



MAGYC

Migration Governance and Asylum Crises

Constrained to be
(im)mobile? Refugees'
and Asylum seekers'
practices to integrate in
restrictive socio-
economic urban
contexts in Northern Italy

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This article comparatively examines forms of (im)mobility of refugees and asylum seekers (RAS) to cope with dispersal process, restrictive migration policies and local socio-economic characteristics in three cities of Northern Italy. Drawing on qualitative data, it sheds light on everyday forms of (im)mobility of RAS to resist structural barriers limiting the possibility to access jobs and welfare services. Results show that people's capacity to overcome barriers depends upon individual characteristics and informal networks, and is shaped by particularities of local contexts. While people's regular legal status is considered an important resource in achieving goals, refugees and holders of international protection often have to adopt (im)mobility practices in order to access resources in contexts that do not facilitate their integration. This article highlights the inefficiency of integration and reception policies and advances the theoretical debate on the link between being (im)mobile and agency by calling authors to pay more attention to the (in)voluntary nature of spatial (im)mobility. Finally, it shows the ambivalent outcome of (im)mobilities in terms of agency, highlighting the implications on individuals before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Introduction

Labour market insertion and welfare services are two of the main domains determining refugee integration (Ager & Strang, 2008). The former concerns a range of services aimed to increase employability (e.g., vocational training, language courses, mentoring), so that people can achieve their goals and self-reliance. The latter includes the provision of basic needs (e.g., food, housing and clothing) and access to healthcare clinics, social service centres and rights that are entitled to all citizens. However, the implementation of integration policies is challenged by a series of structural, contextual and individual factors. These may include a) policies regulating access to asylum and recognition of refugees' and asylum seekers' (RAS) qualifications and skills (Federico & Baglioni, 2021); b) dispersal policies (van Liempt & Miellet, 2021); c) local authorities' initiatives and bureaucracies' acts in favour or against newly arrived people (Hinger et al., 2016); d) the role of the civil society in facilitating or hindering integration processes (Dimitriadis et al., 2021); e) language barriers and psychological distress among newly arrived people due to the situation in the home country, experiences during the journey and waiting times for decision on the asylum status (Federico & Baglioni, 2021).

This article examines the ways in which RAS cope with barriers to integration, by exploring their daily practices of physical mobility and immobility. Drawing upon the perspectives of services providers, RAS themselves and non-participant observation at a help desk migration service and one reception facility, it puts emphasis on the factors shaping newly arrived people's agency and the implications of (im)mobility practices at the individual level before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus on three cities that offer different opportunities in terms of jobs and services adds to the study of the factors shaping RAS'

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agency by challenging views about the extent to which regularity in legal status implies successful integration trajectories. This article also contributes to the debate about the link between spatial mobility and agency, showing the importance to consider the voluntary or involuntary nature of mobility and immobility practices in examining (im)mobile people's agency.

This article is organised as follows. The next section offers information about asylum policies and refugee integration in Italy, while the third section presents the methods and some specificities of the cities where fieldwork research was conducted. The fourth section introduces the theoretical framework of this study and reviews previous works on (im)mobility practices of RAS. The fifth section presents the results of the analysis of the empirical material, while the final section provides some conclusive considerations and policy proposals.

Reception and integration of RAS in times of restrictive asylum policies in Italy

In dealing with increasing arrivals of people seeking international protection since 2015 and facing municipalities' reluctance to be involved in the reception of RAS, the Italian government introduced a complementary reception mechanism. In addition to the ordinary protection system for asylum applicants and refugees run on a voluntary basis by municipalities with the possible engagement of third sector organisations (SPRAR network, then named SIPROIMI and now SAI), the law n. 142/2015 provided the opening of emergency reception centres (CAS) for those who could not be hosted within SPRAR facilities upon arrival. These new structures are managed by various private actors, namely NGOs, hotel owners and other conventional employers, without the engagement of municipalities. However, due to the increasing number of newly arrived people, on the one hand, and the scarce willingness of many local governments to adhere the SPRAR network, CAS became the main reception facilities hosting between 75 to 80 per cent of asylum seekers in Italy in the period 2014-2018 (Campo et al. 2020). These reception faculties were thus called to align the quality of services for RAS' basic needs and integration to those offer by the SPRAR system (Dotsey, 2021).

Integration of (forced) migrants in Italy can be characterised as decentralised, as the national government defines the minimum standards and key priorities of people's insertion in the society, whereas regional and local institutions promote and implement a series of measures and policies. Services for forced migrants' integration is often provided through third-sector organisations (Scholten et al., 2017). In this context, the goal is to promote inclusion and integration through access to the labour market, basic rights and welfare services (e.g., housing, healthcare), education, language courses and civic participation.

RAS' integration pathways were challenged due to the implementation of new restrictive asylum policies. The law no.132/2018 (the so-called Salvini decree or Security decree) excluded asylum seekers from ordinary reception facilities, thus making CAS the only structures that can host them until the final judgment upon their application is made. In other words, only people with a legal status can access the SAI network where they can stay for 6 months. The same amendment provided also reductions in fares that cover asylum seekers' needs, namely from 35 to 20 euros per day, which additionally limited integration services

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offered previously in CAS centres, such as Italian language courses, orientation to the labour market and psychological and medical assistance. Being deprived of integration services while waiting the decision upon asylum requests, self-reliance among refugees and holders of the international protection status can be, therefore, hardly achieved through a six-month project offered by the SAI network; people's independence is expected to be lower in localities where labour supply is limited. Moreover, with the new amendment, the possibility to access and maintain the status of humanitarian protection was narrowed only to those facing serious health problems, coming from countries suffering natural disasters, or those who have been abused. People who are not able to prove that have suffered persecution, and come from unstable or non-democratic countries in which they are equally at risk are now excluded. Therefore, the number of refused asylum seekers was increased over the years (Dimitriadis & Ambrosini, 2022), including both newly arrived people who could not access international protection and holders of international protection who failed to renew their status or convert it into stay permit for work reasons.

Italian dispersal policy seems to further constrain RAS' integration. The allocation of asylum seekers across the national territory happened in a quasi-random basis (Campo et al., 2020), whereas the majority of SAI facilities are concentrated in Southern Italy where job opportunities are lower in relation to Northern Italy. Settlement into socially deprived urban and rural areas can also affect people's integration, as RAS are more likely to experience hostility and institutionalised marginality (Sanò & Della Puppa, 2021; van Liempt & Miellet, 2021). Similarly, isolated (mountainous) areas do not seem to favour RAS' integration (Cottino, 2021), given the limited (seasonal) job opportunities and lack of services aimed to migrants in these areas.

Methods and contexts of inquiry

This article is based on empirical material that was collected through 42 interviews with service providers including managers, social workers and volunteers in formal and informal reception facilities, employees of (private and public) employment centres, representatives of Third Sector Organisations (TSOs) promoting vocational training projects, trade unionists and lawyers with expertise on immigration (Table 1). The important role the civil society in facilitating the settlement and integration of migrants in the last years (Dimitriadis et al. 2021) led us to opt to explore RAS' integration through the perspectives of service providers. However, this data were triangulated through 8 interviews and informal discussions with RAS and ethnographic material collected through instances of non-participant observation at a help desk migration service and an informal reception facility in Como. The sampling of service providers was purposive. We initially contacted some representatives of pro-migrant organisations known to be active in providing service to RAS. These people, then, introduced us to other colleagues or people engaged with migrants. The selection of research participants was based on the heterogeneity of types of CSAs and their services towards migrants. Refugees and asylum seekers were contacted thanks to the intermediation of service providers.

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Table 1 – The sample

Participants	Busto Arsizio	Como	Milan
Reception centre managers	3	2	2
Social workers	3	5	7
TSOs' and independent volunteers	5	2	3
Trade unionists	1	1	2
Religious actors	1	1	1
Lawyers	1	1	1
Refugees / Asylum seekers	3	4	1
Total	17	16	17

Interviews were conducted in Italian language from May 2019 to May 2021, and typically lasted between 40 minutes and two hours. Those conducted before March 2020 took place face to face in public spaces or at the venues of associations, whereas most of those done after the pandemic outbreak were carried out via video communications platforms or telephone. Difficulty to access RAS during the pandemic influenced our initial sampling strategy, thus leading us to mainly focused on service providers' perspectives and adopt alternative techniques of collecting data (ethnography). All participants were informed about the scope of the research and gave their consent to participation, audio registration and processing of personal data. The process of data collection and analysis was approved by the ethics committee of our university. Answers were anonymised, coded and analysed using QDA Miner that facilitates thematic analysis of qualitative data.

Data was collected through fieldwork that was carried out in three cities: Busto Arsizio, Como and Milan. All these cities are located in the region of Lombardy in Northern Italy where the majority of migrants are concentrated (almost 22% of migrant population living in Italy reside in Lombardy: www.istat.it). In addition, 45.6% of asylum seekers and people under humanitarian protection reside in Northern Italy (www.regioni.it). The selection criteria of these specific cities include: a) the stance of local authorities and communities towards RAS, b) labour market opportunities, c) geographical position. Milan (1,406,242 residents) has been selected as a city ruled by a local authority with a positive stance towards refugees (Artero & Fontanari, 2021). Twelve municipalities across its province host almost 800 refugees at SAI facilities in 2021 (www.retesai.it). Being one of the richest urban centres, migrants can easily access (informal) jobs in services and the construction sectors. Instead, the stance of the municipality of Busto Arsizio (83,679 residents) towards RAS can be characterised as indifferent or hostile; local authorities have never adhered to SAI network. In addition, the arrival and settlement of RAS at a CAS facility in the city generated conflicts and mobilization among citizens (Dimitriadis & Ambrosini, 2023). Four municipalities close to Busto Arsizio (in the Province of Varese) run SAI facilities that host 99 people in 2021, whereas 45 asylum seekers are hosted in CAS centres that are located in the city of Busto Arsizio. Most job opportunities of migrants are available in the tertiary and secondary sector of the economy. The selection of Como (83,679 residents) was based on its particularity as a border city, as it serves as locality for short-term stay for those who aim to move to other European countries by crossing the northern Italian borders. Its municipality had a hostile or intolerant stance

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towards RAS (Dimitriadis & Ambrosini, 2022; 2023). No SAI facilities were available in this province until 2021, whereas 8 CAS located in Como host around 330 asylum seekers in 2021. Migrants can access employment in the service sector, while tourism offers many job opportunities.

The perspective of regimes of mobility and its application in studies on forced migrants

In analysing (im)mobility practices of RAS in Italy, this article adopts the framework of regimes of mobility introduced by Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013). According to these authors, the possibility to move is embedded in unequal fields and relationships of political, social, cultural and economic power that unfold differently across the globe in various local contexts. Immobility (in the place of origin) is predominantly seen as involuntary due to constraints on people's possibility and desire to be mobile (Schewel, 2019). In this respect, mobility and immobility are shaped by policies and (control) devices that may be applied differently on the basis of people's nationality, legal status and motivations for leaving their country of origin for example (Sanò & Della Puppa, 2021). People's physical mobility and immobility should be also seen as a continuum in the sense that being mobile or staying put in a place can be interwoven.

The perspective of regimes of mobility highly criticizes assumptions about a linear link between physical and social mobility. Contrary to agentic dimensions attributed to "people on the move" by virtue of being mobile at the international level (Urry, 2007), and challenging overemphasis on national borders and states as points of departure and arrival, previous studies show that mobility across national borders can be seen as consolation for those who cannot experience upward social mobility in the country of origin. Instead, staying put or remaining behind can indicate upward socio-economic mobility (Kalir, 2013). Similarly, other scholars have discussed how different (im)mobility patterns indicate RAS' capacity to "shape and adapt daily routines and mundane social interactions to changing circumstances, precarious livelihoods" (Sigona, 2012, p. 51). These practices seem to generate "interstices", that is autonomous territorial, social and judicial spaces, that enable forced migrants to achieve some of their goals (Fontanari and Ambrosini, 2018). Remaining in the host society despite refusal in asylum application should be considered an achievement for example.

Departing from the above theoretical framework and concepts, a burgeoning literature deals with how forced migrants survive in the host society and overcome structural constraints by deploying practices of physical mobility or staying immobile. Leveraging their legal status, refugees may relocate to another EU country due to lack of job opportunities and to circumvent hostility and discrimination in the first destination country (Ahrens et al., 2016). Onward migrants who enjoy temporary legal status may also become transnational commuters. Borri (2017) showed that people who obtain international protection in Italy can settle in Germany may move back and to Italy when they have to renew their documents. This pattern is also linked to internal mobility for those who aim to access to or maintain legal status by moving to localities where public authorities are more favourable towards migrants (Dimitriadis, 2018; Sanò & Della Puppa, 2021). However, internal (temporary or seasonal) mobility may be due to the lack of employment in the place of residence, thus implying access

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to informal jobs that are characterised by exploitative labour conditions (Anderlini, 2022; Cottino, 2021). Looking at those who stay put, it can be argued that immobility can indicate vulnerability and social marginalisation for those who cannot move due to irregularity of legal status. Staying put at the same place can be the result of lack of knowledge of other territories too (Sanò & Della Puppa, 2021). However, (periods of) immobility can indicate agency when people decide to stay at the same place in order to access legal status (Wajsberg, 2020), or upward social mobility when refugees can maintain stable cross-seasonal work in the place of residence (Cottino, 2021). Experiences of immobility can vary among people and patterns of mobility and immobility can overlap or intersect (Schapendonk, 2021). External shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemics, can even constrain people's mobility or open new opportunities (Sanò & Della Puppa, 2021; Anderlini, 2022).

Overall, this research put little emphasis on the factors that determine people's ability to get by or improve their lives, with the exception of legal status that is considered a key element in shaping migrant agency. Moreover, these studies do not take into consideration the distinction between the voluntary and involuntary character of immobility (Carling, 2002; Schewel, 2019), when accounting for their outcomes in terms of agency. People's "stasis" can be due to constraints on movement or can reveal desire to stay; or, something in between. In reflecting on the enforced or desired nature of RAS' spatial immobility, this article complicates the debate between the link between being mobile and agency.

FINDINGS: MOBILITY AND IMMOBILITY PRACTICES OF RAS TO ACCESS EMPLOYMENT AND WELFARE SERVICES

BEING (IM)MOBILE TO ACCESS JOBS

Daily commuting from small cities to Milan to access (precarious) jobs

According to our informants, a common mobility practice that emerges from our fieldwork concerns daily commuting from Busto Arsizio and Como to Milan for work reasons. While those living in Milan can easily access precarious or (informal) low-wage jobs (mainly as couriers for food delivery companies or other odd jobs), people residing in small cities move to face lack of employment opportunities in their place of residence:

When an asylum seeker becomes a worker who receives a higher salary than the annual social allowance, he cannot remain in the reception centre. So, some of those getting these occasional jobs leave the reception centre because they have exceeded the threshold. But, then, they may lose their jobs and want to re-enter the reception again (Trade Unionist, Busto Arsizio)

You cannot see refugees and asylum seekers anymore in the city. You can only see them go out and enter their homes. They work as riders with those big square-shaped backpacks; they get the train, go to Milan and work (Volunteer, Busto Arsizio)

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Our researcher (person collaborating with the association) notes that the probability of finding a job - maybe at the end of the vocational training period - is too low: and this is known among asylum seekers. (Volunteer, Milan)

As long as asylum seekers are waiting for the decision about their application (Ramachandran & Vathi, 2022) they may opt to be mobile in order to earn more money through precarious employment than those coming from the monthly pocket money (200-250 euro). Acceptance of such jobs allow RAS to cover their actual (survival and send money back to their families) or future needs (e.g., plans to move onward). This may also be due to perceived low probabilities of getting a (good) job through vocational training in the long-term. This is also common among people who have already received a legal status and did not find stable employment once their time within institutional reception facilities is over. However, everyday mobility to Milan is not without implications. High levels of flexibility and insecurity characterising platform economy (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020) and other odd jobs can challenge people's trajectories (e.g., unemployment and inability to afford for housing), as many of them lose the right to reception. In addition, using public means of transportation to reach Milan not only entails economic costs, but also inconvenience and risks when workers have to return back home late due to train cars' limited capacity for bicycles. This means that riders who cannot find a place on train cars have to stay overnight in Milan or to turn back home by bike, thus having to make long distances. This implicates exposure to risks when using provincial roads without lights after a long tiring day at work. Rules to stop the spread of COVID-19 on public transport increased this problem, whereas those who work as undeclared workers risked to receive fines upon police control during lockdown periods. In addition, platform workers were particularly exposed to COVID-19, without paid sick leave and sickness benefits (ILO, 2021).

Abandonment of integration projects and insertion into precarious jobs in Milan through daily commuting seem to be linked to the outbreak of the current pandemic too. The following narrative is telling:

Most of the companies we collaborate with are in the tourism sector, restaurants and hotels and so on. The Region (of Lombardy) stopped activating new internships during the pandemic. Some projects were available but at distance... but remote internships for our guests are very few, in the sense that most (of the jobs people got trained in) are also very physical, manual or, in any case, jobs that require (trainees') presence. [...] Compared to other years there have certainly been 70-80% fewer job entries due to the pandemic (in 2020). (Social worker, Como)

Covid-19 can be paradoxically seen as a catalyser for daily mobility for work. The effects of the pandemic on the hospitality sector were of great magnitude, thus impacting RAS' integration trajectories. Limited efficiency in offering remote training constrained RAS to abandon vocational training projects and access precarious jobs in a big city like Milan. This result was very common in places as Como that are based on tourism sector. However, not all asylum seekers are expected to react in the same way. Instead, many of them stayed put at their place of residence:

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Unfortunately, many of these guys spend all their day closed at home doing anything. (Volunteer, Como)

I don't want to do this job (rider). All those I consider as work experiences are in logistics; and I want to do this (kind of job). [...] During the lockdown I got the driving license. My association helped me to make the registration, but I paid myself around 1,200 euro to get it. (Asylum seeker, Busto Arsizio)

Everything is now stuck for women (due to COVID). We achieve few job insertions; always in the cleaning sector, or less in care services. Some of them are interested in aesthetics. But this kind of vocational training requires very much time and is expensive, and therefore not easily accessible to them. (Social Worker, Como-Milan)

These quotations suggest that immobility can have different outcomes according to one's capacity to mobilise resources and gender. Lockdown periods meant a period of stagnancy for those who were not be able to access vocational training programmes or jobs. Difficulties in holding remote training coupled with the gendered nature of local labour markets, thus leaving little space to access job opportunities for women. However, others can use their time to increase their employability, regardless of their legal status. The participant of the above example is a refused asylum seeker who has repeated his application. Therefore, people's ambitions and capacity to access resources (financial capital) (Şimşek, 2020) can give spatial immobility a different meaning.

Overall, staying put in Italy among refused asylum seekers can be seen as a form of resistance to deportation policies. As our research participants argued and previous research showed, refused asylum seekers often remain in the Italian territory by relying on social ties with national fellows and the civil society to get by (Dimitriadis & Ambrosini, 2022). When thinking of the possibility of regularisation through amnesties (Bonizzoni & Hajer, 2021), this kind of immobility can even indicate improvement of one's life.

Looking now beyond the effects that Italian restrictive policies and the pandemic had on RAS' integration, discrimination is another structural element that triggers everyday mobility among RAS from small cities to Milan:

In Busto Arsizio, for example, you don't see any black waiter, that is we are not in Milan or London. Here, they (black people) can only work as dishwashers or kitchen helpers in restaurants and bars; they don't stay in the room where clients eat. Going around the city and having a look is enough to see this. We have a small-town mentality from this point of view. (Social worker, Busto Arsizio)

This excerpt suggests that small cities can induce movement to multicultural cities due to discrimination in economic sectors in which migrants can find employment opportunities. With reference to the pre-COVID 19 period, almost all service providers pointed out that restaurants and cafés did offer job opportunities. However, when cities are not open to diversity (Pastore & Ponzio, 2016) migrants can be excluded from jobs that entail their being visible to and in contact with clients, thus indicating a mismatch between job opportunities and political attitudes by the local population. This kind of mobility, hence, can be seen as

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enforced due to hostility in local contexts that makes these places not “inhabitable” (Sanò & Della Puppa, 2021).

In the following section, we show that spatial mobility can also include periodic or occasional movements across the Italian territory and beyond.

Seasonal or occasional mobility to access agriculture jobs and transnational movements

RAS often move to Southern Italy to land jobs in the agriculture sector (Cottino, 2021; Sanò & Della Puppa, 2021). This mobility pattern is confirmed in our case studies too, but it may concern localities across the whole Italian territory.

Many homeless people who lose their status leave Como to find employment in other cities. Two guys went to work in Verona for a couple of weeks. Another guy went to Caserta (Southern Italy) to find job through a cousin of his. However, they often turn back to Como because they realise that moving to another place is not that easy if you know nobody. Here, they can at least find a roof to stay and food. (Volunteer, Como)

Regardless of their legal status, RAS may leave their place of residence during the spring months and return back when crop of agriculture products ends. By relying on co-ethnic brokers (Ambrosini, 2017), seasonal or temporary mobility practices enable people to survive or fund their plans, despite implications of precarious or exploitative nature of work in agriculture. People tend to return back to the place where they have social ties and can access welfare services through civil society's action, as analysed below. Therefore, such mobility practices do not seem to improve one's conditions over the long term.

Despite rigidity in border controls across Europe since 2016, RAS can be also mobile across national borders in order to find employment opportunities. Asking a volunteer in Como to put me in contact with a refugee who resides in Como he told me:

He is not in Como this period. He often goes to France where there are some friends of his. He is not stable in the city, but he usually returns here. He follows some job opportunities and his life is like this (Volunteer, Como)

In this case, transnational migrants can undertake work trips for different periods of time in order to access job opportunities in third countries and explore the possibility to settle there (Dimitriadis, 2021). This practice allows RAS to get by and possibly to create the conditions to settle in a new place. Transnational mobility can be also undertaken by (refused) asylum seekers, but with some implications, as the following ethnographic notes reveal:

I'm assisting a discussion between a lawyer volunteering at a pro-migrant association in Como and a refused asylum seeker who intends to apply a repeated asylum request. Lawyer: “The problem is that you've been away from Italy in the last months and this doesn't help you. If you cannot demonstrate that you're in Italy, your application have no possibilities to be accepted. Why did you leave Italy?”

Refused asylum seeker: “I went to (name of European country) just for work. I have a cousin there and I went to earn some money”

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(Ethnographic notes at the help desk migration service, April 9, 2021)

As shown in previous research (Wajsberg, 2020), the importance of staying put in one place while waiting to receive legal status was recognised by well-informed migrants who were able to receive information about the factors determining the success of their application. In other words, mobility can contribute to the reduction of one's possibility to hold a legal status, thus indicating the negative side of transnationalism that has been usually connected to agentic dimensions (Dimitriadis, 2021). Immobility can be also a solution leading to continuity in employment as the following section reveals.

Spatial immobility to face restrictive asylum policies

While staying put at one place among RAS has been often linked to inability to acquire or maintain a stable legal position (Sanò & Della Puppa, 2021), the following excerpt tells a different story:

One woman who obtained international protection moved from Como to a SPRAR in the province of Varese, and she could not keep the job in the hotel she worked in Como. This is a problem. [...] Other people reject to move to SPRAR facilities and remain here (Como), organising their pathway on their own, avoiding moving to other places. (Social worker, Como)

Vocational training courses were not at all designed for female asylum seekers. There were training courses for electricians, for mechanics, for purely male jobs. Furthermore, the other difficulty is that they (women) often have to take care of the children and they do not even manage to have the time, the opportunity to go to school to learn Italian... what I'm trying to do is to incentivize them to develop forms of solidarity. Now, there are some language courses, and one mum looks after another mum's children, so they can participate at the courses. Some of them are illiterate, so it's even more difficult to participate in language courses. [...] the other problem is that they're waiting to access the SPRAR system: one mum with her daughter have been waiting for two years to access the SPRAR network, but unfortunately there are only few SPRAR centres for families in the zone Monza – Brianza, (Social worker, Como and Milan)

In the first case, immobility can be seen as a form of resistance to dysfunctionalities of the formal reception system among refugees and holders of international protection. People may reject to uproot from the place where they have already created social ties (Sanò & Della Puppa, 2021) and found a stable employment. A new movement may be considered as risky in terms of integration (e.g., labour market, housing, ties with locals). This pattern was common in the municipalities of Como and Busto Arsizio that have never adhered to the SAI network. In addition, the lack of policies reflecting women's (and parents') needs conditions people's access to the labour market. Mobility to access SAI centres in different localities is seen as even more counterproductive for women's integration, in front of the major difficulties they face when they take care of their children. In this context, immobility indicates a practice to get by, whereas forms of solidarity developed among women (and incentivized by the civil society) can contribute to coping better with structural barriers.

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Having accounted for (im)mobility among RAS to access or secure employment, we now move to the next section dealing with people's practices to access welfare services.

(IM)MOBILITY PRACTICES TO COPE WITH LACK OF WELFARE SERVICES

Mobility to access affordable (informal) housing

Spatial mobility is also adopted by RAS who cope with difficulties to access housing. A common practice to find a housing solution is to rely on networks of friends and acquaintances.

When men leave the reception facilities, they organize themselves to rent apartments together; I'm talking about guests of the same reception centre who leave and share the rents with other people. Thanks to the network of compatriots, friendship networks, many guys leave in this way. (Social Worker, Busto Arsizio)

This kind of mobility not only concerns asylum seekers who cannot access formal reception facilities, but also refugees or holders of international protection status who often cannot enjoy economic independence after the reception period at CAS or SAI facilities. Despite the importance of ties with fellow nationals in accessing housing (Ambrosini, 2017), RAS may face further hardships in accessing the private housing market:

I heard some bad (offensive/discriminatory) things... (there's) discrimination while seeking a house. I asked many friends of mine. They ask around and they (owners) reply: "no, no I don't rent out the house to Africans". [...] at the end, always Valerio and other friends achieved to find this house (where he actually lives) for me. The house owner said me that he has known Valerio for ten year, and this is why (I got the house). (Refugee, Busto Arsizio)

This quotation underlines the importance of the existence of social ties with locals in the search of housing after the period of institutional reception. In the above case, the key person was a social operator working on vocational training programmes who tutored the refugee in the search of job. In other words, entering networks of local native people allows refugees to face racial discrimination as locals can stand guarantee for the character of people to whom house owners rent out their property (Ravn et al., 2020). Beyond racism or discrimination, though, refugees may be rejected access to housing due to the precarious or informal character of their employment which gives no guaranty to house owners.

Spatial mobility can become recurrent when housing solutions share a temporary or informal nature among people with few resources:

In the city of Varese there is perhaps one dormitory, but the places are insufficient to respond to the needs of homeless population. Instead, Milan has a much higher number of available places. In Milan, there are also food and soup kitchens, shower services, there are all the services for marginalized people; everything is much more structured;

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and, therefore, we give needy people addresses in Milan (where homeless people should go and which persons have to contact). (Social worker, Busto Arsizio)

Homeless migrants may move to cities where housing services are available to all people regardless of their legal status. Many of those who exit the institutional reception system or those who lapse into irregularity may opt to move to Milan in order to access temporary solutions of minimum standards in a system of services that provides forms of “poor relief” (Leerkes, 2016). This is because the city they live and, in general, the Province of Varese do not dedicate adequate resources for the protection of homeless people. This kind of mobility is facilitated by information circulated through TSO workers. One research participant who lost the right to international protection and whose appeal to this decision is still pending, confirms the allegations of the social worker in the previous quotation:

I: why did you decide to come to Milan?

R: it's not that I decided to do so. The first time I was in a CAS in [name of a satellite city close to Milan]. Then, when I entered the SIPROIMI system, I had to move to [name of another satellite city close to Milan]. When I lost the international protection, [an Italian friend of him – social worker] gave me the contact of a woman working in the welfare facilities for homeless people in Milan. That's why I live here now. It's not my choice. (Asylum seeker, Milan)

Mobility of homeless people is therefore linked to survival rather than a planned and desirable action. Due to municipalities' indifference or inability to contribute to the reception of RAS, enforced mobility between different places across Italy may have impacts on RAS' integration because it entails the uprooting of people who are not able to maintain their social ties that they have developed in local communities (Ager & Strang, 2008; Şimşek, 2020). While lack of forms of “poor relief” should be also expected in the case of Como, a recent research tells a different story (Bonizzoni & Dimitriadis, 2023). Due to the geographical position of this city, civil society actors have been particularly active in providing accommodation to homeless migrants since 2016. Dealing with thousands of people who transited, remained entrapped into or turned (the so-called “Dubliners”) to this border city, civil society organisations have undertaken innovative practices to offer housing and integration prospects to people without financial resources and unstable lives. Available structures offer accommodation on a permanent or temporary basis, thus allowing migrants to stay put and work in this city or engage in circular mobility as argued above. This was not the case in Busto Arsizio. Social workers in this city often claimed that they do not see anymore those who lapse into irregularity.

As already argued, the distance between one's dwelling and the workplace implies daily commuting. In other cases, people who exit the reception facilities often have to leave the city they used to live in order to afford accommodation. Although getting public means of transportation to reach the workplace on a daily basis may be a solution, this is not always feasible:

Some guys have jobs outside Como, in hotels, and they have to remain to sleep there. At that point, they have to make a choice, in the sense that the Prefecture, unfortunately, does not allow people sleeping outside the reception facilities. So, some

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guys made the choice to reject job opportunities or exit the reception system because it was not possible to reach hotels. [...] We're advising those who have an internship contract to save money in order to invest it for those expenses (e.g. getting a driving license) that we cannot fund. (Social worker in receptions facilities, Como)

This quotation suggests that access to employment can be constrained due to the distance between reception facilities and workplace that generates dilemmas among RAS about missing jobs opportunities or the right to accommodation (and, generally, reception) in the case they cannot maintain employment positions. Seasonality in jobs also implies that RAS have to find out housing solutions for the months they remain unemployed. Some RAS can overcome such barriers yet:

R: I own a car, I bought the car two years ago so I went to work by car when I did the training at [name of company]. The companies are located far from the city, they are in the industrial area. Every time I sent out a resume, they asked me for my driver's license and car, so I sacrificed myself and got my driver's license and car.

Q: It's not easy to get the driving license, were you able to drive?

R: I knew how to drive, I drove for many years (in his place of origin), but the theoretical part (of the driving exam) was not easy, but I learned a bit quickly anyway, because I am quite good at studying. (Asylum seeker, Busto Arsizio)

This quotation highlights that financial (Şimşek, 2020) and cultural resources (good language and driving skills) are very important in coping with constraints imposed by dispersal policies and opportunities in local labour markets. Comparing the three case studies, although RAS in Milan face less problems with daily commuting while residing at reception facilities (thanks to the efficiency of public means of transportation, availability of jobs around the city), the situation changes when they lose the right of accommodation or opt to abandon state reception facilities. This is because RAS have to move to satellite cities due to the high cost of housing in Milan.

Next to (im)mobility practices to deal with housing issues, RAS can opt to be (im)mobile to access a better treatment in relation to bureaucratic procedures as the next section shows.

Mobility to migrant-friendly cities to access administrative services

Mobility practices are also adopted when RAS have to cope with hardships related to bureaucratic procedures. This can concern internal mobility of people who already reside in Italy (Sanò & Della Puppa, 2021) or those who just arrive after having crossed the Italian territory borders:

They are mainly Pakistani and come from Udine, Trieste and someone from Gorizia. It works by a word of mouth. In fact, I found out that they (Pakistani asylum seekers) are advised to come to Como (through information they get) on a Pakistani website. They arrive here because one thing we do is to help them making the first asylum request, and at the same time we seek for a reception center. [...] Having lawyers (who help newcomers), the insertion in CAS is faster. Or we try to find a housing solution. [...] in addition, the police headquarters collaborate with us, so this helps. [...] In Gorizia or in

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Trieste you have to wait for one month before you have an appointment at the police headquarters; here, it just takes two weeks. (Social worker, Como)

Benefiting from the gap between national policies and actual implementation, settled or newly arrived people can access information that provides them with higher probabilities to regularise and/or access services and rights (van der Leun, 2003; Dimitriadis, 2018). This is not only the case in Como, as our participants located in Milan confirm a similar trend in relation to specific Police Headquarters in Milan. Mobility to enjoy a more favourable treatment by local bureaucrats and services offered by civil society actors is even more beneficial when combined with the possibility to insert into the labour market:

Most of Pakistani people come to Como because they know that they will find job in the fruit market, loading boxes or selling roses. However, they have few probabilities to get regularised. (Social worker, Como)

Relying on a well-established Pakistani community in Como (Bonizzoni & Marzorati, 2015) or other ethnic communities in Milan, newly arrived people move to these cities not only to access services, but also to insert into niches of the (informal) local labour markets which may be beneficial for RAS' integration at the long term (Dimitriadis, 2022). Another practice of (im)mobility we identified relates to access to health services and is presented in the final section.

Forced mobility to receive health services in Milan

Cut of funds dedicated to services for people suffering psychological or psychiatric disorders lead people to move to Milan to receive medical care:

What lacks in the territory (Province of Varese) is the accompaniment of people facing psychological and psychiatric vulnerabilities. Especially in the CAS, we are in difficulty when we find such cases. [...] As for the SIPROIMI, we collaborate with the private sector. This is quite important but not all SIPROIMI projects have a sufficient budget to provide such services. (Social worker, Busto Arsizio)

We rely on the psychiatric department of [name of hospital] in Milan. There are some professionals in our territory but they are few. It is certainly a limitation (for people's integration) in this area. (Social worker, Como)

In front of the lack of healthcare services, RAS are often who are located in Busto Arsizio and Como have to move to Milan in order to receive medical care. This last quotation confirms previous research on the role of medical centres and NGOs based in Milan that provide services to (irregular) migrants by furnishing non urgent medical care, including psychological and psychiatric services (Ambrosini 2017). Inclusive policies and civil society's active engagement in the asylum governance seem to remedy the shortcoming of state policies in the health sector.

Conclusions

This article examined the forms of spatial mobility among RAS in coping with structural constraints on their integration paths in three Northern Italian cities. It mapped the different ways in which RAS deploy mobility and the situations in which they stay put, highlighting the factors shaping these acts, as well as the outcomes and implications at the individual level. In doing so, it contributes to the analysis of RAS' agency, and the theoretical debate on the link between spatial (im)mobility and their agency by calling attention to the (in)voluntary nature of being (im)mobile.

This article advances knowledge about individual and contextual factors that enable RAS to navigate better the reception system. Financial capital (e.g. ability to get driving license or buy a car), knowledge of the local language or previous skills (e.g. ability to drive) and social ties that can provide useful information (e.g., about the regularisation process, jobs and housing) enhance people's capacity to cope with structural constraints. While legal status is considered an important factor in favouring integration processes, this study reveals that holders of international protection and refugees often (have to) undertake similar (im)mobility practices with (refused) asylum seekers. This indicates the failure of integration and dispersal policies of the Italian reception system and is linked to the specificities of the localities where migrants reside. Some of the contextual factors that hinder RAS' integration are considered to be discrimination on a racial basis and low demand in the labour market. Lack of efficient transportation services in small cities on the one hand, and high cost of living in big cities on the other can also obstruct people's insertion in the local labour market. Limited welfare services offered by municipalities and distance between place of residence and workplace are two factors that limit people's agency, regardless of the socio-economic characteristics of local contexts. Instead, high labour demand and the presence of a proactive civil society in favour of RAS facilitates people's settlement and integration. The geographic position of a city can either enable or hinder people's integration.

Looking at the different types of mobility and immobility among RAS, this article complicates the discussion about the connection between (im)mobility and agency. While previous studies that adopted the "mobility regimes" approach challenged the linear relation between immobility and downward social mobility (Cottino, 2021; Kalir, 2013; Sanò and Della Puppa, 2021; Wajsberg, 2020), this article advances the discussion on the meaning of (im)mobility in terms of agency by calling attention to the voluntary or involuntary nature of (im)mobility practices. On the one hand, RAS' mobility practices in the host society seem to be often enforced by structural dynamics such as restrictive migration policies. Talking about spatial mobility for work reasons or to access welfare services, this might be considered as involuntary, as it often entails poor employment conditions or reflects the lack of jobs, vocational training or inadequate integration projects in places where migrants live. On the other hand, staying put in the host society, even among those who hold an irregular legal status, can be considered as voluntary or chosen immobility; as part of their mobility trajectories that goes against border policies. In other words, immobility can be seen as a strategy of resistance towards the reinforcement of external and internal borders (e.g., local policies of exclusion) and can be considered as the other side of their actual plans of being mobile. Similarly, refugees can opt to stay put in a place to cope with lack of integration projects at the place of residence they live.

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Therefore, instead of merely criticizing the linear connection between voluntary mobility and agency, future research should consider people's (im)mobility preferences in order to provide better understandings on the interplay between being (im)mobile and able to resist or overcome structural barriers.

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