilities and confidentiality, as well as the voluntary nature of their participation.

Initially, data was collected through 19 semi-structured interviews with professional experts active at the national level (PENs). We analysed participants' answers related to conflictual cases of reception and settlement of asylums seekers and refugees (RAS) in local communities. Although the initial plan was to recruit an equal number of PENs favourable, neutral or opposing<sup>3</sup> to immigration, this was not be feasible, because many eventual participants with neutral or hostile stances towards migrants did not show interest in the research. We opted for participants who are active in the public domain and located in Northern Italy, where the issue of refugee reception has been more conflictual.

In addition, we selected a case study where the arrival of RAS shared conflictual characteristics to investigate how locals with expert (professional) knowledge (LEKs) make sense of these events. Empirical material was collected through another round of semi-structured interviews with 16 participants living or working in Busto Arsizio who had an expertise in immigration issues. Research participants share different views on immigration, that is we recruited interviewees who are in favour of, neutral to or against immigration. In this case too, it was difficult to recruit participants opposing immigration. All interviewees were informed about the objectives of the research, risks and potential benefits, responsibilities and confidentiality, as well as the voluntary nature of their participation.

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<sup>2</sup> Following the definition of Hitzler and colleagues (1994 cited by Meuser and Nagel, 2009), we consider as experts those whose knowledge is linked to their institutional and professional role (e.g. scientists or policymakers); those who possess an "institutionalized authority to construct reality".

<sup>3</sup> The categorization of participants as 'pro-', 'neutral' or 'against' is established using as criteria their positioning in the public debate on immigration, and their affiliation/membership to specific parties and institutions which publicly state their positions on immigration.

Table 1 – Our sample

Participants	Num. of Interviews	Attitude towards immigration		
		Pro	Neutral	Against
<b>Professional experts active at the national level (PENs)</b>				
Parties' representatives	2	1	1	0
Journalists	5	1	1	3
Scholars	9	6	1	2
Trade Unionists	2	2	0	0
Lawyer	1	1	0	0
Total	19	11	3	5
<b>Locals with expert (professional) knowledge (LEKs)</b>				
Local councillors	4	2	1	1
Journalists	3	2	0	1
Anti-migrant committee	1	0	0	1
Priest	1	1	0	0
CSO professionals	3	3	0	0
CSO volunteers	3	3	0	0
Refugee	1	1	0	0
Total	16	12	1	3

Busto Arsizio is a city of around 83,000 residents in Northern Italy, part of the Province of Varese where the (Northern) League ring-wing party was founded and prevailed in the last decades. We selected this case study because reception of refugees assumed conflictual characteristics when the Prefecture allowed the opening of the *Via dei Mille CAS* center in this city where local authorities were not engaged in the reception system. From the summer of 2014 to 2018, numerous RAS were hosted in that reception center which was managed by a social cooperative. Local media reported that RAS received poor living conditions and opportunities for integration, while municipality and some locals were against the functioning of a facility hosting around 100-200 RAS close to the city center. RAS protested claiming their right to obtain identification documents and better living conditions, while an anti-refugee committee was created to inform citizens about the risks connected to RAS' presence.

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## Project Identity

<b>PROJECT NAME</b>	MAGYC - Migration Governance and Asylum Crises
<b>COORDINATOR</b>	The Hugo Observatory (Université de Liège), Liège, Belgium. hugo.observatory@uliege.be
<b>CONSORTIUM</b>	Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique - Institut français du Proche-Orient (Beirut, Lebanon) GIGA Institute of Global and Area Studies (Hamburg, Germany) IDMC (Geneva, Switzerland) Lebanese American University (Beirut, Lebanon) Lund University (Lund, Sweden) Sabanci University (Istanbul, Turkey) Sciences Po (Paris, France) SOAS University of London (London, UK) University of Economics in Bratislava (Bratislava, Slovakia) University of Macedonia (Thessaloniki, Greece) University of Milan (Milan, Italy)
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<b>BUDGET</b>	EU contribution: 3,175,263.70€.
<b>WEBSITE</b>	<a href="https://www.magyc.uliege.be/">https://www.magyc.uliege.be/</a>
<b>FOR MORE INFORMATION</b>	<b>Contact:</b> Lucia Ragazzi: lucia.ragazzi@uliege.be
<b>FURTHER READING</b>	Cantat, C., H. Thiollet, and A. Pécoud. 2020. Migration as crisis. Framework paper. MAGYC project Working paper. Dimitriadis, I. and M. Ambrosini. 2021. Framing asylum at the local level: experts' narratives of conflictual dynamics in the post-reception period in Italy. MAGYC project Working paper. Dimitriadis, I., M. Ambrosini, and P. Bonizzoni. 2020. Working paper on the construction of the crisis-invasion discourse by different stakeholders in Italy. MAGYC Project.

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