

**Understanding the ‘Refugee Crisis’: An Actor-Centred Analysis of the Constitution of Asylum Governance in Italy**

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ABSTRACT

Through analysis of asylum governance mechanisms, this thesis opens the ‘black box’ of asylum governance processes during the Italian ‘refugee crisis’. Between 2014 and 2018 Italian asylum policies became increasingly restrictive, asylum-seekers’ reception was highly inefficient, and asylum-seeking migration became more politicised. This thesis complements and challenges existing accounts of the ‘crisis’, which tend to focus on governance outputs and outcomes without providing satisfactory explanations about how these were produced in the first place, and largely neglecting actors’ understandings and decision-making processes. To address this gap, I develop an actor-centred ‘macro-micro-macro’ approach applied across different governance levels, based on framing and sensemaking perspectives and network analysis. Drawing from 127 interviews and an extensive document analysis, the thesis shows that the understandings, actions and interactions of Italian asylum governance actors contributed to shape asylum-seeking migration as a social and political problem, constituting the ‘refugee crisis’ itself. I reach this conclusion by developing six interrelated empirical findings. First, at the regional level, actors’ assessments of the situation around them were driven by perceptions of public attitudes to immigration and of its salience. Second, these perceptions were often disconnected from objective evidence and grounded on pre-existing narratives. Third, these perceptions decisively shaped political decision-makers’ actions. Fourth, the interaction of decision-makers that exhibited different approaches to asylum-seekers’ reception influenced the production of key outputs and outcomes: the efficiency of regional reception systems, levels of politicisation of asylum and the consequent emergence of migration-related mobilisations by the public. Fifth, these outputs, in turn, decisively influenced actors’ perceptions of public opinion, mostly reinforcing pre-existing narratives. Sixth, these recursive regional governance processes had powerful effects on the national governance level, significantly influencing the understandings, decisions and actions of national policy actors. They ultimately drove and shaped the restrictive policy approach adopted by the Italian government since 2017.

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# LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ANCI: National Association of Italian Municipalities

CARA: Governmental Reception Centres for Asylum-Seekers

CAS: Extraordinary Reception Centre

CEAS: Common European Asylum System

DCL: Department of Civil Liberties and Immigration

EASO: European Asylum Support Office

EC: European Commission

EU: European Union

FI: Forza Italia

FN: Forza Nuova

ICL: Independent Centre-Left

ICR: Independent Centre-Right

IOM: International Organisation for Migration

IRW: Independent Right-wing

LN: Lega Nord

M5S: Movimento Cinque Stelle

MoI: Ministry of Interior

MoFA: Ministry for Foreign Affairs

NCD: Nuovo CentroDestra

NGO: Non-governmental Organisation

PD: Partito Democratico

SAR: Search and Rescue

SNA: Social Network Analysis

SPRAR: System of Protection of Asylum-Seekers and Refugees

SUW: Socially Useful Works

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

# DECLARATION

*I, the author, confirm that the Thesis is my own work. I am aware of the University’s Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means (*[*www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means*](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means)*). This work has not been previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, university.*

*Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis partially draw on the following published works:*

* *Pettrachin, A. (2019), ‘Opening the “Black Box” of Asylum Governance: Decision-Making and the Politics of Asylum Policy-Making’, Italian Political Science Review (IPSR), 1-22,* [*https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2019.36*](https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2019.36)*.*
* *Pettrachin, A. (2019), ‘Making Sense of the Refugee Crisis: Governance and Politicisation of Asylum-Seekers’ Reception in Northern Italy’. EUI Working Paper RSCAS 2019/13.*
* *Pettrachin, A. (2019), ‘Decision-Making Processes and Dynamics of (Non-) Politicisation of Immigration in Sicily’. EUI Working Paper RSCAS 2019/48.*

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# CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

At some point, in front of the growing immigration wave and the management problems highlighted by mayors, I feared our democracy was at risk. This is why we had to take action, as we did, not waiting for other European countries anymore (Marco Minniti, *La Repubblica*, 29 August 2017).

With these words, the then Italian Interior Minister, justified the new restrictive approach to asylum-seeking migration adopted in 2017 by the centre-left government led by Paolo Gentiloni, a key turning point in the management of the Italian ‘refugee crisis’[[1]](#footnote-1). This quote provides two key insights that inform the analysis that follows in this thesis. First, Minniti is framing his actions based on specific understandings of the causes and effects of asylum-seeking migration in Italy: immigration is perceived as a ‘growing wave’, its effects are understood as unmanageable and even threatening Italian democracy, due to growth in support for far-right, anti-immigration parties which was supposedly caused by growing migration flows. These understandings, while plausible, are not necessarily accurate or ‘objective’. Whether accurate or not, Minniti’s statement suggests that understandings, interpretations and perceptions of events by key actors within governance systems have very powerful effects on actions. Second, this quote suggests that decision-making processes and the identification of policy solutions are significantly influenced by the interactions among different actors within the asylum governance system, in this case mayors and the Interior Minister. Overall, while it is a common understanding that asylum-seeking migration represented a significant challenge and threat to the Italian governance system between 2014 and 2018, Minniti’s statement challenges the idea of asylum as an exogenous shock to the Italian governance system and suggests the role of endogenous factors ‘within’ the governance system.

To explore these endogenous factors, this thesis analyses how in diverse regional settings, understandings held by key actors within the asylum governance system and interactions between these actors shaped actions. As the Minniti quote suggests, it is necessary to understand how the drivers and dynamics of asylum governance during the ‘refugee crisis’ were understood and how a number of structural factors associated with flows created uncertainty within the governance system. Uncertainty required interpretation by decision-makers at different levels. By focusing specifically on frames and interactions, this thesis therefore asks *how, why and with what effects did the Italian asylum governance system and actors within this system shape responses to the ‘refugee crisis’?* By analysing this question, this thesis, distinct from most existing work on the ‘refugee crisis’, does not focus on policy implementation but, rather, on the formation of knowledge claims, the context of decision and ‘inner’ governance and policy-making mechanisms. By so doing, it makes a distinctive contribution to different strands of the migration literature, particularly: decision-making; the role of evidence in policy-making; the production of outputs and outcomes of governance systems; and the ‘multi-actorness’ of multi-level governance (MLG).

This introductory chapter sets the scene for the analysis that follows. It, first, identifies gaps in the existing literature and then specifies the thesis’ research design and research questions to show how it addresses these gaps.

Despite the growing number of academic contributions on asylum governance in Europe, the chapter’s first section shows that the existing literature on the Italian ‘refugee crisis’ largely focuses on analysing observed outputs – including laws, policies and political contestation – and outcomes – such as the inefficiencies of the Italian asylum-seekers’ reception system and its implications. By doing so, it largely neglects how these outputs and outcomes emerged or were produced in the first place or makes assumptions about governance mechanisms and the motives of the actors involved. Scholars tend to conclude that policy-making processes during the Italian ‘refugee crisis’ failed to attain their objectives. In doing so, these works implicitly connect to the ongoing debate in the migration scholarship about ‘policy failure’ (Castles 2004; Massey 2013) and the supposed irrationality or ‘alienation’ of policy-making to migration dynamics (Baldwin-Edwards and Lutterbeck 2019; Scholten 2019). While implicitly assuming a lack of ‘reason’ in policy-making processes they do not, however, explain how understandings about migration are formed and what ‘failure’ and ‘success’ mean for the actors involved. This is problematic because, as was shown, from an analytical and methodological point of view, it is not possible to extrapolate back from the outputs of a process to make assumptions about the nature of the process itself, and about how actors frame migration, make sense of their environment and make decisions (e.g. Brunsson, 1985, 1991).

Second, while very few scholarly works have specifically examined asylum governance during the ‘refugee crisis’, those that do so mostly focus on the ‘multilevelness’ of asylum governance processes (Ambrosini 2018; Campomori and Ambrosini 2018; Giannetto, Ponzo, and Roman 2019; Kuschminder 2019). To develop the important insights offered by this work, I argue that the MLG approach tends to neglect the dynamics of governance and actors’ intentions and interactions across levels of governance. It is necessary to grasp these if we are to develop a better understanding of the drivers of outputs and outcomes of asylum governance at both the national and subnational levels (Peters and Pierre, 2004: 88).

The chapter’s second section argues that these gaps can be addressed through the adoption of an actor- and network- centred approach to the analysis of governance across levels which sheds light on how actors’ understandings are produced and acted upon and how governance processes produce outputs and outcomes. To do so, I develop an approach to the analysis of governance processes through a ‘macro-micro-macro’ design, typical of the so-called ‘mechanism perspective’ (Hedström and Wennberg 2017). This perspective studies outputs and outcomes of governance systems as the result of the interaction of the actions of actors within the system, and such actions as the outcome of their understandings. I assume that actors have a bounded rationality (Simon 1982) and are situated within a certain socio-cultural, political, historical and organizational environment (so-called ‘situated actors’), which requires to be interpreted by them (so-called ‘sensible environment’). Moving from these premises, I propose to study the chain of situational, action-formation and transformational mechanisms through which these understandings, actions and outputs are produced.

The third section specifies how, through the adoption of this actor-centred approach, I contribute to the three strands of the literature already identified. I argue that, by focusing on the cognitive mechanisms that produce actors’ understandings, rather than on how these understandings are used or contested, I complement existing findings on the framing of migration, and challenge arguments about the irrationality of migration-related policymaking (Cairney 2016; Scholten 2019). I also aim to complement the literature on migration policies and politics (Abou-Chadi and Helbling 2018; Ambrosini 2018; Castelli Gattinara 2017b), by focusing on the mechanisms that shape actors’ actions and the production of key policy outputs, such as inefficient regional reception systems and high levels of political contestation of migration. I specifically show the often-neglected interplay of migration politics, policies and political contestation in these dynamics. This thesis finally contributes to the ongoing debate on the MLG of migration (Campomori and Ambrosini 2018; Caponio and Jones-Correa 2018; Scholten and Penninx 2016): by focusing on situated actors and networks, rather than merely on the multi-levelness of governance, I aim to move the existing literature towards ‘more explanatory and less normative or descriptive approaches (Ongaro 2015).

The chapter’s fourth and final section specifies the thesis structure and highlights its key findings. After examining the empirical context and developing a methodology – in chapters 2 and 3 – this thesis initially focuses on the governance of asylum-seekers’ reception and its dynamics in three Italian regions (Veneto, Sicily and Tuscany). Subsequently, it moves to the national level, analysing the governance of asylum-seekers’ access to territory and of the asylum status determination process, two policy dimensions in which decision-making is much more centralised.

By analysing these dynamics across different policy dimensions and governance levels, the thesis crucially shows that asylum governance during the Italian ‘refugee crisis’ was both a cause and an effect of ‘turbulence’ (Ansell, Trondal, and Øgård 2016:1). In other words, it shows that the understandings and actions of actors within the governance system, and their interaction, contributed to shape asylum-seeking migration as a as a social and political problem.

This broader argument is articulated through six more empirical findings, which illustrate the constitutive effects of Italian asylum governance:

* At the regional level, situated actors’ assessments of the situation around them were largely driven by their perceptions of public attitudes to migration and of the salience of migration.
* These perceptions were often disconnected from objective evidence of existing opinion polls and grounded on deeply rooted narratives.
* Third, these perceptions decisively shaped political decision-makers’ actions. This, despite regional actors adopted different decision-making styles and developed different approaches to action, with variation identified across groups of actors with different political affiliation but also across different regional contexts.
* The interaction of decision-makers that exhibited different approaches to asylum-seekers’ reception influenced the production of key outputs and outcomes: the efficiency of regional reception systems, levels of politicisation of asylum and the consequent emergence of migration-related mobilisations by the public.
* These outputs, in turn, decisively influenced actors’ perceptions of public opinion, mostly reinforcing pre-existing narratives. Regional governance processes during the Italian ‘asylum crisis’ had a powerfully self-referential and recursive nature.
* These recursive regional governance processes had powerful effects on the national governance level, significantly influencing the understandings, decisions and actions of national policy actors. They ultimately drove and shaped the restrictive policy approach adopted by the Italian government since 2017.

The approach adopted in this thesis was informed by the wider MIGPROSP Project (Geddes 2020), in the framework of which this research was conducted.

## 1.1. Identifying Gaps in the Existing Literature on the ‘Refugee Crisis’.

This section explores how the Italian ‘refugee crisis’ has been accounted for in the existing literature to identify two major gaps: a narrow focus on the outputs and outcomes of governance systems; and, a static focus on the multilevelness of governance that does not account for the implications of its multiactorness.

### 1.1.1. The focus on policy outputs and outcomes.

Castelli Gattinara (2017b:320) identifies two crucial and interconnected dimensions of the Italian and European ‘refugee crisis’: a ‘public reaction dimension’ of the ‘crisis’, related to the raising politicisation of the immigration issue and the implications of public attitudes to immigration, and a ‘regularity dimension’, related to how ‘the crisis has been managed’. In this paragraph, I examine research on both these dimensions to show that, in both cases, the literature provides in-depth insights on their outputs and outcomes but largely failed to analyse the context of decision and micro-level governance mechanisms.

In the brief review of scholarly works on the ‘regularity dimension’ of the ‘crisis’, I mostly refer to the existing literature on the Italian case. Since few works on the second dimension of the ‘crisis’ in Italy have been published, in the paragraph that follows I refer to academic works that analyse the politicisation of migration in Western or South-Western Europe, more broadly.

The regulatory dimension.

The scholarly literature has extensively analysed asylum policies[[2]](#footnote-2) produced during the Italian ‘refugee crisis’, across the three main ‘dimensions of asylum policy’ (Hatton 2011:52; Thielemann 2004:54): policies concerning access to territory – referring to the rules and procedures governing the access to the country’s borders by potential asylum seekers and their admission to the country; policies concerning the status determination process – relating to the processing of asylum applications and its outcomes; and policies on asylum-seekers’ reception and welfare (Table 1.1).

|  |
| --- |
| *Table 1.1. A classification of asylum policies.* |
| **Policies concerning access to territory** |
| Visa policies |
| Border control policies |
| Penalties for trafficking |
| Carriers’ liability and sanctions |
| Resettlement/Offshore applications policies |
| **Policies concerning the status determination process** |
| Refugee definition |
| Definition of manifestly unfounded applications |
| Speeding up of processing |
| Subsidiary status and humanitarian protection |
| Appeals |
| **Refugee reception and welfare/integration policies** (during and after processing) |
| Asylum-seekers’ reception and dispersal policies |
| Detention policies |
| Deportation/Readmission policies (including voluntary repatriation) |
| Right to employment during processing |
| Family reunification |
| Access to welfare benefits |

*Source: table adapted from Hatton (2011:52) and Thielemann (2004:54) with an added category for ‘reception and dispersal policies’, which acquired growing importance in Italy during the ‘refugee crisis’ (Ambrosini 2018; Campesi 2018; Castelli Gattinara 2017b).*

Many scholars have analysed policies concerning access to territory, mostly focusing on the emergence of practices and policy initiatives, during the ‘refugee crisis’, which had the objective of stemming asylum-seeking flows. Two policy outputs, in particular, have attracted a wealth of attention in the scholarly literature. First, the Memorandum of Understanding between the Italian and Libyan government signed in 2017, and, more in general, externalisation policies aimed at diminishing or stopping flows that reached Italy through the Central Mediterranean Route (Baldwin-Edwards and Lutterbeck 2019; Ciliberto 2018; de Guttry, Capone, and Sommario 2018; Koka and Veshi 2019; Liguori 2019). Second, the ‘Code of Conduct’ imposed by the Italian Ministry of Interior (MoI) on NGOs conducting search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean (Cusumano, 2017) and other outputs of policies related to NGOs’ search and rescue activities (Cuttitta, 2017; Panebianco 2019).

Several scholars have also examined the outcomes of Italian access policies. Given the security-focused nature of the policy outputs adopted, most of this literature has focused on their impact on migrants’ livelihoods and rights. Villa (2018), for instance, notes that, following the Italy-Libya agreement, the number of migrants that died crossing the Mediterranean sea increased, arguing that this is ‘the cost of deterrence policies’. Other scholars focused on the consequences of Italy’s border control policies for migrant smuggling (Albahari 2018). Mancini (2017:259) argues that Italy’s externalisation policies, ‘increasing the number of migrants intercepted at sea by the Libyan Coast Guard’ and transferred to Libyan detention centres, contributed to the worsening of the ‘already inhuman conditions of detention therein’, in violation of international human rights law.

In sum, this review of the literature on Italian access policies for asylum-seekers during the ‘refugee crisis’ shows significant attention to analysing policy outputs and in-depth accounts of the consequences of these policies. Far less attention has, however, been paid to assessing why these policies and approaches emerged in the first place. Most of these scholarly works, in fact, tend to extrapolate back from policy outputs some assumptions about how actors frame their judgements about migration and what drives and motivates their decisions, but largely fail to explore frames, framing effects and the context within which these develop. This is common to works on access policies in other European countries. In an influential article published in 2018, for instance, Abou-Chadi and Helbling argue:

It is beyond the scope of this study to investigate the reasoning of political actors. We, however, think that strategic considerations to regulate or not migration flows are less relevant in this domain than in others. Given the increasing migration flows to Western Europe, concerns expressed by the national populations and the pressure from the political (far) right, governments are exposed to reform pressure whether they like it or not (Abou-Chadi and Helbling 2018:700).

A similar, narrow, focus on outputs and outcomes emerges from a review of the existing literature on policies concerning asylum status determination and asylum-seekers’ reception and welfare.

As to the former policy dimension, it has been mostly analysed in Italy by legal scholars (Giupponi 2017; Panzera 2017), with few exceptions (e.g. Fontana 2019). During the ‘refugee crisis’, most of the scholarly attention was devoted to the key legislation approved by the Italian government in 2017 – the so-called ‘Decreto Minniti-Orlando’, that significantly reformed the Italian asylum procedure – and to the outcomes of this reform, including its impact on the asylum recognition rate and its implications for asylum-seekers’ rights.

An increasing number of scholars, including many political scientists and political sociologists, have recently focused on policies concerning asylum-seekers’ dispersal, reception and welfare (Ambrosini 2018; Campesi 2018; Campomori and Ambrosini 2018; Fiore and Ialongo 2018; Giannetto, Ponzo and Roman 2019; Mcmahon 2019; Ricard-Guay 2019). Many of these scholarly works have also focused on local asylum policy-making during the ‘refugee crisis’, teasing out some key features of local governments’ responses to the ‘refugee crisis’ and examining their consequences on localities (Ambrosini 2013, 2018). This increased attention to the local level during the ‘refugee crisis’ also characterises, more broadly, the European literature on asylum policies, which describes a variegated reality, in which local governments follow pragmatic or right-based approaches in managing immigration or rather decide to adopt ‘policies of exclusion’ (Ambrosini 2018; Doomernik and Glorius 2016; Jørgensen 2012; Steen 2016). Once again, as in the case of access policies, these scholarly contributions tend to focus on the outputs and outcomes of policies and to ignore micro-level cognitive and ideational mechanisms, mayors’ motivations and policy goals and the role of their political affiliation in local policymaking. Often, in fact, scholars tend to merely extrapolate assumptions about decision-making by working back from the observed decisions[[3]](#footnote-3). Mayors’ decisions, for instance, are often assumed to be influenced by the mobilisation of local immigrant-supporting organizations or anti-migrant protests, or by conflicts with regional and national authorities.

To conclude, despite the growing literature on the Italian ‘refugee crisis’, there remain significant knowledge gaps regarding the processes that produced its main outputs and outcomes. A common trend across the literature reviewed is a tendency to make assumptions about what decision-makers know and do not know, and about their goals and objectives. This thesis aims to build upon this literature, arguing that, despite these assumptions being plausible, it is analytically and methodologically problematic to draw conclusions about the nature of a process by extrapolating back from its outputs. Brunsson (1985) showed the scope for the presence of complex and contradictory pressures in decision-making processes, due to both material and ideational factors, to which decision-makers must try to respond and that are not necessarily evident in their outcome. Particularly in situations of ‘crisis’, actors’ interpretations of the effects of external environments can powerfully drive decision-making preferences (Pierre 2000), often leading to the ‘decoupling’ of problem assessments and choices (Cohen, March and Olsen 1972). This means that insights into decision-making cannot be attained from ex post assessment of outputs and outcomes but only through research that focuses specifically on the context of decision and secures direct access to decision-makers.

The public reaction dimension and the politicisation of immigration.

The literature on the politicisation of migration in Italy and on the effects of the ‘refugee crisis’ for Italian party politics and party positions on immigration is much less extensive (Gianfreda 2018; Urso 2018; Di Mauro and Verzichelli 2019). A number of scholars have, however, analysed these dynamics conducting cross-country analyses on Western Europe that include Italy or have drawn conclusion on the politicisation process that arguably should apply in all Western European countries.

Politicisation is defined in the literature as an expansion of the scope of conflict within a political system (i.e. a system-level feature), produced by the combination of issue salience, polarization of views, and an expansion of actors involved (Grande, Schwarzbözl, and Fatke 2018; Kriesi 2016). Many scholars, even before 2015, have focused on identifying the actors that are responsible for the emergence of political conflicts on immigration, largely concluding that political parties play a decisive role in these dynamics (Hobolt and de Vries 2015; Meyer and Rosenberger 2015). It is often assumed that immigration issues tend to be most successfully mobilised by ‘populist, non-governing parties’, particularly the radical right (Grande, Schwarzbözl, and Fatke 2018). Several recent contributions, however, argue that the politicisation of immigration at both the national and subnational levels is largely driven by mainstream parties, mostly from the centre-right (Brug et al. 2015:195; Hepburn 2014; Meyer and Rosenberger 2015).

But what are the mechanisms through which political parties define their positions on immigration and decide to increase the salience of the issue in their public speeches or electoral manifestoes? Many scholars have tried to identify the drivers of politicisation strategies by party actors. In doing so, however, they mostly focused on visible and measurable factors, mainly institutional and environmental. Among them: migration patterns and socio-economic variables (Brug et al. 2015; Green-Pedersen and Otjes 2019), public attitudes to immigration and issue salience (Castelli Gattinara 2016; Gilligan 2015), and issue entrepreneurship by radical right parties (Grande, Schwarzbözl, and Fatke 2018; Hobolt and de Vries 2015; Meyer and Rosenberger 2015). Assuming that opportunities and constraints at the subnational level partially differ from those in play at the national level, Hepburn (2014), Zapata-Barrero (2009) and Castelli Gattinara (2016) specifically identified factors that tend to produce negative political contestation of immigration at the local or regional levels. These include: socio-economic factors such as high levels of migration and high unemployment rates; high issue salience; political factors such as proportional or mixed-member electoral systems, high political variation and the presence of electorally successful anti-immigration parties; extensive competences over immigration policies by regional and local governments; focusing events and media.

Despite this, decision-making processes by party actors, at both the national and subnational levels, are largely neglected. Scholars often tend to make assumptions about the motives and reasoning of political actors. Following an increase in migration flows and issue salience, radical right party actors are generally assumed to adopt issue entrepreneurship strategies. Mainstream centre-right and centre-left parties are assumed to have incentives to downplay or ignore immigration as an electoral priority, since this tends to cause ideological splits and intra-party fragmentation, but they are assumed to modify their positions on migration, ‘whether they like it or not’ (Abou-Chadi and Helbling 2018:700), when facing increasing migration flows, public concerns and issue salience and/or the pressure from the radical right (Gianfreda 2018; Odmalm and Bale 2015:366). Mismatches between mainstream party approaches and their electorate’s preferences are sometimes observed, but these are assumed to be unlikely in situations of high issue salience (Abou-Chadi and Helbling 2018; Odmalm and Bale 2015:366).

In sum, the literature tends to explain a macro-level outcome or property – the politicisation of migration – by analysing relationships between macro level phenomena. Following Hedström and Wennberg (2017), these kinds of explanations are often unsatisfactory ‘because they do not specify the mechanisms by which macro properties are related to each other’. For an explanation to be satisfactory, they argue that it is necessary to ‘open up the black box and detail the mechanisms that brought about the macro-level outcome to be explained’. As already underlined in the previous paragraph, I argue that this analysis specifically neglects the ‘missing middle’, meaning understandings and reasoning by political actors. In doing so, the politicisation literature tends to conceptualize asylum-seeking migration as an exogenous factor, which is threatening and challenging European party politics from outside. Instead, it largely fails to investigate how the causes and effects of migration are understood by party actors – despite these being related to high levels of uncertainty and ambiguity which require interpretation (Geddes and Boswell 2011) – and how these understandings influence political actors’ decisions to politicise migration. This also raises some analytical and methodological problems, if we consider that migration, following Zolberg (1989), is a phenomenon which is made visible by borders of states and determined by the policies of receiving countries and that, as the Minniti quotes shows, political actors’ interpretations of the causes and effects of migration have powerful effects on their actions.

### 1.1.2. The focus on MLG and descriptive approaches.

Despite the growing number of actors involved in the asylum policy field, and despite the erosion of national logic being ‘at the centre of the debate’ within refugee studies (Garelli and Tazzioli 2013:1008), few scholarly works on the Italian ‘refugee crisis’ have systematically examinedasylum governance dynamics. Of those that have done so, most adopt an MLG perspective[[4]](#footnote-4) (Campomori and Ambrosini 2018; Giannetto, Ponzo and Roman 2019; Kuschminder 2019).

This follows a broader trend in the European literature, which often stresses and analyses the multilevelness of migration governance (for a review see Caponio and Jones-Correa 2018), particularly in policy fields such as access and border management (Panizzon and Riemsdijk 2019; Triandafyllidou 2014), integration (Scholten and Penninx 2016; Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, and Scholten 2017) and asylum-seekers’ reception (Geuijen, Oliver, and Dekker 2020; Hanke, Wieruszewski, and Panizzon 2019; Mascareñas and Moreno Amador 2019). As with most of the MLG literature, these works – as well as the vast grey literature produced by international organizations – often adopt very descriptive approaches and elide between analytic and normative concerns (Campomori and Ambrosini 2018; Taylor, Geddes, and Lees 2013:15). In other words, MLG is often used in these works not only as ‘an analytical model’ but also as a ‘normative concept’ or a ‘normatively superior’ way of organizing public decision-making (Marks and Hooghe 2004:16). Giannetto, Ponzo and Roman, for instance, after analysing the MLG of asylum-seekers’ reception in Italy, conclude that:

On paper the openness and the multi-level governance of reception policies appears rather high in Italy. Yet, being dependent on the contingent willingness of the actors involved to cooperate, and given the high concentration of decision power in the hands of the Ministry of Interior, these features may actually be much more limited (Giannetto, Ponzo and Roman 2019:1).

The supposed explanatory power of the MLG approach and its ‘validity as an analytical model’ is the target of widespread criticism in the literature (Marks and Hooghe 2004:5; Ongaro 2015; Piattoni 2010; Taylor, Geddes, and Lees 2013:16). MLG is said to be ‘ultimately descriptive, not explanatory’: it is considered ‘incapable’ of providing ‘explanations of outcomes in the governance process’ (Peters and Pierre 2004:88), and often classified as ‘a mere concept’, a ‘description of political and organisational reality’ rather than a ‘fully-fledged theory’ (Marks and Hooghe 2004:203; Taylor, Geddes, and Lees 2013:21).

Based on this criticism, the focus of most of the MLG literature on the multilevelness of governance is paradoxical considering the rationale behind the early theorisation of the concept of MLG in the early 1990s, and problematic for at least three, interconnected, reasons.

1. *The missing focus on actors*. The MLG concept was initially conceptualised, in the 1990s, in an effort to better account for ‘the transformation from *government* to *governance*’ (Stephenson 2013:820) and to explain the transformations occurring in the patterns of governance. The point of departure for the MLG approach, therefore, was not only the existence of multiple levels of governments but also, and more importantly, the existence of linkages and interactions among different types of actors (p.817). Despite that, most of the recent literature on MLG has largely focused on the ‘multi-level aspect of MLG’ and neglected more and more the ‘multi-actorness’ or ‘governance aspect’ of MLG (Piattoni 2010:19). Most studies focus on the ‘vertical dimension’ of MLG – i.e. relationships among governments at different levels – and only a few consider ‘the interactions between different public and non-public actors at two or more levels of government’ (Caponio and Jones-Correa 2018:1999; Scholten and Penninx 2016). Beyond that, major uncertainties still exist concerning the actual roles of most of the actors involved in asylum governance but also the ‘political context’ in which they operate, their strategies and policy objectives.
2. *The missing focus on networks*. The existing literature provides very little insights about the mutual influences and linkages between the actors involved in asylum governance and the nature of their connections. The focus on policy networks that (formally or informally) linked actors and governmental levels, actually, was of paramount importance for the initial conceptualization of the MLG (Papadopoulos 2006:9). The key innovation brought by MLG theorists was that of substituting the ‘the two-level-game assumptions adopted by state-centrists’ with ‘a set of overarching multi-level policy networks’ (Marks et al. 1996:41). The recent literature on MLG, however, has abandoned network governance tools, with the effect that, often, it merely provides insights about the distribution of competences across levels, and neglects the possibility that MLG networks emerge over and above multi-layered institutional structures. As Taylor, Geddes and Lee (2013:9) explain, however, ‘if multi-levelness is to be more than a metaphor for complexity’, networks ‘have to be mapped and understood from the perspective of those who constitute them’.
3. *The missing focus on conflict*. Early MLG theorists had also understood that the ‘logical consequence of tying actors at different levels into a single polity is that sources of contention about resources and decision-making increase exponentially’ (Marks et al. 1996: preface) and that MLG ‘destabilized, fragmented and restructured existing organizational patterns, challenging the existing concentration of power/authority’ (Dabrowski, Bachtler, and Bafoil 2014:356). Most of the MLG literature, conversely, tends to focus on ‘collaboration’ and ‘negotiation’ rather than on power and conflict (Caponio and Jones-Correa 2018:1998). A growing attention on the tensions occurring in multi-level polities has characterised some more recent literature on MLG and migration, particularly the ‘MLG politics approach’ (Campomori and Caponio 2017; Spencer 2018). However, most of these works tend to identify and study cases in which local authorities mobilise with the goal of advocating more competences and challenging centralised modes of government (among the few exceptions: Campomori and Ambrosini 2018). Furthermore, although they recognise that ‘MLG could well represent not a “party-free” zone, but rather another contentious arena’ (Campomori and Caponio 2017:218), they tend to argue that such conflict ‘is carried out by different means other than rhetoric and ideology’, such as political channels and legal litigation (e.g. Spencer 2018). This conclusion seems to be strictly related to the main focus on this literature on policy implementation, rather than other stages of the policy-making process.
4. *MLG as a static concept*. The narrow focus on the ‘multi-levelness’ of governance had the effect of losing the dynamism of the original MLG framework: as Taylor, Geddes and Lee explain (2013:14) while even ‘the most centralised polity has more than one level of government, *multi-levelled-ness* per se does not automatically produce a single pattern of governance’. Because of that, the existing literature often does not grasp the effective operation of governance. The early MLG theorists were conscious that ‘governance across levels hardly ever emerged from institutional design’ (Benz 2010:217) and rather evolved from collective action of a growing number of actors involved in policy networks and policy-making. This is likely to happen also in the case of migration, which is often assumed to ‘represent a potent trigger for social and political change “from below”’ (Caponio and Jones-Correa 2018:2000). Despite that, most of the MLG literature, including those contributions that focused on the ‘MLG politics of migration’, tend to focus on the outputs and outcomes of governance processes rather than on the processes that produced them. We still know very little about the influence of different actors on policymaking, about ‘how MLG arrangements defuse or reproduce political conflicts, while at the same making migration policies work in a way or another’ (p.2007).

In addition, I argue that the exiting literature on (multi-level) asylum governance in Italy and Europe has often neglected regional governance processes and actors shaping the ‘meso level’. Following Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, and Scholten (2017), most of the scholarship tends to conceptualise the local level of governance as mostly restricted to the dimension of cities and localities and very rarely focuses on horizontal interactions within the subnational level. This is problematic considering the increasing complexity of asylum policy, which has increased the importance of regional institutions in this field (Baldoni et al. 2017).

## 1.2. Research Questions and Research Design.

This section begins by proposing a working definition of governance and then specifies research design and research questions.

The concept of ‘governance’ was initially developed to account for dynamics of intensified cooperation between states and other institutional and non-institutional actors – including international organizations, local authorities, private, semi-public or societal actors – to address new challenges and problems that could no longer be dealt with at the state level (Peters and Pierre, 2004: 77; Stephenson 2013, 820). The term is notoriously slippery and covers a broad range of diverging conceptualizations and meanings (Kohler‐Koch 1996; Levi-Faur 2014; Marks and Hooghe 2004; Peters and Pierre 2004). This thesis adopts a working definition of ‘governance’ derived from Levi-Faur (2012) and Pierre (2000). According to Levi-Faur (2014:7), the term governance is ‘a signifier of change’, by which could be meant change in the meaning, processes, conditions or methods of governing. Following Pierre (2000:3), if governance is a process of adaptation to such changes, it should be understood to possess a ‘dual meaning’: first, the ‘conceptualization of the effects of change in underlying social systems’; and, second, ‘attempts to steer, manage or coordinate these effects’.

This definition of governance sets the scene for an analysis that can fill the gaps in the existing literature identified in the previous chapter. It prioritises the ‘multiactorness’ of governance rather than its multilevelness. This first component of Pierre’s definition means that governance is necessarily linked to how actors in various organizational settings – including across different levels of government – understand the causes and effects of change in, political, social demographic, economic and environmental systems’ (Black et al. 2011:S3). It also assumes that governance is a dynamic rather than static concept: the second component of Pierre’s definition suggests that governance is conceived as an organizational response to quick environmental changes, across different social systems (Pierre 2000:2). In doing so, it implicitly understands governance as an organizational process which has causes or drivers and outcomes. This also sets the scene for an analysis that is not merely interested in outputs and outcomes, such as laws and policies and their effects, but on the cognitive and relational processes and dynamics through which these outputs and outcomes are produced.

Finally, this definition of governance seems to be appropriate to the analysis of asylum, a policy field characterised by the increasing involvement of non-state actors but that remains a ‘high politics’ issue area in which states show a ‘marked inclination to assert interests’ (Freeman 2006:239). Use of Pierre’s definition of governance captures these developments: without conceiving governance as a proof or effect of the demise of the nation state, it rather conceives it as an organizational capacity to adapt to external environmental changes.

Moving from Pierre’s definition of governance, this PhD develops an actor-centred account to open the ‘black box’ of asylum governance processes during the ‘refugee crisis’ and reveal its ‘gears and functioning’ (Tilly, 2008: 5). It identifies the ‘mechanisms’ (Falleti and Lynch 2009:1145) within the Italian asylum governance system that produced policy outputs and outcomes. It addresses this key research question: how, why and with what effects did the Italian asylum governance system and actors within this system shape responses to the ‘refugee crisis’?

To answer this question and analyse asylum governance in Italy during the ‘crisis’, I apply insights from Coleman’s (1990) ‘macro-micro-macro approach’ and the so-called ‘mechanism perspective’ (Hedström and Wennberg 2017), which provide tools to address the gaps identified in the existing literature, arguing that in order to explain macro-level outputs and outcomes it is not enough to merely analyse relationships between phenomena exclusively on the macro level. Instead, this approach proposes to investigate processes internal to the governance system with the aim of understanding something more about the macro characteristics of the system itself (see Figure 1.1).

In order to explain the behaviour of social systems, the ‘mechanism perspective’ looks at micro-level asylum governance mechanisms. In other words, it looks at the actors who are elements of the system, how they organise their experiences and use them to shape action (Coleman 1990:11). However, it does not merely aim at the pursuit of explanatory micro foundations and, conversely, proposes to assess the implications of such micro foundations at the macro level, to understand how the governance system, its processes and dynamics, produce macro outputs and outcomes (e.g. Hedström and Wennberg 2017, 94).

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| --- |
| *Figure 1.1. ‘Macro-Micro-Macro’ Approach.* |
| Actors’ understandings  Individual Actions  Macro Environments  Macro Outputs and Outcomes  **‘Macro – Micro – Macro’ Approach**  Situational Mechanisms  Action-formation Mechanisms  Transformational Mechanisms |

*Source: figure created by the author, partially derived from* *Hedström and Wennberg (2017:94).*

Three components of Italian asylum governance are identified:

* a ‘macro-to-micro component’ that identifies the ‘situational mechanisms’ by which the macro environment(s) in which actors are embedded shape actors’ understandings and beliefs;
* a ‘micro level component’ that analyses ‘action-formation mechanisms’, i.e. the mechanisms that explain how actors’ understandings, beliefs and goals influence their behaviour and purposive actions (Ibid.);
* a ‘micro-to-macro component’ that focuses on the ‘transformational mechanisms’ that show ‘how the behaviour of many individuals jointly brings about various intended and unintended macro outcomes’ (Ibid.).

Only by considering ‘the entire chain of situational, action-formation, and transformational mechanisms’ – as Hedström and Wennberg point out (Ibid.) – is it possible to ‘explain’ an observed macro phenomenon.

As will be explained and justified in detail in Chapter 3, in order to explore these three types of mechanism, this thesis draws concepts and ideas from a number of theoretical approaches. To study situational mechanisms and extrapolate the set of dimensions that drive individuals’ understanding of events, I will largely rely on theories of frame emergence and prospect theory. To investigate action-formation mechanisms I derive insights from the sensemaking approach, rarely applied to political science (Geddes and Hadj-Abdou 2018), which has addressed the cognitive processes by which meanings of events are translated into strategies and actions. Finally, transformational mechanisms will be studied by applying tools derived from network analysis.

Figure 1.1 summarises the research design of the thesis, related to six main sub questions:

*Q1: How do actors in regional asylum-governance systems frame the effects of asylum-seeking migration and understand asylum policy issues?*

*Q2: How do these understandings emerge and through which situational mechanisms are they produced?*

*Q3: How do key political actors act and which policy strategies do they adopt?*

*Q4: How do actors enact their understandings and make sense of the environment in which they operate and new events and challenges?*

*Q5: What are the key networks in the Italian asylum governance system, what are their main features, and how do they shape the production of policy outputs and outcomes?*

*Q6: How are relations between regional and national governance levels organized, and how does this impact the production of policy outputs and outcomes?*

## 1.3. Contributions Made by the Thesis.

Through the adoption of a macro-micro-macro approach, this PhD conducts an actor- and network- centred analysis of governance dynamics across levels that shows how actors’ understandings and their interactions contribute to constitute the challenges they face. By doing so, it contributes to three main strands of the migration literature.

Framing and the role of evidence in migration policymaking.

By analysing understandings of actors within the Italian governance system and the situational mechanism that shaped these understandings this thesis contributes to an ongoing debate in the migration scholarship on the role of facts and evidence in decision-making. Eminent scholars that engaged in this debate concluded that decision-making processes around migration issues tend to be irrational and not grounded on objective evidence (Baldwin-Edwards, Blitz, and Crawley 2018) and that they are alienated to the complexity of migration-related dynamics (Scholten 2019). Cairney (2016:13) calls this ‘evidence-policy gap’. Scholars identify a number of factors explaining this gap. Baldwin-Edwards, Blitz, and Crawley (2018:10) argue that it is due to policy-making being driven by political interests, which overrule objective evidence. Scholten (2019:5) instead argues that this is the result of an estrangement or ‘alienation’ from complexity of policy processes, defined ‘not as something actors pursue on purpose, but as an inclination in actor behaviour that originates in broader structural settings’. In Cairney’s words (2016:13) the ‘evidence-policy gap’ is due to ‘cognitive limits of policymakers, and an unpredictable policymaking environment’. This relates to the ‘bounded rationality’ argument in the policy science literature, according to which actors involved in migration policy-making have to face constraints on time, information and resources (Geddes 2017).

These findings are largely based on a view of political actors as rational and strategic actors that – despite their rationality being ‘bounded’ – use the information available to ‘mobilise support for their policy objectives’ (Boswell and Hampshire 2017:133). Conversely, this thesis analyses how these understandings and perceptions that guide actors’ decisions are produced in the first place. A vast literature (see Chapter 3) has shown that frame emergence is not a linear process and that actors’ understandings of events and policy problems are not mere straightforward assessments of facts. This process, instead, is characterised by a number of shortcuts, and influenced by the availability and accessibility of information, by initial pieces of information that work as ‘anchors’, or by past experiences leading individuals to make historical analogies even when they are not appropriate. Furthermore, individuals tend to dismiss evidence that disagrees with pre-established ideas and to avoid emotional discomfort that arises when questioning prior beliefs and conviction.

The influence of these cognitive processes on the emergence of understandings and interpretations of migration causes and effects has been very rarely investigated in the migration literature, by scholars that adopted different approaches. Boswell (2009) explored why politicians and civil servants ‘commission research and how they make use of it in policymaking’, showing ‘how policymakers use research to establish authority in contentious and risky areas of policy’. Scholten (2018) adopted a similar approach analysing the relations between research and policy and their influence on knowledge production and utilisation. Another strand of the literature has examined more specifically the emergence of ‘policy narratives’ (Boswell, Geddes, and Scholten 2011; Carling and Hernández-Carretero 2011) and their impact on policy-making. All these scholars, however, tend to focus specifically on the more official level of knowledge production and the links between research and policymaking. Other scholars examined more broadly actors’ understandings of events. Pécoud (2015) shed light on how international organizations frame migration, but he mainly focused on analysing policy documents. Infantino (2019) examines dynamics of knowledge production related to EU visa policies, but she focuses on the ‘street-level implementation’ of policy.

None of these works has focused on Italy, on asylum policies, or on governance systems more broadly, through an analysis of processes of frame emergence in socially and politically embedded contexts, characterised by the interaction of different political and non-political actors. This thesis aims to contribute to this debate by focusing on these specific issues. Furthermore, it connects the analysis on frame emergence to broader debates on decision-making and action-formation mechanisms, by looking at how actors make sense and enact these understandings.

The politics of migration policymaking.

A vast literature analyses both migration policies, at the local and national levels, and migration politics and politicisation. By looking specifically at the policies and government actions (policy dimension), the positions and discourses on asylum (political dimension) and the interactions of actors with different roles, political affiliations and located in different contexts (socially, politically and culturally constituted), this thesis aims to create bridges between these two literatures. While migration policies, politics and processes of politicisation of migration are often analysed separately and independently from each other, this thesis investigates the interconnections between public attitudes and public contestation, asylum policymaking and politics.

Most literature on both migration policies and politicisation – particularly at the local level – focuses on policy outputs and outcomes (as is the case for literature on the Italian refugee crisis). Those works that aim to explain variation and effects of local asylum policies and their outcomes (for a review: Filomeno 2017) privilege macro-level environmental factors (the ‘localist approach’) or relational factors (the ‘relativist approach’ and ‘new accounts focusing on civil society actors’). In doing so, they largely neglect to examine the strategies behind these policies, actors’ motivations and policy goals, and rather extrapolate assumptions about the nature of actors’ decision-making processes back from the observed decisions. Furthermore, the role of regional and local actors’ political affiliation in decision-making processes has rarely been analysed, particularly in the Italian context.

This thesis, therefore, aims to complement this existing literature in two main respects.

First, it aims to specifically investigate the role of party affiliation in asylum policy-making and processes of politicisation of migration. Ambrosini (2018:117) has questioned the existence of a clear-cut distinction in Italy between centre-right local governments promoting anti-migrant policies and centre-left local governments promoting inclusive policies. Steen (2016) reached similar conclusions in the Norwegian context. This thesis will investigate whether and how political affiliation influenced actors’ actions and discourses.

Second, moving beyond the mere assessment of policy outputs, I aim to account for such differences or lack of differences through the analysis of the specificities of actors’ decision-making processes in situations of crisis. To investigate these processes, the thesis mainly draws concepts and ideas from Weick’s sensemaking approach (1995). This approach provides an alternative framework to analyse the social psychological processes through which individuals understand and assign meaning to unexpected events and act upon these understandings (Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010:182). Importantly, it is particularly suited to examine decisions in situations of crisis (Maitlis and Christianson 2014:58), such as the one analysed, where actors had to develop strategies and make decisions with scant information available and under the pressure of widespread anti-migrant protests.

Unlike cognitive approaches that merely focus on policy frames, the sensemaking approach connects thought and action and captures ‘the practical activities of real people engaged in concrete situations of social action’ (Boden 1994:10). It addresses both the two key questions that organizations and their members have to face in situations of crisis, related not only to cognition – ‘what is happening?’ – but also to action – ‘what should be done next?’ (Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010:183). Rather than condemning the governance systems for their failures – as many contributions in the literature tend to do – this thesis aims to understand how these failures are produced through the enactment of actors’ understandings of their ‘sensible’ environment. In other words, it investigates the impact of actors’ ideas and interpretations of the causes and effects of asylum-seeking migration on key outputs and outcomes produced by the asylum governance system.

Migration and multi-level governance.

This thesis also contributes to the literature on MLG, adopting a conceptual approach which aims to enhance understanding of governance processes involving actors at different levels, in a way that moves the existing literature beyond descriptive accounts of the governance framework and of its ‘multi-levelness’ and towards more explanatory approaches. In doing so, it addresses the suggestions of several scholars on how to move on from the fundamental criticism of the MLG concept, considered to be overly descriptive.

First, the focus on actors’ understandings allows ‘endogenous’ analysis of MLG (Stephenson 2013:827). In other words, it allows examination of how actors engaged in multi-level interactions see ‘their place’ within governance systems (Ibid.) and their beliefs, perceptions, motivations and preferences (Taylor, Geddes, and Lees 2013:210). In doing so, however, this approach does not neglect the social and institutional environment in which actors operate and environmental factors that contribute to ‘determine opportunities and constraints in policy-making’ (Ibid.).

Second, the approach (re-)gives a central place in the MLG conceptual framework to frames and methods derived from network governance theories, actor constellations and actors’ interactions, as suggested by a number of scholars (Bache 2008:162; Stephenson 2013:822). Following Taylor, Geddes and Lees (2013:5), this thesis applies social network analysis (SNA) because this method, supplemented with qualitative research methods can provide systematic insight into network architecture, issues of power and inﬂuence. In other words, I investigate ‘the relational aspects of networks’ i.e. the nature of the relationships that characterize them and their impact on the determination of policy agendas (Taylor, Geddes, and Lees 2013:210). Following Sorensen and Torfing (2007:312), when analysing networks, I specifically focus on dynamics of construction of ‘hegemonic conceptions’ of policy problems, political values and solutions and on ‘the power structures’ of governance networks that define political conflicts and cleavages and shape the influence of actors on agenda-setting and decision-making.

Third, the focus on the early stages of policy-making rather than implementation and on the mechanisms that produce outputs and outcomes allows to study governance across levels in a dynamic rather than static way and to provide insights about how governance processes develop and evolve (Taylor, Geddes, and Lees 2013:14) through the interactions, tensions and changing power dynamics among the actors involved (Kohler‐Koch 1996:359). While most of the MLG scholarship focused on the question of *who participates* in policymaking, I rather investigate *who decides* and ‘how actions between venues at multiple levels actually lead to decisions’, issues that are largely underexplored in the existing literature (Bache 2008:167; Dabrowski, Bachtler, and Bafoil 2014:357). Following Caponio and Jones-Correa (2018:2007), I aim to explore ‘how migration policies concretely unfold at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of MLG’ and ‘how MLG arrangements defuse or reproduce political conflicts, while at the same making migration policies work in a way or another’ (p.2007).

Furthermore, by prioritising the multi-actorness of governance rather than the formal division of competences across levels, this thesis pays specific attention to governance processes taking place at the regional level rather than the purely local one[[5]](#footnote-5), innovating compared to the existing literature on asylum governance in Italy. Despite the scarce formal competences assigned to regional institutions in Italy, as chapter 2 will show, asylum-seekers in Italy have been equally distributed on a regional basis, and regional governments, the regional branches of the Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI) and of many NGOs have been all significantly involved in the organization of regional reception systems. Several forums of discussion, working tables, communities of practice have also been created at the regional level, gathering members of the prefectures and municipalities. I argue, therefore, that local outputs and outcomes of the Italian asylum governance system cannot be properly analysed outside the regional context in which they were developed.

## 1.4. The Structure of the Thesis.

The thesis is developed in nine chapters. Chapter 2 conducts a more articulated review of the existing literature on the Italian ‘refugee crisis’ and Italian asylum policies and politics. This review shows that existing contributions provides an in-depth overview of the structural organization of asylum governance in Italy and of the ‘macro environment’ and the ‘macro outputs’ of the Italian ‘refugee crisis’, including, crucially, the widespread inefficiencies of the asylum system, the restrictive policies adopted after 2017, and the growing political contestation of asylum. These insights are very useful and provide the empirical context of this research. Three main gaps, however, are identified in this scholarship. I argue that, first, the literature does recognise the growing multi-actorness of asylum governance but has not conducted any comprehensive actor-centred analysis of this policy field. Second, I show that most of the existing literature identifies a number of structural factors that influenced asylum policies and politics during the ‘crisis’, including the scale of flows, public attitudes to immigration and public mobilisations. Despite all these factors being linked to high degrees of risks and uncertainty – meaning that they have to be interpreted by political actors – no attention has been paid to how these structural factors are perceived or understood by actors. Third, while most of the literature adopts a policy failure approach, evidence about the causes of such failures is insufficient and often based on assumptions about how political actors make decisions, and how the micro environment influences policy outputs and outcomes.

Chapter 3 focuses on methodology and illustrates the approach adopted in this thesis to open the ‘black box’ of asylum governance processes and to reveal the mechanisms that produced these policy outputs and outcomes. The chapter starts by defining the ontological premises of the research, and grounds it in Bevir and Rhodes’ concept of ‘situated agency’ (2005). It then introduces and justifies the conceptual tools utilised to investigate situational, action-formation and transformational mechanisms within Italian asylum governance. These are mainly derived from framing theories, the sensemaking approach and network analysis. The chapter then justifies the choice of three Italian regions – Veneto, Sicily and Tuscany – as more specific case studies to investigate the mechanisms driving the governance of asylum-seekers’ reception, which largely involved subnational actors. Finally, it presents the methods used to operationalise this methodology, mostly based on qualitative semi-structured interviews and social network analysis (SNA).

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 analyse governance processes concerning asylum-seekers’ dispersal and reception in the three regions selected as case studies. To do so, the chapters investigate actors’ understandings and actions, and the processes through which they emerged or were produced. Furthermore, they map asylum governance networks in the three regions and illustrate their key features, drawing some findings about the dynamics through which such features are linked to the outputs and outcomes of the governance system. The analysis relies on 113 interviews conducted with a wide range of political and non-political actors involved in asylum governance processes at the regional level.

Chapter 7 then brings the analysis conducted in the previous chapters together and draws some conclusions about the drivers of regional asylum governance during the ‘refugee crisis’ and the mechanisms that shaped the production of outputs and outcomes. By doing so, the chapter shows the recursive and self-referential nature of regional asylum governance and its constitutive effects, meaning how regional governance systems themselves contributed to produce key outputs such as efficient or inefficient asylum-seekers’ reception systems, high or low levels of political contestation of asylum and the consequent migration-related mobilisations. This more general argument is articulated into three interconnected claims. I first argue that actors’ understandings of the effects of asylum-seeking migration across the three regions were mostly linked to the effects of asylum-seekers’ reception on public opinion, and that these understandings of public opinion varied significantly throughout the country, were largely disconnected from objective evidence and rather influenced by rooted pre-conceptions and narratives. Second, I classify actors’ approaches to action as supporting or opposing to asylum-seekers’ reception and as passive or proactive and show that that actors affiliated to the same parties adopted very different strategies and approaches in the three regions. I argue that policymakers involved in regional governance system adopted three different decision-making styles, but overall their actions and strategies were crucially driven by their established public reactions frames, more than by any other factor. Third, this chapter argues that the production of efficient or inefficient regional reception systems is strictly related to who the central actors in the network are and what approach to action they adopt. The level of political contestation of asylum is instead linked to network polarization, but such polarization is not the mere product of the presence of actors with different ideological profiles. Rather, it is due, more broadly, to the interaction of different perspectives on asylum and approaches to action. Finally, the chapter shows that macro outputs and outcomes produced by governance systems – the inefficiencies of the reception system and political contestation – significantly influenced the emergence or absence, strength or weakness, and the high or low visibility of anti-migrant protests and pro-migrant mobilisations across the country. In turn, these mobilisations played a key role in shaping processes of frame emergence. Regional governance systems, therefore, during the asylum ‘crisis’, had a powerfully recursive nature.

Chapter 8 moves the analysis to the relations between the national and local/regional levels. Crucially, it identifies political conflicts and cleavages within the multi-level asylum governance network and examines how these influenced decision-making processes at the national level. It concludes that regional governance dynamics and outputs crucially influenced the construction of policy problems and solutions at the national level, and that this occurred not (only) through direct pressures of local actors on national decision-makers but mainly through an influence on their diagnostic understandings of their (sensible) environment. In other words, the chapter shows the constitutive effects of national asylum governance and how these effects were shaped by interactions with the regional level. This broader argument is developed through three more empirical claims. I initially apply SNA to study interactions between actors at the local and national levels. This shows that asylum governance in Italy during the ‘asylum crisis’ was complex and conflictual. Two key conflicts are identified that define actors’ relations: a more ‘ideological’ conflict among actors that support and oppose asylum-seekers’ reception, and a conflict around competences and management, between local and national actors. Then, I move to analyse actors’ understandings of the effects of asylum-seeking migration and decision-making processes, using insights from the SNA to draw some conclusions about the impact of tensions within the MLG on policymaking at the national level. I show, crucially, that such conflicts, and the local protests they scattered, produced uncertainty and – by influencing national actors’ assessments and interpretations of their ‘sensible’ environment – pushed the MoI to adopt a more restrictive policy approach on access and asylum status determination. Such policy change was also fostered by a change in actors’ understanding of the causes of migration flows, despite the asylum recognition date during the ‘refugee crisis’ in Italy remaining pretty stable over time. Finally, I provide evidence that these key actors’ interpretations of the situation that drove policy change were largely shaped by the outputs of the emergency-based approach to the management of migration adopted by the Italian government. I conclude that asylum governance processes during the ‘crisis’ have been both a cause and an effect of ‘turbulence’.

Chapter 9, finally, concludes the thesis, synthetizing key empirical and conceptual findings, reflecting on their implications and contribution to the broader literature, and considering potential avenues for future research.

# CHAPTER 2 - THE CONSTITUTION OF THE ITALIAN ASYLUM GOVERNANCE SYSTEM: A REVIEW

This chapter reviews the existing literature on the organization of asylum governance in Italy and the key actors involved in it, on the structural factors forming the ‘macro environment’ of the ‘refugee crisis’ and key outputs and outcomes produced during such ‘crisis’. The aim of this comprehensive review is three-fold: it establishes the value of the analytical approach of this thesis, which adopts an actor-centred perspective and examines the constitutive effects of governance; it clarifies the extent to which the existing literature adopted similar approaches, identifying key gaps that this thesis intends to fill; and it illustrates the empirical context of this research, providing contextual information about the Italian ‘refugee crisis’.

The first section of the chapter reviews the existing literature on asylum policies and governance in Italy and asks whether such literature adopted actor-centred approaches to study this policy field. The section concludes that, conversely, the scholarship has mainly focused on the legislative and institutional framework. This, despite the increasing shift of competences on asylum to supranational institutions, local and regional authorities and non-governmental organizations – and the muddle structure of Italian asylum policy – making an actor-centred analysis highly relevant.

The second and third sections more specifically focus on the existing literature on the Italian ‘refugee crisis’. I initially examine key structural factors that created uncertainty during the ‘crisis’, and needed interpretation by political actors, and ask whether the existing literature has examined actors’ subjective perceptions and interpretations of these unexpected and uncertain events and of the risks associated to them. Then, I move to examine how this literature analysed key outputs and outcomes of the asylum governance system. Since, as already mentioned, these works mostly identify policy failures associated to asylum management during the ‘crisis’, I specifically ask to what extent and how the existing scholarship examines the causes of these failures.

The review conducted leads me to conclude that the existing literature provides an in-depth overview of the objective structural organization of asylum governance in Italy and of the ‘macro environment’ and the ‘macro outputs’ of the Italian ‘refugee crisis’, including, crucially, the widespread inefficiencies of the asylum system, the restrictive policies adopted after 2017, and the growing political contestation of asylum. All these insights are highly relevant for this thesis. Despite that, three main gaps are identified in this scholarship.

* First, no comprehensive actor-centred analysis of asylum governance in Italy has been conducted so far, despite most works recognising that a growing number of actors is involved in this policy field.
* Second, most of the existing literature on the ‘refugee crisis’ focuses on the impact of a number of structural factors, including the scale of flows, public attitudes to immigration and public mobilisations, but no attention has been paid to how these structural factors are perceived or understood by actors. This, despite all of them being linked to high degrees of risks and uncertainty, meaning that they do require interpretations.
* Third, while most of the literature adopts a ‘policy failure approach’, evidence about the causes of such failures is insufficient and often based on assumptions about how political actors make decisions.

## 2.1. The Italian Asylum Policy Framework.

To what extent has the existing literature on Italian migration and asylum policies focused on institutions and the legislation, and to what extend has it adopted an actor-centred perspective?

Whilst a vast literature has investigated the migration and asylum policy framework in Italy since the 1980s (for comprehensive reviews see: Caponio 2008; Zincone 2011), I argue in this section that most scholars focused on the structures of the governance system and that much less attention was placed on actors. This, despite the growing number of actors involved, which makes an actor-centred analysis highly relevant to analyse this policy field.

### 2.1.1. The Legislative and Institutional Framework.

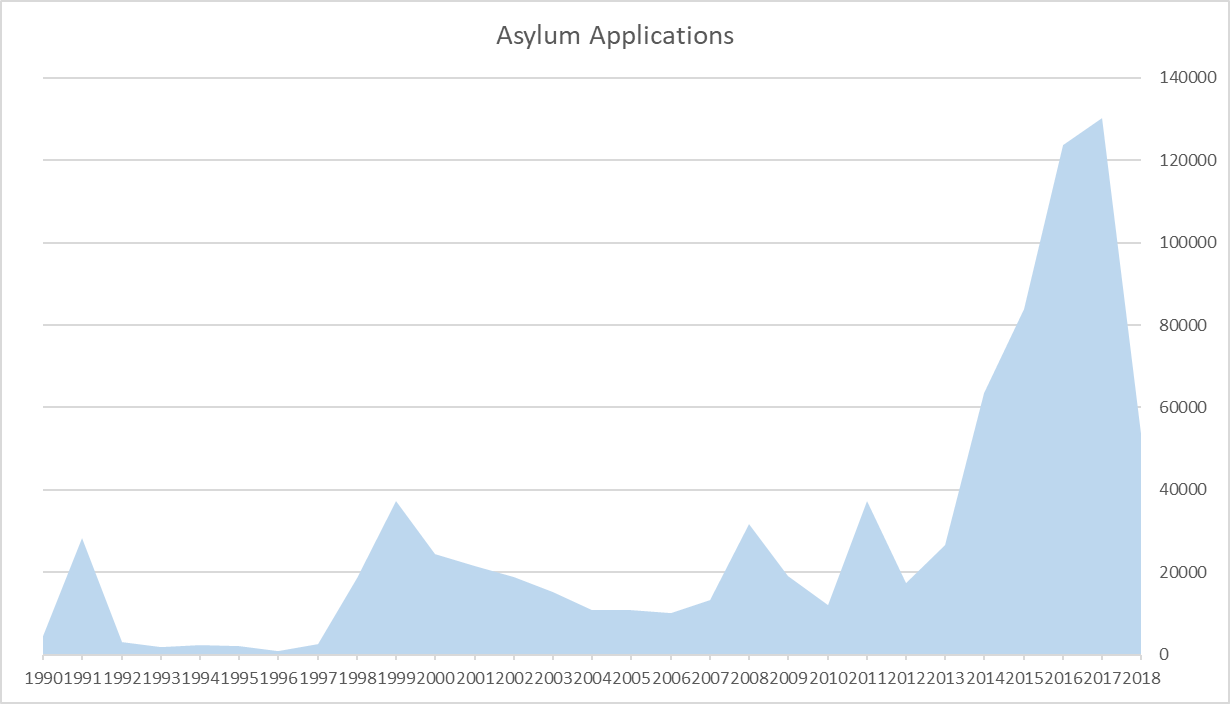
For many years, asylum in Italy was mainly analysed by legal experts or scholars adopting a legal perspective. These works provide very relevant insights about the development of the Italian asylum legislation over time, the institutional system and organizational responsibilities, and key features of the structure of Italian asylum governance before the ‘refugee crisis’.

For decades, this literature suggests, asylum did not play a crucial role in Italian policymaking, dominated by concerns over border control, integration of existing migrant communities and the management of labour migration quotas (Menz 2009:67). Italian authorities, before the ‘refugee crisis’, mainly treated asylum as a ‘marginal issue’ (Hein 2010:47), ‘often dealt with under broader immigration policy’ or even ‘scattered in pieces of legislation concerning public security’ (Zincone 2011:251). Despite asylum being constitutionally guaranteed, no organic law regarding asylum was ever developed (Triandafyllidou and Ambrosini 2011:254).

Figure 2.1 summarises the main legislative developments in the field. After that for decades Italy had merely ‘conformed to international law’ (Riso and Mazzilli 2014:54), the first piece of legislation defining rules on asylum admissions and procedures was the 1990 ‘Martelli Law’, which set the legislative and institutional framework for asylum in the country. Such law, however, was conceived with the broader aim of reformulating the rules on entry, stay, and expulsion of immigrants. After 1992, no comprehensive asylum legislation was approved and the general framework ‘proved remarkably stable’ (Menz 2009:246). The subsequent 1998 ‘Turco Napolitano Law’, which attempted to create an all-encompassing regulation of immigration only marginally dealt with asylum. The 2002 ‘Bossi-Fini Law’ and the 2008 ‘Security Package’, finally, although introducing some new tougher provisions targeting asylum-seekers, did not include a comprehensive reform of the matter (Benedetti 2010:238).

Although no other organic immigration law was approved after 2008, the Italian legislation on asylum, in this period, was significantly modified by legislative decrees adopted to transpose the EU ‘asylum Directives’, aimed at harmonizing the asylum systems of EU members states. These decrees finally shaped a legislation which stands comparison with other European countries and resulted in a rise in asylum standards overall (Hein 2010:84).

*Figure 2.1. Asylum-related Legislative Developments and Italian Governments 1990-2018 (figure created by the author).*



**ASYLUM-RELATED LEGISLATIVE DEVELOPMENTS**

*[number of asylum applications in the background]*

Law No.39/1990 (Martelli Law)

Migration Flows from Former Yugoslavia and Albania

Law No.40/1998 (Turco-Napolitano Law)

Law No.189/2002 (Bossi-Fini Law)

‘Friendship Treaty’ with Libya; Leg. Decree No.125/2008 (part of the ‘Security Package’)

‘North Africa Emergency’

Sentence *Hirsi v Italy* of the European Court of Human Rights

Lampedusa Shipwrecks; Launch of the *Mare Nostrum* Search and Rescue Operation

The EU-led *Triton* Operation replaces *Mare Nostrum*

Law No. 46/2017 (Minniti-Orlando Law); Cooperation Agreement with Libya

1990

1991

1992

1993

1994

1995

1996

1997

1998

1999

2000

2001

2002

2003

2004

2005

2006

2007

2008

2009

2010

2011

2012

2013

2014

2015

2016

2017

2018

**GOVERNMENT**

Andreotti VI (DC, PSI, PSDI, PRI, PLI)

Andreotti VII (DC, PSI, PSDI, PLI)

Amato I (DC, PSI, PSDI, PLI)

Ciampi I (technical)

Berlusconi I (centre-right coalition)

Dini I (technical)

Prodi I (centre-left coalition)

D’Alema I (centre-left coalition)

D’Alema II (centre-left coalition)

Amato II (centre-left coalition)

Berlusconi II (centre-right coalition)

Berlusconi III (centre-right coalition)

Prodi II (centre-left coalition)

Berlusconi IV (centre-right coalition)

Monti I (technical)

Letta I (PD, PDL, SC)

Renzi I (PD, NCD, SC)

Gentiloni I (PD, NCD, SC)

Conte I (M5S, Lega)

‘Refugee

Crisis’

20,000 40,000 60,000 80,000 100,000 120,000 140,000

*Source: figure created by the author, data on asylum applications from MoI.*

Despite the legislative framework’s stability, some important institutional changes were driven by broader reforms affecting the whole Italian institutional system.

At the central administrative level, some institutional innovations were introduced concerning the distribution of responsibilities on asylum-related issues within and between ministries. These were mostly related to governments’ different ‘conceptualisation of immigration’, with centre-right governments, generally more security-oriented, being more inclined to allocate responsibilities to the MoI, whereas ‘more integration-oriented’ centre-left governments tended to place more responsibilities in the Ministries of Social Affairs and of Welfare (Zincone 2011:265–69). The current distribution of responsibilities is largely dominated by the MoI (Figure 2.2).

|  |
| --- |
| *Figure 2.2. Allocation of responsibilities on asylum at the central level.* |
| which includes:  It is also in charge of some jurisdictions on asylum, entrusted to:  **MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS**  ***General Directorate for Italians Abroad and Migration***  ***Policies***   * *Office for Migration and Asylum Policies* (handles juridical and administrative matters regarding asylum applicants and refugees; cooperates in the field of the planning of migration flows and contributes to the promotion of bilateral agreements on migration).   The Department also includes the  **National Commission for the Right to Asylum:**   * It is the major State agency dealing with the right to asylum and recognition of the status of international protection; * It outlines and coordinates the activities of the “Territorial Commissions”; * It has decisional powers over suspension and cessation of the status granted by the “Territorial Commissions”.   It is responsible for the coordination of migration and asylum policies, which is entrusted to:  which avails itself of  **MINISTRY OF INTERIOR**   * *Central Directorate for Immigration and Asylum Policies;* * *Central Directorate of Civil Services for Immigration and Asylum.*   ***Department of Public Security***  ***Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration*** |

*Source: figure created by the author.*

Beyond these minor institutional changes at the central administrative level, the formal structure of asylum policy-making was affected by some important changes after 1992, pushed by two parallel processes that radically transformed ‘the territorial division of power’ in the Italian institutional system: the increasing shift of competences to EU institutions and the decentralisation of responsibilities to subnational authorities (Zincone 2011:268). The two processes were closely linked, and can be considered as two aspects of a unique dynamic process of ‘institutional layering’ and ‘vertical transfer of powers’ (Bull and Rhodes 2007:657).

* *The Supranational Dimension*. The significant transfer of responsibilities to EU institutions in the 1990s also involved asylum policy (Geddes 2000), leading to the creation of a European governance system around asylum (Lavenex 2007:309). After the Maastricht Treaty (1992) formally incorporated asylum into the Treaties, the Amsterdam Treaty (1997) included asylum policies under the first (supranational) pillar. A third crucial step in the communitarisation of asylum policies was the progressive development of the Common European Asylum System, which led to a partial harmonization of national asylum procedures. Two EU Agencies were given mandates for the implementation of the CEAS: the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) and Frontex. The EASO was established in 2010 as ‘the implementing arm of the CEAS’, with the mandate to enable cooperation among member states and offer operational support (Triandafyllidou and Dimitriadi 2014:22). As a result of these processes, in the last three decades, the EU served as a ‘vincolo esterno’ (Dyson and Featherstone 1996; Geddes 2008:358): given the rudimentary state of development of national asylum legislation, the Italian government for years ‘accepted passive top‐down Europeanization’ in this field, ‘downloading’ EU policy ideas or even adopting ‘a stance of pre‐emptive obedience’ (Menz 2009:250; Zincone 2011:267).
* *Decentralisation*. A long-term ‘quasi-federalist’ programme of decentralisation of powers and responsibilities deeply redefined, starting from the early 1990s, the Italian administrative structures and the powers of the four main governmental tiers of the country: national government, regions, provinces and municipalities (Catalano, Graziano, and Bassoli 2015:748). The programme absorbed ‘many different values’ – subsidiarity, MLG, devolution – and finally led to the involvement of different layers of local government in several policy fields (Lippi 2011:497). This ‘slow but onward process toward federalisation’ (Ibid.), carried out both through ‘big laws’ and ‘small measures’, encompassed two waves, empowering, respectively, municipalities and provinces, and regional governments. Such profound redistribution of responsibilities also had an impact on asylum policies, influencing the drafting process of the main laws on immigration approved after 1992, which allocated to local authorities important responsibilities for the reception and integration of asylum-seekers (Benedetti 2010:235; Caponio 2010:170; Zincone 2011:273).

As to the outcomes of this process of institutional layering, Zincone (2011:264–71) and Sciortino (2014:368–69) conclude that the asylum policy field in Italy is characterized by a complex, muddled structure, characterised by unclear boundaries among the responsibilities of the institutions involved, by the involvement of ‘too many actors in too many acts’ and by ‘endemic turf wars’ generated by conflicting ‘bureaucratic interests’ (including between different ministries). This is consistent with findings of research conducted on policy structures in other fields, suggesting that that the division of responsibilities in many policy sectors is ‘unclear’, ‘fragmented’ and ‘characterised by a permanent and ambiguous *negotiated pluralism*, with contradictory and mutable borders’ (Bull and Rhodes 2007:668; Lippi 2011:496). Despite having ‘legitimised the role of local authorities *out of shadows*’, the devolution process did not manage to modify the potential reach of the central state, producing an ongoing power struggle and increasing tensions on competences between national, subnational and European institutions (Catalano, Graziano, and Bassoli 2015:748; Lippi 2011:495).

### 2.1.2. Actors in Italian Asylum Governance.

Although the existing literature does identify the key actors in the asylum policy field, very few scholars have adopted an actor-centred perspective to study the Italian asylum governance system. In the following paragraphs I show that the adoption of an actor-centred perspective is highly relevant considering that, as a consequence of the shift in the locus of asylum policy-making and the increasing involvement of non-governmental actors (Garelli and Tazzioli 2013:1009), this policy field was characterized by significant ‘multi-organizational’ or ‘multi-actor’ governance dynamics.

Access policies.

Policies concerning access to territory are mainly under the responsibility of the national government. Rescue operations in the Mediterranean during the ‘crisis’, however, involved a growing number of actors (Attinà 2016:9). At the EU’s external borders, Frontex was formally mandated to identify irregular migrants prior to or at entry at the EU’s border, but its navy ships were often involved in rescue operations, particularly after 2014, when the ‘Mare Nostrum’ operation launched by the Italian government in 2013 was replaced by the Frontex-led ‘Triton’ Operation. Several national and international NGOs, since 2015, launched autonomous search and rescue (SAR) operations (del Valle 2016). Offshore applications and resettlement programs were developed by UNHCR, IOM and NGOs in cooperation with the Italian government (Morozzo Della Rocca 2017).

Table 2.1 provides a general overview of the actors involved in the first policy subfield.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Table 2.1. Actors involved in the governance of access to territory.* | | | | |
|  |  | ***TYPE OF ACTOR*** | | |
| **Political Actors** | **Governmental/ Administrative Actors** | **Civil Society Actors** |
| ***GOVERNANCE LEVEL*** | **National** | National Government  MPs  National Party Leaders | *Central Administration:*   * MoI * Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MoFA) * Ministry of Transports (Coastal Guard). * Ministry of Defense | National NGOs |
| **EU/International** | EMPs | European Commission, EASO, Frontex…  IOM, UNHCR | NGOs involved in SAR operations. |

Status determination policies.

Refugee determination remains a policy area where states ‘show a marked inclination to assert national interests’ (Freeman 2006:239). Some multi-actor dynamics can be also identified in this second asylum policy subfield, but they are mostly limited to policy implementation (Figure 2.3). For instance, the bodies mandated to make decisions on asylum applications – the so-called Territorial Commissions for the Recognition of International Protection (henceforth: Territorial Commissions) – include representatives of the MoI, of local governments and of UNHCR. UNHCR, IOM and NGOs monitored the access of asylum-seekers to the international protection procedure and provide advice to national authorities on the use of eligibility criteria, procedural standards and country of origin information (UNHCR 2017:2). UNHCR was also involved in a working group led by the MoI on the reform of the asylum procedure, set up in 2015 (UNHCR 2017).

|  |
| --- |
| *Figure 2.3. The Asylum Procedure in Italy.* |
| + Dispersal in the reception system  *Prefettura*  Decision:  Italy responsible  **Humanitarian protection**  (Stay permit recommendation to *Questura*)  Dublin transfer  EURODAC hit  **Application**  Border Police  (Airport, seaport)  **Application**  *Questura*  (Police HQ)  Rejection  **i) First appeal**: Administrative Court  **ii) Final appeal**:  Council of State  **Subsidiary protection**  (5-year permit)  **Refugee Status** (5-year permit)  **Examination of the Asylum Request**  *Territorial Commission for the Recognition of International Protection*:   * Regular procedure (Personal interview); * Prioritised procedure(Art 28 LD 25/2008; applied in case of: manifestly well-founded claims; vulnerable applicants; applicants in CIE; applicants from CNDA countries) * Accelerated procedure(Art.28-bis D.L.No.25/2008; applied in case of applicants in CIE)   **Registration of the Asylum application**  *Questura*  **Dublin procedure**  Dublin Unit, MoI  **i) First appeal**: Civil Court  **[**Second appeal removed by the Minniti-Orlando Decree]  **ii) Final appeal**: Court of Cassation |

*Source: figure created by the author.*

Reception and welfare/integration policies.

The Italian model for the reception and dispersal of asylum-seekers, organized across three main levels (first-line reception, second-line reception and integration), is based on a structural co-optation of NGOs and regional/local authorities (Figure 2.4). In this third policy subfield, the presence of multi-actor dynamics is the very evident and is not merely limited to policy implementation.

|  |
| --- |
| *Figure 2.4. The Italian Reception System.* |
| Dispersal into the National Reception System  Irregular migrants   * **First Reception (governmental) Centres (CPA, previously CARA/CDA);** * **SPRAR centres (System for the Protection of Asylum-seekers and Refugees):** * A publicly funded network of small reception structures distributed across the country, run by the National Association of Italian Municipalities and managed by local authorities and NGOs; * It aims at providing ‘integrated reception’ i.e. not only lodging/health care/food/clothes but also legal advice, psychological support and socio-economic integration services; * Special SPRAR projects accommodate unaccompanied minors and disabled individuals. Others also accommodate beneficiaries of international protection. * **Temporary facilities, also known as Extraordinary Reception Centres (CAS centres):** * They provide temporary accommodation if no places are available in first-line or second-line reception centres. * They include private accommodation structures provided by NGOs, Churches or other private service providers.   Syrians, Eritreans and Iraqis may adhere to  Asylum-seekers  **Relocation Programs**  *(with temporary stay in Ad-hoc Regional Hubs)*  Rejection/Expulsion order and transferring to **Identification and Expulsion Centres (CIE)**  **First Assistance facilities (CPSA) and ‘Hotspots’** (close to disembarkation ports):   * pre-identification * registration * photo/fingerprinting operations |

*Source: figure created by the author.*

*a) First Assistance and First-Line Reception.* In 2015, under the EU pressure, the Italian authorities created several ‘hotspots’ for the management of first reception in the ports of Southern Italy, where, through a platform of cooperation among EASO, Frontex, Europol and Eurojust, arrivals are assisted and registered, and asylum applications processed. These centres became a fundamental feature of the relocation procedures of asylum-seekers to other EU States, managed by the Dublin Unit office in Rome with the support of EASO. UNHCR, IOM, Red Cross and various NGOs were also involved in the disembarkation process, with the aim to consolidate reception capacities, provide information and emergency support to migrants.

*b) Second-Line Reception.* Local authorities are the most important actor involved in asylum-seekers’ dispersal, the organization of ‘second-line reception’ and the provision of welfare services to asylum-seekers. Before 2011, the reception system was organized around two distinct reception models (Marchetti 2016). On the one hand, the big reception facilities directly managed by the MoI (the so-called CARA centres), hosting hundreds or thousands of migrants, mainly located in Southern Italy, close to disembarkation points. On the other hand, the so-called SPRAR system (*System of Protection for Asylum-seekers and Refugees*), a publicly funded network of small reception structures distributed across the country, gradually emerged from a pre-existing network of initiatives spontaneously developed in the 1990s. The system, financed by the MoI, is run by the National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI) – which coordinates the SPRAR Central Service – and managed by local authorities – which develop the single projects – and NGOs, to which the project management is subcontracted (Riso and Mazzilli 2014:54). Participation in the system is voluntary. The local authorities involved include local governments but also networks of municipalities, provincial governments, and other supra-communal entities (*Società della Salute*, *Unioni di Comuni* or *Zone Distretto*).

After 2011, and even more after 2014, when increased numbers of asylum applications put the Italian asylum determination and reception systems under growing pressure, the Italian government introduced a third reception model, conceived to respond to pressing reception needs (Giovannetti 2013). The system is organized around ‘extraordinary reception facilities’ (CAS centres) and includes private accommodation structures provided by Churches, NGOs, private companies, landlords and hotel managers (Campesi 2018). The creation and management of this CAS system was initially entrusted to the Civil Protection[[6]](#footnote-6) and then, since 2014, to the Prefectures[[7]](#footnote-7), the local branches of the MoI.

Importantly, the responsibility for the dispersal of asylum-seekers at the national, regional and provincial levels – which became a very sensitive issue during the ‘refugee crisis’ – was shared between different types of actors, including: the Prefectures, the ANCI and its regional branches, and regional governments. The National Distribution Plan agreed in 2016 between the MoI and ANCI foresaw ‘the voluntary participation of local institutions and the involvement of the regional governments, based on the principle of sharing and of fair collaboration’ (Baldoni et al. 2017:19). Overall, the growing complexity of asylum-seekers’ reception increased the importance of the regional level of governance: not only the regional governments and the regional branches of ANCI were involved in the organization of regional reception systems, but several fora of discussion, working tables, communities of practice were created at the regional level, gathering Prefectures, local and regional authorities (Baldoni et al. 2017:19). Regional Coordination Work Groups were established within the Prefectures of the regional capitals with the mandate to plan reception at regional level and promote coordination, continuous consultation and cooperation among the different institutions involved. In some regions a ‘Community of Practice on the Right to Asylum’ was created[[8]](#footnote-8) gathering representatives of local authorities and service providers involved in the SPRAR network, and aims to strengthen coordination, sharing of information and good practices, and the creation of networks and partnership for the development of new projects.

*c) Integration.* The dominant actors in the integration policy field are, formally, regional governments, which since 2001 were assigned ‘complete autonomy’ in the field of social policy, integration issues included (Campomori and Caponio 2017:313). The Italian regions could decide whether to strengthen asylum-seekers’ and refugees’ rights in their territory beyond the minimum level established by the national law and develop specific integration programs. Since regional resources are often insufficient, the third sector (NGOs, social movements, trade unions) is often involved in the provision of these services (Zamponi 2018). The 2017 Minniti-Orlando Law, finally, invited Prefects to develop, in agreement with local governments (and, potentially, in partnership with third-sector organizations) initiatives promoting the voluntary engagement of asylum-seekers in socially useful works (SUW).

Table 2.2 provides a general overview of the actors involved in the third policy subfield.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Table 2.2. Actors involved in the governance of asylum-seekers’ reception.* | | | | |
|  |  | *TYPE OF ACTOR* | | |
| **Political Actors** | **Governmental/ Administrative Actors** | **Civil Society Actors** |
| *GOVERNANCE LEVEL* | **Municipal** | *Local Governments* (Mayors or Deputy Mayors responsible for immigration/integration) | Civil Servants | Service Providers with implementation responsibilities (NGOs, Churches, cooperatives, private actors)  Advocacy NGOs and social movements  Anti-migrant committees |
| **Provincial** | Networks of municipalities, provincial governments, and other supra-communal entities (*Società della Salute, Unioni di Comuni or Zone Distretto*).  Provincial Party Leaders | *Prefetture* and *Questure* (local branches of the MoI)  Territorial Councils on Immigration | Trade Unions (provincial branches)  Anti-migrant committees |
| **Regional** | Regional Governments (President and Member(s) responsible for immigration/integration)  Regional MPs  Regional branches of ANCI  Party Leaders | Regional Coordination Work Groups (led by Prefects of regional capital)  Regional Officials  Communities of Practice on the Right to Asylum | Trade Unions (regional branches)  Regional NGO Platforms |
| **National** | National Government  MPs  National Party Leaders  ANCI | MoI (Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration)  SPRAR Central Service. | National advocacy NGOs |
| **International** |  | UNHCR |  |

## 2.2. The ‘Macro Environment’.

The quote from the Minniti that opened this thesis powerfully suggested that actors’ interpretations of the ‘macro environment’ in which they operate and of key structural factors during the Italian ‘refugee crisis’ has very significant effects on their decisions. This section reviews the existing literature to identify key structural factors that influenced asylum policies and politics during the Italian ‘refugee crisis’. It asks whether these factors were unexpected and/or associated to uncertainty and risks – meaning that they needed interpretation by political actors – and examines whether scholars have examined actors’ subjective interpretations of these unexpected and uncertain events.

The scale of asylum-seeking flows and their causes.

The first structural fact that created uncertainty during the ‘crisis’ was the growing number of asylum-seeking flows. Starting from late 2014 the number of sea arrivals and asylum applications in Italy significantly increased (Figure 2.5). A peak of around 181,436 sea arrivals was reached in 2016, while sea arrivals suddenly decreased after the Memorandum of Understanding between Italy and Libya (Section 2.3). In 2018, only 23,370 migrants reached the Italian shores. Since 2017, the Central Mediterranean Route has also become more deadly, with a sharp rise in proportion of migrants dying during the journey (Villa 2018).

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| *Figure 2.5. Sea Arrivals and Asylum Applications in Italy between 2008 and 2018.* |
|  |

*Source: figure created by the author, data from MoI.*

Figure 2.5 also shows that the increase in asylum applications was not necessarily proportional to the number of sea arrivals. The main reason for this discrepancy is that migrants arriving in Italy until 2016 were not regularly identified and fingerprinted by Italian authorities. As reported by Villa (2019), the identification rate raised in 2016 (87 per cent) and 2017 (99 per cent).

Around 60 per cent of asylum-seekers whose applications where examined by the competent Territorial Commissions in 2014 received some form of protection status, while this percentage decrease to 40 per cent after 2014 (Figure 2.6).

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| *Figure 2.6. Asylum Decisions in Italy from 2014 to 2018.* |
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*Source: figure created by the author, data from MoI.*

Between 2014 and early 2018 the number of asylum applications was constantly (and, often, significantly) higher than the number of asylum decisions (Villa, Corradi, and Villafranca 2018), which generated a huge backlog in Italy's asylum processing system, another key factor that actors had to take into account when developing policies during the ‘crisis’. Because of that, the number of asylum-seekers hosted within the Italian reception system kept increasing also in 2017, despite decline of sea arrivals. Only in 2018 the number of asylum-seekers in the Italian reception system started to decline (Figure 2.7).

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| *Figure 2.7. Number of asylum-seekers in the Italian reception system.* |
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*Source: figure created by the author, data from* *Openpolis (2018).*

Despite the increase in asylum applications, it is important to point out that, during the ‘refugee crisis’, the total number of migrants that reached Italy remained rather stable. This is illustrated in Figure 2.8, which shows the number of residence permits released since 2011, disaggregated per type of permit. The figure suggests that family migration flows remained much more significant than asylum-seeking flows during the ‘crisis’, while work flows drastically diminished after 2014, in the absence of legal pathways to enter the countries.

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| *Figure 2.8. Residence Permits Issued in Italy.* |
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*Source: figure created by the author, data from OECD, ISTAT.*

Compared to labour migration flows, planned by the government, flows of asylum-seekers during the ‘crisis’ were unexpected, arrived by surprise, in relatively high numbers. Although international organizations during the ‘crisis’ made estimates about the number of asylum-seekers that would have crossed the Mediterranean in the months to come, these flows clearly caused uncertainty in the governance system. This uncertainty concerned their scale, but also their causes. Despite these objective facts being associated to high risks and uncertainties, which makes them likely to be differently perceived (or misperceived) by actors, the existing literature, so far, has not analysed how actors made sense of this uncertainty.

Increasing issue salience.

A second objective factor that created uncertainty during the ‘refugee crisis’ and required interpretation by political actors is public opinion’s reaction to these increasing flows. According to Castelli Gattinara (2017b:322), these flows generated ‘public anxiety and moral panic’. In fact, data suggest that Italian positive and negative feelings towards immigration in Italy, as in the rest of the EU, are fairly stable (Dennison and Geddes 2019:113) and that attitudes to both EU and non-EU immigrants have consistently become less negative during the ‘refugee crisis’ (Figure 2.9). They also suggest that, during the ‘crisis’, there was no significant attitudinal polarisation to extra-EU migration. The standard deviation of responses regarding ‘immigration from outside the EU’ between 2014 and 2019 did not change.

A report released by More in Commons (Dixon et al. 2018), however, shows that Italians became increasingly concerned about the impact of immigration on the country: 18 per cent viewed the impact of immigration on Italy positively, while 57 per cent felt its impact overall was negative.

Importantly, the literature suggests that between 2014 and 2018 the salience of the migration issue increased steeply in the country (Figure 2.10): in 2016 and 2017 more than 40 per cent of Italians identified migration as one of the two most important issues that their country was facing (compared to only five per cent in 2014). An even higher percentage of Italians identify migration as one of the two most important issues affecting the EU (Eurobarometer, 2014-2019).

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| *Figure 2.9. Italian attitudes to immigration from outside the EU and other EU member states.* |
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*Source: Eurobarometer 2014-2019, around 1000 respondents. ‘Please tell me whether each of the following statements evokes a positive or negative feeling for you: Immigration of people from other EU Member States/Immigration of people from outside the EU’. Net positivity = Very positive + Fairly positive - Fairly negative - Very negative.*

|  |
| --- |
| *Figure 2.10. Salience of the Migration issue in Italy and Vote intention for anti-immigration parties.* |
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*Source: Eurobarometer 2005-2018; Castelli Gattinara 2017b; MoI 2018.*

At the regional level, existing evidence shows that public attitudes to immigration tend to be slightly more negative in the South but, overall, are very homogeneous throughout the country (Dennison 2018; Dixon et al. 2018; Genovese, Belgioioso, and Kern 2016; Mancino 2019). This runs against ‘common perceptions that northern Italians are more anti-immigration than those in the south’ (Dixon et al. 2018:80). The same sources also show that, despite the salience of the immigration issue being traditionally higher in the North[[9]](#footnote-9), differences are much less noticeable than in the past. According to Flash Eurobarometer data 2018, 32 per cent of Venetians, 23 per cent of Sicilians and 21 per cent of Tuscans identify immigration as one of the two key issues affecting their country (Mancino 2019).

In sum, while public attitudes and the salience of the migration issue are objective facts, this paragraph has shown that these are very complex, and that available data often run against common perceptions. This means that the interpretations that actors make of them are important. Despite that, these have been completely neglected in the existing literature.

Increasing public mobilisations on asylum.

A third key objective factor that created uncertainty in the asylum governance system during the ‘refugee crisis’ was the mobilisation of civil society actors, which contributed to politicise the asylum issue. The ‘crisis’ triggered a wave of ‘solidarity-oriented collective action’ and initiatives (Zamponi 2018:116). It also led to an increasing number of anti-migrant demonstrations throughout the country, ranging from direct ‘confrontational actions’ against the creation of reception centres for asylum-seekers, to ‘institutional activities’ by representative political organisations, and ‘grassroots activities’ aimed at mobilising citizens and raising their awareness (Castelli Gattinara 2017a:18). A total of 209 anti-migrant protest events took place in Italy in 2016 (Lunaria 2017), the majority of which in the northern regions of Veneto and Lombardy, governed by the LN (Table 2.3). In Southern regions (in yellow) very few protests were recorded, while Central regions and Piedmont (in red) experienced a more limited anti-migrant campaigning (small regions are marked in blue).

Once again, it is plausible to state that these mobilisations increased the risks connected to asylum-related decisions, influencing actors’ choices, but also that these mobilisations could be differently interpreted by actors with different values, or occupying different positions within the governance system. Despite that, no scholarly works so far has assessed actors’ interpretations of these mobilisations.

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| *Figure 2.11. Anti-Migrant Protest Events and % of asylum-seekers hosted in Italy in 2016.* |
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*Source: figure created by the author, data from Lunaria (2017) and MoI (2016).*

## 2.3. The Italian Refugee Crisis: Governance Outputs and Outcomes.

In chapter 1 I argued that most of the existing literature on the Italian ‘refugee crisis’, at both the local and national levels, mainly focuses on policy outputs and outcomes and that it largely concludes that the asylum governance system was unable to attain its policy objectives. In this section I review this literature more in detail and ask: to what extent has it analysed the causes of policy failure and the processes that led to the production of key outputs and outcomes? I initially focus on the regulatory dimension of the ‘crisis’ and subsequently move to the increasing political contestation of asylum.

### 2.3.1. Reactive asylum management, restrictive policies, inefficient management.

Many recent scholarly works have examined the approach to asylum management in Italy and local and national policy responses during the ‘refugee crisis’, concluding that the Italian policy approach to asylum since 2013 has exhibited three key characteristics: the increasing restrictions of access to territory and national protection systems, the ‘reactive’ and ‘emergency-based’ character of asylum management and the ‘inefficiencies’ of asylum management. Overall, these works tend to condemn the Italian asylum governance system for its failures in managing the ‘crisis’ and provide substantive evidence about such failures. I argue that this literature does not provide compelling evidence about the causes of such failures and real-life decision-making processes that produced them.

Access and status determination policies.

During the ‘crisis’, access and status determination policies were developed without a coherent, comprehensive and long-term strategy, often in response to impressive events, as already before 2013 (Geddes 2003:158). In 2013, the launch of the ‘Mare Nostrum’ SAR operation was driven by the death of over 360 migrants off the coast of Lampedusa (Panebianco 2019). In the first part of the ‘crisis’, the exacerbated tensions over ‘burden-sharing’ led the Italian government to contest and circumvent the Dublin rules by refraining ‘from systematically fingerprinting newly arrived asylum-seekers’ (Hampshire 2016:546). Despite that, the monthly number of asylum applications in Italy exceeded the number of asylum decisions, the number of Territorial Commissions being inadequate to face the new challenges. Then, in 2017, the government signed a ‘Memorandum of Understanding in the field of cooperation and human trafficking’ with the Libyan government to stop migration flows. The new restrictive strategy – defined by Ambrosini as Italy’s ‘answer to the asylum crisis’ (2018:113) – also resulted in an increasing criminalisation of the work of NGOs conducting SAR operations (Fekete 2018). In early 2017, the Minniti-Orlando Decree significantly reformed the Italian asylum procedure with the aim to simplify asylum procedures and speed up both status determination and repatriations. In July 2017, Italy drafted a controversial, ‘EU-sponsored code of conduct’ aimed at regulating migrant rescuing by NGOs (Cusumano 2019:106), forcing them to accept law enforcement personnel on board.

Scholars that focused on access and status determination policies tend to highlight their outcomes and implications for migrants’ rights and lives. Cusumano (Ibid.) argues that Minniti’s code of conduct ‘violated humanitarian principles without increasing existing rescuing capabilities’. This also led to the withdrawal of SAR ships of those NGOs that refused to sign the document (Castelli Gattinara 2017b:327). The huge backlog of the asylum system resulted in asylum-seekers waiting for up to two years for their assessment status (Villa, Corradi and Villafranca 2018). While trying to speed up asylum processing, however, the logic of the Minniti-Orlando decree ‘remains one in which migration is treated as an emergency phenomenon that must be repressed’(Castelli Gattinara 2017b:326). Importantly, these restrictive measures did little to stem growth in support for the radical right (Youtrend 2019):

By placing borders at the core of the public debate, the so-called refugee crisis has (…) paved the way for a collective moral panic, where public anxieties have become widespread and allowed exclusionary actors, as well as mainstream political parties and the mass media, to perform the role of entrepreneurs of fear (Castelli Gattinara 2017b:327).

Asylum-seekers’ reception and dispersal.

Many scholars have defined Italian reception policies as ‘inefficient’, ‘confused’ and ‘contradictory’ and unable to provide adequate services to asylum-seekers (Benedetti 2010:222; Garelli and Tazzioli 2013:1009). Before the ‘crisis’, the constant depiction of asylum flows as sudden, difficult to forecast and massive for at least two decades led the authorities to repeatedly defer the organization of a permanent reception system. This led them to carry out improvised institutional restructurings around asylum-seekers’ reception (Garelli and Tazzioli 2013:1016) and to asylum-seekers being dispersed across different types of reception structures, depending on the availability of space, which resulted in a ‘blurring of the distinction between “first” and “second” reception’ (Campesi 2018:494) .

In the first phase of the ‘refugee crisis’, the Italian government declared its intention to dedicate the huge CARA centres in the South exclusively to ‘first reception’ (Ibid.) and to make the SPRAR system – considered as one of the few Italian ‘good practices’ (Ambrosini 2018:117) – the foundation of the national reception system, investing resources to strengthen and expand it (Corte dei Conti 2016). These attempts largely failed. The SPRAR system never expanded beyond a critical threshold, mainly due to the reluctance of many local governments to join the network (Marchetti 2016). The CAS system was ‘normalised’ and formally ‘extraordinary’ and ‘temporary’ reception facilities ‘became a structural feature of the Italian reception system’ (Campesi 2018:493). In 2017, 78 per cent of asylum-seekers were hosted in emergency centres and less than 15 per cent were hosted in the SPRAR system (Figure 2.12).

Despite some common trends, however, different Italian regions were characterised by more or less efficient reception systems. While few insights are provided by the literature about the causes of this variation, three key indicators to judge the efficiency of reception systems can be identified:

1. *The prevalence of big hubs and emergency centres (CARA, hubs, CAS centres) over small reception facilities (SPRAR centres)*. While SPRAR centres are known for providing more efficient services some of the large CARA centres created in Sicily and Apulia in 2011 kept hosting asylum-seekers during the ‘refugee crisis’ (Figure 2.12). In 2017, more than 4,000 asylum-seekers were hosted in the CARA centre of Mineo (‘CARA di Mineo’), a huge facility in a small village with 4,000 inhabitants, in Sicily. In addition to these pre-existing centres, and despite the new logic of dispersal adopted by the government since 2013, new big reception centres (so-called ‘regional hubs’) were created during the ‘crisis’ in Veneto. Veneto is also the region with the lowest percentage of asylum-seekers hosted in SPRAR centres, more widespread in the South.

*Figure 2.12. Asylum-seekers in different types of reception centres (2017).*

*Source: figure created by the author, data from MoI (2017).*

1. *The dispersal of asylum-seekers*. The ‘logic of dispersal’ drives the operation of both the SPRAR system (SPRAR structures by the law cannot host more than 60 asylum-seekers) and the CAS system, for which, however, ‘ministerial guidelines do not set a precise size limit’ (Campesi 2018:497). This dispersal mechanism was reformed in 2014 and then 2016, through the government’s ‘Plan for the Distribution of Asylum-seekers on the Italian Territory’, which ‘aims at a more “balanced” and “sustainable” distribution of asylum-seekers by setting “quotas” for each municipality, according to demographic thresholds’ (Campesi 2018:500). The approach had ‘many weaknesses and eventually failed to produce the desired territorial balance’ (Ibid.), although with significant differences across regions. In central regions such as Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna asylum-seekers were uniformly dispersed across the regional territory and mostly hosted in small reception facilities. In northern and southern regions, the percentage of municipalities hosting asylum-seekers was much lower. Remarkably, the Distribution Plan did not involve the more than 41,000 unaccompanied minors who entered Italy by sea between 2016 and 2017, 44 per cent of whom remained in Sicily (Save the Children 2018:49). As established by the Italian law, they entered a dedicated reception system under the control of the regional government, which imposed a disproportional economic burden to some Sicilian municipalities and their social services (Ibid.).
2. *The quality of the reception services*. The quality of services offered was higher in SPRAR centres compared to CAS centres, although this latter network was highly fragmented. Their management was outsourced to an heterogeneous group of service providers and some of them lacked adequate experience (Anci, et al. 2017:27). The reception system in southern regions was characterised by widespread corruption and clientelism, leading to frequent misuse by local governments of funds formally allocated for refugee reception and to the provision of reception services well below the standards envisioned by the Italian legislation (Manzano, Mishtal, and Harris 2018:83). This led to public ‘scandals concerning the management of reception centres’ and ‘media outrages on the living conditions of migrants’ (D’Angelo 2019:2215). Furthermore, as asylum-seekers’ reception became a lucrative business, in some southern regions criminal organizations occasionally took control of parts of the budget for migrant reception (Manzano, Mishtal, and Harris 2018:83). In 2015, the Italian authorities arrested members of the Rome-based gang known as *Mafia Capitale*, alleged to have bribed senior local authority and political officials in Rome to award construction and maintenance contracts, including those for the Mineo reception centre in Sicily, to criminal associates and to divert migrants to some reception centres (Massey 2013:24). Reception systems in the central regions of Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna, instead, were known for providing services of very high quality. According to the Inquiry Committee of the Italian Parliament on the Reception System, ‘Tuscany, unlike other regions, has invested a lot in monitoring the reception projects and controlling for the quality of the services offered, and the outcome is a well-functioning reception model’ (Biella 2018).

### 2.3.2. Political contestation.

The increasing politicisation of asylum governance and political contestation of immigration more broadly have been covered rather extensively by the literature, but much less insights have been produced about decision-making processes producing party actors’ actions and politicisation strategies.

Important insights about the growing political contestation around asylum-seekers’ reception at the local level have been produced by Ambrosini (2018), who shows how, in the attempt to obstruct asylum-seekers’ dispersal, some local governments – mostly but not exclusively supported by far-right parties – promoted a new wave of municipal exclusion policies, often lined to anti-migrant protests (see also Ambrosini 2013). Right-wing regional governments of the northern regions of Veneto, Lombardy and Liguria also opposed the national distribution plan, although their obstructive stances had no real implications on the distribution of asylum-seekers across regions (Borella and Sgherza 2015).

Party positions on immigration of the main Italian parties during the ‘refugee crisis’ have been investigated by Gianfreda (2018), Gianfreda and Carlotti (2018) and other scholarly works on Italian party politics.

This literature shows that the ‘refugee crisis’ featured prominently in the anti-immigration rhetoric of both far-right parties and smaller extreme right movements, which after 2013 all started to link asylum-seekers’ reception to security issues. Figure 2.10 above shows that anti-immigration parties significantly increased their consensus after 2014. The *Lega Nord* (LN) had long combined regionalism with radical-right populism (Hepburn 2009; McDonnell 2006). From the early 2000s its leaders radicalised the party’s position on immigration, increasingly framed as a threat to the survival of the culture and identity of northern Italians. These anti-immigration stances became even more central in the party’s propaganda under the leadership of Matteo Salvini, who dismissed the regionalist element of the party’s ideology turning this to ‘an empty form of nativist nationalism’ (Albertazzi, Giovannini, and Seddone 2018:645). The party was officially renamed ‘Lega’ in 2017, although the label ‘Lega Nord’ keeps being used at the local level in Northern regions, where regional leaders and party elites still recognise the regionalist component of the party’s ideology (Ibid.)[[10]](#footnote-10). *Fratelli d’Italia* (FdI), emerged in 2012 as a right-wing splinter in the mainstream right, led by former members of the post-fascist *Alleanza Nazionale* (Castelli Gattinara 2017b:329) and, since 2014, also sought to capitalise on concern about irregular migration focusing their propaganda on anti-immigration rhetoric. ‘Combating illegal immigration’ and ‘reclaiming the values of ‘Italianness’’ became a ‘banner’ for both the LN and FdI, which adopted slogans such as ‘Italians first’ and ‘Put a stop to the invasion’ (De Giorgi and Tronconi 2018:338). Such slogans and the prominence given to the immigration issue by these parties are very similar to those of small extreme right movements, such as *Forza Nuova* (FN) and *Casapound Italia* (Koopmans and Statham 2010). These movements experienced a surprising boost in 2016-2017 and, although their electoral support remained very low, received increasing media coverage, mainly because of their engagement in anti-refugee mobilisations, and episodes of racism and xenophobia (De Giorgi and Tronconi 2018:341).

During the ‘refugee crisis’ the leaders of the populist anti-establishment[[11]](#footnote-11) *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (M5S) started to increasingly frame immigration in a populist manner as an issue of (elite) corruption, with the reception of migrants characterised as an industry arranged by establishment parties, the organized crime and cooperatives providing reception services (Pirro 2018:452). The party, however, since its foundation in 2010, was characterised by a blurred positioning on the issue of immigration, mixing national securitisation and international humanitarianism (Mosca and Tronconi 2019). While an exclusionary framing of immigration occasionally emerged in blog posts of Beppe Grillo and official statements of the leader Di Maio (Pirro 2018:452), other M5S actors have framed immigration in more humanitarian terms (Gianfreda 2018:103).

During the ‘refugee crisis’, mainstream parties also took increasingly harsh stances on migration (Castelli Gattinara 2017b:326). Berlusconi’s centre-right *Forza Italia* (FI) took a harder line on immigration particularly after 2017, as a result of increased competition with far-right parties and bargaining to form a coalition for the 2018 general elections. The centre-left *Partito Democratico* (PD) – the merge of former post-Communists and progressive Christian Democrats – was the main party of the governing coalition ruling Italy between 2013 and 2018, which also included the centrist *Nuovo CentroDestra* (NCD), splinter of FI. During the ‘crisis’, the PD was the target of much political campaigning by opposition parties and took an increasingly harsh stance on migration. Its leaders sometimes started emulating some anti-immigration claims, and echoing the political campaign of the far-right (Castelli Gattinara 2017b:326).

Some in-depth insights about the drivers of the increasing political contestation of asylum and these shifts in party positions on immigration have been produced only by a few scholars that analysed mass-media coverage of the ‘refugee crisis’. Berry, Garcia-Blanco, and Moore (2016) show that local and national newspapers and other media reported extensively on tensions between newly arrived migrants and local citizens, giving resonance to local protests and paving the way for interventions by anti-immigrant political entrepreneurs. Triandafyllidou (2018:206) explains that the interaction of media, political discourses, and civil society mobilizations around the ‘refugee crisis’ contributed to ‘construct the refugee flows as an effective emergency, a crisis that called for more drastic measures’. Despite the relevance of these insights, these scholarly works have not adopted actor-centred perspective and mostly tend to make assumptions about how media influenced the strategies of local and national party actors.

## 2.4. Conclusion.

This chapter has reviewed the existing literature on Italian asylum policies, politics and governance, with a specific focus on scholarly works that analysed the recent ‘refugee crisis’. The review conducted showed that many scholars have examined, often from a legal perspective, the objective structural organization of asylum governance in Italy. Furthermore, many insights have been produced about the structural factors forming the ‘macro environment’ of the Italian ‘asylum crisis’, and the ‘macro outputs and outcomes’ produced by the governance system during the ‘refugee crisis’.

Despite that, a number of gaps have been identified in this existing literature.

The first part of the chapter has shown that not enough attention has been paid to the multi-actorness of asylum governance. The literature does recognise that a growing number of actors is involved in the asylum policy field (and allows to identify the relevant actors in the field) but the implications for governance processes of this multi-actorness and of the interactions of actors in policy networks and policy-making have not represented a key focus of the scholarship. Unlike these existing works, this thesis adopts an actor-centred approach, and privileges situated actors over structures, in order to understand the constitutive effects of governance.

The second part of the chapter, instead, has shown that many scholars have examined key structural factors that influenced governance processes during the ‘refugee crisis’ and the key outputs and outcomes of the governance system. Key structural factors include the scale of flows, public attitudes to immigration and public mobilisations around the asylum issues, while key outputs include the functioning of reception systems, the restrictive policies on access and status determination adopted since 2017, and the increasing political contestation over asylum. In doing so, however, the literature mainly analysed relationships between these phenomena exclusively on the macro level, often making assumptions about the impact of structural factors on the production of outputs, or, rather, condemning the governance system for its failures in reaching policy objectives. By adopting these approaches, I argue, the existing literature has failed to open the ‘black box’ of asylum governance processes illustrated in the previous chapter.

Investigating processes internal to the governance system, instead, seems highly relevant, in the light of the review conducted, for at least two key reasons. First, because the main structural factors identified by the literature are all linked to high degrees of risks and uncertainty. This means that they can be contested and that they are open to subjective interpretation, and potentially understood through the lenses of actors’ values. These subjective perceptions of the actors involved in the governance system, as the initial quote from Minniti suggests, have important implications for policy decisions.

The second reason why an approach that open the ‘black box’ of governance processes seems relevant is instead related to the need to understand more about the causes of the many policy failures identified by the existing literature. Without disputing the failure of the governance system in reaching objectives, I argue that it is not enough to simply condemn the governance system for its failures, or to make assumptions about actors’ incapacity to make decisions that allow them to attain their policy objectives. Mcconnell (2010) and Brunsson (2000) – among the others – have shown that failure and success are not binary categories and that it not possible to derive assumptions about the causes of a process from its outputs.

In order to address these challenges and fill these gaps, in the next chapter I develop an approach to analyse asylum governance during the ‘refugee crisis’ that aims to open the ‘black box’ of governance processes and that is grounded in real-life decision-making processes.

# CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY

Early this year we realised that the flows were keep raising, the number of migrants leaving Libya was raising, the number of arrivals was raising. And we were alone facing this. I remember very well something that a friend of mine, very close to Minniti, told me: ‘we will have 250,000 migrants arriving per month, we cannot deal with that’, I really remember this sentence, ‘250,000 per month, we cannot deal with that’. It means 3 million people arriving and the relocations had completely failed. So what do we do? We cannot deal with that, what do we do? At that time the approach changed, and we decided to govern the phenomenon (Interview with PD MP, November 2017).

This quote from a PD MP describing the rationale behind the decision of the MoI to act to stop asylum-seeking flows across the Central Mediterranean route captures the importance of analysing asylum governance with a key focus on how situated actors understand the situation around them, how they process the information collected from their environment, and make decisions about ‘what should be done next’.

Chapter 1 of this thesis identified the importance of opening the ‘black box’ of asylum governance processes during the Italian ‘asylum crisis’ to account for these cognitive and relational mechanisms, rather than merely focusing on the outputs and outcomes of such processes. This chapter specifies the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis and develops the methodology that guided the research into such analysis. It does so, by addressing three main questions. What is the ontological positioning of this research, and what approach can be adopted, consistent with these assumptions, to analyse the functioning of the ‘black box’ of asylum governance processes? What are the theoretical approaches that are suited to investigate the chain of macro and micro governance mechanisms that produced outputs and outcomes? And, how can a researcher identify and analyse such mechanisms?

The chapter’s first section describes the ontological and epistemological assumptions implied by the adoption of an actor-centred approach and explains why the adoption of a ‘macro-micro-macro’ approach and insights from the so-called ‘mechanism perspective’ suit the purposes of this research. It shows how such an approach provides analytical tools to open the ‘black box’ of asylum governance processes and analyse the gears and functioning of such processes, by assuming that macro outputs and outcomes are the result of a chain of situational, action-formation and transformational mechanisms. The second section identifies a number of theoretical approaches and perspectives that provide conceptual tools to explore these three types of mechanisms. I argue that framing theories provide tools to explore situational mechanisms, that the sensemaking approach provides a useful framework to study action-formation mechanisms, and that SNA can be used to identify transformational mechanisms. The third section justifies the choice of case studies. The chapter concludes by explaining data collection and the methods used in the research.

## 3.1. A ‘Macro-Micro-Macro’ Approach.

To analyse asylum governance, the approach I adopt in this thesis is primarily focused on actors, on their understandings and interpretations of the environment in which they operate, but does not, however, dismiss the relevance of structures. In line with Bevir and Rhodes (2006) and Fiss and Hirsch (2005), I assume that the (structural and organizational) context in which actors are situated and operate contributes to influence their understandings and perceptions of the world around them. Importantly, as the previous chapter has shown, this context – the one of the Italian ‘refugee crisis’ – is assumed not to be fixed. Rather, it is assumed to be highly instable and uncertain. For this reason, it can be differently interpreted by the actors involved in governance processes. In a nutshell, I assume that actors shape and are shaped by the context in which they operate.

The position I adopt in this thesis is based on the concept of ‘situated agency’ developed by Bevir and Rhodes (2003, 2005, 2006). Bevir and Rhodes argue that individuals acting in the same context can variously interpret this context, can have different preferences, and, consequently, develop different actions based on such interpretations and preferences (Ibid.). While defending actors’ ‘capacity for agency’, these scholars recognise that such agency, however, is ‘not autonomous’ but ‘situated’, i.e. it ‘always occurs in a social context’ that influences or constrains it (Bevir and Rhodes 2005:172). They specifically refer to this social context as formed by ‘traditions and discourses’ (Ibid.). These traditions are defined as ‘the ideational background against which individuals come to adopt an initial web of beliefs’ (Bevir and Rhodes 2006:400). They influence actors’ beliefs and actions, even if actors through their reasoning can adapt, develop, and reject these traditions, and are not necessarily aware of such influence. Importantly, they, however, do not determine or limit actors’ beliefs and actions. In the scholars’ words, ‘they cannot entirely explain actions partly because people act on desires as well as beliefs, and partly because people are agents capable of innovating against the background of a tradition’ (Ibid.).

While developing an approach which privileges agency, Bevir and Rhodes, therefore, leave ‘room for concepts akin to that of structure’ (Bevir and Rhodes 2006:399). Importantly, not only they do so when conceptualising the role of traditions in influencing actors’ beliefs and actions – as explained so far – but also ‘in the gap between actions and their consequences’ (Ibid.). Bevir and Rhodes’ approach conceptualises the ‘effects’ of individual actions – which in this thesis I call ‘governance outputs and outcomes’ – as dependent on the interactions of actors’ actions. They specifically use the term ‘clusters of actions’ to define these interactions and clarify that their consequences – unlike those of actions themselves – can be unintended (Bevir and Rhodes 2006:401). For this reason, Bevir and Rhodes’ approach is compatible with a focus on governance networks.

I argue that Bevir and Rhodes’ approach, their idea of ‘situated agency’, and the way they conceptualise the relationship between individuals and the environment in which they operate, well reflect the ‘macro-micro-macro approach’ to study asylum governance in Italy during the ‘refugee crisis’ of this thesis. Such approach, as described in Chapter 1, aims to provide a perspective to explain the behaviour of social systems by looking at the beliefs and actions of actors who are elements of the system and their interactions (Coleman 1990:11). Bevir and Rhodes’ approach is also perfectly in line with Hedström and Wennberg’s ‘mechanism perspective’ (2017), developed in organizational studies, which proposes a methodology to understand how a social system, its processes and dynamics, work and evolve. As already mentioned in Chapter 1, such methodology is based on the study of macro outputs as results of a chain of mechanisms that, in a certain macro environment, produce actors’ beliefs, actions and outputs (see Figure 3.1 below).

Before moving forward to identify the conceptual framework of this thesis, it is important to clarify why I differ in my approach from the Rational Choice approach, which has been another relevant perspective occasionally adopted in the literature to study decision-making processes in the asylum policy field (Lidén and Nyhlén 2015). Rational choice theorists assume that individuals are rational and ‘can be relied upon to act in ways which best secure their goals’ (Hindmoor 2010:42). In other words, individuals are thought of being capable to take into account all available information, to assess probabilities of events and the potential costs and benefits of the different options they face. Policy makers are therefore assumed to be able to choose the self-determined best option available and to act consistently, without any constraints of cognitive influences (ibid.).

Rational choice approaches have been vastly used in political science (Hug 2014), particularly for analysis of elite decision-making (for a review: Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2013). Whist this approach has been used to study decision-making processes in local migration governance (Lidén and Nyhlén 2015), many scholarly works conversely argue that migration policies tend not to be founded on an evidence-based, rational, understanding of international migration (Baldwin-Edwards, Blitz and Crawley 2018:1; Scholten 2019:1).

The premises of the rational choice approach therefore are not considered appropriate and realistic for the type of analysis conducted in this thesis. I, however, do not start from the assumption of a lack of reason by elite actors involved in governance processes, which would lead to conclude that policy outcomes are likely to be unanticipated and counterproductive (Massey 2013:6; Jeandesboz and Pallister-Wilkins 2016). I rather assume that actors involved in migration governance, in the context of real life decision-making, can be potentially rational but in fact have a ‘bounded rationality’ (Simon 1982). In a situation of crisis such as the one analysed in this thesis, they must take quick decisions with limited time and resources. This requires actors to adopt strategies of complexity reduction that likely to occur through shortcuts or ‘judgement heuristics’ (Druckman 2011; Kahneman 2012). For this reason, I adopt the perspective proposed by the so-called ‘prospect theory’, which was defined as ‘the most influential behavioural theory of choice in the social sciences’ (Mercer 2005:1). This theory moves from the premise that rational choice approaches have proved to be ‘descriptively inaccurate’, because individuals tend to ‘deviate from its predictions in systematic ways by, for instance, basing their decisions not on a final outcome but on deviations from a reference point’ (Vis and Kuijpers 2018:575) and has incorporated insights on such ‘deviations’ or ‘judgement heuristics’ into a coherent theory. I will move back to the question of how actors frame issues and problems later in this chapter, in the section on framing theories.

## 3.2. Research Areas.

Arguing that in order to explain a macro-level outcome or property, it is not enough to merely analyse relationships between phenomena exclusively on the macro level, the ‘macro-micro-macro’ approach proposes to analyse the behaviour of a social system by focusing, sequentially, on three different components – a ‘macro to micro component’, a ‘micro level component’ and a ‘micro to macro component’. These correspond to three types of mechanisms: situational, action formation and transformational (Hedström and Wennberg 2017). Only by considering ‘the entire chain of situational, action-formation, and transformational mechanisms’ – Hedström and Wennberg point out – it is possible to ‘explain’ an observed macro phenomenon.

In order to explore these three components of the analysis, this section shows, I apply insights from framing theories, the sensemaking approach and SNA (Figure 3.1). In doing so, I make some assumptions that are strictly connected to the analytical framework and ontological position described before:

1. *The ‘macro-to-micro component’.* First, this thesis examines actors’ understandings and the situational mechanisms through which these understandings are formed. Consistent with Bevir and Rhodes’ idea of ‘situated agency’, it is assumed that beliefs and identified solutions do not emerge fully formed from the environment and that, conversely, actors interpret the environment and reflect on it. This means that environments per se are not assumed to have any causal power independent of how individuals understand it, and that different actors might interpret the same external events in different ways.
2. *The ‘micro component’*. Second, this thesis examines how actors’ understandings are enacted and influence political actors’ strategies and purposive actions. In doing so, I assume that individual decision-making preferences and purposive actions, in a situation of crisis, are not merely driven by rational considerations (Brunsson 2000). Rather, I assume that action-formation mechanisms, in situations of crisis, are mostly ‘cognitive’ (Falleti and Lynch 2009:1145), and linked to actors’ interpretations of the effects of external environments. These might be perceptions and understandings of the causes and effects of asylum-seeking migration on underlying social systems – including diagnostic and prognostic understandings of the impact of migration flows on public debate and attitudes of the local population (given the high salience of the immigration issue) – or of organizational constraints. This assumption is derived from well-established findings in the literature on decision-making (Kingdon 2014:113) and migration governance (Geddes 2017). It is in line with the working definition of governance adopted in Chapter 1, derived from Pierre (2000), according to which governance is driven by how key actors conceptualise ‘the effects of change in underlying social systems’ (e.g. economy, politics, society, demography…) and how they ‘attempt to steer, manage or coordinate these effects’.
3. *The ‘micro-to-macro component’.* Third, this thesis examines the transformational mechanisms through which the combination of individual actors’ actions led to macro-level outputs and outcomes of governance systems. It is assumed that these mechanisms, in the situation analysed, are mostly of a ‘relational type’ (Peetz 2019:148)[[12]](#footnote-12), meaning that the organization of ties that link actors within the governance system affects governance outputs and outcomes, more so than individual actions and attributes of individual units (Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009:562). This research therefore analyses governance networks, based on the view that these represent important mediating tools or bridges that connect actors’ actions and the outputs and outcomes.

Importantly, having assumed that actors shape and are shaped by the context in which they operate, actors’ understandings and actions are expected to potentially evolve, as a consequence of changes in the structured context, potentially produced by actors’ own actions.

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| *Figure 3.1. Analytical Framework*[[13]](#footnote-13)*.* |
| Social Network Analysis  Framing Theories  Sensemaking Approach  Situational  Mechanism  Action-Formation  Mechanism  Transformational  Mechanism  **REGIONAL ASYLUM GOVERNANCE**  **MICRO LEVEL**  **(Q1)**  **(Q4)**  **(Q2)**  **(Q5)**  **(Q6)**  **NATIONAL ASYLUM GOVERNANCE** |
|  |

*Source: figure created by the author.*

A number of questions arise from Figure 3.1. If understandings do not emerge fully formed from the environment, then how are they formed and how do macro outputs influence them? How are these understandings translated into actions, if actors are not assumed to always behave rationally? How can the organization of governance networks influence the production of outputs and outcomes? In a nutshell: how can we understand how these action-formation, transformational and situational mechanisms work and how can we study them? The rest of this section outlines the methodology of this research, explaining why and how framing theories, the sensemaking approach and social network analysis can provide the conceptual tools to investigate these questions.

### 3.2.1. Framing.

The main premise of framing theories is that issues ‘can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and be construed as having implications for multiple values or considerations’ (Chong and Druckman 2007:104). While framing is said to have two broad conceptual foundations – sociological and psychological (Entman 1993; Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Goffman 1974; Tversky and Kahneman 1981) – the terms ‘frames’, ‘framing’ and ‘framing effects’ are widely used terms across a variety of disciplines and subfields in social sciences, including within political science and migration studies (Lavenex 1999). Despite such widespread usage, these terms typically evade precise and consistent definition. Following Goffman (1974:21), ‘frames’ constitute ‘schemata of interpretation’ or means of organising experience. ‘Framing’, instead, has been defined as an individual level process through which ‘individuals, groups, and societies, organize, perceive, and communicate about reality’ (Druckman 2011, 279) or ‘locate, perceive, identify, and label’ in ways that organize experiences and guide actions ‘providing coherence to a set of idea elements’ (Goffman 1974:21).

Two key dichotomies are crucial to make sense of the very broad literature on framing, and it is important to specify how this research positions with respect to them.

First, the distinction between ‘frames in thought’ and ‘frames in communication’. Frames in thought (or ‘individual frames’), mostly conceptualized and analysed in psychological studies, relate to ‘an individual’s (cognitive) understanding’ or ‘perception’ of a given situation (Druckman 2001, 228). More precisely, to ‘the set of dimensions’ or ‘mentally stored clusters of ideas’ that guide individuals’ processing of information and affect their evaluations and overall opinion (Chong and Druckman 2007:105; Entman 1993:53). They reveal what an individual considers relevant to such understanding. Two different types of frames in thought were identified by Scheufele (1999:107): ‘global and long-term political views’ – which are linked to the personal characteristics of the individual and have a ‘rather limited influence on the perception and interpretation of political problems’ (Kinder 1983:414) – and ‘short-term, issue-related frames of reference’, which instead can impact the way in which individuals perceive, organize and interpret information and draw inferences from that.

Frames in communication (or ‘media frames’), instead, are mostly conceptualised by framing research that grew from sociological foundations, and refer to the ‘words, images, phrases, and presentation styles’ used by a speaker to relay information to an audience or to construct news stories (Druckman 2001, 226). Revealing what the speakers consider as relevant to the topic at hand, these frames ‘organize everyday reality’ by providing ‘a meaning to unfolding strip of events’ and ‘promoting particular definitions and interpretations of political issues’ (Chong and Druckman 2007:106).

Frames in thought and frames in communication differ in that the former focus on ‘what the individual is thinking’ (e.g., the aspects of an issue or problem an individual thinks are most important), while the latter focus on ‘what a speaker says’ – e.g., the ‘aspects of an issue emphasized in elite discourse’ (Druckman 2011:283). While most of the existing literature on framing and migration has focused on frames in communication (Dekker and Scholten 2017; Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou, and Wodak 2018), this thesis is primarily interested in studying frames in thought. Only by analysing cognitive frames it is possible to extrapolate the set of dimensions that drive individuals’ processing of information and perception/understanding of events. Yet, I do not entirely neglect frames in communication, which, however, are treated as outputs, following Sher and McKenzie’s suggestion (2011:3) that ‘a frame in thought may be the theoretical mechanism whereby the frame in communication is proposed to influence the subject’s response’.

Framing research can be also broken down into research that examines frames as independent or dependent variables (Scheufele 1999:107). This thesis is interested in analysing both the causes and effects of frames.

To explore the causes of frames in thought, I specifically apply insights from a broad literature that analysed frame emergence, i.e. how actors form their understandings. This literature has shown that, particularly in situations of scarce information (bounded rationality), processes of frame emergence tend to be characterised by shortcuts or ‘judgement heuristics’ (Druckman 2001). These heuristics have several effects, including that individuals, while framing contemporary problems, might be swayed by the information collected by the media or directly from the environment around them. Understanding how these shortcuts work in uncertain circumstances is crucial because they it is through these psychological mechanisms that actors form their judgments.

The literature identifies several judgement heuristics (Druckman 2011; Tversky and Kahneman 1974). Frame emergence is significantly linked to the availability and accessibility of frames (‘availability bias’), which increase ‘with chronic or frequent use of a consideration over time or from temporary contextual cues – including communications – that regularly or recently bring the consideration to mind’ (Druckman 2011, 10). Repeated exposure to a frame induces frequent processing, which in turn increases the accessibility of the frame. Pre-set powerful ideas and narratives about certain phenomena also shape current framing processes (which points to the relevance of institutional environments in frame emergence). A ‘representativeness bias’, instead, assumes the probability that an event or object belongs to a certain category is based on their similarity rather than the statistical likelihood of such an event occurring. An example here would be the use of historical analogy whether appropriate or not. As Haidt (2013) points out, individuals tend to reach conclusions rather quickly and to produce reasons at a later stage in order to justify our decisions and judgements. Finally, an ‘anchoring bias’ occurs when judgements based on uncertain data largely depend on an initial piece of information. Research on individual attitudes to migration has shown that the ‘anchor’ can influence ‘judgements about immigration’ (Navarro and Lopez de Arechavaleta 2010:254). Furthermore, individuals tend to devote extra cognitive resources to dismiss evidence that disagrees with pre-established ideas and to avoid emotional discomfort that arises when questioning prior beliefs and conviction (cognitive dissonance; see Tversky and Kahneman 1974).

### 3.2.2. Sensemaking.

Framing theories have focused on the emergence of understandings rather than on their impact on decision-making dynamics, and tend not to connect the process of meaning production with the structural and (multi-) organizational context in which framing occurs or account for the power relations to which frames are subject (Fiss and Hirsch 2005:30). The sensemaking approach that developed in organizational studies (Weick 1995, 2001), instead, provides specific tools to examine how actors’ understandings are enacted, or transformed into ‘actions’, particularly in situations of crisis (Helms Mills, Thurlow and Mills, 2010: 183). Despite the sensemaking approach having been rarely used in political science (Geddes and Hadj-Abdou 2018), I argue that extending the framing perspective by incorporating some insights from such approach is crucial to investigate action-production mechanisms and to capture the social dimension of the framing process. Furthermore, sensemaking well fits with the ontological positioning of this thesis.

Sensemaking is defined in organizational analysis as the process through which individuals work to understand and assign meaning to ‘novel, unexpected or confusing events’ (Maitlis and Christianson 2014:57) and through which then ‘meanings materialise and inform and constrain action’ (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005:409). It is specifically salient in situations of ambiguity or uncertainty, when a personal jolt, shock or break of routine, violating expectancies, requires individuals to ‘develop some sort of sense regarding what they are up against, what their own position is relative to what they sense, and what they need to do’ (Weick 2001:42). It can form a basis for action or, in an unstable environment, inaction or confusion.

Weick’s ‘properties of sensemaking’ offer a ‘rough guideline for inquiry into sensemaking’ (Weick 1995:18) and constitute a framework that allows to untangle cognitive action-formation mechanisms and suggest different hypotheses about how actors enact their understandings. Weick identifies seven properties:

1) *Sensemaking is grounded in identity construction*. The way individuals make sense of events and the environment around them and the way they act are influenced by who they think they are as organizational actors in a certain context (their identity). New experiences and contact with others, moreover, constantly redefine individual identities.

2) *Sensemaking is retrospective*. Sensemaking is a comparative process. The opportunity for sensemaking is therefore provided by retrospection: individuals rely on similar or familiar past experiences and the factors that have shaped their lives to make sense of current events and decide how to act (Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010:184). Weick explains that individuals tend to be more sceptical about planning, projecting and forecasting if these are ‘decoupled from reflective action and history’ (Weick 1995, 30). Reflective action and history can also lead to a reluctance to act because of the fear of unintended effects.

3) *Sensemaking is enactive of sensible environments*. During the sensemaking process, individuals enact the environments they face in narratives and dialogues. Not only sensemaking is about interpreting an experience within a certain environment but individuals generate a new reality through what they do, what they choose to pay attention to, how they create boundaries, draw lines, create categories and label (Seiter and Dunn 2010:10). Sensemaking can be influenced (or constrained) by the very environment that the sensemaker creates (Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010:185).

4) *Sensemaking is social*. The sensemaking process unfolds ‘in a social context of other actors’ (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005, 409) and is contingent on the ‘interactions with others, whether physically present or not’ (Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010:185). Organizational actors, in particular, often take decisions with the knowledge that these will have to be implemented, understood or approved by others. This can also allow individuals to construct shared accounts to make sense of their environments and, when such collective sensemaking process does not fail, to act collectively (Maitlis and Christianson 2014:66).

5) *Sensemaking is ongoing*. Individuals are constantly engaging in making sense of the events that happen around them: sensemaking flows are constant and the process of sensemaking is never-ending and sequential (Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010:186).

6) *Sensemaking is focused on and by extracted cues*. Sensemaking involves focusing on certain elements or aspects of a phenomenon while ignoring others and extracting cues from the environment in order to support an interpretation of events or take decisions about the relevance and acceptability of an information or explanation. These extracted cues are ‘simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring’ (Weick 1995:50) and can be linked to broader networks of meaning. Since sensemaking is retrospective, past experiences, rules, regulations and well-established beliefs dictate what cues individuals will extract from their environment to make sense of a situation (Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010:185). Control over ‘which cues will serve as a point of reference’ is ‘an important source of power’ (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005:50).

7) *Sensemaking is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy*. Individuals tend to favour plausibility over accuracy of their own perceptions when making sense of events and contexts: they look for cues that make their sensemaking ‘seem plausible’ and, in doing so, they can ‘distort or eliminate what is accurate and potentially rely on faulty decision-making in determining what is right or wrong’ (Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010:185). After discussing plausibility Weick (1995:61) concludes that in short – in ‘an equivocal, postmodern world, infused with the politics of interpretation and conflicting interests’ – ‘what is necessary in sensemaking is a good story’. Sensemaking, therefore, is definitely ‘accomplished via the stories members tell’ and individuals’ interpretations become evident through the narratives they enact (Seiter and Dunn 2010:10). As Weick (1995:56) puts it: ‘accuracy is nice but not necessary’ and what counts are ‘plausibility, pragmatics, coherence, reasonableness, creation, invention and instrumentality’.

Clearly, the analysis of framing and sensemaking are strictly interlinked and the two perspectives sometimes overlap, which requires two further clarifications.

First is the relationship between framing and sensemaking. Fiss and Hirsch (2005:30) explain that the two perspectives are ontologically, methodologically and ‘conceptually compatible’. In fact, some scholars in the sensemaking tradition treat framing as the first step of the sensemaking process (Bird and Osland 2005:125; Gamson and Modigliani 1989:3). I adopt Bird and Osland’s perspective, which conceptualises sensemaking as a process made of these steps (Figure 3.2): a) the establishment of a frame about the situation (framing the situation); b) the making of attributions or assignment of meaning to this situation (making attributions); and c) the selection of a script that guides actions/inactions. The three stages are sequential, meaning that each stage influences the following ones. Weick’s different properties, following Bird and Osland, intervene at different stages, as specified in figure 3.2.

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| *Figure 3.2. The Sensemaking Process.* |
| *‘What should we do next?’*  By answering this question, the individual makes attributions about the situation.  These depend on:   * the frame established; * actors’ self-identity; * social relations with others and attitudes and beliefs about their identity.   *‘What can we do next?’*  By answering this question individuals select a script that defines their position and guides their actions/inactions through the situation.  Script selection depends on:   * the frame and attributions made (which can enable or constrain action); * repertoires developed through past experiences and individuals’ ability to draw similarities between the present situation and such past experiences (mainly enabling actions).   By figuring things out and shaping responses, individuals also shape their environment.  *‘What is happening?’*  The individual establishes a frame (or understanding) for a specific situation, selecting aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient (Entman 1993:52).  Frame emergence is influenced by:   * expectations about a situation, based on past experiences (‘representativeness bias’); * what we think we know about the situation (‘anchoring bias’); * Signals and cues picked up from the surrounding environment (‘accessibility’ and ‘availability’ biases). These can be contradictory. They are stronger if they confirm previous expectations (cognitive dissonance).   SELECTING A SCRIPT  MAKING ATTRIBUTIONS  FRAMING THE SITUATION |

*Source: figure created by the author, adapted from Bird and Osland (2005:125).*

The prevalence of different factors over others in these three phases of the sensemaking process can be assumed to define different decision-making styles or ‘styles of reasoning’ (Tetlock 2005:73). Tetlock differentiates between two ‘styles of reasoning’ typical of two types of expert decision-makers: ‘Foxes’ and ‘Hedgehogs’. ‘Foxes’ ‘know many small things’ from disparate sources and traditions, tend to make decisions by ‘stitching together’ these diverse sources of information, with the aim to make better predictions and more efficient decisions, and are much less influenced by pre-existing beliefs and past experiences (Ibid.). ‘Hedgehogs’, instead, tend to ‘know one big think’ and to ‘extend the explanatory reach of that one big thing into new domains’ (Ibid.). Their decision-making style (i.e. their attributions and scripts) is largely shaped by pre-existing ideas and knowledge (i.e. their ideological positions, past experiences, rooted conceptions of their identity). Tetlock argues that ‘Foxes’ tend to be more effective and better in making predictions because their style ‘is more adaptive to rapidly changing events’ (Huffmon 2006:468). Due to the complexity and instability of the migration area and the chronic difficulties to make precise predictions in this field, actors involved in migration governance processes are expected to be more similar to Hedgehogs.

The second clarification concerns why considering framing and sensemaking together is necessary. I argue that introducing sensemaking is important because it allows the making of connections between thought and action: while framing is mainly concerned with thought and does not provide tools to analyse action-formation mechanisms, sensemaking addresses both the key questions that individuals face in situations of crisis, related not only to cognition –’what is happening?’ – but also to action – ‘what should be done next?’ (Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010:183). It captures ‘the practical activities of real people engaged in concrete situations of social action’ (Boden 1994:10). Furthermore, connecting framing and sensemaking allows to account for the importance of the wider organizational context where the process of meaning construction occurs and for the role of structural factors affecting the emergence of frame contests. While framing ‘focuses on *whose* meanings win out in symbolic contests’, sensemaking ‘shifts the focus to understanding *why* such frame contests come into being, as well as how they are connected to “hard” structural changes, and over which territory they are fought’ (Fiss and Hirsch 2005:31).

### 3.2.3. Social Network Analysis.

Consistent with the ontological position described earlier in this chapter, the Italian asylum governance system is conceptualised as a network of actors that interact with one another. SNA provides a toolkit of concepts and a methodology for empirical research of these interactions – or the ‘properties of persistent patterns of relations among agents’ (Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009:561) – and of their impact on the outcomes of governance systems.

Three basic concepts are at the heart of SNA: actors, conceived as autonomous but interdependent, and denoted as ‘nodes’; actors’ attributes, which are used to mark their features; and the ties among actors, denoted as ‘edges’. While these relations between actors can be conductors of both material and non-material elements, this research focuses on discussions among actors about asylum-related matters. Importantly, I apply SNA not only for descriptive purposes – identifying and mapping networks and providing a snapshot of their organization – but also for analytical ones.

First, complementing the analysis of framing and sensemaking processes, SNA can illustrate how actors’ beliefs and actions are located within and depend upon the social and political context of network relations. The networks in which actors are embedded contribute to shape their understandings and goals (Hedström and Wennberg 2017:94), and they can enable or constrain actions (Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009:560). Despite Weick admitting that ‘sensemaking unfolds in a social context with other actors and is contingent on interactions with others’ (1995:30), his sensemaking framework was criticised for being blind to power relations and assuming that ‘all voices are more or less equally important’, while in reality understandings can be dominant or marginal (Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010:187). In other words, actors make sense of the situation around them by also acknowledging power relations in their environment (Oliver and Montgomery 2008; Vardaman 2009).

Second, SNA is used to study the transformational mechanisms through which key network features contribute to shape governance outputs and outcomes (Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009:561). SNA provides a ‘set of theories and tools to generate puzzles and test propositions about these effects’ (Ibid.). Three key structural characteristics of networks are usually analysed: centrality, cohesiveness, and polarization. The centrality of nodes and networks’ cohesiveness are often assumed to be related to network efficiency: in this research, they can provide information about why and how regional asylum governance systems produced efficient or inefficient reception systems. The polarization of the network, and its division into subgroups, is instead assumed to be related to conflicts within networks: they can provide useful information about the polarization of views and the degree of politicisation of asylum.

Rather than offering general theoretical propositions about the impact of networks’ properties on efficiency and conflict that apply in all social networks, the literature suggests some guiding hypotheses, to be tested in different contexts. Networks’ cohesiveness, for instance, can improve their efficiency or undermine it: ‘redundant links make a network more robust but they may also make it operate less efficiently’ (Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009:569). Highly centralized networks are generally assumed to be more efficient (Ibid.). Group dynamics shape the potential to consider different perspectives and alternative courses of action: if powerful actors in highly centralised networks are proactive in sanctioning antagonistic beliefs, this generates a tendency to ‘share, repeat, and trust “commonly held” rather than new information’, reducing potential sources of conflict and improving networks’ coherence and cooperation (Cairney and Kwiatowsky, 2017). Networks’ polarization and the division of the network into subnetworks with different features tend to be directly related to conflict within networks. A high polarization tends to be linked to high levels of conflict, because ‘nodes in a cohesive sub-group tend to favour those in-group and treat those outside with enmity’ (Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009:569). Subnetworks that are blurred in terms of their membership rather than very cohesive tend instead to be associated with lower levels of conflict.

The two issues – efficiency and conflict – are clearly related. Conflicts within networks tend to hinder decision-making (Castles 2004:866): if the role of central actors (those who have the potential to coordinate the network) is contested, a high centralization is unlikely to produce efficiency. This can also be the case if central nodes are aggressive and they themselves engage in conflictual rather than cooperative types of relationships (Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009, 569).

The different measures or variants of cohesiveness, centrality and polarisation used in SNA are analysed in the section on methods below. Before discussing methods, I move on now to define the case studies of the research.

## 3.3. Case Selection.

This research is carried out at both the national and regional levels. At the regional level, I selected three Italian regions as case studies, based on a qualitative-comparative strategy guided by two purposes. First, the aim to examine regional governance systems that, despite having very similar institutional and structural frameworks, produced different policy outputs and outcomes. Second, that of accounting for long term relevant variations within the Italian political system and the deep cultural, political and socio-economic differences among the three macro-regions in which Italy is typically divided (the North, the Centre and the South).

Veneto, Tuscany and Sicily were finally selected, for four main reasons (Table 3.1).

First, they well reflect major socio-economic and cultural variations in Italy, having all been often referred to as ideal-typical examples of the three main territorial political subcultures[[14]](#footnote-14) that characterized the country in the Twentieth century (Floridia 2014:77; Ramella 2010:309): the ‘white’ (Catholic) political subculture of the North-East, the ‘red’ (communist) political subculture of Central Italy, and the ‘clientelistic’ subculture of the South (Agnew 2002:112). They are also homogenous in terms of number of inhabitants and distribution of the population in the regional territory.

|  |
| --- |
| *Table 3.1. Case Selection.* |
|  |

Second, they are interesting cases because of the different party actors involved. Veneto represents the strongholds of the LN, but during the ‘refugee crisis’ its dominant presence was partially contrasted by the centre-left PD, which in 2017 controlled a significant number of municipalities. The Tuscan political system, since 1945, has been characterised by an extraordinary electoral continuity, and its regional and local governments, in 2017, were still largely controlled by the PD and other centre-left parties, despite the growing support for the Lega. Sicily, conversely, after 2011 has been characterized by both ‘extreme electoral volatility between one election and the other’, and a significant ‘instability of preferences in elections of different types’ (Cerruto and Raniolo 2018:420). Sicilians for decades had massively supported centre-right parties, but after 2011 their popularity decreased: the region became the main stronghold of the M5S, which was the leading party at all regional and national elections during the ‘refugee crisis’ but did not manage to win the governorship nor a significant number of municipalities. The regional government was controlled by the centre-left until 2017 and, then, by the centre-right coalition, with a strong far-right component, mainly represented by FdI. In Sicily (and, to a minor extent, in Veneto) several municipalities were governed by independent mayors, not affiliated to any major party, a sign of the personalisation of local Italian politics.

The third reason that justifies case selection is their significance in terms of the exposure to the asylum issue between 2014 and 2018. The three regions are privileged points of observation to analyse regional asylum governance processes: they are three of the five regions that hosted the highest number of asylum-seekers (together they host around 25% of asylum-seekers of the country). Sicily, in particular, became the main European gateway for asylum-seeking migration between 2015 and 2017. Veneto and Tuscany, however, since the 1990s, were characterized by much higher levels of migration.

Finally, the regional asylum governance systems in Veneto, Tuscany and Sicily produced very different outputs and outcomes, despite the three regions being characterised by similarities in terms of both high issue salience and public attitudes to immigration (see Chapter 2). Available data suggest that the three governance systems produced different policies, different levels of politicisation of the asylum issue, efficient or inefficient reception systems. Veneto was characterised by a very high political contestation of migration and widespread anti-migrant protests and a weak reception system, mainly due to the prevalence of emergency centres (CAS and hubs) and to the unequal dispersal of asylum-seekers (Table 3.1). It experienced the highest number of anti-migrant protests of the country (43 out of 210 protests recorded in 2017). The traditionally left-wing region of Tuscany is a case of moderate politicisation of asylum and its reception system was widely recognised as the most efficient in Italy (Biella 2018), due to the uniform dispersal of asylum-seekers across the region (84 per cent of municipalities hosted asylum-seekers in 2017) and high reception standards applied. Sicily is characterised by low levels of public contestation of migration, despite the high unemployment and the prevalence of negative attitudes to immigration. It was also characterised by a very inefficient reception system, frequent scandals concerning the management of reception centres, and the infiltration of the organized crime in the reception system (Manzano, Mishtal, and Harris 2018:83).

|  |  |  |  |
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| *Table 3.2. Outputs and outcomes of asylum governance systems in Veneto, Tuscany and Sicily*. | | | |
|  | | | |
|  | | **Political and public contestation** | |
| *High* | *Low* |
| **Efficiency of regional reception system** | *High* |  | Tuscany |
| *Low* | Veneto | Sicily |

## 3.4. Data Collection.

An extensive data collection – from both primary and secondary sources – was carried out to collect information about the outputs and outcomes produced by regional (and national) governance systems and other thorough background knowledge and contextual information about the settings analysed. This preliminary analysis of policy documents and newspaper articles was also used to identify the key actors involved in governance processes and a sample of interviewees.

Some of these documents were used to derive insights about actors’ understandings and actions and framing and sensemaking processes. Particularly primary sources were used for this purpose, assuming that they reflect positions and thinking of the actors. These included statements and original speeches/interviews identified in local and national newspapers. Legislative and administrative acts were also used for the same purposes. Crucially, to study governance processes at the national level, I largely used media interviews and parliamentary speeches given by the Ministries of Interior and the minutes of forty auditions of the Inquiry Commission of the Italian Parliament on the Reception System (henceforth: Inquiry Commission), conducted between 2015 and 2017, with key actors involved in the management of asylum policies (across the three policy subfields).

While documents can provide some useful insights about the processes analysed, the findings of this research were largely derived from interviews with governance actors. The choice of interviews as the main method of data collection is strictly related to the analytical framework adopted and the ontological assumptions of this study. Because of the interviewees’ position in the asylum governance system, most of these interviews are ‘(local) elite interviews’ (Cochrane 1998; Leech 2002:663). While the meaning of ‘elite’ is often not fully explored, there is some consensus that elite interviewees are those that have both specific expertise on the topic in question and ‘some influence upon decision-making’ (Wicker and Connelly 2014:2). Clearly, interviewees vary in terms of the authority or influence – or the level and nature of ‘eliteness’ – which they can command across different contexts (Smith 2006).

Elite interviewing requires the selection of actors with expertise in the field as interviewees. In this research, this means selecting actors that are in the best positions to reflect upon and provide insights about asylum governance processes and dynamics, and the competing perspectives of individuals or organisations that engage in these processes, at different levels. At the local level, the ‘local political elite’ typically includes local politicians and officers (Cochrane 1998:2127): in this thesis I assume it is formed by chief executives, members of local and regional governments, prefects and deputy prefects, key civil servants, national and regional MPs and local party leaders. Several local ‘influential actors’ (Ibid.) involved in asylum governance processes are also included in the sample of interviewees: heads of NGOs, anti-migrant movements, service providers, trade unions, journalists, heads of local research centres and academics. At the national level, interviewees included governmental officials – particularly within the MoI – officials of international organizations and EU agencies, MPs, national and international NGOs.

In order to identify potential interviewees, I followed a criterion of ‘substantive representativeness’ rather than ‘statistical representativeness’ (Corbetta 2003:268). Following the principles of ‘quota sampling’, interviewees at the regional level were chosen through careful consideration of a number of variables, including: institutional role, political affiliation, geographical area (province), type of municipality (provincial capital, town or village), the type of reception centres created in that municipality (SPRAR centres, CAS centres, regional hubs). Interviewees were approached sequentially across three different modes of correspondence. They were initially contacted via email, and, sometimes, via a phone call. Legitimate sponsorship, advocacy from ‘insiders’ and emphasis of the participation of partner organizations/other authorities was utilized.

Single interviewees were first identified based on the document analysis, and then selected through snowball sampling techniques and following a criterion of relevance built up during the course of the research itself. Snowballing was significantly improved thanks to interviewees’ responses to the short questionnaire for the SNA, and to information collected in a few public meetings and open-door events related to asylum-seekers’ reception that I attended, in Veneto and Tuscany. The presence of several governmental and non-governmental actors attending these events allowed me to develop a network of contacts that was useful for the identification of the most relevant actors.

A total of 127 interviews were conducted between October 2017 and January 2019 (see Tables 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5), in four different rounds.

Between October and November 2017, 43 interviews were conducted in Veneto, across all its seven provinces.

Between February and April 2018, I conducted 14 interviews in Rome. In addition to them, the 14 interviews with national MPs across the three regions were structured in a way to collect information also about national governance processes.

Between May and June 2018, I spent five weeks in Sicily, during which I conducted 41 interviews, across six provinces in three different geographical areas: North-Eastern Sicily (Messina, Catania), South-Eastern Sicily (Ragusa, Siracusa) and Western Sicily (Palermo, Trapani). The higher number of party actors interviewed in Sicily is due to the extremely high political variation there. Although Sicily is the only region while no member of the regional government was interviewed, one of the regional MPs interviewed had a key role in the regional Parliament and provided many insights about discussions within the regional government.

29 interviews were conducted in Tuscany between November 2018 and January 2019, across five provinces (Firenze, Pisa, Livorno, Lucca and Pistoia). The lower number of party actors interviewed in this region is due to the low political variation within the region. Moreover, unlike in the other regions, the distinction between service providers and advocacy NGOs is particularly blurred in Tuscany, where a restricted and cohesive group of organizations performed both functions, which also rendered less necessary the conduct of more interviews with these actors. Due to the very low number of mayors and regional MPs affiliated to right-wing/centre-right parties in the region before 2018, I managed to interview only one right-wing actor (affiliated to the LN): this limitation was compensated by the information provided by interviews conducted with non-party actors in the few municipalities governed by the centre-right coalition, and an extensive analysis of media interviews and policy documents produced by centre-right mayors and party leaders. In both Tuscany and Sicily, unlike in Veneto, I did not interview any leader of anti-migrant committees. While the other interviews and analyses of local newspapers suggest that in Sicily no such committee was formed during the ‘asylum crisis’, in Tuscany their number was very low, and these committees were not mentioned as relevant players by any of the interviewees.

As illustrated in Table 3.3, in a few cases the interviewees did not fill in the structured questionnaire. This was mainly due to time constraints: only in three cases the interviewees themselves refused to fill in the questionnaire.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Table 3.3. Sample of Interviewees at the regional level (in parenthesis: number of interviewees that filled in the structured questionnaire, if different from the number of semi-structured interviews).* | | | | |
|  | | | | |
|  | | **VENETO** | **SICILY** | **TUSCANY** |
| *Political Actors* | Mayors/Deputy Mayors (Villages/Towns) | 6 | 15 (11) | 7 |
| Mayors/Deputy Mayors  (Provincial Capitals) | 6 (5) | 4 | 4 |
| Members of Regional Government | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Regional MPs | 1 | 2 (1) | 4 |
| National MPs | 6 (5) | 6 | 2 |
| Party Leaders | 4 (3) | 0 | 1 |
| *Administrative/ Governmental*  *Actors* | Deputy Prefects | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| Civil Servants (ANCI, Regional/Local authorities) | 3 (2) | 1 (0) | 2 (1) |
| *Civil Society Actors* | Advocacy NGOs | 3 | 3 | 1 |
| Service Providers | 4 (3) | 4 (3) | 3 |
| Academics, Heads of Local Research Centres | 4 | 2 (1) | 0 |
| Anti-migrant committees | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Trade Unions | 2 (1) | 2 | 2 |
| Journalists | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| **TOTAL** | | **43 (37)** | **41 (33)** | **29 (28)** |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Table 3.4. Sample of interviewees at the national level.* | | |
|  | | N° |
| *Political Actors* | MPs | 1 |
| *Administrative/ Governmental Actors* | Ministry of Interior | 3 |
| Ministry of External Affairs | 1 |
| International Organizations (IOM, UNHCR) | 2 |
| EU Agencies (EU Commission, EASO) | 2 |
| *Civil Society Actors* | International SAR NGOs | 2 |
| National NGOs | 3 |
|  | **TOTAL** | **14** |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Table 3.5. Political affiliation of the party actors interviewed.* | | | |
|  | **VENETO** | **TUSCANY** | **SICILY** |
| EXTREME RIGHT (FN) | 2 | - | - |
| RADICAL RIGHT (LN, FdI, others) | 5 | 1 | 3 |
| CENTRE-RIGHT (FI, NCD, others) | 2 | - | 5 |
| CENTRE-LEFT (PD, others) | 7 | 9 | 3 |
| LEFT (Sinistra Italiana, Verdi, Articolo 1-MDP) | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| M5S | - | 4 | 7 |
| INDEPENDENT | 6 | 3 | 7 |
| **TOTAL** | **24** | **19** | **27** |

## 3.5. Methods.

After having defined the sample of interviewees in the previous paragraphs, this section moves to analyse the methods of data collection and analysis. As already mentioned, the analysis relies on elite interviews and an in-depth document analysis. The interviews were semi-structured (Corbetta 2003:270), with a short structured component to generate data for the SNA. The interview guide and structured questionnaire are included in the Appendix. In this section I explain the methods used to investigate the different sub- questions.

|  |  |  |  |
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| *Table 3.6. Methods of Data Collection.* | | | |
| ***LEVEL OF ANALYSIS*** | ***RESEARCH AREA*** | ***RESEARCH QUESTIONS*** | ***METHODS*** |
| *Understandings and Situational Mechanisms* | Framing | Q1+Q2 | Semi-structured interviews + document analysis |
| *Actions and Action-formation Mechanisms* | Sensemaking | Q3+Q4 | Semi-structured interviews (+ structured questionnaires) |
| *Networks and Transformational Mechanisms* | SNA | Q5 | Structured questionnaires  + semi-structured interviews |

*Note: these three research areas are analysed with reference to both the regional and national levels. Q6 assesses interactions between processes at different levels.*

Q1: How do actors in regional asylum-governance systems frame the effects of asylum-seeking migration and understand asylum policy issues?

Semi-structured interviews, organized around open questions, are the best technique available to analyse situated actors’ perceptions and understandings of the causes and effects of asylum-seeking migration (Aberbach and Rockman 2002:673). The first question asked to all interviewees was: ‘What do you see as the main effects of asylum-seeking migration to your municipality/region?’. This was followed by a follow-up question about perceived changes in such effects. Actors were finally asked whether they could identify other effects apart from the ones already mentioned (particularly in the case previous answers had been brief, in order to reduce differences in the length of the interviews that might bias the analysis).

To analyse actors’ responses to questions conceived to grasp how they understand the effects of asylum-seeking migration, I applied frame analysis. According to Hope (2010:1), frame analysis is a ‘method that is principally concerned with dissecting how an issue is defined and problematized’ and the effects of this process for the broader discussion. The term was first coined by Goffman (1974:11) who aimed at isolating ‘some of the basic frameworks of understanding available in our society for making sense of events’.

Different approaches can be used to conduct frame analysis, ranging from automated word frequency-based approaches to purely qualitative textual analysis. In this thesis, to identify frames from interviewees’ responses, I adopted a mixed deductive and inductive approach. I first analysed the existing literature on asylum-related frames and derived a list of frames that suited the purposes of this research. While most of this literature has focused on frames concerning the causes of asylum-seeking migration (for a review see: Nickels 2007), I mostly relied on three scholarly works (Benson and Wood 2015; Dekker and Scholten 2017; Helbling 2014) that outlined frame categorizations concerning the effects of migration. While none of them specifically focuses on asylum-seeking migration, they all identify generic frames rather than issue-specific frames (Helbling 2014:24), i.e. frames that can ‘transcend thematic limitations and can be identified in relation to different topics, some even over time and in different cultural contexts’ (de Vreese 2012:368). Second, while analysing a first set of interviews, the list of frames was adjusted: a new frame ‘effects on public opinion’ was introduced, and some subframes were inductively identified. Table 3.7 describes the resulting list of frames and sub-frames.

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| --- | --- |
| *Table 3.7. List of Frames and Sub-frames.* | |
| MAIN FRAME | SUB-FRAMES |
| **Effects on Public Security** | Problems of law and order |
| Problems for public health |
| **Economic Effects**  (labour and public finance) | Negative economic effects |
| Positive economic effects |
| **Effects on Public Opinion** | Negative reactions of the local population |
| Positive reactions of the local population |
| **Administrative Effects** | Burden for local authorities, institutional tensions |
| Corruption, mismanagement, infiltration of organized crime |
| **Political Effects** |  |
| **Cultural or Demographic Effects** | Positive socio-cultural effects |
| Negative socio-cultural effects (includes nativist frames) |
| **No effect** |  |

While conducting the frame analysis, core sentences have been the main unit of analysis. They could be associated to more than one frame. I decided not to count core sentences but rather to assess whether each frame was used or not by the interviewee. This latter strategy has some limitations but the different length of actors’ responses made counting core sentences not relevant.

Q2: How do these understandings emerge and through which situational mechanisms are they produced?

In order to analyse the framing processes that shape actors’ understandings, questions were asked that prompted interviewees to clarify why they evaluated the effects of asylum-seeking migration in a certain way, why they did not perceive other types of effects, and what are the reasons why the identified effects were produced. Questions were also asked that inquired the potential for changes in their understandings, i.e., to assess whether these understandings were altered by or changed after specific events or with the passing of time. Importantly, interviewees were then asked about the sources through which they derive information about asylum-related issues. While the questions listed in the questionnaire were intended to guide the conversation, a degree of flexibility was kept (following Aberbach and Rockman 2002, 673) in order to probe interviewees to develop points of interest that had not emerged in their replies.

Q3: How do key political actors act and which policy strategies do they adopt?

To identify and analyse actors’ actions, I relied on both the interview material and the policy documents and media interviews collected. Again, interviewing is the best technique available to analyse what situated actors ‘have done or are planning to do’ (Aberbach and Rockman 2002:673). Actors’ were asked about the key measures that they or their institutions adopted during the ‘refugee crisis’, and whether they developed specific actions or policies. Analysis of documentary sources (newspaper articles, policy documents…) party manifestoes allowed to verify and cross-check the information collected and to provide supplementary information about what the interviewees stated.

Party manifestoes were used, in the Sicilian case, to analyse actors’ and party positions on migration.

In order to facilitate subsequent analysis approaches to action and policymaking of political actors at the regional level were categorised according to two main criteria. First, whether they were characterised by opposition or support to asylum-seekers’ reception. Second, whether they were mostly active or mostly passive. A few criteria, partially derived from the existing literature[[15]](#footnote-15), were used to define ‘activism’ and ‘passivity’. I assume that an active approach to policy-making is characterised by: the adoption of policies that contradict, complement or surpass the existing legal framework (explicitly or implicitly); attempts to exploit the discretion allowed by the existing legal and institutional framework for defining a local strategy, designing local governance structures and pursuing its own policies; the mobilisation of additional resources; attempts to engage with, foster and coordinate civil society. This is not an exhaustive enumeration but outlines some of the codes identified during the analysis. In contrast, a passive approach is assumed to be characterised by a very strict adherence to national guidance and the formal division of competences; lack of initiative to mobilising additional resources, actors’ perception not to have any room for manoeuvre in this policy field.

I sometimes also refer in the thesis to active and passive stances adopted by party actors towards public opinion. While in most cases an active approach to action also implies active stances towards public opinion, in a few cases, as shown in the next chapters, instances of decoupling of actors’ policies and discourses were identified. Analysing my interviewees’ descriptions of their relationship with the local population, eight different codes were inductively identified, considered to be indicative of passive or proactive stances towards public opinion.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Table 3.8. Codes indicative of passive or proactive stances towards public opinion.* | | |
|  | ***Accept reception*** | ***Oppose reception*** |
| ***Passive/Defensive stance*** | * Fear of public opinion * Public opinion as a constraint to action | * I explained to public opinion that key decisions do not depend on me * I wouldn’t do it, but I must take people’s opinions on board. |
| ***Proactive stance*** | * I tried to open peoples’ minds; * Public opinion does not constrain my actions. | * I encouraged citizens to mobilize against national asylum policies * I aimed to provide concrete responses to public concerns |

*Q4: How do actors enact their understandings and make sense of the environment in which they operate and new events and challenges?*

Sensemaking processes were investigated, again, through the semi-structured interviews. Questions were asked that, aiming to induce reflection in the interviewees, investigated how, based on their understandings of the situation, they decided ‘what to do next’. I took in due consideration the fact that interviewees were likely to initially offer an instinctive answer to the questions before then rationalising their strategic thought. The questions were designed based on Weick’s seven properties assumed to influence actors’ sensemaking processes. Interviewees were asked about the influence on their decisions and actions of some specific events (e.g. new policy challenges, the main events of the ‘refugee crisis’, legislative changes etc.), of new knowledge/information available and, more broadly, of the wider public debate (e.g. pro- or anti-immigration sentiments or mobilizations etc.). They were asked whether and how their institutional role, their past experiences and interactions with other actors also influenced their decisions. Interviewees were then asked to identify a key decision that they made during the ‘asylum crisis’ and to reconstruct the decision-making process that led to such decision, identifying the key elements that ultimately influenced it. Again, consonant to the methodological approach of this thesis some flexibility was kept, which allowed to adapt the original questionnaire to the flow of the conversation, e.g. asking respondents to develop specific points of interest emerged (Aberbach and Rockman 2002:674).

Following Bird and Osland’s three-step approach to the analysis of sensemaking outlined above, while analysing the responses provided to these questions, I aimed to identify: first, how actors perceived the situation around them (‘framing the situation’); second, what they perceived they ‘should do’ in such situation (‘making attributions’); and, third, what they concluded they ‘could do’ (‘selecting a script’).

*Q5: What are the key networks in the Italian asylum governance system, what are their main features, and how do they shape the production of policy outputs and outcomes?*

In order to map asylum governance networks and to identify their key features, I applied SNA, conducted on the basis of data collected through a structured questionnaire. Such questionnaire investigated actors’ relations, with a focus on frequency of interaction – measured on a temporal scale – and framing consonance between actors, i.e. the degree of similarity of their perspectives on asylum. Findings were elaborated using the Gephi software.

The SNA was developed in different steps.

First, I mapped asylum governance networks in the Italian asylum policy framework, identifying nodes and edges. To facilitate the analysis of the results, condensed visualisations of the networks were created, where all nodes of the same type were collapsed into a single node representing the actors’ group. The main unit of analysis was the interaction. Based on the information provided by the actors about the frequency of their relational events and their consonance or dissonance of views, two ‘categories of interaction’ (Borgatti, Everett, and Johnson 2013:4) were created, named: frequency of exchange and framing consonance. Different networks were created for these two categories of interaction, measured, respectively, on a scale of 1 to 4 and 1 to 5 (see Annex).

After having mapped asylum governance networks, I used different strategies and measures to examine the key network features identified above (cohesiveness, centrality and polarization).

Following Caiani and Parenti (2013:57) I used three different measures to provide information about a network’s cohesiveness. First, the density of networks i.e. the proportion of existing ties in comparison to the total number of possible ties in a network. Second, the ‘average path length’ between the network’s nodes i.e. the average length of the shortest path that connects two actors in the network. Third, networks’ ‘average degree’ i.e. the average number of ties that each node has in the network: networks with a higher average degree are ‘more likely to collaborate, surmounting the distances by which they are separated’ (Ibid.).

The literature also distinguishes between several measures of centrality (Castells 2009; Freeman 1978). A network can be centralized because there are actors that have the ‘ability to connect and ensure the cooperation of different networks by sharing common goals and combining resources’. Castells (2009, 45) calls them *switchers* and explains that these actors ‘coordinate and exert a function of intermediation between groups in the network’. They can be identified by measuring the ‘betweenness centrality’ of nodes, which corresponds to the number of shortest paths from all the vertices to all the other vertices in the network that pass through the node in consideration. Overall, if most paths go through a few nodes, ‘betweenness measures indicate that a network is highly centralized’ (Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009:569).

Alternatively, a network can be centralised because dominated by actors that, enjoying a broad recognition within the network, can ‘define the substantive framework of the conversation’ (Padovani and Pavan, 2016: 360) and influence other actors’ decisions. Castells calls these actors *programmers* and explains that they have the power to programme and reprogramme the network ‘in terms of the goals assigned to it’. They can be identified by measuring the weighted in-degree centrality of nodes, which corresponds to the sum of the value of all the ties in the network directed towards a node (Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009:564). If in-degree measures are high, this indicates that a network is highly centralized.

Furthermore, I also assessed the out-degree of switchers and programmers (i.e. the number of out-going relations) to derive supplementary information about whether these central actors proactively operate to activate the network’s relational potential. To assess nodes’ influence in the network I have compared their eigenvector scores, which depend not only on the number of actors’ ties, but also on whether actors relate to nodes that are themselves central in the network (relative scores are assigned to all nodes for this purpose).

To assess polarization within networks, clusters of actors within networks mapping actors’ consonance of views were identified by applying the community detection algorithm of the Gephi software. I, then, measured networks’ degree of segregation in two groups, using the community quality metric known as ‘modularity’ (Newman 2006). This is considered as the simplest approach to study polarization, based on the assumption that ‘if nodes can be partitioned into two highly cohesive subgroups’, these possibly reflect two ‘contrasting viewpoints’ (Guerra et al. 2013:1): a network segmentation with high modularity indicates that nodes within a cluster have many connections among them and few ties connecting them to the other group, which is ‘widely accepted as an indication of polarization’ (Borgatti, Everett, and Johnson 2013). Guerra et al. (2013:2), however, suggest that a high modularity (i.e. ‘the existence of two segregated social groups’) is a necessary but not sufficient condition to claim that a social network is polarized. Following their suggestions, I analysed other network features to seek for additional evidence of antagonism. I therefore calculated the percentage of conflictual ties within networks (edges with a weight of less than 2.5 over a scale of 1-5), and identified nodes that are involved in the highest number of conflictual ties. Another feature analysed is the concentration of nodes with high in-degree outside community boundaries: it is assumed that ‘polarized networks tend to have a lower concentration of popular nodes in the boundary’, because ‘the antagonism between both sides decrease the likelihood of existence of nodes that are popular in both groups’ (Ibid.).

Finally, variations across the three regional networks were assessed, with the aim to formulate some general statements about the relational mechanisms that produced the different policy outputs and outcomes observed in the three regions. The semi-structured interviews were used to complement these insights. Interviewees were asked about policy responses developed in their region or nation, to briefly evaluate their effectiveness and efficiency, and to identify the key elements that, according to them, were crucial in producing key outputs and outcomes of governance systems.

Q6: How are relations between regional and national governance levels organized, and how does this impact the production of policy outputs and outcomes?

The analysis described so far was conducted at both the regional level (across the three case studies) and at the national level. I could therefore assess if and how actors’ understandings and actions, and situational, action-formation and transformational mechanisms at the different levels influenced each other. By merging networks created at the regional and national levels, I identified interactions between actors at these different levels of governance, and tensions, conflicts and power struggles within the governance system.

Overall, 127 interviews were carried out across the three regions and the national level – their length ranging from 30 minutes to an hour – which resulted in a significant amount of interview data collected. Interviews, mostly conducted in Italian, were recorded and transcribed and the notes taken during the interviews were also included in the analysis. The NVIVO software was used to help with the organization and analysis of the interview material. Interviews were coded adopting a mixed inductive and deductive coding procedure. Initially, a codebook was created containing codes based on the theoretical framework of the thesis and that reflected the main subquestions analysed. Other codes were then developed during the analysis. Codes were grouped and organized into trees. An operationalization process was conducted, through the creation of a grid/matrix and the transferring of data for each case into relevant cells. The material was finally analysed through matrix coding queries. The segments of interviews included in the thesis were translated.

## **3.6. Conclusion.**

This chapter has explored and discussed the methodological implications of the analytical framework introduced in the previous chapter. To do so, it has, first, explored the ontological assumptions of this research, explaining that this is grounded on the premises of Bevir and Rhodes’ idea of ‘situated agency’. Consistently with these assumptions, I have proposed to open the ‘black box’ of asylum governance processes by looking at the actions of actors who are elements of the system and their interactions. More specifically, in accordance with Coleman’s ‘macro-micro-macro’ approach, I have argued that it is possible to ‘explain’ an observed macro phenomenon such as the Italian ‘asylum crisis’ and its outputs and outcomes by considering a chain of three types of mechanisms: the ‘situational mechanisms’ by which the macro environments in which actors are embedded shape actors’ cognitive understandings; the ‘action-formation mechanisms’ that explain how actors’ understandings influence their behaviour and purposive actions, and the ‘transformational mechanisms’ that show how the behaviour of many individuals jointly generate (intended or unintended) macro outcomes.

I have, then, identified theoretical approaches that offered conceptual tools to conceptualise these mechanisms. I argued that framing theories provide tools to investigate situational mechanisms, but that these need to be complemented by the sensemaking approach in order to provide insights about how actors’ understandings are enacted. Finally, I argued that SNA provides useful tools to investigate transformational mechanisms.

Section 2.3 justified the choice of three Italian regions as case studies, while subsequent sections have operationalised the discussion developed in the first part of the chapter, discussing methods of data collection and analysis used to investigate each sub-question.

# CHAPTER 4 - VENETO

Veneto was one of the two regions in Italy governed by a right-wing coalition during the ‘refugee crisis’. During the ‘crisis’ it was characterised by very high levels of politicisation of asylum-seekers’ reception and a high number of anti-migrant protests. The asylum regional governance system there produced very inefficient outputs and outcomes. Key inefficiencies were related to the very unbalanced dispersal of asylum-seekers across the region and a reception system organized around big emergency centres, some of which created in disused military barracks, rather than small reception facilities. This chapter aims to analyse how and why these outputs and outcomes were produced.

To do so, I start by presenting the ‘cast of characters’, in Section 4.1, meaning describing who are the key actors and parties within the Venetian asylum governance system. Then, in sections 4.2 and 4.3, I identify actors’ understandings of the effects of asylum-seeking migration and processes of frame emergence. In the two subsequent sections, I examine the strategies and actions of different groups of actors, and the sensemaking processes through which they enact their understandings. Finally, section 4.6 applies SNA to examine the key features of the Venetian governance networks, and how it relates to the outputs and outcomes produced.

The analysis leads to three main findings.

* While describing the effects of asylum-seeking migration, the vast majority of party actors used ‘public reactions frames’, meaning that actors’ perceptions of public attitudes to immigration played a key role in guiding their responses to the ‘asylum crisis’. Despite opinion polls showing that a significant part of the Venetian population is not hostile to immigration, all actors perceive Venetians as being harshly hostile to asylum-seekers. This seems to be the effect of ‘representativeness’ and ‘availability’ biases, related to the many anti-migrant protests that took place in the region and the emphasis given to them by local media, but also of a deeply rooted narrative about Venetian identity.
* Different groups of actors differently assess the drivers and causes of public hostility in the region and this crucially influences how they enact the above-mentioned understandings of public hostility. PD actors perceive public hostility as overwhelming and a necessary output of the exclusionist Venetian identity and therefore adopt very passive stances towards asylum-seekers’ reception. Some independent mayors (close to the centre-left or the centre-right) perceive public hostility to be the outcome of misinformation and anti-migrant propaganda, and therefore adopt more proactive stances towards public opinion trying to modify these perceptions. The availability of past experiences of asylum management influenced the adoption of these more proactive stances. On the other side of the political spectrum, LN actors adopt passive and strategic opposition strategies, while some independent far right actors and some extreme-right movements, framing locals as threatened by asylum-seekers, adopt a much more proactive and ideological approach to action.
* SNA shows that the Venetian asylum governance network is extremely polarized and that no political actors took the lead in coordinating the organization of the asylum-seekers’ reception system. This was entirely delegated to the Prefectures, the role of which, however, is extremely contested. These dynamics contribute to explain why the governance system produced very inefficient outputs and outcomes.

## 4.1. Cast of Characters.

Following Agnew (2002:112) until the 1990s Veneto was an ideal-typical case of the ‘white’ political subculture of North-Eastern Italy, characterised by the dominant presence of the Catholic Church and the Christian Democratic Party (DC), which for decades represented economic, social and political interests (Gómez-Reino Cachafeiro 2002). This subculture was characterised by a relative organizational weakness of the dominant party, due to the association with the Catholic Church, and a ‘non-interventionist style of government’ by most local authorities (Ramella 2010:311).

For decades the prevalence of the ‘religious cleavage’ in the region was able to resume other cleavages (Diamanti and Riccamboni 1992:7). From the 1970s, however, the processes of industrialisation and secularization – which made of Veneto one of the wealthiest regions of Italy – undermined the main elements of the white subculture and the electoral support of the DC. They also increased the importance of the ‘territorial cleavage’ (Gómez-Reino Cachafeiro 2002), leading to the emergence of the regionalist independentist LN. Since the 1990s, Veneto became one the main strongholds of the ‘centre-right coalition’, initially dominated by Berlusconi’s FI and, then, by the LN itself, which gained the governorship in 2010 and progressively marginalised FI.

According to Ramella (2010:311), these changes led local and regional governments to ‘assume a more active role of coordination in economic development, territorial planning and policies for immigration’, but also produced resistance from interest organisations, not accustomed to this interventionist role of local authorities. Importantly, the LN redefined some basic values of the white subculture, fuelling a previously latent opposition to the political centre and turning ‘localism’ and ‘anti-statism’ into political identities (Ramella 2010:312). This led to a growing emphasis on issues related to the Venetian regional identity, shaped around its own dialect, culture and history of previous statehood (Diamanti and Riccamboni 1992). On the one hand, from the early 2000s – when Veneto received high levels of immigration – LN leaders radicalised their position on immigration, ‘framing it as an existential threat to the very survival’ of the regional identity and culture (Albertazzi, Giovannini, and Seddone 2018:648). On the other hand, this emphasis on identity issues led to growing conflicts between local communities and the central governments, ‘hostility to national policies’ and political demands for federalist reforms (Ramella 2010:311). In 2017, the regional government organized an autonomy referendum, in which 98 per cent of participants (with 57 per cent turnout) legitimized the regional government to ask the national government for more devolved powers. The LN’s traditional regionalism remains a key component of the party’s ideology in Veneto, despite its transformation into a national radical right party under Salvini’s leadership.

During the ‘asylum crisis’, the LN still controlled the regional government and many municipalities, although the corruption scandals that involved its leadership in 2012 had reduced its electoral consensus in national and local elections between 2013 and 2015. This was at the main advantage of the PD, which ended up controlling a significant number of local governments, its leader Renzi being particularly appealing to moderate northern middle-class (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2017).

While the M5S remained marginal in Venetian politics, a significant number of municipalities in 2017 (including two provincial capitals) were governed by independent mayors, not affiliated to any national party. These mayors are fringe actors, who can be distinguished from traditional party actors for their different eligibility to government i.e. for having less or no aspiration to pursue a political career. Extreme right street-based movements such as FN and Casapound, finally, were particularly active in anti-refugee campaigning but never managed to gain any significant electoral support.

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| --- |
| *Figure 4.1. Number of Venetian municipalities led by the different parties in early 2017.* |
|  |

*Source: figure created by the author, data from www.comuniverso.it.*

The heterogeneity of party-actors in the region is reflected in the sample of 43 interviewees (Chapter 3). The subsample of party-actors includes: five LN actors; seven PD actors; two left-wing actors; two leaders of FN; and eight independent actors, of whom three were categorized[[16]](#footnote-16) as ‘centre-left’ (ICL), three as ‘centre-right’ (ICR) and two as ‘right-wing’ (IRW). Interviews quoted in this chapter were all conducted in October/November 2017.

## 4.2. Frame Analysis.

This section examines how political actors frame the effects of asylum-seeking flows. As Table 4.1 shows, when asked about their perceptions of such effects, the vast majority of interviewees focused on the negative effects of asylum-seekers’ reception on local public opinion. Actors’ perceptions of public attitudes to immigration, therefore, emerge as a key driving force of political actors’ strategies in Veneto.

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| *Table 4.1. Frame Analysis: how interviewees in Veneto frame the effects of asylum-seeking migration.* | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|  | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|  |  |  | ***Interviewees (Political Actors only)***  *In bold: mayors/deputy mayors; in italics: actors based in provincial capitals.* | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|  |  |  | **IRW1** | IRW2 | *FN1* | FN2 |  | **LN1** | ***LN2*** | LN3 | *LN4* | LN5 |  | **PD1** | **PD2** | **PD3** | *PD4* | *PD5* | *PD6* |  | **ICR1** | **ICR2** | ***ICR3*** | **ICL1** | **ICL2** | ***ICL3*** | LEFT1 | *LEFT2* |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Effects on Security** | Problems of Law and Order |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Problems for Public Health |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Economic Effects** (labour and public finance) | Negative economic effects |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Positive economic effects |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Administrative Frames** | Burden for Local Authorities, Institutional Tensions |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Corruption, Mismanagement, Infiltration of organized crime |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **No effect** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Political Effects** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Public Reaction Frames** | Negative reactions of the local population |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Positive reactions of the local population |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Cultural or Demographic Effects** | Positive socio-cultural effects |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Negative socio-cultural effects |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

A more in-depth analysis of how actors frame public attitudes to immigration, however, reveals that actors provide very different explanations about the causes of locals’ negative reactions to asylum-seekers. Furthermore, it reveals that actors with the same political affiliation tend to frame the effects of asylum-seeking migration in strikingly similar ways.

PD actors all provide very tense accounts of the anti-migrant demonstrations that took place in the region:

In early 2017 the phenomenon was exploding in our hands, because the population in this region was hostile and could not be kept under control anymore (…). The entire community of this region was rebelling and organizing demonstrations against the asylum-seekers (PD MP).

Crucially, they frame such public hostility towards asylum-seekers as the outcome of ‘innate fears’: as a Deputy Mayor explains, ‘people have a really *ancestral* [i.e. not modifiable] fear of migrants and what is different from them’. For this reason, they are ‘very pessimist’ about any possible change in this trend: as a Mayor puts it, ‘people’s perceptions do represent a problem of great magnitude, for which it is hard to find any solution’. Most of them tend to project this intolerance into the future, forecasting, at the end of 2017, that these tensions and intolerance will keep raising.

Furthermore, despite opinion polls suggesting that a significant part of the Venetian population is not hostile to immigration (see Chapter 3), this seems not to be acknowledged by PD actors (as also by most of the other political actors interviewed). While civil society actors, when describing the Venetian public opinion, tend to divide locals in two groups (‘those against immigrants’, and ‘those in favour’), this distinction is rejected as inconsistent by PD actors:

I am pleased that some people do recognise the work you do [on asylum-related issues], but let’s say they come from niche, mostly catholic circles, more sensitive to the issue. I do not believe that *the population* acknowledges anything about what you do on these matters (PD Deputy Mayor).

When asked about their perception of public attitudes to immigration in Veneto, independent centre-left (ICL) and independent centre-right (ICR) actors also explain that the local population harshly opposed asylum-seekers’ dispersal. They, however, understand anti-migrant attitudes not as the necessary outcome of ‘innate fears’ but, rather, as the contingent outcome of ignorance, misinformation, unawareness of the complexity of the phenomenon and the influence of anti-migrant campaigns by media and the far-right:

The private citizen hardly manages to be aware of the complexity of this issue. It is much more likely that people are influenced by slogans or statements that provide simplistic accounts of the immigration phenomenon, both on the side of those ‘against’ and on the side of those ‘in favour’ (ICR Mayor).

The people are pushed by mass media to have a distorted vision of the issue (ICL Mayor).

Furthermore, these actors perceive the many anti-migrant protests very differently, as the initiative not of ‘the entire population’ but rather of marginalized far-right groups which, as an independent centre-left mayor explains, ‘are continuously looking for opportunities to gain visibility’.

On the other side of the political spectrum, actors affiliated to the LN and independent right-wing (IRW) actors both frame migration mainly in terms of law and order and opposed asylum-seekers’ reception, but, again, they differently assess the drivers of anti-migrant protests and attitudes. LN interviewees explain that the main effect of the arrival of asylum-seekers in Veneto was – more than a real increase in crimes – an increased perception of insecurity and fear of the local population, which resulted in social tensions, protests and a widespread hostility towards asylum-seekers:

The main effect of the arrival of asylum-seekers has been an increasing perception of insecurity among the citizens. They have the perception that these people that are hosted within reception centres are not properly controlled (…) they see this phenomenon as something imposed from above and that they don’t know how to face (…). These perceptions of citizens, in the secret of their house, risk to turn into racism and xenophobia. Leaving the phenomenon uncontrolled leads to generalisations, which risks creating harsh social tensions (LN MP).

IRW politicians, as also the leaders of FN, conversely, seem to be convinced that the local population is ‘under threat’ because of asylum-seekers’ presence. Unlike LN politicians, they do not refer to mere perceptions but to real events, real crimes (drug deal, thefts, prostitution, murders, rapes…) and public health issues:

These are irregular persons. What are they going to do here? Petty crimes, nothing else (…). A spate of crimes has broken out, crimes are concrete, particularly those of a sexual nature, sadly, which are those of a more basic nature (IRW Mayor).

Crimes are increasing exponentially (…). Whatever newspaper you read, every day, you see that those perpetrating crimes – drug deal, murders, rapes – are almost always the non-EU immigrants (…). Ninety-nine percent of them is made of deadbeats, criminals, dedicated to drug deal, thefts and prostitution (FN Leader).

They are causing an abnormal social malaise, an overwhelming fear. Some asylum-seekers went to the doctor – because the state offers these people healthcare – and everybody ran out of the clinic, especially older people. Who are they? The ASL [local health agency] says they passed some medical checks, but the doctor didn’t know which checks had been done (IRW Mayor).

Some of these interviewees underline that locals, under threat, are unable to appropriately react to what is happening.

The FN leaders are the only ones that use nativist frames, which are instead never used by all the other right-wing actors. Some LN actors did mention that the sudden arrival of the asylum-seekers was perceived as a threat to the strong local identity of the region, but again, they referred to an impact on perceptions more than on reality.

Importantly, most interviewees across the whole political spectrum frame asylum-seekers’ reception as a burden for local authorities. Some actors describe these management problems as caused by the number of asylum-seekers, others refer to the unequal dispersal across municipalities.

In any case, most interviewees frame asylum-seeking flows as an entirely new phenomenon, overwhelming and impossible to control. Four interviewees explained that we cannot ‘transfer the whole Africa to Europe’. Recent flows are perceived as incomparable to any other past immigration flows to the region, despite Veneto having received several thousands of migrants from the Former Yugoslavia and Albania in the 1990s. A few actors recall this past experience, but mainly with the aim to underline their differences with recent flows, especially in terms, again, of their impact on locals’ perceptions:

How could you reject these poor people, when you know that in their countries there was a war? It was something that even simple people could perceive, the same for the crisis in Albania, somehow they are crisis that people know, that they can see, and with which they are in direct contact (IRW Regional MP).

We all remember the flows of Yugoslavians that arrived in Veneto in the 1990s, which were not different from current flows in terms of numbers. (…) What is different is the colour of their skin and their impact on public opinion, it’s simply that. I mean, it would have been unconceivable to involve Former Yugoslavians in voluntary public utility works (ICL Mayor).

Albania is not Africa, you know, it is an immense territory, and therefore the problem is much bigger (FN Leader).

## 4.3. Frame Emergence.

Why do all Venetian actors – unlike interviewees in Sicily and Tuscany (as shown in the next chapters) – perceive locals as harshly hostile to asylum-seekers, despite polls showing that Venetians’ attitudes to immigration are not more negative than elsewhere in Italy? In this section, by applying insights from framing theories, I identify three main biases that contribute to explain why this is the case.

First, actors’ assessment of public reactions to immigration seems to be the effect of a ‘representativeness bias’, related to the widespread anti-migrant protests that were enacted in Veneto. Lunaria (2017) identifies 43 anti-refugee protests in Veneto in 2016, the highest number across the whole country. Despite these protests having been mostly organized by extreme right movements with very low electoral support, they played a key role in shaping actors’ perceptions of locals’ hostility. This point is illustrated by two different descriptions of the same anti-migrant demonstration that took place in a Venetian town in late 2017, provided by a PD MP and the coordinator of a local NGO:

Recently, in my own town the arrival of 20 asylum-seekers led to a massive demonstration with hundreds of people in the street…it’s obvious that you are influenced by events like this (PD MP).

In –– there was just a little demonstration organized by a TV show that basically survives making these scenes. They gathered a few people from different places, almost all came from outside, and tried to show how in the village there was a situation of absolute social emergency, with security and health-related problems, which was absolutely untrue (NGO coordinator).

Second, the emergence of these frames seems to be produced through an ‘availability’ or ‘accessibility’ bias related to how local media in the region reported about these protests. As underlined by all the four experts interviewed, Venetian local media instrumentally contributed to raising the salience of asylum in the region by reporting extensively on tensions between asylum-seekers and local citizens. Tronchin and Di Pasquale (2017) analysed frames and narratives promoted by local media in Veneto in 2017, concluding that most migration-related news focused on local anti-refugee protests, and that reactions from local politicians, anti-migrant committees and citizens were given much more space compared data and information on the functioning of the reception system, interviews with experts or neutral explanations. When asked about the sources through which they derived information about migration-related issues, what emerged is that most political actors relied on local newspapers. This suggests that local media, repeating exposure to a ‘negative public reactions’ frame, increased the accessibility of this frame, influencing actors’ assessment of public reactions to asylum-seeking migration.

Third, actors’ frames about these negative public reactions to asylum-seekers’ reception seem to be also produced as an outcome of an ‘anchoring bias’, the ‘anchor’ being a pre-existing conception about Venetian public opinion, grounded on a dominant narrative about the Venetian identity. Many interviewees explain that locals’ opposition to immigration is largely rooted on identitarian concerns:

In Veneto the prevalent idea is that the ‘other’ must stay at his place, and that this ‘other’ represents a threat. So, public houses must go to Italians first, places in childcare facilities must go first to the children of Veneto people, even if you come from Emilia-Romagna or Lombardy you must get a lower score. There is a local culture in this region that pushes on the identity dimension which is based on contrapositions more than on integration, and this explains the so widespread hostility against immigrants here (ICL Mayor).

Other interviewees suggest that Venetians’ ‘industriousness’ and ‘aptitude for hard work’ – described as key defining features of the Venetian identity – represent elements upon which the contrapositions with ‘the others’ are built. As a Deputy Prefect interviewed puts it, the fact that most asylum-seekers were unemployed during the asylum applications was ‘not accepted in the Venetian culture’, and fostered locals’ hostility against asylum-seekers.

## 4.4. Actions.

Analysis of actors’ actions and strategies shows that LN, IRW and extreme right actors oppose asylum-seekers’ reception, while PD, left-wing and independent centre-left and centre-right actors accept the creation of reception centres. PD and LN actors, however, tend to adopt passive approaches to action, while independent politicians adopt more proactive stances.

PD: passive acceptance.

Most PD local governments, during the ‘refugee crisis’, decided *not to oppose* Prefects’ decisions to send asylum-seekers to their municipalities but refused to take any direct responsibility on the issue and to be involved by any means in the decisions taken:

The mayor said ‘I tolerate’, he never said ‘no’ to the Prefecture. Indeed, we ended up having 900 asylum-seekers. I mean… he was an open-minded mayor. However, he said ‘Prefecture, it is your own responsibility’ (…). And he kept saying to us, ‘let’s stay out of it as local government’ (PD Deputy Mayor).

PD mayors were also very keen to inform the population that any decision concerning asylum-seekers’ reception could only be attributed to the Prefectures and often publicly complained about Prefects’ decisions. Furthermore, very few PD-led municipalities adhered to the SPRAR system, requiring a direct involvement of the local government. When this happened, it was mainly the outcome of a long process – a ‘painful delivery’ as explained by a PD Deputy Major. Another mayor explains:

Ideally, we would like to join the SPRAR system. However, we have always asked for precise guarantees from the prefecture, according to which, then, we would not have received any request to host more asylum-seekers in the CAS centres (…). The prefect informally committed to that, and all the guidelines from the MoI go towards this direction, but there is no written rule (…). So, we are still waiting for some reassurances that, in case we adhere to the SPRAR, then absolutely no more asylum-seekers will be sent here (PD Mayor).

The PD Mayor of the village of Resana, close to Treviso, after being elected decided to withdraw from the SPRAR system. A very passive approach was also adopted by regional and national PD MPs and party leaders:

Because of the fear to be unpopular we have been really passive in front of the phenomenon (…). The number of asylum-seekers was significantly increasing, and I could breathe this atmosphere of intolerance, of very strong rejection, everywhere. I stopped going to public events because it was a massacre for us. I was really impressed that we were all passive in front of such a wrong cultural message (…). But it was not easy, because as a politician you are often influenced by public consensus (PD MP).

When asked about some key decisions that they made during the ‘asylum crisis’, all PD mayors referred to their decision to develop projects for the involvement of asylum-seekers in voluntary and unremunerated community service or ‘socially useful works’ (henceforth: SUW policies). While SUW policies were developed by mayors with different political affiliations, PD mayors implemented them in a bigger scale and with the greatest enthusiasm:

While others started developing these policies on a smaller scale, our mayor decided that we had to ‘go big’, doing something that could be visible to everybody. It didn’t have much sense to develop a project just for a few tens of asylum-seekers, we had to do something important. So, he decided to involve the municipal company to implement these projects. And everybody praised him. (…) He was not the first one to develop this policy, but he systematised it and communicated it very well (PD Deputy Mayor).

Importantly, in PD-led municipalities the activities in which asylum-seekers are involved tend to include low-skilled auxiliary works such as sweeping the streets, painting of public buildings and maintaining parks and are developed in ways that make asylum-seekers’ work strongly visible to the locals:

The local government decided to develop this policy in a period when the context was quite tense, with the aim to show to the locals that these migrants were doing something useful for the community, reason why we made them work in areas where they could be highly visible (City Official).

ICL and ICR actors: proactive acceptance.

ICL and ICR actors, conversely, not only accepted asylum-seekers’ reception but also adopted a more active approach to policy-making and proactive stances towards public opinion.

Some of these mayors decided to be actively involved in the organization of the reception system and closely cooperated with the Prefects to improve the efficiency of the dispersal scheme. The ICL local government of Belluno decided to actively coordinate asylum-seekers’ dispersal and reception in the entire province (going beyond its formal competences)[[17]](#footnote-17). Other mayors promoted networks and burden-sharing measures, organized meetings for the discussion of good practices and tried to launch innovative solutions to improve asylum management. The ICL mayor of Santorso promoted the creation of a network of municipalities affiliated to the SPRAR system, which inspired the national Distribution Plan adopted by the MoI in 2016, based on the proportion between migrants received and permanent residents[[18]](#footnote-18).

Other independent mayors organized public meetings with the local population, involving experts, distributed pamphlets with detailed information on the local reception system, or organised events to introduce the asylum-seekers to the local population:

We asked the health authority to speak with the population, we even published and spread a pamphlet all over the province which describes what is happening, why and when they arrive here, what’s the procedure, who takes care of them, who provides the money. So, we moved from platitudes and we destroyed them one by one (ICL Deputy Mayor)

The independent centre-right mayor of –– took the decision to adhere to the SPRAR system, hosting around 50 asylum-seekers in a municipality with more than 20,000 inhabitants. The population protested, and he didn’t care. Rather, he knocked at the doors of those protesting to introduce the asylum-seekers to them (Director of Service Provider).

Finally, independent centre-left and centre-right mayors also develop SUW policies, although, interestingly, they also propose different types of activities to asylum-seekers, including works in public libraries, schools, canteens and nursing homes.

LN: passive opposition.

Assessing LN actors’ approach to policymaking proved to be a rather complex task.

At the level of public discourses, the analysis of online interviews and newspaper articles suggests that some LN mayors and leaders became well-known for their anti-migrant positions (Cartaldo 2016). The Mayor of Rovigo – the only provincial capital governed by a LN mayor during the ‘refugee crisis’ – repeatedly associated migration with security threats and declared his readiness to take every possible measure to decrease the number of migrants and enhance law and order (La Voce di Rovigo 2016). The mayor proposed a tax on private citizens who rented their properties to service providers managing reception centres and an electronic bracelet imposed on asylum-seekers to ‘ensure citizens’ security’ (Corriere del Veneto 2016). More broadly, many LN mayors, MPs and members of the regional government occasionally joined local anti-migrant protests and encouraged people to mobilise in opposition to asylum-seekers’ dispersal (Pietrobelli 2016). When Prefects tried to impose the creation of CAS centres in municipalities led by LN mayors, these released threatening interviews to local newspapers, and put pressure on service providers or the individuals willing to rent their properties to them. While online interviews suggest that LN actors did not publicly use nativist or identitarian frames, they did frequently use genuineness frames, recognising the duty to host ‘deserving’ recognised refugees despite their opposition towards the majority of ‘bogus refugees’ (Cronaca del Veneto 2016). This framing aligns with the official LN position (Albertazzi, Giovannini, and Seddone 2018).

Analysis of the asylum policies adopted by LN-led local and regional governments, however, suggest that these were sometimes inconsistent with such discourse. Clearly, the party tried to (passively) disengage from the organization of the reception system. All the institutions controlled by the Lega tried to avoid any direct involvement in asylum-seekers’ reception. The party intimated to its mayors not to take part in the working tables organized by the Prefectures that should have coordinated asylum-seekers’ dispersal, and to withdraw their affiliation with the ANCI, preventing its regional branch to play any coordination role. The regional government also decided not to take any responsibility in the organization of the reception system, unlike other regional governments in Italy:

Regional authorities in Italy don’t have specific competences on asylum-related matters. Some regional governments decided to take an active role in these policy processes and coordinate the reception system, while others, such as the Venetian one, pushed by mayors and public opinion, decided not to have an active role and to be mere observers in these processes (Regional Official).

The LN Governor Luca Zaia openly declared, during an audition at the Chamber of Deputies, that ‘the Veneto Region is not willing to contribute to the organization of the reception system’. An academic explains that ‘the regional government never consulted any expert on the issue, not even experts close to the Lega’. Furthermore, the LN mayors interviewed reported that they kept informing the population that they are not responsible for asylum-seekers’ dispersal and that their institutional position does not allow them to have any impact on these matters.

Most of the experts interviewed, however, suggest that overall the asylum-related measures publicly announced were largely symbolic with little practical effect. In Rovigo, the number of asylum-seekers increased after the Lega mayor took office (Lucchin 2017), and none of the announced anti-migrant measures was implemented. Conversely, he developed a SUW project (RovigoOggi 2018), a policy strongly supported by the centre-left government and formally criticised by LN leaders for imposing a disproportional administrative burden on local governments and under the principle that these activities should be rather proposed to local unemployed citizens[[19]](#footnote-19). Surprisingly, he even decided to renew the participation of the municipality in the SPRAR, despite having harshly criticised that during the electoral campaign (Lucchin 2017). No LN local government withdrew from the SPRAR during the ‘asylum crisis’. Furthermore, interviewees suggest that the regional government did not refuse to providing health care to asylum-seekers, health-related issues being under its competences:

The regional government did not have a leading role in these processes, and this was a choice, the President himself declared that. For sure, had the region taken a different approach, the local governments would not have been left so isolated and some tensions could have been avoided (…). However, while publicly the regional government is not dealing with the issue, concretely it is doing its job. As far as health-related matters are concerned, which are under its own responsibility, it has always done its part, granting health care, the screenings etc. Someone might say that this is its duty. Fine. But still, beyond the public proclaims that ‘we don’t accept them’ etcetera, then concretely the services are provided (City Official).

According to both the IRW actors and the extreme right actors interviewed, the LN never organized a structured opposition to national asylum policies despite their participation in local demonstrations and their discursive opposition to the national dispersal scheme:

The Lega is extremely responsible for what is happening. Lega politicians scream, but they don’t solve problems. And the Lega is the only party that could do it, because it is the only party that adopted a clear position on the issue. However, they don’t do it (IRW Mayor).

As an example of that, LN mayors chose not to join a network of municipalities led by right-wing mayors, created to protest against national asylum policies (Orsato 2017). According to a FN leader, the active involvement of the LN in local anti-migrant citizens’ committees undermined their success.

IRW and FN: active opposition.

Unlike LN actors, both IRW actors and extreme right movements adopt a much more proactive approach to action in opposition to asylum-seekers’ reception. The IRW actors interviewed actively developed initiatives or promoted administrative acts aimed at opposing the creation of new reception centres, but also, more broadly, at countering national asylum policies. A group of IRW regional MPs promoted two resolutions aimed at pushing the regional government to adopt a much tougher stance on asylum-related issues[[20]](#footnote-20). In the village of Albettone, close to Vicenza, the mayor – an independent politician recently affiliated to the post-fascist FdI (and never supported by the LN) – declared that, in case the neighbouring villages had accepted to host some asylum-seekers, he would have built a wall along the border between the two villages to ‘protect his people’ (Berizzi 2015). He added that, had the Prefect dared to turn some unused public buildings in his village into a reception centre, he would have ‘blocked the windows to make the buildings be condemned’. The local Council adopted a resolution aimed to empower the mayor to adopt ‘any measure to protect the community’ against ‘risks connected to the security and the possible spread of diseases or plagues’[[21]](#footnote-21). The independent mayor of Pastrengo launched a network of local authorities to protest against the incentives and privileges granted to those municipalities that decided to join the SPRAR: the initiative aimed, as explained by a mayor that joined the network, at ‘making the reception system explode’ and catching the government’s attention. The initiative failed, according to the interviewee, due to the lack of support of the LN.

Other IRW local governments tried to develop exclusionary or anti-migrant local policies (such as imposition of taxes on asylum-seekers or service providers), that were mainly blocked by local Courts. Again, these interviewees hold the LN responsible:

What’s the strategy of the Lega? A mayor decides to adopt an administrative act against migrants and the Lega welcomes the action. If the act, however, is taken to court and it is blocked, because it is not acceptable from a legal point of view – and I clearly agree that it is unacceptable – then the Lega blames the judge. But, no, it’s your fault! Because you didn’t support the mayor, and you didn’t tell him that that mistake had to be avoided, how is it possible that the Lega and its apparatus and its pool of lawyers, cannot prepare some guidelines with clear suggestions about the actions to be taken to stop all this? (IRW Mayor).

Whist LN interviewees reported to have cordial relations with the Prefects, the relationships between IRW and FN actors and the Prefectures were described as very tense and described using the terms ‘threats’, ‘blackmail’, ‘fighting’.

## 4.5. Sensemaking.

This section analyses action-formation mechanisms, examining how actors made sense of the situation around them and enacted the understandings previously identified. Consistent with Bird and Osland’s framework (2005), I analyse, first, how actors make attributions on how they should deal with the effects they identify and, second, how they select a script to guide their actions during the ‘asylum crisis’.

PD actors.

As mentioned above, PD actors tend to frame public reactions to asylum-seekers’ reception as non-modifiable because they are the result of ‘innate fears’. Because of this particular framing of the drivers of public attitudes to immigration, these actors tend to perceive public opinion as a harsh constraint to their own actions:

Public opinion is a major constraint that often prevents us to act, because it is well known that whatever choice that goes in the direction of not opposing the reception of asylum-seekers is very unpopular (PD Mayor).

As a mayor, I’m more aware of the practical problems and also I realize much more how people think. As a private citizen I would probably mostly relate with people that share my own views, while as a mayor I relate with everybody and I am much more aware of the situation, of what are people’s perceptions. And these must not be underestimated, they must be considered in our decisions, we must deal with that, no choice (PD Mayor).

An MP admits that public opinion was ‘breathing down her neck’, causing her many troubles and preventing her from freely expressing her thoughts. Three different MPs refer to their participation to local talk shows as destabilizing experiences, mainly due to ‘violent’ questions or comments by the audience. Furthermore, these attributions also suggest that the negative reactions by public opinion represent a problem that cannot be faced by any means. As a Mayor explains, ‘even if the effects of the arrival of asylum-seekers have been much less significant than the perceived ones, we have to make the hard effort to provide concrete responses to such perceptions’.

On the other hand, PD actors’ ideology – mostly rooted in the Catholic tradition – prevent them from opposing the creation of reception centres. Furthermore, the very strong sense of belonging of PD mayors to the Italian state – which increasingly became a defining element of the Venetian PD’s ideology in a region characterised by harsh autonomist sentiments – also has a strong impact on their decision to cooperate with national authorities. Despite PD mayors perceiving the creation of a reception centre in their municipality as a tough burden and a likely source of tensions and protests, these identity processes prevent them from opposing Prefects’ decisions about asylum-seekers’ dispersal:

Why did we finally accept some asylum-seekers? Well, arguments raised were of a humanitarian nature, and we are convinced that municipalities, being part of a State, should do their part and cooperate with national authorities so that the State can fulfil its duty to provide international protection to those entitled to it. (…) As a local authority within the Italian state, I must do my part (PD Mayor).

This enduring tension between the willingness of PD actors to cooperate with national authorities and accept asylum-seekers and the fear of the reactions of the public opinion produces *ambiguity* in their actions about what problems, solutions and consequences to attend to at any time (Ansell, Trondal, and Øgård 2016:45), as these quotes suggest:

The big challenge is that of finding a compromise between different positions. We must be welcoming, because this is the mission of a centre-left administration and of those who believe in certain values. But at the same time we must hold the situation, our choices must aim at reinforcing social cohesion rather than increasing social tensions (…). And in order to have social cohesion in a city, you must keep the number of asylum-seekers under control (…). You need to maintain your consensus, and it’s clear that when the number of asylum-seekers is too high, the fact that the local elections are approaching also has a negative impact (PD Deputy Mayor).

We have our own ideals, but a local administrator has to face reality, try to give responses. This doesn’t mean giving up our own ideals but rather that we have to contextualise or adapt them to the present situation because otherwise they are dry leaves that never turn green (PD Deputy Mayor).

This ambiguity seems to have several implications on the actions of PD politicians and ultimately produces decision-making preferences that are powerfully driven by this understanding of the effects of anti-immigration sentiments. This explains why most PD actors decided not to oppose Prefects’ decisions to send asylum-seekers to their municipalities but refused to take any direct responsibility and often complained about Prefects’ decisions. It also explains the passive stance adopted towards public opinion. In the few instances in which they have to act – because the situation requires their intervention or because the passive stance adopted clashes with their values or their institutional identity – the script adopted requires PD actors to act adopting the lowest possible profile:

At a certain point you *marry* your own institutional role, in my case that of deputy mayor for social policies. And sometimes you must act also partially ‘against’ the other members of the administration, because the responsibilities sometimes clash (…). The mayor was telling me ‘stay away from the reception centres’, but, informally, a bit under the table, where it was possible to help I did it. It was not possible to do it openly but I did it, because it seemed to me the right thing to do (PD Deputy Mayor).

Finally, this ambiguity also means that political and symbolic considerations play a key role in decision-making, characterised by an emphasis on being seen doing something, rather than on actions necessarily achieving their intended effects. The highly visible involvement of asylum-seekers in SUW policies is a key example of the importance of political and symbolic considerations in their decision-making processes. All PD interviewees agree that SUW policies were a crucial policy measure implemented to show the empathy of the local government for the local population, afraid of migrants and annoyed by seeing asylum-seekers loitering in reception centres:

We cannot deny that the rationale was that of positioning ourselves on the side of our citizens, who were annoyed by seeing migrants doing nothing for the whole day. Thus, we decided that these migrants had to give something back to the community that was hosting them (PD Mayor).

A Deputy Mayor explains that for long she had launched the idea to develop SUW projects without being supported by the mayor, but that, at some point, the mayor suddenly changed his mind ‘when he perceived a raising social tension around asylum-seekers’ reception’.

ICL and ICR actors.

The proactive approach towards public opinion of ICL and ICR mayors seems to be strictly linked to their assessment of the drivers of anti-migrant attitudes and protests. Convinced that anti-migrant attitudes are the product of misperceptions and far-right propaganda rather than of innate fears, these actors think that, as such, these misperceptions can be contrasted and modified and that the local population must be properly informed. This contributes to explain why they took action in various ways with the main aim to inform citizens and counter their misperceptions, through the organization of public meetings with experts and of opportunities to introduce the asylum-seekers to the local population. This involved both ICL and ICR mayors of small villages and big cities, and municipalities with different types of reception centres, as clarified by the following quotes:

I strived hard every day, literally day and night, to face a lack of information on the one hand and a mass of false information on the other hand, and the risk – because the hub we have is a powder keg – of tensions between the asylum-seekers and the local population. This did not happen, and this was due to my own approach to the matter (…). I would do again everything I have done, that is the attempt to open people’s minds (ICR Mayor).

The perception of the population is very important. Perceptions are often much more important than reality, because it is perceptions that then guide people’s choices and attitudes. If people are scared, we must intervene to prevent them from being scared, it is not enough to tell them ‘there are no reasons for you to be scared’ (…). We analysed perceptions, we realized that people were largely uninformed, and we intervened. That’s the reason why we organized lots of public meetings around the province. If the perception was ‘they steal our jobs’ or ‘they carry diseases’ – and this is largely due to the media – we directly confronted these questions (ICL Deputy Mayor).

Two elements, I argue, contribute to enable the adoption of this proactive stances.

The first element is the availability of past experiences in the management of asylum-seekers’ reception and migrants’ integration more broadly. Four of these independent mayors during the interview refer to lessons from the past that influenced their decisions:

The Prefect suddenly decided to send 90 asylum-seekers here. After 15 years of experience with the SPRAR system, however, we knew that this system and the diffused reception model worked: we had to recover that model and develop it further (ICL Mayor).

These past experiences seem to make these mayors less afraid about the impact of asylum-seeking flows on their municipalities, and keener to recommend innovative policy solutions:

I think the most important thing is to understand that immigration is a structural phenomenon that will continue for the next 30-40 years. We have the social policy areas of disability, mental health, seniority, we have and will have the one of immigration. We must govern it through three-year programmes, in a structural manner, building networks between municipalities, as we do in these other areas (ICL Mayor).

Interestingly, the availability of past experiences particularly influences the development of SUW policies: three mayors reported that while designing these projects they replicated similar initiatives implemented in previous years with asylum-seekers hosted in the SPRAR centres or with other groups of disadvantaged individuals. Their tendency to project into the future contributes to explain why they implement SUW policies with more long-term policy goals.

These findings are quite sticking if compared with the description of the ‘asylum crisis’ provided by most of the other actors interviewed, who tend to rather perceive recent flows as an entirely new phenomenon, despite Veneto having received significant migrant flows in the past three decades, and to be much more reluctant in planning and projecting, in the absence of any previous definition of the situation. Most mayors interviewed describe asylum-seeking migration as an overwhelming phenomenon beyond their control and speak about the future in very anxious terms. Many are concerned about the possibility that the asylum-seekers will settle in their municipality after the asylum procedure. This lack of planning, at odds with the urgent need to provide solutions, suggests the potential for reactive tendencies in local asylum policymaking and emergency responses. Most interviewed mayors, in fact, seem to have internalized the idea of being passive respondents rather than active shapers of asylum policies. As a PD Mayor explains, ‘it would be pretentious to say that a local municipality has the prescriptions, we have to take management decisions about asylum-seekers that are sent to our territory’. Others add:

We don’t have the instruments. Problems arise, and no ideas about how to deal with them had been previously developed. I think we are dealing with a matter on which we were not prepared (PD Mayor).

You take decisions in the emergency and the urgency, then at the end you just hope to have taken the right decision (PD Deputy Mayor).

These findings seem consistent with Weick’s second property of sensemaking (see Chapter 2) according to which ‘sensemaking is retrospective’ and his argument that the availability of past experiences and prior definitions of the situation allows individuals to be less sceptical about planning, projecting and forecasting (Weick 1995:30), leading them to act, mostly ‘replicating procedures that have been perceived as successes in the past’ (Ansell, Trondal, and Øgård 2016:11).

The second element that tends to explain why ICL and ICR actors tend to develop more proactive approaches to action is related to what Tetlock calls ‘decision-making styles’ (2005:73; see Chapter 3). The interview material reveals that these actors, unlike other actors, tend behave like Tetlock’s foxes. Using his words, these actors tend to make decisions by ‘stitching together diverse sources of information’, to be ‘sceptical of grand schemes’, and to see ‘explanation and prediction not as deductive exercises but rather as exercises in flexible ‘ad hocery’’. The vast majority of ICL and ICR interviewees, rather than stating that their institutional role forced them to act responsively to people’s perceived will, explain their institutional position put them in ‘a privileged point of observation’ which allowed them to meet experts, be more informed, understand dynamics they did not understand before, learn, and ‘get round mystifications and journalists’ stretches’ (ICR Mayor). Interestingly, also mayors of villages hosting the huge hubs – mostly ICR mayors – reported that, despite all the problems, this was for them a growing experience. As one of them explains: ‘it is only through knowledge and the direct contact with a problem that you establish a relationship with the reality and truth’ (ICR mayor).

As to the reasons why these actors, not affiliated to any major party, adopt a different decision-making style, this seems to be linked to the absence of pressures from national parties and the lack of any aspiration or ambition to pursue a political career at the national level:

We are an independent government, with a civic background (…), so we are free, and I think this is a key factor that allows us to take decisions only by evaluating what is the best solution for our city, I think this is a freedom. We don’t have that…obstacle (ICL Deputy Mayor).

In sum, the different assessment of the causes of the anti-migrant protests around them, the availability of past experiences that help defining the situation they are facing, and their tendency to make decisions as ‘Fox’ decision-makers rather than ‘Hedgehog’ decision-makers contribute to explain why ICL and ICR actors decided to be actively involved in the organization of the reception system. These sensemaking processes also contribute to explain why these mayors developed SUW policies adopting different approaches. Crucially, the analysis reveals that these mayors are much less concerned about the impact of SUW policies on public opinion, and therefore about their visibility. As an ICR mayor puts it, ‘our decision [to develop SUW projects] had nothing to do with what public opinion thinks, I feel ashamed to hear around me people saying that the solution is having them cleaning the streets’. SUW policies are therefore implemented mainly with the aim to foster asylum-seekers’ integration in the local community and labour market, or, more pragmatically, as an ICR mayor explains, ‘to provide services to the local population that could not be provided otherwise’.

The LN and IRW actors.

On the other side of the political spectrum, LN actors and IRW actors all oppose asylum-seekers’ reception, but end up adopting, respectively, more passive and proactive approaches to action. This paragraph aims to illustrate the sensemaking processes that produced these different approaches, by proposing two main arguments.

The first argument points to different assessments that these actors make of the drivers of anti-migrant protests and attitudes already described above.

LN politicians’ strategic goals are strongly influenced by the signals and cues about citizens’ perceptions of insecurity that they pick up from their environment. Their actions, therefore, seem to be mainly aimed at giving voice to these widespread concerns. All LN interviewees agree that public attitudes do influence their actions: as a member of the regional government puts it, ‘undoubtedly, the feelings of the population have an influence on our mood and considerations’. In addition to that, they are eager to state that their main aim is to give representation to citizens’ perceptions and to bring them, as an MP states, ‘within the institutions’:

Had I been a simple citizen I would have simply had certain ideas, but being a mayor it is clear that you must interpret what the people feel, because you have their trust. (…) The votes I had are sacred, and I must respect the electoral mandate (LN Mayor).

Interestingly, by giving voice to peoples’ concerns, LN politicians think that they can also contain social tensions:

Not only the political activities of the LN originate from and aim to collect people’s complaints, but they also contribute to contain such complaints (LN MP).

These attributions seem to create scope for decision-making preferences that are powerfully driven by such understanding of the effects of anti-immigration sentiments (as in the case of the PD), but also for a strategic approach to actions and a defensive rather than proactive stance towards public opinion.

This strategic approach requires them to take different courses of action in different situations. In politically salient situations, i.e. when actions can have an impact on the perceptions of the local population, therefore, LN politicians tend to steer into what they perceive to be the citizens’ will. In most cases this leads to inactions rather than actions. For this reason, LN local and regional governments avoided any direct involvement in the organization of the regional reception system. In other cases, this strategic attitude requires LN politicians to take action in order to distance themselves from events or situations that risk undermining people’s support, leading mayors to inform locals that their institutional position does not allow them to have any impact on the creation of new CAS centres. Finally, when the stakes are high, this strategic approach requires LN politicians to take action with the aim to give voice to people’s concerns and prove their empathy for the local population. Crucially, when mayors become aware that the Prefecture is considering the possibility to send some asylum-seekers to their municipality, then they organize demonstrations against the creation of the new reception centre, they release threatening interviews to local newspapers, and put pressure on the Prefecture and service providers. The interview material suggests, therefore, that the decision to join or organize anti-migrant demonstrations is mainly defensive or strategic – i.e. aimed at maintaining or gaining consensus – rather than a proactive, ideologically driven, action:

I must carry out all the initiatives that the situation requires. If I were a simple citizen, I could simply said that ‘I am against’ but without doing anything. Instead, being a mayor, I have to call the journalist, write the letter, contact the service provider, protest with the Prefect and so on (LN Mayor).

In situations which, conversely, are not perceived as politically salient, LN politicians behave in a rather different way. This explains why, often in contrast to announcements made during the electoral campaign, no LN-led local government, during the ‘asylum crisis’, withdrew from the SPRAR system and why some of them even developed SUW policies, while the regional government did not refuse to provide health assistance to asylum-seekers. Overall, therefore, as in the case of PD politicians, political and symbolic considerations play a key role in LN actors’ decision-making, which leads to an emphasis on being seen doing something, rather than on actions necessarily achieving their intended effects. This is actually the reason why IRW politicians in the region harshly criticise the LN, accused of not having organized a proper, structured opposition to asylum-seekers’ dispersal.

In line with their perception that the local population is under threat, conversely, IRW actors are convinced that, through their political activities, they must ‘protect’ public opinion, taking action for the sake of their people. Coherently with this understanding of the situation, all these actors have actively developed initiatives aimed at providing concrete responses to the local population. Convinced that asylum-seekers represent a concrete threat for public security, they also harshly condemn SUW policies, which increase the chances of interactions between locals and migrants.

I feel the duty to take people’s complaints in and to respond effectively to the problems perceived by the people (…), to provide support and to provide responses as much as I can (IRW regional MP).

I keep doing whatever the law allows me to do, which is not street demonstrations, which is not yelling and screaming as politicians do, Salvini in the first place (IRW Mayor).

Interestingly, all the IRW actors interviewed also explain that their harsh anti-immigration stances and actions are not influenced by public opinion and that, had the issue been less politically relevant, they would have acted in the same way:

Even if public opinion was less deeply involved on this topic, in any case I would keep on fighting for my ideas. Probably I would have a lower impact, I would have received less publicity, but I am used to act in the same way also for minor, niche, issues…if I see a problem, no matters whether it involves 10, 100, 1000 people, I take action to solve it (IRW regional MP).

This seems to suggest that their actions are ideology-driven: even when their actions meet negative feedbacks from the citizens, this seems not to have an impact on choices and strategies. Conversely, the LN’s approach, compared to this one, seems to be much more consensus-driven (see chapter 6).

The second argument is related to identity processes, that are ‘at the root of sensemaking’ and influence its other properties (Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010:55). As Weick points out (1995) individual identities have various dimensions. The interview material reveals that mayors’ decisions are influenced by their political identity (linked to party membership), their cultural identity (the sense of belonging to the region) and their institutional identity (who they think they are as institutional actors). The complex interaction between these dimensions contributes to explain the different approaches adopted by LN actors and IRW mayors.

The strong sense of local/regional identity of both these groups, not surprisingly, seems to strongly influence their judgements and understandings, radicalising their anti-migrant stances and positions. The coordinator of a local service provider explains that the mayor of a village (supported by LN and FI) motivated his decision not to accept asylum-seekers in this way:

He said ‘I’m sixty, I want to keep eating *soppressa* (a local type of sausage) as I have always done and drinking my own wine, I don’t want my wife to be forced to wear a burqa and I don’t want these people to enter my house and hold a knife to my throat’ (Coordinator of a service provider).

A LN mayor explains:

In my village we have a percentage of foreign people which is very high, around 25 per cent, three times more than the national average, even 30-40 per cent in the central area of the village. In the elementary school there are classes with 65 per cent of foreign children. That’s why the people experience this dynamic as a sort of threat, not because anything happened, but they feel that the number of local people, of us, is decreasing while slowly but surely the foreigners are invading almost everything and this seems to be happening a bit too quickly, because it is very hard to stop migration flows (LN Mayor).

Interestingly, however, these identity processes seem to clash with another dimension of actors’ identity, i.e. actors’ perception of who they think they are as institutional actors in a certain context, an identity which is constantly redefined by new experiences and contact with others. Four of the five LN politicians interviewed, unlike IRW actors, explain that their institutional role has moderated their initial, more radical, anti-migrant positions:

Before being elected I dealt with the issue with a political and mostly ideological approach. Then, when you directly have to make decisions, the approach changes significantly. For instance, I was against renewing the participation to the SPRAR system [and then I changed my mind]. If you don’t know the details, you could think that I am a mayor from the Lega Nord who is helping illegal migrants. But the truth is that, after having analysed this situation in detail, I changed my mind. The decisions you make as a mayor, despite being partly influenced by political considerations, are more reasoned and thought-of (LN Mayor).

If I were a private citizen I would approach the issue in a much more radical way. The private citizen faces decisions that he sees as imposed from above and that he doesn’t know how to face, while staying within the Parliament you develop some kind of institutional dialogue (LN MP).

IRW interviewees, conversely, explain that their institutional position does not have any impact on their beliefs and actions. An IRW regional MP states that, if he were a private citizen, he would probably be the leader of one of the many anti-migrant committees protesting against asylum-seekers’ reception. An IRW mayor explains that his action against the creation of a local reception centre started before his election and that there was total continuity between his actions before and after being elected. The very strong regional identity, in the case of these actors, therefore, seems to have prevailed, leading them to harshly counter the dispersal measures of the prefectures but also national asylum policies more broadly:

I don’t accept impositions (…). Because local governments are still one of the public institutions in Italy with the higher level of trust by citizens. Rome [i.e. the national government] has the lowest, but Rome, the central power, comes to impose migrants’ reception to us, the local government, the last *peones* living in a remote area of the peninsula (IRW regional MP).

Rome is trying by any means to cancel us and it will manage to do so sooner or later (…). For me, the only thing to do is to reject them [the asylum-seekers]. We must send them back to the sender. Rome, as I keep saying, should burst. In a metaphorical sense of course. They should manage this problem there. Because only then they will understand what it means (IRW Mayor).

The same mayor explains that his aim is to ‘make the reception system explode’ and catch the government’s attention.

Again, the more proactive approach to action adopted and the different stances adopted towards public opinion seems to be related to the absence of aspirations to pursue a political career and of constraints related to party membership:

I was member of a party before. In a party you have constraints, you have to agree before your actions, what to say what not to say, where it is better not to push. Instead now I am free to say what I think (IRW Regional MP).

I’m not a politician, I’m pragmatic, what I decide it is not due to impositions from a party. Thanks God we are an independent government, we are not accountable to anyone. And, I make it very clear, we also don’t take decisions because we have been elected and we aim to be re-elected, we simply act for the sake of the village. (…) Had I been a politician I would have made different choices, I would have accepted the Prefect’s decision and attacked it (IRW Mayor).

## 4.6. SNA.

This section applies SNA to map actors’ relations and power within the governance system and analyse key network features. Then, using both SNA and the interview material, it asks how key networks features are related to governance outputs and outcomes.

Figure 4.2 shows the asylum governance network in Veneto, elaborated with the Gephi software. More precisely, the graph shows a condensed visualisation of the network, where all nodes of the same type (i.e. actors with the same role and political affiliation) have been collapsed into a single node representing the actors’ group[[22]](#footnote-22). In this figure, ties indicate the existence of discussions between the two groups of actors on asylum-related issues, while the strength of ties depends on the frequency of exchanges between groups: the more intense the communication flow, the bolder the tie in the network illustration[[23]](#footnote-23). The network – as all the networks that follow in this thesis – is organized implementing in Gephi the spatial, force-directed, layout algorithm ‘force atlas’. Overall, the figure suggests that the conversation is rather fragmented and that interactions in the network tend to be carried on in a selective way (density values will be compared in Chapter 7).

SNA was then used to investigate power relations within the network, through the identification of actors that acted as ‘switchers’ and ‘programmers’ in the governance system (see Chapter 3).

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| *Figure 4.2. Asylum Governance Network in Veneto. Weight indicates the frequency of exchange (measured on a scale of 1-4). Node size indicates betweenness centrality.* |
|  |

The size of the nodes in Figure 4.2 highlights *switchers*, the more central and relevant actors in the network, that have the ‘power to coordinate’ and exert a function of intermediation between groups in the network (measured by the betweenness centrality). The figure clearly suggests that the main *switchers* in the network are service providers and anti-migrant committees (and, to a minor extent, the Prefecture). Importantly, those institutions that could have taken a leading role in coordinating and organizing the regional reception system, such as the regional government, the ANCI and the Prefecture of Venice, reach a very low score and occupy a marginal position in the network.

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| --- |
| *Figure 4.3. Programmers in the Venetian governance network. Weight indicates the frequency of interaction (measured on a scale of 1-4). Node size indicates in-degree centrality.* |
| Immagine che contiene testo, mappa  Descrizione generata automaticamente |

Figure 4.3, instead, highlights *programmers* in the governance network, that is, those actors that enjoy the broader recognition within the network, measured by the in-degree. These are the actors that are potentially ‘capable of defining the substantive framework of the conversation’ (Padovani and Pavan, 2016: 360) and of influencing other actors’ decisions. The software identifies seven *programmers*: the MoI and its local branches, the Prefectures and the *Questure*; service providers; mayors; the regional government and local journalists. While service providers and local journalists are broad and heterogeneous groups of actors, it is important to underline, here, that 46 of the 61 cities/towns in 2016-2017 were controlled by either the LN (which also controlled the regional government) or the PD. These two parties, together with the Prefectures, are the main *programmers* of the regional asylum governance system.

Figure 4.4, finally – where the size of nodes is proportional to their weighted out-degree centrality – shows the so-called *mobilisers* in the governance network, that is, actors that implement the network’s relational potential by reaching out in different directions. These are the actors that operate within the network with a broad understanding of both the actors involved and the issues at stake and that contribute ‘to interested actors’ perception and understanding of existing challenges and available solutions’ (Padovani and Pavan, 2016: 360). Consistent with the analysis on sensemaking, the list of *mobilisers* mostly includes independent actors. Importantly, most of these *mobilisers* are neither *switchers* nor *programmers*, which means that, despite attempting to activate the network’s relational potential, they lack the power to have a real impact on understandings and the identification of solutions. The only *mobilisers* that are also *programmers* and *switchers* are the Prefectures and service providers (which, however, is a heterogeneous group of actors with no decision-making power).

While Figure 4.2 above shows the existence and frequency of exchanges between actors and is blind to any divergence of views, Figure 4.5 shows the degree of similarity of the perspectives of actors that relate to one another (the bolder the tie, the higher the similarity of views between the actors)[[24]](#footnote-24), illustrating conflicts and alliances within the governance network. It crucially shows that the network can be compartmentalized into five sub-networks or clusters of actors, identified through the ‘community detection’ algorithm of the software. Interestingly, four of these clusters correspond to the four groups of actors identified in the previous section: a green cluster with actors affiliated to the PD; a blue cluster with ICL and ICR mayors and a number of advocates of migrant reception (left-wing politicians, local NGOs and the Catholic Church); an orange cluster with actors affiliated to the LN, IRW actors, the regional government and anti-migrant committees; and a dark green cluster formed by FN. In addition, a fifth, purple cluster groups most of non-party actors, including international and national organizations, experts, trade unions and service providers. Overall, Figure 4.5 shows that the network is significantly polarised between those groups of actors that accept the reception of migrants – and interact with service providers – and those groups of actors that refuse reception and form coalitions with anti-migrant local committees.

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| --- | --- |
| *Figure 4.4. Mobilisers in the Venetian governance network. Weight indicates the frequency of interaction. Node size indicates weighted out-degree centrality.* | |
|  | |
| *Figure 4.5. Framing consonance within the Venetian network.* *Weight indicates the degree of similarity of views (measured on a scale of 1-5). Node size indicates betweenness centrality. Colours indicate subnetworks.* |
|  |

The many thin ties in the graph suggest a high divergence of views between (but also, sometimes, within) these clusters of actors. Figure 4.6 better illustrates conflicting views in the network and highlights those actors that engage in the highest number of conflicting interactions. Overall, the Figure suggests the existence of harsh political and institutional tensions between/towards institutions at all levels, including regional and national institutions, prefectures, and mayors (mostly: PD and LN mayors). In particular, the central and active role of the prefectures in the governance system is harshly contested by actors from all clusters, with the only exception of PD actors (who tend to passively accept Prefects’ decisions).

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| --- |
| *Figure 4.6. Conflicting views in the Venetian governance system. Edges indicate existence of discussions* and *divergent views (weight <2.5). Weight indicates the degree of divergence. Node size indicates in-degree centrality.* |
|  |

In sum, this analysis of key features of the Venetian asylum governance network provide useful insights to understand why the regional reception system in Veneto was characterised by such an unbalanced dispersal of asylum-seekers and by the prevalence of huge emergency centres. Not only most local governments did not actively cooperate with the Prefects (the PD’s approach) or opposed asylum-seekers’ dispersal (the LN’s approach), but the network was very fragmented and no institution took the lead in coordinating the governance system. The most powerful actors in the system (including the two dominant parties) adopted passive approaches. The regional branch of the ANCI, weakened by the decision of all LN mayors to leave the Association, also refused to take an active role in this process, unlike in other regions. Six interviewees made a comparison between the Venetian municipalities and the EU member states, both unable to fairly distribute asylum-seekers among themselves. Most responsibilities were therefore delegated to the Prefectures, the only powerful actor that acted as *mobiliser*, the role of which is, however, harshly contested. As two Deputy Prefects explain during the interviews, the widespread opposition of the local authorities in the region prevented the prefectures from shaping an efficient dispersal scheme and reception system. The opposition of most local governments forced them to create huge regional hubs in small villages in the countryside hosting, in some cases, more than a thousand asylum-seekers and described by interviewees across the political spectrum as ‘concentration camps’ or ‘lagers’.

The SNA also contributes to explain the very high politicisation of asylum-seekers’ reception in Veneto. This is clearly linked to the extreme polarization of views on asylum leading to tensions among actors and to the mobilisation of anti-migrant committees which, together with service providers, are the key *switchers* of the network. On the other hand, the SNA and interview material suggest that the high levels of conflict were also fostered by the lack of any central coordination in asylum management. As a city official explains, ‘the problem was the lack of an effective coordination and collective management between local, regional and national authorities’. This lack of coordination led to harsh institutional tensions between authorities at different governance levels:

In Veneto there was a crazy contention between different institutions, something I had never seen before (PD MP)

Everybody here points the finger at the others, mayors say that it’s the prefects’ fault, prefects say it’s the minister’s fault or the mayors’ since these don’t cooperate. I think there are responsibilities at all levels (ICL mayor).

Local authorities in this region have played the Russian roulette, hoping that the asylum-seekers would have been sent to other municipalities (ICL Mayor).

The lack of coordination even led to tensions between different areas within the same province. The ICR mayor of a village hosting one of the huge hubs says that the hubs have been the outcome of ‘the betrayal of some Veneto people by other Veneto people’, while a FN leader complains about the disproportional burden imposed on the southern side of his province, pointing to a plot supposedly organized by the LN local governments of the province.

Transformational mechanisms through which actors’ interactions produced outputs and outcomes of regional governance systems are analysed in depth in Chapter 7.

## 4.7. Conclusion.

This chapter has shown how the understandings and actions of actors within the Venetian governance system contributed to produce a harsh political and institutional crisis around asylum-seekers’ reception and extremely high levels of political and public contestation of the issue tin that regions. The analysis leads to three key findings.

First, while framing the effects of asylum-seeking migration in their region, most actors focused on public reactions to asylum-seekers’ reception and public attitudes to immigration. These understandings, however, are very much disconnected from the evidence of available opinion polls and, rather, grounded on pre-existing narratives and local identity processes. They were also largely shaped by the ‘sensible environment’ in which actors operate, and influenced by the signals and cues that political actors picked up from the politicised environment in which they operate, characterised by widespread anti-migrant protects that receive a lot of media attention. The analysis also shows that actors with similar political affiliation tended to make different diagnoses of the causes of the ‘public reaction dimension’ of the ‘asylum crisis’. PD actors understood public hostility against immigrants as overwhelming and as the output of ‘innate’, unmodifiable, fears, while ICL and ICR actors mostly perceived such hostility as the outcome of misperceptions driven by local media narratives and the propaganda of the far right. Lega actors also perceived locals’ opposition to asylum-seekers’ reception as the outcome of people’s fears, unlike IRW actors, that perceived asylum-seekers as a real, concrete, threat to the local population.

Second, in a politicised asylum governance system such as the Venetian one, actors’ understandings of the causes and effects of public reactions to asylum-seeking flows and public attitudes to immigration powerfully drove their strategies and actions. Based on how they processed these information, different groups of actors adopted very different policy strategies, and passive or proactive approaches to action. ICL, ICR and IRW actors tended to adopt more proactive approaches to action as a result of different perceptions of the causes of people’s hostility towards asylum-seekers (perceived as linked, respectively, to misinformation and concrete risks for public security) which enabled actions. At the same time, their approach was less consensus-driven, as a consequence to their lack of aspiration to pursue political careers. In the case of PD actors, understandings of the scope and cause of anti-migrant public reactions represented a harsh constraint to action, which prevented them from pursuing their pre-established policy goals, related to their ideology, values and institutional role. The lack of reflective action and history contributed to produce scepticism about planning and forecasting, leading to reactive tendencies and emergency-based responses. LN actors instead understood public reactions as mainly due to people’s perceptions of insecurity, and their decision-making processes seem to be guided by the very aim of addressing perceived people’s preferences, which suggests a more consensus-driven or ‘populist’ approach to policymaking.

Third, by applying SNA, this chapter suggests that the Venetian asylum governance network during the ‘refugee crisis’ was very fragmented and polarised, characterised by very high levels of conflict between the different institutions and levels of governance. Crucially, it shows that the most powerful actors did not mobilise to activate the network’s relational potential. In such a context, the political competition between the main parties and the political contestation by anti-immigration political entrepreneurs constrained policymaking and prevented the development of efficient policy responses while, rather, producing a fractured, weak and contested reception system.

# CHAPTER 5 - SICILY

Sicily became the main European ‘gateway’ for asylum-seeking migration during the ‘refugee crisis’ which led to a growing number of asylum-seekers being hosted in reception centres throughout the region. Its reception system produced very inefficient policy outputs and outcomes: low reception standards were guaranteed to asylum-seekers, corruption was widespread, the organized crime occasionally infiltrated the reception system. Despite the prevalence of negative attitudes towards immigration and the high salience of migration, however, Sicily did not experience any anti-refugee campaigning, and rather became known for the radical pro-migrant narratives promoted by several mayors.

This chapter aims to explain how and why the regional governance system produced these apparently contradictory outputs and outcomes. After describing the ‘cast of characters’, I initially focus on frames and framing effects, identifying three groups of actors that differently understood the effects of asylum-seeking migration in the region. Then, in sections 5 and 6, I analyse how these groups of actors acted during the ‘asylum crisis’, and how these actions enacted their understandings. Finally, in section 7, I apply SNA and examine the impact of key network features on policy outputs.

The analysis leads to three main findings:

* Despite immigration not being the object of political contestation in Sicily, most of the party actors interviewed describe the effects of asylum-seekers’ reception using ‘public reaction frames’. Unlike in Veneto, however, many actors in the Sicilian provincial capitals (and across the whole political spectrum) identify positive reactions of the public, which contradicts the evidence of available opinion polls. These understandings seem to be grounded on a pre-existing narrative about Sicilians’ tolerance and on party elites’ preconceptions about Sicilians’ attitudes to immigration, justified by Sicily’s history and culture. In rural Sicily, conversely, ‘the public’ is mostly perceived to be split among those supporting and those opposing asylum-seekers reception. Only a few actors, from centre-right and radical right parties, frame the effects of migration in securitarian terms.
* The only actors that politicise immigration in Sicily are the mayors of the main Sicilian cities and towns, adopting radical pro-migration narratives. Remarkably, the centre-right and the radical right – including those actors that used securitarian frames – do not attempt to politicise migration with their actions and discourses. This suggests that party elites’ decisions to politicise migration (or not) are not shaped by objective evidence about public attitudes or social mobilisations, and that it is not self-evident that increases in migration flows, in the salience of migration, and in social mobilisations initiate reactive responses by party elites. Rather, these decisions seem to be shaped by how they make sense of the (many different) effects of migration on underlying social systems and, crucially, by their perceptions of the salience of the immigration issue.
* Finally, the SNA, complementing the analysis of sensemaking, allows to elaborate some plausible explanations about why the regional governance system produced very inefficient outputs and outcomes, despite the absence of any political contestation. While local governments of the main cities were mostly interested in the production of symbolic and discursive outputs, and those in rural Sicily were mostly interested in the economic implications of asylum-seekers’ reception, no institution took the lead in coordinating the organization of the reception system in the region. Asylum management was largely delegated to the Prefectures and directly to service providers, with very scarce controls carried out by local authorities.

## 5.1. Cast of Characters.

Sicily is an ideal-typical case of the ‘clientelist’ subculture of Southern Italy (Agnew 2002:112), characterised by the personalisation of politics and the prevalence of ‘exchange’ or clientelist voting, particularly evident in small municipalities, where mayors tended to turn into powerful gatekeepers mediating access to public funds and providing for personal support and political favours to citizens in exchange of votes (Parisi and Pasquino 1977).

For decades, Sicilian electors massively supported centre-right parties: the Christian Democrats until 1994, then Berlusconi’s FI. After 2011 the popularity of centre-right parties started to decrease, with the result that, in the past decade, Sicily was characterized by both extreme electoral volatility between one election and the other and a significant instability of preferences in elections of different types. Different parties and coalitions have therefore played a key role in recent Sicilian politics. The region became the main stronghold of the M5S, which was the leading party at all regional and national elections after 2011, although it remained weak in municipal elections. The centre-left coalition during the ‘asylum crisis’ controlled a significant number of municipalities and the regional government until 2017. In 2017 the centre-right coalition won the regional elections and Nello Musumeci, close to the post-fascist FdI was elected Governor. Since 2017, the Lega, previously totally alien to the regional context, also started to gain some consensus, after Salvini decided to get rid of its traditional anti-southernism. Three independent mayors of small villages joined the party during the ‘refugee crisis’.

Several independent mayors, sometimes close to the left (such as the mayor of Palermo Leoluca Orlando and the mayor of Messina Renato Accorinti), also played a central role in Sicilian politics in the last decade. More broadly, the very high number of mayors not affiliated to the main parties is a sign of the persistent strong personalisation of local politics in the region (Figure 5.1).

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| *Figure 5.1. Number of Sicilian municipalities led by the different parties in early 2017.* |
|  |

*Source: figure created by the author, data from* [*www.comuniverso.it*](http://www.comuniverso.it)*.*

The heterogeneity of party-actors in the region is reflected in the sample of 41 interviewees (Chapter 3). Interviews were conducted in May/June 2018, across six provinces.

## 5.2. Frame Analysis.

The frame analysis of actors’ responses to the questions investigating their perception of the effects of recent migration flows in their municipality suggests that Sicilian party actors frame these effects very differently from party actors in Veneto. Findings are illustrated in Table 5.1, where actors are divided into three main groups.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
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| *Table 5.1. Frame analysis: how interviewees in Sicily frame the effects of asylum-seeking migration.* | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|  |  |  |  | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|  | | | |  |  | ***Interviewees – Political actors only***  In bold: mayors or deputy mayors; in Italics: actors from provincial capitals. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|  | | | |  |  | **FR2** | ***M5S3*** | ***IND1*** | ***IND6*** | ***CL1*** | **CL5** |  | **FR1** | **CR1** | **CR4** | *M5S1* | **M5S2** | M5S4 | M5S5 | **M5S6** | **IND2** | **IND3** | **IND4** | **IND5** | CL2 | **CL3** | CL4 | LEFT1 |  | **CR2** | CR3 | *CR5* | **FR3** |
|  | | | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Effects on Public Security** | | | | Problems of law and order |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Problems for public health |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Economic Effects** (labour and public finance) | | | | Negative economic effects |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Positive economic effects |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Administrative Effects** | | | | Burden for local authorities, institutional tensions |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Corruption, mismanagement, infiltration of organized crime |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **No effects** | | | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Political Effects** | | | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Effects on Public Opinion** | | | | Negative reactions of the local population |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Positive reactions of the local population |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Cultural or Demographic Effects** | | | | Positive socio-cultural effects |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Negative socio-cultural effects |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

*Notes: FR= far-right (Lega, FdI, DiventeràBellissima); CR=centre-right (FI, NCD); CL=centre-left (PD, MDP); IND=independent.*

A first group of actors, including six mayors and deputy mayors of four provincial capitals and two port towns describe the effects of asylum-seeking migration in very positive terms. They mainly adopt multiculturalist frames and explain that asylum-seekers’ arrival encountered very positive reactions from the local public opinion.

Most actors adopt ambiguous stances. A few do not identify any significant effect of asylum-seeking migration, despite their municipalities hosting reception centres. Many others refuse to clearly frame such effects in negative or positive terms, and rather adopt ‘administrative frames’ – for instance emphasising the inefficient management of asylum-seekers’ reception.

Five centre-right or far-right actors, finally, adopt securitised or threat frames and describe the effects of migration in very negative terms. The group includes two mayors of little villages that hosted big reception centres, two centre-right MPs with previous affiliations to the far-right MSI/AN, and a Lega mayor. None of them used nativist frames.

Overall, the table also shows that that in Sicily actors tend to perceive important positive or negative effects of asylum-seekers’ reception on the local economy but, as in Veneto, most actors put a strong emphasis on local reactions. Unlike in Veneto, in the main Sicilian cities locals are perceived as very welcoming towards asylum-seekers. Outside the main cities, actors perceive some intolerance towards migrants, but also acknowledge the presence of sectors of the population that are convincingly in favour of asylum-seekers’ reception. In small villages, mainly isolated and far from the coast, locals tend to be perceived as hostile towards asylum-seekers.

Despite these divergent views, each of the four groups (except for the last one) includes actors from across all the four political blocks, none of which is characterised by a uniform approach to asylum. Remarkably, some centre-right and far-right actors perceive positive effects of asylum-seeking migration. Actors’ institutional role and the type of municipality seem to be better predictors of actors’ frames.

## 5.3. Frame Emergence.

The interview material reveals that evidence about public attitudes to migration in Sicily is strongly embedded in a narrative story: party-actors’ understandings of public reactions to immigration are powerfully influenced by what Jeffrey Cole called ‘the prevalence of preconceptions about Sicilian tolerance’ (1997:101).

Many of the actors interviewed, when describing public reactions to recent flows, referred to Sicily's multicultural past and its position at the crossroads of Mediterranean history:

We are Sicilians, we are the product of migration flows, those that left the island, and those that arrived here, during all the dominations that we have experienced. Therefore, we are ready for asylum-seekers’ reception, we believe in this reception, we believe in multiculturalism (Independent Deputy Mayor, City).

I think what influenced in determining Sicily’s response [to the refugee crisis] is the history and the culture of this region, which is built on the capacity to open itself up to the world outside. Sicily is at the centre of the Mediterranean, it could not have been different (PD Deputy Mayor, City).

Sicily is an island in the middle of the Mediterranean, it was repetitively colonized, we melted with other people. I really couldn’t have an instinct to shut myself away, because I really love the Sicilian culture and history. The Arabs, the Greeks, the Romans, they all left us something, and taught us something, and we taught them other things (M5S MP).

Our history and our culture help us making the right decisions (Mayor, centre-right)

Crucially, this prevailing narrative on Sicilian tolerance tends to be projected by many actors to the entire Sicilian population:

Sicilians have always been super welcoming, because of their history and culture, they are used to share their land with other populations and they are open to different cultures (…). All this explains why recent migration flows have not been really suffered here (MP, M5S).

We have a history of absorbing outsiders, having been dominated by Romans, Arabs, Byzantines and Normans, and the city is deeply catholic. The combination of these two elements makes Palermo a very welcoming city, not easily affectable by racism (centre-left MP).

A M5S deputy mayor explains that ‘being welcoming towards newcomers is in Sicilians’ DNA’, while an independent deputy mayor explains that ‘the people accepted the idea that our future is that of being a multicultural city’. As Leoluca Orlando declared: ‘I was elected mayor with a victory of 74 percent. That means people think I’m right. There is no intolerance in the stomach of the people, it’s only in politicians’ minds’ (van der Zee 2017).

Importantly, this narrative is also proposed by interviewees adopting securitarian frames and, in public speeches, by the main leaders or centre-right and far-right parties. The right-wing Governor, Musumeci, declared that ‘there is no racism in Sicily, a land which has been dominated by 15 different foreign populations, and is used to coexist peacefully with people from other cultures’ (Rossini 2018). The far-right mayor of Mazara del Vallo explained that ‘here there are no tensions between different communities, since centuries Jews, Muslims and Christians live in the same territory and respect each other, we did nothing more than going further along the same lines’ (Svampa 2017:67).

Nine interviewees also referred to Sicilian emigration as an element that powerfully shapes public reactions to migration flows.

These accounts are at odds with existing data on public attitudes on migration, suggesting that most of the Sicilian population perceive migrants as a burden and that the issue is more salient than this narrative would suggest. This observation supports Cole’s ‘Sicilian thesis’ (1997:101), according to which Sicily’s history and culture, and the long experience of emigration, ‘would explain the acceptance of migrants there or should justify such acceptance if it did not already exist’. The Sicilian political elite, recalling the emigrant experience and the history of Sicily, would ground the acceptance of migrants in historical precedent and ‘give local resonance to abstract formulations of anti-racism and diversity’ (1997:132). In Cole’s words ‘a powerful and satisfying, if insinuating and destructive, ‘commonsense’’ emerges ‘from a fusion of ideologies’ (Ibid.) powerfully influencing framing processes. This clearly resonates with what the literature on frame emergence calls ‘representativeness’ and ‘anchoring’ biases: in the absence of objective data about public attitudes to migration (rarely available at the local level), historical analogy is used by individuals as an ‘anchor’, whether or not appropriate, to understand contemporary events.

The interview material also suggests that actors’ framing processes are powerfully influenced by public mobilisations around migration-related issues. Interviewees in the main cities are influenced by the presence of a very active civil society, which mobilises in favour of migrants’ rights and does so by continuously invocating Sicilian culture and history aiming to make more evocative their general calls for tolerance and solidarity. These pro-migrant groups reinforce preconceptions of Sicilians’ tolerance, representing a powerful ‘feedback that gives information on current performance’ (Kingdon 2014:113). On the other hand, when asked about why they do not perceive migration to be salient – or why they do not perceive locals to be hostile – most interviewees in rural Sicily, including those adopting securitized frames, point to the absence of anti-migrant mobilisations. Many interviewees, if explicitly asked so, could in fact remember some protests, but these received no support by local political elites and did not gain significant media coverage. Local media are very rarely mentioned and some interviewees suggest that they tend to stigmatise any critical position on migration:

Disability is much more exploited as an issue than immigration by Sicilian media. In local newspapers the ratio between news about disability and immigration is 9 to 1 (…). You might find some news about immigration if there is a big landing, or if a particular event happens. There is more coverage in Palermo, but in positive terms, lucky us, because Palermo is very active, there are often pro-migrant initiatives. But in general, you rarely find news about immigration in Sicilian media (Head of trade union).

Frame emergence seems therefore to be the outcome of ‘availability’ and ‘accessibility’ biases (Druckman 2011, 10): repeated exposure to frames about ‘Sicilian tolerance’ induces frequent processing, increasing their accessibility.

## 5.4. Actions.

Analyses of actors’ actions provide interesting insights about both actors’ political contestation of asylum-seeking migration and local reception policies and actors’ approaches towards asylum-seekers’ reception.

Politicisation strategies.

Despite the increase in flows and public salience and the prevalence of negative attitudes towards immigration most actors did not mobilise the immigration issue during electoral campaigns or injected immigration into the political debate. Remarkably, most right-wing actors publicly avoided the issue while some city mayors, from across the whole political spectrum, mobilise the issue proposing pro-migrant narratives. To reach this conclusion, I have derived insights from party manifestoes, media interviews, and the interview material.

Tables 5.2 and 5.3 illustrate findings of a content analysis of manifestoes of presidential candidates at the regional elections held in 2017 and of mayoral candidates at the local elections held in June 2018 in 14 Sicilian municipalities[[25]](#footnote-25). Manifestoes have been categorized in four different groups: those that do not mention immigration at all; those that mention immigration in neutral terms (mostly very briefly, in paragraphs dedicated to social services); those that frame the effects of migration positively (identifying positive cultural/demographic or economic effects); and those that frame such effects negatively (identifying negative effects on public security, economy, culture).

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Table 5.2. Frames in Electoral Manifestos – 2017 Sicilian regional elections.* | | | | | |
|  | |  | | | |
|  | Immigration or asylum not mentioned in the electoral manifesto | | Manifestoes that frame the effects of migration in neutral terms | Manifestoes that frame the effects of migration positively | Manifestoes that frame the effects of migration negatively |
| Presidential Candidates (coalition in parenthesis) | **N. Musumeci** (centre-right) | | **G. Cancelleri** (M5S) | **F. Micari**  (centre-left)  **G. Fava**  (left) |  |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Table 5.3. Frames in Electoral Manifestoes – 2018 Local Elections (in bold: municipalities hosting reception centres; in Italics: municipalities hosting SPRAR centres).* | | | | | | | |
|  |  |  | | | | | |
|  |  | | Number of Mayoral Candidates | Manifestoes that do not mention immigration | Manifestoes framing the effects of migration in neutral terms | Manifestoes framing the effects of migration positively (or propose pro-migrant policies) | Manifestoes framing the effects of migration negatively (or propose anti-migrant policies) |
| **Pr. Capitals** | ***Messina*** | | 5 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 0 |
| ***Catania*** | | 5 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| ***Siracusa*** | | 7 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| ***Ragusa*** | | 7 | 5 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| ***Trapani*** | | 5 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| **Towns** | ***Modica (RG)*** | | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| ***Mascalucia (CT)*** | | 4 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| ***Carlentini (SR)*** | | 5 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Taormina (ME) | | 3 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Villages** | ***Valderice (TP)*** | | 3 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Santa Domenica (ME) | | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| ***Francofonte (SR)*** | | 4 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| ***Acate (RG)*** | | 3 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| **Mineo (CT)** | | 3 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
|  | TOTAL | | 60 | 40 | 7 | 7 | 6 |

The analysis provides three main insights. First, the vast majority of manifestoes, particularly in towns and villages, do not mention immigration, despite most of these municipalities hosting significant numbers of asylum-seekers, often in SPRAR centres directly managed by the local government. Even in Mineo, the village that hosted the biggest reception centre in Europe, none of the manifestoes advocated closure or partial emptying of the centre. Second, in the five provincial capitals, seven of the 27 manifestoes, mainly from centre-left or independent candidates, frame the effects of migration positively. Third, only five manifestoes, none of whom was elected, frame its effects negatively or propose the adoption of anti-migrant policies. Four of them were candidates in the provincial capitals: two were exclusively supported from the Lega (gaining, respectively, 1.3 and 2.1 per cent of votes), two are candidates of the centre-right coalition supported by the Lega. The inclusion of anti-migrant frames in these latter cases was proposed by the Lega and motivated its decision to support those candidates (RagusaOggi 2018). The analysis concludes that the Lega is the only party attempting to inject anti-migrant frames in the local Sicilian debate.

Analyses of media interviews released by the main Sicilian party leaders largely confirms these findings[[26]](#footnote-26). The right-wing Governor Musumeci never adopted anti-migrant frames and even occasionally expressed pro-migrant positions: in July 2018 he declared that ‘we have to keep fighting against the exploitation of these people, who are our brothers’ (Rossini 2018). The President of the Regional Council and FI leader Gianfranco Micciché also expressed pro-migrant positions (Reale 2018). Remarkably, the mayor of Mazara del Vallo – an important port town, and the biggest Sicilian municipality governed by a ‘centre-right coalition’ in 2017 – became known as one of the strongest advocates of multiculturalism and cross-Mediterranean connections in Italy despite his party FdI being known for xenophobic nationalism (Giglioli 2017:758). Conversely, the main Sicilian leaders of the Lega occasionally expressed in public anti-migrant positions (Il Fatto Quotidiano 2017).

The independent mayors of Palermo and Messina and the PD mayor of Catania, all released interviews to regional, national and international newspapers, in which they framed immigration in very positive terms and advocated for the protection of migrants’ rights (Gurrado 2018; Marx and Ellyatt 2018; van der Zee 2017). They also often reported to local media about invitations they received to give speeches about the ‘refugee crisis’ and Sicily’s welcoming culture at foreign institutions and universities. The far-right mayor of Mazara del Vallo was also invited to give speeches on multiculturalism at the British Parliament and announced this invitation to the people during the final rally of his electoral campaign in 2014[[27]](#footnote-27).

Importantly, the municipality of Palermo launched an innovative declaration on migrants’ rights, the so-called Charter of Palermo[[28]](#footnote-28), stating that ‘mobility must be recognized as an inalienable human right’, which fostered Orlando’s image of advocate of migrants’ rights (van der Zee 2017).

The interview material further clarifies these findings. Most civil society and non-political actors, asked about dynamics of political contestation of migration in Sicily, confirmed that immigration was not a salient issue in all recent local and national electoral campaigns:

If I think about local and regional electoral campaigns in the last two years, I have never heard any statement on immigration. I remember the last local electoral campaign in Pozzallo [a port village] in 2017, where you would say immigration could have been a very salient issue, and rather it was a topic that was never mentioned, nobody spoke about it (Director of a local research centre).

Furthermore, most interviewees struggled to identify clearly the positioning of parties in Sicily on immigration:

The political debate on immigration in Sicily is messy, it’s not possible to identify clear differences in party approaches to immigration. You can find a left-wing local government that is hostile towards migrants and open-minded mayors from FdI (Director of a local research centre).

Interviewees confirm that centre-left or independent mayoral candidates in the biggest Sicilian cities proactively framed the effects of asylum-seeking migration positively. Two interviewees report that during the final rally of his campaign in 2017, Orlando famously declared that ‘whoever lives in Palermo is a Palermitan citizen, no matter where he comes from’.

When asked about the position they adopted in debates about immigration during recent electoral campaigns, the five interviewees that adopted securitarian frames also reply that the issue was not at the core of their campaign. No reference to immigration, in fact, could be identified in their social media pages. As one of them states:

Mayoral candidates must explain how they plan to solve the problems of their municipality if they are elected. Clearly, it is important to coordinate a sound opposition to potential future attempts to increase the number of non-EU migrants in our region, but we must avoid transforming local electoral campaigns into a struggle around an issue which is marginal, the immigration problem must be addressed and solved by the national government (centre-right MP).

The growth of the Lega and its attempts to inject immigration in the political debate, conversely, seem to be perceived as a shock to the system by several interviewees. Importantly, however, while some refer to the activity of Lega’s affiliates in Sicily, most seem to be referring to the impact on Sicily of the Lega’s national propaganda, minimising the role played by local party members:

The Lega gained some votes at the last national elections, but its members here are not conveyors of the typical ideas of the Lega on immigration, they are old politicians coming from other parties (…). If you speak with them or read about what they say, you will never find any public statement about migration (Deputy Prefect).

To conclude, the analyses opens two questions: why is it that most Sicilian party actors, including far-right actors (with the partial exception of the Lega), do not mobilise the immigration issue? And why is it that, contrary to the expectations, the mayors of cities and port towns act as issue entrepreneurs, actively promoting a previously ignored issue? In section 5.5, I will address these questions.

Reception policies.

If the differences in migration-related discourses by party actors are very evident, these largely disappear when the focus shifts to approaches to actions and reception policies.

The interview material suggests a generalised acceptance of asylum-seekers’ reception in the region. When asked about how decisions to create reception centres were adopted, most of the mayors interviewed did not portray the choice as a relevant and politically sensitive or debated one:

We were asked to open a reception centre for around 50 or 60 asylum-seekers. I thought and still think that this number was acceptable, which is the reason why we immediately accepted, without any problem, without any discussion (centre-left Mayor, village)

Recently I interacted with the local governments of a big town, with around 60,000 inhabitants, which hosts a huge number of asylum-seekers and unaccompanied minors, disproportionate to the capacity of that town to develop a proper reception. Despite that, the mayor, a right-wing mayor, was very open towards the possibility to open new reception centres. I therefore asked the civil servant responsible for asylum-related issues ‘how do you manage to do it? Why do you keep accepting the creation of new reception centres?’. She replied that the mayor told her ‘500 children are nothing for a city like this one’ (Head of local Service Provider).

Despite this generalised acceptance of asylum-seekers’ reception by political actors, the interview material reveals that most local governments adopted very passive approaches towards asylum management. Many civil society actors vehemently criticised local governments and the Prefectures, for not making any effort to prevent or counter the inefficiencies of the local reception system, and to control how service providers operate:

The only objective of local governments and of the prefecture was that of opening new reception centres, nothing beyond that (…) we made tens of reports, we submitted information to the Public Prosecutor’s Office, denouncing that the buildings were not appropriate, that services were not delivered by service providers, that the health assistance was totally inadequate (…) and the Prefecture has always replied that everything is fine (Head of Local NGO).

This passive approach, quite remarkably, seems to characterize also those mayors that adopt more proactive approaches at the level of public discourses:

We hear [from mayors] many discourses in favour of migrants’ reception but these are empty words because then they do not act consistently with these claims (…), the system is totally inefficient and they do not really work to create the conditions for a different type of reception (Head of Local NGO).

The local government in Palermo keeps repeating that they are very welcoming towards migrants, but nothing changes in the management of the reception system. Despite the very powerful narrative, the lives of many asylum-seekers hosted in Palermo remains problematic (…). He [the Mayor] is extremely open-minded but I hear that the reception centres in the North, even in Veneto, work much better than here (Representative of Trade Union)

The regional government is also criticised by many interviewees for having adopted a very passive approach towards the issue and for not having coordinated the local reception system, despite its formal acceptance of the national Dispersal Plan and despite its competences on the management of unaccompanied minors’ reception:

The regional government was completely absent. I can’t say whether they were shy or fearful, but apart from a few formal authorizations of the creation of new reception centres for unaccompanied minors, which is something under its own competence, we never heard anything from them (…). And they should and could have played a much more important role. It has some legislative competences, and never made use of them, it doesn’t support local governments in any way, it could and should have coordinated the organization of the reception system, other regional governments did so (Deputy Prefect)

Quite remarkably, no official statement or document by the regional government was identified concerning the absence of any redistribution system for unaccompanied migrants across the Italian regions, despite the Sicilian reception system being overwhelmed and unable to provide adequate assistance to children:

The reception system for unaccompanied minors was totally inefficient due to the disproportional number of minors hosted in this region, they were 8,000 three months ago. This imbalance was never addressed. Clearly, the other regions were not interested in favouring any redistribution. But at the same time, I raised this issue at a meeting in Emilia-Romagna a few months ago, and I remember that a senior official of the Emilian regional government then privately came to me and told me that he agreed that I was right but the Sicilian regional government had never raised the issue (Head of Local Research Centre).

The next section will clarify why most party actors in Sicily accepted asylum-seekers’ reception but adopted passive approaches to asylum management.

5.5. Sensemaking.

To address the questions raised by the previous section, this section analyses the interviews conducted with the 27 Sicilian party actors, in order to understand how they make sense of immigration and define their strategies, positions and actions on the issue. I initially focus on the politicisation strategies of three groups of actors identified in Table 5.1, and finally focus on approaches to policymaking.

Why do mayors of the main cities and port towns proactively and publicly adopt pro-migrant stances?

The interview material shows that these mayors’ decisions to adopt pro-migrant stances publicly is largely driven by how they perceive the Sicilian public opinion as ‘welcoming’ towards migrants and by some more strategic motivations.

Focusing events that accomplish pre-existing perceptions, as Kingdon explains (2014:113), are a key condition for these to generate actions. The interview material reveals that, in the case of city and port town mayors, the narrative about Sicilian tolerance was reinforced by several focusing events, indicators, personal experiences, and feedback.

First, some personal experiences powerfully influenced these actors’ sensemaking, constituting the moral basis for the enactment of the narrative on Sicilian tolerance in the present.

These include, on the one hand, recent experiences, such as the direct experience of assisting to migrants’ landing process. All mayors of provincial capitals and port towns mention this as a very strong and harsh experience that powerfully influenced their decisions. A M5S Deputy Mayor explains that ‘it was really heart-breaking, after seeing all that I thought that none of us can choose the place where we were born…therefore how can we not receive these people?’. The mayor of the port towns explains that what he saw reminded him of the pictures of the victims of Nazi Concentration Camps. The same two interviewees also referred to their involvement in the process of distribution and burial of the bodies of migrant’s dead during the journey as another shocking experience.

On the other hand, the defining experience of nearly a century of emigration from Sicily also seems to influence actors’ sensemaking processes, with the experience of stigmatization endured by Southern Italians in Northern Italy fostering a compassionate understanding for asylum-seekers:

I’m a politician since many years and I have a political vision of the current immigration flows. But I make no secret that I also have a personal vision on the issue, influenced by the fact that I have relatives that have been migrants. They had harsh troubles at the beginning (…), I know what ‘reception’ meant to them. Therefore, it’s very easy for me as Sicilian to understand the reasons why these migrants come here…they come here because they are forced to. We have been a people of migration too (PD Mayor, town).

Especially in Northern Italy, we Sicilians have suffered what asylum-seekers are suffering now. Until a few decades ago, in Bolzano, just to give you an example from a personal experience in my family, they did not rent houses to Sicilians, even if they had an employment contract, even if they were very nice people, families (M5S MP).

Other interviewees referred to their sons and relatives living abroad and made direct parallelisms between them and young African migrants.

A second important element is pressures from a very active civil society, particularly in big cities, which pushes actors to adopt pro-migrant narratives. In a context where most party-actors refrain from injecting immigration into the public arena, the Sicilian politics of immigration is mostly left to associations, NGOs and Christian churches, which, as Bassi explains (2014:62) play a crucial role in immigration policy-making. While most interviewees welcome the role played by these NGOs, the four city deputy mayors interviewed admitted that these actors created significant (and, sometimes, uncomfortable) pressures to which they had to respond:

We had to deal with the opposition of the Lega (…) but, even more, with pro-migrant activists, for whom the administration was not doing enough for the asylum-seekers. Sometimes they had very destructive attitudes, some of them tend to always perceive the institutions as something that must be contrasted, regardless of who is leading the institution and what they are doing (…). I could also perceive a strong competition between them, with the result that all of them tried to be in the limelight (…). They tend to consider you responsible of what the central government does, as if you were not doing enough to contrast them (Independent Deputy Mayor, city).

We experienced some pressures, but they were coming from the civil society, from the NGOs, not from public opinion in general. Public opinion did not exert any significant pressure, but some of the NGOs did (PD Deputy Mayor, city).

We have some NGOs that promote human rights that operate in this city and they force us to be always very careful about what we do. And this allowed us to develop a specific type of responses, all together (Independent Deputy Mayor, city).

Third, many interviewees suggest that the enactment of actors’ understanding of Sicilians’ tolerance was also influenced by some identity processes and many interviewees use the narrative on Sicilians’ tolerance to contrast the acceptance of Southern Italian with the intolerance of Northern Italians. As the coordinator of a local NGO explains, ‘the defence of immigration in Sicily has become a matter of identity’. Many mayors point to the concentration of anti-immigrant politics and intolerance in the North by way of contrast to Sicilian tolerance:

Once, in a meeting with other mayors I said that ‘talking about reception and solidarity is very nice but putting them into practice is different’. These mayors were talking about solidarity but then the prefecture sent 20 or 30 asylum-seekers to a big city in the North and they raised hell. Here, we have put the principles of reception and solidarity into practice (PD Deputy Mayor).

This eagerness to compare oneself favourably with the North, to address and avenge unjust treatment and characterizations, is an example of what Cole defines as an ‘ongoing Sicilian reaction to anti-southernism in Italian politics and culture’ (1997:101). It also shows how pro-immigration stances in Sicily develop ‘in relation to internal forms of ‘othering’ of southern Italians’ (Giglioli 2017:749). These dynamics are consistent with Weick’s finding that sensemaking is retrospective, and grounded in identity construction, while identity is often shaped by interactions with others, and can ‘turn out to be an issue of plausibility rather than accuracy’ (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005:416).

Finally, some strategic considerations, enabled by actors’ perceptions of local public opinion, contributed to shape these actors’ politicisation strategies. Without constraints from public opinion, these mayors think that the ‘refugee crisis’ offered an opportunity to develop pro-migrant discourses that are strategically aimed at ‘branding difference’ (Catungal and Leslie 2009) and promoting a new image of their cities. The Mayor of Mazara del Vallo started to celebrate the multicultural status of the town with the aim to rebrand it as a tourist destination and strategic location for cross-Mediterranean relations (Giglioli 2017:758). The Mayor of Palermo declared that ‘there is no city in the world that changed so deeply and widely like Palermo: in the last forty years we went through a tremendous change, we started from being the capital of mafia to being the capital of human rights’ (Marx and Ellyatt 2018). A PD Deputy Mayor explained that he thinks ‘the refugee crisis represented an opportunity for Sicilian cities, to show their capacity to be open to the world, and to be an example for others’. Another deputy mayor explains:

We proposed a model that we want to offer to the others (…) Palermo won a Special Prize as ‘Smart City IBM’ thanks to the ‘Charter of Palermo’. In New York they asked themselves, how is it possible that these Sicilian people, that everybody perceives as being invaded by migrants, rather than complaining, they tell migrants ‘come, and we will try to develop some reception programmes’? They used their time to understand what we were doing, they came to Sicily, they spent one month in Palermo to understand how this model could be exported to other parts of the world (Independent Deputy Mayor, city).

A similar logic seems to apply to the main port villages and towns where migrants were disembarked, although in this latter case the decision to adopt pro-migrant narratives seems to be mostly a defensive strategy, to preserve the image of the municipalities as touristic destinations:

Moving from the premise that this is a little village and that geography gave us this role of virtual border between the North and the South of the world, I really think that recent flows enriched the town from a cultural and social point of view. The only problem we have is that media tend to portray this town as invaded by migrants, which is not true, locals don’t even realise when some migrants are disembarked. But these media campaigns harm us, because we live of tourism (PD Mayor, port town).

Why do most actors adopt strategies of issue avoidance?

The ambiguous stances adopted by most Sicilian party actors, I argue, are revealing of Hall’s concept of ‘deliberate malintegration’ (1984): actors involved in designing migration policies – which are often the object of a range of competing pressures – tend to develop strategies that are reflective ‘of an intentional jumble, or ‘fudging’, of different goals and priorities’ (Geddes and Boswell 2011). While Hall specifically referred to pressures related to competing interests, I argue that these pressures also come from opposite sections of public opinion.

Local public opinion, particularly in rural Sicily, is mostly perceived by local party actors as divided into two groups. Part of the population is perceived to be not sympathetic or hostile to asylum-seekers’ reception. Such hostility, remarkably, is considered by to be caused by economic reasons and the competition at the bottom of the segmented labour market, rather than by security or identity-related concerns. Furthermore, many interviewees report that locals complain that immigrants receive the government attention that they also deserve but cannot get:

*Part of the population* does not understand the complexity of the phenomenon (…). Their hostility depends on the absence of welfare policies that could support families in need. What the ‘underclass’ asks to local governments is the opportunity to be supported and granted a basic income, and each time they make this request, they say, in Sicilian dialect, ‘to the blacks yes, to the whites no’ (M5S Mayor, village)

Here, the locals don’t say that they don’t want asylum-seekers, they say that they must be integrated, that they should work and have a house. But they say they should also have all this. This is the key concept: why them and not me? Why the welfare system is so generous towards migrants but not towards locals? (PD Mayor, town)

Importantly, however, most of the interviewees explain that this opposition very rarely ends up in open protests, and that it seems to be mostly directed towards the national government.

Another part of the population, conversely, is perceived by these actors to be supportive or tolerant towards asylum-seekers’ reception for ideological or religious reasons or because of they see in asylum-seekers’ reception an opportunity of business or employment (something that in bigger – and wealthier – municipalities is much less noticed):

Part of the population sees the potential creation of a reception centre as an opportunity of local development for our village and to create jobs (Independent Mayor, village)

Asylum-seekers reception became an opportunity for several service providers. Initially single reception centres were created, then the importance of asylum-seekers’ reception for the local economy increased even more. Of course, I don’t think that this can or should represent a model of local development for this province, but in fact this is a sector of the economy that can offer some responses to the very high unemployment that is a huge problem here (Far-right Mayor, town).

The presence of a consistent part of the population in favour of asylum-seekers’ reception, for both ideological and economic reasons, is admitted also by the mayor affiliated to the Lega.

These opposing pressures, I argue, produce an enduring tension between the opportunity to offer employment to locals (and meet civil society’s requests) and the fear of people’s hostile reactions:

The choice [to create or not a reception centre] is a difficult one. Clearly this sector created job opportunities that we didn’t have before (…) creating a new demand for high-skilled labour. Yet, on the other hand, probably we had job losses in agriculture, since many asylum-seekers are now employed and exploited by local employers in the countryside (M5S Mayor, village).

While these opposite pressures emerge in the whole region, they lead to different outputs and outcomes in different areas. In Mineo, which hosted 4,000 asylum-seekers in 2017, these pressures turned into harsh tensions among locals who benefitted from the presence of the huge reception centre – which offered jobs to hundreds of locals, in a province characterised by high unemployment and emigration rates – and those complaining because of the problems of law and order that the centre created:

The presence of the CARA generated within the village a mechanism of self-destruction. Because here the unemployment rate is high, many young people have to leave, and their parents were ready to do everything in order for this not to happen. Therefore, when they knew that their neighbours’ son got a job in the CARA, they became extremely jealous and started fighting against each other, with lawsuits, denunciations and whatever. There was a never-ending war, with citizens one against the other, which has powerfully destabilized the village (Mayor, village).

In such a situation – and despite forensic evidence that members of the Rome-based gang ‘Mafia Capitale’ had infiltrated the management of the centre – most party-actors decided not to take any position on the CARA in the wake of the local elections of 2018.

In other areas the underlying tension between the economic opportunities offered by asylum-seekers’ reception and the fear of people’s reactions led mayors to make decisions on the creation of reception centres by balancing the different interests at stake. Sometimes, in little villages, when they perceived a strong opposition by locals, they decided to oppose the creation of reception centres. More often, they accepted or informally promoted the creation of new centres or the renewal of pre-existing agreements with the Prefectures:

We have not faced the decision to renew or not our adherence to the SPRAR system yet. But I think that when we will have to discuss about that, we will have to make same careful evaluations. We have to make sure to keep the number of asylum-seekers under control but also keep in mind that these centres offer job opportunities to many locals, and we cannot disappoint the expectations of the people that work in the reception system (Far-right Mayor, town).

When promoting the creation of these centres, mayors seem to be very careful not to make the choice appear to be an open matter of choice, something that is decided upon and that therefore entails responsibility.

Furthermore, some civil society actors suggest that these decisions are significantly influenced by the possibility that reception centres offer to develop new patronage relationships:

It is quite clear that mayors are willing to create reception centres because, in a context of economic stagnation, these centres can offer jobs to several people. This is always a key element of their decisions. And I don’t think this is scandalous per se, it is part of the effects of migration flows in broader terms, the fact that they have the potential to radically transform a socio-economic context (…) Some decision-makers understand that. For other mayors the only element that matters is the opportunity to offer jobs to their people in a clientelist manner. This component is very strong. And very often it gets mixed with a genuine tendency to be welcoming with migrants. Everything is complex in Sicily, it’s never black and white (Director of a local research centre).

To sum up, these actors’ ambiguous stances and strategies of issue avoidance are linked to their perception of these competing interests:

Immigration is a very slippery slope, from a political point of view. When you openly speak about this topic, you know that by doing that you disappoint some and you please others. Therefore, typically, you tend not to take side, or to only refer to the national level, avoiding linking the issue to the regional level and to face the issue in regional debates, the last electoral campaign for the regional elections is a clear example of that. Certainly, the regional government has very few competences on this matter, but nobody spoke about that, and the reason is that it is clear to everybody that this is a very slippery slope, where you can be perceived as a racist populist or as the one who takes care of migrants rather than poor Sicilians (M5S Regional MP).

Why potential anti-migrant political entrepreneurs do not mobilise the immigration issue?

The case of those actors affiliated to centre-right and far-right parties that frame the effects of migration in securitarian terms but do not take actions to inject the issue into the local political debate suggests that problem recognition is not sufficient by itself to place an item on the agenda. As Kingdon (2014:114) explains, problems abound and decision-makers ‘pay serious attention to only a fraction of them’, while several considerations independent of problem solving prompt politicians to act or not.

These actors mostly perceive locals to be harshly hostile to migrants – as a centre-right MP explains ‘our traditional attitude to welcome those who are suffering has turned into widespread racist and xenophobic attitudes’ – and tend to dismiss the importance of asylum-seekers’ reception in the local economy. Other elements, therefore, I argue, explain their passive stances.

First, actors’ perceptions of the salience of the migration issue. The lack of anti-migrant protests seems to lead these actors to underestimate such salience: they are rather convinced that the widespread anti-migrant sentiments that they perceive are unlikely to generate protests or gain political expression, influencing people’s voting, because electoral preferences are shaped by other more salient issues. This seems a widespread belief, both among actors adopting securitarian frames and others:

Clearly, it is important to coordinate a strict opposition to any attempt to increase migration flows to our region, but we cannot transform local electoral campaigns into a struggle around an issue which is marginal (Centre-right MP).

Asylum is not perceived as a relevant issue in Sicily, in this region the real problems are others (…). In a context where public transports are very inefficient or non-existent, waste management and access to potable water are big problems, people do not have a house or a job, well, in this context immigration is necessarily a marginal or less important issue (M5S MP).

The impact of immigration on Sicilians’ perceptions, moreover, is perceived to be limited by the fact that most migrants do not aim to settle in Sicily:

I hear people complaining [about the asylum-seekers] but, since Sicily is a poor region, the impact of these flows is less strong (…). Some migrants commit little crimes, or beg in the streets, but the situation is much worse in richer regions, where they want to settle to develop their legal or illegal activities. The only ones who settle here are those that don’t want to work and keep doing nothing. So here, where the situation is difficult for everybody, the effects of immigration are limited, all honest politicians in Sicily should tell you this, if they overemphasise such effects, they are bullshits. I tell you this as somebody who is harshly against immigration (Centre-right MP).

Second, these actors seem to be afraid of the negative consequences that using anti-immigrant frames publicly might have on the Sicilian electorate. The catholic religion is depicted by most centre-right politicians as a foundational element of the Sicilian identity and, as a left-wing MP explains, constraints them, leading them to think that adoption of anti-migrant stances is not politically convenient. A centre-right MP adopting securitarian frames admits that ‘it is hard to say openly the things I tell you, because if you do so you are butchered in the local media’. This and other quotes suggest the perceived presence of a strong ‘anti-populist norm’ in Sicily dictating ‘that politicians should not seek to exploit racial, ethnic or immigration-related fears in order to win votes’ (Freeman 1995:885).

Third, these perceptions seem to be interlinked with some interest group pressure. Conservative parties are traditionally close to the Sicilian economic elite and landowners, who has an incentive to attract migrants to offer them low-skilled (and low paid) jobs, mostly in agriculture:

It is very common here to employ non-EU migrants in houses and enterprises, permanently or seasonally. They are employed not only to carry out tasks that locals don’t want anymore, but also because they do it better, with higher dedication and greater punctuality, and certainly, on average, at a lower cost for employers (Far-right mayor).

As a centre-left MP explains, therefore, ‘right-wing politicians in Sicily, with the exception of the Lega, have no incentives to frame migrants as a problem or an enemy, rather they tend to employ and exploit them in their business’.

In sum, the absence of anti-migrant protests, the strong Catholic identity, the apparently apolitical reaction of Sicilians towards asylum-seeking flows, and the close links between the conservative political elite and the economic elite, frustrate and prevent the emergence of anti-migrant political entrepreneurs in Sicily. Importantly, as already mentioned, actors’ strategic decisions not to politicise migration also prevent the emergence of anti-migrant protests, which reinforces preconceptions of Sicilians’ tolerance, representing a powerful ‘feedback that gives information on current performance’ (Kingdon 2014:113). This connection between dynamics of production of outputs and outcomes and frame emergence is explored in Chapter 7.

Why do actors that accept asylum-seekers’ reception adopt passive approaches to action?

The sensemaking processes described so far contribute to clarify why the prevalence of positive or neutral stances towards asylum-seekers’ reception does not lead to actions and concrete attempts to make the reception system work efficiently.

In the case of the second group of actors, this is strictly linked to the framing of asylum-seekers’ reception as a source of jobs and the perception of a split public opinion, which leads mayors to accept asylum-seekers’ reception but delegate any management responsibility to the Prefecture and service providers, not to be seen spending time on asylum management by the locals. Moreover, the inefficiencies of the reception system seem to be linked to this dominant economic dynamics: saving resources dedicated to the provision of services to asylum-seekers allows service providers to boost their gains and hire more employees, while the presence of unqualified personnel is the outcome of hiring procedures based on clientelist dynamics.

Importantly, the perceived importance of the effects of asylum-seekers’ reception on local employment also tends to discourage actions to ensure the well-functioning of the reception system by both local institutions and the Prefectures. When asked about some difficult and debated decisions that he had to make during the ‘asylum crisis’, a Deputy Prefect replies:

Yes, many difficult decisions had to be taken, especially when we had to decide whether to sanction service provides that were not working well, or whether to close or not a reception centre…because this means not only moving all the asylum-seekers, which is somehow a minor problem, but also that you might have tens or sometimes hundreds of workers that would lose their job as a consequence of your decision, which is another problem that as Prefecture you have to consider. These were harsh decisions for us to make (Deputy Prefect).

Furthermore, especially in those areas where this clientelist management of reception centres led to judicial investigations and public scandals, these widespread practices seem to also have had the effect of discouraging some local governments that would otherwise be open to create reception centres for ideological reasons:

After my recent election we are working in order to elaborate a strategy that would allow us to develop a well-functioning reception centre. We want the whole process to be as transparent as possible and do things well. Because one of the arguments that those that oppose asylum-seekers’ reception tend to raise – sometimes instrumentally but often not so – is that there is a high risk to end up working with service providers whose activities are not transparent and that do not work well. The selection of the service provider is crucially important and not easy. The consequence of a wrong choice can be a public scandal and negative reactions by the locals (PD Mayor).

We had a number of public scandals in this province, and this makes us extremely careful in deciding to give my approval for the creation of reception centres and definitely we would not accept without knowing who are the service providers (…) We are clearly influenced by what happened, it’s an environmental conditioning, you are afraid to end up involved in mechanisms that you cannot control. It’s unfortunate because, as you say in Sicilian dialect ‘*pa u tintu pate u bonu’*, meaning that the good ones that could do some good things do not act because of the bad ones (Mayor, M5S).

These dynamics do not clarify, still, why also the mayors of the main cities and port towns – who do not perceive significant economic effects of asylum-seekers’ reception – do not take actions that could improve the efficiency of the reception system. I argue that the interview material seems to reveal that this is due to the fact that the efficiency of the reception system is not a necessary component for the ideologically-driven and ‘branding’ strategy adopted by local governments. Mayors, in other words, are much more inclined to invest resources on initiatives that are more visible and functional to foster their pro-migrant narratives and reach locals. In other words, they seem not to invest resources and efforts in reception and integration policies, because their outputs are much less visible to the wider public and their pro-migrant stances are largely a response to perceived stances by public opinion and civil society rather than the outcome of ideology-driven goals. This, despite the pro-migrant stances adopted making it difficult for these mayors to openly refuse to accept asylum-seekers, which, at the peak of the ‘refugee crisis’, put their local reception systems under pressure.

Importantly, consistent with this argument, many resources were invested to ensure the efficiency of the disembarkation process and first-line reception, which attract the attention of national and international media. Most interviewees agree that the disembarkation procedures, often carried out at the presence of local authorities, became extremely efficient, allowing mayors ‘to take credit for the Sicilian brand of tolerance’ (Cole 1997:132):

Orlando made pressure on national authorities in order to start using the port of Palermo to disembark rescued migrants, and for sure it was a praiseworthy initiative. But they didn’t care about the implications of that. I give you an example: yesterday some hundred migrants were disembarked in Palermo and the Questura was closed because of that. This meant that all asylum-seekers and immigrants that had an appointment yesterday to receive a residence permit were notified that they have to come back in five months (Representative of Trade Union).

## 5.6. SNA.

This section applies SNA to understand something more about actors’ relations, the organization of the Sicilian asylum governance network and its impact on asylum policy outputs.

Figure 5.2 provides some initial insights on actors’ interactions within the Sicilian asylum governance system. As in the previous chapter, the figure shows a condensed visualisation of the asylum governance network, where the strength of ties depends on the frequency of exchanges between groups of actors[[29]](#footnote-29). Mayors are divided in the following four groups: mayors of the provincial capitals, mayors of port towns, mayors of (other) towns, and mayors of villages. The figure shows that, as in Veneto, the conversation is very fragmented, with only a small percentage of ties being activated. Node size in the figure highlights the main *switchers* in the Sicilian governance system, which include: mayors (of both provincial capitals and towns), the Prefectures, and local NGOs (the group of service providers in Sicily is a very broad and heterogeneous).

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| *Figure 5.2. Asylum Governance Network in Sicily. Weight indicates frequency of exchange (measured on a scale of 1-4). The size of nodes indicates betweenness centrality.* |
| *Immagine che contiene mappa, testo  Descrizione generata automaticamente* |

As shown in Figure 5.3, among the main *switchers*, only the Prefecture and town mayors act in the governance network as *programmers*. Very remarkably, Sicily is the only region where the regional government was not a programmer of the regional governance system.

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| *Figure 5.3. Programmers in the Sicilian governance network. Weight indicates frequency of interaction. Node size indicates weighted in-degree centrality.* |
| *Immagine che contiene testo, mappa  Descrizione generata automaticamente* |

Figure 5.4, finally – where the size of nodes is proportional to their weighted out-degree centrality –identifies so-called *mobilisers*, showing that actors adopting the most proactive approaches in the governance system are the mayors of provincial capitals and port towns, local NGOs and the Prefectures.

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| *Figure 5.4. Mobilisers in the Sicilian governance network. Weight indicates frequency of interaction. Node size indicates weighted out-degree centrality. Mobilisers are marked in red.* |
| *Immagine che contiene testo, mappa  Descrizione generata automaticamente* |

As in Veneto, the Prefectures therefore emerge as the most central actors in the governance system and the only ones that act at the same time as programmers, switchers and mobilisers, while both the ANCI and the regional government are very marginalised in the network. While mayors of the main provincial capitals and port towns were proactive in launching symbolic, visible, advocacy initiatives in favour of migrants’ rights, this was not coupled by more material actions aimed at increasing the coordination of asylum-seekers’ reception. As one of them explains ‘we had very few relationships with the neighbouring municipalities, because there are no projects in common on migration-related issues, each municipality here has its own policy, and develops its own projects’ (Mayor, port town).

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| *Figure 5.5. Framing consonance within the Sicilian network. Weight indicates framing consonance (measured on a scale of 1-5). Node size indicates betweenness centrality. Colours indicate subnetworks.* |
| *Immagine che contiene testo, mappa  Descrizione generata automaticamente* |

Figure 5.5 provides complementary insights on this by mapping the network according to the degree of consonance of actors’ approaches. Unlike in previous networks, here political actors are grouped according to their political affiliation. The figure crucially reveals that, unlike the Venetian one, the Sicilian governance network cannot be easily compartmentalized into clearly cohesive sub-networks or clusters of actors, and due to the low modularity, subsequent applications of the software’s ‘community detection’ algorithm provided different partitions of the network. In the compartmentalisation proposed in Figure 5.5, the network is divided into five closely intertwined clusters, meaning that nodes’ likelihood of connecting to members of their cluster is often not much higher than the likelihood for them to connect to members of other clusters. The blue and purple clusters include mayors of the main Sicilian cities and port towns and several advocates of asylum-seekers’ reception and migrants’ rights, including NGOs, the Catholic Church, trade unions and some left-wing actors. The same clusters also include international actors: EU agencies, international organizations, city networks and international journalists. This is partly connected to the fact that the ports of the main Sicilian cities were used to disembark rescued migrants during the ‘refugee crisis’, and partly to the strategies of the mayors of these municipalities to use the ‘refugee crisis’ to promote a positive image of their region abroad. Actors involved in the management of the reception system are instead included in the green and orange clusters, in the right and low corners of the graph. These subnetworks include mayors of towns and villages, the ANCI, service providers and the key national institutions involved in the organization of the reception system. A fifth, small cluster of actors (in dark green) includes two of the actors that adopted securitarian frames and are more critical towards asylum-seekers’ reception (a Lega mayor and a FI MP). As the figure shows, these actors have very few relationships with all the other actors in the network, which confirms that they mostly adopt passive stances towards public opinion. Overall, the prevalence of thick ties in the graph suggest a good convergence of views within and between different clusters of actors.

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| *Figure 5.6. Conflicting Views in the Sicilian Governance System. Edges indicate discussions and divergent views (i.e. weight <2.5). Node size indicates in-degree centrality. Nodes that are the target of the highest number of conflicting ties are marked in red.* |
| *Immagine che contiene testo  Descrizione generata automaticamente* |

Figure 5.6 better illustrates conflicting views in the network and highlights those actors that engage in the highest number of conflicting interactions. Overall, the figure suggests that the level of conflict within the network is very low: only 13 nodes out of 51 are involved in at least one conflicting relationship (meaning that 75 percent of nodes have no conflicting interactions), and only ten per cent of interactions in the network (25 edges) are conflicting. Only eight edges (three percent) describe high levels of divergence of views[[30]](#footnote-30).

The Prefecture and the Questura are the target of the highest number of conflicting relations, but they are mainly criticised by pro-migrant actors not directly involved in asylum management, which criticise Prefects’ inactions in front of the inefficiencies of the reception system. Conversely, there is no conflictual tie between the Prefectures and local and regional governments and institutions. As a Deputy Prefect puts it, ‘we never had problems with mayors, we dialogue with them, we try to avoid conflicts, and at the end solutions are found’. Overall, very few political actors appear in the figure, which explains the very low political contestation of asylum governance in the region.

In sum, the very low polarization, low levels of conflict and high consonance of views among actors, and the passivity of actors with divergent views, contributes to explain the low levels of political contestation of asylum in Sicily. However, as in Veneto, the coordination of the network – and the organization of the regional reception system – is mainly delegated to the Prefectures, while most discussions on asylum-related issues are centred on advocacy more than on management. Remarkably, city mayors interacted much more with advocacy actors and international organizations than with the institutions involved in the management of the reception system.

The low density and lack of coordination by political institutions contributes to explain why, even if so many municipalities adhered to the SPRAR system, asylum management was so inefficient. The non-politicisation of asylum governance in the region provided incentives to municipalities to adhere to the SPRAR system – which allows them to directly manage public funds – and offered the chance to frame this decision as a technical decision. Most local governments, but also the other institutions involved – conscious that asylum-seekers’ reception offered job and business opportunities to locals – adopt very passive stances and leave the management of reception centres to service providers. The networks also show that, outside the main Sicilian cities, very few advocacy actors are involved in asylum governance. Asylum management, therefore, seems not to be subject to any public scrutiny, from either pro-migrant or anti-migrant policy entrepreneurs.

The SNA also contributes to explain why the emergency system, managed by the Prefectures, was mostly organized around big reception structures. Considering the strong incentives for service providers to open big reception hubs rather than small reception structures, the creation of big centres in few municipalities represented the easiest solution available to the Prefectures and the most attractive one for service providers, in the absence of any coordination of asylum-seekers’ dispersal carried out by political institutions (mayors, the ANCI or the regional government). These decisions were also enabled by the lack of protests or opposition of the local population (with the partial exception of the ‘CARA di Mineo’):

In the mountains close to this city, there are municipalities where there are many asylum-seekers, in some cases there are almost more asylum-seekers than locals. But asylum-seekers’ reception is a source of income and locals don’t complain, they are even happy, and welcoming. These are the effects of the poverty of this area (MP, M5S).

## 5.7. Conclusion.

This chapter has analysed dynamics of regional asylum governance in Sicily, providing interesting insights about why asylum governance is not politicised in the region and about why such absence of political contestation did not produce an efficient management of asylum-seekers’ reception. Both outputs are very counterintuitive, since, on the one hand, Sicily was dramatically exposed to the ‘refugee crisis’, and, on the other hand, it might have been assumed that lower levels of political contestation of asylum could have produced a more efficient reception system there.

By explaining the lack of political contestation of migration mainly by referring to party elites’ understandings and decision-making processes, this chapter has questioned some assumptions of the existing literature on the politicisation of migration. Such literature tends to ignore the reasoning of political actors to conclude that political contestation is a (necessary) outcome of increasing migration flows, anti-migrant attitudes and/or pressures from the far-right. Conversely, this chapter has shown that it is not self-evident that an increase in migration flows, in the salience of migration and social mobilisations, lead to political contestation of migration or initiate reactive policy responses. As explained by Cohen, March and Olsen (1972:16), the relationship between problems and solutions is not necessarily smooth-flowing and the Sicilian case demonstrates that a mere focus on objective and measurable outcomes is insufficient to catch the complexity of actors’ decision-making and of the politicisation process. Sicily was centrally affected by the ‘refugee crisis’ and experienced an increase in anti-migrant attitudes and in the salience of migration, but, despite that, most party-actors refer to migration in public discourses and during electoral campaigns. The only issue entrepreneurs (the mayors of the main cities) adopt multiculturalist frames and promote a very unusual type of ‘positive political contestation’ of migration.

Furthermore, the analysis has demonstrated that party elites’ decisions to inject or not migration in the public debate are crucially driven by actors’ understandings of the effects of migration on public opinion. As in Veneto, evidence about public attitudes on migration is strongly embedded in a narrative story: party-actors’ understandings of these attitudes are powerfully influenced by preconceptions about Sicilian tolerance, i.e. the widespread idea that the Sicilian population is welcoming, or tolerant, or not willing to mobilise against asylum-seekers, and that this acceptance is justified by Sicily’s history and culture. These understandings, disconnected from the reality suggested by available opinion polls, powerfully shape the way actors frame the situation around them. This chapter therefore shows that the way politicians frame problems and make attributions is not a mere straightforward assessment of facts.

The perceived absence of pressures from public opinion, then, led party-actors to develop different courses of action based on the attributions that they make of the situation. In the main cities the attributions that mayors make are largely shaped by pressures coming from civil society actors such as the very active NGOs and Christian churches. In rural Sicily, instead, actors’ strategies are largely shaped by the economic interests linked to the increasing importance of asylum-seekers’ reception in the stagnant economy. These attributions lead mayors and other party-actors in the main cities to adopt radical pro-migrant narratives and preventing potential anti-migrant entrepreneurs, particularly in the countryside, from publicly using anti-migrant frames. The majority of actors outside the main cities adopt issue-avoidance strategies.

Finally, sensemaking and SNA suggest some possible explanations about why the regional governance system produced very inefficient outputs and outcomes, despite the absence of any political contestation in the region. While actors in the main cities and in rural Sicily were mostly interested, respectively, in the production of symbolic and discursive outputs, and in the economic implications of asylum-seekers’ reception, no institution took the lead in coordinating the organization of the reception system in the region. Asylum management was largely delegated to the Prefectures and directly to service providers, with very scarce controls carried out by local authorities.

# CHAPTER 6 - TUSCANY

The Tuscan asylum governance system, compared to those of most Italian regions, produced efficient policy outputs and outcomes. The regional reception system was organized around small reception structures uniformly distributed across the whole regional territory, and the region experienced very few organized anti-migrant protests despite the growth of anti-immigration parties. This chapter aims to understand how these efficient outputs and outcomes were produced.

As in previous chapters, after presenting the cast of characters, I analyse actors’ understandings and actions, framing and sensemaking processes. Initially, in sections 6.2 to 6.5, I focus on actors affiliated to centre-left parties, which control the vast majority of local and regional authorities in the region. I specifically aim to clarify, on the one hand, why, how and with which aims did these actors create and implement an efficient model of asylum-seekers’ reception, during the first phase of the Italian ‘asylum crisis’. On the other hand, I examine the impact on framing and sensemaking of the emergence of new perspectives and the growing salience of immigration in Italy, in the second part of the ‘crisis’. After 2017 the dominant position of centre-left parties within the governance system was seriously threatened, for the first time after decades, by the emergence of anti-immigration parties (the LN and, to a minor extent, FdI) and the M5S. Then, in section 6.6, I shift the focus to these new actors, in order to understand how they frame and make sense of asylum-seeking migration. Finally, in Section 6.7, I analyse the key features of the Tuscan asylum governance network and draw some conclusions about the impact of key network features on policy outputs and outcomes.

The analysis leads to four main findings:

* Key centre-left actors in the Tuscan asylum governance system, do not use ‘public reaction frames’ to describe the effects of asylum-seeking migration in the region, and rather tend to frame such effects in more technical terms. Despite that, during the first part of the ‘refugee crisis’, actors’ perceptions that locals were progressive and supportive or neutral towards asylum-seekers – shaped by available narratives and identity processes – *enabled* centre-left actors to adopt an interventionist approach in the asylum policy field.
* Such a proactive approach was crucially influenced by a very well-established regional script – legacy of the ‘red political subculture’ that characterised Tuscany after the Second World War (Floridia 2014:77) – based on the ideas that interventionist policy approaches tend to produce efficient outputs and generate political consensus, and that deeply rooted civil society organizations guaranteed the successful reproduction of these dynamic.
* Third, and crucially, this chapter illustrates that, despite the many changes occurred in the Tuscan political system since 2017, there still seems to be a fairly stable transmission mechanism, that leads to the persistency of frames, sensemaking processes and actions. In the second phase of the ‘asylum crisis’, centre-left actors perceive a dramatic and quick deterioration of public attitudes to immigration but, despite that, their strategies and actions are resistant to external shocks. I argue that such persistency of frames and actions is related to the persistency of a ‘sensible environment’ – the deeply rooted ideas about the relationship between policy-making and public support, legacies of the ‘red political subculture’ – and the very strong political identity by centre-left actors, which fosters ideological approaches to respond to new challenges.
* Finally, SNA shows that the Tuscan asylum governance network was highly centralized and dominated by the regional government and ANCI, which actively coordinated the regional reception system. The central role taken by these institutions seems to be the key element that led to efficient policy outputs and outcomes.

6.1. Cast of Characters.

The Tuscan political system until the 1990s represented the ‘ideal-typical case of the red political subculture’ (Floridia 2014:77) and was characterised by an extraordinary electoral continuity. For 40 years, its local and regional governments were controlled by left-wing parties, which were ‘able to ‘occupy’ the local public scene’, managing from time to time to ‘co-opt new leadership resources from civil society, preventing the emergence of an alternative “political class”’(Ramella 2000:20). The Communist Party, in particular, was the ‘central element’ of a broad ‘constellation of civil society, political and institutional actors’ (Floridia 2014:77).

Despite the decline of political subcultures in Italy, Tuscany demonstrated a surprising electoral continuity. After 1991, the regional government and most local governments remained uninterruptedly under the control of centre-left parties (Caciagli 2011:98) and in 2017 most local governments were still controlled by the PD and its allies (Figure 6.1)[[31]](#footnote-31). Importantly, most Tuscan PD actors come from the communist tradition. Thanks to the popularity of the former Mayor of Florence and then Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, the ‘centrist’ component of the party grew in the region and, since 2013, a few mayors close to Renzi were elected across the region (Vanni 2013).

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| *Figure 6.1. Number of Tuscan municipalities controlled by the different parties in early 2017.* |
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*Source: figure created by the author, data from comuniverso.it.*

The few mayors supported by the centre-right coalition were ‘centrist’ mayors close to FI. Since the 2015 regional elections, however, the LN – which before had played a very marginal role in the political system – suddenly emerged as the main party of the ‘centre-right’ coalition. Crucially, in 2016, the party won the municipal elections in the town of Cascina, close to Pisa.

During the ‘crisis’, the M5S also emerged as a new important outsider party. Crucially, in 2014 the party won the municipal election in Livorno, the third city of Tuscany and a historic stronghold of the radical left. Both the local governments of Cascina and Livorno were popularly identified as agents of change, disrupting long-held ‘red fortresses’. In 2017, municipal elections were held in three provincial capitals, leading to the election of another M5S mayor in Carrara and a FdI mayor (supported by the LN) in Pistoia.

The sample of interviewees reflects this power balance within the region (see Chapter 3). All interviews quoted in this chapter were conducted between December 2018 and January 2019.

## 6.2. Frame Analysis.

This section analysis actors’ understandings of the effects of asylum-seekers’ reception, with a specific focus on centre-left actors, while analysis of LN and M5S actors’ understandings is conducted in section 6.6.

As illustrated in Table 6.1, when replying to questions about the effects of asylum-seekers’ reception most Tuscan centre-left actors frame the arrival of asylum-seekers in a rather ‘technical’ way, as a situation that required specific policy solutions, rather than as a situation of ‘crisis’. Remarkably, only a small number of actors describe asylum-seekers as a burden for local governments and none of them identifies problems in asylum management as a major effect. Very few centre-left actors refer to public reactions, either in a positive or in a negative way. When asked specifically about public opinion, most of them replied that, particularly until the first half of 2016, effects of the ‘refugee crisis’ on public attitudes were not relevant and not visible. Tuscans were widely perceived as tolerant or at least ‘neutral’ towards asylum-seekers, and no protests were organized against asylum-seekers:

In this town we never had any conflict or any protest event or things like that. The reality is that we have managed to govern the phenomenon, in a positive atmosphere which favoured asylum-seekers’ reception (PD Mayor)

I don’t say that the local population was extremely welcoming, but they were substantially neutral and ready to accept these asylum-seekers. Neutrality is the word that best describes the overall social and political climate, there was a general predisposition to receive and host asylum-seekers. It was the same reaction that we had when we hosted earthquake victims from Southern Italy: there were people in need that came to us, the fact that they came from Nigeria rather than from Italy was totally irrelevant (PD Mayor).

An interviewee even reports that a mayor of a neighbouring village that refused to host some asylum-seekers was harshly criticised by his citizens. Importantly, actors’ responses also suggest that public attitudes to immigration in Tuscany are perceived as influenceable by local policymakers, because locals are expected to reward local governments that prove capable to elaborate efficient policy responses.

Many interviewees, however, tend to identify a sudden change and a dramatic and quick deterioration of these attitudes starting from 2016:

There has been a significant change. In 2014, I would say 80 percent of the population in this city supported asylum-seekers’ reception, and there was a residual, structural, 20 percent that was hostile to asylum-seekers reception. Then asylum-seekers reception started to be framed as a matter of security (…), and these percentages changed. Let’s say now we have 70 percent against, and 30 percent in favour (Deputy Mayor, PD).

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| *Table 6.1. Frame analysis: how interviewees in Tuscany frame the effects of asylum-seeking migration.* | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
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|  |  |  | ***Interviewees (Political Actors only)***  In bold: mayors/deputy mayors; in italics: actors based in provincial capitals. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|  |  |  | *PD1* | *PD2* | ***PD3*** | **PD4** | *PD5* | **PD6** | **PD7** | **PD8** | **ICL1** | **ICL2** | *ICL3* | ***LEFT1*** | **LEFT2** | *LEFT3* |  | ***M5S1*** | ***M5S2*** | *M5S3* | M5S4 |  | LN1 |
| **Effects on Security** | Problems of Law and Order |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Problems for Public Health |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Economic Effects** (labour and public finance) | Negative economic effects |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Positive economic effects |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Administrative Frames** | Burden for Local Authorities, Institutional Tensions |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Corruption, Mismanagement, Infiltration of organized crime |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **No effect** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Political Effects** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Public Reaction Frames** | Negative reactions of the local population |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Positive reactions of the local population |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Cultural or Demographic Effects** | Positive socio-cultural effects |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Negative socio-cultural effects |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

Importantly, unlike PD actors in Veneto, most PD and centre-left party actors in Tuscany are convinced that Tuscans are not *a priori* hostile to migrants. The growing hostility towards asylum-seekers is perceived to be driven, on the one hand, by the political propaganda of the Lega, conveyed through social media and national mainstream media, and, on the other hand, by the consequences of the economic crisis:

The magnitude of the problem has been outrageously overestimated (…) The perception that people have of this phenomenon is completely unrelated to the effective existence of this problem. There are social phenomena, other issues in local government, which are much more important and are completely ignored by the people and the media. Asylum-seekers’ reception is an issue that keeps having no economic relevance, no relevance for public order, at least in my city. This hostility was artificially created, inducted, by those parties that aimed to increase their consensus influencing voters’ opinions (Mayor, PD).

Political institutions must act to guarantee social rights to our citizens. If they fail to do so, they lead to the emergence of conflicts among groups of people in need. It is only because people are unemployed or perceive that their rights to having a house and having free access to the health system are not guaranteed that their dissatisfaction turns into hostility against the asylum-seekers (Regional MP, left-wing).

## 6.3. Frame Emergence.

Why do centre-left actors in Tuscany, unlike their colleagues in Sicily and Veneto, not perceive any effect of asylum-seekers’ reception on public opinion, despite opinion polls suggesting that Tuscans’ attitudes to immigration are as negative as in the other Italian regions? And why do actors perceive such a quick change in public attitudes, which is not supported by any objective evidence, as shown in Chapter 2? I crucially argue that, as in the other two regions, actors’ understandings of public attitudes to immigration in Tuscany are linked to pre-existing and deeply rooted preconceptions about local public opinion.

In order to develop this argument, it is important to refer to what the existing literature tells us about the relationship between elites and the local population in the red political subculture.

Ramella (2000:7) suggests that the red political subculture promoted a specific form of ‘civic culture’, the main component of which was expressed in a form of localism and ‘local civicness’, ‘linked to values of solidarity and openness toward the external world’ (p.19). Such ‘civil culture’, according to the scholar, led to the creation of ‘an upper-middle class public opinion, which expresses forms of solidarity and civic participation’ (p.16). Since the early 1990s, many scholars assessed whether this component of the red political subculture survived the disappearance of the Communist Party and whether the traditional organizational framework was still able to guarantee an adequate reproduction of this traditional ‘civicness’. Despite some arguing that substantial aspects of this local civicness continued to be reproduced – such as the diffusion and strong organization of associations and high levels of ‘both visible and invisible participation’ (Floridia 2010) – most scholars agree that it experienced a deep crisis. Ramella himself (2010:312) argues that values of the red subculture such as inclusiveness, solidarity and equality – which ‘had a strong ideological connotation’ – have undergone ‘a creeping change, transforming themselves into social values based solely on membership in the local community’. Caciagli (2011:103) points out that, in Tuscany, the political culture changed and this implied the ‘weakening of forms of social integration’ and ‘the growth of individualism and fragmentation’ in the society. Economic globalisation and growing immigration flows, since the 1990s ‘exposed local governments and welfare systems to increasing demands for social protection’ (Ramella 2010:310).

The interview material suggests that the reason why most of the centre-left interviewees describe Tuscan public opinion as not hostile towards asylum-seekers before 2017 is exactly this dominant ‘local civicness’, suggesting a strong ‘anchoring bias’:

My town is different, people traditionally give great attention to the values of democracy and solidarity, and has a strong presence of associations, it cannot be compared to other areas of this country where racism and fear of immigration are particularly strong (ICL Mayor).

Initially, there was still a strong dichotomy between “left” and “right”. Those that came from a leftist culture were the majority and they understood, they were sympathetic with asylum-seekers (…). Only the few people that were not left-wing were against immigration (PD Deputy Mayor).

There is a strong civic sensitivity, which I think comes from our history, especially in the countryside where we still have strong interpersonal relations that resisted on time’ (ICL Mayor).

Importantly, the perceived persistence of the ‘local civicness’ is fostered by the activism of Tuscan civil society organizations (see section 5) which contributed to provide to centre-left actors a reassuring or false idea of ‘the public’.

A second component of the traditional ‘civic culture’, Ramella (2000:7) points out, refers to ‘the political matrix of local civicness’, rooted in the institutional network formed by the Communist party and its collateral organisations, which resulted in ‘the political construction of a collective identity’. Such a strong, shared, political identity and the presence of an organizational network that allowed its reproduction guaranteed to the Tuscan left a high ‘electoral fidelity linked to a strong party allegiance’ (Ibid.). For decades the Tuscan political system was characterised by a very high percentage of ‘allegiance voters’, who identified with left-wing parties and voted for them with continuity, regardless of the nature of electoral competition (Parisi and Pasquino 1977). Such a stable relationship between voters and parties persisted after 1991, thanks to a combination of ‘family and locally-based forms of socialization’, the ‘adhesion to new cultural trends fuelled by the channels of mass communication’ and ‘increasing levels of education’ (Ramella 2000:17). According to many scholars, this electoral continuity hid important transformations in citizens’ political attitudes and in the bases for political consensus to left-wing parties (p.5). The vote for left-wing parties – Caciagli points out (2011:98) – became ‘more autonomous’ from traditional forms of political and ideological identification and mobilization, and much more linked to local policies and the personality of the candidates, which made the consensus for left-wing parties more unstable.

Despite these changes, the interview material suggests that many centre-left actors describe public opinion in Tuscany – at least before 2016 – as still characterized by a strong leftist identity and loyalty to the values of the red political subculture:

Despite the recent changes, Tuscany is a leftist region. The left here is deeply rooted in the conscience, in the families, in the individuals. With the passing of time, Tuscans and Tuscan parties seem to be less aware of that. But this tradition persists (Member of Regional Government, PD).

The fabric of the society here is different, people are left-wing, if you look at the electoral results you see that in this area left and centre-left parties at the last national elections got almost 60 percent of the votes (ICL Mayor).

The conviction that public attitudes to immigration are easily influenced by local policymakers seems to be also related to this rooted trust and fidelity of the electorate:

You must govern well when you deal with immigration-related issues, because the topic is clearly conflictual. But if your interventions work and do not create problems, then this potential for conflict vanishes in the long-term (Member of Regional Government, PD).

Importantly, the absence of anti-migrant protests in Tuscany provided a powerful feedback that reinforced these assessments (‘accessibility bias’):

While in other regions the growth of the LN and its anti-immigration propaganda had devastating effects (…) I cannot remember any significant problem in the management of the reception system here. I cannot remember protests or citizens’ committees that opposed the creation of reception centres, maybe really few and isolated cases (MP, PD).

These processes of frame emergence also seem to explain why actors started to perceive a very strong deterioration of public attitudes to immigration in Tuscany in 2017, when the LN won the local elections in many municipalities, questioning prior beliefs and conviction. The idea that these results were due to a sudden dramatic deterioration of locals’ attitudes to immigration seems to be the outcome of an ‘availability bias’: while identifying the causes of sudden growth of the LN, centre-left actors were swayed by the information collected by the media or directly from the environment around them and concluded that this was due to a change in public attitudes.

**6.4. Actions**

From 2013 to 2016: the creation of the ‘Tuscan model’.

In the first phase of the Italian ‘asylum crisis’, centre-left local authorities – and, crucially, the PD-led regional government and the Tuscan branch of ANCI – adopted a proactive stance towards public opinion on asylum-related issues, and an interventionist policy approach. Despite the organization of the reception system being mainly a competence of national authorities, key actors in the Tuscan regional government and the regional branch of ANCI decided to take direct responsibility on this field – and particularly in the governance of the CAS system – with the aim to ‘integrate and complement the work of national institutions’ (Regional Official) and ‘influence the governance of asylum-seekers’ reception and guide policy-making processes’ (ANCI Official).

Not having formal competences, the role adopted by the regional government and ANCI was ‘purely political’ – as a member of the regional government defines it – meaning that they tried to coordinate the organization of the reception system through ‘political pressures on Prefects and all the other actors involved’ (ANCI Official). After the regional elections in 2015, the new regional government gave to the Deputy President, Vittorio Bugli, specific responsibility in the asylum field, giving ‘a special political visibility to the asylum issue (…) and politicising its role in this policy field’ (Regional Official).

Such an interventionist approach, led, on the one hand, to some concrete actions, aimed at improving the organization of the reception system and at coordinating the main actors involved:

We started looking for buildings owned by the Region that could be used as reception centres, we tried to convince mayors to host asylum-seekers in public buildings identified in their municipalities. We tried to push the many Tuscan associations to propose and develop their own reception projects, to be proactive, to identify some buildings and to apply for the calls launched by the Prefecture, and host these asylum-seekers in their buildings (PD Member of Regional Government).

On the other hand, these institutions created a joint platform, called #*AccoglienzaToscana* – in cooperation with some municipalities and a number of NGOs – aimed at analysing existing policy instruments, identifying good practices of asylum-seekers’ reception, developing innovative policy solutions and influencing national institutions’ decisions. The platform produced a ‘White Paper on the Polices for Asylum-seekers’ Reception’[[32]](#footnote-32), intended as both a policy document and a position paper, which, in its first part, mentions five key objectives at the basis of the Tuscan reception model:

1. *Developing an ‘integrated governance model’*, through the creation of a ‘supra-communal’ level of governance responsible for the management of asylum-seekers’ reception, with the aim to create economies of scale, guarantee an efficient use of available resources, and promote responsibility-sharing among municipalities – defined as preconditions for ‘efficient, sustainable, and long-term systemic policy responses’.
2. *Recognising the SPRAR system as the main reception model* and creating incentives and new policy instruments to prompt more municipalities to adhere to the system.
3. *Defining quality standards for the emergency centres (CAS)*, with the long-term aim to ‘extend the key principles and standards of the SPRAR to CAS centres’. The emergency system, formally, is entirely under the responsibility of the prefectures, but the White Paper ‘pushes forward the idea that the governance of emergency centres should have been led by local authorities’ (ANCI Official).
4. *‘Defining and strengthening asylum-seekers’ reception as part of the regional welfare system’*. As a regional official explains, ‘the services offered to asylum-seekers are very similar to the health and social services that we offer to the other subjects in need, we wanted to have them all included in our welfare system’.
5. *‘Promoting a model of diffused reception’.* The ANCI and the regional government pushed the Prefectures to organize the CAS system in Tuscany around small reception structures with proportional quotas of asylum-seekers assigned to each village.

Such an interventionist approach and such a politicisation of the role of local authorities in the governance of asylum-seekers’ reception led all these actors to adopt a proactive stance towards public opinion:

After the Tuscan reception model was structured, the regional government bragged about it (…). There was a moment when there was also a bit of pathetic exhibitionism. Mayors, local governments and other institutions all started to talk proudly about how good they were in developing projects or initiatives of different kinds, even proposing as new some policies that elsewhere had been developed already ten years ago (PD Mayor).

Since 2017 onwards: continuity or change?

Several elements would have suggested the potential for changes in centre-left actors’ approach to asylum management, particularly since 2017, due to the growing salience of the issue, the electoral success of anti-immigration parties, and actors’ perception that public attitudes on immigration had changed. Furthermore, the increasing number of asylum-seekers dispersed in the region put the Tuscan ‘diffused model’ under pressure, forcing the Prefectures to open some bigger reception centres in former hotels. A few scandals also emerged:

With the growing number of asylum-seekers, new private service providers entered in this sort of market, and often they did not have the same moral strength, experience and competences of local organizations and associations. And this had some implications for the quality of the services offered (PD MP).

Contrary to the finding that in times of high issue salience – or under pressure from radical right parties – centre-left parties at the local level tend to converge towards right-wing stances on migration (Castelli Gattinara 2016), the analysis conducted suggests that this only partially happened in Tuscany.

On the one hand, some centre-left mayors, after 2016, in fact adopted a more passive stance towards public opinion and started to delegate more responsibilities to the Prefectures:

With the passing of time, some mayors started to complain about a situation that they couldn’t control anymore, the relationship with the Prefectures were often tense (…) and it became more and more difficult to find local governments that accepted to adhere to the SPRAR system (ANCI Official).

Many mayors avoided more and more to take open positions on the issue, although these passive stances towards public opinion, as suggested by a regional official, did not necessarily led to changes in local policies. An independent centre-left mayor interviewed is even more explicit in describing the change of approach of some of his colleagues:

Some local governments led by the PD, in Florence for instance, unfortunately, started to be afraid, they perceived that their consensus was at risk and started to somehow emulate, although in a much more moderate manner, the responses and messages used by the Lega. This, especially after the mayor of Cascina reached a national visibility with her slogans and propaganda focused on the contrast to immigration (ICL Mayor).

The PD Mayor of Florence Dario Nardella, in 2018, criticised his party’s stance on immigration and declared that ‘citizens’ security is neither left-wing nor right-wing’ (Bozza 2018)

On the other hand, most of the local and regional institutions that had organized the Tuscan reception system between 2011 and 2015 – including the regional government, the ANCI, and the majority of centre-left mayors – did not modify their proactive policy approach:

I have seen a few centre-left Mayors modifying their positions on the issue, but this has not involved the regional government. Its approach, the organization of the Tuscan reception system, the policies did not change at all (Left-wing regional MP).

It’s true that we had a growing anti-immigration sentiment in Tuscany too. But the positive thing is that this really strengthened the network of actors that had the opposite perspective. The hard core of institutions and persons that had developed the Tuscan reception model has been united even more by this growing anti-migrant sentiment. We keep developing our work, and promoting our vision and principles, and we will do so as long as the regional government and ANCI agree on that. We know that the situation has changed but we are deeply motivated to continue along the same path (ANCI Official).

Recently, the regional government kept trying to actively involve and re-involve local governments, sometimes creating further incentives such as the co-participation of the regional government in the management of some services or in the financial contribution to a number of initiatives. We even developed some campaigns on the issue of socially useful works for asylum-seekers and most of the municipalities responded positively (Regional Official).

Some interviewees even reported to have adopted more proactive stances to public opinion with the passing of time. For instance, some of them tried to explain in public interviews and meetings that the creation of reception centres was something beneficial for the entire community, because, through an efficient management, part of the resources available could be used to finance social services for the entire population:

My personal and political approach on the issue has not changed (…). Conversely, I have increased the number of interviews that I released to local newspapers on the issue, with the aim to explain our approach, although it was a hard effort. I was even asked by a group of people that were against asylum-seekers’ reception to confront me in a public meeting. I accepted without hesitation and I knew that it meant meeting two hundred persons that would have attacked me. And it was the right decision, because it allowed me to explain to the population what was happening (PD Deputy Mayor).

I did my best to explain our approach and actions in public meetings and even meeting in person some groups of people that started to complain or protest, to convince people that the presence of asylum-seekers had positive repercussions for everybody (PD Deputy Mayor).

Two interviewees reported that they deliberately refused to answer any question in which immigration was declined as an issue of security.

## 6.5. Sensemaking.

Why did key actors in the Tuscan asylum governance system create the so-called ‘Tuscan model’ for asylum-seekers’ reception, during the first phase of the crisis? And why has the interventionist approach of centre-left actors in Tuscany not changed after 2017? To address these questions, I develop, in the next paragraphs, four interrelated arguments.

The influence of the past.

I argue that the proactive approach adopted by most centre-left local governments and the regional government in the first phase of the ‘asylum crisis’ can be largely explained by the influence of past experiences and a deeply rooted administrative style.

The red political subculture was characterized by a ‘strongly interventionist policy style’ (Vassallo 2013). Following Floridia (2014:78), such an administrative style was characterized by ‘the capacity of political actors to elaborate strategies, innovate, and apply ideas and knowledge through which to interpret ongoing processes’. Importantly, it led to a specific ‘social model’ characterized by high levels of local welfare and excellent levels of ‘institutional performance’ and ‘administrative efficiency’ (Putnam 1994). After 1991, this style persisted and Tuscan regional and local authorities maintained a ‘greater planning capacity compared to other regions’ (Casula 2015:26) which allowed them to successfully respond to new challenges in many policy sectors (Vassallo 2013).

While facing increasing flows of asylum-seekers, starting from 2011, centre-left local authorities responded with the same interventionist policy approach, driven by the conviction that this leads to higher levels of administrative efficiency and, through that, to the political construction of consensus. While facing the new challenges of the ‘asylum crisis’, they mainly ‘replicated procedures that had been perceived as successes in the past’ (Ansell, Trondal, and Øgård 2016:11):

We decided to follow the strategy that has characterized this region since the Second World War, and that has always been successful, which implied relying on our social model characterized by strong social organization and strong relationships between institutions and civil society (…). The prevalence of “spontaneism” risks to generate conflict, only with a structured and long-term strategy you can prevent it (PD Mayor).

Furthermore, many of the mayors interviewed, having a long experience in local government, could specifically rely on past experiences of local asylum governance, developed before the ‘asylum crisis’. By the early 2000s some Tuscan municipalities had contributed to create and develop the SPRAR system, and this experience helped defining and responding to the new challenges:

This province since 30 years has been involved in asylum-seekers’ reception, which made it easier for us to give our contribution when the refugee crisis started (PD Mayor).

The Tuscan regional government developed its approach to asylum-seekers’ reception many years ago and it never changed. We are proceeding along the same line, the policy instruments have been updated with the passing of time, but the regional government responded in a very similar way in the 1990s when we faced a similar situation, with the Albanians (left-wing Regional MP).

These quotes point to Weick’s argument (1995:18) that individuals, while facing new and unexpected events, rely on ‘similar or familiar past experiences and the factors that have shaped their lives’ to make sense of the current situation, meaning that ‘reflective action and history’ can facilitate planning, projecting and a proactive approach to action. When asked about why the Tuscan regional government adopted a very interventionist policy approach on asylum and persistently proactive stances towards public opinion, the member of the regional government interviewed referred back to other ‘successful’ reforms promoted by the regional governments in the past:

The best reforms promoted in this region were developed when regional authorities faced new challenges and managed to convince our citizens that the policies proposed to face such challenges were in their own interest. I think about the radical reform of the Tuscan health system that led to the closure of forty hospitals but also led us to have now the best health system of the country. That reform was carried out convincing the old lady that complained because the hospital she had in her town was closed that this was in her own interest (PD Member of Regional government).

Furthermore, he specifically referred back to the so-called ‘North Africa Emergency’ in 2011, during which local and regional authorities autonomously organized a reception system in the region. Such recent experience – perceived as successful by the political actors involved, most of whom still was occupying some institutional positions from 2015 onwards – played a key role in inspiring and shaping subsequent policy responses:

The experience of 2011 was crucial, it was a shorter emergency but the approach adopted by national institutions allowed much more room for manoeuvre for local authorities (…) At that time we decided to be directly involved in asylum-seekers’ reception but adopting our own approach, so we developed our policy approach, the principles that have guided all our more recent actions (…), and we created a structured network with many municipalities, and civil society organizations (PD Member of Regional government).

Importantly, the influence of such past experiences seems to have persisted with the passing of time, including after 2017. The interviews suggest quite strong effects of ‘path dependency’, as a direct consequence of the interventionist style of government in the first phase of the ‘asylum crisis’, and of the politicisation of the role of regional and local institutions in asylum management:

The approach that we adopted and the huge effort that we did across the region made us always go straight ahead in our path, and to keep proposing new projects and new policy solutions (ANCI Official).

As local government we always stack to our decision to create a reception centre, including because at some point you have a choice to make: either you accept to host asylum-seekers or you refuse, there are no intermediate choices, and after you choose you cannot go back and change your decision (PD Mayor).

The influence of civil society.

Both the more traditional policy style of the red political subculture and the more recent experiences of asylum governance in Tuscany are based on a deep and structural cooperation between local institutions and civil society organizations. The role of civil society actors and their relationship with the local institutions represent key distinctive elements of Tuscan asylum governance, and significantly contribute to explain the interventionist approach adopted by local and regional authorities in Tuscany. Again, this relates to key findings of the sensemaking research.

As a regional official explains, local associations, during the ‘asylum crisis’, played in Tuscany a three-fold role: ‘they did advocacy, promoting principles linked to the protection of human rights and citizenship’, they ‘directly managed the reception centres’ and ‘participated in the policy initiatives aimed at favouring asylum-seekers’ integration and social cohesion in our region’. Often, and unlike in other regions, the same organizations (among them: ARCI, Caritas, Oxfam) performed these three functions at the same time. In most cases, these are organizations that are deeply rooted in the Tuscan society, and with a long-term experience of involvement in the provision of social services and in the support of immigrants. Their influence on key local and regional authorities’ policy choices, I argue, was developed at four different levels.

First, through their strong and structural relationship with local authorities, Tuscan civil society organizations contributed to influence centre-left party actors’ decisions to support asylum-seekers’ reception. As Ramella explains (2000:20), since the 1990s, with the erosion of the strong ideological identification of the past, civil society support became a key element for municipal governments to maintain electoral consensus, which put local organizations in the position to have a relatively strong influence on policy processes. A regional official explains that, during the ‘asylum crisis’, there was a continuous mutual exchange between civil society organizations and local authorities, which ultimately contributed to lead to the adoption of innovative policies. As the research on sensemaking suggests, the sensemaking process is contingent on the interactions with others (Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010:185), and the ideological congruence between civil society organizations and centre-left party actors crucially enabled civil society action, allowing them to reach and influence key powerholders in the regional governance system (see section 6.6).

Second, at the beginning of the ‘asylum crisis’, the possibility to rely on a pre-existing structured network of organizations with specific expertise on asylum-seekers’ reception played a key role in helping local and regional authorities to define the situation around them and identify policy solutions. This related to Weick’s argument that decisions in situations of crisis are taken with the knowledge that these will have to be *implemented* by others:

In Tuscany the impact [of asylum-seekers’ reception] on local communities has been much more sustainable than in other regions. This because here, since many years and well before the refugee crisis, there was a structured network of local and regional authorities and civil society organizations, already involved in the SPRAR system. (…) So, when the number of asylum-seekers grew, first in 2011 and then even more, after 2014, Tuscany was ready, this network that was already there and could deal with asylum-seekers’ reception. Something that did not happen in other regions where traditionally local governments don’t have these close ties with civil society and couldn’t rely on such previous experiences of involvement in asylum-seekers’ reception (PD MP).

The member of the regional government interviewed adds that the ‘dispersed reception model’ in Tuscany was possible only because of the presence of such a structured network of civil society actors – already responsible for the provision of other social services. The organization of the regional reception system around small reception structures throughout the territory, he explains, is not economically convenient for service providers that are profit-driven organizations. More broadly, many mayors reported that their trust in local service providers played a key role in their decision to promote or accept the creation of reception centres, representing a guarantee that reception would have been managed efficiently, by actors with professional experience and expertise, with no risk of being involved in public scandals:

It was crucially important to know that we were dealing with organizations that operated in this region since decades, and whose mission has always been that of favouring migrants’ integration and contrasting social marginalisation and poverty in all its forms. We could see that they were putting an effort and resources that went even beyond what was strictly asked to them (ANCI Official).

Third, civil society involvement helped to legitimate the interventionist disposition of centre-left local governments, which relates to Weick’s argument that decisions in situations of crisis are taken with the knowledge that these will have to be *understood* and *approved* by others. Centre-left actors, when deciding to act in favour of asylum-seekers’ reception, counted on the fact that organizations from the civil society would have mitigated its impact on public opinion and ‘guaranteed social cohesion’ (ANCI Official). According to many mayors, local associations played a key role in mediating and favouring the integration of asylum-seekers in the local communities. By doing so, ‘they increased the number of locals that could have a direct contact with asylum-seekers, know who they are, what are their stories, their plans and expectations, with the effect of decreasing potential tensions’ (ICL Mayor). Importantly, the involvement of local associations allowed centre-left mayors to contrast claims that asylum-seekers’ reception was turned into a profitable business.

Again, this strong trust on the role that civil society organizations can have in influencing public opinion is a legacy of Tuscan tradition and history. A local journalist interviewed suggests that such trust is very much overestimated by political actors:

We have a number of associations here that openly take positions on immigration and traditionally had some influence on public opinion (…) although I think nowadays they don’t have the instruments to be really effective, certainly they don’t have the power of tv programmes and social media’ (Local Journalist).

Fourth, as already argued, activism by Tuscan civil society organizations provided a reassuring idea of ‘the public’ – disconnected from the evidence of available opinion polls – that led them to ‘enact their sensible environment’ (Weick 1995:18).

*The role of actors’ perceptions of public attitudes to immigration.*

This paragraph builds on the previous ones to argue that actors’ perceptions of public attitudes to immigration – significantly influenced by the activism of civil society organizations – enabled the interventionist approach adopted by centre-left actors in the first phase of the ‘asylum crisis’, and subsequently played a role in its persistency after 2017.

The enabling effect of perceptions of public attitudes in the first part of the ‘crisis’ emerges as a recurrent topic in several interviews:

In the last decade Tuscan local and regional governments have progressively organized a structured governance system on asylum-seekers’ reception (…) But, compared to today, all this happened in a different atmosphere, (…) the local population was substantially neutral and ready to accept these asylum-seekers (…).This general atmosphere allowed the regional government to develop its own policies organising a structured reception system in Tuscany (Mayor, PD).

As already mentioned, centre-left actors share a view of public opinion as culturally progressive, loyal to centre-left parties, and potentially influenceable by local governments in its attitudes to immigration. Such capacity to influence attitudes is perceived as dependent on the provision of efficient policy responses. By adopting an interventionist policy, many actors were convinced that they could have produced more efficient policy solutions, which in turn would have prevented negative reactions from public opinion:

We adopted this approach because promoting a more structured and orderly management of the asylum system was the only way to reduce the risks of fragmentation, social disintegration, and prevent attempts to portray as negative the positive effects of asylum-seekers’ reception (Regional Official).

We did all this to avoid negative repercussions of asylum-seekers’ reception within our communities. This has been the key goal of all our efforts (ANCI official).

I also argue that the specific framing of the causes of the sudden and dramatic change in public attitudes to immigration perceived in 2017 contributes to explain why these perceptions did not lead to policy change.

First, the deterioration of public attitudes is framed as the effect of contingent issues (the economic crisis) and external influences (the far-right propaganda) rather than of ‘innate fears’. Because of this, centre-left actors kept a certain trust in their ability to shape these attitudes. Despite the perceived growing anti-immigration sentiment, many centre-left politicians maintained a general ‘optimism about their capacity to make people think, change their ideas and support the position of their party’ (Local Journalist). This explains the proactive stances adopted towards public opinion by many centre-left actors in the second half of the ‘crisis’.

Second, this assessment of the drivers of public attitudes to immigration produced even more proactive efforts by party actors to shape efficient policy responses. While in the first phase of the ‘crisis’ actors thought that an ordered and efficient management of asylum-seekers’ reception was enough to keep locals’ support, in the second phase they started looking for policy solutions that enabled them to frame asylum-seekers’ reception as beneficial to the local community. As the ANCI official explains, the identified solution was ‘saving resources from asylum-seekers’ reception’ – through an efficient use of resources – and ‘using them to implement local services could have a positive impact on public opinion’. As a Deputy Mayor explains:

You cannot contrast people’s fears of immigrants giving more security, but rather offering more social services, improving the welfare system. Our strategy was that of replying to this perceived insecurity by investing more resources in our welfare system. (…) Through the supra-communal management of the reception system and the economies of scale that this implied, we could save some resources, which we have used to improve the services for our citizens (Deputy Mayor, PD).

Again, this strategy is the product of the legacy of red subculture and tries to replicate solutions considered as successful in the recent past, when as Ramella (2010: 310) explains, ‘inclusive and redistributive social policies, bequeathed by the red subculture allowed the post-communist parties to deal with growing immigration with fewer traumas’.

Furthermore, the interview material reveals that, despite the perceived deterioration of public attitudes and its implications for voting behaviours, centre-left actors were convinced that their interventionist approach and the efficiency of the Tuscan reception system had, at the very least, prevented anti-migrant protests:

We are confident in ourselves, since some years we have the situation under our control, we can claim that we comprehend very well the dynamics and features of the phenomenon we are dealing with (ANCI Official).

The way in which the reception system for asylum-seekers has been organized and managed in Tuscany has contained negative effects and prevented protests. Many centre-left institutions did not modify their approach to the issue, mainly because there were no protests here (PD MP).

Furthermore, the regional official interviewed explains that, analysing the few protests that took place in the region against asylum-seekers, they realised that they were strictly related to how these reception centres were created: the protests almost exclusively targeted emergency centres created by the Prefecture, and almost never structures created through the involvement of the regional government:

We kept asking ourselves why in one case we often had complaints by locals and in the second case this never happened. The asylum-seekers were black in both cases, the number of people hosted in these centres was similar (…). Our conclusion was that our reception projects, unlike the others, were always anticipated by a detailed planning, decision-making processes that involved local governments, and supra-communal entities, analyses of the broader context and of the potential impact of the centres (…). We realized that, if protests are the effect of a wrong management, the solution is not working to increase the acceptance of asylum-seekers. Merely working on convincing people that complain is a strategy that is likely to fail. Rather, the solution, is an efficient management of the phenomenon (Regional Official).

A strong political identity.

A fourth element that contributes to explain the continuity in policy approaches of many centre-left actors is their very strong political identity.

Post-communist parties in Tuscany kept being deeply attached to ‘some founding and evocative values (…) such as equality, solidarity, social justice, and the key principles of the republican democracy’ (Floridia 2010:8). Such a strong identity, defined by deeply rooted visions of the world, norms and social practices (Ramella 2010:310), has powerfully influenced many centre-left actors’ decisions:

All members of public institutions are mandated by the Constitution to act with the purpose to raise the social, cultural and moral level of their communities. I am stubborn, I reacted to all what was happening by making choices that were always guided by the first twelve articles of the Italian Constitution (PD Mayor)

Active citizenship and citizens’ responsibility for common goods were at the core of our electoral manifesto. These principles guided our approach to asylum issues, during all our mandate (ICL Mayor).

Overall, the interview material reveals that many Tuscan centre-left party actors adopted a more ideological rather than consensus-driven approach to action:

We have several institutional duties. Governments are elected by the citizens, that’s true, but first of all they swear on the Italian Constitution, which forces us to protect the dignity of all individuals and guarantee a number of rights. Electoral consensus is not more important than the dignity of the people (PD Member of Regional government)

We had to offer our solidarity to persons in need and it was morally right to offer our help and being welcome. This, even though I’m aware that it doesn’t help us from an electoral point of view. I think that local governments cannot exclusively act guided by the search of electoral support and by what we think public opinion want us to do. We must accept the risk of losing the next elections to safeguard our values (ICL Mayor).

While facing a perceived growth of anti-migrant sentiments in the region, therefore, many centre-left actors did not modify their stances and the policies adopted. Conversely, two interviewees defined their strategy as one of ‘cultural resistance’ or ‘cultural fight’ against ‘a strategic legitimation and promotion [by right-wing parties] of wrong and dangerous values, which fomented sentiments of rage, fear, tension, individualism, and which are against our Constitution’ (PD Mayor). Another mayor decided to formally file a complaint against a group of citizens that spread some fake news about the creation of a reception centre and did so because he was convinced that these actions were ‘morally wrong but also breaking the Italian law’. A PD Mayor compared the approach adopted by his local government to asylum-seekers’ reception to the one adopted by his fellow citizens during the Second World War, who welcomed and supported some internally displaced people.

While this idea of the ‘cultural battle’ presupposes a view of the ‘asylum crisis’ as a constraint to the actions of centre-left parties, other interviewees even portray this as an opportunity, to reaffirm some fundamental values and ‘positively recreate a strong and shared identity’ (Ramella 2010:312), regenerating the tradition of the Italian left:

If you don’t constantly regenerate it, our left-wing tradition centred on persons and their rights risks to be lost in the long-term. We must regenerate this tradition now, returning to our origins, to its core principles of addressing people’s need, especially of those of the weak and poor. The challenges posed by the refugee crisis offered an opportunity to restore this tradition (PD Member of Regional government).

## 6.6. The LN and the M5S.

This section focuses on the main opposition parties within the regional governance system – the LN and the M5S – with the aim to assess their understandings, actions and approaches to asylum issues. It shows that, as expected, members of the two parties frame the effects of asylum-seeking migration differently from centre-left actors, which led them to develop strategies that contributed to politicise asylum-seekers’ reception in the region. This sets the scene for the analysis conducted in the next section.

The M5S.

While describing the causes of asylum-seeking migration, M5S actors largely adopted ‘human dignity frames’. As a Tuscan Regional MP explains ‘on a personal level, I am in favour of the abolition of all borders’. The programme of the M5S in the two cities where it controls the local government – Livorno and Carrara – also demonstrate a progressive agenda regarding immigration.

Table 6.1 above shows that M5S actors frame the effects of asylum-seekers’ reception differently from centre-left actors, putting a distinctively strong emphasis on public reactions to asylum-seeking flows. Remarkably, the negative impact of asylum-seeking flows on peoples’ perceptions is often mentioned in opposition to the absence of any meaningful ‘real’ effects of flows:

I would make a distinction between objective effects and subjective effects. The objective effects have been almost irrelevant from my point of view, because the migration flows to this region have been perfectly sustainable […]. Conversely, perceptions of this phenomenon are different from reality, because when this mass migration targets a social system which is very fragile, social tensions cannot but rise and generate a sort of war among the poor (M5S Regional MP).

More specifically, M5S members tend to describe local public opinion as split between two groups, those against migration and those that support asylum-seekers’ reception. Hostility towards asylum-seekers is mostly explained via economic motives and competition in the labour market, rather than perceptions of insecurity or fear:

Not having enough resources to develop welfare policies that could adequately contrast poverty and social exclusion, it is obvious that social tensions arise and the situation turns into a fight among the poor. And you have many citizens complaining that they don’t have a house and are in economic hardship and do not receive anything from the state, while instead asylum-seekers receive 35€ per day, and all the other fake news that you hear in the social media. *This section of the population* does not understand the complexity of migration (M5S Regional MP).

Recent flows are perceived to have had a major impact on certain social classes (the poor), and much less on middle and high social classes, perceived as more tolerant towards asylum-seekers:

The average Tuscan, from the well-off middle class, is rather ready to accept immigrants, who are largely employed to do all those works that Tuscans don’t want to do anymore. (…) People with this social and economic status accept that asylum-seekers settle here, they are moved by their stories, I perceive this in Tuscany more than in other regions (M5S MP)

Such perceptions of local public opinion strongly influence the attributions that these actors make of the situation around them. As one of the interviewees explains, ‘we are influenced by and we feel the heavy weight of public opinion, of those that do not understand this phenomenon’. The perceived hostility of part of the local population, therefore, seems to make any decision in favour of migrants’ reception very difficult to sustain. On the other hand, their perception that part of the local population – and of their electorate – is not against migration (and, to a minor extent, their underlying values and humanitarian interpretation of the causes of asylum-seeking flows) prevents them from adopting a clearly anti-migrant stance which makes any position at all on the matter unsustainable:

The only position that the Movement takes openly is that we need more cooperation between the EU member states and that we must contrast the “immigration business” (…). It never expresses any position on the local and regional levels, because I guess it wouldn’t know what to say (…). The Movement does not have a position on the issue (Local M5S leader).

These attributions create scope for decision-making preferences that are powerfully driven by the conflicting signals about public attitudes on migration identified from the surrounding environment, as well as for a strategic ‘voter-driven’ rather than ‘ideological’ approach to actions (Reeves, de Chernatony, and Carrigan 2006).

This mostly led to strategies of issue avoidance, particularly when they have to take decisions on highly salient and visible issues. M5S members, in these situations, adopt a passive stance towards public opinion and try to avoid public statements or discussions on the topic. This strategy may involve explaining to the population that the subnational level of governance has no responsibility on the issue or that immigration is an issue in which they are not interested, and the importance of which is highly overestimated. A Tuscan Deputy Mayor, asked about the position of his party and administration on migration, explains that:

I think the M5S here has had the chance not to confront this matter. Because the local administration of this city did not have to take any specific choice, we didn’t have to take any decision. For instance, for the organization of the local reception system, the Prefecture did everything. So, in this context, besides a few general statements, we didn’t have to make our position on the topic really explicit [or] make decisions (M5S Deputy Mayor).

Analysis of media interviews released by mayors and other members of the M5S confirm that they largely avoided asylum-related issues during their mandate. As other interviewees explain, the mayors of the M5S and other members of the party largely avoided taking position on the debate on asylum-seekers’ reception, an issue repeatedly described as ‘very complicated’ and requiring ‘caution’ (Cocchi 2018).

When forced to decide whether to accept or oppose the creation of reception centres, M5S mayors mostly decided *not to oppose* Prefects’ decisions. Instead, they mostly refused to take any direct responsibility and presented the arrival of asylum-seekers as imposed upon them without their choice. When asked about the rationale behind the decision of the administration to join the SPRAR system, a Deputy Mayor explained that ‘our municipality joined the SPRAR system in the sense that the Prefecture managed it…but anyway, yes we do have some SPRAR centres’. Another Deputy Mayor explained that most of the decisions of the local administration on this matter were a ‘mere implementation of the law’. The local government of Livorno adhered to the SPRAR reception system, without any publicly visible involvement and largely delegating any responsibility to the NGOs who manage it.

M5S members act rather differently in situations that are instead perceived to be less politically salient. These are mainly situations in which their actions are less visible to the wider public. The local governments of Livorno and Carrara, for instance, mostly supported initiatives aimed at the integration of asylum-seekers and recognised refugees, when these were formally developed by other entities, such as the regional government or NGOs. They were also particularly keen to provide funds for the creation of specialised reception and integration centres for unaccompanied minors or women (perceived to be more easily accepted by the local population), rather than for centres for asylum-seekers.

It is important for this chapter to assess whether the M5S did or not oppose the Tuscan asylum-seekers’ reception system coordinated by the regional government. The analysis reveals on the one hand that the M5S ‘never contested and rather supported on a general line the Tuscan reception model organized around small reception structures’ (M5S Regional MP). M5S municipal councillors in the main Tuscan municipalities mostly supported the initiatives of centre-left mayors and the regional government. On the other hand, M5S local governments pursued a policy to avoid direct and visible involvement in the regional asylum governance system:

Certainly we have appreciated the Tuscan model, but what can I say, it worked out well for us as spectators (M5S Deputy Mayor).

On the sidelines of the debate, the M5S did not do the battle of the centre-right, but neither did it propose to manage it itself ... it was a bit ‘secluded’ (Regional Official).

Furthermore, M5S actors took advantage of the scandals around asylum-seekers’ reception emerged in the second part of the ‘crisis’ to structure their discourse on asylum around frames related to the mismanagement of the reception system. This approach seems functional both to stand out from the approach of the centre-left and to boost the party’s anti-establishment claims, around which the M5S tries to build its position on immigration at the national level (Gianfreda and Carlotti 2018:59):

In Tuscany the M5S focused its efforts on denouncing the cooperatives that made a business out of asylum-seekers’ reception. We have never attacked the reception policies of the regional government because they were impeccable. But some scandals about the management of the centres emerged and, on this, the M5S could “attack”. We made a lot of inspections and even in Tuscany we observed some really shocking situations. So, on this, you can criticise, although the target is not the regional government but rather the Prefect that should have done some spot-checks (Local M5S leader).

As a result, arguably, M5S actors, did not contest the Tuscan reception model or undermine its efficiency but contributed to politicise asylum governance by introducing new anti-establishment frames in the political debate.

The LN.

The LN in Tuscany during the ‘asylum crisis’ became a one-issue party which focused its political activity almost exclusively on immigration and identitarian issues:

Before the refugee crisis the proposals and propaganda of the Tuscan LN were very much in line to those of the LN in the North. According to the local members of the party – including the mayor of Cascina Ceccardi, who was already part of the LN when the party had no support here – Tuscany should have become part of ‘Padania’ because it is a region which is industrially, economically, socially and culturally advanced. All these issues and discourse have been completely abandoned, now they focus exclusively on immigration (Local Journalist).

While local Councillors and regional MPs largely contested the asylum policies of the centre-left local and regional governments, Susanna Ceccardi, the only LN Tuscan Mayor, became well-known for her anti-migrant positions, even at the national level (Coen 2016). She repeatedly associated migration with security threats and declared that her administration was ready to take every possible measure to decrease the number of migrants and enhance law and order (PisaToday 2016). More broadly, LN politicians, unlike their colleagues in Veneto, more frequently use of nativist-identitarian frames. Crucially, the party proposed a law in the regional Council to introduce in the Regional Statute a provision that recognised ‘the Christian roots of Tuscany’[[33]](#footnote-33), which generated a long debate in the Council.

Importantly, LN members radically contested the Tuscan reception model and disengaged from the existing structures of the asylum governance system:

Here in Tuscany they created this diffused reception model. But […] the problem is not how you distribute the irregular migrants across the region, they should not be here (…). So the whole concept is wrong, it’s not that you have to solve the problem, the problem shouldn’t exist in the first place (LN Regional MP).

In Cascina, Ceccardi disengaged from the existing asylum governance structures and conducted a long-running and largely symbolic campaign to close an asylum-seekers’ reception centre, framed as insanitary and inhumane for the residents[[34]](#footnote-34). Furthermore, she withdrew her municipality from the SPRAR system despite being aware that this decision would lead to an increase in the number of asylum-seekers hosted in the CAS centre, due to a rule set by the local Prefecture[[35]](#footnote-35). The mayor justified the decision as a way to save ‘eroding municipal funds that I believe I must use to offer the citizens of Cascina a better city than the one that was handed to us (…) citizens facing situations of unemployment, social unease, housing and economic problems’[[36]](#footnote-36). She also withdrew the Cascina’s affiliation with the ANCI.

Overall, these actions and discourses by members of the LN in Tuscany reveal much more proactive stances towards public opinion compared to those of their colleagues in Veneto and a more proactive opposition approach, which raises the question of which are the causes of such significant differences.

Analyses of policy documents, media interviews and interview material reveal that LN actors in Tuscany frame and make sense of the ‘asylum crisis’ in a way which is very similar to LN members in Veneto. They similarly use a public reaction frame to describe the effects of asylum-seekers’ reception and similarly perceive that the situation requires them to take a position on the side of the citizens. The different approach adopted seems to be rooted on a different perception of public attitudes to immigration linked to local identity processes. Due to the very high support for centre-left parties in Tuscany, the local population is perceived to be traditionally more liberal on immigration issues and less inclined to embrace anti-migrant positions:

Until 2015 the Tuscan population did not see immigration as a problem’ and ‘the left here is still very strong, which is the reason why we didn’t have in Tuscany many public protests against the reception centres (LN Regional MP)

While Tuscans were perceived as not very sensitive to anti-immigration propaganda, they are perceived even less interested in the LN’s regionalist claims, which represent the other key element of the party’s ideology in the North:

Tuscans have never been interested in the North-South divide. Venetians are independentist, it is part of their own identity (…), in Tuscany this need is not really perceived, this component is absent (Regional MP, Lega)

These understandings lead the party to adopt a more proactive approach aimed at shaping or moulding Tuscan attitudes to immigration and bringing the traditionally progressive local population to their side. Importantly, this involves, on the one hand, strategic attempts to increase the salience of the immigration issue, mainly by charging centre-left regional and local governments to spend too much time and resources on asylum:

They [the centre-left] have devoted much more time to the immigrants, neglecting many other policies in favour of the Tuscan population. (…) We adopted a completely different approach, we keep repeating that we want to take care of Italians first, the PD keeps thinking about the best strategies to integrate the immigrants (…) Our goal was to show to the electorate that we take care of them, while the PD takes care about the immigrants, and this has been the key element of the growth of the LN in Tuscany (Regional MP, Lega).

On the other hand, this requires a strategic use of nativist-identitarian frames. In a region characterised by a strong Communist tradition and a ‘local civicness’ which ‘differs from the localism of LN, in that it is linked to values of solidarity and openness toward the external world’ (Ramella 2000:19), nativist frames seem to be strategically used by the LN to create a new political and historical identity, rooted on Christian values. More exclusionary local identity processes seem to be a necessary precondition to foster the Lega’s rhetoric against immigrants, charged with threatening local values and identity.

To summarize, the Tuscan context and perceptions of locals’ attitudes to immigration, once again, play a crucial role in shaping actors’ strategies, pushing LN actors to take more radical stances compared to their fellow party members in Veneto. By doing so, they politicised immigration and asylum-seekers’ reception and they introduced elements of political contestation within the governance system.

## 6.7. SNA.

This section moves the analysis forward, by applying SNA, in order to understand something more about actors’ relations and key features of the Tuscan asylum governance network in 2017.

Figure 6.2 provides some initial insights on actors’ interactions within the Tuscan asylum governance system. As in previous chapters, the figure shows a condensed visualisation of the asylum governance network, where all nodes of the same type have been collapsed into a single node representing the actors’ group. In this figure, ties indicate the existence of discussions between the two groups of actors on asylum-related issues, while the strength of ties depends on the frequency of exchanges[[37]](#footnote-37). The overall network features suggest that the conversation is much denser than in Sicily and Veneto.

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| *Figure 6.2. Asylum Governance Network in Tuscany. Weight indicates the frequency of exchange (measured on a scale of 1-4). The size of nodes indicates betweenness centrality.* |
| *Immagine che contiene testo, mappa  Descrizione generata automaticamente* |

Analyses of power relations provide other interesting insights about the Tuscan network’s features. Figure 6.2 suggests that the main *switchers* in the network are the regional government, centre-left mayors of both cities and towns, and service providers. The questionnaires confirm that this latter group, compared to the other regions, includes a much smaller number of subjects, and is dominated by a few big organizations such as ARCI, Caritas and Oxfam.

As shown in Figure 6.3, the main *switchers* also act in the governance network as *programmers*.

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| *Figure 6.3. Programmers in the Tuscan governance network. Weight indicates frequency of interaction (measured on a scale of 1-4). Node size indicates weighted in-degree centrality.* |
| *Immagine che contiene testo, mappa  Descrizione generata automaticamente* |

Figure 6.4, finally identifies *mobilisers* in the governance network. Again, these include the regional government, centre-left mayors and the group of trade unions.

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| *Figure 6.4. Mobilisers in the Tuscan governance network. Weight indicates frequency of interaction. Node size indicates weighted out-degree centrality.* |
| *Immagine che contiene testo, mappa  Descrizione generata automaticamente* |

Overall, the analysis suggests that in Tuscany, unlike in Veneto and Sicily, the regional government and centre-left mayors, situated in a position that allowed them to coordinate the governance network and influence other actors’ decisions, mobilised their understandings and took a leading role in organizing the regional reception system. This confirms that the interventionist approach adopted by the regional government and ANCI led to concrete and successful efforts of coordination of the governance system.

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| *Figure 6.5. Framing Consonance in the Tuscan governance network. Weight indicates framing consonance (measured on a scale of 1-5). Node size indicates betweenness centrality. Colours indicate subnetworks.* |
| *Immagine che contiene testo, mappa  Descrizione generata automaticamente* |

Figure 6.5 finally shows the degree of similarity of the perspectives of actors that relate to one another, showing that the network can be compartmentalized into five sub-networks or clusters of actors, identified by the Gephi software. The central, orange, subnetwork includes most (centre-left) local and regional governments and other local institutions. A dark green subnetwork includes mainly civil society actors, including service providers, NGOs and trade unions, and some left-wing politicians. A light green subnetwork includes the national-level institutions that organized the national asylum governance system (MoI and its local branches, the Prefectures and the *Questure*; the SPRAR Central Office) and international organizations. Finally, two subnetworks are dominated, respectively, by actors affiliated to the M5S and centre-right actors. Importantly, the light blue subnetwork of the M5S has close ties with national and international actors, but also with the civil society subnetwork. Centre-right actors, instead, have few and conflicting relationships with all the other actors in the network (with the only exception of the *Questure*). They contribute to increase the polarization of a network that is otherwise very centralised and homogeneous. The many thick ties suggest a high convergence of views within subnetworks and a good convergence of ideas also among four of the five clusters of actors.

Figure 6.6 better illustrates conflicting views in the network and highlights those actors that engage in the highest number of conflicting interactions. Overall, the figure suggests that the level of conflict within the network is very low: 58 percent of nodes have no conflicting interactions, and only 14 percent of interactions in the network are conflicting. Only seven percent of edges describe high levels of divergence of views[[38]](#footnote-38).

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| *Figure 6.6. Conflicting Views in the Tuscan Governance System. Edges indicate existence of discussions and divergent views (i.e. score <2.5). Node size indicates in-degree centrality.* |
| *Immagine che contiene testo, mappa  Descrizione generata automaticamente* |

Not surprisingly, the few centre-right mayors in the region are the target of the highest number of conflicting relations. Interestingly, the role of the Prefectures (and Questure) is also contested. As in other regions, the work of the Prefectures is often criticised by mayors that complain about not having been consulted before the creation of CAS centres:

We always had the impression that the Prefecture was telling us ‘these are the people, this is the place where we have sent them, now it’s your own problem’ (PD Mayor).

The decisions of the regional government to disperse asylum-seekers and to promote a structured reception system were absolutely positive and successful. All the other decisions that were imposed from the Prefectures did not work (ICL Mayor).

Figures 6.5 and 6.6 illustrate a broader tension between two opposite approaches to the management of asylum-seekers’ reception: the ‘centralist’ approach of national institutions and the interventionist approach of regional and local governments, advocating more competences on the issue. This underlying conflict emerged in many interviews.

The Prefectures reacted very sceptically and severely against the interventionist approach of the regional government, of the ANCI and some municipalities. They had certain rules to follow and wanted to rigidly follow them, we had our principles and we had to discuss quite heavily with them (ANCI Official).

Furthermore, some tensions also emerged between Tuscan local authorities and an institution – the SPRAR Central Service – that had positive relations with most of the centre-left local authorities in other regions:

Our choice to intervene in the CAS system had consequences on our relations with the SPRAR Central Office which didn’t see very positively the choice of Tuscan authorities to intervene in a field under their competence. Strengthening the CAS system, for them, meant removing any incentive for the municipalities to adhere to the SPRAR (…) while our own perspective was that, even if we agree that the SPRAR is the best system, we couldn’t accept that the CAS system, which hosted the vast majority of asylum-seekers, was exclusively managed by the Prefectures and often left to the anarchy (ANCI Official).

In sum, the Tuscan asylum governance network is very dense, and coordinated by two central actors: the regional government and ANCI. It is also characterized by low levels of conflict: while the few centre-right mayors disengaged from existing asylum governance structures, the M5S, despite the passive stance adopted, had positive relationships with the other actors in the governance system. Most of the other actors involved in the governance system share very similar views on asylum.

These features contribute to explain the very low levels of politicization of asylum, particularly before the growth of the number of centre-right mayors and the efficient policy outputs and outcomes produced. The analysis largely explains the very high number of municipalities which hosted asylum-seekers and the prevalence of small reception structures dispersed across the entire regional territory. These are two key principles imposed by the regional government, which, from its central position in the network, imposed its model of governance based on the involvement of supra-communal entities to prevent imbalances. The interview material suggests that in most of the region this approach gave positive results. Many interviewees outside Tuscany referred to the ‘Tuscan reception model’, a label invented by the Tuscan regional government and ANCI.

The network features also suggest why the Tuscan reception system guaranteed, on average, higher reception standards. This can be explained by the close contacts and consonance of views among the actors involved and, again, by the presence of central actors that dominated the conversation and the public discourse on asylum transmitting the idea that an efficient governance system would have prevented negative effects of asylum-seekers’ reception. Tuscan trade unions, very active in the network and deeply rooted in the Tuscan society, played a role of guarantors of the efficiency of the reception system, signalling situations of mismanagement of reception centres to the competent authorities and pushing local governments to promote and guarantee asylum-seekers’ rights.

## 6.8. Conclusion.

This chapter has focused on key actors within the Tuscan asylum governance system and has investigated how they framed and made sense of the ‘asylum crisis’, how they related to each other, and the impact of these cognitive and relational processes on policy outputs.

The analysis conducted leads to four main findings:

First, unlike in Veneto and Sicily, key actors in the Tuscan asylum governance system, did not use ‘public reaction frames’ to describe the effects of asylum-seeking migration in the region, and rather tended to frame such effects in more technical terms, or not to identify any relevant effect. Despite that, actors’ responses to questions investigating how they enacted their understandings and made sense of the ‘asylum crisis’ in Tuscany reveal that, during the first part of the ‘crisis’, perceptions of the local population as progressive, neutral or supportive of asylum-seekers’ reception, *enabled* centre-left actors to adopt an interventionist approach to actions, aimed at creating a structured and efficient regional reception system. Such perceptions were powerfully shaped by available narratives, identity processes, and actors’ interactions with civil society actors.

Second, such a proactive approach adopted by local authorities was crucially influenced, on the one hand, by ‘repertoires of action’ (Bird and Osland 2005; Geddes 2020) and the deeply rooted ideas that interventionist policy approaches tend to produce efficient outputs and outcomes and, through them, political consensus. On the other hand, centre-left actors’ sensemaking processes and decisions were crucially influenced by their close interactions with deeply rooted civil society organizations which, at their eyes, were capable to guarantee efficiency in asylum management and mobilise and shape locals’ support for pro-refugee policies. Both these elements are arguably legacies of the so-called ‘red political subculture’ (Floridia, 2014: 78).

Third, and crucially, the Tuscan case offered the opportunity to investigate the impact of external shocks and significant political change on governance dynamics, through analysis of the impact on governance of the emergence of new populist and/or anti-immigration parties in the regional political system. Following Schain (2006), anti-immigration parties can have a ‘direct impact’ on policies, when they have ‘policy-making capacity’ or ‘indirect influence’, because of their mere existence, when mainstream parties change their positions on migration in hope of winning votes. This chapter shows that, following the growth of anti-immigration parties in the region, centre-left actors perceived a dramatic and quick deterioration of public attitudes to immigration. Despite that, their frames, sensemaking processes and approaches to actions persisted. This suggests that key actors’ understandings, once defined, are resistant to external shocks. Consistent with findings of the framing literature, individuals tend to devote extra cognitive resources to dismiss evidence that disagrees with pre-established ideas and to avoid emotional discomfort that arises when questioning prior beliefs and conviction (cognitive dissonance). This chapter also suggests that initial environmental conditions leave a persistent mark (or ‘imprint’) on situated actors: they continue to shape their ‘behaviours and outcomes in the long run, even as external environmental conditions change’ (Marquis and Tilcsik 2013:45). I argue that such persistency of frames is mainly related to a ‘sensible environment’ that was able to persist. Crucially, despite the perceived changes in public attitudes to immigration, understandings of their drivers fostered deeply rooted ideas about the relationship between policy-making and public support inherited from the ‘red political subculture’, instead of undermining them. A very strong political identity by centre-left actors – their sense of who they are as left-wing Tuscans – also contributed to foster organisational responses to asylum drawn from this very well-established regional script.

Finally, SNA shows that the Tuscan asylum governance network was highly centralized and dominated by the regional government and ANCI, which actively coordinated the regional reception system. The central role taken by these institutions seems to have been the key element that led to more efficient policy outputs and outcomes in the region.

# CHAPTER 7 - THE DRIVERS OF REGIONAL ASYLUM GOVERNANCE

This chapter draws some conclusions on the causes of variation in the governance dynamics described in previous chapters and identifies the drivers of regional asylum governance, and the mechanisms that shaped the production of key outputs and outcomes during the ‘refugee crisis’. By so doing, the chapter shows the recursive and self-referential nature of regional asylum governance and its constitutive effects, meaning how regional governance systems themselves contributed to create key outputs such as inefficiencies and protests against asylum-seekers’ reception.

The chapter starts by conducting a comparative analysis of findings identified from previous chapters aimed at identifying the chain of situational, action-formation and transformational mechanisms that contributed to produce key outputs and outcomes of regional governance systems. Section 7.1 specifies the key dimensions that influence actors’ understandings of the effects of asylum-seeking migration and through which situational mechanisms these understandings are produced in the first place. Section 7.2 examines the causes of the significant variations in the strategies and actions are adopted by actors across the three regions and through which action-formation mechanisms actors made sense of their environment and enacted their understandings. Section 7.3, then, shifts the attention to actors’ interactions and the organization of asylum governance networks, calculating several statistical measures that allow a systematic comparison of the key features of regional networks. Such analysis aims at identifying the transformational mechanisms through which actors’ interactions influenced the production of asylum policy outputs and outcomes.

In section 7.4, the chapter moves the analysis forward, investigating dynamics of change in governance dynamics. It does so by shedding light on the role played in asylum governance processes by the mobilisations of civil society actors embedded in the different regional contexts – which is identified as a key element influencing all the mechanisms previously identified – drawing insights from semi-structured interviews conducted with civil society actors.

The analysis leads to three interconnected findings, which demonstrate the significant constitutive effects of regional asylum governance:

* Decision-makers involved in regional asylum-governance frame the effects of asylum-seeking migration as mainly impacting public opinion’s perceptions, more than any other dimension. Their understandings of public opinion, which vary significantly throughout the country, are largely disconnected from objective evidence from available opinion polls and rather influenced by rooted pre-conceptions and narratives, and the signals and cues about citizens’ mobilisation that they pick up from their environment.
* Policymakers involved in regional governance system adopted three different decision-making styles, but the actions and strategies of the vast majority of actors, during the ‘refugee crisis’, was crucially driven by their assessments of the causes and effects of public reactions to asylum-seekers’ reception, more than by any other factor.
* The production of efficient or inefficient regional reception systems is strictly related to who the central actors in the network are and what approach to action they adopt. The level of political contestation of asylum is linked to network polarization, but such polarization is not the mere product of the presence of actors with different ideological profiles. Rather, it is due, more broadly, to the interaction of different perspectives on asylum and approaches to action.
* Regional asylum governance during the ‘asylum crisis’ had a powerfully recursive and self-referential nature. Macro outputs and outcomes produced by governance systems – the inefficiencies of the reception system and political contestation – significantly influenced the emergence or absence, strength or weakness, and the high or low visibility of anti-migrant protests and pro-migrant mobilisations across the country, and, in turn, these mobilisations play a key role in shaping processes of frame emergence. Governance systems, therefore, during the ‘asylum crisis’, played a key role in generating ‘turbulence’ (Ansell, Trondal, and Øgård 2016:1).

## 7.1. Situational Mechanisms.

Assuming that asylum governance is driven by decision-makers’ conceptualisations of the effects of asylum-seeking migration in underlying social systems (including economic, political, social, demographic effects; Pierre, 2000; Geddes, 2017), the previous chapters have examined how political actors interviewed in the three regions frame and interpret such effects. Based on the findings produced, I argue that it is possible to draw some conclusions about the situational mechanisms that produce them. More specifically I conclude that regional asylum governance is largely shaped by actors’ perceptions of the effects of asylum-seekers’ reception on public opinion, and that these perceptions are largely influenced by available narratives and signals and cues about public mobilisations around migration issues that actors pick up from their environment.

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| *Figure 7.1. Frame analysis of party actors’ understandings of the effects of asylum-seeking migration – cross-regional comparison*[[39]](#footnote-39)*.* |
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| *Figure 7.2.*  *Frame analysis of party actors’ understandings of the effects of asylum-seeking migration – across different political affiliations.* |
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Figures 7.1 and 7.2 compare the results of the frame analyses of political actors’ answers to questions conceived to explore their perceptions of the effects of asylum-seekers’ reception in their region. Beyond some evident regional variations, Figure 7.1 shows that actors across all regions make large use of frames concerning public reactions. Importantly, public reaction frames are dominant also in Sicily, a region where immigration is not perceived to be a salient issue and which experienced no anti-migrant campaigning. Figure 7.2 suggests that this is true for actors independently of their political affiliations.

The interview material suggests several potential explanations about why political actors largely focus on the effects of asylum-seekers’ reception on public opinion rather than on other dimensions. A first explanation is related to the scarce expertise and past experience on immigration-related issues of most actors involved in regional asylum governance – including members of local and regional governments and the Prefectures. Most of them admitted that the ‘refugee crisis’ led them to deal with an issue – asylum-seekers’ reception – which is very complex and about which they had very little knowledge and very few information. Second, most of the party actors interviewed explained that they could very rarely rely on the support of experts: only the main cities could mandate one or more civil servants to focus specifically on asylum-seekers’ reception, and many of these officials also had not specific expertise on the issue. Furthermore, when asked about the sources through which they gain information about migration-related issues, most decision-makers referred to non-specialist sources, such as local and national tv programmes or newspapers, or social media.

If this is the case, it is important to analyse how political actors perceive public attitudes to migration in the three regions and how these understandings emerge in the first place. The interview material reveals that, despite polls suggesting the existence of very little within-country variation in public attitudes to immigration, public opinion is perceived very differently in the three regions. Also, it shows that these different understandings of public opinion are strongly embedded in (powerful) narratives entailing different stories or ‘knowledge claims’ about attitudes and behaviours of the local population (Boswell, Geddes and Scholten 2011:1). This is consistent with findings from the literature on frame emergence, arguing that in situations of crisis individuals tend to reach for an historical analogy when trying to make sense of contemporary dilemmas. Furthermore, it shows that these perceptions are largely influenced by the signals and cues about public mobilisations around asylum-issues that actors pick up from the environment around them. This is line with another well-established finding of the same literature according to which processes of frame emergence, particularly in situations of scarce information (bounded rationality), tend to be characterised by shortcuts (or ‘judgement heuristics’; Druckman 2011). These heuristics have several effects, including that individuals, while framing contemporary problems, might be swayed by the information that are available and accessible, for instance because collected by the media or directly from the environment around them. Repeated exposure to a certain frame ‘induces frequent processing, which in turn increases the accessibility of the frame’ (p.10).

In Veneto, actors across the whole political spectrum (as also most non-party actors, including the local experts interviewed) tend to perceive the local population to be harshly hostile to migrants. Many interviewees, while describing the effects of asylum-seekers’ reception, referred to the many anti-migrant protests that took place in the region. Importantly, these are described as organised by ‘the community’ or ‘the Venetian population’. The significant share of the population in Veneto that, according to available opinion polls, is not hostile to immigration, is not acknowledged by most interviewees, including centre-left party actors. Instead, it is a widespread belief that this hostility is ‘innate’ and connected to the strong sense of regional identity of the region or ‘ingrained in the Venetian culture’, as an independent mayor puts it.

In Sicily, conversely, most party actors (but also many non-party actors and local experts), particularly in the main cities, perceive the local population to be welcoming and not hostile towards asylum-seekers, despite available evidence suggesting that Sicilians are more hostile to migrants compared to Venetians. Crucially, immigration is perceived, by all Sicilian interviewees, including politicians from the far-right, to be a marginal, non-salient issue. Even when actors acknowledge that part of the population is hostile towards migrants, this hostility is assumed not to influence voters’ decisions, due to the presence of other more salient issues at the regional level. The perceived widespread acceptance towards asylum-seekers is largely justified by Sicily’s tradition and history. The narrative is proposed by actors from across the whole political spectrum and it is particularly influential because ‘morally compelling’ (Boswell, Geddes and Scholten 2011), with the defining experience of past Sicilian emigration constituting the moral basis for its enactment.

In Tuscany, until 2017, the population was also perceived to be tolerant or neutral towards asylum-seekers’ reception. Such tolerance is grounded on the ‘civicness’ that was typical of Tuscany’s ‘red political subculture’ during the Twentieth century (Floridia 2014) and its values of inclusiveness, solidarity and equality: despite most scholars agreeing that these values underwent a creeping change in the past two decades (Ibid.), centre-left party actors still perceive Tuscans as strongly attached to them and, consequently, tolerant towards migrants. The constantly high levels of support for centre-left parties in the region (at least until 2018), in the eyes of policy-makers, represented the evidence that support these claims, despite polls suggesting that attitudes to immigration in the region are not more positive than in most other Italian regions (Dixon et al. 2018).

Crucially, the analysis conducted in the previous chapters suggest that the mobilisation of both anti-migrant and pro-migrant entrepreneurs from the civil society played a key role in shaping and influencing decision-makers’ understandings of public attitudes to immigration. In Veneto, the widespread anti-migrant protests contributed to reinforce centre-left policy-makers’ perceptions that the local population is very hostile towards migrants. In Sicily, the active and visible mobilisation of pro-migrant groups that invokes Sicilian history and culture in order to make more evocative their pro-migrant stances, contributed to render cognitively plausible party actors’ conviction that the local population is very welcoming towards asylum-seekers in the main Sicilian cities and port towns and reinforce their pre-existing perceptions of Sicilians’ tolerance. The perceived absence of anti-migrant protests in Sicily also represents a powerful ‘feedback that gives information on current performance’ (Kingdon 2014:113) which also reinforces the dominant narrative about Sicilians’ tolerance. In Tuscany, instead, the absence of anti-migrant protests – in the first part of the ‘asylum crisis’ – seems to have reinforced actors’ understandings that locals were tolerant or neutral towards asylum-seekers. In the second part of the ‘crisis’, when centre-left actors started to perceive a deterioration of public attitudes to immigration, these actors analysed the few anti-migrant protests that took place in the region and concluded that these largely targeted reception centres managed by the Prefectures. This provided positive feedback to local authorities about their capacity to influence public opinion through the policies adopted.

Importantly, the visibility of pro- and anti-migrant mobilisations in both Veneto and Sicily seems to be also raised by local media that variously influence the local debate on asylum-seeking migration in the two regions. In Veneto, all the four experts interviewed pointed out that local media instrumentally contributed to raising the salience of asylum in the region by reporting extensively on tensions between asylum-seekers and locals. A report produced by the Fondazione Moressa (Tronchin and Di Pasquale 2017) analysed frames and narratives promoted by local media in Veneto in 2017 to conclude that most of the news on immigration in these newspapers focused on protests against asylum-seekers and that anti-migrant positions expressed by politicians and movements were given a disproportionate space compared to neutral information and comments by experts. In Sicily, local media are very rarely mentioned during the interviews by both the political and non-political actors interviewed. As the head of a trade union explains, ‘you very rarely find news about immigration in Sicilian media’. No newspaper articles could be identified for this research reporting about the few protests mentioned by Sicilian interviewees. Conversely, many interviewees suggest that Sicilian media tend to stigmatise any critical position on migration.

## 7.2. Action-Formation Mechanisms.

While examining actors’ actions in the three regions analysed, actors’ approaches to action and actors’ stances towards public opinion have been classified as supporting or opposing to asylum-seekers’ reception and as passive or proactive. Table 7.1 compares these findings, focusing on the stances adopted towards public opinion[[40]](#footnote-40).

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Table 7.1. Party actors’ strategies in the three regions.* | | | | |
|  | | | | |
|  | | **VENETO** | **TUSCANY** | **SICILY** | |
| ***STANCE TOWARDS PUBLIC OPINION*** | **ACTIVE SUPPORT** | Few ICL and ICR mayors | Some PD actors (e.g. regional government), Left parties | Mix of party actors (mayors of major cities and port towns) | |
| **PASSIVE SUPPORT** | PD | Part of PD, M5S | Mix of party actors (regional government, most mayors of towns and villages) | |
| **PASSIVE OPPOSITION** | LN |  | Few right-wing politicians, few mayors in rural Sicily | |
| **ACTIVE OPPOSITION** | LN (occasionally);  IRW | LN |  | |

The table shows that actors affiliated to the same parties adopted different strategies and approaches in the three regions. Actors affiliated to both the LN and the PD, for instance, adopted more passive stances to public opinion in Veneto, but proactive stances in Tuscany. Unlike in Tuscany and Veneto, in the Sicilian case party membership cannot always predict the policy approach and stances adopted by the actors interviewed.

By comparing the findings of previous chapters it is possible to draw some conclusions about the action-formation mechanisms through which actors involved in regional asylum governance in Italy enacted their understandings and decided their strategies during the ‘asylum crisis’.

In Chapter 3 I explained that I assume that situated actors’ actions in a context of crisis such as the one analysed are the outcome of a process of sensemaking through which actors, after having framed the situation around them, make attributions about such situation (what should be done next?) and identify a ‘script’ that guides their actions (what can we do next?). These two latter steps, in situations characterised by uncertainty, time constraints and pressures for action, require ‘complexity reduction’ (Mayblin 2019) and, as specified in Figure 3.2 in Chapter 3, are influenced by several factors, including the frames established but also actors’ self-identity, interactions with others (and attitudes and beliefs about their identity), repertoires developed through past experiences and individuals’ ability to draw similarities between the present situation and such past experiences. All these factors can enable or constrain actions.

Based on the analysis conducted in previous chapters I argue that actors made decisions following three distinctive decision-making style, two of which correspond to Tetlock’s ‘Fox’ and ‘Hedgehog’ decision-makers (2005:73), while a third style characterise actors belonging to populist parties (which might be called ‘Chameleon’ decision-makers). As shown in the next paragraphs, different factors guided decisions of actors adopting different decision-making styles. Crucially, the analysis shows that most actors acted either as ‘Hedgehog’ or as ‘Chameleon’ decision-makers and that in both these cases – following Bevir and Rhodes – their strategies were largely influenced by their ‘interpretations’ – i.e., perceptions of public attitudes to immigration and its salience (the ‘established frames’) – more than by their established ‘preferences’.

‘Hedgehog’ style thinking.

As expected, most decision-makers involved in regional asylum governance systems – all those affiliated to non-populist parties – acted as ‘Hedgehogs’. Following Tetlock, ‘Hedgehog’ decision-makers tend to ‘know one big think’ and to apply and ‘extend the explanatory reach’ of that one big thing into new domains (Ibid.). They ‘appear to use a favoured “schema-esque” template to analyse every new problem or circumstance’ (Huffmon 2006:467): as Huffmon explains, their reasoning style resembles ‘the old saw, “when one has a hammer, everything begins to resemble a nail”’.

As discussed in Chapter 3, ‘hedgehog-style’ thinking leads to decisions to support or oppose asylum-seekers reception that were mostly driven by self-identity, including political identity (linked to ideology and party affiliation), institutional identity and cultural identity (their sense of belonging to their region). Most actors affiliated to centre-left and left-wing parties accepted asylum-seekers’ reception, influenced by their progressive ideology, heritage of the Communist and Catholic traditions (particularly strong in Tuscany), and by strong sense of belonging to the Italian state, especially in Veneto, a region characterised by widespread independentist sentiments. Most right-wing actors, instead, opposed asylum-seekers’ reception. In Veneto, the widespread independentist sentiments and opposition to the national government pushed many actors to oppose asylum-seekers’ reception.

‘Hedgehogs’’ decisions to adopt more passive or active approaches to action and more proactive or submissive stances towards public opinion are instead powerfully driven by their perceptions of the salience of asylum issues in their local contexts, which act as powerful constraint or enabler of their actions. In contexts or situations of perceived high issue salience, Hedgehog decision-makers that support asylum-seekers’ reception[[41]](#footnote-41) tend to adopt passive stances. Most of them do not oppose Prefects’ decisions but delegate to them any responsibility, often publicly complaining about their decisions. In situations or contexts of low salience, conversely, these decision-makers adopt active approaches to actions and/or more proactive stances towards public opinion. Two elements play a key role in shaping these decisions: pressures from policy entrepreneurs and repertoires of actions.

Pressures from policy entrepreneurs, in situations of perceived low issue salience, influence decision-makers’ choices. In Tuscany, local trade unions and NGOs operating both as service providers and as advocacy group, played a key role in pushing centre-left policymakers to adopt an interventionist approach to asylum-seekers’ reception. In the main Sicilian cities, advocacy NGOs contributed to push mayors to develop pro-migrant discourses. In rural Sicily, economic actors such as employers and private actors willing to open reception centres, but these pressures coexist with actors’ perceptions that locals have negative attitudes to immigration, although in a context of perceived low issue salience, and these competing pressures produced a decoupling between decision-makers’ ‘talk’ and ‘action’ (Brunsson 2000).

The argument that policy entrepreneurs such as business and NGOs greatly influence policy-makers’ decisions on migration is widely debated in the literature on migration policymaking (Caponio and Cappiali 2018; Freeman 1995:885; Hix and Noury 2007). Caponio and Cappiali (2018:128) argue that the recent humanitarian crisis in Italy dismantled the ‘powerful lobby of the weak’, at the national level, leading to ‘the demise of actors in the sphere of the economy and the delegitimisation of those in the sphere of liberal norms’. I suggest that these pressures are still playing a role in influencing ‘Hedgehog’ decision-makers’ choices at the regional level, but only in contexts of low issue salience, a necessary condition for ‘client politics’ and ‘embedded liberalism’ to determine policy choices. Following Kingdon (2014:199), ‘when organised interests come into conflict with the combination of national [regional] mood and elected politicians, the latter combination is likely to prevail’. In Veneto, for instance, most PD actors adopted very passive approaches to action, although admitted being subject to pressures from Catholic associations. Venetian business organizations also advocated the adoption of more expansive immigration policies during the ‘asylum crisis’ due to the lack of workers in many sectors of the growing Venetian economy (Del Frate 2018), but issues related to client politics never emerged in any of the 43 interviews.

The second element is the availability of repertoires of actions or prior definitions of the situation (Ansell, Trondal and Øgård 2016: 11), which, following the sensemaking literature, tend to decrease actors’ scepticism about planning and forecasting (Weick 1995:30), leading them to replicate strategies perceived as successful in the past. The long history of active involvement in social policies of centre-left Tuscan local and regional authorities is the key element that led them to adopt and maintain an interventionist policy approach on asylum. The scarcity of civil servants with specific expertise on asylum, and the high turnover among elected members of local governments (especially in Sicily and Veneto), instead, often reduced the availability of these past experiences. Many interviewees explained that, during the ‘crisis’, decisions were mostly taken under conditions of emergency and urgency, in the absence of adequate instruments and previous experience of how to deal with the situation: they, therefore, shaped responses to the perceived ‘external pressures’ posed by asylum-seeking migration as they defined them. Most interviewees described asylum-seekers’ arrival as an overwhelming phenomenon and the organisation of the reception system as a very complex issue, which poses unprecedented challenges to local authorities. This led most political actors to internalize the idea of being passive respondents rather than active shapers of asylum policies, and to adopt passive approaches to action and generated ‘reactive’, ‘emergency-based’ responses, often developed in response to crisis or notable events (Weick 1995).

‘Fox’ style thinking.

As Tetlock puts it, ‘Foxes’ ‘know many small things’ from disparate sources and tend to make decisions by ‘stitching together’ these diverse sources of information (2005:73). This leads to better predictions because this style is more adaptive to rapidly changing events: ‘foxes doubted that real-world problems could be squeezed, without serious distortion, into syllogistic templates’ (p.140).

A few decision-makers adopted this decision-making style and were much less influenced by public opinion. ‘Foxes’ include, in particular, some independent mayors in Veneto (and, to a minor extent, in the other regions), not affiliated to any party and who had no aspiration to pursue a political career. Some of them had clearly defined ideological or identity-related position on asylum, others did not. In any case, unlike in the case of ‘Hedgehog’ (and ‘Chameleon’) decision-makers, their sensemaking process is much less influenced by their established frames related to public reactions to asylum-seeking flows and they rather adopt pragmatic decision-making styles which lead them to change and adapt their positions on the issue over time, and to look for more information and contact experts to support their decisions. This sometimes leads them to differently frame the causes of public hostility and to try to adopt strategies to contrast these negative attitudes. It also leads them to adopt proactive approaches to action and proactive stances towards public opinion despite its perceived high hostility and the perceived high salience of immigration.

‘Chameleon’ style thinking.

I argue that the decision-making styles adopted by actors affiliated to both the M5S and the LN do not fit in either of the previous categories, mainly because, unlike both Foxes and Hedgehogs, these actors seem not to be interested in making forecasts. Tetlock differentiates ‘Foxes’ from ‘Hedgehogs’ ‘on the basis of their cognitive approach to making predictions’ (Huffmon 2006:467). Rather, in the case of both LN and M5S actors, the public reactions frames established guided actors’ very attributions of the situation and therefore played a key role in script selection.

This does not mean that these actors’ sensemaking is immune to any influence of self-identity processes. Most M5S actors interviewed have humanitarian views of the causes of migration which would lead them to support asylum-seekers’ reception. LN actors, particularly in Veneto, are pushed by cultural identity processes to oppose asylum-seekers reception (although their institutional identity often tends to discourage proactive approaches to action). Importantly, these actors seem to act irrespective of and often against the direction suggests by these identity-related processes, because the established frames about public reactions to asylum-seeking flows and their distinctive aim to act according to the perceived people’s will, prevail over any other ideological or identity-related consideration.

Their decisions to support or oppose asylum-seekers’ reception are powerfully shaped by their understandings of public attitudes to immigration. While LN actors tend to perceive the population as more cohesively opposing asylum-seekers’ reception, M5S tend to perceive it as split in two groups, those supporting and those opposing asylum-seekers reception (these different views seem to reflect these parties’ different electorate). Where public attitudes to migration are perceived to be predominantly positive – such as in the case of the main Sicilian cities – M5S actors openly support asylum-seekers’ reception. In those contexts – such as in rural Sicily and in Tuscany – where the population is perceived to be split between two groups (those supporting asylum-seekers’ reception and those opposing) M5S actors end up adopting mixed strategies, such as supporting the creation of reception centres only if hosting minors, or if managed by the Church. Finally, in those situations where the local population is perceived to be predominantly hostile to migrants – such as in some isolated Sicilian villages – M5S actors oppose the creation of reception centres.

These actors’ decisions to adopt more passive or active approaches to action (in support of or opposition to asylum-seekers’ reception) and more proactive or submissive stances towards public opinion are then powerfully driven by their perceptions of the salience of asylum issues not only in their local contexts but also, more broadly, in the different situations in which they are involved. Therefore, these actors seem to perceive different decisions related to asylum management as more or less visible to the local population and make different decisions accordingly. In situations or contexts of perceived low salience, LN actors tend to adopt more passive approaches, mainly involving a disengagement (or ‘non engagement’) from asylum governance structures, and M5S actors more proactive ones. In situations of high salience LN actors adopt more proactive approaches, while M5S actors remain passive or disengage from asylum governance structures. The ordinal nature of salience also seems to affect these actors’ choices: the fact that Tuscans, unlike Venetians, are perceived as uninterested in the regionalist claims made by the LN, pushes Tuscan LN actors to adopt more proactive approaches on immigration compared to Venetian LN actors.

Importantly, these populist actors’ decisions, even in situations of low issue salience, seem not to be influenced by past experiences nor by pressures of policy entrepreneurs.

To sum up, despite different factors ultimately influencing the stances and approaches to action of these different groups of actors, actors’ perceptions of public attitudes to immigration and of the salience of the asylum issue in different contexts and situations crucially influenced the choices of the vast majority of decision-makers (‘Hedgehogs’ and ‘Chameleons’), enabling or constraining preferred scripts or even shaping these very scripts.

## 7.3. Transformational Mechanisms.

In order to identify transformational mechanisms that produced outputs and outcomes of governance systems I compare in this section governance networks across the three regions, with the aim to assess, first, whether different patterns of interactions among actors developed in the three regions, and, second, whether and how these are linked to the different outputs and outcomes produced.

Some of the most common statistic indicators used in SNA are calculated to provide insights about networks’ features. To make the comparison more systematic, a few adjustments have been made to the networks developed in previous chapters[[42]](#footnote-42). First, actors have been grouped adopting the same criteria for all regions. Mayors have been grouped according to the type of municipality (village, town or city[[43]](#footnote-43)), and according to their political affiliation[[44]](#footnote-44). Second, nodes with one single edge have been deleted from the networks, as also a few other nodes that were mentioned by the interviewees in the category ‘others’[[45]](#footnote-45). As a result of these adjustments the networks compared have a similar number of nodes (with small differences due to the different degree of regional political variation). Table 7.2 illustrates key network features and who are the key programmers and switchers in the three regions.

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| *Table 7.2. Key features of regional governance networks mapping the frequency of exchange (statistics calculated for undirected networks, except for in-degree measures).* |
|  |

Networks’ density, average path length, and average degree provide insights on their cohesiveness (Caiani and Parenti 2013:57). The density values suggest that 40 per cent of possible links are activated in the Tuscan network, compared to 22 per cent in Veneto and 28 per cent in Sicily. This suggests that the conversation in Veneto and Sicily is much more fragmented, while the Tuscan network is more cohesive. Furthermore, the higher average degree in Tuscany suggests that, on average, each node in the network is connected to 13 other actors, more than in Veneto (8) and Sicily (11): in Veneto, therefore, actors in the regional governance network are less likely to collaborate, overcoming the distances by which they are separated, suggesting that the network is more segmented. Finally, the average path length, which is inversely related to the network’s cohesiveness, suggests that all networks are fairly centralised, although the Tuscan one is more centralised than the others: the value ranges between 1.6 (Tuscany) and 1.94 (Veneto), meaning that, on average, actors in all networks are less than two nodes away from each other.

The table above also shows who these central actors are and how they behave. Following Castells (2009:45) in previous chapters I investigated two different types of centrality: the in-degree centrality and the betweenness centrality. Actors with a high in-degree centrality (*programmers*) are those who are potentially capable of defining the framework of the conversation and of coordinating the governance system. Actors with a high betweenness centrality (*switchers*) are those that do take actions to coordinate the network. In the table above I have added a third type of centrality, the ‘eigenvector centrality’, which is a measure of the influence of the node in a network (Chapter 3).

The analysis suggests that key *programmers* – crucially prefectures, local and regional governments – not necessarily had high betweenness and eigenvector values. In Tuscany, the regional government and the regional branch of ANCI dominated the asylum governance system, mobilised to activate the network’s relational potential, and crucially influenced its operation. They took direct responsibility to organize and coordinate the regional reception system (in cooperation with a homogeneous and strong group of service providers). In both Veneto and Sicily, the regional governments and the ANCI did not take the lead in coordinating the governance system, with the role of intermediators being left to the Prefectures and the (weak and heterogeneous) groups of service providers. In these two regions, most of the responsibilities to organize the reception system were in fact delegated to the Prefectures, the only *programmers* that acted as *switchers* and were influential in the network.

Table 7.3 complements these findings, providing insights about conflict within networks.

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| *Table 7.3. Key features of governance networks mapping framing consonance (statistics calculated for undirected networks*[[46]](#footnote-46)*).* |
|  |

The higher modularity of the Venetian network suggests that this is characterised by a higher polarization between actors in favour and against asylum-seekers’ reception compared to the other networks, as shown in the previous chapters. Although the modularity of the Sicilian network is also apparently rather high, the network does not meet the other criteria suggested in the literature to test whether the high modularity is actually an indicator of high polarization, such as the concentration of nodes with high in-degree inside community boundaries, a criteria which is instead met by the Venetian network (Guerra et al. 2013). The SNA also suggests that interactions within the Venetian network are much more conflictual than in the other two regions: 29 per cent of interactions occurred between actors with very different views on asylum.

Table 7.3 also identifies nodes that are involved in the highest number of conflictual relations. In Veneto, these actors include the Prefectures, mayors and the regional government, suggesting that the conflict around asylum-seekers’ reception in Veneto is a political and institutional conflict over asylum-seekers’ dispersal. The fact that the role of the Prefectures, the only central actor in the network, was very much contested contributes to explain why they did not manage to organize an efficient reception system there. In Sicily, instead, actors involved in conflictual relationships mostly include non-political actors, suggesting that the conflict there is largely connected to the (mis)management of the reception system and the mobilisation of civil society actors. These interaction patters confirm that migration is not politicised in Sicily. In Tuscany, finally, the two central actors that took the lead in organizing the regional reception system – the regional government and ANCI – are not involved in conflictual relations, which contributes to explain why their attempts to coordinate the network were successful and led to efficient policy outputs and outcomes[[47]](#footnote-47).

To sum up, the analysis suggests that in the three regions, characterised by a similar structural and institutional framework, actors acted very differently and that the interactions of their actions did significantly influence the production of policy outputs and outcomes.

Coherently with the literature suggesting that efficiency of outputs is linked to networks’ cohesiveness, more efficient policy outputs and outcomes were produced in the Tuscan network, which is characterised by higher density, higher average degree and is more centralised. Less efficient policy outputs and outcomes are produced in the Venetian and Sicilian governance systems, characterised by lower density and average degree and higher average path length. These different network features seem to be strictly linked to who the central actors in the network are and what approach to action they adopt. In Tuscany, the regional governments and local governments (and ANCI, that coordinated them), all supported asylum-seekers’ reception and proactively coordinated the governance network, directing and controlling understandings within it. As the interview material also demonstrates, it was their approach that shaped a dense and centralised network there. The inefficiencies of the Venetian and Sicilian reception systems, instead, are connected to their fragmentation, the absence of coordination by key political actors, and the delegation of responsibilities to the Prefectures, which organised the two regional reception systems around emergency centres, guaranteeing lower reception standards.

Coherently with the literature suggesting that higher political contestation of migration is related to a higher polarisation of actors’ views on the issue, the analysis conducted shows that the Venetian network has a higher modularity and higher level of internal conflict, compared to the Sicilian and Tuscan networks. Network polarization seems not to be merely linked to the diverse ideological profiles of the actors involved in the political system and its political variation, but also, more broadly, to the interaction of different perspectives on asylum and approaches to action in this field. The Sicilian case demonstrates that clusters of actors within the network are formed which are unrelated to actors’ political affiliations.

Mobilisations on asylum-related issues.

Inefficient policy outputs and outcomes, and high levels of political contestation of asylum within the governance system seem to have played a key role in triggering the mobilisation of civil society actors and in leading to episodes of collective action. This emerges from interviews conducted with a wide range of civil society actors – including anti-migrant committees, pro-migrant NGOs, service providers and trade unions.

In 2016, Veneto experienced the highest number (43) of anti-migrant protests in Italy (Lunaria 2017), while 11 protest events took place in Tuscany, and only one in Sicily. A more in-depth analysis of protest events in Veneto suggests that most of them (33) were organized by anti-migrant committees or extreme-right movements. Only ten protests were organized by the LN, and the interview material suggests that these were mostly intended as strategic actions aimed at maintaining locals’ consensus. Importantly, most of the protests targeted big emergency centres, created by the Prefectures following the opposition of many mayors to create small reception structures[[48]](#footnote-48) (which were the target of only six protests).

This suggests that the high number of protests in Veneto cannot be entirely explained by the strong presence of the Lega and dynamics of political contestation by party actors. Rather, it suggests that this is related to the imbalanced dispersion of asylum-seekers throughout the region – with the huge concentrations of asylum-seekers in specific centres or areas – and the organisation of the reception system around big emergency centres (often contested by local administrations). All these elements pushed extreme-right movements and groups of citizens to mobilise and increased the visibility of their protests.

Interviews conducted with civil society actors in Veneto corroborate this finding. The leader of an anti-migrant committee – one of the most active in the region – explains during the interview that the committee itself was created when a group of citizens spontaneously gathered to protest against the dispersal of ninety of asylum-seekers in a former hotel in a village in the countryside. A local leader of the extreme-right movement FN, when asked about key events that influenced his understandings of asylum-seeking migration, explains that:

I’ve always voted for right-wing parties, but, to be honest, it was only after the creation of the big regional hub in --- [his village] that, as other friends of mine, I decided to openly take action. And this happened when I met *Forza Nuova* and its members, who came to help us after the hub was opened (FN Leader, Veneto).

Importantly, these inefficiencies also led to mobilisations of left-wing actors and asylum-seekers themselves, particularly within the big regional hubs or in opposition to anti-refugee protests (Ambrosini 2018:122; Zamponi 2018:112). As explained by the leader of a pro-migrant association, after the huge regional hub of Bagnoli di Sopra was opened, several left-wing associations created a joint platform to express solidarity with asylum-seekers and denounce the living conditions in the regional hubs. In December 2017, 250 asylum-seekers left the regional hub of Conetta, accompanied by groups of activists, and marched for 50 kilometres in order to meet the Prefect in Venice asking for the closure of the regional hub (Camilli 2017). This march was widely covered by local media, and led to counter-mobilisations by the extreme right (Pietrobelli 2017).

In Sicily, instead, actors’ passive strategies and the absence of anti-migrant political entrepreneurs, prevented the emergence of anti-migrant protests. Some interviewees, explicitly asked so, reported that they remembered some spontaneous protests against asylum-seekers, but that none of them received support or legitimation by local party elites, or led to more structured anti-migrant movements. The Sicilian politics of immigration is rather dominated by pro-migrant groups, including NGOs, Christian churches and left-wing movements. The interview material shows that most of the actions of these groups are ‘reactive and contingent’ (Zamponi 2018:109). Some NGOs, such as Borderline Sicily, and NGO networks were created to denounce the conditions of migrants and demand changes in the reception system. Others, which had no previous experience in the field, started to deal with asylum-related issues for the same purpose. As an activist interviewed explained:

Our organisation was created to respond to the lack of services offered to asylum-seekers within the reception systems. We have been collecting complaints directly from migrants or from persons working in the reception centres, who have been reporting about service providers that do not distribute the pocket money to migrants or do not provide proper food or winter clothes. We heard complaints by asylum-seekers that claimed to have been beaten, and then there are cases of migrants dispersed in centres in the countryside, where they are completely isolated, they do not see anybody, they remain for months without seeing a lawyer or a doctor (Coordinator of a pro-migrant NGO, Sicily).

Other local initiatives, networks and campaigns, were created in response to ‘emergencies’ linked to the inefficiencies of the Sicilian reception system, to provide asylum-seekers with food, shelter and other services due to the lack of action from the competent authorities:

We created our organisation in 2014. At that time more and more migrants were starting to reach the Sicilian shores, there were no hotspots, there was a first reception centre that was a shame (…). This is the reason why we decided to get in the game, we contacted the Prefecture and asked the Prefect how we should have positioned ourselves within the reception system from a formal point of view, and we ended up creating a centre which is a safe place for unaccompanied minors, vulnerable persons, women with children, single women, who could not be hosted in the official first reception centre. It was a gift for the Prefecture, since we are doing all this with the money of our Church, without asking for any funds from the State (Head of a Christian Organisation).

Many Christian churches and organisations became actively involved in the provision of services to asylum-seekers and, often, as also reported by Zamponi (2018:111) this individual help gradually became collective action.

Because of the more efficient management of the reception system, similar political opportunities were absent in Tuscany for both anti-migrant groups and pro-migrant associations. The Tuscan politics of migration is dominated by trade unions and a restricted group of service providers, mostly including organisations, such as ARCI and Caritas, with a long experience in the field and which were already involved in asylum management before the recent ‘asylum crisis’. The interviews conducted suggest that these organisations ‘tend to bring a more long-term perspective to the issue and to focus more on structural solutions for the reform of the Italian immigration system than on the need for immediate relief in a particular emergency situation’ (p.113). They invested efforts and resources in concrete activities aimed at strengthening asylum-seekers’ integration and the development of their own reception projects, rather than acting as mere advocacy organizations. Together with local trade unions, these civil society organizations were very active to defend the rights of both asylum-seekers and workers employed in the reception system, and advanced claims that were not merely ideational but also material, related to the efficiency of the reception system. On the one hand, they forced local authorities to make controls and prevent the emergence of scandals and inefficiencies in the reception system. On the other hand, their direct involvement in the reception system and their close contacts with many centre-left mayors and representatives of local authorities contributed to prevent the emergence of political opportunity structures for broader collective actions on asylum-related issues.

At the same time, the ‘Tuscan reception model’ organized around small reception structures dispersed uniformly across the region, also reduced the opportunities for anti-migrant movements to emerge and gain visibility. Despite the presence of well-established far-right parties and extreme right movements in Tuscany – even before the growth of the Lega in the political system – none of the actors interviewed reported of any structured anti-migrant committee or movement in the region, but only of isolated protests enacted by groups of citizens living close to reception centres:

In Tuscany the widespread good practices in asylum-seekers’ reception and the Tuscan reception model were not sufficient to prevent the emergence of anti-migrant sentiments and to contrast a national trend that led to the growth of the Lega, but at least they avoided the mass protests that took place in other Italian regions (Head of a trade union, Tuscany).

## 7.4. The Recursive and Self-referential Nature of Regional Asylum Governance.

Having identified the chain of situational, action-formation and transformational mechanisms that produced policy outputs and outcomes during the ‘asylum crisis’, this section focuses on the scope for change in governance dynamics, arguing that the mobilisation of civil society actors played an important role in mediating the relationship between macro-level policy responses and micro-level understandings. Previous paragraphs, have shown, on the one hand, that these mobilisations during the ‘asylum crisis’ were mostly triggered by the inefficiencies of the reception systems and other policy outputs. On the other hand, these mobilisations crucially influenced political actors’ understandings of the situation and assessment of public attitudes to migration.

This suggests that regional asylum governance systems were not only shaped by cognitive and relational mechanisms but also shaped these very mechanisms: during the ‘crisis’, they generated a narrative-reinforcing dynamic that fed on itself (Figure 7.3).

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| *Figure 7.3. Regional Asylum Governance.* |
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Actors’ actions, as shown in sections 7.1 and 7.2, were powerfully driven by their understandings of the effects of asylum-seekers’ reception on public opinion, embedded in narrative stories linked to local history and identity. Section 7.3 has also shown that these actions shaped policy outputs and outcomes, including the efficiency of the asylum system and levels of political contestation of asylum. These outputs and outcomes then influenced the emergence, strength, and visibility of anti-migrant protests and pro-migrant mobilisations organised by civil society actors. In turn, to complete the circle, these then played a key role in the process of frame emergence, reinforcing actors’ perceptions of public reactions to asylum-seekers’ reception and available narratives on local attitudes towards migrants.

In Veneto, the widespread anti-migrant protests were both the effect of actors’ perception that the local population is harshly hostile towards asylum-seekers, but also shaped these very perceptions. Such understandings powerfully shaped actors’ passive stances towards public opinion and, ultimately, produced a very inefficient reception system, characterised by huge concentrations of asylum-seekers in emergency centres, which contributed to scatter these very protests (Figure 7.4).

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| *Figure 7.4. Veneto’s response to the Asylum Crisis: a ‘hostility cycle’.* |
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| *Figure 7.5. Sicily’s response to the Asylum Crisis: a ‘welcoming cycle’.* |
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In Sicily, conversely, the active and visible mobilisation of pro-migrant groups invoking Sicilian history and culture to make more evocative their pro-migrant stances, contributed to reinforce political actors’ perceptions of Sicilians’ tolerance. The absence of anti-migrant entrepreneurs, in turn, prevents the emergence of anti-migrant campaigning, which represents a powerful feedback that reinforces preconceptions of Sicilians’ tolerance and prevents any political contestation of migration. In both regions, focusing events, personal experiences, and symbols accompany and reinforce pre-existing perceptions (Kingdon 2014, 113).

In Tuscany, instead, the efficiency of the reception system – despite the increasing political contestation of asylum by far-right actors (which since 2017 started to gain votes and govern some important municipalities) – prevented the emergence and reduced the visibility of anti-migrant and pro-refugee mobilisations. The absence of mobilisations against asylum-seekers – despite actors’ perceptions of growing anti-migrant public sentiments – represented a positive feedback to local authorities, about their capacity to influence public opinion through the policies adopted. It suggested them that the efficient management of the reception system and, more broadly, the interventionist policy approach adopted by key local and regional institutions, contributed to prevent social tensions.

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| *Figure 7.6. Tuscany’s response to the Asylum Crisis: an ‘efficiency cycle’.* |
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The Tuscan case also provides interesting insights on the effect of political changes and other external shocks on governance. In this region, a few LN and M5S mayors were elected for the first time during the ‘asylum crisis’ and developed different policy approaches to asylum, contributing to politicise asylum governance. Importantly, they influenced processes of frame emergence, because of their very election, leading centre-left actors to perceive a sudden significant deterioration in local attitudes to immigration. Despite that, this perceived change in public attitudes did not lead (most) centre-left actors to modify their actions and strategies.

This suggests that key actors’ understandings, once defined, are resistant to external shocks, and that initial environmental conditions leave a persistent mark (or ‘imprint’) on situated actors (Marquis and Tilcsik 2013:45). Such persistency of frames was mainly related to a ‘sensible environment’ that was able to persist, and to a very strong and persisting political identity by centre-left actors, as mentioned in Chapter 6.

## 7.5 Conclusion.

This chapter has explained why different regional governance systems in Italy produced efficient or inefficient reception systems and high or low levels of politicisation of asylum, and identified the situational, action-formation and transformational mechanisms that produced these outputs. By doing so, the chapter has shown the self-referential nature of Italian regional asylum governance systems.

This finding has two important implications.

First, it shows the constitutive effects of regional asylum governance. While it is an established finding that the policy-making process is not linear, and that actors’ frames and decision-making dynamics can potentially lead to a decoupling between “problems” and “solutions” (Brunsson 2000; Cohen, March and Olsen 1972; Kingdon 2014), this chapter shows that public policy processes at the regional level had a recursive nature, during the ‘asylum crisis’. In other words, they had important structuring effects of governance, they contributed to produce meaning. Actors in regional asylum governance systems, during the ‘asylum crisis’, tried to work out ‘what is going on’ and ‘what they should do next’ and they shaped what they were dealing with through actions and assessment of the effects of these actions (Geddes 2020). In a sense, through these actions and assessments, they answered their own questions. The chapter therefore also concludes that regional asylum governance is both a cause and an effect of ‘turbulence’ (Ansell, Trondal, and Øgård 2016:1). This corrects a tendency to see asylum-seeking migration only as an external shock to governance systems when this chapter shows that the governance systems themselves play a key role in generating or enacting turbulence and defining asylum-seekers’ reception as a challenge.

Second, the recursive nature of asylum governance has significant implications for the scope of policy change in regional asylum governance. Considering the resistance to change of individual strategies, this chapter shows, the scope and potential for change in governance dynamics and dominant policy approaches seems to be ultimately dependent on changes in the constellation of actors involved within the political system, or in the power balances between them. Changes in structural or objective factors (such as the increase in the number of asylum-seekers or structural reforms of the asylum system) seem to have a much less important influence. The analysis also suggests that the potential of new perspectives getting through is limited, as their impact on policy change, unless they are coupled with a change of who is in power, meaning the actors that coordinate and control the governance network.

Changes in the control of key institutions (such as the regional government and ANCI) seems to be potentially crucial and to have the potential to change dominant understandings in the governance system and to lead to the disruption of highly centralised networks. As a PD Tuscan mayor foresees:

The next local and regional elections will represent the key events for the future of this region (…). If the Lega wins these elections this will lead to the break of the Tuscan system. The Lega in Tuscany is already creating a new political elite, made of persons that before had no chances to emerge as local political leaders. If they win, new lobbies will emerge, and new social, cultural and political reference systems will become dominant. (Mayor, PD).

# CHAPTER 8 - NATIONAL ASYLUM GOVERNANCE

This chapter shifts the focus to the national level to identify the key actors that played a role in national asylum decision-making processes, reconstruct decision-making processes that led to key national asylum policy outputs during the ‘refugee crisis’, and examine tensions within the asylum governance system. This analysis is conducted in three main steps. I first apply SNA to identify political conflicts and cleavages within the multi-level asylum governance network. Then, I move to analyse decision-making processes by national actors during both the first and the second parts of the ‘asylum crisis’. Finally, I draw some conclusions about the processes that led to the production of key policy outputs of the national governance system.

The chapter largely focuses on decisions that led the Italian government to adopt a new restrictive approach to the management of access and status determination in 2017. As a PD MP interviewed explains, this was ‘a real shift of paradigm, a new approach which gave priority to migration control rather than humanitarian principles, unlike the previous approach’. This radical change of approach tends to be explained by structural factors, including the persistently high migration flows and the high costs of asylum-seekers’ reception (Fabbrini and Zgaga 2019:288), the high salience of migration and the growth of anti-immigration parties in opinion polls (Castelli Gattinara 2017b), and the EU failure to enact a cooperative redistribution of refugee-admission responsibilities (Ibid). More broadly, many scholars argue that strategic considerations by party actors do not play a significant role in influencing decisions to regulate migration flows, because ‘given the increasing migration flows to Western Europe, concerns expressed by the national populations and the pressure from the political (far) right, governments are exposed to reform pressure whether they like it or not’ (Abou-Chadi and Helbling 2018:700). This chapter challenges this view by examining the impact of actors’ understandings and frames on their policy decisions. In doing so, I do not intend to claim that structural factors did not play a crucial role in determining the government’s approach to the management of the ‘refugee crisis’. Opening the ‘black box’ of decision-making processes allows enhanced understanding of how these structural factors have been interpreted by actors and whether and how these interpretations – rather than objective facts – led to certain outputs.

The chapter concludes that regional governance dynamics and outputs crucially influenced the construction of policy problems and solutions at the national level, and that this occurred not (only) through direct pressures of local actors on national decision-makers but mainly through an influence on their diagnostic understandings of their (sensible) environment. In other words, the chapter shows the constitutive effects of national asylum governance and how these effects were shaped by interactions with the regional level. This broader argument is developed in two main sections, through three more empirical claims.

* The first section shows that asylum governance in Italy during the ‘asylum crisis’ was complex and characterised by the involvement of a high number of institutions and organizations, at different levels of governance, ‘intricately nested and overlapping’ (Ansell, Trondal, and Øgård 2016:5). More importantly, it was very conflictual. The asylum governance ‘battleground’, following Ambrosini’s metaphor (2018), was defined by two main political conflicts or cleavages: a more ‘ideological’ conflict among actors that support and oppose asylum-seekers’ reception, and a conflict around competences and management, between local and national actors.
* The second section shows that these conflicts – which did not lead to changes in the distribution of competences (see Chapter 2) – largely influenced actors’ understandings of the effects of asylum-seeking migration, produced uncertainty and pushed the MoI to adopt a more restrictive policy approach on access and status determination. These policy changes in 2017 were significantly influenced by key actors’ understanding that the situation of asylum management had reached a ‘point of no return’, because the local level had become unmanageable. This perception seems to have been largely shaped by contacts between the MoI, Prefects, mayors and PD MPs. The section also shows that other powerful understandings influenced national asylum policy choices. Among them, a perceived change in actors’ understanding of the causes of migration flows, despite the asylum recognition date during the ‘refugee crisis’ in Italy remaining pretty stable over time, and the perceived ‘saturation’ of the Italian asylum system, due to the huge backlog of asylum applications, and of the reception system.
* The third section finally shows that these latter structural factors are in turn outputs of the emergency-based approach to the management of migration previously adopted by the Italian government, which suggests that asylum governance processes during the ‘crisis’ have been both a cause and an effect of ‘turbulence’.

## 8.1. The Italian Asylum Governance Network.

This section applies SNA to examine the organization and key features of the national asylum governance network, and supplements these findings with interview data, which allows deeper understanding of actors’ relations. First, the asylum governance network is mapped with a narrow focus on national actors. Then, subnational actors are added to the network to investigate the interactions between subnational and national levels of governance. Finally, attention shifts from the frequency of exchange to the consonance and dissonance of framing of asylum-seeking migration, to identify tensions and conflicts within the multi-level governance system, and key sources of pressures to which national decision-makers were subject.

### 8.1.1 Key national decision-makers.

Most of the existing literature on the ‘refugee crisis’ makes assumptions – mostly based on the formal distribution of competences – about who are the main actors directly involved in national asylum-related decision-making processes. Rather than merely looking at formal competences, here I address this question relying on the interview material and SNA.

To do so, I have initially mapped the Italian asylum governance network (Figure 8.1), focusing only on national actors, highlighting nodes with the highest betweenness centrality. The figure suggests that the actors that played a central role in decision-making processes are, first and foremost, the MoI (including both its political and technical components) and some PD MPs.

The interview material confirms, not surprisingly, a central role in decision-making of the Minister of Interior. This is true especially in the case of Marco Minniti, who replaced Angelino Alfano[[49]](#footnote-49) as Minister of Interior in December 2016. A PD MP since 2001, Minniti had a long experience in coordinating the secret services during previous centre-left governments and established contacts in North Africa (Berruti 2017), and the interviews suggest that he played a key role in implementing the new government’s external migration policy approach:

Minniti was uniquely placed, because he had this huge expertise that I would say, nobody else in Europe at his level had on Libya, thanks to his personal service (Official, EU Commission, 2018).

I think the new policy approach was largely due to the new minister. We have daily contacts with the MoI and we could immediately perceive a different dynamism, and a specific interest in addressing the roots of these situations. It was a very particular approach, really related to his own person (Official, IOM, 2018).

Minniti has a very special personal background…let’s call it an approach of ‘democratic security’. I don’t think he was a mere executor of a mandate, I think he created and shaped this mandate. He largely developed his policy and managed to impose it to the rest of the government, although initially it was not unanimously accepted (NGO Leader, 2018).

Key officials within the MoI, and particularly the Department of Civil Liberties and Immigration (DCLI), also played a key role in these processes, particularly in the first part of the ‘refugee crisis’, when the then Minister Alfano delegated to them many responsibilities on asylum management[[50]](#footnote-50), but also under Minniti:

From what I could see there was a total convergence of views between the officials within the ministry and Minniti. Minniti really was deeply inside his institutional role, he was really active, the institutional role became part of himself. So, on the one hand he managed to mobilise the officials of the Ministry, on the other they contributed to shape his decisions (PD MP, 2018).

While the Department of Public Security (DPS) also played a crucial role in policy implementation, as an EU official reported, the relationship with the DCLI were discontinuous and the key policy choices were made within the DCLI. The MoFA, instead, played a more marginal role:

Well, in theory the MoFA has a role to play, because the migration policy has to be implemented abroad. In practice, it’s almost exclusively the Interior Ministry. At least in our system. If you look at our policy towards Libya in the field of migration, it was always the Ministries of Interior who went to Libya to make the agreements to regulate migration, to stop migration under certain conditions (Official, MoFA, 2018)

The third key actor that emerges as central in Figure 8.1 is the PD and its members, including members of the government, the deputy ministries and undersecretaries in the MoI, and some key MPs, including the members of the Inquiry Commission and, since 2017, some MPs close to the new Minister Minniti. Not all MPs approved Minniti’s choices: the new restrictive approach to asylum generated a vibrant debate within the PD and was ‘unpopular with senior figures in party’ (Fabbrini and Zgaga 2019:288).

Other important actors were involved in the discussions that led to key decisions without having a direct role in decision-making. These included, first of all, the European Commission, Frontex and EASO. As mentioned in Chapter 2, for many years Italian asylum policies across all the three asylum policy subfields were driven by ‘passive top-down Europeanization’ (Zincone, 2011: 267). Interview data suggests that the EU kept acting as a ‘vincolo esterno’ (Dyson and Featherstone 1996) during the ‘refugee crisis’, for instance imposing the ‘hotspot approach’ in 2015. Many decisions of the Italian government during the ‘refugee crisis’ – starting from the development of the *Mare Nostrum* operation – were, however, not strictly aligned with the position of the EU:

It was very difficult at the beginning to put a foot in the door [of Italian authorities]. The main interlocutor, obviously, was the Minister of Interior, which has two branches, the police branch, and the DCL. (…) With the police, whenever we had technical problems, this was easy. You get more fingerprinting scanners, you get more personnel…you manage. On the other side, it was much more difficult, because we're talking about fluid things which cannot so easily be influenced by us, like the length of asylum procedures as such, the whole set up of the reception system (…). I mean, we can suggest, we can provide expertise, we can provide financing, linked to the financing we can softly try to steer them in some direction rather that another, but it was very difficult to have an impact (Official, EU Commission, 2018).

IOM and UNHCR were crucially involved in discussions about asylum policies and in policy implementation. Despite that, their impact on the identification of policy solutions seems to have been also limited:

If you ask me about the impact we had on the identification of policy solutions, well, I am a bit sceptical. Of course, they consult us and hold us in esteem, but what really influences decisions is politics, their balancing of different elements, points of view, factors. In some political moments we are taken into consideration more than in others. The added value of our experience and activities is related to a better knowledge of the migration phenomenon, but there are decision-makers that want to have this information and knowledge and others that do not want (…) and do not really take our advice into consideration (Official, IOM, 2018).

Finally, as shown in previous chapters, several subnational actors, in particular local governments, were also involved in discussions about asylum management.

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| *Figure 8.1. National asylum governance network. Nodes represent single actors. Weight indicates frequency of exchange. Node size indicates betweenness centrality.* |
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| *Notes. The network does not include relations between MPs (for methodological reasons). Nodes with one single edge were hidden.* |

### 8.1.2. The relationships between national and subnational actors.

Figure 8.2 adds subnational actors to the previous network, providing a first overview of actors’ interactions within the whole Italian governance system. In the figure, nodes represent groups of actors of the same type. Mayors are grouped according to the type of municipality (village, town or city[[51]](#footnote-51)), and according to their political affiliation[[52]](#footnote-52), regardless of the region where they are located[[53]](#footnote-53). Ties between nodes indicate the existence of interactions between groups of actors and their thickness is proportional to the frequency of these interactions. The size of nodes is proportional to their betweenness centrality.

The network was organized implementing the spatial, force-directed, layout algorithm ‘force atlas’, and five colours are used to mark different subnetworks identified through the ‘community detection algorithm’. Five subnetworks are identified: an orange subnetwork mostly including national and international actors, and four subnetworks of actors mostly located at the local/regional levels, including a pink subnetwork with left-wing actors and independent mayors, a dark green subnetwork dominated by PD actors, a light green subnetwork with mostly M5S actors, and a purple subnetwork with right-wing actors. The software clearly indicates that the MoI and its local branches, as expected, are the key ‘switchers’ that connect these subnetworks.

Crucially, it is possible to draw a line in the figure (the blue dashed line) that separates actors that accept and oppose asylum-seekers’ reception. Moving from the blue line towards the left side of the figure, local political actors are found that more closely interact with national and international actors, and are therefore more favourable towards asylum-seekers’ reception or adopt more proactive approaches to action: initially PD and M5S actors are found, then left-wing actors and independent city mayors.

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| *Figure 8.2. Italian asylum governance network. Nodes represent groups of actors. Node size indicates betweenness centrality.* |
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*Notes. The SNA excludes relations between MPs and between regional MPs. Nodes with one single edge were hidden.*

The figure also suggests that national and international actors (the orange subnetwork) interact with most of the subnetworks of local actors and that the local and national levels of governance are very much intertwined, rather than representing two separates and independent levels of governance. Only in the case of right-wing local actors, their relations with national actors is mostly (although not exclusively) mediated by the local branches of the MoI (Prefectures and *Questure*). This suggests that governance dynamics at the subnational and national levels directly influenced one another.

### 8.1.3. Conflicts and tensions within the governance network.

Figure 8.3 shifts the attention to framing consonance. Again, the network was organized applying the force-directed algorithm ‘Force Atlas’, with the result that actors with the lower consonance of views (or highest dissonance) tend to be pushed towards opposite corners. The four subnetworks identified by the software are similar to the ones identified in Figure 8.2: a purple subnetwork of national and international actors, a dark green subnetwork with PD and left-wing actors, a light green subnetwork with M5S and centre-right actors, and an orange subnetwork with right-wing actors.

The high polarization of the network suggests that asylum governance in Italy was highly conflictual. Interestingly, in this new network two dimensions seem to explain actors’ position, particularly in relation to the MoI and its local branches: not only actors’ acceptance or opposition to asylum-seekers’ reception (the blue line), but also their belonging to the local or national level of governance (the red line). These are two different dimensions of conflict within the asylum governance ‘battleground’ (Ambrosini 2018): the conflict around acceptance of asylum-seekers’ reception and the conflict between the local and national level (including among actors that accept asylum-seekers’ reception). The two lines also tell us something about the ‘battlefields’ in which the two conflicts are played and actors that acted as mediators. The proximity of journalists to the blue line shows that the conflict around asylum-seekers’ reception – which mainly takes place within the subnational level – was largely acted through the media. Regional governments are the only political actors positioned along the blue line, although the position of this node in the network is the result of an average of the positions of different regional governments (and, as shown in the previous chapters, regional governments acted very differently in the three regions analysed). The conflict between the subnational and national levels is instead mainly mediated by the MPs from the parties that do not oppose asylum-seekers’ reception, and the ANCI (with the SPRAR Central Service).

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| *Figure 8.3. Framing Consonance within Italian governance network. Weight indicates framing consonance. Node size indicates betweenness centrality.* |
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| *Figure 8.4. Conflicts within Italian governance network. Edges indicate existence of discussions and dissonance of views (weight < 2.5). Node size indicates in-degree centrality.* |
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Crucially, the MoI and the Prefectures are very isolated in the network, meaning that the majority of actors declared their perspective on asylum to be very highly different from the one of the MoI. This is true for both local and national actors, and for both actors that promote or oppose asylum-seekers’ reception. Remarkably, this is also true for many mayors affiliated to the PD, the same party that controlled the MoI.

Conflicts within the network are better illustrated in Figure 8.4, where only conflictual ties are shown (with a weight of less than 2.5 in the scale 1-5), and all nodes not engaging in any conflictual interaction have been deleted. The size of nodes in this figure is proportional to their degree centrality, meaning that bigger nodes engage in the highest number of conflictual relations. The figure suggests that the Prefectures and the MoI are the actors in the whole governance network that engage in the highest number of conflictual relations.

It is interesting to examine more closely the actors engaging in conflictual relations with the MoI and its local branches. These can be assumed to put pressure on the MoI, asking for policy change, potentially influencing understandings and decisions. Since local actors in different regions have different understandings and goals, as previous chapters have shown, to investigate this question in Figure 8.5, I have disaggregated per region the nodes corresponding to local political actors. Then, in Figure 8.6, I have identified those nodes that engage in conflictual relations with the MoI, the Prefectures and the *Questure*. As the figure shows, the MoI is subject to pressures coming first and foremost from Veneto and Tuscany. The interview material and the document analysis contribute to clarify the requests made by these actors to the MoI and the claims they advance.

In Veneto, most local governments and the regional governments, including many PD mayors (although these do not appear in Figure 8.6) asked the MoI not to delegate to local and regional governments any responsibility on asylum-seekers’ reception. As the Governor Luca Zaia declared during an audition of the Inquiry Commission in 2015: ‘the Veneto region is not willing to contribute to the organization of the reception system which is not a regional competence according to the law’. The Governor justified this decision by arguing that the regional government ‘is concerned that identifying solutions downstream would prevent any solution of the problem upstream’. Furthermore, Zaia kept framing the effects of asylum-seekers’ reception in Veneto as unsustainable:

We cannot think that Italy or Europe become the ‘natural headquarter’ of the ‘new Africa’, our community would not accept that. My region is not racist (…) but, believe me, there is no space anymore. The recent dispersal of 100 migrants in Eraclea, a touristic centre was for us a ticking bomb – the Venetian MPs here [from the PD] can confirm what I say. It generated widespread protests (Luca Zaia, Audition of Inquiry Commission, 2015).

Importantly, a similar framing is used in public meetings by the President of the Venetian branch of ANCI, and PD mayor of Mirano, Mariarosa Pavanello. After a meeting with senior officials of the MoI in 2017, she declared:

We are very sceptical about the dispersal plan proposed in the agreement between the Minister of Interior and the National ANCI (…). This dispersal model could solve the problem of having huge concentrations of asylum-seekers, but it would lead to social tensions in the municipalities where the rationale behind the dispersal itself is hardly accepted (Mariarosa Pavanello, 2017)[[54]](#footnote-54).

This sets out a pattern of relations between the local and national level that does not fit with Scholten’s well-established typology of types of MLG interactions (Scholten and Penninx 2016), dominated by the assumption that local and regional governments have a tendency to challenge centralised modes of governing.

Ultimately, both the regional government and the regional ANCI asked the national government to adopt more restrictive asylum policies:

How do we understand this situation? Somebody rightly said that making decisions on Italy’s foreign policy is not up to us. True, but we are paying the price for a lack of policies. We cannot solve the problem if we do not block immigrants upstream, creating refugee camps managed in a way that respect human dignity, in Tunisia and Libya (…). We need to sink the smugglers’ boats in Libya (…). You say these thinks need three years, but we are already playing the extra time, we are almost at the penalties. We need an extra effort now to end the match quickly (…). We must have guarantees that the migrants do not arrive anymore (Luca Zaia, Audition of Inquiry Commission, 2015).

The dispersal of asylum-seekers is possible only if we have guarantees from the State about the effective repatriation of those that cannot legally stay, about the speeding up of asylum processing, the involvement of asylum-seekers in socially useful works, and a reform of the asylum procedure that prevents migrants from appealing to the courts if their asylum request is not accepted. These are our requests, since a long time we have been asking these things, but so far we could not see any tangible progress (Mariarosa Pavanello, 2017).

In Tuscany, conversely, the centre-left local and regional governments asked the national government to be assigned more competences on asylum-seekers’ reception:

We kept repeating that the Prefectures were not the institutions with the best know-how and organizational structure suited to the organization of the reception system, which at the end is a type of social service. They could only adopt an emergency approach, and they keep doing it. We kept repeating that the government had to rather directly involve regional and local governments which according to our Constitution are responsible for providing social services. These are the institutions that know how to do it (…). We officially asked the national government to include asylum-seekers’ reception among the competences delegated to the regional government, based on article 116 of the Constitution (PD Member of Regional Government, Tuscany, 2018).

The representative of the Tuscan ANCI reported of significant tensions with the SPRAR Central Service and the MoI due to the interventionist approach adopted by the Tuscan regional and local governments:

The SPRAR Central Service and the Prefectures were very critical about our decision to intervene in in the governance of the CAS centres, an area not strictly under our competence. (…) At some point we directly went to talk with the MoI, protesting against some provisions introduced by Minniti (…) which initially were introducing a sort of parallel health system for asylum-seekers. We were really scared, because it is unconceivable in Tuscany to have part of the health system not under our control (ANCI Official, Tuscany, 2018).

As Figure 8.6 shows, Sicilian local and regional governments have less conflictual relations with the MoI and the Prefectures.

Finally, the figure also shows that significant direct pressures on the MoI came from M5S MPs, many of whom elected in the South of the country, who mainly mobilized the immigration issue ‘to boost their anti-elitist claims, focusing on the mismanagement of the immigration crisis (and in particular the reception system) by the national elite’ (Gianfreda and Carlotti 2018, 59). No direct pressure came from right-wing MPs, who did not interact at all with the MoI and the Prefectures.

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| *Figure 8.5. Italian governance network (articulated across regions)8. Weight indicates framing consonance. Node size indicates betweenness centrality.* |
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| *Figure 8.6. Conflictual relations within Italian governance network. Edges indicate existence of discussions and dissonance of views (weight < 2.5)8. Node size indicates in-degree centrality.* |
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## 8.2. Decision-Making by National Actors during the ‘Asylum Crisis’.

In this second section of this chapter I use some of the insights of the previous section to open the ‘black box’ of decision-making processes that led to key asylum policy outputs during the ‘refugee crisis’, identifying key actors’ understandings and how these have been enacted. I initially focus on the first phase of the ‘refugee crisis’ and then move to the period that followed Minniti’s appointment as Minister of Interior in December 2016. As in previous chapters, I analyse sensemaking processes analysing how actors frame the situation, make attribution about it, and select the script to guide their actions.

### 8.2.1. Before 2017.

Framing the Situation.

Until 2016, actors’ understandings of the ‘refugee crisis’ were strictly linked to a humanitarian view of migration and its causes. Despite the growing concerns for the increasing migration flows to Italy, these flows were mainly perceived, particularly by politicians and the general public, as made of migrants entitled to some form of international protection:

I remember until 2, 3 years ago, the government, politicians and the civil society, they were all exclusively talking about asylum, even if asylum was only part of the story. Some of us experts in the field, we were aware that these flows, with these numbers, they had little to do with ‘political asylum’, and indeed the Territorial Commissions granted protection to around half of the asylum-seekers. Most of them were economic migrants (Deputy Prefect, 2018).

Matteo Renzi himself, then Prime Minister, frequently framed migration in humanitarian terms in public speeches. In 2015, in the aftermaths of one of the huge shipwrecks in the Mediterranean he declared: ‘our sisters and brothers who are dying in the sea, they are not Libyans, they come from other countries, where hunger, war and conflicts are dominating’[[55]](#footnote-55). Importantly, the ‘refugee crisis’ is described by most interviewees as a phenomenon that affects the whole of the EU, and that needs international support. Renzi himself framed the debate ‘not only in terms of humanitarian need but also in relation to the shared security concerns of EU states’ (Colombo 2018:164).

Reports and scholarly works on media representation of the ‘refugee crisis’ in Italy suggest potential explanations about how these frames emerged. According to the Third Report of the NGO *Carta Di Roma*, humanitarian themes received great attention in Italian media in the first part of the ‘refugee crisis’, while threat themes ‘backgrounded when dealing with the arrival of refugees, a term that was generally underused by the Italian press in the past’ (Colombo 2018:164). Berry, Garcia-Blanco, and Moore (2016), reconstructing the press coverage of events related to the ‘refugee crisis’ until the end of 2015, concluded that SAR operations resulted as the most featured theme, and that newspapers ‘allowed significant space for sympathetic stories about the plight of migrants and refugees and advocacy on their behalf’ (p.258). Overall, humanitarian themes were very prominent in coverage (47 per cent of all articles) and explanations of the causes of migration were predominantly focused on ‘push factors’ such as wars and terrorism. The report also highlights that NGOs were given significant space, and that they used this opportunity to stress the need for better reception policies and advocate protection of migrants’ rights.

The interview material also suggests, not surprisingly, that the many big shipwrecks that resulted in hundreds of victims close to the Italian coasts in 2013 and 2015 were key focusing events that shaped actors’ perceptions. Quite remarkably, they seem to be perceived as having had a wide emotional impact on the public, re-shaping the debate around migration:

That dramatic shipwreck with more than 700 victims was a moment that marked a shift in the political approach to immigration, because that was a tragedy in front of which even the worst racists couldn’t close their eyes (PD MP)

Despite that, a well-established view about the Italian public perceiving migration as a threat persisted. As a government official admits: ‘we were aware that many people were coming and that Italians would be fed up about such arrivals’ (Official, MoFA, 2018).

Attributions.

Both the interview material and the document analysis reveal a tension – particularly at the level of governmental officials – between actors’ preferred policy solutions (what they think they should do) and what they perceived to be viable policy options in that situation (what they think they can do). On the one hand, governmental officials report that reducing flows of migrants that crossed the arriving to Libya remained a key policy goal during the ‘refugee crisis’. On the other hand, no alternative solutions to managing access to territory through the Central Mediterranean route seemed to be available. The sentence of the European Court of Human Rights in the case *Hirsi et al. vs Italy*, in 2012, had condemned Italy for having violated the principle of non-refoulement when sending some migrants back to Libya in 2009. Furthermore, the chaotic situation in Libya was perceived as one that put migrants’ lives at risk. Not only this made any action to reduce flows from Libya unsustainable at many officials’ and politicians’ eyes, but the government also seemed to fear the negative political consequences that other shipwrecks might have had, mainly because of the reactions of civil society and the centre-left electorate. A PD MP explains that ‘we had to do something otherwise these shipwrecks would have continued, which was unsustainable’ (PD MP). When *Mare Nostrum* was replaced by the European operation *Triton*, whose ships remained much closer to the Italian shores, the Italian government was ‘afraid that new shipwrecks could have started again the debate that led to Mare Nostrum’ (Official, MoFA, 2018), something that would have put it in troubles.

These tensions are illustrated by these quotes:

I remember the discussions in 2013. There was a key difference between us and Spain or Greece. Spain can push back migrants to Morocco, there's no problem. So when migration to Spain increased, they launched the Rabat Process with Western African countries to control migration. They could do it because you can keep the migrants in the transit countries, mainly in Morocco. It's not a democracy, but it's a country that respects human rights. The same applies for Greece, with Turkey (…). Our difficulty is that we have Libya. You cannot keep migrants in Libya. Berlusconi tried to push them back and the Hirsi sentence condemned Italy for that. We couldn't do it. On one hand you cannot push them back to Libya. On the other hand, they would die in the sea because of the condition of transport of the traffickers, so the decision was to use our navy to go and save them very near the Libyan coast, in order to avoid the dangerous journey to Sicily. This was the only thing we could do (Official, MoFA, 2018).

We must act to reduce these migration flows because if they keep arriving in this number it is clear that we have a problem. (…) [However] we all have no alternatives, because in front we do not have countries that can provide any help – Libya in particular. Conversely, in the mere hypothesis in which we sent them back there, there would be a high risk for their lives. As an expert on the topic, I regret we have a maritime rather than a land border, and I do it since a while. Because I knew that despite the discourse on stopping migrants and so on, I was aware that those arriving by sea must be necessarily accepted. We must save human lives. The last data from IOM and UNHCR report about more than 3,000 migrants died, a figure that keeps raising. So saving lives at sea comes before anything else, we can’t deny that [Giovanni Pinto, Director General for Immigration and Border Controls, MoI, Audition of Inquiry Commission, 2015]

Script and Actions.

As a result of these tensions between preferred and available policy solutions, the government decided to ‘disengage from the ordinary management of irregular migration’, first by launching *Mare Nostrum* (Castelli Gattinara 2017b:321) and, then, by largely contributing to the EU operation *Triton*. At the same time, the strategy of the Italian government was largely based on trying to identify alternative solutions to reduce the burden imposed by flows on Italy. Two main strategies were identified. First, action to push for burden-sharing at the EU level. This entailed formal pressures to implement a relocation procedure for disembarked migrants, but also the decision to ‘prod and cajole’ asylum-seekers to move towards Northern European countries by not registering their arrival. Second, the MoFA started to develop a dialogue and cooperation process with countries of the Horn of Africa, the so-called Khartoum Process, aimed at reducing migrant flows before they reached Libya.

Both these strategies, according to the officials interviewed, were not expected to provide short-term results but had the potential to offer long-term policy solutions:

Since we couldn’t cooperate with Libya, we did cooperate with the countries around, trying to manage flows better. Of course, we did not have many resources, meaning that for sure the Khartoum Process couldn’t solve the problem, but it was a starting point (Official, MoFA, 2018).

Crucially, the conviction that migrants’ reception represented only a temporary solution before these two strategies would have started working or before other preferable policy solutions would have become available, the MoI, while struggling to manage the reception system, decided not to expand it in a structural way:

I would say, there was no political will to invest, to upgrade the system. At least in the years 2013-14, because the idea was that there were already quite a number of people who arrived and if you would increase them too much, the people would be fed up (…) In those days I spoke to people in the MoI. There was no political will to invest in our reception capability. After a while, the situation changed also because we were obliged to do it (Official, MoFA, 2018).

The former MoI left the situation ungoverned. (…) His idea was that the less you talk the better, the less you managed the phenomenon the better, so that he had not to put his face on that (…). A close friend of mine, very close to Minniti, told me that in 2017 ‘we took office in a Ministry were de facto there was no government’ (PD MP, 2017).

This, despite the minutes of the Inquiry Commission suggesting that most actors, in 2015, were projecting that flows from Libya would have remained constantly high in the years to come:

All the data we have suggest that this phenomenon will last, unfortunately, for a long time. I hope it will not last for long, but past experiences and the political situation of countries in the Southern shores of the Mediterranean tell us that this phenomenon, sadly, and tragically, will continue for a long time (Edoardo Patriarca, PD MP, Audition of Inquiry Commission, 2015)

We must be very clear: either the attempt to stabilise Libya will rapidly succeed, or our forecast for the future is that these flows will remain constant, and will not decrease, in the next future (Angelino Alfano, Minister of Interior, Audition of Inquiry Commission, 2015).

### 8.2.2. After 2017.

Framing the situation.

Analysis of actors’ framing of the causes of asylum-seeking migration in 2017, compared to the previous periods, reveals some elements of continuity but also some significant changes in actors’ perceptions.

Most actors keep projecting that the drivers of migration will lead to persistently high migration flows in the years to come. As Minniti declared during an audition of the Inquiry Commission ‘this migration phenomenon is an epochal phenomenon, which will persist for a long time’. In early 2017 some alarmist reports and news about the number of migrants supposedly ready to ‘simultaneously’ leave from the Libyan shores seem to have had a key impact on actors’ perceptions of the scale of asylum-seeking flows:

There was a sequence of news, according to which there was a certain number of migrants ready in the Libyan shores, ready to leave towards Italy, these were significant alarm bells (Official, MoI, 2018).

Early this year we realised that the flows were keep raising, the number of migrants leaving Libya was raising, the number of arrivals was raising. And we were alone facing these growing and growing numbers. I remember very well something that a friend of mine, very close to Minniti, told me: ‘we will have 250,000 migrants arriving per month, we cannot deal with that’, I really remember this sentence, ‘250,000 per month, we cannot deal with that’. It means 3 million people arriving and the relocations had completely failed. So what do we do? We cannot deal with that, what do we do? And at that time the approach changed (PD MP, 2017).

No mention of these figures was found in any official report released by the main international organizations in 2017. In February 2017, Frontex in fact foresaw for the year to come the arrival in Italy of the same number of migrants of 2016 across the Central Mediterranean route (Tgcom24 2017). These alarmistic reports might have been echoed by some right-wing media (Francese 2017). In any case, it seems that, at many MPs’ eyes, these figures were proving right when 12,000 migrants were rescued in the Mediterranean in less than one week in June 2017. This seems to be an example of an ‘anchoring bias’: judgements based on uncertain data largely depended on an initial piece of information. According to many interviewees, this event played a key role in influencing or accelerating Minniti’s decisions. When the Minister received the news of such arrivals while flying towards the USA, he decided to go back to Italy immediately. He then declared that what was happening in the Central Mediterranean required him to be present in Rome and make ‘urgent decisions’ (Bonini 2017).

These changes in actors’ perceptions of the scale of asylum-seeking flows seem to have been coupled by changing perceptions about their drivers. Despite the recognition rate for all types of protection remaining very stable over time, many PD MPs report of an occurred change in the type of flows:

I think initially the causes were those leading to the recognition of the right to asylum or protection, meaning wars, famines, discriminations. It is evident to everybody that in the last two years the flows increased because they are made of economic migrants now, who cannot legally enter the country and therefore ask for asylum (PD MP, November 2017)

According to a Deputy Prefect this change was largely influenced by media discourses:

I remember what I would call Mentana’s turning point[[56]](#footnote-56). At some point, all of the sudden, something happened in the discourse about refugees, and they all started saying that not all migrants were escaping from wars (Deputy Prefect, Tuscany, 2018).

An IOM official, instead, argues that the substitution in the public and political discourse on asylum of a humanitarian frame of migration with a threat frame was fostered by the absence of massive shipwrecks in the Mediterranean. This was largely due to the replacement of the big boats used by smugglers in the first part of the ‘crisis’ with smaller dinghies, rather than by an actual decrease of the mortality rate in sea crossings:

It has become quite unlikely, fortunately, to have these accidents where three, four, five, six hundred people drown or go missing. They're not moving in these big boats anymore. But that's what was getting the attention. That's what was getting a lot of media attention, and that's what actually got leaders' attention, it was three, four, five hundred people dying. If you have five a day, for a hundred days, it's just... it's just much easier to ignore (IOM Official, 2018)

As to actors’ understanding of the effects of asylum-seeking migration, what emerges from the analysis is that many interviewees defined the situation around them in early 2017 using two key expressions. First, they keep referring to such situation as one where a ‘tipping point’ or ‘point of no return’ was reached:

In the first half of 2017 we were reaching a limit beyond which our country would not have handled. Yes, true there are Lebanon and Jordan, but our country would not have handled the situation in a civic manner, it could not have managed the phenomenon as done until then. (…) We were aware that we had done everything we could do and that going beyond that limit, the risk was that of breaking the bank. (…) We had a growing awareness that we were reaching a point of no return (Official, MoI, 2018).

When asked to clarify what were the elements that justified this understanding of a ‘point of no return’, interviewees’ focused, overall, on three key issues.

Some of the responses focused on the huge backlog of the Italian asylum system and/or pointed to the limits of the reception system and of its capacity to integrate migrants:

The problem was that, as far as asylum-seekers kept arriving, the asylum system was about to explode. It was as a hydraulic system, you pump water in, but there is a tap at the end, because the asylum-seekers exiting from the system were very few (PD MP, 2018).

In 2017 we realised that there was a threshold that we had to monitor, which is that of the capacity of inclusion and integration of the migrants. If you overcome that threshold, the system risks to break (Official, MoI, 2018).

Many other respondents, instead, rather focused on the negative public reactions to asylum-seeking flows, and the growing hostility of public opinion towards migrants. When asked about the elements that made them conclude that public opinion was increasingly hostile to migrants, however, only a narrow minority of actors pointed to objective facts such as a deterioration in public attitudes to immigration, the raising salience of the immigration issue or the growth of anti-immigration parties. No interviewee referred to any poll or data (and anti-immigration parties had not yet grown significantly in the polls in early 2017; Youtrend 2019). Rather, most officials and PD MPs referred to local protests against asylum-seekers’ reception. One of the officials from the MoI is very explicit in saying that ‘no, it was not very much the positions of public opinion in general, it was the tensions over asylum-seekers’ reception’.

Some interviewees referred to the protests enacted by local and regional governments:

Our perception was that of a great difficulty in the dispersal of asylum-seekers across the territory, because the municipalities, particularly of Northern Italy, perceive asylum-seekers as a danger for their identity (…) which led to a lot of discontent among mayors, and the prefects were doing a massive job to face it (Official, MoI, 2018).

I started understanding more the critiques raised by mayors, I have learnt to comprehend more about where these fears and difficulties arise (…) and to understand some protests. Because there are indeed significant management problems (PD MP, 2018).

Minniti himself declared that the ‘management problems’ highlighted by the many mayors he encountered in 2017 played a key role in the decisions he made in 2017 (La Repubblica 2017b).

Other interviewees referred more explicitly to the anti-migrant protests organized across the territory.

You ask me to what I’m referring to when I speak about tipping point? Well, to the repeated cases of rebellion, of discontent, the mobilisations and protests, the gatherings of anti-migrant groups when a bus of asylum-seekers was sent somewhere (PD MP, 2018).

The phenomenon was exploding in our hands. Why? Well, because we were not able to grand a dignified reception anymore but, even more, because we could not control the local population which opposed that [i.e. protesting against asylum-seekers’ reception] anymore (PD MP, 2017)

These protests led Minniti to conclude that the ‘Italian democracy was at risk’, which is the second expression repeatedly used in both the interview material and the documents analysed:

Immigration is an issue that is impacting on democracy in our country and on its equilibrium. I am deeply convinced of that, it is a conviction that I have acquired over time and I think Italy must face this problem without presumption (Marco Minniti, audition of the Inquiry Commission, 2017)

This idea that in 2017 ‘democracy was at risk’ was repeated by many PD MPs interviewed. As the following quote suggests, whether accurate or not, this view is the result of an historical analysis, or ‘representativeness bias’:

The situation of early 2017 was creating mechanisms that we risked not to be able to control any more, which were producing racism and were giving new strength to certain positions, of which we had got ridden after the Fascist regime in this country, with the racial laws. Nobody would like to see these things again, but if we re-create the conditions for which these positions can re-emerge, they will re-emerge, there will be nothing to do then (PD MP, 2017).

The SNA contribute to suggest some plausible explanations about how these understandings emerged. In particular, they suggest that the events that took place in Veneto played a key role in influencing actors’ perceptions. Several auditions of the Inquiry Commission were dedicated specifically to the Venetian case. When asked about differences in the dynamics of asylum governance in the different regions, two of the three interviewees from the MoI referred to Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna as virtuous cases, while all of them referred to the case of Veneto as the one that put the highest pressure on their work. No other Italian region was mentioned in their replies:

Well, some welcoming regions such as Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna, have organized a diffused reception system, they involved mayors, they de facto removed any problems of social impact of these migrants (…). Other regions obstructed our work. I refer to Veneto, of course, before all the others. They forced us to create the huge refugee centres, which are the absolute evil, which we were trying to dismantle in any way. So we reached 1,600 asylum-seekers in Conetta, 900 in Bagnoli. This was absolute madness. Yes, we can call it madness, and it was due to the unavailability of alternative solutions in the field (Official, MoI, 2018).

There have been some regions that were notoriously less ready to accept migrants. Veneto, for instance. (…) The voice of Veneto was loud and strong, especially because it was very much sustained at the political level, by the regional government in particular. In other regions the number of municipalities that host asylum-seekers was similarly low, not very different from the one of the Veneto, but the political approach was different. What made the difference was not only the actual participation of municipalities in asylum-seekers’ reception, but the political positions taken and discourses promoted on this issue (Official, SPRAR Central Service, 2018).

In the North the Lega is very strong, and the Lega is an anti-migrant party. This means that it was much more difficult to have the cooperation of the municipalities, which is key to ensure the dispersal of asylum-seekers. In the North, in Veneto in particular, it is a very widespread approach, also the PD mayors are afraid to cooperate on this issue (Official, MoI, 2018).

Interestingly, these quotes confirm that sensemaking is not a ‘democratic process’ whereby all voices are equally important: as the Venetian case shows, some voices are more powerful than others. This is an established finding of the sensemaking literature (Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010:187). Venetian prefects and mayors, including PD mayors, seem to have played a key role in conveying this idea that a ‘point of no return’ was being reached. Despite the previous section having shown that Tuscan centre-left local and regional governments also criticised the MoI asking for more competences, their requests remained unheard. Quite surprisingly, Sicily was also never mentioned during the interviews, despite the many public scandals around asylum-seekers’ reception. The emergence of the ‘negative public reactions frames’ that influence actors’ decisions, in other words, seems to be an effect of an ‘availability’ and ‘accessibility’ bias: the repeated exposure to reports and news about protests in Veneto (which received wide overage in local and national media), induced frequent processing, increasing the accessibility of the frame. As a PD MP, not aligned with the policy approach adopted by his party, explains:

I tried to scale back my colleagues’ perceptions of these local tensions to their real scale, and it was very difficult. It’s a tendency which goes beyond this specific policy field, and that concerns all the issues that have a strong impact…the tendency to overestimate the mobilisation of the very active ones and to ignore the real sentiments of the many inactive ones. The active component [of the population] is much overestimated and oversized, the proportion of the shares of these components is distorted, compared to the percentages that an opinion poll based on scientific criteria shows (PD MP).

Making Attributions.

Analysis of how actors make attributions about the situation around them, framed in the way described so far, suggests that most interviewees thought, in early 2017, that the situation required the Italian government to adopt a (more) proactive approach to the management of the ‘refugee crisis’. One key expression, frequently used by both officials and MPs, refers to the need to ‘govern the immigration flows’ or ‘govern the phenomenon’, an expression presumably borrowed from the Minniti himself:

Minniti decided to govern the phenomenon (…). When he came to us MPs to illustrate his new decree he told us exactly that. Because our instinctive reaction was that we are depriving asylum-seekers from rights that we do recognise to all citizens. He replied: ‘look, we cannot think to control this phenomenon without governing it, we have to impose ourselves some rules and we have to manage to impose them, because otherwise we lose the control of this phenomenon, and at that point we will not handle it, we will not hold. This is in the interest of the country, of the government, of the citizens, but also of those migrants that have arrived here and that will arrive. We must control, regulate, govern this phenomenon’ (PD MP, 2017).

We reached a tipping point after which I think it is right to face the phenomenon with a new approach (…). We cannot and we must not chase the problem or undergo it. I think that the best way forward, without prospecting any miraculous solution, is that of governing the process (Marco Minniti, Audition of the Inquiry Commission, 2017).

Leaving things as they are, pretending that they are not there, not dealing with them, can be convenient in the short-term, while governing the problems can be extremely difficult and costly, but such an approach in the long-term brings results, this is certain (…). You can be lucky enough to have citizens that are responsible, even without being accompanied, but experience tells that this very rarely happens, it tells that problems can be solved only if you govern them. Only by governing problems you can prevent them from becoming blatant, huge, unmanageable. Rationally, we must do so, it’s our duty (PD MP, 2017).

This idea of ‘governing the phenomenon’, as these quotes suggest, was clearly, implicitly pointing at the need to stop or decrease migrant flows, a conviction fostered by the perception that many actors had that previous strategies – aimed at countering anti-migrant narratives – had failed. The idea of ‘taking back control’ over access policies emerges from many interviews. In particular, it is linked to growing concerns about the role of the NGOs conducting SAR operations:

Our state was losing its sovereignty over such an important phenomenon as the entry of foreign citizens into its territory, we could not accept that. After Mare Nostrum we delegated to the NGOs most of the SAR operations and they, with all the best intentions, admitting that they had them, were objectively favouring the crossing of the Mediterranean (PD MP, 2018).

While the same NGOs were already operating in the Mediterranean since 2013, their SAR activities were progressively politicised, mostly as the consequence of the propaganda of right-wing parties:

We had a constructive, positive, cooperation with these NGOs, and we recognised and reclaimed that (…) until when they started to excommunicate them (…) everything changed from morning to night, in a few weeks (PD MP, 2018).

Again, the negative public reactions perceived clearly contributes to shape and influence these attributions.

The process of identification of policy solutions to reach this goal, however, was subject to an underlying tension between the need to ‘take back control’ and the need to reconcile that with the respect of migrants’ rights, in the light of the political situation in Libya and the risks it entailed for migrants there. This tension, already present before 2017, emerges in many interviews:

What we tried to do was keeping respecting international laws on reception and the rescue of people at sea, and therefore respecting these people’s lives, but at the same time inverting the tendency of the flows and reducing sea arrivals. Our main goal was reducing sea arrivals but with no detriment to our respect of human rights standards (PD MP, 2018).

Certainly bilateral agreements to reduce migration flows make sense, they are part of politics (…). The question was and still is, can we make agreements of this kind, can we develop this kind of cooperation, with the so-called Libyan government as interlocutor? In that context, which is ungoverned and ungovernable, from the point of view of the guarantees offered for human rights protection? Frankly I had many doubts, and still have doubts, as proved by some dramatic testimony (PD MP, 2018).

Interestingly a very similar tension emerged from discussions about the reform of the asylum status determination process:

At some point we proposed some amendments to the decree [the Minniti-Orlando Decree] because we didn’t want to cut migrants’ rights, but as I said already, we had to govern the phenomenon (PD MP, 2017).

Script Selection.

Based on these framing and evaluations of the situation around, the Italian government, and the MoI, selected the strategy that should have guided their actions in 2017. Enduring tensions such as the ones identified, following Ansell, Trondal, and Øgård (2016:45) tend to produce ‘ambiguity about what problems, solutions and consequences to attend to at any time, and what actors are deemed efficient and legitimate’. Whilst previously this ambiguity had mostly led to inactions rather than actions, in 2017 it leads to the development of restrictive access and status determination policies.

This change in decision-making preferences is driven by the different understandings of the drivers of migration, and of the effects of asylum-seeking migration and anti-migrant sentiments. Furthermore, policy change seems to be the output of political and symbolic considerations in decision-making leading to an emphasis on being seen doing something. The interviews seem to suggest that the main aim of such strategy was that of ‘sending signals to the public’.

The system was exploding. Not because it was wrong, but it couldn’t work due to several causes. And to adjust the system gradually in the long term, it was necessary to give a break to public opinion, to its concerns, it was necessary to show something (…) I had a personal discussion on this with Minniti, during which I proposed to him an alternative strategy (…) I proposed to reopen legal ways to access the country. Minniti replied: ‘you are right on this, but we cannot do that, we cannot tell this story convincingly, our people would not understand’. He agreed that I was right, but he said ‘before we have to send a signal that we stop the arrivals’. This was the political strategy (PD MP, 2018).

The decision was that of focusing on control, control, control. Again, this is was nothing new, it was something that was already being done before, the key difference has been in the increased visibility given to such control dimension, the unbalanced emphasis on it compared to the one given to strategies to counter fake news on migration (Official, SPRAR Central Service, 2018).

This latter interviewee is even more explicit in pointing out that ‘sending signals to the public’ was much more important than developing actions necessarily achieving their intended effects, especially because, this official argues, the new Gentiloni government was very fragile and not perceived to have the potential to last until the end of the legislature. Since the government, unexpectedly, did not collapse in 2017, ‘what at the beginning was nothing more than an advertising spot became a real structural policy’ (Official, SPRAR Central Service, 2018).

With this aim in mind, Minniti’s strategy was based on two key pillars. The first pillar, as Minniti himself declared during an audition of the Inquiry Commission, was the adoption of restrictive asylum policies ‘both downstream’ [i.e. through the reform of the asylum system] and ‘also, a bit, upstream’ [i.e. through the cooperation agreement with Libya]. These outputs have been described in chapter 2.

In order to make these policy solutions sustainable and acceptable for the PD and its electorate these actions were balanced with other initiatives. Minniti repeatedly stressed that the government would have been able to guarantee the respect of human rights of migrants in Libya. This was defined as a baseline of the government’s policies. Moreover, the Ministry promoted, in cooperation with NGOs, the organization of humanitarian corridors through which 162 potential refugees were brought from Libya to Italy by plane in 2017 (La Repubblica 2017a). As a UNHCR official explains, ‘it was a way to convey the idea, I’m using Minniti’s own words, that they stopped sea crossings but still they were bringing people at risk to Italy in a safe manner’.

The auditions of the Inquiry Commission also suggest an increasing, strategic, emphasis on the violations of human rights enacted by traffickers in the Mediterranean:

Another key issue concerns our actions against human traffickers. This is a really crucial point. In this moment human trafficking is (…) a great armed industry in Libya, operating at full capacity (…). These are ruthless persons that send people to die at sea, if they die they die, if they don’t die they don’t die, they have a real contempt for human life. If somebody asked me to make a comparative evaluation on ‘who is closer to Evil’ between a human trafficker and an ISIS terrorist, I wouldn’t know what to answer. I think both have a total contempt for human life, I consider them at the same level. Contrasting their actions must be a key priority for the international community, because there is nothing worse than considering a human as a commodity and ‘trafficking’ him without any respect for his life (Marco Minniti, Audition of the Inquiry Commission, 2017).

The second pillar of Minniti’s strategy, largely aimed at addressing mayors’ concerns about the presence of asylum-seekers in their territory, was ‘a structural plan for migrants’ integration’. Interestingly, the two pillars were intended to be addressed sequentially:

First and foremost, it was important to give signals to public opinion and the other parties. (…) Minniti very much focused on this idea of ‘two times’, the time for repression and stopping the flows and, subsequently, the time for integration. The ‘integration phase’ should have started at the end of 2017 and remain there for a long time. However, it was the end of the parliamentary term, which meant a likely change of the MoI. So, the plan was finally approved, it is in theory a good plan, but soon became unattainable (PD MP, 2018).

Only one key provision on integration was directly included in the Minniti-Orlando Decree: the support for initiatives aimed at involving asylum-seekers in SUW, defined by Minniti as a key measure to foster integration and improve the relationship with the hosting community. Interestingly, as described in chapter 4, these policies had been first developed in Veneto and had been identified by PD mayors there as the key measure to contrast the perceived hostility of public opinion. This seems to suggest, once again, that Venetian PD mayors and governance dynamics in Veneto had a strong impact on national decisions.

## 8.3. Asylum Governance as Cause and Effect of Turbulence.

This section shows how the Italian asylum governance system, and key organizations within this system, contributed to create the turbulence to which then they had to respond. ‘Turbulence’ means ‘the collision of politics, administrative scale and complexity, uncertainty, and time constraints’ (Ansell, Trondal, and Øgård 2016:2). I argue that, while most of the literature has explained the Italian government’s decisions in 2017 as the necessary output of external shocks, such as the continuous increase in asylum-seeking flows and pressure from public opinion, my analysis shows that such turbulence that produced policy change was not only exogenous, but that it had a crucial ‘endogenous dimension’.

The previous section has shown that the development of restrictive policies by the Italian government in 2017 was a consequence of actors’ understanding that the situation around them had reach a ‘point of no return’. The interviewees suggested that three key factors contributed to shape this perception. In the next paragraphs I analyse these factors and show how the governance system, and actors’ own past decisions, contributed to produce them.

The main factor mentioned by the interviewees is the local protests against asylum-seekers’ reception, particularly in northern regions. Previous chapters have shown how these protests were largely generated by the inefficient outputs of the governance system, and by the interaction of the actions and choices of key actors within regional governance systems. They also showed that these were not a necessary effect of asylum-seeking flows, considering that some Italian regions did not experience any anti-refugee mobilisations, and that other regions managed, through an efficient management of the reception system, to contain these protests. As some of the interviewees suggest, moreover, the protests were fed by the absence of any compulsory mechanism to force municipalities to take asylum-seekers, which created further incentives for both local authorities and groups of citizens to mobilise against the dispersal of migrants in their municipality:

The government kept insisting with the equal redistribution of asylum-seekers among all the municipalities, and with insisting that the CAS centres should have been turned into SPRAR centres (…) but these principles were at odds with the absence of instruments that could facilitate these processes, both from a political point of view, in crating incentives for municipalities, and from a technical point of view, because of the complexity of many bureaucratic procedures (Official, SPRAR Central Service, 2018).

The Ministry of the Interior, after long discussions, came up with a distribution key for migrants that applied for international protection all over Italy. But this is a voluntary scheme (…). Italy has 8,000 municipalities, only 3,000 take migrants. Put aside those who are really tiny municipalities, somewhere lost in Abruzzo, but it shows a little bit the same issue we have at the European scale, that someone always prefers to always stay outside. Now, if you see that a voluntary approach is not working, I would argue from a normal citizen's perspective, but also then in my capacity here, well, maybe then you have to act as a legislator (Official, EU Commission, 2018).

Furthermore, according to one of the officials, involving new municipalities in the SPRAR system became also more complex as an effect of the new measures introduced by the government – after the scandal of *Mafia Capitale* – to prevent corruption and public scandals in the management of the reception system.

Another key factor that shaped actors’ perceptions of ‘a point of no return’ was the huge backlog in asylum applications. While clearly the increasing number of asylum-seekers objectively put the Italian system under pressure, both the interview material and the many auditions of the Inquiry Commission suggest that, while facing a growing number of asylum demands since 2014, the Italian authorities were aware that the system was unfit to deal with them, but also unable or unwilling to adjust the system the new situation:

It is a very much Italian problem, the extreme slowness in adapting to external events, to the new scenarios that we face. We would have needed to adopt a more structured approach (…). Germany, when the phenomenon appeared, in 2015, they hired 1,000 people [to deal with asylum status determination]. As to us, now, at the end of May 2018, we will finally manage to hire 250 people that will work in the Territorial Commissions, after a harsh fight with the Parliament and the other institutions (Official, MoI, 2018).

We have a really huge backlog, which was caused not only by the number of applications, but also by the fact that the civil servants working in the Territorial Commissions so far did not have this competence only (…) and they didn’t manage to do many things at the same time. The problem is that with the harsh spending review that we had due to the economic crisis, we couldn’t hire any new personnel, our personnel is getting older, we have few people working, our offices cannot work properly on many different issues at the same time (Official, MoI, 2018).

By early 2015, the then President of the National Asylum Commission Angelo Trovato, during an audition of the Inquiry Commission, stated that, to deal with the upcoming flows, at least ten new Territorial Commissions should have been created. He admitted that, for the time being, the Italian asylum system was able to deal with a maximum of 50,000 asylum applications per year. In early 2017, Trovato was heard again by the Inquiry Commission, and denounced that only 26 officials of the Prefectures were dedicating full time to examining asylum applications and that in 2017 there had been an overall decrease by 10 per cent in the number of applications examined each month by the asylum system[[57]](#footnote-57). In 2015, the PD MP Paolo Beni, member of the Inquiry Commission, stated:

The problem is this: from the evidence that we have collected through the work of this Commission, our impression is that there is a high risk that the whole mechanism will jam. The Territorial Commissions are trying to improve their productivity, but in their current number they cannot keep pace with the increase in the asylum demands (Paolo Beni, Audition of the Inquiry Committee, 2015).

Very much linked to both the backlog of the asylum system and the local protests is the saturation of the reception system and the impossibility to find buildings to be used as reception centres – another key element mentioned by the actors interviewed to sustain their ‘point of return’ thesis. Interestingly, as argue in section 8.2.1, this was at least partially the output of the choice of Italian authorities not to expand the reception system at the beginning of the ‘refugee crisis’. Such choice was the due to the conviction that, through the relocation system, by keeping low recognition rates, and through the cooperation with African countries close to Libya, the burden on the Italian asylum system would have decreased. From this point of view, it can be also argued that the EU and its member states also played a key role in creating turbulence in the Italian migration governance system, since the both the backlog of the Italian asylum system and the saturation of the reception system were largely produced by the decisions of the EU to force Italy to fingerprint all disembarked migrants (a goal achieved through the implementation of the ‘hotspot approach’), the re-activation of border checks at the French and Austrian borders, and the failure of the relocation procedure.

The last element mentioned by some interviewees is the inability of the system to integrate asylum-seekers, an argument also often raised by mayors. However, most of the interviewees, when asked about Italian integration policies, denounced the lack of any structural national integration policy in Italy:

At the local level integration is a huge challenge, because in Italy, we are talking about that since a long time, we do not have policies for integration or inclusion yet. They do not exist. And I’m not referring to financial resources, there are many funds providing resources, the FAMI, EU funds. There are many individual interventions, with the involvement of the Ministry of Labour, *Confindustria* and other business organizations. There are actors involved by the Ministry in order to help, facilitate inclusion, support trainings etc., but they are not national policies, and they are clearly not enough (Official, SPRAR Central Service, 2018).

We should have adopted a more structured approach, and more quickly, not only on reception but also on social inclusion and integration, issues on which we are now starting to develop some initiatives (Official, MoI, 2018).

Two different MPs suggest that a key mistake was that of facing the situation merely as a matter of public security, rather than focusing on integration, and this ultimately favoured the emergence of negative public reactions. Other interviewees state that the lack of integration policies was mainly due to the scarce resources available. While this chapter has not aimed at investigating this and other structural factors in detail – but, rather, how actors’ interpreted them – it is interesting to point out that an UNHCR official disagreed with this argument:

The resources usually are not a key problem. Often, in Italy and elsewhere, the key problem is governance, and politics. And by governance I mean also supranational and transnational governance, of course (Official, UNHCR, 2018).

Finally, even if the interview material tends to suggest that the inefficiencies of the asylum system played a minor role in influencing decisions compared to the other elements mentioned so far, it can be also noticed that the public scandals that emerged seem to have been favoured, particularly in the first part of the ‘crisis’, by the absence of strict controls by the local Prefectures, as already outlined in Chapter 5. As an official admits, ‘we did support the Prefectures in this, but I cannot deny that, everything is done with breathlessness, we are always running after problems rather than anticipating them or facing them in due time’ (Official, MoI, 2018).

## 8.4. Conclusion.

To conclude, the analysis conducted in this chapter has shown the constitutive effects of national asylum governance through interactions with the regional level. In other words, it has shown that the environment in which key national decision-makers operated, during the ‘asylum crisis’, was not merely made of objective elements, but rather was ‘sensible’ to them, i.e. constructed through their interactions with actors located at the subnational level and the interpretations that these actors made of what was happening around them.

This main argument developed throughout the chapter, leads to three main findings. First, asylum governance in Italy during the asylum crisis was characterised by high levels of complexity and conflict. The high complexity was due to the involvement of a high number of institutions and organizations, at different levels of governance, ‘intricately nested and overlapping’ (Ansell, Trondal, and Øgård 2016:5). Asylum governance was also highly conflictual, which relates to a growing debate about the often-neglected issue of conflicts within MLG arrangement, supporting Ambrosini’s argument (2018) that asylum governance in Italy can be understood through the metaphor of the ‘battleground’. While Ambrosini and Campomori (2018) argue that this battleground was composed by a conflict between levels (vertical dimension of MLG) and a conflict between public and private actors (horizontal dimension of MLG), the SNA conducted in chapter 8 rather shows that this second conflict can more precisely defined as an ideological conflict on asylum-seekers’ reception. It was largely played within the local level, with private and public actors involved in both sides.

Second, these conflicts largely influenced actors’ understandings of the effects of asylum-seeking migration, produced more uncertainty and pushed the MoI and the Italian government to adopt a more restrictive policy approach on access and asylum status determination. The significant policy changes promoted in 2017 were mostly the consequence of key actors’ perception that the situation of asylum management in Italy had reached a ‘point of no return’, and that the arrival of more asylum-seekers would have represented a threat to Italian democracy. These perceptions were crucially influenced by the idea that the local level had become ‘unmanageable’ and that this was threatening Italian democracy. This suggests that local actors’ understandings, actions, and the outputs and outcomes of regional governance systems (mutually reinforcing each other) crucially influenced national actors’ interpretations of the situation around them, how they constructed policy problems, identified solutions and selected the script that guided their actions in 2017, when the Italian government decided to adopt a new restrictive approach to asylum management. This finding corrects the tendency in the literature on MLG to merely conceptualise the impact of the local level on national dynamics as the outcome of direct pressures on national policymakers, coherently with the prevailing definition of MLG as a ‘*negotiated order* among public and non-public actors’ (Caponio and Jones-Correa 2018:1998).

Third, other powerful understandings influenced key asylum policy decisions. Among them, the perceived change in the causes of migration flows, despite the asylum recognition date during the ‘refugee crisis’ in Italy remaining pretty stable over time, and the perceived saturation of the asylum system, due to the backlog of asylum applications and the unavailability of buildings to be turned into reception centres. Both these latter factors, however, are in turn the output of previous decisions made by the Italian government and other institutions and organizations involved in the governance system, and of an emergency-based approach to the management of migration. As an EU official put it:

Some people still talk of the crisis. Crisis is something temporary. I always have a problem with this label of crisis because, first of all, time wise it was started before 2015, you cannot call it a crisis for 10 years or more, and the other thing is if you look at the real numbers, you also have to allow the question "is this really a number that justifies that everybody cries crisis, crisis, crisis". Because, we're talking here for Italy at high times, a hundred, whatever 70 thousand. Now, if you look at the mortality rate, if you look at the young people in Italy leaving the country...what was the challenge? (Official, EU Commission, 2018).

Overall, this chapter has shown that, not only the Italian asylum governance system, being driven by actors’ understandings of the causes and effects of migration, has important elements of endogeneity, but also that this has the effect that governance processes are both a cause and an effect of ‘turbulence’. Recognising that the governance system itself contributed to generate ‘turbulence’ is important because it corrects a tendency to see asylum-seeking migration as an external shock to governance systems.

# CHAPTER 9 - CONCLUSION

This thesis began with a quote from the former Italian Interior Minister Marco Minniti in which he explained that he decided to develop new restrictive asylum policies in 2017 because the high asylum-seeking flows were threatening Italian democracy and that his discussions with mayors had played a key role in shaping this view. The quote reveals some powerful understandings of the effects of asylum-seeking migration and suggests that the interpretations of external events by powerful actors crucially influence governance processes. This study aimed to unravel these understandings about the causes and effects of asylum-seeking migration and to study how they emerge and how they influenced actors’ actions and asylum governance processes. In other words, the thesis focused on the link between structural factors that characterised the Italian ‘refugee crisis’ – such as increasing flows, public attitudes to immigration, the salience of immigration and migration-related mobilisations – and the outputs and outcomes of asylum governance. To do so, an actor-centred ‘macro-micro-macro’ approach was adopted, which assumes governance outputs to be the product of a chain of situational, action-formation and transformational mechanisms. Situational mechanisms concern the formation of actors’ understandings of the macro-environment in which they are situated. Action-formation mechanisms concern the decision-making processes through which situated actors enact these understandings. Transformational mechanisms concern the production of the outputs and outcomes of the governance system as the result of the interaction of the actions of the situated actors that form part of the system itself. Through this approach, this thesis analysed asylum governance dynamics in Italy in three regions (Veneto, Sicily and Tuscany) and at the national level in order to provide fresh insight into the factors framing and driving relations between the national and regional levels of governance.

The Italian ‘refugee crisis’ has attracted increasingly more scholarly attention. Most of the recent scholarly works describe it as a ‘crisis of governance and responsibilities’ (Wolff 2015:3), reviving the long-standing debate over the so-called ‘policy failure’ thesis, pointing to the apparent inability of states to attain their policy objectives in the migration field (Castles 2004). These recent works do, however, tend to conceptualize asylum-seeking migration as an exogenous factor, which is threatening and challenging the European migration governance systems from outside and, more broadly, to explain the ‘refugee crisis’ as a result of objective factors. They almost exclusively focus on (and tend to judge migration governance by) the observed “outputs” of migration governance systems such as laws, policies and political contestation. By doing so they largely neglect the decision-making process itself, its characteristics and consequences, and the mechanisms by which the governance system leads to these supposed policy failures. They also tend to extrapolate back from such outputs and to make assumptions about how actors frame their judgements about migration, but do not explore frames, framing effects and the organizational context within which these develop.

This thesis has corrected a tendency to treat asylum-seeking migration and the ‘refugee crisis’ as purely external shocks to governance systems. It reversed the analytical focus of the existing literature, placing more emphasis on endogeneity by analysing the constitutive effects of governance, and the effects of situated actors’ understandings on how the governance system identifies solutions and shapes responses. It assumed that actors in the Italian asylum governance system – at both the national and regional levels – are not just blind servants of structures but have a certain capacity to shape and influence the context in which they operate with their decisions. Second, it focused specifically on the context of decision rather than on outputs and outcomes, arguing that, from an analytical and methodological point of view, it is not possible to extrapolate back from the outputs of a process to make assumptions about the nature of the process itself. Using Tilly’s words (2008:5), this thesis has opened the ‘black box’ of asylum governance processes and revealed its gears and functioning.

This concluding chapter discusses the findings of the research, relating them to the main overarching question and the six sub questions of this thesis. I synthesise the findings for each question raised and connect them to ongoing debates in the academic literature. Then, I develop some final reflections on the implications of these findings for future research.

Q1: How do actors in regional asylum-governance systems frame the effects of asylum-seeking migration and understand asylum policy issues?

This question was addressed in this thesis by developing a frame analysis of actors’ responses to questions designed to understand how they understand the effects of asylum-seeking migration. Findings have been illustrated in chapters 4, 5 and 6, and a comparative analysis was developed in chapter 7. Crucially, the frame analysis shows that most actors, when framing the effects of asylum-seeking migration, specifically refer to their effects on public attitudes to immigration and public reactions to asylum-seeking flows, more than to their effects of any other type. This finding contributes to the broad literature on migration-related frames, which, however, had largely focused on the so-called ‘frames in communication’ rather than on the so-called ‘frames in thought’. Importantly, the thesis also shows that, at the local level, actors’ perceptions of public attitudes to immigration – and to some extent the salience of the immigration issue – are very much disconnected from the evidence of available opinion polls. Most party actors in Veneto, independently of their political affiliation, perceive locals to be harshly hostile towards immigration and asylum-seekers’ reception while, instead, most party actors in Sicily perceive locals to be very welcoming or tolerant towards migrants. Conversely, all available opinion polls suggest that public attitudes to immigration are more negative in Sicily and southern regions than in Veneto. In Tuscany, most local party actors affiliated to the (dominant) centre-left coalition, perceive a quick and dramatic change in public attitudes towards immigration occurred in 2016, despite existing research suggesting that public attitudes towards immigration are very stable over time (Dennison and Geddes 2019).

Q2: How do these understandings emerge and through which situational mechanisms are they produced?

By addressing these questions this thesis relates and contributes to an ongoing debate in the migration scholarship on the role of facts and evidence in decision-making. Eminent scholars that engaged in this debate identify an evidence-policy gap’ (Cairney 2016:13), arguing that decision-making processes around migration issues are led by assumptions rather than objective evidence (Baldwin-Edwards, Blitz and Crawley 2018). Scholten (2019:5) instead argues that this is the result of an estrangement or ‘alienation’ from the complexity of policy processes, defined ‘not as something actors pursue on purpose, but as an inclination in actor behaviour that originates in broader structural settings’. In Cairney’s words (2016:13) the ‘evidence-policy gap’ is due to cognitive limits of policymakers, and an unpredictable policymaking environment’. These latter considerations relate to the ‘bounded rationality’ argument in the policy science literature, according to which actors involved in migration policy-making have to face constraints on time, information and resources (Geddes 2017).

While examining actors’ understandings of the events related to the Italian ‘refugee crisis’ this thesis has shown that, particularly at the local level, many decision-makers lacked information and resources, and could not rely on the support of experienced civil servants or other experts in the field. Beyond that, this research, however, shows that understandings about the situation around them, in situations of scarce information (bounded rationality), are shaped by cognitive processes, often neglected by the existing literature. This is particularly true in the case of actors’ understandings of the causes and effects of public reactions to asylum-seeking flows, which drive policy-making processes, as argued in the next section. The emergence of these understandings is characterised by a number of shortcuts. As many interviews cited in this thesis show, key actors were swayed by the information collected by the media or directly from the environment around them while framing problems. Frame emergence was often influenced by the availability and accessibility of frames, and therefore linked to pre-set powerful ideas, narratives, and pre-set organizational policy goals (‘accessibility bias’). It was also influenced by perceived historical analogies (‘representativeness bias’), or initial pieces of information (‘anchoring bias’). These processes lead decision-makers to highlight some aspects of the situation and dismiss others. They also produce a tendency to dismiss evidence that disagrees with pre-established ideas and to avoid emotional discomfort that arises when questioning prior beliefs and conviction (cognitive dissonance). Strikingly, in all regions, actors tended to quickly dismiss as inaccurate the data about public attitudes to immigration at the regional level that I mentioned to them at end of the interview, if these data were not in line with their rooted perceptions. These findings suggest that, whether political actors are ignorant or not of the complexity of the phenomenon, political actors are not mere ‘passive recipients of information’, but active ‘interpreters and rationalizers’ (Mutz 2011:12). The way they frame problems is not a mere straightforward assessment of facts, as demonstrated by social psychologists such as Jonathan Haidt (2001).

Q3: How do key political actors act and which policy strategies do they adopt?

By addressing this question the thesis investigated both the policies and government actions adopted by party actors (policy dimension) and their positions and discourses on asylum (political dimension), providing insights that relate to ongoing debates in both the policy science literature and the politicisation literature.

While Italian national asylum policies have been explored in considerable detail, much less is known about local asylum policies and approaches to action by local and regional governments. The few studies that have teased out some key features of local governments’ responses to the ‘asylum crisis’, in Italy and beyond, have described a variegated reality, in which local governments follow pragmatic or right-based approaches in managing immigration or rather decide to adopt ‘policies of exclusion’ (Ambrosini 2013, 2018; Doomernik and Glorius 2016; Jørgensen 2012; Mcmahon 2019; Steen 2016). Most of this literature has, however, focused on explaining variations in and effects of local asylum policy at the expense of the strategies behind these policies as well as actors’ motivations and policy goals.

Instead, this thesis shows that similar actions and policies can be developed with different policy goals, which highlights the importance of studying actors’ strategies. Local SUW policies, for instance, were developed by some local governments with the main aim to foster migrants’ integration but, more often, particularly in Veneto, to be seen to ‘do something’ to reduce citizens’ perceptions of insecurity that mayors perceive around them. This and other examples show that local and regional governments do not implement passively the measures promoted by the national government. In doing so, they follow their own agenda and adapt national-level guidelines to their own aims in a way that powerfully shapes the policies developed and their outcomes. This is consistent with established findings in the literature in public policy analysis (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973).

This thesis also contributes to clarify both the role of the political affiliation of local and regional governments in policymaking. Ambrosini (2018:117) questioned the existence of a clear-cut distinction in Italy between centre-right administrations promoting anti-migrant policies and centre-left governments promoting inclusive policies. Steen (2016) reached similar conclusions in the Norwegian context. This thesis suggests that in some regions (Veneto and Tuscany, but not in Sicily) mayors’ political affiliation is a strong predictor of mayors’ actions and strategies. However, very significant variation was identified in the approaches adopted by actors affiliated to the same party in different regions. PD actors in Veneto adopt very passive approaches to action, unlike their colleagues in Tuscany. The thesis also suggests that substantial differences between parties at the level of discourses do not necessarily correspond to different local government actions and that, even in the case of the Lega, the ideological consistency of the local and regional policies adopted is less striking than expected.

Moving to party actors’ discourses and positions on asylum, the analysis has shown that it is not self-evident that increases in migration flows and issue salience lead to negative political contestation of migration or initiate reactive responses by subnational party actors. As Cohen, March and Olsen explain (1972:16), the relationship between problems and solutions is not necessarily smooth-flowing. This is not to say that we should always expect a radical disconnect between public reactions and actors’ politicization strategies. Rather, a focus on objective and measurable outcomes that characterises the politicisation literature is insufficient to explain actors’ decisions to mobilise the immigration issue. The Sicilian case is very revealing in this sense. Sicily was centrally affected by the ‘refugee crisis’ and experienced an increase in anti-migrant attitudes and in the salience of immigration, but, despite that, most party actors competing in local, regional and national elections, including far-right party actors, did not mobilise on the issue. The only issue entrepreneurs in the region are the mayors of the main cities who, adopting multiculturalist frames and promote a very unusual type of ‘positive’ political contestation of migration.

Q4: How do actors enact their understandings and make sense of the environment in which they operate and new events and challenges?

This question was addressed in this thesis by applying insights from Weick’s sensemaking approach, which is particularly relevant to study decision-making processes in situations of crisis. Again, in doing so I have engaged with the policy literature and the politicisation literature, which both largely neglected decision-making during the Italian ‘refugee crisis’ or made assumptions about the factors influencing actors’ choices.

The findings of this thesis complement and challenge the assumptions of the scant existing literature available on local asylum decision-making processes. They show that asylum policies, at least in situations of crisis, have not necessarily ‘an objective basis’, in terms of quantifying local economic costs and benefits and demographic effects on the community, as argued by Steen (2016:466). Furthermore, they demonstrate the potential of applying sensemaking approaches to understand local asylum policy-making processes, compared to cognitive approaches that more narrowly focus on policy frames analysis (Lidén and Nyhlén 2015).

The main finding of the analysis is that local party actors’ decisions to develop right-based or exclusionary asylum policies and to adopt proactive or passive approaches to action are largely driven by actors’ understandings and interpretations of the effects of migration on public attitudes to immigration, the salience of the issue and of the causes and consequences of public reactions to asylum-seeking flows. Different groups of actors frame public reactions and enact such understandings in very different ways and their different actions largely reflect these different framing and sensemaking processes. In Veneto, PD mayors and ICL mayors were characterised by a similar humanitarian view of the causes of asylum-seeking migration, but their different perceptions of (the causes and effects of) public reactions to asylum-seekers’ reception led them to adopt, respectively, passive and proactive approaches to asylum management. Right-wing mayors of little villages in both Veneto and Sicily all perceive the local population to be hostile to migrants, but the low perceived salience of the issue in Sicily prevents mayors from adopting proactive opposition strategies.

In most cases, these understandings of public reactions constrain or favour the adoption of a preferred course of action, identified by actors based on their ideological positions and influenced by past experiences (or repertoires of actions: see Bird and Osland 2005; Geddes 2020), identity processes and contacts with or pressure from other actors. Conversely, in the case of local actors affiliated to the LN and the M5S, asylum-related strategies and choices seem to be guided by the very objective to act accordingly to the perceived “will of the people”. These strategic voter-driven approaches towards asylum governance are specific of these populist actors and lead them to take different governmental actions in situations with different perceived salience. Once again, particularly in the Tuscan case, actors affiliated to the two parties, however, perceive public opinion towards the issue differently – for the LN, the public is perceived in unified opposition, for the M5S, the public is perceived to be split into two groups – and this crucially shapes the decisions adopted.

Similar cognitive mechanisms related to actors’ perceptions of public attitudes to immigration and the salience of the immigration issue influence actors’ decisions to politicise or not the asylum issue. The perceived very low salience of the immigration issue in Sicily and the perceived strength of a strong anti-populist norm influencing voters’ behaviours prevent right-wing actors in Sicily from politicising the immigration issue.

Q5: What are the key networks in the Italian asylum governance system, what are their main features, and how do they shape the production of policy outputs and outcomes?

By mapping asylum governance networks and analysing actors’ interactions within the governance system, this thesis has revealed the role of politics in asylum policymaking and governance. By applying SNA, the thesis shows that what really shapes key outputs at the regional level – including the overall politicisation of asylum governance and the efficiency of the regional reception systems – is the ideological profile of the political actors involved, their capacity to mobilise their different understandings, their power, positioning and behaviours. In the very fragmented and polarised Venetian governance network, characterised by very high levels of conflict between the different institutions and levels of governance, the most powerful and central actors did not mobilise to activate the network’s relational potential. In such a context, political competition between the main parties and the political contestation by anti-immigration political entrepreneurs constrained policymaking and prevented the development of efficient policy responses while, rather, producing a fractured, weak and contested reception system. Conversely, the Tuscan network is very dense and centralised, mainly because of the proactive approach adopted by the regional government and ANCI, which coordinated and ‘programmed’ the network, and were surrounded by actors with similar views on the asylum issue. The Sicilian network is not polarised but, at the same time, not very dense and organized around the central role of the Prefectures, which contributes to explain the inefficiencies of the reception system, despite the low level of politicisation of asylum.

Importantly, the thesis has shown that these outputs, produced by actors’ actions, crucially influenced public mobilisations on immigration, which in turn played a key role in shaping actors’ understandings of public reactions to asylum-seeking flows. In other words, it has shown the circularity of the relationship between public attitudes on migration, frame emergence, asylum policymaking, asylum politics and anti-refugee or pro-refugee campaigning.

Q6: How are relations between regional and national governance levels organized, and how does this impact the production of policy outputs and outcomes?

This final question was addressed specifically in Chapter 8 to show that Italian asylum governance during the ‘refugee crisis’ was characterised by two main political conflicts or cleavages that shaped actors’ interactions: a more ‘ideological’ conflict among actors that support and oppose asylum-seekers’ reception, and a conflict around competences and management, between local and national actors. The MoI and its local branches were the actors involved in the highest number of conflicting relations but were targeted by different types of pressure originating from different regions. Most local actors in Tuscany advocated for more competences in the asylum field, while conversely many Venetian local governments refused to cooperate with the national government and rather protested and opposed the dispersal of asylum-seekers imposed by the national government.

These findings lead to two important conclusions that relate to the broader literature on MLG and migration. First, they correct a tendency of the MLG literature to define patterns of relations across governance levels mainly in relation to the degree of cooperation across levels. They therefore contribute to a growing debate about conflict within MLG arrangements (Ambrosini 2018; Caponio and Jones-Correa 2018; Spencer 2018). The case of Italian local authorities developing proactive opposition strategies against asylum-seekers’ dispersal, this thesis suggests, does not fit into the well-established typology proposed by Scholten (Scholten and Penninx 2016; see chapter 1) which only includes patterns of ‘decoupling’ between local and national policies. Following Ambrosini (2018:122) asylum governance resembles as a ‘*battleground* upon which different actors engage’, with different frames, interests and values, and some local governments carry out ‘resisting actions’ against government decisions. These actions suggest a pattern of relations across governance levels that goes beyond the mere ‘absence of meaningful policy coordination between levels’ (Campomori and Ambrosini 2018). Whilst Ambrosini and Campomori argue that this *battleground* is composed by a conflict between levels (vertical dimension of MLG) and a conflict between public and private actors (horizontal dimension of MLG), the SNA conducted in chapter 8 shows that this second conflict can be more precisely defined as an horizontal ideological conflict on asylum-seekers’ reception. This is largely played within the local level, with private and public actors involved in both sides.

Second, this thesis has complemented the existing MLG literature by focusing on the early stages of policy-making rather than implementation and exploring ‘how migration policies concretely unfold at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of MLG’ (Caponio and Jones-Correa 2018:2007). While most of the MLG scholarship focused on the question of *who participates* in policymaking, I rather investigated *who decides* and how actions between venues at multiple levels influence decisions. By answering this question, this thesis suggests that dynamics of local governance had a major impact on decisions taken at the national level. Other scholars reached this conclusion, but they did so by deriving assumptions about policymaking processes from the outputs and outcomes observed, and they also tend to assume that this impact is due to the exertion of direct pressures on national policymakers, coherently with the prevailing definition of MLG as a ‘*negotiated order* among public and non-public actors’ (Caponio and Jones-Correa 2018:1998). Conversely, this thesis shows that, in the case of the Italian ‘refugee crisis’, this impact was much more significant at the level of actors’ understandings. None of the requests made to the MoI by the Venetian local and regional governments (as also of the Tuscan ones) was met or led to changes in the distribution of competences across levels. At the same time, local actors’ understandings, actions, and the outputs and outcomes of regional governance systems (mutually reinforcing each other) crucially influenced national actors’ interpretations of the situation around them, how they constructed policy problems and identified solutions. As shown in Chapter 8, local diagnostic frames were conveyed through the media but, more significantly, through direct contacts between officials of the MoI (including the Interior Minister himself) and actors located at the regional level, including prefects, MPs and mayors, mostly from the PD. These plausible interpretations (or ‘signals and cues’) of what was going on in the field (the ‘sensible environment’ in which situated national actors operate) – not necessarily accurate – had then prognostic implications, influencing the selection of the script that guided national actors’ decisions and actions.

Main Question: How, why and with what effects did the Italian asylum governance system and actors within this system shape responses to the ‘refugee crisis’?

Building on the findings illustrated so far, to answer my main question, I argue that the Italian asylum governance system has itself contributed to construct asylum-seeking migration as a social and political problem.

Most of the existing literature on the Italian ‘refugee crisis’, while describing and analysing it, tends to identify two elements that caused or shaped it. On the one hand, some powerful structural, ‘objective’, factors, that put under pressure the asylum system and the political system a whole, such as increasing asylum-seeking flows and issue salience, the widespread anti-migrant protests and the growing support for anti-immigration parties. Such powerful objective factors, according to many accounts, were enough *per se* to produce certain outputs, such as high levels of political contestation around migration. On the other hand, the unpreparedness of Italian authorities, their failure to manage asylum efficiently and to engage with citizens’ concerns. In doing so, the scholarship more or less explicitly recalls the ongoing debate in the migration literature around the tendency of migration policies to fail in attaining their objectives (Castles 2004; Czaika and De Haas 2013; Massey 2013). These policy failures are mainly assumed to be due to lack of evidence or ‘credible information’ or other factors related to the complex and contradictory nature of political systems (Castles 2004:874).

This thesis does not deny that, between 2014 and 2018, the Italian governance system had to face pressures related to the objective factors outlined in the scholarship nor that the Italian asylum governance system failed to produce adequate responses to the ongoing asylum-seeking flows. It does, however, question, first, the idea that the ‘asylum crisis’ as the mere outcome of external factors. Second, it challenges the linear relation between intentions and outputs implicitly assumed by the policy failure approach, which considers policy actors as passive recipients of information and describes policies and discourses as mere strategic means used by these actors to push through specific interests – or ‘hidden agendas’ (Castles 2004:852) – and mobilise their electorate (Wong 2017:3).

The thesis shows that many of the above-mentioned objective factors were highly uncertain and required to be interpreted by decision-makers. Actors involved in asylum governance variously interpreted the causes and effects of the increase in asylum-seeking flows, the widespread anti-migrant protests, public attitudes to immigration and its salience. These understandings were then variously enacted by political actors, depending on several factors that influenced their sensemaking processes, which I identified through extensive interviewing. These sensemaking processes were often complex, characterised by tensions and ambiguity. They led to frequent decoupling between discourses and actions. More importantly, through these processes actors played a role in constructing the very situations they were attempting to comprehend (Maitlis and Christianson 2014:58). By making sense of the environments they faced in dialogues and actions, they generated a new reality, which then influenced or constrained the sensemaking process itself (Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010:185). Through these processes – and as a result of the interplay between policymaking, politics and political contestation – the actors involved in asylum governance systems contributed to constitute asylum-seeking migration as a challenge to the political system. In other words, to constitute the Italian ‘refugee crisis’ itself.

In addition to highlighting the finding of governance systems being constitutive of the ‘refugee crisis’, I also would like to emphasize that the approach taken can be beneficial for studying governance processes more broadly. I largely based my analysis on approaches and concepts developed in organizational studies, approaches rarely applied in political science to study asylum or migration governance. This research showed that framing theories and the sensemaking approach do offer very relevant analytical tools to analyse governance processes and dynamics. Rather than moving back from the outputs and outcomes of governance system to draw conclusions on the nature of the decision-making processes, they allow to open this ‘black box’ and focus on the context of decision and action of the ‘situated actors’ that are part of the governance system. The thesis showed the relevance of integrating framing and sensemaking, with the aim to study not only individuals’ beliefs but also how these inform actions, and how beliefs emerge and actions are developed in a certain context. This research also demonstrated the potential of SNA – rarely applied in the literature on migration governance – to supplement analysis of actors’ beliefs and actions and how actors’ interactions and dynamics of power within governance systems contribute to produce policy outputs and outcomes in an MLG system.

This research shows that there is scope for this approach to inform further research on governance, and the intersection of politics and policymaking. Future works could benefit from the adoption of this approach and could apply it to other countries and to the study of other policy fields, with the same purpose of identifying mechanisms within governance systems that lead to the production of policy outputs and outcomes in a certain context. As this thesis showed, this approach particularly provides tools to overcome some of the main limitations of current research on MLG, criticised for being overly descriptive and for largely neglecting tensions and power struggles within multi-level polities.

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# ANNEX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

**STRUCTURED COMPONENT:**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Please indicate with whom on this list you discussed matters regarding asylum-seeking migration during 2017.* | | | |
| **Actor/Institution** | **Frequency of exchange**  How often did you discuss asylum-related matters with this actor in 2017? | **Framing consonance**  How similar on a scale from 1 to 5 are the perspectives on AS migration of this actor to your own perspectives on the issue?(5 is high similarity and 1 is low similarity) | **Who is more likely to initiate this contact, you or Actor/Institution X?** (space for interviewer’s notes): |
| *Group of Actors 1* | ⃝Occasionally  ⃝Monthly  ⃝Weekly  ⃝Daily | ⃝ ⃝ ⃝ ⃝ ⃝  1 2 3 4 5 |  |
| *Group of Actors 2* | ⃝Occasionally  ⃝Monthly  ⃝Weekly  ⃝Daily | ⃝ ⃝ ⃝ ⃝ ⃝  1 2 3 4 5 |  |
| *Group of Actors 3* | ⃝Occasionally  ⃝Monthly  ⃝Weekly  ⃝Daily | ⃝ ⃝ ⃝ ⃝ ⃝  1 2 3 4 5 |  |
| … | … | … |  |

*Notes: The list includes a list of all groups of actors mentioned in Figure 8.3. Party actors were grouped according to political affiliations, additional information about type of municipality were added in the notes.*

**SEMI-STRUCTURED COMPONENT:**

|  |
| --- |
| 1. What you see as the major causes of asylum-seeking migration? 2. What you see as the major consequences/effects of these migration flows in your region?   *Possible follow-up: Have these effects changed over time? Do you see also other types of effects?*   1. Could you briefly tell me what do you see as the main features of the reception system in your region? *Possible follow-up: how did key institutions acted? Should have they acted differently? How?* 2. Why do you think these effects emerged? 3. Through which sources do you derive information about asylum-seeking migration and its effects? 4. What were the main decisions made by you or your institution during the refugee crisis? *Possible follow-up: do you remember other decisions, that were particularly complex and difficult?* 5. Let’s take the *policy/initiative/action X* developed by you or your organization/institution. Which thinking/ideas/goals/rationale informed this decision? *Possible follow up: could you describe the discussions and reasoning that led to this decision? And what about decision Y?* 6. Which are/were the key factors that you consider when making decisions in this field? Factors that constrain you or enable you? 7. Could you tell me whether there have been any events (incidents, things you observed, you read, you saw or first-hand experience) which have shaped or affected your understanding of asylum-seeking migration and its effects and in what ways? 8. Has your institutional role impacted or shaped the way you approach the issue of asylum-seeking migration? 9. Has any past experience influenced the decisions you made? 10. Would you say that what people in your region (or state) think (the so-called public opinion) influences your decision in this field? How? 11. So, how would you describe public opinion in your region? Has it changed over time? 12. I would like to know more about the relevance and the effect of the networks of discussions and the interactions that we discussed in the structured questionnaire before: did these interactions affect your decisions? How? 13. What do you see as the key factors that led to high/low levels of political contestation AND/OR efficient/inefficient asylum management? |

1. I use interchangeably the terms ‘refugee crisis’ and ‘asylum crisis’ to speak of the flows of asylum-seekers that Italy received during the period 2013–2018. While I realize that these terms are contested (Triandafyllidou 2018:200), they allow to concisely refer to this set of events. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘Asylum policy’ is generally assumed to be the branch of migration policy that relates to the regulation of fully-fledged Geneva-based asylum and other forms of international protection, its foundation being the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Hatton 2011:43). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A few scholarly works, outside the Italian context, focused on local actors and decision-making, adopting different perspectives (Lidén and Nyhlén 2015; Steen 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. No commonly agreed definition of MLG can be identified in the literature, after the term was initially defined by Marks as a ‘system of continuous negotiation among nested governments at several territorial tiers’ (Marks et al. 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. From now onwards I will use the terms ‘local level’ and ‘regional level’ interchangeably. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Prime Minister Decree, 12 February 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Circular Order of the MoI No.104/2014. Legislative Decree No.142/2015 allowed Prefects to set up ‘extraordinary reception measures’ in emergency situations. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Source: https://www.comune.vicenza.it/albo/notizie.php/81710. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. These seemingly contradictory trends is partially due to the ordinal nature of the salience question which is affected by the far higher salience of unemployment in southern regions. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. At the local level, in Central and Southern Italy the name of the party was changed into ‘Lega’ or ‘Lega-Noi con Salvini’. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The M5S is notoriously difficult to define, beyond its obvious populist character, and does not fit easily into ideological dichotomies of left and right (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). Ivaldi, Lanzone and Woods define it as a ‘post-ideological’ mixture, able to adapt its messages to newly salient issues (2017:18). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Peetz (2019:148) defines a ‘relational social mechanism’ as a model of (structures of) interactions among social entities that produces a specific social phenomenon. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Figure created by the author. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ramella (2010:309) defines a ‘territorial political subculture’: a ‘system of signification’ (visions of the world, norms, social practices, etc.) which helps to define the actors’ political identities in the background of historically and territorially defined contexts. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For a comprehensive review: Schammann et al. 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. These criteria were used: the definition of actors themselves as such; the past membership to a party; the external support received by one or more parties at local elections. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Sources: interviews with expert and NGO leader. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Source: interview with expert. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Source: Lega Nord website (https://www.leganord.org/notizie2/12550-dl-lavoro-rondini-ln-renzi-si-inventa-i-lavori-socialmente-utili-per-stranieri). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Retrieved from: <http://www.consiglioveneto.it/crvportal/attisp/RIS/Anno_2017/RIS_0038/testo_presentato.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Retrieved from: <http://www.comune.albettone.vi.it/zf/index.php/atti-amministrativi/delibere/dettaglio/table-delibere-public-page/49/atto/GTlRRNA--H>. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Grouping mayors entailed some choices. In the networks that follow mayors are grouped according to their political affiliation, regardless of the type of municipality, since actors with the same political affiliation in Veneto tend to make sense of the asylum crisis in similar ways. Furthermore, due to the very low number of municipalities adhering to ANCI in Veneto, the category ‘MAYORS OF THE PROVINCE’ was introduced in the structured questionnaire to assess the interactions of each mayor with groups of other mayors of the province (e.g. in assemblies gathering more than two mayors). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Nodes with one single tie were hidden in all networks that follow. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Unlike in the previous figures, in this figure mayors are grouped according to their political affiliation and type of municipality. The networks created following the other two approaches provided very similar findings. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Local elections in Sicily were held in 137 municipalities. This sample includes all provincial capitals where elections were held and a representative number of towns and villages, selected to keep a balance between geographical areas, number of inhabitants and asylum-seekers, type of reception centres. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Interviews were found through a keyword search of online archives of local, national and international newspapers. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Source: http://www.nicolacristaldi.it/news/320/londra-17-giugno-2014-l-intervento-di-nicola-cristaldi-sindaco-di-mazara-del-vallo-nella-sede-del-parlamento-inglese [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Retrieved from: https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/our\_work/ICP/IDM/2015\_CMC/Session-IIIb/Orlando/PDF-CARTA-DI-PALERMO-Statement.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Nodes with one single tie were hidden in all the networks of this chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. I.e. their weight corresponds to a score of less than 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Most of the formally independent mayors of the smaller villages are also very close to the PD. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Available at: http://accoglienza.toscana.it/documents/882515/882891/PDF+LIBRO+BIANCO/f95ad8a5-0209-4482-81c9-a35251dba070. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Retrieved from: http://www.consiglio.regione.toscana.it/ufficio-stampa/comunicati/comunicati\_view?idc=&id=26439 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Source: Interview with journalist. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. When the Lega-led government took office, 14 asylum-seekers were hosted in Cascina in a SPRAR centre, while 50 asylum-seekers were hosted in CAS centres. The number of asylum-seekers in CAS centres almost doubled following the withdrawal from the SPRAR. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Retrieved from: http://www.pisatoday.it/cronaca/progetto-sprar-rinuncia-cascina.html [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Nodes with one single tie were hidden in all the networks of this chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. I.e. their weight corresponds to a score of less than 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. The two FN leaders are excluded from the analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. In most cases these coincide with approaches to action in the reception policy field, with some exceptions (e.g. Sicilian city mayors). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Perceptions of salience are less crucial for Hedgehog decision-makers that oppose asylum-seekers’ reception, although they contribute to enable their adoption of proactive approaches. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. These new adapted networks are not shown since they are very similar to the ones illustrated in previous chapters. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. ‘Cities’ here refers to ‘provincial capitals’. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Venetian ICL and ICR mayors were merged into one category, as also all centre-right mayors (FI, NCD). Mayors of port towns and mayors of villages with big CARA/hubs were included under separate categories. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. They include: provincial governments, Catholic Church, European City Networks, civil servants, local left-wing leaders. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Analysis for directed networks provides very similar results. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. In Tuscany, most local authorities are controlled by the PD, and two of the three groups of opposition parties – the left and the M5S – share similar views on asylum. Right-wing parties, instead, were relatively marginal in the governance system before 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. An analysis of the 43 protest events in Veneto – described in detail in Lunaria, 2017 – reveals that 28 of them targeted the creation of regional hubs or big CAS centres in former hotels, while only six protests targeted small SPRAR or CAS centres. For the remaining seven episodes Lunaria (2017) does not specify the target of the protest. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Angelino Alfano was the centrist NCD leader. After Renzi’s resignation in December 2016, the Gentiloni government was supported by the same majority, and included most of the outgoing ministers, but Minniti replaced Alfano as Minister of Interior. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Source: PD MP, November 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. ‘Cities’ here is used for ‘provincial capitals’. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Mayors of cities and towns are grouped according to party affiliation. The label ‘INDEP’ is used for groups of actors not affiliated to any political party. The category ‘mayors FI’ also includes the mayors that then joined its split-off, NCD. Mayors of Sicilian port towns/villages are included under a separate category (‘mayors port towns’). Mayors of villages, mostly not affiliated to any party, are grouped into three categories: ‘independent’, ‘Lega/independent right-wing’, and ‘mayors villages hubs’ (for villages hosting CARA centres or regional hubs). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. To reduce imbalances due to the different patterns of relations of mayors in different regions, the weight of each edge was calculated as the average of the average values already calculated for the same edges in each region. The same method was used to create the other networks of this chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Interview retrieved from: http://www.anci.it/index.cfm?layout=dettaglio&IdDett=59143. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Quoted in Colombo 2018, 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Enrico Mentana is an Italian journalist, director of the newscast hosted on the privately-owned channel La7. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Much of the backlog was also due to the examination of the asylum-seekers’ appeals in the Tribunals. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)