

REFUGEES' RECEPTION IN ITALY: PAST AND PRESENT OF A HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

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ACCEPTED VERSION (BEFORE FORMATTING AND PUBLICATION)

INTRODUCTION¹

TERMS such as 'Migration Crisis' and 'Refugee Crisis' have been widely used to refer to the large numbers of people recently arriving into the European Union by crossing the Mediterranean or travelling by land through the Balkans. Following the Arab Spring of 2011, this mixed-migration flow reached its peak in 2015, as a consequence of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic. Overall, in that year, over 1 million migrants arrived in Europe by sea, the highest number ever registered by official statistics. If there has been a crisis, however, this was not so much in the numbers, but in the way in which policy-makers and institutions have failed to respond adequately and to prioritize humanitarian concerns rather than allowing xenophobic hysteria and political interests to set the

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agenda². In all of this, the focus of the EU and, to an extent, of international media outlets, has been very much on border control and the identification of migrants. The crucial issues of reception, accommodation and integration in the countries of arrivals have been very much treated as a national problem, with local populations often shifting from sentiments of solidarity to openly anti-immigration stances. Across the whole of Europe, the 'Refugee Crisis' has been used to channel popular discontent arising from years of political and economic instability and the consequences of Austerity policies³.

Although Mediterranean migration is often discussed as one trans-national phenomenon, there are marked differences between the main receiving countries - and it is indeed possible to identify distinct, though interconnected, sub-regional systems⁴. This applies both to the composition of the migration flows and to the national and local responses implemented to manage arrivals. This chapter focuses on the case of Sicily, which, with the exception of the dramatic but relatively brief period between Spring 2015 and Spring 2016, has been the main area of arrival of migration by sea in Southern Europe at least till Spring 2018. Indeed, the chapter aims to debunk the popular notion that mixed-migration from North Africa to Italy is a very recent and very sudden phenomenon.

The next section starts by providing an overview of the migration flows from North Africa to Sicily since the early 1990s, explaining how we came to the so-called 'crisis' of the 2010s. This is followed by an analysis of the characteristics and experiences of those who have been coming to Italy between 2015 and 2017 - when this migration trend reached its highest numerical point - offering a

² PETERS, M. A. / BESLEY, T. (2015). The Refugee Crisis and The Right to Political Asylum. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 47(13-14), pp. 1367-74.

³ ALBAHARI, M. (2015), Europe's Refugee Crisis. *Anthropology Today*, 31(5).

⁴ D'ANGELO, A. / BLITZ, B. / KOFMAN, E. / MONTAGNA, N. (2017), Mapping Refugee Reception in the Mediterranean: First Report of the Evi-Med Project. [Middlesex](#) University

counter-narrative to the stale dichotomy between refugees and economic migrants. The chapter then moves to analyse the legal and organisational framework of refugees' reception in the country; also in this case, a brief historical excursus is useful to understand how the current, extremely complex system came into being. This involves a galaxy of state and non-governmental actors and a multi-tier classification of centres and structures. As discussed further on, in spite of ambitious national regulations, an overall 'emergency approach' is the norm, rather than the exception. Furthermore, ground level-analysis reveals an implementation characterised by legal gaps, delays, and inadequate provision of services, which dramatically impact on the life and prospects of individual migrants. Finally, the chapter briefly looks at the political shift that hit Italy in Spring 2018, with the establishment of a populist, openly anti-immigration government, and how this is likely to affect this already concerning scenario.

The chapter is informed by the findings of the 2-year research project EVI-MED⁵ (Constructing an Evidence Base of Contemporary Mediterranean Migrations) as well as additional research undertaken by the author. EVI-MED included a survey administered over the course of 2016 to 750 migrants and refugees hosted by national receptions systems across the Mediterranean, of which 400 in Sicily. Although not statistically representative in strict sense, this sample provides important insights in the characteristics and experiences of migrants, allowing us to integrate the evidence available through official data sources. The survey was also complemented by in-depth interviews with migrants, NGOs and local stakeholders and an extensive analysis of grey literature.

⁵ EVI-MED (Constructing an Evidence Base of Contemporary Mediterranean Migrations) was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) - Grant Ref: ES/N013638/1. The project was led by Prof. Brad Blitz, Prof. Eleonore Kofman, Dr. Alessio D'Angelo, Dr. Nicola Montagna, and Martin Baldwin-Edwards. Partner organisations: Borderline Sicilia (Italy), Greek Council for Refugees (Greece), People for Change (Malta). Project website: www.mdx.ac.uk/evimed

MIXED-MIGRATION FROM NORTH AFRICA TO SICILY

The South of Italy has experienced significant flows of irregular migration by sea since at least the 1990s when, following the introduction of a stricter visa policy, the route from North Africa supplied Sicily with seasonal workers for its agricultural sector⁶. In the following years, with extremely limited mechanisms for the regular entry of non-EU migrants, the only concrete attempts of the Italian governments at managing these migration flows took the shape of bilateral agreements with North African countries. This 'offshore containment' approach⁷ culminated in the deal reached in 2010 by then Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi with the Libyan regime of Muammar Gaddafi. In return for substantial payments from Italy and other EU countries, Libya became the key partner in enforcing Europe's externalisation of border control. This included joint naval patrols with Italian authorities, a crackdown on smugglers' networks and the creation of detention centres. The agreement was characterized by a lack of humanitarian considerations - Libya never signed the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention and was well known for its brutal methods of policing and migration control - but succeeded in containing the number of migrants from North Africa, albeit only for a very short period of time. The collapse of Gaddafi's regime following the Arab Spring and the NATO military intervention in 2011, led to large numbers of forced migrants leaving Libya for Italy over the following months. The post-Gaddafi's era, characterized by a high level of political instability, conflicts between rival factions and a weak central government unable to exert its authority over the whole territory, saw smuggling - and people's smuggling in particular -

⁶ PASTORE, F. / MONZINI, P. / SCIORTINO, G. (2006). Schengen's Soft Underbelly? Irregular Migration and Human Smuggling across Land and Sea Borders to Italy. *International Migration* 44(4).

⁷ ALBAHARI, 2015, *ibid.*

becoming the country's main economic sector⁸. This led to an unprecedented increase in the irregular migration towards Italy.

According to official sources, in 2014 the number of arrivals by sea in Italy reached the record number of 170,100 (see table 1 below); this compares to the 41,038 registered in Greece during the same period of time. In Summer 2015, however, with the humanitarian crisis in Syria at its peak, migration in the Eastern Mediterranean saw a dramatic growth. The 856,723 sea arrivals recorded in Greece in 2015 dwarfed those in Italy which, with 153,842 people, remained in fact relatively stable. While in an initial phase most people transited through Greece and the Balkans before making it to central and northern European countries - above all Germany - by early 2016 large numbers of migrants were blocked after the imposition of national border controls in several EU states. By Spring 2016 - also as an effect of the EU-Turkey deal to block irregular migration through Anatolia - the balance of Mediterranean migration flows was gradually re-established. In the whole of 2017, the arrivals in Greece went down to 29,718, compared to 119,369 in Italy. Finally, in 2018, the number of arrivals to Italy also saw a drastic decrease, in part due to a political agreement between the Government of Rome and the Libyan authorities, as further discussed in the last section.

Table 1 - Arrivals by sea to Europe, by year and country of arrival

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Italy	170,100	153,842	181,436	119,369	23,370
Greece	41,038	856,723	173,450	29,718	32,494
Other	4,916	4,513	7,867	23,214	58,569
Total	216,054	1,015,078	362,753	172,301	114,433

Source: Author's analysis of UNHCR data⁹

⁸ MARTIN, J. (2017), Libya, a smuggling hypermarket, Euractiv. URL: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/libya-a-smuggling-hypermarket/>

⁹ UNHCR (2018). Desperate Journeys. January-August 2018. URL: www.unhcr.org/desperatejourneys/

Focusing on the peak of the 'refugee crisis', it is also important to highlight that also the composition of arrivals is markedly different between the Centre and East of the Mediterranean. Whilst the vast majority of migrants arrived in Greece between 2015 and 2016 were from three nationalities - namely Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq - in Italy it takes the top 10 groups to account for 80% of the arrivals (see Table 2). Overall, however, the inflows are dominated by countries from sub-Saharan Africa and the Horn of Africa. In particular, the main country of origin in 2016 was Nigeria (37,551 people, 21% of the total), followed by Eritrea (11%) and then Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Gambia - each representing about 7% of all arrivals. Over the last few years, migrants from South East Asia, particularly Bangladesh, have also been quite significant, whilst the number of Syrians who have tried the Central Mediterranean route has been fairly limited. The other distinctive characteristic of the migrant population heading to Sicily is its demographic composition, with a strong predominance of young males, mostly in their late teens and early twenties, whilst women and older people are only a small minority. This is clearly reflected in the composition of the sample of the EVI-MED survey, as visualised in Figure 1. Finally, whilst migrants arriving to Sicily are characterized by a great variety of personal and economic backgrounds, it is interesting to note that the majority of respondents (52.4%) only had primary education or less, whilst just 3.7% had a degree or above.

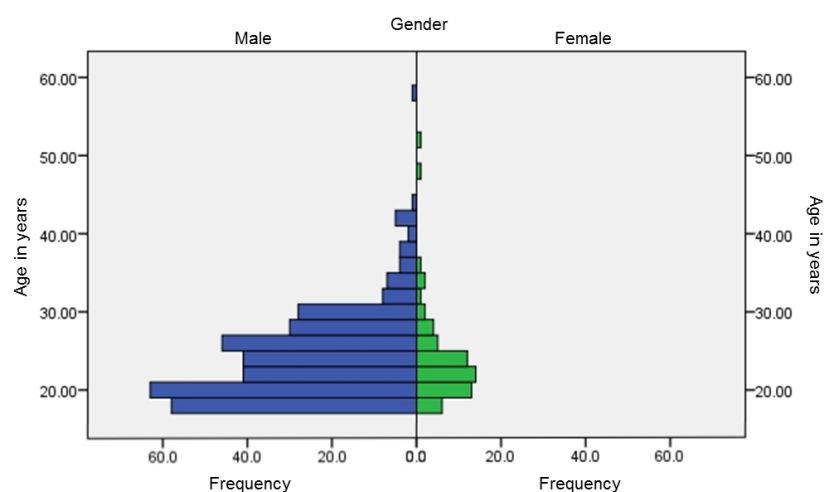
Table 2 - Arrivals by sea in Italy, by year and country of origin

	2015		2016		2017	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Nigeria	22,455	15%	37,551	21%	18,100	15%
Eritrea	39,534	26%	20,718	11%	7,000	6%
Guinea	8,937	6%	13,345	7%	9,700	8%

Côte d'Ivoire	8,637	6%	12,396	7%	9,500	8%
Gambia	3,789	2%	11,929	7%
Senegal	2,672	2%	10,327	6%	6,000	5%
Mali	12,433	8%	10,010	6%	7,100	6%
Sudan	5,843	4%	9,327	5%	6,200	5%
Bangladesh	6,126	4%	8,131	4%	9,000	8%
Somalia	5,041	3%	7,281	4%
<i>Others</i>	38,375	25%	40,421	22%	46,769	39%
Total	153,842	100%	181,436	100%	119,369	100%

Source: UNHCR¹⁰

Figure 1 - EVI-MED survey, Sicily -
Sample structure by age and gender



¹⁰ UNHCR, 2018, *ibid.*

Source: EVI-MED survey data. Sample of 400 migrants in reception centres across Sicily

The profile of the migrants coming to Sicily strongly has influenced the way in which they have been perceived in the national public opinion and, crucially, determined their likelihood to obtain the status of refugee or other forms of international protection. Although according to national and international legislation the decisions on asylum applications should be made on an individual basis, it is widely recognized that nationality represents the main factor in determining the outcome of people's legal status¹¹. In fact, with the notable exception of Eritreans, most of those who reach the Italian shores have very low chances to be granted refugee status under the Geneva Convention. According to Eurostat data, of all applications to the EU countries in 2016, the recognition rate among Nigerians was only 22%, whilst for citizens of Côte d'Ivoire was 27% and 31% for those of Guinea. This compares, for example, to a 98% recognition rate for Syrians. All in all, of the applications submitted in Italy in 2016, over 60% were rejected - against an EU-level rejection rate of less than 40% (see table 3).

Table 3 - First instance decisions on asylum applications - 2016

	EU 28		Italy	
	Recognitions	Rejections	Recognitions	Rejections
Eritrea	92.5%	7.5%	84.4%	15.6%
Côte d'Ivoire	27.0%	73.0%	30.8%	69.2%
Guinea	31.0%	69.0%	29.2%	70.8%
Nigeria	21.7%	78.3%	24.9%	75.1%
Syria	98.1%	1.9%	98.7%	1.3%

¹¹ MELCHIONDA, U. (2016 Ed.), *Intra Moenia. Il sistema di accoglienza per rifugiati e richiedenti asilo in Italia nei rapporti di monitoraggio indipendenti*, *Affari Sociali Internazionali*, Special Issue, IV (1-4), Roma: IDOS.

Total non-EU	60.8%	39.2%	39.4%	60.6%
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Source: Author's analysis of Eurostat data

These statistics appear to reinforce the discourse - promoted both by national media and most political parties - that the vast majority of those entering Italy by sea are coming from 'safe' countries and thus, by definition, are economic migrants. The fact that they are mostly young males makes it even more difficult for them to conform to what in the public opinion has become the stereotype of the 'real refugees' as vulnerable families fleeing from war zones. However, the individual experiences emerging from the EVI-MED fieldwork - consistent with other recent research¹² - tell a very different story. When asked about what made them leave their last country of residence, migrants reported persecution (49%) and concerns about their own security or that of their family (43%) as the main drivers, with a 24% referring specifically to war. Only 18% described their motivation as economic (see table 4). Often insecurity was magnified by other pressures such as inter-ethnic tension, gender-based discrimination or local practices such as forced marriage, as emerged in many of the in-depth interviews and exemplified in the quote below.

"When I left Ivory Coast, there was a war everywhere. But I did not quit Ivory Coast because of the war, no. It wasn't my motive to come here. What made me come here was a family problem. It's a family custom which forced me to marry a woman that I was not willing to

¹² CRAWLEY, H. / DÜVELL, F. / JONES, K. / MCMAHON, S. / SIGONA, N. (2016) 'Destination Europe? Understanding the dynamics and drivers of Mediterranean migration in 2015', MEDMIG Final Report. URL: www.medmig.info/research-brief-destination-europe.pdf; ANSEMS, L. / GUILD, E. / CARRERA, S. (2016). Documenting the Migration Crisis in the Mediterranean: Spaces of Transit, Migration Management and Migrant Agency. CEPS Paper in Liberty and Security in Europe; SQUIRE, V. / DIMITRIADI, A. / PERKOWSKI, N. / PISANI, M. / STEVENS, D. / VAUGHAN WILLIAMS, D. (2017) Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat: Mapping and Documenting Migratory Journeys and Experiences, Final Project Report. URL: www.warwick.ac.uk/crossingthemed

marry, so when I refused, my family tried to kill me, so that's the main reason why I left".

Ivory Coast, Male, 25

Table 4 - Why did you leave your last country of residence?

<i>Main reasons (up to 3 options)</i>	<i>Responses</i>
War	24%
Persecution or targeted violence (e.g. political, religious, sexual)	49%
Concerns about my own or family security	43%
Environmental disaster / Famine	5%
Health care needs	5%
Work (i.e. seeking work in another country)	10%
Economic reasons	18%
Education	3%
Family reunification / join family members	2%
Exploring Europe	2%
Other	3%

Source: EVI-MED survey data. Sample of 400 migrants in reception centres across Sicily.

Figures rounded to the nearest unit.

Clearly people's motives are much more complex than the dichotomy between refugees on the one hand and economic migrants on the other¹³. The survey results also record shocking instances of abuse in transit, especially for those - the vast majority - who had travelled via Libya. Over 50% had experienced arrest or detention and 17% underwent a period of bonded (unpaid) labour, sometimes as a way to obtain a sea passage. Equally striking is the answer to another survey question: when asked "Why did you choose Sicily?" as a destination, nearly two thirds (64%) of the migrants simply responded "I didn't choose/I had no alternative". This is revealing of the way in which hundreds of thousands of people have been channeled into the Libyan smuggling system,

¹³ ALBAHARI, 2015, *ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

often with little knowledge of their destination and with little choice on when and how to cross the sea. A situation which is tellingly summarised in the quote below.

"Well, I am here but understand that it was not my option, it was not my option to come here. My initial choice was to go to Libya [...] I went to poor countries for a short period of time. [...] I found myself stuck in Libya, I could not go back home. I can guarantee you that amongst us, whether it be a refugee or an economic migrant, 95% of us are stuck against our own will. Once you arrived in Libya it's better for you to cross the Mediterranean Sea than to turn your back to save your life. On your way back, there is the desert".

Senegal, Male, 18

The crossing of the Mediterranean is only the last, though not the least dramatic stage of a long and staggered journey which, for many migrants, started months or even years earlier in their native countries. Travelling on unconceivably overcrowded dinghies and rubber boats, with a high risk of dying at sea before being intercepted by the international 'Search and Rescue' missions or NGO boats¹⁴, by the time they reach the Sicilian shores most people would have witnessed and experienced all kinds of physical and psychological suffering. The very next moment, they are expected to start a new journey, channeled into the Italian reception system.

REFUGEE RECEPTION IN ITALY: A COMPLEX HISTORY

Although the right of asylum is enshrined in the 1947 Italian Constitution (Art. 10) and Rome ratified the Geneva Convention on Refugees back in 1954, up until the end of the 1980s Italy was one of the countries receiving the smallest numbers of asylum seekers and refugees in Europe¹⁵. For this reason, it lacked a specific legal

¹⁴ Amnesty International (2017), A perfect storm. The failure of European policies in the Central Mediterranean, Amnesty International. URL: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur03/6655/2017/en/>

¹⁵ CAPONIO, T. (2004). Dal Programma Nazionale Asilo al Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati (2001-2004). Bilancio di una

framework and a national approach regarding refugees' reception and accommodation. This issue appeared on the Italian agenda only in the 1990s, with the crisis in Albania first (1991), then with the civil war in Somalia (1992) and above all following the war in Yugoslavia. The arrivals of these different waves of refugees were addressed by the Italian authorities through '*ad hoc*' interventions, without introducing a proper, country-wide reception system to be run in the long term. Within this context, the role of establishing accommodation centres and supporting refugees and other recently arrived migrants was in effect left to the initiative of local authorities and civil society¹⁶.

The increasing arrivals from the Balkans - particularly following the conflict in Kosovo in 1999 - showed all the limitations of this approach and led to the creation of pilot projects (such as 'Azione Comune' and 'Nausicaa') funded by the European Union and the Italian Ministry of Interiors and run collaboratively by a number of NGOs and associations. The successful experience of these initiatives, characterised by multi-agency work, with high levels of decentralisation within a national coordination, led the way to the first proper national framework for the reception of asylum seekers and refugees. The so-called 'National Asylum Programme' or PNA (in Italian '*Programma Nazionale Asilo*') was established in October 2000 on the basis of an agreement between the Ministry of Interiors, UNHCR and the Italian Association of Local Authorities (ANCI). The PNA had three major aims: the creation of a network of reception centres for refugees, the implementation of integration initiatives, and a programme to assist voluntary returns, in partnership with the IOM - the UN Migration Agency.

In 2002, within the broader context of a new immigration law (so-called 'Bossi-Fini'), Italy established a 'System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees' - usually referred to as SPRAR (in Italian: '*Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati*'). This built on and further institutionalised the PNA model, aiming to

esperienza di governo territoriale dei flussi migratori. CeSPI (Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale).

¹⁶ CAPONIO, 2004, *ibid.*

develop a widespread system of hosting centres for asylum seekers and other beneficiaries of international protection. The SPRAR is coordinated and monitored at national level, but managed by the ANCI. Individual centres are run by local social enterprises and cooperatives, with funds assigned by individual municipalities. The role of the SPRAR is not simply to give accommodation, but also to provide legal advice, psychological and health support, as well as running cultural and integration activities, including Italian language classes and professional training. Starting with less than 1,400 places in 2003, by 2010 the network could host 1,346 people¹⁷. The following year, to respond to the sudden inflows of refugees from Libya, the Italian government funded an emergency reception plan ('Emergenza Nord Africa' - ENA) which included an increase to the SPRAR capacity of about 1,500 places and, thanks to the involvement of NGOs and religious organisations, saw the short-term reception of nearly 30,000 people over two years. Finally, in 2014 and 2015 the government further increased the financial resources allocated to SPRAR (nearly 440 million euros over 24 months) so that by the end of 2015 the network reached a capacity of 21,613 places.

In spite of this, the SPRAR never managed to offer a number of places sufficient to host all those entitled. These centres require time to be set up, are complex to organise and subject to regular monitoring by a central office. Moreover, they need the initiative - and political will - of municipal authorities, something which in many cases has been missing due to public opinion resistance. To partially address this issue, in 2014 the Ministry of Interiors created one new instrument: the 'Extraordinary Reception Centres' or CAS (in Italian: *Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria*). Managed by cooperatives or private contractors responding directly to the Ministry of Interiors, these are meant to be temporary structures to address particularly high numbers of arrivals in the short term,

¹⁷ LASCIATECIENTRARE (2016), ACCOGLIERE: LA VERA EMERGENZA. RAPPORTO DI MONITORAGGIO DELLA CAMPAGNA LASCIATECIENTRARE SU ACCOGLIENZA, DETENZIONE AMMINISTRATIVA E RIMPATRI FORZATI.

whilst more places are made available through SPRAR¹⁸. Nonetheless, as further discussed in the next section, the CAS have become a major and, so far, permanent feature of the Italian refugees' reception.

In parallel to all this, the country saw the gradual development of a distinct system of 'governmental centres' for the immediate response to large numbers of sea arrivals. In particular, the so-called CPSA (*Centri di Primo Soccorso e Accoglienza*), established since 2006, are large-scale structures where migrants receive first assistance straight after disembarkation, are photo-identified and can express their will to seek international protection - before being transferred to other types of centres for longer term accommodation. The CPSA have been working alongside the CARA (*Centri di Accoglienza per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati*) - first instituted in 2004 - and the CDA (*Centri di Accoglienza*), which were established back in 1995 as an emergency response to forced migration from former Yugoslavia. The specific role of these different centres are not clearly defined and they end up playing a range of disparate tasks which can vary across geographical areas and depending on the needs of the moment.

From the end of 2015, the already chaotic system of government centres underwent a drastic and rapid change, with the introduction of the so-called 'Hotspot Approach'. The idea was brought to international attention with the 'European Agenda on Migration', the document produced by the EU in order to set new strategic actions "to better manage all aspects of migration"¹⁹. In fact, the

¹⁸ BARBIERI, A. / CALÒ, F. / CANNELLA, G. / KIROS ABRAHA, A. / DESSÌ, A. / PAGLIAZZO, S. / VEGNA, V. (2016), *Asilo Precario. I Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria e l'esperienza di Ragusa*, MEDU (Medici per i Diritti Umani). URL: www.mediciperidirittiumani.org/pdf/MEDU_Rapporto_CAS_26_aprile_FINALE.pdf

¹⁹ European Commission (2016), *European Agenda on Migration*, URL: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration_en

agenda merely focused on border management²⁰, promising increased funding to the European border agency Frontex and presenting the 'hotspot approach' as a way to "swiftly identify, register and fingerprint arriving migrants". This aimed to address what was perceived as a very ineffective implementation of the Dublin Regulation (EC 343/2003) determining the member state responsible for examining each asylum application - *i.e.* the country of first arrival²¹. Specifically, Italian authorities had been accused of an intentionally laid-back approach to fingerprinting at the point of disembarkation, thus making it much easier for migrants to travel to other European countries unregistered²². For the Italian government, then led by centre-leftist Matteo Renzi, the implementation of the hotspot approach became a precondition to regain political credibility²³ and thus be able to demand a stronger support from other EU members in the management of the 'refugee crisis'. The first Italian hotspot was opened in the little Sicilian island of Lampedusa on 21 September 2015, followed by Trapani (December) and Pozzallo (January 2016) - with a fourth opening in Spring 2016 in the city of Taranto, in the Apulia region. These are not new facilities as such, but a rebranding of pre-existing reception centres, following some minor refurbishments, and with a much bigger role played by European agencies such as Frontex and EASO. Thus, with the implementation of the hotspot approach, the

²⁰ D'ANGELO, A. (2015), Immigrazione e presenza straniera in Ue: oltre l'Agenda Europea. In: *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2016*. Rome: IDOS.

²¹ CASOLARI, F. (2015). The EU's Hotspot Approach to Managing the Migration Crisis: A Blind Spot for International Responsibility? SSRN Scholarly Paper. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network. URL: <http://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2800537>

²² TRAUNER, F. (2016) Asylum Policy: The EU's "crises" and the Looming Policy Regime Failure. *Journal of European Integration* 38(3), pp. 311-25.

²³ D'ANGELO, A. (2016). Italy's system of migration management has been called an 'Illegality Factory'. This is how it works. Middlesex Minds URL: <https://mdxminds.com/2016/03/09/italys-system-of-migration-management-has-been-called-an-illegality-factory-this-is-how-it-works/>

Italian reception system - with its multi-agency structure involving national institutions, local authorities, NGOs and a myriad of actors, contractors and sub-contractors - became even more complex, with an increased number of overlaps (if not fully fledged conflicts) of responsibilities²⁴.

Trying to make sense of such complexity is an extremely daunting task, as reported even by many of the Italian practitioners, activists and lawyers who have been working on the ground for years. As discussed in the next section, this is even more confusingly daunting for the migrants who need to live through it. Nonetheless, it is possible to summarise - and simplify - the Italian reception system as a two-tier structure. The first level comprises the government centres. In particular, the hotspots represent the entry point for the near totality of the migrants arriving by sea. Those applying for asylum, or otherwise entitled to protection, should then be moved to the so-called 'Regional Hubs' (a recent rebranding of the CARA and CDA government centres). Conversely, those who are deemed to have entered the Italian territory illegally and 'not asylum seekers' should be transferred to dedicated 'Centres for Identification and Expulsion' (CIE) or, in most cases, receive a letter of 'deferred expulsion' that requires them to leave the Italian territory within 5-7 working days (these are all practices which have attracted firm criticism both in terms of their legality, practicality, and impact on individuals²⁵ - see e.g. Amnesty International, 2016; Vassallo Paleologo 2012). The second level of reception is built around the hosting, support and integration work undertaken within the SPRAR centres, though with the supplementary role of the CAS network. However, despite the high number of rejections and expulsions orders issued by the

²⁴ CAMPESI, G. (2015), *Polizia della frontiera. Frontex e la produzione dello spazio europeo*. Rome: DeriveApprodi; TRAUNER, 2016.

²⁵ See e.g. Amnesty International (2016). Hotspot Italy: How EU's flagship approach leads to violations of refugee and migrant rights. Amnesty International URL: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur30/5004/2016/en/>; VASSALLO PALEOLOGO, F. (2012), *Diritti sotto sequestro. Dall'emergenza umanitaria allo stato di eccezione*. Aracne.

Italian authorities, it is important to highlight that this is a pathway reserved only to a very small share of those reaching Sicily by sea²⁶.

THE REALITY OF RECEPTION IN SICILY

If some of the problems with the Italian system arise from its own procedural framework and overly complicated structure, others are due to the ways in which these have - or have not - been implemented. Over recent years, migrants' reception in the country, and in Sicily in particular, has attracted strong criticism by local, national and international observers, including NGOs, human rights lawyers and activists, with the publications of often damning reports focusing on several different aspects: from the lack of health and safety considerations to the inadequate qualifications of the staff, from the shady economic interests of some of the providers to the inadequate support for minors and other vulnerable groups²⁷. The following paragraphs will focus on a few of the specific issues emerged during the EVI-MED research.

²⁶ D'ANGELO, 2018, *ibid*.

²⁷ See e.g. Amnesty International (2014), Italy: Exploited labour Two Years On: The 'Rosarno Law' fails to protect migrants exploited in the agricultural sector in Italy. Amnesty International. URL: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur30/007/2014/en/>; BARBIERI, A. / CALÒ, F. / CANNELLA, G. / KIROS ABRAHA, A. / DESSÌ, A. / PAGLIAZZO, S. / VEGNA, V. (2016), Asilo Precario. I Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria e l'esperienza di Ragusa, MEDU (Medici per i Diritti Umani). URL: www.mediciperidirittiumani.org/pdf/MEDU_Rapporto_CAS_26_aprile_FINAL.pdf; CHIODO, S. / NALETTO, G. (2016), Il mondo di dentro. Il sistema di accoglienza per richiedenti asilo e rifugiati a Roma. Lunaria. URL: <http://www.lunaria.org/2016/10/29/il-mondo-di-dentro-roma-dossier-accoglienza-lunaria/>; MEDU (2016) Asilo Precario. I centri di accoglienza straordinaria e l'esperienza di Ragusa. MEDU (Medici per i Diritti Umani). URL: <http://www.mediciperidirittiumani.org/asilo-precario/>; Oxfam (2017), L'inferno al di là del mare. Oxfam, Borderline Sicilia, Medu. URL: <https://www.oxfamitalia.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Linferno-al-di-la-del-mare.pdf>

The first point to raise is that of the legality of the whole system, and of the hotspot approach in particular. As noted by many, its introduction took place without passing any new legislation, neither at EU nor at national level²⁸ and there is no official document providing a clear and detailed definition of what a hotspot should be and how it should operate²⁹. Indeed, this is just an 'approach', taken forward by "reshaping"³⁰ - if not twisting - existing legal instruments. In this respect, the specific aspect of identification via fingerprinting - implemented 'by force' when deemed necessary - is, in the view of many lawyers, illegal within the Italian legislation and a violation of migrants' fundamental rights. The inadequacy of the legal information provided to migrants on their arrival and the hasty methods used in the hotspot to separate 'real asylum seekers' from those who are 'just economic migrants'³¹ has also been highlighted by local and international observers as both unfair and illegal. More generally, the practices within the hotspots have received wide condemnation with regard to migrants' living conditions. Notably, in December 2015, the Italian branch of Médecins Sans Frontières announced its decision to leave the hotspot of Pozzallo (near the city of Ragusa) because of "undignified and inadequate reception conditions" which made it impossible to provide proper healthcare³².

An additional reason of concern regarding the Italian system is in the prolonged waiting times people have to face at every stage of the asylum application process and before being moved from one type of reception centre to the next. Although, in accordance with national legislation, 48 hours are considered the maximum length of an 'administrative detention', in many cases waiting times in the

²⁸ CASOLARI, 2015, *ibid.*

²⁹ MELCHIONDA, 2016, *ibid.*

³⁰ CASOLARI, 2015, *ibid.*

³¹ D'ANGELO, 2016, *ibid.*

³² MSF (Médecins Sans Frontières) (2015), Italy: MSF ends activities in Pozzallo reception centre, press release, 30 December 2015. URL: <http://www.msf.org/article/italy-msf-ends-activities-pozzallo-reception-centre>

closed hotspots have been of several days, occasionally even weeks³³. Once moved to the 'regional hubs', people should be further transferred to the second reception centres in a relatively short period of time - though the guidelines of the Ministry of Interior vaguely indicate something between 7 and 30 days³⁴. Next, a 'territorial commission' is required to make decisions on each asylum application within 180 days; however, in practice, a first determination can take up to 18 months. In effect, after their arrival by sea, migrants can spend over two years living in a limbo, with very little information about the status of their application and its chances of success, struggling to make sense of an intricate system which often baffles even those who are supposed to offer advice. The tedious and sometimes undignified life in the reception centres adds to this frustration, as evidenced by quotes like the one below.

"I have been in this centre for months, they do not tell me what is happening ... I do not know when they will make a decision. I am really worried because these are things that can drive you crazy. Some of my friends here have done crazy things ... because you just wait and do not know what will happen to you".

Nigeria, Male, 23

The other major issue regarding second level reception, is the chronic lack of spaces. Because of this, many migrants remain in the government centres for much longer that they should. As explained before, the 'extraordinary' CAS centres should have the function of creating short-term additional accommodations whilst more are available through the SPRAR. In practice, the CAS network ends up hosting the majority of those who are recognised as asylum seekers and refugees. As indicated by official national data (Table 5), at the end of 2016 there were 23,822 people in the whole SPRAR, against over 137,000 in the CAS centres (nearly

³³ SUPRANO, A. (2016), Il sistema di accoglienza in Italia. Un cammino verso l'integrazione?, in: *L'Altro Diritto*. URL: www.altrodiritto.unifi.it/ricerche/asilo/suprano/cap5.htm

³⁴ Ministero dell'Interno (2015), Roadmap Italiana, URL: <http://www.meltingpot.org/IMG/pdf/roadmap-2015.pdf>

80% of the total). In Sicily, less than a third of the migrants registered in the reception system are in a SPRAR centre, with the others split between government centres and CAS. This does not take into account all those migrants (the numbers are hard to estimate) that decide or are forced to leave the official centres and end up living rough or, for example, in squats or camps³⁵.

Table 5 - Migrants in the Italian reception system - 31/12/2016

	<i>Italy</i>		<i>Sicily</i>		
	#	%	#	%	% on Italy
<i>First level reception</i>					
hot spots	820	0%	584	4%	71%
government centres (CPSA, CDA, CARA)	14,694	8%	4,525	32%	31%
<i>Second level reception</i>					
'temporary' reception centres (CAS)	137,218	78%	4,593	33%	3%
SPRAR	23,822	13%	4,374	31%	18%
<i>Total</i>	176,554	100%	14,076	100%	8%

Source: Author's analysis of Italian Ministry of Interiors (Ministero degli Interni) data

Percentages rounded to nearest unit

Thus, the most part of refugees' reception in Italy takes place in structures which, by definition, are not fit for purpose. The required standards for the CAS - given their supposed exceptional and short-term nature - are much less prescriptive than for the SPRAR, though the Italian regulations vaguely state that they should "aim" to the same quality of service. Our research - in line with the findings of earlier grey literature³⁶ - highlighted many cases of

³⁵ D'ANGELO, 2016, *ibid.*

³⁶ E.g. inCAStrati (2016), Iniziative civiche sulla gestione dei centri di accoglienza straordinaria per richiedenti asilo, CittadinanzAttiva, LasciateCIEntrare, Libera.

inadequate structures, sometimes lacking even in terms of basic health and safety provision. These include out-of-business hotels, 'bed and breakfast', private accommodation and even industrial compounds and the back of restaurants and catering structures. The process of CAS subcontracting bypasses many formal regulations and requirements, with lack of transparency, allowing all sorts of private contractors to run migrant centres, often employing staff lacking skills, qualifications and even appropriate inclinations. Although some examples of good practice exist, for many this is first of all a business opportunity³⁷.

Whilst the SPRAR is supposed to be the 'gold standard' of the Italian reception system, research in the field suggests that only few centres manage to adequately provide the full range of services and functions required. If, on the one hand, some centre managers indicated that the expectations placed on their structures, considering the available economic resources, are unrealistic, on the other hand many activists interviewed during fieldwork pointed their finger at the less than efficient use of funds and the very limited monitoring from the national coordinating offices. Whilst more research in this area is needed, our EVI-MED survey indicates levels of service provision much less than satisfactory. As illustrated in table 6, below, among the migrants surveyed in second-level reception centres in Sicily (SPRAR and CAS), only 50% reported to receive some kind of legal support. The in-depth interviews revealed that even those who, in theory, were supported by a lawyer, often were unable to receive regular and clear information, as shown by the brief interview excerpt below.

A: "I don't understand how this works, I have not met a lawyer, I am not in contact with him..."

Q: "How is this possible? Is there a lawyer who can advise you? Does he speak English?"

A: "He speaks English but I didn't understand why they rejected my application"

Q: "Do you know it is your right to understand why they rejected? So you need to discuss with your lawyer any point of this rejection".

³⁷ MELCHIONDA, 2016, *ibid*.

A: "... I have got his number but when you call he is not answering".
Gambia, Male, 20

As far as language support is concerned, the picture is equally, if not more, worrying: 33% claimed to receive no support whatsoever and only 17% reported the presence of proper 'cultural mediators' (a role required by the national guidelines). Overall, about half of the respondents received some kind of assistance with language issues, such as interpreting or translation of documents. However, also in this case, the fieldwork revealed that the quality was often very poor. On countless occasions, when visiting second-level reception centres, the EVI-MED researchers witnessed the attempts of clearly un-trained members of staff to translate official documents or other information to English-speaking migrants resulting in vital information being lost in translation or totally misrepresented.

Migrants taking part in the EVI-MED survey were also asked about health and psychological support. Whilst 74% reported to receive some form of health care - again, the quality of it varied enormously - a large majority (64.6%) claimed to not receive any psychological support or counselling. This is quite worrying if one considers not just the traumatic experience of international border-crossing but also, as mentioned above, the stressful conditions within the Italian system. Even with regard to this, centre managers or 'factotum' members of staff often end up providing all sorts of assistance, sometimes in good faith, mostly with dubious results. The quote below is only one example from the many.

"It is now 1 year and 4 months since I arrived in this refugee centre...but if there is a psychologist here, personally, I do not know him. They never, never introduced me to a psychologist here. The only persons that I know here are these two persons, [the managers], only them, only these two persons that I know here."

Senegal, Male, 18

Considering the very large number of second-level reception centres - which in some cases open and close, or change management, in a matter of months - and considering the sheer diversity in terms of size, nature of the providers and geographical

location, it is hard to assess the extent to which some of the problems highlighted above are indeed systemic. Many of the key-informants, and most of the reports produced by local activist organisations, indicate that these are not exceptions. Clearly, as mentioned earlier on, there are also examples of good practice and organisations which make an effort to provide genuinely high-quality support. However, the extremely patchy and, in practice, unregulated nature of the refugees' reception system in the island is a cause of extreme concern and can produce some devastating effects on the lives of individual migrants.

Table 6 - Types of support received within reception centre (Sicily)

Do you receive legal support?		Do you receive health support?	
Yes	50%	Yes	74%
No	50%	No	26%
Do you receive language support?		Do you receive psychological support and/or counselling?	
Interpreting / translation	50%	Yes	35.4%
Cultural mediators	17%	No	64.6%
Other	3%		
No	33%		

Source: EVI-MED survey data. Sample of 400 migrants in reception centres across Sicily.

Figures rounded to the nearest unit.

THE POLITICS OF A HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

As examined in the previous sections, the Italian approach to refugees' reception over the last few years has been at best 'reactive', piling up *ad-hoc* and often short-term solutions to confront a succession of occurrences systematically perceived (or presented) as emergencies. This was not just a matter of inefficiency. Rather, the Italian political class, worried about anti-

immigration sentiments amongst the electorate, have not dared formulating a coherent vision which recognises the long-term nature of these mixed-migration flows. Quite the opposite: over the course of 2016 and 2017 the Italian government (led by a coalition between centre-left and centre-right parties) focused increasingly on the containment of flows and externalisation of borders. This included the controversial deal with the Libyan authorities, which coincided with a significant reduction of arrivals, at least in the short term. In spite of this - or, one could argue, because of this - the most repressive views on sea-migration became increasingly popular. Following the general election of March 2018, a new government was formed between the populist '5 Stars Movement' and the anti-immigration 'Lega', with the leader of the latter, Matteo Salvini, appointed Minister of Interiors. The initiatives of the new government included further cooperation with the Libyan coast guard and active opposition to the NGOs operating search and rescue at sea. These measures are unlikely to contain Mediterranean migration in the long term; they are, however, producing an increase in the death ratio for those attempting the journey (UNHCR, 2018) and more generally a further worsening of the humanitarian conditions of migrants on both sides of the sea. This process culminated, in November 2018, with the approval by the Italian Parliament of a series of hard-line measures targeting those who manage to reach Italy to claim asylum. The so-called 'Security Act' (*'Pacchetto Sicurezza'*) sees, firstly, the abolition of the 'humanitarian protection' status, previously granted to those applicants not deemed eligible for refugee status (the vast majority), but who for various reasons could not be sent back. Secondly, the Act introduces a curtailment of the SPRAR system. As made clear by the statistics presented earlier on, this relatively well-resourced, second-level reception network was able to host only a very small minority of arrivals already. With this new policy initiative, the SPRAR is now bound to face major financial cuts and will be reserved exclusively to those with full refugee status and unaccompanied minors. The others - such as asylum seekers still waiting for a decision - will be excluded and will have to resort, at best, to the CAS centres, with all the human, legal and economic

implications presented before. In effect, the new measures are expected to increase the number of destitute migrants left with no form of support whatsoever. As discussed elsewhere³⁸, most of those who entered by sea and do not receive formal protection are destined to remain in Italy for quite some time, often becoming the victims of exploitative mechanisms of irregular employment³⁹. Overall, the current Italian approach to reception - by pretending that the Mediterranean migration flows are a sudden transitory phenomenon to be policed, rather than a long-term humanitarian challenge - is not just reactionary in nature, but also very unlikely to bring substantial long-term results in terms of net migration. By increasing destitution and illegality, it exacerbates the already difficult conditions of individual migrants, but it will certainly not appease the concerns - more or less spontaneous - of the public opinion.

³⁸ D'ANGELO, A. (2018), The 'Illegality Factory'? Theory and practice of the Italian hotspot approach, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. Special issue 'Against the evidence: Europe's migration challenge and the failure to protect', edited by B. BLITZ / H. CRAWLEY / M. BALDWIN-EDWARDS.

³⁹ Amnesty International, 2017, *ibid*; Caritas Italiana (2015), Nella terra di nessuno. Lo sfruttamento lavorativo in agricoltura. Rapporto Presidio 2015. Caritas.