

# ITALIAN RECEPTION POLICIES AND PANDEMIC: FROM EXCLUSION TO ABANDONMENT

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## ABSTRACT

### **Italian Reception Policies and Pandemic: From Exclusion to Abandonment**

The article analyzes how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the management of reception centers for refugees and asylum seekers in Italy. By analyzing the transformation of Italian reception policies in the last years, the article shows the relationship between these changes and the condition of refugees and asylum seekers in these centers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overcrowded housing, the absence of institutional guidance on managing the situation, and the interruption of many migrants' migratory projects are the main findings that emerged. The article is based on digital ethnographic techniques, in addition to phone interviews with key speakers of the social contexts monitored online.

**KEYWORDS:** asylum seekers, refugees, reception system, COVID-19 pandemic, Italy

## IZVLEČEK

### **Italijanske politike sprejemanja in pandemija: Od izključenosti do zapuščenosti**

Članek obravnava vpliv pandemije Covida-19 na upravljanje sprejemnih centrov za begunce in prosilce za azil v Italiji. Na podlagi analize sprememb v politiki sprejemanja v zadnjih letih prikazuje, kako so te v omenjenih centrih med pandemijo vplivale na življenjske razmere beguncev in prosilcev za azil. Rezultati analize poudarjajo predvsem prenatrpane nastanitvene zmogljivosti, odsotnost institucionalnih smernic za obvladovanje položaja, pa tudi prekinitev selitvenih načrtov številnih migrantov. Članek temelji na digitalnih etnografskih tehnikah in telefonskih intervjujih s ključnimi govorniki družbenih kontekstov, ki se spremljajo na spletu.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** prosilci za azil, begunci, sistem sprejemanja, pandemija Covida-19, Italija

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

This article aims to provide a snapshot of what happened in Italian reception centers during the confinement imposed due to the emergence and development of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic exists within a social framework which in itself is already complex and constantly evolving. To describe this framework, this article initially focuses on the main changes implemented through the approval of the Legislative Decree 113/2018 (“Salvini Decree”).<sup>2</sup> In this analysis, the first Salvini Decree is a legislative step that constituted a paradigm shift in Italy’s international protection and reception system. From this perspective, we will analyze dynamics in Italian reception centers within the context of the lockdown, which is when some of the contradictions in the government’s reception policy emerged more visibly (Carwley 2021: 81).

The context of this article is the first wave of the pandemic (end of February–beginning of May 2020), which corresponds to Italy’s first national lockdown. It is worth highlighting that the empirical research was conducted while the authors complied with confinement guidelines; this impacted the adoption of specific research tools and methodologies. More specifically, the empirical material gathered relies on intensive local, national, and international newspaper and document-based research, in addition to digital ethnographic techniques, such as the analysis of the blogs and Facebook pages involved in processes of migrant welfare and protection. We also conducted twenty phone interviews with key informants of the social contexts we monitored online. More specifically, we connected with social workers employed in some reception centers in several Italian cities such as Rome, Genoa, and Padua, and members of associations working for the rights of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, such as “LasciateCIEntrare,” “Melting Pot,” and “ASGI” (*Associazione per gli Studi Giuridici sull’Immigrazione*).

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1 This article is a product of the PRIN project entitled “De-bordering activities and bottom-up citizenship of asylum seekers in Italy: Policies, Practices, and People (ASIT)” (Research Unit of the University of Genoa). For purely academic purposes, sections 1 and 2 can be attributed to Luca Giliberti, while sections 3 and 4 can be attributed to Davide Filippi.

2 During his tenure, the former minister of domestic affairs Matteo Salvini – representative of Lega Nord, a Far Right populist party – issued two decrees, which the media informally called the “Salvini Decrees”. While the first decree focused specifically on reforming the reception system, the second amended the provisions pertaining to the landings of migrants at sea. In the interest of clarity, we will exclusively focus on the former, Legislative Decree 113/2018, which includes amendments pertaining to immigration, international protection, and granting and revoking Italian citizenship. This decree was approved by the Council of Ministers on September 24, 2018.

## THE LEGISLATIVE DECREE 113/2018 AND THE ITALIAN RECEPTION SYSTEM BEFORE COVID-19

To reflect on the pandemic and how the subsequent confinement guidelines have impacted the Italian reception system, we must look at the changes to the system in recent years. It is important to begin with the impact of the approval of the Salvini Decree in terms of the overall reconfiguration of reception spaces and types, but also in terms of refugees' and asylum seekers' potential access to international protection in Italy (Algotino 2018: 165–199; Campomori 2018: 429–436; Della Puppa, Gargiulo, Sempredon 2020: 183–199).

First and foremost, Legislative Decree 113/2018 lays out a drastic reduction in the number of resources allocated to reception centers. This decision led to a radical cut in the number of services available in former SPRAR projects (Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees) and at CAS reception centers (Extraordinary Reception Center) and aimed at integrating asylum seekers and refugees; these include Italian language lessons, legal consultation, cultural mediation, and professional courses for job seekers (Accorinti, Spinelli 2019: 103–120). Consequently, CASs have inevitably become centers in which the lives of the people welcomed there are put on hold as they wait for the results of their asylum petitions. The allocation of funds set forth by the Salvini Decree puts distributed reception solutions at a disadvantage; it cuts financing for centers that had organized the presence of asylum seekers in individual housing solutions. At the same time, it encourages the presence of more centers with large concentrations of migrants (ActionAid-Open-Polis 2019).

The new tenders for the identification of reception centres, responding to the logic of the evaluation of economic criteria and not of the planning ones, are driving away managing authorities that have acquired skills, leaving the field to heterogeneous economic operators who do not always conceive the context of reception as an area of protection and development of the personal autonomy of asylum applicants. By removing the services provided in the reception centers, the ministerial economic commitment is also reduced. It passes from a national average of the previous call of 35/32 euros as a daily contribution per single guest, including all goods and services provided, to 23/21 euros, with the recognition of only 3.90 euros per day for the rental of facilities and utilities. By removing the pocket money paid to guests of 2.50 euros, a recent study published by Oxfam and InMigrazione (2019) points out that in the invitation to tender of the prefecture of Rome, the decrease in costs for services is about 5 euros per day in a CAS with 50 places and 6.50 euros per day in collective centers with over 300 places. (Accorinti, Spinelli 2019: 112)

Another particularly relevant element worth mentioning concerning the redefinition of the Italian reception system is the transformation of projects previously called

SPRAR into SIPROIMI (Protection System for Internationally Protected People and Unaccompanied Foreign Minors). In the previous model, the CAS centers, managed by the prefectures, were designed to be the first place that received people who arrived in Italy and requested asylum. The SPRARs, managed by local administrations, were a virtuous model centered on distributed reception and integration, even if this never occurred in full: even before the approval of the Salvini Decree analyzed in this article, 80% of the asylum seekers and refugees lived in a CAS center, and only 20% were in the SPRAR programs (Amnesty International 2020). The switch from the acronym SPRAR to the acronym SIPROIMI is significant. It highlights the main change made by the Salvini Decree: only refugees have the right to access these establishments. At the same time, asylum seekers must live exclusively in CAS centers.

This issue introduces us to the second aspect on which Legislative Decree 113/2018 has had a clear impact, and that is access to the different types of humanitarian protection set forth by the Italian legal system. In this sense, the main change this new legislation introduced is the structural re-sizing of access to humanitarian protection, through which most asylum seekers obtain a residence permit. Humanitarian protection was granted not only to people from areas deemed unsafe by international organizations. In fact, from this perspective:

The residence permit for humanitarian reasons was issued by local authorities, the Questura, after consulting the Territorial Commission for the Recognition of International Protection on the existence of “serious grounds” of humanitarian nature, i.e. health reasons, age, famine, human-induced environmental threats or natural disasters, and political instability, episodes of violence or lack of family strings in the country of origin. (Open Migration 2020).

In other words, humanitarian protection does not only consider the country of origin of the person requesting a residence permit but also their personal background, their level of vulnerability and the situation of risk that they leave behind. The inevitable result of this legislative change has been that a significant number of migrants who up until that point were in possession of a valid residence permit – and who were waiting for the opportunity to convert the residence permit they had obtained through humanitarian protection into a work permit – have been expelled from the Italian reception system (Omizzolo 2019; Della Puppa, Gargiulo, Semprebon 2020: 183–199). As stated by Nazzarena Zorzella, lawyer of Bologna and member of ASGI, in an interview with *La Repubblica*:

People who had already left the administrative-judicial network of international protection found they no longer had the right to keep their permit from one day to the next. In some cases, people who had a job managed to obtain the conversion. People who were registered on employment lists, or had been employed on a short-term contract which was maybe renewed on a day-to-day basis by temporary work

companies, found it hard to renew their residence permit. The objective outcome of the legal amendment was that many people who lived in Italy and had had a valid permit for years no longer had a valid permit. The government, knowing that it could not repatriate these hundreds of thousands of people, thought the best option was to let them lose their validity status. (Facchini 2019)

It is therefore important to highlight that, up until the emergence of the pandemic in Italy, the issue of migration was at the forefront of the political and public debate in Italy. The virus, which took hold quickly and has been defined as a new “total social event” (Sayad 2002), is a variable that has inevitably played a part in shaping, defining, and transforming global societies both specifically and collectively (Corliano 2020: 227–246). In this sense, it has radically shifted the focus away from migrant issues and accentuated vulnerability that affects refugees and asylum seekers residing in the Italian reception centers practically invisible.<sup>3</sup>

## **THE CONTRADICTIONS OF THE ITALIAN RECEPTION SYSTEM DURING AND BEYOND THE PANDEMIC**

As indicated in the previous point, the Italian reception system was under extreme pressure already before the outbreak and development of the pandemic. The so-called Salvini Decree played a crucial role in radicalizing the conditions of vulnerability which, in structural terms, impacted the life experiences of the asylum seekers and refugees taken in by the humanitarian protection system. There are multiple, complex issues pertaining to this topic. In this article, we will primarily concentrate those pertaining to the concentration of people in large centers in relation to the different types of distributed reception solutions available and the protection of public safety and people in different types of establishments. From this perspective, and in the words of the people we connected with, there appears to be a radical difference between the organizational practices in spaces connected to the concept of distributed reception and the medium and large CAS centers. As we previously stated, the Salvini Decree favors larger centers rather than the smaller distributed reception housing solutions. Some of the criticism aimed at the reception system reform emerges clearly in the context of the pandemic. It appears to be validated by the testimonies gathered while conducting this empirical research.

The group of key players we interacted with state that, within the context of the pandemic, people who are still in the reception network are significantly less vulnerable than people who are excluded or who have been excluded. However, even among people who to this day appear to be taken in by the Italian reception system,

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3 Meanwhile, when our research was over, the government in Italy changed and the law was partially revised. See Della Puppa, Sanò 2020.

according to workers and representatives of rights advocacy groups and third sector associations we interacted with, there is a substantial difference between those integrated into a system aimed at distributed reception and those living in medium and large CAS centers. To this point, a worker of a Genoa-based cooperative who manages four apartments which each house six refugees and asylum seekers, tells us about a series of procedures adopted in this context.

Look, over the past few weeks, I've realized how important it was for us to have insisted on distributed reception. I've been speaking to my colleagues over the last few days, and we've been asking each other how things are going in the bigger centers. To be honest, we're all a little concerned. We're basically saying to one another, "Thank God they believed us! They tell me it's crazy in other places." (Marco, 35 years, social worker from Genoa)<sup>4</sup>

According to this worker, distributed reception made it possible to start a process of awareness-raising about the COVID-19 risks and preventative practices; thanks to the smaller set-up, residents and workers had developed a relationship of trust. In this case, the cooperative provided the PPE (Individual Protection Equipment), sanitizing products, and brochures in multiple languages outlining the medical and health regulations to follow during the lockdown. Although the cooperatives advised on reducing visits to different houses, the workers and resident migrants organized themselves by creating a specific WhatsApp group for each house. In these groups, they shared updates relating to the health conditions of each resident in each house to monitor and, if necessary, intervene if somebody was experiencing symptoms that, according to protocol, indicated a high probability of contagion. Thanks to these groups, the migrants could also constantly ask the workers questions and advice. What transpired was that, unlike in medium and large CAS centers, in the distributed reception network, it is possible to establish a series of good practices which, on the one hand, ensure the protection of public health, the health of migrants and the workers themselves, and on the other, define more horizontal practices that the service providers (the workers) and the service receivers (the migrants) share and appear to be more reciprocally sustainable.

While the example we have put forward refers specifically to distributed reception, two questions emerge in transversal terms in the words of all the people we reached out to during the research. First of all, all workers state that the pandemic awareness-raising and prevention practices occurred in procedural terms. The reasons provided to explain this dynamic are very much in line with one another. A recurring element in the stories of our interlocutors is the fact that refugees and asylum seekers initially perceived the pandemic to be the umpteenth direct attack

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4 The names of the people mentioned and interviewed have been changed to protect their identity.

on them. In a political and social context that over the last few years has represented migrants as some sort of threat or as profiteers and in a climate of growing racism that repeatedly escalates into episodes of violence toward refugees and asylum seekers (Lunaria 2020), the workers and welfare activists tell us that migrants initially perceived the imposition of the confinement as yet another legislative maneuver aimed at limiting their freedom and rights. As one of the social workers told us:

In the first frantic moments of the pandemic, it was difficult to keep the guys at home. They told me they were really fed up with racism and all the laws against them. When I tried to explain that the curfew concerned everyone, they didn't believe me, and they went out anyway, but I couldn't lock them in the house. Then, step by step, with the translated flyers and especially when they began to see that no one was walking on the streets anymore, they understood what was happening. (Giovanni, 27 years old, a social worker from Rome)

Furthermore, many workers and representatives of welfare associations we contacted agreed that the migratory experience that sets migrants apart from all other people has deeply transformed their relationship with diseases and death. This situation probably led to the initial distrust felt by asylum applicants residing in the reception centers regarding the containment measures implemented by the government. The words of a member of one of the associations we interacted with poignantly validate this point:

As you know, these are people who have crossed the desert on foot. Sometimes, they've been captured and made slaves in Libya, even for years. Or maybe they've tried to reach Europe ten times on a vessel in the Mediterranean, with the risk of drowning every single time. When they get here, they then must deal with the violence of racism that permeates our country. As far as they are concerned, death and disease are an engrained reflection of their existence; it's something that has accompanied them throughout their lives, maybe for years, maybe since they were born. (Luisa, 47 years old, LasciateCIEntrare)

Regarding the second issue, the stories gathered speak of the fear that migrants have that their migratory project may fall through. This sentiment is expressed from several perspectives: some are in continuity with the structural dynamics which characterize the global migratory process; others are localized and specific to the context of the pandemic. From the first perspective, the feeling of suspended time and unawareness of what the future may hold emerges in the literature as a feature of contemporary migrations (Mezzadra, Nielson 2013; Queirolo Palmas, Rahola 2020). However, when we conducted the research for this article, the uncertainty for the future seemed even more pressing given the regulatory changes that have occurred in rapid succession. One element which an ever-increasing number of people

see, to some extent, as an integral part of the migratory experience is the important role of sending money to their families back home (Bonciani 2018).

As is well-documented (Ambrosini 2008; 2017), one aspect of a successful migratory project is the migrant's ability to send money to the family they have left behind in their country of origin. People taken in by the Italian reception system are given housing and food; they make the money that they send to their families primarily by participating in the informal economy and through illegal work. During the lockdown, due to the closure of all commercial activities and the prohibition to circulate in public spaces (which is where the informal economy and illegal work markets typically thrive), the ability for migrants to accumulate money to send to their countries of origin was made impossible. The impossibility of knowing what the future holds or sending money home questions a migrant's current and future perception of a winning migratory project. This condition, among the other elements shared in this article, has generated tension among the people who are involved in the Italian reception system.

One of the most complex issues that the people interviewed mentioned is that it was physically impossible in medium and large CAS centers to respect the confinement measures (Ullah et al. 2020). In this sense, the absence of specific institutional guidelines that considered the housing conditions in these centers led to a general lack of interest on behalf of the cooperatives and institutions. In medium and large CAS centers, cooperatives impeded their workers from coming into contact with migrants. They invited them to leave the shopping bags or pre-cooked meals at the CAS entrance, thus creating much stricter isolation than was imposed on the rest of the Italian population. In some cases, for example, the one defined by Verona Prefecture, CAS migrants were explicitly prohibited from leaving their housing even in "cases of necessity," which was one of the few cases in which the rest of the population was allowed to ignore the confinement guidelines set by governmental protocols (Melting Pot 2020).

This stricter isolation frequently led to many resident migrants and workers in these centers being put at risk from a medical perspective; what's more, the potential consequences that this abandonment could have led to in terms of spreading the virus even more were ignored. To this point, a member of an association dedicated to migrant reception on a national level gave a statement denouncing an incident that occurred in a medium CAS center of the province of Milan. There was a potential COVID case in the house, and the impossibility of applying isolation protocols due to the number of people living in the housing unit put the health of all the young people who lived there at serious risk. According to Giovanna, this specific situation can be taken as a general example, as it is also occurring in other CAS centers:

The other day, a male asylum seeker from Mali who lives in a medium-sized CAS called me and told me some shocking things, which, from what we have gathered, are happening in many places. Basically, he lives in a small villa with nineteen other

guys. There are four rooms, five of them share each room, and there's only one bathroom. Last week, one of them started to have a high temperature; so, all of them freaked out and started to worry and repeatedly call the co-op. They were simply advised to stay home and try to keep their distance from the guy. In other words, the co-op simply isolated a suspected COVID-19 case with another nineteen people in a small house with one bathroom, paying no attention whatsoever to this potentially sick guy's life or the lives and well-being of everyone else. This guy's condition deteriorated, and a doctor finally saw him: it turns out he did have COVID-19 and was admitted to hospital. And the others? No one stepped in to help them; they were just repeatedly advised to "stay home" ... let's see if anyone else in the group falls ill over the next few days. (Giovanna, 47 years old, Melting Pot)

A second statement, provided by the president of a community of migrants in Padua, also indicates that the guidelines were impossible to implement, especially in medium and large CAS centers. However, the president further pointed out that, after the Salvini Decree, many asylum seekers become "of no fixed abode," and it is not uncommon for them to be hosted in the centers unbeknownst to cooperatives thus increasing the risk of potential new contagions.

Basically, our migrants are very young, and initially, they didn't believe everything they heard regarding the virus. In Bagnoli, more than twenty of them live in a house with only one bathroom. In the beginning, out of decency toward others and basic human rights, they welcomed other migrants who had sadly lost their right to live there. But when a guy from another country got sick, they got scared and angry both at the cooperative and at one another, and they stopped letting people in. We don't know if this guy actually had COVID-19 because he wasn't seen by a doctor. The problem is that these young people do go out a little, so if he had the virus, it's a big problem. (Victor, 33 years old, president of a migrant community in Padua)

These two examples are representative of some of the dynamics which are occurring in most medium and large CAS centers in the country. They should give public institutions food for thought in terms of the current emergency, the types of prevention that need to be applied swiftly, and the need to design and create types of reception that can increase the rights and self-determination of those who use them.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article has analyzed the impact of the pandemic on the Italian reception network. The opportunity to gather stories from workers in this field and key players connected to migrant welfare activism has allowed us to understand better the different realities that became visible during Italy's first lockdown.

In this article, we focused on how the effects of the pandemic are inserted in a social and political scenario that was already fraught in itself due to the approval of Legislative Decree 113/2018. The substantial abolition of the residence permit for humanitarian protection together with the dismantling of the distributed reception system – mainly the result of the radical cut to cooperative financing which placed migrants in smaller capacity establishments and small-sized housing units – were the two elements which, already before the COVID-19 outbreak, appeared to be highly problematic for the rights of refugees and asylum seekers.

With the pandemic, this situation got much worse. What has emerged from the statements we gathered is the impossibility of enforcing distancing guidelines in medium and large centers due to overcrowded housing. To this end, our exchange with workers who continue to be involved in distributed reception projects tells us that, within the context of the pandemic, distributed reception appears to be a good choice that reconciles the rights to health of migrants and workers and enables migrants and workers to the necessary confinement guidelines issued over the past few months. Secondly, the stories of our interlocutors paint a picture of the vicious circle caused by the absence of clear institutional guidance on how to manage confinement in the CAS centers and a certain lack of interest on behalf of many cooperatives toward the people already housed in their facilities. Lastly, the indefinite suspension of the migration projects of thousands of people who live in Italy has led to a sense of frustration amongst migrants, whose future is at stake due to the pandemic, and even more poignantly, due to the confinement measures.

Our analysis encourages us to reflect upon two points. The first reflection is that the pandemic, as a new “total social event,” adds another layer of complexity to the Italian reception system, which was already under duress due to the Salvini Decree that introduced changes that did not benefit refugees and asylum seekers. The second reflection is that the pandemic has amplified and brought to the fore those pre-existing dynamics of marginalization and exclusion, which often feature in the stories of migrants who enter the Italian reception system (Goldin, Muggah 2020).

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## POVZETEK

### ITALIJANSKE POLITIKE SPREJEMANJA IN PANDEMIJA: OD IZKLJUČENOSTI DO ZAPUŠČENOSTI

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Članek obravnava vpliv pandemije Covida-19 na upravljanje sprejemnih centrov za begunce in prosilce za azil v Italiji. V uvodu se osredotoča na poglobljene spremembe v italijanskem sistemu sprejemanja, ki so se v zadnjih letih uresničevale predvsem na podlagi Zakonodajnega odloka št. 113/2018. Prvič: odlok močno zmanjšuje obseg finančnih sredstev za sprejemne centre; predvsem zmanjšuje sredstva za individualne nastanitve prosilcev za azil, obenem pa spodbuja ustanavljanje centrov z velikim številom migrantov. Drugič: glavna sprememba, ki jo prinaša nova zakonodaja, je strukturno spremenjen dostop do »humanitarne zaščite«, po prejšnjem je bila večina prosilcev za azil upravičena do dovoljenja za bivanje. Ta zakonodajna sprememba za tisoče migrantov pomeni izgon iz italijanskega sistema sprejemanja. Glede na nastali položaj sta se avtorja osredotočila na družbene in politične učinke pandemije, ki so bili zaradi sprejetja nove zakonodaje že tako ali tako zaostrene. Odločilna sprememba v politiki sprejemanja je bila za begunce in prosilce za azil problematična že pred izbruhom pandemije.

S pandemijo se je položaj še poslabšal. Empirična analiza je pokazala, da je v srednje velikih in večjih centrih zaradi prenatrpanosti nemogoče vzdrževati varnostno razdaljo. Članek pojasnjuje tudi začarani krog, ki je nastal zaradi odsotnosti jasno začrtanih institucionalnih smernic za upravljanje omejevanja gibanja v t. i. sprejemnih centrih v izrednih razmerah, kakor tudi zaradi pomanjkanja podpore oziroma zanimanja za njihove prebivalce s strani številnih zunanjih sodelavcev. Nenehno odlaganje selitvenih načrtov v oddaljeno prihodnost migrante frustrira, njihova življenja so zaradi pandemije in omejitve gibanja resno ogrožena. Empirično gradivo za študijo sta avtorja zbrala s poglobljenim proučevanjem lokalnega, nacionalnega in mednarodnega časopisja ter z digitalnimi etnografskimi tehnikami.