



SCUOLA
NORMALE
SUPERIORE

Class of Political and Social Sciences
Specialization Course in Political Science and Sociology
XXXV Cycle

If the state ‘keeps aloof’:
*Securitarian neoliberalism and informalization
in the governance of migration along
the Balkan route*

Scientific Disciplinary Sector **SPS/07**

Ph.D Candidate
Francesca FORTAREZZA

Ph.D Supervisor

Guglielmo Meardi

Ph.D Co-supervisor

Francesca Longo

Ph.D Coordinator

Donatella Della Porta

Academic Year 2023/2024

Abstract

In a world increasingly defined by globalization, a plethora of private and public actors, within and outside the state apparatus, collaborate and compete in the political sphere, shaping both domestic and international policies. In such a pluralistic and multi-level system, the role of nation-states may appear diminished and even obsolete. And yet, national governments' decisions – or their conspicuous inaction – have a tangible impact on the lives of the people they govern – be them citizens or foreign nationals. This generates a tension between centrifugal and centripetal forces, that is between de-nationalization and re-nationalization of politics.

Asylum governance exemplifies this vividly. A growing number of diverse non-state actors are actively involved in developing and implementing immigration, border, and asylum policies, while national governments are simultaneously elevating migration as a top security issue in their political agendas and electoral campaigns. Delving into this tension, this research will interrogate the role of the state in asylum governance and examine the tools, methods, and approaches it uses to translate this role into concrete actions.

Employing a political and relational ethnographic approach, I investigated asylum policies and practices along the so-called Balkan route, and particularly in Trieste, an Italian city bordering Slovenia. Combining my role as a researcher with solidarity work, I actively participated in initiatives that support people on the move along their journeys, particularly during their passage through border zones. Through this grounded and engaged approach, my research sheds light on the real-world dynamics informing and surrounding the governance of refugee flows. In this way, this study examines three key issues: how de-nationalizing and re-nationalizing forces coexist within asylum governance, what is the role of the state in these dynamics, and how this role manifests in everyday practices on the ground. To address these research questions, I adopted a composite theoretical framework drawing on Political Geography, Governance Studies, and Informality Studies. This approach allows me to contribute to the scholarly discourse on Migration and Refugee studies by refocusing the analysis on the role of the state.

Overall, this research provides an empirically-based analytical toolkit to reconceptualize the role, function, and responsibility of the state in the governance of refugee flows. The research shows how and why seemingly opposing forces coexist in these systems: centrifugal forces that pull power away from the state, and centripetal forces that re-nationalize it. This reveals a form of governance I term *securitarian neoliberalism*. By investigating these dynamics, we can see that states have adapted their role and capacity for power and control in response to domestic and international constraints. This adaptation involves a reconfiguration of their authority: national governments retain a key role, not as direct service providers, but rather as regulators influencing how other actors deliver those services. In essence, states '*keep aloof*', turning constraints into opportunities to maintain their overall authority. They achieve this also by operating in increasingly unregulated, opaque, and discretionary manners, fostering what can be defined as an *informalization* of asylum governance – a governing mode at the margins of the rule of law.

Notably, the scope of this research extends beyond the specific policy field of migration and asylum, opening up fresh perspectives on the role of the nation-state in a broader context. This reveals a concerning trend toward unaccountable and illiberal, and thus nondemocratic, modes of governing citizens and non-citizens alike.

Acknowledgments

For the opportunity to carry out this research, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Department of Political and Social Sciences of the Scuola Normale Superiore, and to all the academic, administrative, and operational staff who have made this experience possible. Particularly, my deepest thanks go to my supervisors, Guglielmo Meardi and Francesca Longo, for guiding me with their experience and knowledge, broadening my academic horizons while allowing me the freedom to experiment and find my own path.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to all the scholars who have encouraged me over this journey, both within and outside my institution. Their diverse approaches and sensibilities have been invaluable for shaping my epistemic community. In particular, I am grateful to Guya Accornero, Roberta Altin, Federico Alagna, Lorenzo Bosi, Manuela Moschella, and Chiara Milan for the intellectual guidance and moral support they have generously offered me over the years. My PhD experience would not have been the same without my beautiful travel companions, the PhD students of the 35th cycle. These people have filled these years with empathy, care, laughter, and light-heartedness, keeping alive a strong community amidst a pandemic and despite the physical distance.

This research would not even exist without the generosity of all my participants. I am deeply grateful to each one of them for sharing their time, knowledge, and experience. In particular, I am honoured and proud for all the moments shared with the solidarity community in Trieste. Together we explored the limits and potentialities of our individual and collective capacities, shaping a path of personal growth and political awareness for which I will be eternally grateful.

Among my beautiful friends, a vibrant community of brothers and sisters scattered around the world, I want to express special thanks to those who, in their own unique ways and capacities, tirelessly work to keep the hope for a more just world for everyone alive. The honest conversations, harsh disagreements, shared tears, and small victories we have experienced together kept me on track when I felt like I was losing my path.

More than anything, I am grateful to my family, which has always been there for unconditional support, even when our opinions differed. And especially to my parents, for the freedom and determination they have given me to explore the world and myself. Inspired by their sensitivity and strength, I dedicate this work to them.

To conclude, allow me to express my sincere gratitude to some of the persons who have most profoundly shaped this journey, each in their own way.

To Giulio, for being 'home' along the journey. Friend, brother from another mother, and trusted ally.

To Ari, '*cucciolo di confine*', companion along the routes. For the shared pain, anger and joy.

To Paola, for her nurturing guidance and her honest friendship.

To Francesco, for the enthusiasm and the hugs.

To Giando, for always being there.

To Alessia, for striving to be 'a positive person' every day, even in this gloomy world.

To Saffini, for being an escape during the most challenging times of the PhD.

To Eli, for the tears and laughter that made my stomach ache.

To Ire, the best roommate one could ask for.

To Dario, my 'mentor'.

To Aida, for the political discussions while eating cream puffs.

To Alice, Laura, Sarah, and Fiorenzo for the loving care.

To my roommates and friends in Lisbon, an adorable family of crazy people.

To Aida, from the S. Croce canteen, for her smiles.

List of abbreviations

ASGI	Associazione per gli Studi Giuridici sull'Immigrazione
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
BVMN	Border Violence Monitoring Network
CAI	Centri di Accoglienza e Identificazione
CAS	Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria
CPR	Centri di Permanenza per i Rimpatri
DIGOS	Divisione Investigazioni Generali e Operazioni Speciali
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights
ECtHR	European Court of Human Rights
EU	European Union
EURODAC	European Asylum Dactyloscopy Database
FVG	Friuli-Venezia Giulia
ICMPD	International Centre for Migration Policy Development
ICS	Consorzio Italiano di Solidarietà
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organisations
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MS	Member State (EU)
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
ORS	Organisation for Refugee Services
SAI	Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione
SAP	Sindacato Autonomo di Polizia
SIPROIMI	Sistema di protezione per titolari di protezione internazionale e per minori stranieri non accompagnati
SIULP	Sindacato Italiano Unitario dei Lavoratori della Polizia
SPRAR	Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Table of contents

<i>Abstract</i>	2
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	3
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	5
<i>Prologue</i>	9

Chapter 1.

Introduction: Where Has the State Gone?

1.1. Introduction	15
1.2. Why the state still matters in asylum governance	18
1.3. Italy within the Balkan route: an exemplary case of a diffused model	20
1.4. The state's role in governance: an analytical framework	23
1.5. Terminological notes	25
1.6. Outline of the dissertation	29

PART I: Analytical Framework

Chapter 2.

Theories and Concepts

2.1. Introduction	32
2.2. The 'de-nationalization' of asylum governance	33
2.3. Political Geography: between securitarian nationalism and neoliberal de-nationalization	37
2.3.1. Neoliberalism in asylum governance	39
2.3.2. Securitisation in asylum governance	42
2.4. Governance studies: the 'steering' role of the state	45
2.5. Informality studies: the informalization of asylum governance	48
2.6. Conclusions	53

Chapter 3.

Methodological Approach

3.1. Introduction	55
3.2. Interpretive and grounded approach	56
3.3. An ethnography of the state	58
3.4. Solidarity as a research approach	60
3.4.1. Solidarity as an analytical 'mirror'	62
3.4.2. Solidarity as a methodological 'laissez-passer'	65
3.4.3. Solidarity as 'epistemic friction'	67
3.5. Research methods and field(s)	71
3.5.1. Methods: participant observation, qualitative interviews and document analysis	71
3.5.2. Field(s): Piazza della Libertà within the Balkan Route	72

PART II: Empirics

Chapter 4.

Setting the Stage: The EU Asylum Regime

4.1. Introduction	81
4.2. The migration-security nexus	82
4.3. State-centred mindset and fragmented implementation	84
4.4. Morphology of the Balkan route	86
4.5. The crisis of EU solidarity	88
4.6. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum: fresh start or politics as usual?	93
4.7. Conclusions	97

Chapter 5.	
Understanding the Context: Journey along the Balkan route	
5.1. Introduction	99
5.2. Securitarian neoliberalism in Lipa camp	100
5.3. Waiting in Bihać, springboard to Europe	103
5.4. 'Counter-steering' solidarity, accounts from BiH and Serbia	107
5.5. Rushing through Croatia, the EU watchdog	112
5.6. Steering the flow away, Slovenia as borderzone	115
5.7. Conclusions	117
Chapter 6.	
Centring the Perspective: the Italian Asylum Regime	
6.1. Introduction	120
6.2. The Italian asylum regime, a story rooted in the Balkans	121
6.3. Keeping the emergency alive	124
6.4. The north-eastern border, between normality and emergency	128
6.5. Echoes of the past, 'border syndrome' then as now	129
6.6. Conclusions	135
Chapter 7.	
Digging in the Detail: Trieste and the Italian-Slovenian Border	
7.1. Introduction	137
7.2. Throwing a wrench into the reception system	138
7.3. (Failed) securitarian neoliberalism in Casa Malala	142
7.4. Denying services, forcing people away	145
7.5. The 'informal readmissions' affair	151
7.6. Dismantling the asylum right	154
7.7. Informality as a tool of governance	156
7.8. Confusion and omerta	159
7.9. Cutting resources and responsibilities	162
7.10. Conclusions	165
PART III: Discussion and Conclusion	
Chapter 8.	
Discussion: (Re)positioning the State in Asylum Governance	
8.1. Introduction	169
8.2. Conceptualizing the state in asylum governance	170
8.2.1. Securitarian neoliberalism	171
8.2.2. 'Keeping aloof'	174
8.2.3. Informalization	179
8.3. Refocusing the literature	182
8.4. Asylum as 'battleground', solidarity as 'research approach'	185
8.5. Conclusions	188
Chapter 9.	
Conclusion	
9.1. Introduction	190
9.2. Limitations and future horizons of the study	192
9.3. Closing the circle: a question of intention	193
9.4. Epilogue: solidarity as a political project	197
References	202
Appendix: List of interviews	232

Prologue

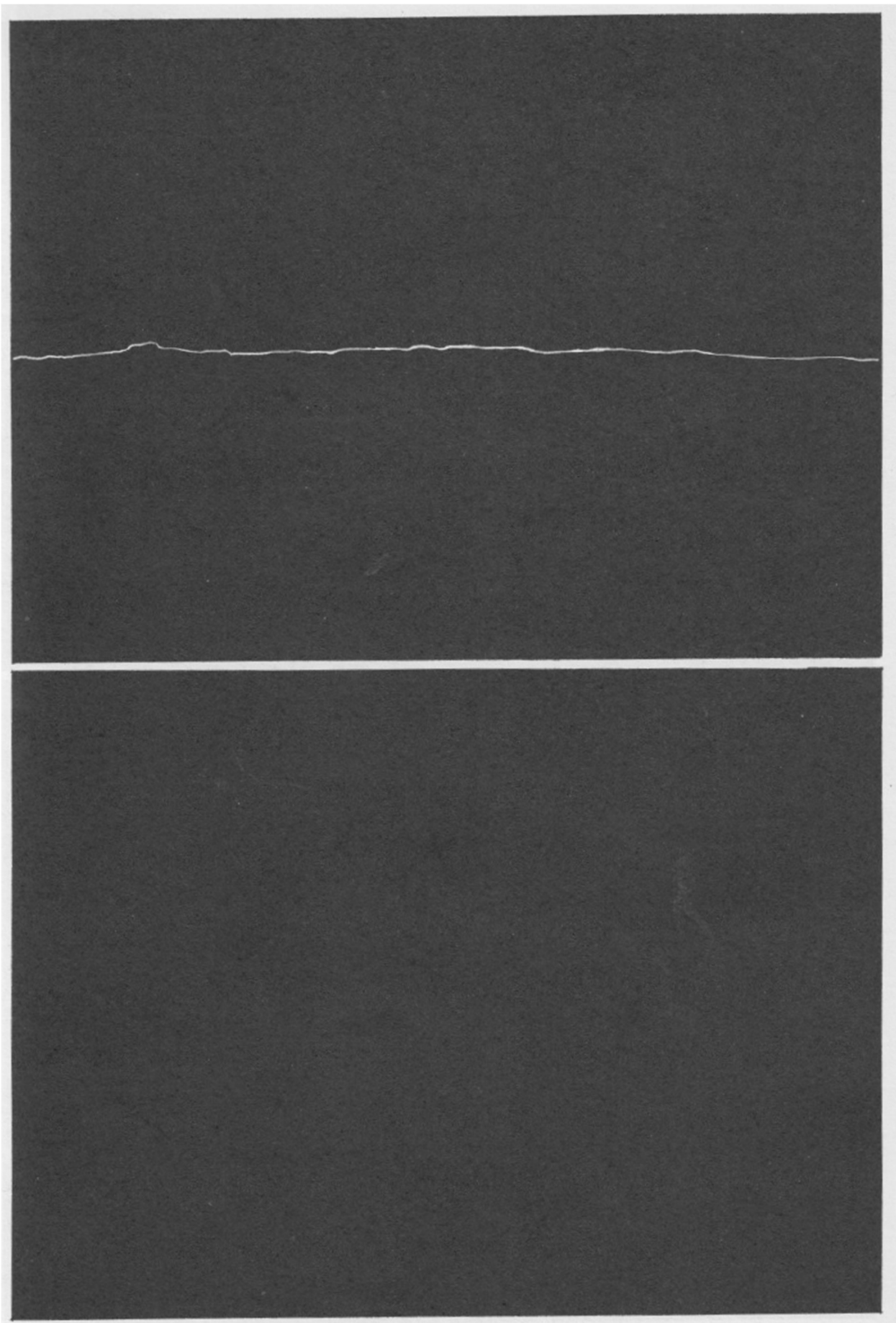


Image 1 - De Franco, "Sopralluogo sulla SP57"

Capturing the essence of research experiences can be a formidable task. The complexities and ambiguities we encounter in the realities we study can sometimes render them ineffable. The challenges are particularly pronounced when navigating imbalanced power dynamics – such as those between governmental actors and people on the move – since they lead to the production of knowledge that is state-centric and one-sided, making verification more difficult. In such circumstances, it can be beneficial to make a step beyond our traditional academic frameworks and embrace alternative viewpoints.

A few months ago, during the final push of writing my thesis, I found myself stuck and unable to articulate my thoughts. Everything felt muddled, and the data and reflections gathered over nearly four years of research seemed to defy organization and *clarity*. It was January, and outside the windows darkness had fallen hours ago. After a day spent grappling with ‘writer’s block’, I finally decided it was pointless to persist. I tried to disconnect and seek a distraction, hoping to refresh my perspective and approach the next writing session with renewed energy. What to do, though? My eyes burned from staring at the screen all day, making movies or TV shows a non-starter. Even reading demanded a mental and physical exertion I could not manage at that point. My gaze lingered on the bookshelf and a memory surfaced: a graphic novel I had purchased a couple of years prior. Filled with black-and-white visuals and minimal text, it seemed like the perfect escape. I had bought it in an independent bookstore, in Naples. I was looking for inspiration for my drawings and I decided to go for something related to my research area. I inquired about any graphic novels that might resonate with my interests in human mobility. The bookseller presented me with a slim red book titled *Confini* (e.g. *Borders*).

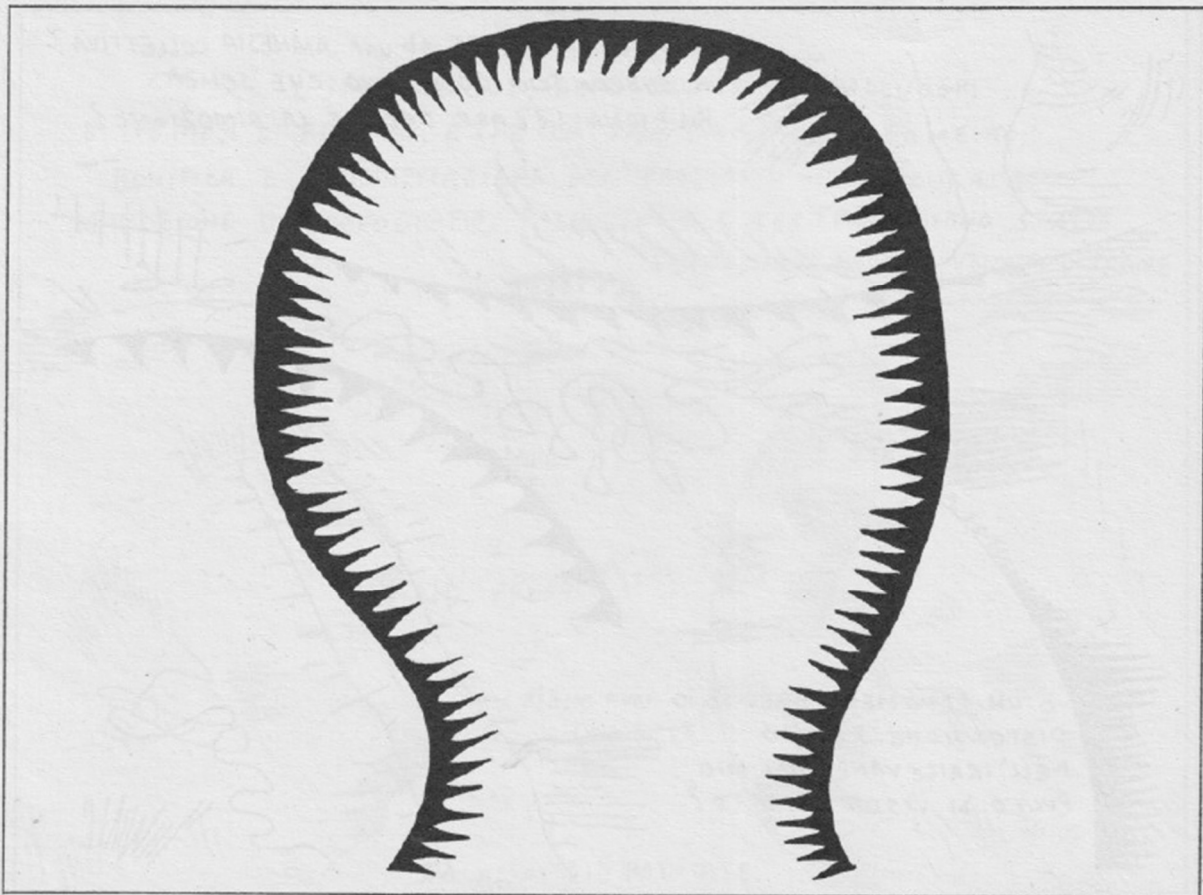
I began flipping through the panels of the first graphic novel, “Sopralluogo sulla SP 57” (“Inspection on Provincial Road 57”), and there I found the words to describe my research process. As Andrea De Franco, the author of the novel, I was also “seeking to discern” something “that seems to [slip] away, perhaps deliberately erased”. Our interest converged on the issue of Italian asylum policies. However, while De Franco explored them through a historical lens, focusing on the Central Mediterranean route, I observed them in real-time along the Balkan route. De Franco’s work recounts the events surrounding the so-called ‘Manduria camp’, the first of twelve Reception and Identification Centers (CAI) built in response to the so-called migration emergency caused by the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, in March 2011. Established by the Italian Ministry of Interior, the tent camp was managed by a cooperative as well as various humanitarian organizations. “The relationship with the local area was turbulent – De Franco comments – and a heterogeneous mix of assistance and mistrust, racist outbursts and pity, a willingness to help and a desire to be left in peace was immediately created”. And yet, in just a few months, the Manduria camp vanished: from dominating the news cycle, it was dismantled in complete silence.

“Narratives frayed, opinions were held back. In short: no one talked about it anymore. An operation, a gesture, began... (De Franco, 2022)”

Throughout that period, the military and police blocked any access to the facility. This prevented any independent monitoring of the living conditions inside, which soon became evident to be substandard at best. De Franco thus asks himself if what happened there, “with the project and support of a democratic government and the involved citizenry”, a great violation of human rights and international law was not perpetrated through the establishment of a “concentration camp”. He cannot answer, but he wonders if “the apparent impossibility of doing so is the result of something deliberate”. He writes:

“The impression is that the disappearance, cancellation, reclamation, and desertification of the landscape – the careful removal of scenery, stage, and theatre – were the manifestation of a deeper will. Deeper, less concrete, but far more radical. The will to prevent the rereading, the restaging of the drama; to prevent the laying bare, or at least the scrutiny, of political will, of responsibilities [...] I found myself imagining a collective psychological operation, somehow both occult and public. A kind of performative schizophrenia, an operation of historical surgery. The creation of a refuge from responsibility, a way to place oneself on a map by choosing the most comfortable and advantageous point, the least harsh” (De Franco, 2022 - translated by the author).

What I present in this manuscript is an attempt to disclose this responsibility by questioning which institutions, through their actions or inadequate responses, should be held accountable for making international mobility an undignified, alienating, and dangerous experience for so many asylum seekers, with justice for the violations they experience rarely achieved.



MI SONO TROVATO AD IMMAGINARE UN'OPERAZIONE PSICHICA COLLETTIVA, IN QUALCHE MODO OCCULTA E PUBBLICA ALLO STESSO TEMPO. UNA SORTA DI SCHIZOPRENIA PERFORMATIVA, UN'OPERAZIONE DI CHIRURGIA STORICA.

LA CREAZIONE DI UN RIFUGIO DALLE RESPONSABILITÀ, UN MODO PER COLLOCARSI SU UNA MAPPA SCEGLIENDO IL PUNTO PIÙ COMODO E VANTAGGIOSO, MENO ASPRO.

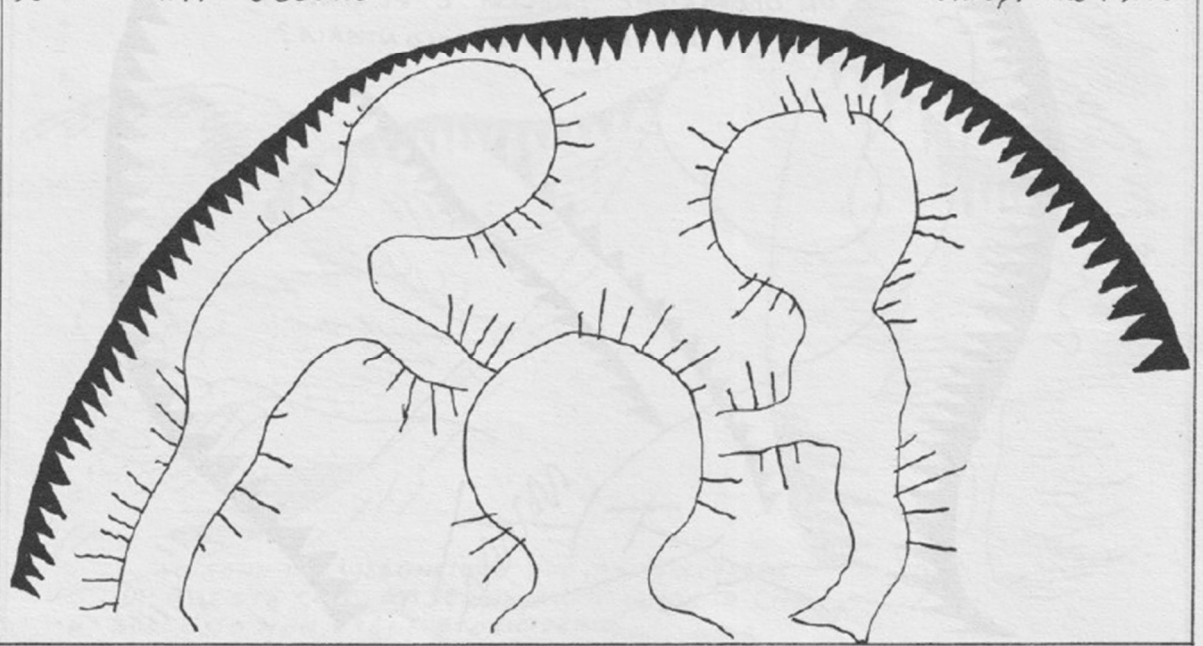


Image 2 - De Franco, "Sopralluogo sulla SP57"

Chapter 1

Introduction: Where Has the State Gone?

1.1. Introduction

De Franco's artwork tells the story of the CAI in Manduria, a small town in Southern Italy. This facility was one of several temporary tent cities established by the Italian government in 2011 during the period referred to as the 'North Africa emergency'. At that time, Italy experienced a significant increase in arrivals of asylum seekers from Tunisia and Libya, due to the unrest of the Arab Springs. In response to the emergency situation, the steering committee presented its strategy at its first meeting in April 2011: to slow down the arrival of asylum seekers by blocking departures, in agreement with Tunisian authorities, and to repatriate as many Tunisians as possible. At the same time, the government resorted to Article 20 of the Consolidated Immigration Act - *Testo Unico Sull'Immigrazione* (TUI), which provides for the granting of a temporary permit to foreigners. This measure enabled Tunisians arrived in Italy to freely circulate within the Schengen area and reach other countries like France and Germany. In a nutshell, the plan was either to prevent people from arriving or to push them further away.

Over those months, Manduria became a crucial hub in this processes of containment, distancing and dispersal. The camp was built in March 2011, when the Italian Ministry of the Interior decided to evacuate Lampedusa, the primary arrival point, and to transfer migrants to Reception and Identification Centres across the peninsula. The mayor of Manduria became the commissioner for the 'refugee emergency', gaining the authority to assign services and construction tasks to trusted companies and cooperatives for supplying machinery, materials, and necessary labour. In this context, 'emergency' firstly meant the possibility to avoid public tenders and to manage financial resources with limited restrictions. In addition, it meant treating the issue as a security concern, as evidenced by the overt deployment of law enforcement personnel around the highly surveilled area. Citing security reasons, the government strictly prohibited access to the facility to journalists and human rights advocates, effectively preventing any independent monitoring of conditions for

people held there¹. Hence, the declared state of emergency also meant that access to spaces and information was arbitrarily limited. Then, once the centre's purpose was deemed fulfilled, it was dismantled, leaving no tangible trace of its existence. As a result, despite concrete concerns raised about human rights and international law violations in Manduria, the entire affair remains shrouded in opacity until this very day (for a complete and detailed account of the events, refer to Manconi & Anastasia, 2012).

The events in Manduria mirror a widespread tendency regarding asylum (mis)management across the continent over the last few years. Grippled by a seemingly never-ending state of emergency, European and non-European decision-makers have given priority to swift procedures and short-term solutions, which have almost invariably proven inadequate to facilitate legal and safe mobility and smooth interaction between foreigners and local communities. This situation has resulted in asylum seekers being increasingly forced into dangerous, expensive, and clandestine journeys, often ending up in reception centres lacking even the most basic support mechanisms. Public awareness of the hardships and violence endured by people on the move is widespread, yet upholding their rights remains a significant challenge due to the general climate of opacity surrounding these processes. This thesis delves into the complexities surrounding these realities – their root causes and wide-ranging consequences – aiming to bring clarity to the processes, practices, and procedures that perpetuate this situation. Ultimately, this implies looking at who does what and how in asylum governance.

In this regard, recent Migration and Refugee studies have aptly described the transformation of the asylum regime into an increasingly plural, multi-level, and hybrid system, in which state institutions are less and less involved in the management of human mobility and international protection (Ambrosini, 2021; Caponio, 2021; Gammeltoft-Hansen & Nyberg Sørensen, 2013; Guiraudon, 2000; Longo & Fontana, 2022; Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017a). Building on this body of literature, my thesis (re)centres the focus on the state and its responsibilities *within* this complex and dispersed arena. This is not only because states remain the primary issuers and implementers of public policies. But even more importantly because of the rising tide of far-right nationalism, and related anti-immigration policies, in Europe. This widespread phenomenon compels us to reflect on the evolving role of the nation-state in the public debate, particularly concerning the respect for the rule of law and the well-being of our democracies.

These are critical issues that extend far beyond the realm of migration and asylum policies, as they fundamentally question how power is distributed, exercised, maintained and contested. At the same time, by examining asylum policies, we gain a privileged vantage point to understand how the exercise of sovereignty – and the relationship between those who control and those who are controlled – evolves and adapts to new realities. Indeed, “the way in which refugees and immigrants are treated can become a proxy for the rest of society” (García Agustín and Jørgensen,

¹https://www.laprovinciaunicatv.it/stories/apcom/immigrazione-nuove-misure-sicurezza-tendopoli-manduria-o_195424_11/

2016, p. 11). As Saskia Sassen argues, “[i]mmigration is thus a sort of wrench one can throw into theories about sovereignty” (Sassen 1996, p.67). This means that the way in which governmental bodies treat non-citizens can be viewed as a litmus test for various aspects of a society’s political life, including the (in)effectiveness of welfare systems, the underlying values and beliefs of the society, the strength of the rule of law, and ultimately, the quality of its democracy. Therefore, while focusing on asylum governance processes, this thesis also aims to propose points of reflection beyond this specific field and across various policy sectors involving the state at the domestic and international levels. For this purpose, the research integrates the existing literature of Migration and Refugee studies with insights from different areas of study, including Political Geography, Governance studies, and Informality studies, and uses them to interpret the ethnographic material that I collected along the Balkan migration route between 2020 and 2023. Ultimately, this study identifies a model of governance in which national governments retain a key role in the control of refugee flows, not so much because they actually engage in the protection and reception of asylum seekers and refugees, but because they selectively limit people on the move access to their territories and areas of jurisdiction (Ambrosini, 2022; De Haas et al., 2018). That is, they govern asylum by non governing it (Tazzioli, 2020c). In other words, states exercise their authority over these flows by ‘steering’ them away from their areas of competence. I will show that this strategy is legitimized through securitarian discourses that portray foreigners as threats; while neoliberal operational modes further this goal by limiting public intervention and delegating asylum management to non-state actors. Notably, this type of governance blurs the lines between formal and informal, accountable and unaccountable, in/actions. As such, fragmented implementation systems, procedural ambiguity, and discretionary knowledge production contribute to the ‘informalization’ of refugee governance, ultimately crippling democratic accountability. In relation to these issues, I introduce the expression “to keep aloof” to describe the strategic dis-engagement or selective engagement of government institutions in matters concerning the protection and reception of asylum seekers and refugees. As I will show, the combination of securitarian and neoliberal approaches, which leads to an informalization of policies and practices, produces a type of governance in which the state takes a distance from the actual management of refugee flows while maintaining control over the general direction of the system. In response to this mode of governing refugee flows, grassroots movements across Europe have sprung up, generating networks of solidarity with people on the move. In some extreme cases, they have become the only source of free and unconditional support for people on the move and one of the very few independent voices of dissent, exposing state shortcomings and misconducts. This research builds *also* on the practices and motivations of these solidarity initiatives and uses them as a prism to observe the actions and inactions of government actors. This approach provided me with direct and real-time access to the dynamics of governance, including the rollout of new policies, evolving practices on the ground, and emerging challenges and contestations. But most importantly, it allowed me to analyse the state relationally, examining

it within the ‘battleground’ (Ambrosini, 2021) of asylum governance, where policies are sanctioned, endured, and contested by a plurality of actors at different levels.

This introductory chapter establishes the research boundaries. To begin with, Section 1.2 highlights the significance of this study by elucidating the compelling reasons to (re)focus on the state when discussing asylum policies. In doing so, it defines the research problem that ignited my curiosity and the research questions that directed the subsequent analysis. Section 1.3 defines the research’s geographical and temporal scope. It justifies the selection of the main case study and its significance within the broader regional context. Section 1.4 lays the groundwork for the analytical framework of the research, outlining its epistemological, methodological, and theoretical underpinnings. Section 1.5 defines the key terms used in this manuscript. This clarifies what I mean by *state* and *governance*, and also specifies the categories of *migrants* I have focused on. Finally, Section 1.6 presents the outline of the manuscript.

1.2. Why the state still matters in asylum governance

Over the last few decades, the methodological nationalism connoting the first generations of Migration and Refugee studies has been progressively re-scaled to make space for a chorus of voices rising from both within and outside, above and below, the state apparatus. In Migration and Refugee studies, methodological nationalism refers to the tendency to focus on the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis, even when studying phenomena that extend beyond national borders. This approach has been criticized for creating blind spots, reinforcing the *status quo*, and perpetuating biases (Anderson, 2019; De Genova, 2013b; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). In response to this, researchers have increasingly adopted a critical perspective and applied it to investigate the increasing plurality, diversity and dynamism of asylum governance.

It is now widely accepted that the management and oversight of refugee flows extend well beyond national borders, involving individuals and institutions outside the jurisdiction of the state (Collins, 2021; Lin et al., 2017). Sub-, supra- and non-state actors have become involved in processes of policy-making and policy implementation, and, at times, in their contestation (Ambrosini, 2021; Caponio, 2021). Among them, we can find local authorities and municipal administrators (Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017b), EU and other transnational institutions (Guiraudon, 2000), non-state agents such as the private and third sectors (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Sørensen, 2013), but also civil society initiatives and social movements (Ambrosini, 2021). Inter-state collaboration seems to have increased as well, with origin, transit and neighbouring countries becoming involved in the management of the flows, the control of borders and even the implementation of asylum procedures (Longo & Fontana, 2022). These studies not only question the centrality of the state amid an increasingly diverse array of stakeholders, but also challenge its internal homogeneity and the consistency of its actions (Tazzioli, 2021). Overall, recent literature adeptly shows that asylum governance is not a strictly top-down process nor does it

follow a linear trajectory. Instead, it emerges tentatively through the interplay of diverse interests and modes of government, which can both align and conflict (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Fontanari & Borri, 2018). In line with this, several studies have also brought back the attention to people on the move themselves, recognizing that they are an integral and non-negligible part of the processes in question, thus restoring to them agency and autonomy (De Genova, 2017; De Genova et al., 2018). In light of this, the centrality of state authority has been significantly resized. This has contributed to a partial ‘de-nationalization’ of the research field, emphasizing a move from government-centric approaches to governance-focused perspectives (Geddes, 2022), in which the state is merely one of several influential actors.

And yet, the political discourse of most EU and non-EU governments affected by refugee flows is moving in the opposite direction. As a matter of fact, strong and sometimes provocative pronouncements from ministries and politicians advocating for stricter immigration controls dominate national broadcasts and newspapers (Berry et al., 2016). This reinforces the narrative that human mobility is a paramount national security concern, simultaneously bolstering the image of the state as the primary authority in migration and border affairs. This type of discourse, far from reflecting the complexities of contemporary asylum governance, has demonstrably fuelled the rise of nationalist governments globally. Particularly right-wing, conservative, and anti-immigration parties have effectively capitalized on these narratives, gaining political influence by exploiting public anxieties (Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010).. In the UK, apprehensions about immigration fuelled the ‘Leave’ campaign’s victory in the Brexit referendum, ultimately leading to the country’s departure from the European Union (Grinan-Moutinho, 2022). Similarly, the issue of illegal immigration has become a central tenet in US public discourse and policymaking, exemplified by former President Trump’s controversial wall project on the US-Mexico border (Massey, 2020). Italy provides another example. The current far-right government’s election campaign heavily emphasized protecting national identity and economy from the perceived threat of immigration – often conflating refugee flows and asylum seekers with ‘illegal’ or ‘irregular’ immigration². Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni positioned herself as a defender of Italian culture against globalization, advocating for stricter border controls to safeguard national security and traditional values like family and faith (Campisi & Sottilotta, 2022). By consistently invoking the migration-security nexus and portraying migrants, including asylum seekers, as problematic, politicians have emphasized the political and economic risks associated with allowing *irregularised* foreigners to enter national territory. In doing so, they have brought the role of the state in facilitating (or constraining) human mobility back to the forefront. Despite the fact that these statements are not always and necessarily accompanied by coherent

² <https://www.rainews.it/articoli/2024/07/meloni-a-tripoli-con-piantedosi-per-partecipare-al-forum-sulla-lotta-alle-migrazioni-irregolari-03fd522a-469b-4097-8ee6-bed6d497045c.html>; <https://www.fratelli-italia.it/ue-migranti-calor-netto-di-arrivi-irregolari-frutto-approccio-voluto-dal-governo-meloni/>; <https://www.fratelli-italia.it/ue-migranti-calor-netto-di-arrivi-irregolari-frutto-approccio-voluto-dal-governo-meloni/>.

political strategies, it is undeniable that such discourses have had tangible effects on the lives of migrants and asylum seekers.

In light of the above, a tension seems to emerge between the pluralization and partial de-nationalization of asylum management and the re-centralization and re-nationalization of the discourse on refugee flows. On the one hand, governments seem to have less ‘grip’ over decision-making processes and implementation procedures, and hence less responsibility; on the other hand, their ideological and political attitudes towards asylum have rarely been so pronounced and influential. How can we explain this tension? How do we make sense of the discrepancy between a dispersed asylum governance – in which sub-, supra-, and non-state actors become involved in managing people on the move in a ‘neoliberal’ fashion – and a ‘securitized’ approach that prioritizes the sovereignty of the nation-state and the defence of its territory, economy, and identity for policymakers? This research tackles this tension by re-focusing the analysis on state actions, or inactions, within the realm of asylum governance. Building on the crucial contribution of existing theories, which highlight the ongoing (re)distribution of functions and responsibilities among a variety of actors, this thesis interrogates the evolving role of national governments within this plural and multi-scalar arena. That is, it investigates how states are reacting to this evolving scenario and what essential functions remain within their purview (Campisi & Sottilotta, 2022; Indelicato et al., 2023). Three research questions served as the foundation for this analysis:

RQ1: *How can de-nationalization and re-nationalization processes coexist in asylum governance?*

RQ2: *What is the role of the state in these processes?*

RQ3: *How does this role manifest in practice?*

1.3. Italy within the Balkan route: an exemplary case of a diffused model

To engage with these questions in a way that strives for both empirical accuracy and a systemic comprehension, I chose to focus on a main case, e.g. Italy, and investigate it within a wider regional context, e.g. the so-called Balkan route. To provide an in-depth and granular understanding of how governments operate in practice, I focused on a single location, Trieste, an Italian city bordering Slovenia. My field research began in September 2020, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, and officially concluded in June 2023. While my research focused on the ongoing dynamics I observed and experienced during this period, the analysis expands its timeframe to consider the period from 2015 onwards, a turning point in Europe due to outbreak of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’. Importantly, as the analysis progressed, it became necessary to delve further into the past, tracing the origins of the EU’s asylum regime and examining the evolution of Italian asylum policies, especially from the 1990s, when the unprecedented inflow

of refugees fleeing the Yugoslav wars necessitated the country's development of an institutional mechanism to manage the crisis.

Over the last few decades, the Balkan route has become the second migration corridor into Europe for number of transits, after the Central Mediterranean route. The significance of this region for the study of asylum policies in Europe is underscored by the fact that, when my fieldwork began, in 2020, among the top ten nationalities of asylum seekers in European countries there were Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, and Iraq³. These were the same nationalities that were found with absolute prevalence in the Balkan region according to data collected by the UNHCR⁴. Italy represents a crucial transit and arrival point for both routes, the Balkan and the Central Mediterranean, making it a focal point for scholars studying the challenges and opportunities of asylum in Europe in recent decades (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Campomori & Caponio, 2017; Geddes & Pettrachin, 2020). However, academic and political attention has remained mostly focused on southern arrivals via the Central Mediterranean route – where Manduria served as a crucial stopover, a place of arrival but also a launching point for journeys further north – while the northeastern border with Slovenia – a key crossing point on the Balkan route, heavily used by people traveling towards central Europe – has received considerably less scrutiny. Despite its historical significance and the recent surge in inflows and irregular crossings, particularly since 2015, this area has remained largely overlooked, with a few notable exceptions (Altin, 2019, 2021; Altin & Degli Uberti, 2022).

Trieste, the main city of this border region, holds particular practical and symbolic significance for understanding the history of the Italian asylum regime. Namely, in the 1990s, the outbreak of the conflicts that led to the collapse of former Yugoslavia led thousands of refugees to cross this border in search for safety and security. On that occasion, the border city became a pivotal context for the development of what would later become Italy's national System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR)⁵. Despite the decades-long effectiveness of the system of reception and integration put in place in Trieste, the situation in the city began to deteriorate starting in 2016-2017. This deterioration has led to serious violations of the right to asylum for those attempting to cross the Italian-Slovenian border (Astuti et al., 2022), and extreme difficulties for those who managed to enter Italian territory in accessing even basic services (Astuti et al., 2020). By focusing my research in Trieste, I was able to observe these dynamics in their everyday unfolding, and to examine them with particular clarity due to the strong contrast between the city's past as a functioning model of reception and integration and its current state, a location overwhelmed by the influx of asylum seekers. At the same time, by putting these

³ <https://integrazioneimmigranti.gov.it/en-gb/Ricerca-news/Dettaglio-news/id/1674/First-time-asylum-applicants-down-by-a-third-in-2020->

⁴ <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/western-balkans-refugees-asylum-seekers-and-other-mixed-movements-end-december-2019>

⁵ The SPRAR was reformed in 2018, becoming the System of Protection for Holders of International Protection and for Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (SIPROIMI), and again in 2020, becoming the System of Reception and Integration (SAI).

observations in relation to the regional Balkan context, I gained some potentially generalizable findings, unveiling a recurring pattern in which both EU and non-EU governments initiate and sustain these processes while shielding them from judicial and public scrutiny.

The Balkan route, a network of corridors traversing southeastern Europe, cuts across both EU and non-EU countries. This unique geography offers a valuable opportunity to examine diverse governance models and identify similarities and continuities in how states with different institutional structures manage refugee flows. While not intended as a comprehensive comparison, this perspective unveils recurring patterns in how national governments, both within and outside the Schengen Area, approach asylum governance. In recent decades, all the countries considered in this thesis (Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Greece) have faced significant migratory pressures. However, EU countries, such as Greece, Italy and Slovenia, operate under a fundamentally different legal framework (Croatia only entered the Schengen Area in 2023, when my fieldwork was almost concluded). This framework includes a distinct – generally more binding – set of regulations concerning refugee protection. However, EU institutions and member states have also interacted directly with non-EU countries in the region, particularly in the last decade since the intensification of refugee flows across the Balkans. As such, neighbouring countries in the Balkans have become integrated partners of the EU, influencing and influenced by its asylum governance. Therefore, the EU asylum regime, with its legal framework and policy tools, constitutes the overarching framework for understanding asylum governance in this region, and specifically in Italy.



Image 3 - The Balkan route(s) in 2019 (source: Border Violence Monitoring Network)

Notably, my research took place predominantly in border areas, a deliberate choice driven by the desire to immerse myself in the “places where the power of the [state] as a constitutive relation was unfolding” (Kallius et al., 2016, p. 10 - they use “border”). Situated on the margins of national communities and constantly traversed by flows of people and ideas (Brambilla, 2015; Brunet-Jailly, 2005), border zones offer opportunities to experiment with ‘centralized’ norms and ‘institutionalized’ roles from both top-down and bottom-up perspectives. Indeed, borders are not only strategically utilized by centres of political power to reshape the balance between security and liberties (Basaran, 2008, p. 339), but also by societal actors as a “transgressive category of practice” capable of sparking confrontation, conflict, and political change (Kallius et al., 2016, p. 10). Border zones can thus be considered “as sites where norms can be analysed in the making and in their constant adjustment to changing circumstances, including their relations and conflicts with other norms” (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013, p. 236).

1.4. The state’s role in governance: an analytical framework

Motivated by the curiosity to understand how the state operates in practice, beyond its visible and official façade, this research gives precedence to studying real-world experiences through a local lens. This interpretive approach allows for an exploration of how national policies are elaborated and implemented, as well as their actual effects on the ground. In light of this, my research approach emphasized qualitative methods and inductive reasoning, grounding my analysis in the real-world situations I encountered throughout the research process (Charmaz, 2012).

To understand the state’s role within the asylum regime, I opted for an approach inspired by political (Joseph et al., 2007) and relational (Desmond, 2014) ethnography. This framework allowed me to observe the state’s actions and inactions not in isolation, but in relation to the other actors on this ‘battleground’ (Ambrosini, 2021). Notably, my presence in the field, particularly at the Italian-Slovenian border in Trieste, was mediated by a participative and engaged involvement in solidarity initiatives. I will address the meaning and implications of this positionality in greater detail in the Methodological chapter. For now, it suffices to know that I use the term solidarity to indicate actions and projects ‘in solidarity with’ people on the move – that is, solidarity initiatives assist them during their journey or at rest stops, without any profit motive and typically outside of the formal state structure. Drawing on Rozakou’s (2017) and Theodossopoulos’s (2016) definitions, I will make use of the term ‘solidarians’ to refer to the actors involved in such initiatives.

To make sense of these experiences, I engaged in a dialectical process that continually referenced existing theories and empirical data. By moving back and forth between abstract concepts and first-hand observations, this approach allowed each to inform and refine the other. This iterative process led me to identify three main concepts that I will use to answer my research questions: the concept of *securitarian neoliberalism*, the one of *keeping aloof*, and the one of

informalization. Not all of these concepts appear in the extant literature in the exact way I use or combine them. However, they draw inspiration from existing areas of study, namely Political Geography, Governance studies, and Informality studies. By combining theoretical insights from these fields, I aim to contribute to the existing debate on asylum governance by re-centralizing the focus on the role of the state.

First, Political Geography allowed me to confront the tension between denationalizing and renationalizing approaches in asylum management (Lueck et al., 2015; Sparke, 2006). These trends, I came to understand, are neither mutually exclusive nor independent. Building on the extensive body of literature by political geographers – which have addressed various dimensions of asylum, including border and reception policies – I will ‘unpack’ these approaches by reading them respectively as processes of securitisation and neoliberalisation. Indeed, the former is commonly associated with nationalist and state-centred approaches that prioritize national security and emphasize the state’s role as its primary provider (re-nationalization). The latter, instead, reflects the idea of the state ceding space and authority to third-party actors, particularly but not exclusively private ones (de-nationalization). Although these two approaches may appear incompatible at first glance, they share significant commonalities. They both cast asylum seekers in problematic terms – either as potential criminals or economic burdens – and foster an emergency-like approach to their management. Most importantly, in both cases, the state retains a central role as the regulator of these processes. By introducing the concept of *securitarian neoliberalism*, my research reveals how national governments negotiate their power and authority by strategically navigating the tension between neoliberal forces pushing for denationalization and securitarian pressures for renationalization.

Second, Governance studies equipped me to understand the actual role played by the state within this complex system of asylum management, that is what kind of authority and operational power national governments retain within a plural, diverse and contentious arena of governance. In this respect, Governance studies have highlighted a critical shift that has occurred across various policy areas particularly since the 1990s: the move from a focus on traditional ‘governing’ to a more encompassing concept of ‘governance’ (Pierre, 2002). This move signifies a transition towards a more decentralized and collaborative approach, where state actors share responsibilities and coordinate with non-state actors like international organizations, NGOs, private companies, and local communities. Crucially, this body of literature emphasizes that this decentralization does not equate to a relinquishing of state control entirely. Instead, it suggests the state has adapted to these ‘new’ circumstances by assuming a “steering role” (Pierre, 2002). That is, given the increasing complexity of governance systems in a globalized world, the state exerts its influence indirectly by establishing frameworks, fostering partnerships with other actors, and utilizing informal mechanisms to guide decision-making and policy implementation without requiring constant and direct engagement in every policy area. In this regard, I introduce the concept of *keeping aloof*, which offers a fresh lens to analyse state behaviour in asylum governance. Absent

from traditional social science, it nonetheless captures the state's seemingly ambivalent approach. In common usage, aloofness suggests distance, which aligns with observations of states withdrawing from direct immigration management. However, the nautical origin of the expression 'to keep aloof' suggests a slightly different interpretation, more suitable for describing the processes analysed in this thesis. To 'keep aloof' at sea means strategic sailing against the wind for avoiding perils while maintaining control. Applied here, this expression refers to the fact that the state navigates constraints and opportunities by strategically adapting, and not succumbing, to potentially adverse conditions (the 'wind') both domestically and internationally – including unprecedented refugee flows, constraints on sovereignty due to international law, and the pressures of globalization and markets. In this thesis, I will show that, when it comes to asylum governance, the state keeps aloof by selectively disengaging from certain policy areas, while still keeping control of the 'helm' – that is, by governing refugee flows by proxy.

Finally, Informality studies proved particularly insightful in elucidating how the state puts this approach into practice – that is, the specific actions, discourses, and methods employed by national governments as they engage in policies, procedures and practices connected to border and reception tasks. Traditionally, migration and refugee scholarship has prioritized the study of formal laws and official practices of sovereign states. However, there is a growing consensus that examining asylum governance beyond the limitations of formal law and jurisdiction is crucial (Mainwaring & Walton-Roberts, 2018; Tazzioli, 2020b). In this respect, Informality studies emphasize that formality and informality coexist and are mutually dependent not only in societies at large, but also within the state itself (Haid, 2017; McFarlane, 2012). Drawing on informality as a broad category, I will scrutinize the use of semi-official, non-regulated, opaque, and unrecorded processes as tools of state governance. At the same time, I will use the concept of informalization to examine processes of de-institutionalization and de-nationalization of asylum procedures and reception services. By weaving together different types and uses of informality, we can see how the state co-produces and enacts them in an attempt to govern refugee flows by non-governing them (Tazzioli, 2020c), which essentially means acting in unaccountable and hardly-sanctionable manners. Ultimately then, informality allows the state to keep aloof, that is to exert control over asylum management indirectly, without taking direct and open responsibility for such control.

1.5. Terminological notes

To familiarize readers with the context of this research, it is important to clarify the specific usage of certain concepts and word families. In particular, this refers to the concepts of *state* and *asylum governance*, as well as the various definitions of *migrant*. The theoretical and methodological chapters will delve deeper into the definition of state actors and asylum governance. Thus, in order to provide a foundation for our discussion, I will here offer only a concise definition of the

terms. I will instead devote a few more words to the concept of *migrant*, given the epistemological and political significance of its use.

- *The state*

When discussing the concept of the state, a straightforward and universally accepted definition remains elusive. The state consists of various components that may not always operate in a coordinated or consistent manner (Duyvendak & Jasper, 2015; Jasper & Duyvendak, 2015). This internal complexity allows conflicting interests and perspectives to co-exist within the same institution. At the same time, the lines between public and private spheres are blurred at both the individual and macro levels, as public actors can engage in private businesses, and political and economic interests are often intertwined. Considering these complexities, I propose a basic definition of the state – which I interchangeably refer to as ‘(national) government’, ‘state actors’ and ‘government actors’ – as the collective body of people and agencies empowered to create and enforce laws within a country. I differentiate the state from both supranational governmental institutions, such as the EU or the United Nations, and subnational government levels, such as regional and municipal administrations. Intuitively, I also distinguish it from non-public entities, including private businesses, NGOs, and civil initiatives.

- *Asylum governance*

The term migration governance encompasses the vast array of tools states and other actors utilize to manage the movement of people across (and within) borders (Betts, 2011; Geddes, 2022). This intricate system includes policies, laws, institutions, public discourse, and practical activities. Border control, visa and permits systems, reception and integration initiatives, asylum processing, detention procedures, and removal mechanisms all fall under the umbrella of migration governance. Within this framework, my research focuses specifically on asylum policies and procedures⁶, the set of tools used to address forced mobility for those fleeing persecution or serious harm in their home country (Castles, 2003). To describe this policy arena, I will interchangeably use ‘asylum governance’, ‘refugee governance’, ‘asylum regime’, and ‘governance of refugee flows’. These terms specifically refer to the management of asylum seekers and refugees. In contrast, migration governance will serve as a broader term encompassing the management of all types of mobility. To enhance stylistic variety, I may occasionally use the broader terms ‘immigration’ or ‘human mobility’ when discussing asylum-related issues. Still, this linguistic diversity does not alter the central focus of this study on asylum

⁶https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/common-european-asylum-system_en#:~:text=The%20European%20Union%20is%20an,on%20the%20protection%20of%20refugees;https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199743292/obo-9780199743292-0175.xml?rskey=ky8hFO&result=2&q=asylum+governance#firstMatch

governance. At the same time, it is worth acknowledging that a clear-cut division between migration and asylum governance often fails to capture the complexities of real-world policies. Significantly, many research participants interchangeably used terms like ‘migrants’ and ‘refugees’, as will be shown in the interview excerpts – a tendency apparent even in the official pronouncements and legislative enactments of European governments. Within this framework, my analysis brings together border and reception policies designed for asylum seekers and refugees. While these two areas have been extensively studied individually, my research takes a novel approach by examining them simultaneously. This focus allows me to illuminate the intricate connections between border and reception policies, emphasizing how coordination between these sectors is crucial within the international protection framework, both for those imposing it from above and for those challenging it from below.

- *Migrants, asylum seekers and ‘people on the move’*

In the context of this research, ‘migrant’ is used broadly to encompass anyone who has left their country in order to improve their living conditions. This aligns with Sen’s capability approach (Sen, 1992; Clark & Manchester, 2005), which argues that all individuals, regardless of migration status, strive to improve their life opportunities. When I use the term ‘asylum seeker’ I refer specifically to those migrants who intend to or have already applied for international protection. I also utilize the terms ‘undocumented’, ‘irregular’ and ‘irregularised’ as defined by Kaufmann (2019) to refer to migrants whose presence in a country falls outside legal channels. This includes those who enter undetected, use false documents, or overstay their legal visas. Importantly, in many countries at present, this also applies to individuals seeking asylum.

While for analytical reasons my research focuses on asylum-related policies, procedures and practices, it is equally important to acknowledge that the distinction between different types of migration and the political responses designed for supposedly distinct migrant groups are, in reality, increasingly blurred and less clear-cut. The factors driving people to leave their country are complex: conflict, social instability, economic precariousness, and environmental crises feed off each other, making it extremely difficult to determine whether such movements are voluntary or involuntary (Castles et al., 2014). At the same time, restrictive and discriminatory policies implemented by many governments in recent decades have limited legal channels of access, forcing so-called economic migrants and asylum seekers to travel together along dangerous and obstacle-ridden paths. Therefore, despite the ongoing diversification of national policies – immigration policies (encompassing border control and combating irregular migration) being distinct from international protection policies – the migrant/refugee distinction, in practice, operates more as a moral categorization and a mechanism for shaping political discourse, rather than a reflection of the true diversity of lived experiences. By categorizing people as ‘refugees’ versus ‘economic migrants’, this distinction frames them respectively as ‘deserving’ and

‘undeserving’ of protection and assistance (S. Clark et al., 2024; Paynter, 2022; Sales, 2002). This, in turn, shapes both public discourse and policy in ways that can be highly detrimental. As Crawley & Skleparis (2018) put it,

“The use of the categories ‘refugee’ and ‘migrant’ to differentiate between those on the move and the legitimacy, or otherwise, of their claims to international protection has featured strongly during Europe’s ‘migration crisis’ and has been used to justify policies of exclusion and containment. [However], these dominant categories fail to capture adequately the complex relationship between political, social and economic drivers of migration or their shifting significance for individuals over time and space” (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018, p. 48).

In light of this, I will also incorporate the term ‘people on the move’ to define the individuals I encountered migrating along the Balkan route and across the Italian-Slovenian border. This broader term offers a fresh perspective by shifting the focus from the reasons for leaving to the shared experience of the migratory journey itself. It broadly refers to individuals engaged in relatively long-term movements from one place to another. This reframing highlights a crucial point: the experiences of refugees and economic migrants often converge during their journeys, with both groups facing similar policies that exclude, marginalize, and criminalize them. As such,

“Although ‘people on the move’ is a broad term without a legal definition, it offers two advantages. First, it transcends the problematic dichotomy between refugees and migrants [...] In particular, it avoids any negative connotations that may be associated with the terms ‘refugee’ and especially ‘migrant’ in public discourse [...] [and] which can be used wrongly to suggest that only refugees have rights while migrants have no rights at all. Second, the term ‘people on the move’ makes it easier to reconceptualize their rights. We do not argue that people on the move have special, different or additional rights to other humans, but, rather, the ways in which these rights risk being violated, and the avenues available to claim these rights, deserve attention, regardless of whether people on the move also qualify as refugees or some other category which deserves protection. In a sense, then, the term ‘people on the move’ enables us to take the humanity of people on the move as a starting point. [...] By shifting the focus away from the distinction between refugees and migrants and towards their common humanity, it becomes easier to adopt a human rights perspective” (Pijenburg & Rijken, 2021, p. 283).

While all categories involve some simplification, ‘people on the move’ offers a distinct advantage over other labels. Indeed, though now widely used in academic circles, the term originated among solidarity networks interacting daily with migrants along migration routes. As such, this term reflects a bottom-up way of understanding and framing human mobility, inherently critical of policies that differentiate between migrants and refugees. The everyday use of this expression by volunteers and on-the-ground operators embodies this challenge to the state and other governing bodies’ dominant narrative. Because solidarity initiatives have been key epistemological and

methodological resources, shaping both my research approach and the knowledge I produced (see Chapter 3), this linguistic choice is particularly significant for my research. This also highlights the importance of solidarity actors as crucial interlocutors for the research's findings and practical implications.

1.6. Outline of the dissertation

The remainder of this chapter offers a roadmap for the manuscript, outlining the key themes and arguments to follow.

Part I of this thesis delves into a detailed discussion of the theoretical (Chapter 2) and methodological (Chapter 3) frameworks that underpin this project. Namely, it describes how my participatory engagement with and in the field of study has informed my analysis and the conceptualizations I used to conduct it, rooting them in the empirical realities I met 'on the ground' while ensuring consistency with the existing scholarly debate.

Part II of this manuscript engages with the empirical materials (interviews, participant observation, and document analysis) collected over almost three years of non-continuous ethnographic fieldwork conducted in multiple trips along the so-called Balkan route and specifically in Trieste, at the Italian-Slovenian border. I will structure this part of the thesis like a matryoshka doll, progressively zooming in from the macro to the micro level. Starting with the EU institutional framework on asylum, I will then travel through the Balkan region and arrive in Italy, where I will delve into the everyday stories of the Trieste border area. Chapter 4 focuses on the European asylum regime. It examines the historical development of the regime, its ideological foundations, and how it functions in practice. By doing so, the chapter sheds light on the political, legal and operational factors that have contributed to, or at least enabled, the current situation. This includes a securitarian approach to cross-border mobility, the regulatory role of the state in managing this issue and its capacity to outsource part of this management to third actors. Chapter 5 delves into the Balkan route, guiding the reader through various border regions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia. It looks at border and reception policies together to reveal the underlying continuity between these two seemingly disparate areas of governance. In doing so, the chapter foregrounds the concept of *securitarian neoliberalism*, demonstrating the pervasiveness of this EU-incentivized approach implemented by the governments of the region. This section also begins to unveil the 'steering' role of the state. Namely, while national governments remain the primary beneficiaries of international funding, they delegate the use of these resources to international organizations and private security companies. Chapter 6 shifts the focus to Italy, entering the country through its northeastern border with Slovenia. This chapter provides an overview of the Italian asylum regime. By discussing the political and legal boundaries of asylum in Italy, the chapter traces a line of continuity between the historical flows of refugees crossing the Balkans, the evolution of Italian asylum policies, and the particular

significance of Trieste within these processes. Chapter 7 further narrows the focus on Trieste and the events that have taken place in this border city from 2015 to the present day (2024). Prior to that moment, the local community of Trieste had proven a great capacity for managing and being resilient to the arrival of migratory and refugee flows. Nonetheless, the chapter shows how the actions, as well as the inactions, of the Italian government in recent years have had important repercussions on the governance of the Italian-Slovenian border. In these dynamics, the coexistence of security and neoliberal elements will clearly emerge, as well as the ways in which the Italian government has strategically used them to govern these flows without actually taking charge of them. Additionally, by closely observing the daily dynamics of this mode of governance, the chapter offers a glimpse into the ways in which the government steers the system. By looking at border and reception policies together, this time more closely than in Chapter 5, the chapter reveals the extensive use of informality and informalization as a way for the state to distance itself from its legal, social and operational responsibilities in matters concerning the protection and reception of asylum seekers, while still managing to govern their im/mobility by proxy.

Finally, Part III dives into the analysis and discussion of the research findings. This section will explore the contribution and significance of my research, not just from a theoretical standpoint, but also in terms of its epistemological and methodological implications. Chapter 8 discusses the empirical findings within the conceptual, theoretical and methodological framework I have developed during the research process. Additionally, the chapter situates my research within the existing body of Migration and Refugee studies literature, highlighting how my work engages with and contributes to existing approaches in the field. Finally, Chapter 9 concludes the thesis by reflecting on the implications, limitations and future prospects of my study.

PART I
Analytical Framework

Chapter 2

Theories and Concepts

2.1. Introduction

In recent decades, researchers in the field of migration, asylum and borders have actively worked to transcend the methodological nationalism that previously characterized the functioning and study of human mobility (Anderson, 2019; De Genova, 2013b; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). On the one hand, this has led to the emergence of the Autonomy of Migration approach (De Genova, 2017; De Genova et al., 2018), a theoretical perspective that challenges conventional views focusing on states as the primary actors in these dynamics, and instead emphasizes the agency and autonomy of migrants themselves, highlighting their capacity to (co)shape migration processes. Particularly interesting in this regard are studies that bridge migration and social movements research. This literature sheds light on the politically charged mobilizations of migrants and refugees as they fight for recognition of their rights (Giugni & Passy, 2004; Nyers, 2015; Steinhilper, 2021). On the other hand, several researchers have challenged our state-centred understanding of migration and asylum governance by highlighting the increasingly diverse range of actors involved in crafting, implementing, and contesting migration and asylum policies. My research addresses this second strain of literature, and interrogates the role of the state *among* these ‘new’ actors.

In this chapter, I will firstly outline some of the theories that have analysed the governance of human mobility in recent years, providing the theoretical ‘boundaries’ within, across and beyond which my research has developed. Subsequently, I will delve into my conceptual and theoretical framework, presenting the literature and fields of study that have enabled me to enrich and systematize my understanding of the state’s role within a pluralistic and multi-scalar governance system.

2.2. The ‘de-nationalization’ of asylum governance

The ‘de-nationalization’ of the governance of asylum has been identified across various contexts and scrutinized through diverse lenses. This encompasses the externalization of migration control to transit and neighbouring nations, as well as the delegation of responsibilities to actors beyond the traditional state sphere, including sub-, supra-, and non-state entities.

One of the most prominent strands of literature stemming from this debate is the Multilevel Governance approach (Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2018; Scholten & Penninx, 2016), which scrutinizes the distribution and interaction of authority and decision-making among various levels of government and non-state actors. As such, it offers a comprehensive perspective on “the construction of immigration and asylum policies as a complex process in which diverse institutional and also non-institutional subjects play a role” (Ambrosini, 2021, p. 377; Scholten et al., 2018). In a similar vein, the Venue-shopping approach investigates the evolving dynamics that arise from the intricate interplay between national and non-national agents in matters concerning mobility and border control (Guiraudon, 2000; Guiraudon & Lahav, 2000; Lahav & Guiraudon, 2006). It posits that nation-states’ responses to refugee flows involve the decentralization of decision-making *upwards* to intergovernmental forums, *downwards* to local authorities and *outwards* to non-state actors (Guiraudon & Lahav, 2000, p. 164). Both the Multilevel Governance and the Venue-shopping approaches highlight the challenge to the traditionally dominant role of the state in shaping and implementing these policies. However, while the Multilevel Governance approach is more descriptive, outlining a multi-layered governance system, the Venue-shopping approach explicitly addresses the strategic use of this ‘multi-layeredness’ by the actors involved, and particularly the state.

Even if the Venue-shopping approach acknowledges the growing participation of local authorities and private actors in migration and asylum management, its primary focus remains at the international level, as demonstrated by its emphasis on the relocation of domestic policy-making to EU policy venues. Notably though, this shift in state authority, whether passively undergone or actively employed, also encompasses the engagement of sub-state and non-state actors. At the sub-national level, the everyday processes that inform and surround the governance of immigration ‘on the ground’ bring the role of local authorities and communities to the forefront. As noted by Ambrosini, “[i]mmigrants and refugees ... are settled in specific places, they interact with local institutions, they search for employment, accommodation and services in local societies, they meet local residents and their children attend local schools” (Ambrosini, 2021, pp. 383–384; Schiller & Çağlar, 2009). In this context, municipalities have demonstrated their capacity to question the political and administrative centrality of the state. So-called ‘sanctuary cities’, for example, are municipal jurisdictions that employ their discretionary powers to safeguard the protection and inclusion of refugees and even unauthorized migrants beyond the – sometimes exceedingly strict – boundaries set by the state (Bauder, 2017; Fauser, 2019). In other

cases, local administrations may opt for greater ‘closure’ than that envisioned by the state, reducing the services provided by institutions to foreigners and tightening the restrictions imposed on them. The renewed interest in the ‘local policy arena’ (Caponio & Borkert, 2010) has inspired the so-called ‘local turn’ in Migration studies (Caponio & Borkert, 2010; Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017). This paradigm shift has redirected attention from abstract norms to the everyday practices by which local actors (whether public or private) shape governance systems, offering a more profound comprehension of the operational dynamics of the state beyond its institutional façade. At the same time, municipalities possess the ability to engage in alliances in trans-national and supra-national arenas whenever opportunities and resources at the national level are lacking (Alagna, 2023; Fauser, 2019). In this way, cities have emerged as battlegrounds where new power dynamics are negotiated and contested between the public, private, and civil society spheres (Mayer, 2017).

While the ‘local turn’ focuses on what happens within the borders of the state, the ‘externalization’ of migration refers to policies and practices in which states engage outside their territorial boundaries (Fontana & Rosina, 2024; Kunz et al., 2012; Lavenex, 2006; Menjívar, 2014). Over the last few decades, inter-state collaboration in asylum governance has become a prominent strategy for countries of arrival. In this respect, ‘externalization’ describes how states affected by refugee flows extend certain aspects of the asylum governance beyond their own borders through a variegated set of policy and operational tools. Some of the most notable externalization techniques include push-back⁷ and readmission policies (Augustova et al., 2023; Lemberg-Pedersen, 2015). Additionally, the establishment of processing centres for asylum claims and reception camps abroad allows for detainment, processing, or repatriation of migrants before they reach the destination country (Silverman, 2018). These operations typically involve bilateral or regional agreements with neighbouring and transit countries, usually leveraging political and economic needs. In exchange for support in managing the flows, for example, countries of destination can provide development aid and other types of investments to the governments of third countries. While governments clearly remain central in these processes, the externalization of migration and border control increasingly involves collaboration with international agencies, such as the UN, and private businesses, such as security service providers, offering logistical and organizational support.

Regarding this last point, existing literature in Migration studies has delved into the causes and implications of the growing interaction – whether formal or informal – between public and private actors in migration management, particularly in border zones. One of the most significant attempts to describe and understand these processes is represented by the Migration Industry theory (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Sørensen, 2013). This concept was initially introduced to describe the

⁷ “Pushbacks entail a variety of state measures aimed at forcing refugees and migrants out of their territory while obstructing access to applicable legal and procedural frameworks. In doing so, States circumvent safeguards governing international protection (including minors), detention or custody, expulsion, and the use of force” (<https://www.ecchr.eu/en/glossary/push-back/>).

range of formal and informal actors who profit from migration management, primarily in relation to labour and economic migration (Hernandez-Leon, 2005). However, the concept of migration industry has later been used to encompass a broader and complex field in which state and non-state actors co-participate in shaping migration and asylum governance by either facilitating or hindering migration flows “for reasons other than (solely) financial gain” (Nyberg Sørensen & Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2012, p. 2). The industry encompasses a wide range of participants, from small migrant entrepreneurs drawing on personal experiences to guide others, to large multinational companies competing for government contracts to manage entire migration processes. Government officials like border guards and bureaucrats, criminal networks facilitating illegal migration, and even international organizations and NGOs are all involved (Nyberg Sørensen & Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2012). The spectrum of their actions depends on whether they aim to facilitate or constrain human mobility, and ranges from formal and transparent to informal and opaque. Facilitators, for instance, may provide access to labour recruitment, legal assistance, transportation facilitation, as well as communication tools and remittance services; while other actors may limit the freedom and autonomy of migrants by operating in connection with governments, for example in border control and detention centres (Nyberg Sørensen & Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2012).

Overall, this theory emphasizes a shift towards a hybrid form of governance involving both formal and informal, public and private actors. Notably though, the theory highlights the role of the nation-state in initiating and sustaining these processes. As Hernandez-Leon argues, “the components and the historical dynamics of the migration industry depend on the policies and restrictions that states impose on different types of international migration flows [...] at different times” 2005, p. 9). In this perspective, governments “actively sustain” the emergence and consolidation of the migration (and asylum) industry (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Nyberg Sørensen, 2013; Nyberg Sørensen & Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2012).

The theories described above highlight the multiplicity of sub-, supra-, non-, and third-state actors that intervene in the governance of human mobility, beyond and alongside the state. Given the plurality of interests and approaches that emerge from this framework, it becomes essential to understand not only how these actors act individually, but also how they relate to each other. On this matter, Ambrosini’s concept of migration as a ‘battleground’ offers a valuable perspective (Ambrosini, 2021; Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Dimitriadis et al., 2021). Ambrosini and colleagues provide an integrated perspective on asylum and immigration governance by considering both vertical (supranational, national and local governments) and horizontal (public and private actors) dynamics. As such, the concept of battleground – resonating with Lahav and Guiraudon’s (2006) concept of a ‘Multi-Level Playing Field’ – offers several analytical advantages. First, it expands the scope of actors involved in the system of governance beyond formal institutions. Importantly, it recognizes the significant role played by both solidarity initiatives that support people on the move and anti-immigration movements (Ataç et al., 2016).

Second, it emphasizes the relational dynamics in which all these actors engage, both ‘vertically’ and ‘horizontally’. Finally, and because of that, the concept of battleground has the potential to unveil not only coordination and cooperation among different stakeholders, but also competition and conflict among them. In this way, Dimitriadis et al. (2021) shed light on the discrepancies that often arise between official asylum policies and their actual implementation on the ground. That is, the battleground concept challenges the traditional notion of human mobility governance as a harmonious negotiation between public and non-public actors. Instead, it compels us to recognize the inherent complexities and potential for conflict within this multifaceted arena. In other words, it illuminates “a fractured political and social landscape where several actors – public and private, national and international, politically organized or individual citizens, volunteers, activists, social workers, researchers – are involved in the redefinition of European borders in a historic time of changes” (Fontanari & Borri, 2018, p. 33).

The frameworks explored above effectively portray a significant transformation in the governance of refugee flows, moving us beyond the notion that states are the sole architects and enforcers of asylum policies. Decision-making and implementation in matters concerning the protection and reception of asylum seekers and refugees now involve a diverse range of stakeholders, encompassing not just state institutions but also private companies, local communities, and even civil society groups. This plurality of perspectives gives rise to complex interactions in which power relations are constantly negotiated within and outside the state apparatus. As a consequence, these theories point to a diminished role for the state as the sole authority, with its power increasingly dispersed and contested within a broader landscape of interests, capabilities, and alliances.

And still, daily news reports provide constant evidence that national governments continue to play a pivotal role in both domestic and international forums. These actors keep demonstrating their remarkable capacity to shape the course of events, impacting not only their own citizens but also those beyond their borders. This influence manifests through a range of tools, including the strategic allocation or withholding of resources, the provision or denial of political support, and their willingness to uphold the law and take legal action when necessary. In border zones, especially, the authority of the state appears anything but reduced (Ferdoush, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2020). Walls and fences are being erected across the globe, surveillance apparatuses strengthened, and frontier patrols encouraged to pursue and penalize irregular transits. More recently, the migration issue has been used strategically by political leaders and heads of government to enhance their bargaining power within the EU. This has led to a situation where European debates are, to some extent, re-nationalized, and national interests are once again emphasized at the core of the European agenda.

How can we reconcile these two seemingly contradictory realities – the fragmentation and multiplication of governance modes in a neoliberal fashion, on the one hand, and the re-nationalization of politics and policies on migration along securitarian lines, on the other?

Building on the significant contribution of the studies described above, the theoretical framework presented below allows us to (re)position the state within this plural and multi-scalar system, with a particular focus on scrutinizing how and why the increasing inclusion of non-state actors in asylum governance is not necessarily an indication of a diminished state authority, but surely of its transformation.. As it will emerge in the course of this thesis, it is precisely by mediating between processes of denationalization and renationalization that the state manages to orient the functioning of governance while limiting its formal responsibilities. In the following sections, I present three interrelated bodies of literature. While each has been used to address a particular research question, their insights have inevitably woven together to form a cohesive framework throughout the analysis. These approaches complement and reinforce each other, thus enriching the overall exploration.

2.3. Political Geography : between securitarian nationalism and neoliberal denationalization

Political Geography interrogates the “intersections of key geographical concerns of space, places and territory on the one hand and issues of politics, power and policy on the other” (Storey, 2009, p. 243). Researchers in this area of study analyze topics such as the state, borders and territoriality, nationalism, and the influence of political decisions on both the physical and social environment. By exploring how political power, governance, and political processes are influenced by, and in turn, influence spatial patterns and landscapes, Political Geography is thus particularly well equipped to investigate “fractured, uneven and contested assemblages of sovereignty” (Tazzioli, 2021, p. 8; see also Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). Hence, these studies provide a valuable vantage point from which to observe and document the battleground of asylum. They reveal how discourses, policies, spaces, practices, and actors co-shape themselves through their interactions. This places the state within a relational and highly articulated system, shedding light on the shift from government to governance and the resulting implications for the state’s role in asylum governance (Storey, 2009).

Research in this field explores both the geographical configurations and the legal infrastructures (Dikeç, 2009) that define the physical, administrative, and juridical boundaries within which the right of asylum is enacted from above and claimed from below. Research on migration governance likely originated in the 1990s (Samers, 2015) and it experienced a significant surge in the 2000s, coinciding with the growing focus on ‘migration management’ among both policy-makers and researchers (Ashutosh & Mountz, 2011; Geiger & Pécoud, 2010; Kofman, 2004; Morris, 2003). The term encapsulates “an amalgam of policies that attempt to manage different forms of migration (asylum/refugee, family, student, or work-oriented, etc.) together (Kofman, 2008) through often complex policy schemes” (Samers, 2015). The study of this complex field has thus required scholars to look at different aspects and policy domains.

Under the umbrella of this wide-ranging field of study, the political geography of asylum has been organized into two main research areas, which are strongly complementary yet rarely brought into dialogue. On one hand, a rich body of literature dissects the inner workings of border regimes, exposing how they utilize mechanisms like securitisation (increased surveillance and military-like approaches) and forced (im)mobility (migrants are forced into exhausting journeys, long waits, and circular paths) to keep migrants at bay, both physically and legally (Davies et al., 2023; Heyer, 2022; Tazzioli, 2020b, 2020c). On the other hand, a consistent group of researchers has investigated the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees who have already entered a state's territory, focusing on their access to reception and integration projects (Darling, 2016a; Geddes & Pettrachin, 2020; Williams, 2015). A common finding across these studies is the increased use of dispersal techniques (where asylum seekers and refugees are spread across different and isolated locations), privatization (where services for them are increasingly handled by non-state entities), and more broadly neoliberal approaches (where cost and time efficiency drive policy-making and implementation). At the intersection between border control and reception policies, Carceral Geography offers valuable insights into practices of confinement and incarceration of people on the move (Gill, 2016a; Moran et al., 2013). Persecutory and police-like approaches to human mobility rely not only on the militarization of borders, but also on a growing use of prison-like facilities for accommodating 'irregular migrants'. In this respect, Novak (2019) highlights that policies of 'closing' borders, coupled with efforts to control and redirect refugee flows, necessitate the identification of spaces where unwanted, rejected, and deportable asylum seekers can be temporarily housed. Border mechanisms are thus deeply entangled with accommodation facilities, and both contribute to rendering migrants' lives unbearable (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015; Tazzioli, 2021). At the EU level, this clearly manifests in the so-called 'hotspot approach'. This strategy confined processing in peripheral EU and non-EU countries, establishing big centers for identification, registration, and swift differentiation between those seeking protection and those considered irregular migrants (Dimitriadi, 2017; Sciarba, 2017). Key actions included fostering relocation agreements with other EU members to share processing responsibilities and return agreements with third countries to facilitate repatriation of those ineligible for asylum. This approach emphasized simplified and accelerated asylum procedures. In these instances, the involvement of private entities in managing aspects of the hotspot approach has grown significantly, raising concerns about transparency, accountability, and human rights standards. Overall, the hotspot approach reveals how securitisation – the configuration of human mobility as a security problem – and neoliberalism – the outsourcing and streamlining of state functions – intertwine in asylum governance. At the same time, it highlights the growing interdependence between humanitarian aid and policing – a tendency supported by contemporary debates that portray “the migrant as both at risk and a risk, as a subject needing to be rescued and apprehended” (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015, p. 63). In such context, the provision of aid and support can be made conditional to asylum seekers giving up part of their autonomy and freedom of mobility

(Williams, 2015). At the same time, reception conditions can be designed to deter arrivals and “tame those who enter by producing discomfort” (Borelli et al., 2023, p. 4). In light of this, Agier observes that, in the governance of human mobility, “there is no care without control” (2011, p. 4).

Considering the foregoing, this research adopts a “kaleidoscopic” (Brambilla, 2015) approach to the study of asylum governance by integrating into a unified discourse border practices, asylum procedures, and reception services implemented (or not) by the state. As I am about to discuss in detail, securitarian control and neoliberal abandonment of asylum seekers and refugees are interdependent and mutually reinforcing in this context. Therefore, I propose the concept of *securitarian neoliberalism* to describe a model of governance in which refugee flows are increasingly viewed as a national security threat, leading to nationalist policies that prioritize border security and repressive approaches, ultimately restricting refugee rights.. At the same time, it indicates that the actors carrying out the control of these flows are changing, as well as their operational and relational modes. State direct involvement is decreasing, with a growing role for both formal and informal non-state actors, including private businesses, local communities, international organizations, solidarity networks, and criminal organizations.. Neoliberal processes reshape how these actors operate and interact, prioritizing speed and cost-effectiveness through streamlined and informal methods. In the next two sections, I will unpack securitarian and neoliberal approaches in asylum governance in order to highlight their analogies and the ways in which they can reinforce each other (Lueck et al., 2015; Sparke, 2006).

2.3.1. Neoliberalism in asylum governance

Neoliberalism is not simply about market forces. It is a comprehensive ideology that blends political and economic principles, shaping the life of a society from government structures to how knowledge is produced. As a result, neoliberalism manifests differently depending on the historical and geographical context, and according to the policy field it is applied to (Biebricher, 2020; Slobodian, 2018). In the case of asylum governance, a neoliberal approach emphasizes limited government intervention, deregulation, and de-nationalisation of services. This includes outsourcing asylum-related services to private businesses and the third sector, prioritizing efficiency and cost-reduction, minimising government control over implementing processes, and streamlining bureaucratic procedures. In this respect, the transition from a government-centric approach to a governance-focused one has been described as a process of neoliberalisation of asylum (Bhagat & Soederberg, 2019; Darling, 2016a, 2016b; Fontanari, 2022b; Lethbridge, 2017; Novak, 2019).

While a comprehensive review of theories exploring asylum policies through the lens of neoliberalism would exceed the scope of this discussion (for relevant studies see Bhagat, 2021; Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2019; Faber & Schlegel, 2017; Fontanari, 2022b; Green, 2020; Riva & Routon,

2020), it is worth mentioning specific studies that shed light on key aspects for this investigation. Among these, Darling's work (2016b) explores the system of accommodating asylum seekers in the UK, highlighting the emergence of an asylum market driven by "neoliberal norms of market competition, economic efficiency and dispersed responsibility" (p. 231). Similarly, Novak (2019) investigates the neoliberal aspects of asylum governance in Italy, specifically focusing on the accommodation of asylum seekers within the Italian Extraordinary Reception System (CAS). Despite differences in context, both studies highlight a transformation in the role of government institutions, whose direct intervention in asylum procedures is increasingly limited. However, rather than assuming a shift *tout court* from public to private governance, Darling and Novak look at neoliberalisation as a dialectic process wherein partnerships and "new assemblages of authority" (Darling, 2016b, p. 231) are established between entities that were once exclusively public or private. Local authorities, private companies, and the third sector – they do not address civil initiatives, social movements and international organizations – become prominent actors, operating as intermediaries and 'interpreters' of state policies according to "logics of efficiency, flexibility, and cost" (Darling, 2016b, p. 235; see also Newman, 2014). However, the 'simplification' of procedures and practices for reasons of efficiency and cost-reduction leads to the weakening or elimination of legal and procedural safeguards. This highlights concerns in terms of liability and accountability, particularly when considering the involvement of business companies. These usually prioritize minimizing risk and maximizing profit, often through methods that reduce transparency and avoid accountability (Rako, 2014). As a result, outsourcing government functions to these entities can create a system where profits are prioritized over democratic oversight, making it harder to address violations of refugee rights (Rako, 2014; Riles, 2008). Overall, this reliance on private intervention and streamlined procedures significantly reduces the ability to monitor and sanction controversial behaviours.

The neoliberalisation of asylum also involves the production of knowledge and perceptions a given society has on refugee flows. As observed by Darling (2016b), asylum seekers in neoliberal societies tend to be portrayed as a "burden". This "enables the lives of vulnerable individuals to be positioned as commodities for marketisation and legitimates the exclusion that runs through dispersal as a mode of regulatory governance" (p. 240). Especially in times of economic hardship, this can fuel public support for restrictive immigration policies that blame foreigners (particularly racial minorities and those experiencing poverty) for financial insecurity (Bhagat & Soederberg, 2019). This further consolidates a system designed to maintain physical, legal, and moral distance from the 'poor' and the 'diverse' (Springer, 2011). By creating categories of 'good' and 'bad' asylum seekers based on wealth and origin, neoliberalism breeds suspicion towards people on the move. Along these lines, asylum seekers and refugees are represented as problematic presences for both public and private organizations, in turn justifying their 'management' via emergency measures (Darling, 2016b).

States of emergency grant authorities the ability to take actions they would not normally be allowed to do, such as restricting movements of people or allocating special resources with limited scrutiny to address critical issues. They usually entail streamlining bureaucratic and legal procedures in favor of an efficient, adaptable, and simplified governance approach. In this regard, the Italian case stands out as emblematic. Over the past few decades, the political discourse on asylum in the country has consistently revolved around the theme of emergency, regardless of the political affiliation of the governing party. The Extraordinary Reception System analysed by Novak is a case in point, for instance. It represents an attempt to address the inadequacies of the ‘ordinary’ reception system through the creation of ‘exceptional’ structures – which have progressively become the norm. At the same time, the government’s frequent use of guidelines (*‘circolari’*) and decrees for swift implementation of border and reception measures bypasses bureaucratic hurdles, prioritizing cost and time reduction in a manner similar to business-oriented efficiency models (Gjergji, 2018). Ultimately, emergency approaches weaken democratic scrutiny, because they assign the state a regulatory role but they do so while limiting its direct accountability (Bruff, 2017).

Interestingly, research suggests that neoliberal ideologies, by prioritizing individual interests over community concerns and the well-being of outsiders, can foster apathy and prejudice towards refugees (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2019; Green, 2020). This may cultivate “a sense of distancing” from non-citizens, expressed through ethnocentrism and reduced willingness to support asylum seekers (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2019). Consequently, neoliberal contexts may favour punitive and repressive approaches towards human mobility. Crucially, these dynamics not only have implications for asylum seekers but also cultivate a climate of diminished solidarity among citizens, potentially impacting social stability and future generations (Green, 2020). In this respect, political geographers have turned to concepts such as “dispersal” (Gill, 2009; Schuster, 2005), “ghosting” (Wilson, 2008), “retreat” (Tazzioli, 2020b), “ghost bureaucracy”, and “unreachability” (Borelli et al., 2023), as well as “moral distance” and “adiaphorism” (Gill, 2016b), to illustrate the growing distance between policy-makers, implementers and policies recipients. Namely, they describe a situation in which dispersal strategies and “remote control” (Guiraudon, 2002) facilitate “the eviction of national-level responsibilities for asylum-seekers and other irregular migrants” (Gill, 2016b, p. 41). As these processes unfold, the neoliberalisation of asylum contributes to create a system of fragmented accountability, in which “almost no one takes responsibility for the organization as a whole” (Gill, 2016b, p. 33; see also Bauman, 2008). This does not leave the state devoid of authority, though. The down-, up-, and out-scaling of state functions “should not be viewed as a contraction or abdication of national state power” (Brenner, 2004, p.62), but rather as an adaptive strategy in response to a changing context.

Still, this should not lead us to believe that state interests are always pursued linearly and coherently (Conlon, 2019). Although frequently defended as rational and effective, simplified procedures and limited resources can lead to inefficiencies and unexpected outcomes. In light of

this, Conlon emphasizes the importance of recognizing asylum processes in their discontinuities and dissonances to fully understand neoliberal forms of governance as they manifest in real-world situations. As such, neoliberalism should not be considered as “a finalized or fixed form of government”, but rather an “adaptive” and “geographically contingent” process which “involves the interaction of multiple impulses to co-opt, engage, subvert and ignore multiple actors, the state *among* them” (Darling, 2016b, p. 232; see also Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Springer, 2010). Rather than ‘less government’, neoliberal governmentality involves a “transfer of operations that produces *a different* mode of government” (Ferguson & Gupta, 2002, p. 989 - italics added). Specifically, it operates as “an assemblage of rationalities, strategies, technologies, and techniques concerning the *mentality of rule* that facilitates ‘governance at a distance’” (Springer, 2011, p. 95; see also Barry et al., 1996; Larner, 2000). The state is no longer an accountable provider of services but an enabler and a regulator of the ‘spaces’ in which these services can (or cannot) be provided (Cloke et al., 2010; Larner, 2000). In this way, “the state still exerts substantial control over noncitizens, but it does so by proxy” (Borelli et al., 2023, p. 2). Hence, neoliberalism involves more than just changing the way services are provided for asylum seekers and refugees; it also encompasses a broader process of reconfiguration of the institutional apparatus of states (Saad Filho, 2019), ultimately transforming political authority itself (Darling, 2016b). However, while “delegating certain functions to other actors entails avoiding accountability for the dirtiest part of the job”, it also makes the state “in a way, more vulnerable to subterfuge and ingenuity by those subject to its rule” (Borelli et al., 2023, p. 2; see also Abarca & Coutin, 2018).

2.3.2. Securitisation in asylum governance

If the neoliberalisation of migration policies has often been interpreted as a process of depoliticization (Darling, 2016b; Gill et al., 2012), their securitisation can be defined as “the extreme politicization of migration and its presentation as a security threat” (Léonard, 2010, p. 231). Political geographers use the concept of securitisation in several ways to understand the production of space and the exercise of power, thus shedding light on how government practices shape the movement of people across and within borders. These studies investigate how states construct borders and territories as security zones through the implementation of physical barriers, legal restrictions, and ideological boundaries (Dickson, 2015; Squire, 2022). The portrayal of people on the move as security threats fuels stricter border controls, the establishment of detention centers, and increased deportations (De Genova, 2010; Moran et al., 2013; Mountz, 2011, 2014). Furthermore, these policies shift border control responsibilities to third parties, as exemplified by the ‘hotspot approach’ (Pallister-Wilkins, 2020; Tazzioli, 2018c, 2018a; Tazzioli & Garelli, 2020).

The concept of securitisation was first developed by the Copenhagen School of Security Studies and has evolved into two main currents of thought. The first one, endorsed by Wæver (1995),

investigates security through the lens of discourses; the second, advanced by Bigo (Bigo, 2002, 2014), puts emphasis on processes and practices.

Wæver focused on the discursive processes that render a person or an event a threat. Discursive processes influence the interpretation of an issue, shaping the ‘appropriate’ perspective on it in legal, political, operational and linguistic terms. This entails a set of prescriptions that govern exclusions and selections. The discursive portrayal of refugee flows as a security threat becomes a powerful governance tool in asylum policies and practices, because it allows governments to distinguish between welcomed and unwelcome foreigners. Several crises over the last few decades, from the terrorist attacks of 9/11 to the 2007-8 financial crisis, have questioned the integrity and stability of Western nation-states. Building on the feelings of precariousness and fear generated by these events (Bello, 2017; Huysmans, 2000), politicians across the spectrum, and particularly populist and nationalist parties, have resorted to the trope of the ‘foreign threat’ to gain consensus among an increasingly diversified electorate. As Bello (Bello, 2022b) notes, among the supporters of anti-immigration and anti-refugees policies,

“there are both those who live anchored to the idea of the nation, and those who suffer from globalization and perceive and anticipate risks to a greater extent (Beck 1992). They become those persons whose frustrations can be exploited to request a revival of nationalism, and with it, its discriminatory politics, exclusionary dynamics and hard, untraversable borders (Bello 2017a)” (p. 1332).

This situation has the potential to escalate into an emergency scenario, in which the exceptional treatment of refugee flows through repressive and coercive means is justified by their recognition as an existential threat to the nation and its inhabitants (Salter, 2008). This type of processes normalize coercion and discretionality in the exercise of power, even in democratic regimes. In this respect, González (2020) argues that coercion, far from being exclusive to authoritarian governments, constitutes an integral element of ordinary democratic politics. However, Gonzales underlines that, in democratic regimes, coercion should be executed within the bounds of the rule of law and subject to external accountability mechanisms (see also Schedler et al., 1999). Conversely, “the exercise of authoritarian coercion is [...] exceptional or arbitrary, systematically deployed beyond what is in the law and unconstrained by rights and limits defined by law” (González, 2020, p. 14). In times of crisis, the identification of certain groups as threats to national security blurs the line between democratic and authoritarian coercion, and unwanted individuals become subjects of forms of control that are often arbitrary and unpredictable. Overall, securitisation policies tend to endorse emergency-oriented approaches that foster the use of semi- and in-formal policy tools (Longo & Fontana, 2022; Seeberg & Zardo, 2022).

This leads us to consider who is involved in securitisation processes and in what capacity. In this regard, the second line of research in securitisation, spearheaded by Bigo (2002, 2014), provides valuable insights. Bigo moves the focus from the discourses to the processes through which

refugee flows become a security issue. This involves looking at the actors involved in these processes and the specific technologies they employ (Balzacq, 2008; Huysmans, 2000). In a nation-state system, the police and military traditionally handle security matters. These institutions have a long history of ‘securitizing’ individuals and communities through their everyday actions. Rather than relying on speeches or pronouncements, these bodies foster securitisation by, for example, disproportionately targeting minority communities with aggressive policing, thus fuelling the public perception that these groups are disruptive or dangerous to society. Nationalist and right-wing parties often contribute to these mechanisms. On the one hand, by driving security concern on a specific social group, often immigrants. On the other, because they tend to emphasize the role of law enforcement agencies in maintaining public order and are more prone to increase military budgets compared to their left-wing counterparts (Bove et al., 2017; Wenzelburger & Böller, 2020). Notably, law enforcement agencies typically operate with a high degree of discretion and secrecy. While this may be justified in specific situations due to the nature of their work, it can also easily morph into a concerning pattern of silence, unchecked power, and a lack of accountability.

Another crucial player in security issues are private security companies (PSCs), also sometimes called private military and security companies (PMSCs) – businesses that provide security services to individuals, businesses, and governments on a for-profit basis. Especially in the last few decades, private companies have greatly contributed to the securitisation, militarization and externalization of migration, asylum and border control, providing technologies, personnel and know-how (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Sørensen, 2013; Lemberg-Pedersen, 2015). These actors have become very influential players in policy-making processes in the EU, further encouraging the deployment of military-like techniques and technologies for social control. In this respect, the concept of the ‘security-industrial complex’ (Davitti, 2019; C. Jones, 2017) has been employed to describe the progressive delegation of state powers in matters concerning border and immigration policies to the private sector. As has been well-documented, these interferences “raise serious problems for both the free market and the probity of public institutions” (Crouch, 2011, p. 93). Hybrid assemblages of public and private agencies facilitate the reproduction of patterns of plausible deniability (Ruzza, 2014), allowing for the perpetration of controversial behaviours while making liabilities difficult to allocate. Spaan and Hillman (2013) highlight border areas as prime examples of this, where collaboration schemes transcend legal, socioeconomic, and geographic boundaries. In these space,

“governments use the complexity of the border control market, with its dynamics of branching off, merging and sub-contracting, to distance themselves from controversial practices. This obscures states’ legal responsibilities, accountability and liability” (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2018).

This type of assemblage contributes to the creation of ‘new geographies of security’ (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2010; Godfrey et al., 2014), wherein networks of economic and political elites cooperate in security management. In this context, “security is conceived of as a knowledge, discourse, technology or practice that mediates the relation between the social processes of human mobility and the search for governmental control and steering capacity over them” (Huysmans & Squire, 2009, p. 2).

Securitisation tends to be discursively state-centred, portraying the nation-state as both the primary subject and main provider of security policies. Expansive and expensive security apparatuses at borders “have transformed border landscapes from liminal and remote edges of state authority into legible and governed state spaces where agents gain firmer control over movement” (Mitchell et al., 2020, p. 8). However, the actual execution of these policies has been consistently delegated to non-state actors, not always directly or in official capacities. As such, Andreas (Andreas, 2003) suggests that the securitisation of migration can be viewed as a process of ‘rebordering’ the state. Through processes of securitisation, nation-states have partly changed themselves. Thus, similar to neoliberalism, the securitization of migration can be viewed as a lens through which to observe a reconfiguration of the state apparatus – with both processes building on mutually compatible premises and evolving into similar modes of governance. Namely, they develop upon a problematic representation of people on the move and thus foster the implementation of emergency-like approaches to manage refugee flows, in which the state coordinates while delegating responsibilities to non-state actors.

2.4. Governance studies: the ‘steering’ role of the state

Governance studies offer valuable insights into the evolving role of the state in asylum governance. These studies investigate how public institutions navigate complexities and interferences emerging from both domestic and international arenas, which can potentially constrain the state’s authority and sovereignty.

Between the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, processes of globalization – involving the surge in cross-border mobility and the consequent diminished significance of national borders – had imposed dramatic changes in the relations among states and between the state and its citizens. In addition to this, the private sector has advanced into being a pivotal stakeholder not only in economic and financial activities, but also more importantly in policy and governance debates. Against this background, Governance studies offer insights into the ‘adaptation’ techniques employed by national governments to preserve their leverage within an increasingly plural, internationalized and market-oriented system of governance. Once a direct provider of a wide range of public services, the role of the state has transitioned towards regulation and coordination (Pierre & Peters, 2021), often referred to as “steering at a distance” (Stoker, 1998). The idea of an ‘adaptive’ state that reconfigures itself to

'survive' in and to a globalized world resonates in several inquiries carried out by political scientists and political economists (Pierre, 2002; Sassen, 1996). In the face of globalization, these studies say, nation-states had to reassess their role. Under increasing interferences coming from both within and outside national borders, the authority and power of state governments have been challenged and, undoubtedly, re-scaled (Pierre, 2000). This occurs within an arena encompassing various stakeholders, including political actors and institutions, corporate businesses, civil society, and transnational organizations (Pierre, 2000, p. 4). Nonetheless, these studies concur that this situation has not led to the decline of the state. Pierre, for example, contends that the shift from government to governance should not, "prima facie, be taken as proof of the decline of the state but rather of the state's ability to adapt to external changes" (Ivi, p. 3). Instead of assuming that the state simply succumbs to new pressures, Pierre suggests examining how it adapts to the challenges it faces, eventually turning constraints into opportunities (Ivi, 2000, p. 2).

When it comes to the governance of human mobility, challenges to the integrity and authority of the state are posed by a globalized market that requires states to relax their national borders for the fluid movement of people, goods and capital. Concurrently, international human rights legislation, particularly in the field of international protection, has counterbalanced state sovereignty by compelling governments to fulfil certain obligations towards non-citizens. Within a broader study on governance and accountability, Sassen (1996) analyses the state's new role in confronting these challenges, highlighting the tension between processes of denationalization – within the economy and through supranational institutions – and re-nationalization, as seen in the diffuse case of nationalist anti-immigrant discourses (p. XIV). Hollifield (2004) has described this tension as a 'liberal paradox', which necessitates reconciling market demands with human rights and security concerns (Coleman, 2005; Nevins, 2010; Sparke, 2006; Van Houtum & Pijpers, 2007). Addressing these issues, Sassen (1996, 2012) observes that the present era of globalization has given rise to a hybrid form of authority, situated at the crossroads of local, national, and global spheres, which is neither entirely public nor private. While acknowledging a decentralization of state sovereignty, with power distributed among various stakeholders (Sassen, 1996, p. 65), Sassen also recognizes the state's active role in this 'denationalizing' process (Sassen, 2005). The significance of this role becomes apparent, Sassen (2005) stresses, when we break down the state and analyse the functions of specific components within it, such as particular agencies, specific court rulings, and particular executive orders. The transformation in state authority can be better appreciated by examining its everyday unfolding, that is. And indeed Sassen writes that the migration governance is "an arena for both deploying ideas and pursuing the day-to-day implementation and practice of policy" (Sassen, 1996, p. 66). By examining what various stakeholders do (or not) 'in practice' and revealing how these behaviours align (or not) with government policies, we can make sense of the apparent contradictions and unresolved tensions between declarations and intentions, between what the state 'says' and what it actually pursues. Examining the everyday actions of individuals can reveal the invisible 'lines' drawn by

the state – that is, the institutional, legal and political boundaries it sets for society. According to Pierre and Peters (2021), the capacity to draw these lines primarily depends on the state’s ability to design and enforce public policies. As they point out, while governance encompasses more than just policy, “in practice, governing relies on the design and implementation of public policies as the principal instruments for achieving its ends” (Pierre & Peters, 2021, p. 6). In this context, governance is defined as “the political and administrative processes involved in making policies that are intended to steer” (Ivi, p. 5). Concurrently, this thesis identifies an additional instrument through which governments can substantially shape governance processes and determine other actors’ conduct – the ability to distribute and withhold resources.

Against this background, the expression ‘to keep aloof’ can offer a fresh perspective on the steering role of the state in asylum governance, that is its ability to exert influence by proxy. In everyday language, ‘aloof’ describes someone who maintains distance and shows little interest in getting involved. Applied to the state, this concept captures the documented tendency of national governments to ‘retreat’ from directly managing refugee flows (Tazzioli 2020a). This retreat can involve disengaging from previously held responsibilities or avoiding involvement altogether. The contraction of public reception systems, with reduced government-funded services and facilities, serves as a prime example of this trend. Similarly, border push-back practices that complicate, delay, or obstruct asylum seekers’ access to protection and reception systems exemplify how governments are abdicating their responsibilities under international law. And yet, ‘aloofness’ implies a level of passivity or apathy that is not entirely accurate in this context. While the state may delegate tasks and maintain distance, these behaviours can also constitute a strategic and calculated way to retain influence over processes and outcomes. In this respect, the word’s origins also indicate a slightly different connotation associated with the term ‘aloof’, precisely when used in the expression ‘to keep aloof’. Connected to nautical terminology, ‘to keep aloof’ means to sail strategically against the wind to maintain control and avoid getting pushed towards hazards. Applied to the state’s conduct in processes of governance, this strategy of ‘navigating’ the system indicates that the state deliberately and selectively disengages from certain competencies, both legal and operational. In this way, it achieves a twofold objective. Firstly, by keeping asylum seekers and refugees outside or at the periphery of its jurisdiction, the state reinforces the securitisation of these individuals as external threats to society. Secondly, by outsourcing the management of these flows to third-party actors, the state can minimize the time and resources it needs to invest in these processes. Therefore, the state is not indifferent, e.g. aloof, to the presence of refugee flows and the ways in which they are managed and controlled. Instead, it strategically distances itself, e.g. it keeps aloof, precisely to maintain indirect authority and control – both over asylum seekers and the non-state actors involved in these processes – while minimizing potential obstacles and undesired costs. That is, the state navigates domestic and international constraints – such as limited resources, contested authority and legal obligations – by strategically adapting to such conditions and turning them into opportunities. The ‘wind’

against which the state sails is represented by the economic, geopolitical, and judicial transformations occurring at both the global and local levels, within a plural and multi-scalar arena of actors. Rather than succumbing to these transformations, the state tactically embraces them and adjusts its role accordingly. To give some examples, governments can leverage the actual increase in refugee flows to recentre public focus on the identity, integrity and security of the nation, thereby reclaiming their authority and control over their territory and the people transiting and inhabiting it. At the same time, the state may respond to the easing of border restrictions due to global markets by turning the porosity and flexibility of borders into an advantage – for the purpose of selecting entries according to economic and labor needs, or to unofficially redirect unwanted foreigners to other countries. Concurrently, they can regain margin of action despite international legal obligations by bending these rules at their advantage or by mimicking these laws through policy instruments that, while appearing legally binding, do not carry the same degree of juridical and procedural certainty. Additionally, they can turn the plurality of actors intervening in governance processes into an opportunity for them to delegate functions and thus limiting their own responsibilities.

In light of this, the expression ‘to keep aloof’ provides an innovative way to describe the role of the state and its performative modes of governance in matters concerning the management of asylum. As I will show in this thesis, it is precisely by selectively dis/engaging from specific policy areas and by ‘circumnavigating’ legal obligations that governments resist new and challenging scenarios.

As these processes unfold, Pierre notes that formal authority has been increasingly supplemented by reliance on informal authority (Pierre, 2000, p. 3). Drawing on Informality studies, in the next section I delve into this issue by considering studies that have addressed the processes through which public services and functions become part of a hybrid and increasingly informal system of governance; as well as the ambiguous, opaque and discretionary practices and procedures through which the state contributes to shaping this mode of governing refugee flows. In this perspective, my research attributes significance not solely to actions and declarations but also, and predominantly, to states’ inactions and unspoken actions, including the externalization, privatization and informalization of its services and the “modes of governing through partial non-control and non-registration” (Tazzioli, 2021, p. 8; Rozakou, 2017a).

2.5. Informality studies: the informalization of asylum governance

Traditionally, migration and refugee scholarship has focused on the formal laws and official procedures of sovereign states. However, scholars increasingly recognize the need to examine systems of governance beyond the rigid confines of codified norms and jurisdiction (Mainwaring & Walton-Roberts, 2018; Tazzioli, 2021). Building on this consensus and insights from diverse disciplines that have explored informality across various societal and policy arenas, this section

establishes a framework to analyse processes of informalization in the asylum regime. In the context of this research, I use the concepts of informality and informalization to describe a spectrum of actions and inactions that reveal a system of governance shaped by the conflation of neoliberal and securitarian approaches. This includes the deliberate or accidental outsourcing to non-state actors – e.g. de-nationalization and de-institutionalization – of asylum-related procedures, that is the hybridization of public and private sectors in managing refugee flows. Additionally, it refers to the inner workings of the state machinery, emphasizing how and why government actors themselves employ informal means in managing refugee flows, including unregulated, ambiguous, and discretionary practices. Given that the preceding sections have already explored how the outsourcing of state functions to non-state actors and the hybridization of governance systems facilitate the proliferation of unofficial and unchecked practices, this section will delve more deeply into the informal dynamics within the state apparatus. Although this conceptualization of informality embraces even very different dimensions of asylum governance, inevitably leading to a certain degree of linguistic approximation, it remains valuable in capturing the state's operational and legal withdrawal from its prescribed and official duties, that is understanding how the state manages to 'keep aloof' in practical terms.

Informality studies offer crucial tools for dissecting the spectrum of actions and inactions observed in this context, providing insights into processes of informalization that occur both within and beyond the state's boundaries. Initially rooted in economic discourse, studies on informality have primarily focused on how non-government actors navigate contexts where public support and legal channels to address societal needs are lacking (Atesagaoglu et al., 2017; Levy, 2008). Looking specifically at economic dynamics, these studies have investigated the techniques and strategies employed by societal actors to meet their needs beyond the confines of the formal economy. Non-institutional channels and spontaneous networks provide access to resources, jobs, and services the state fails to offer. Informality, in this perspective, is an adaptive and creative response of non-state actors to institutional negligence (Bosma & Schutjens, 2009; Harris & Todaro, 1970; Phelps, 2021; Phelps & Wijaya, 2020). This type of dynamics become particularly evident in the context of refugee governance, where people on the move are forced to resort to informal means and unregulated channels to initiate and complete their journeys (Czaika & Hobolth, 2014, 2016; Düvell, 2011). In the absence of adequate policies and effective legal frameworks, asylum seekers turn to alternatives to achieve their goals and meet their needs. As a result, a growing number of non-state and informal initiatives emerge to fill the gaps left by inadequate or non-existent public services (Norman, 2024). In this respect, recent studies on non-profit solidarity initiatives – which generally operate in informal spaces and spontaneous networks – highlight how these projects arise in response to gaps in government support for people on the move (Fortarezza, 2023; Lahusen et al., 2021; Mescoli & Roblain, 2021).

Over the last few decades, Informality studies have yielded significant contributions that extend beyond the purely economic realm, including domestic and international politics (Polese, 2023).

This interest was largely motivated by evidence that, particularly since the late 1990s, state institutions have increasingly engaged in governance processes through collaboration and coordination with private actors and other public bodies (Abbott & Snidal, 2000; Westerwinter et al., 2021). In light of this, the concept of informal governance has come to define “any rules, norms, and institutional structures and procedures that are not enshrined in formally-constituted organizations or in their constitutions” (Roger, 2020, p. 10) – that is modes of governing that fall outside the strict boundaries of the state and the rule of law. In relation to asylum policies, this type of governance manifests in a multifaceted arena where both state and non-state actors are involved in managing refugee flows. Partnerships, subcontracting, and externalization blur the lines between public and private sectors, fostering a hybrid approach to decision-making and implementation that encompasses both formal and informal, explicit and opaque domains. The growing involvement of various actors – international humanitarian agencies like UNHCR and IOM (Garnier, 2023; Lavenex, 2016), NGOs and local associations (Ambrosini, 2021; Kaunert et al., 2013), and private businesses (Darling, 2016c; Menz, 2011; Novak, 2019) – alongside the increasing complexity of their interactions with the state apparatus, exemplifies a process of ‘hybridization’ and ‘informalization’ of asylum governance. By encompassing both public and private, institutional and non-institutional actors, this type of governance involves growing mediation and layering in policy-making and implementation, making it increasingly difficult to identify official and direct responsibilities. At the same time, the inclusion of private and market actors fosters a shift towards less regulated and hence less accountable governance.

Notably, more recent studies on informality have highlighted that, even in the absence of non-state intervention, formal institutions and government actors themselves may actively use informality to achieve their objectives. This involved a shift in focus from studying informality that exists outside of state control to examining how the state itself utilizes informal methods for governance. This shift underscores the importance of scrutinizing the semi-official, informal, and un/de-regulated aspects of state power that exist on the periphery of institutionalized structures (Basaran, 2008). Informality in this sense includes policies lacking legal foundation, unchecked procedures, ambiguous information, discretionary decisions, and practices lacking transparency that can allow stakeholders to bypass procedural and legal safeguards, and to evade responsibilities for their actions. Political geographers have increasingly explored these dynamics in asylum governance, providing interesting connections between their field and Informality studies.

Looking at this type of processes, Stel (2021a) and Nassar and Stel (2019) relies on the concept of “institutional ambiguity” to describe a mode of governance by state institutions which involves deliberately keeping laws and policies vague. For instance, governments may produce informality through *ad hoc* measures and case-by-case decisions without providing complete and transparent information on the rationale for their policies. These studies underscore that this type of conduct coincides with the aforementioned tendency of governments to delegate the management of

migration flows to market forces and other actors, thereby reducing costs and responsibilities. In this context, both actions and lack of thereof can lead to informality, liminality, and exceptionalism (Stel, 2021b, p. 2). This creates legal gray areas that shield decision and policy makers from potential backlash, while encouraging reliance on informal networks for refugee support to address financial burdens and administrative complexities. According to Stel, governments strategically initiate and sustain these processes “with the aim to discourage, control, and expel refugees” (2021b, p. 2). Institutional ambiguity thereby fosters the normalization and institutionalization of a ‘no-policy-policy’ approach (Nassar & Stel, 2019), that is a scenario where a government or governing body opts not to establish a clear and coherent set of policies for managing human mobility, instead producing inconsistency, unpredictability, and lack of transparency. The so-called hotspot approach is a case in point, as Stel eloquently explains:

“The initial establishment of ‘hotspots’ was, according to Veglio (2017), ‘surrounded by a haze of vagueness.’ The hotspot system represents what Kalir and Rozakou (2016) have called a ‘fantasy of a regularizing facility that aspires to bring order to chaos and to ensure the streamlining, absolute knowledge and control of populations on-the-move’. It was meant as a tool aimed at guaranteeing the ‘orderly and effective management’ of arrivals (Gatta, 2019,p.127). In practice, however, critical research has shown them to operate as almost the exact opposite. Due to, first, the absence of a regulatory framework and, second, the ‘hotspots’ prioritization of deterrence over protection they have become places of institutionalized non-recording, containment through mobility, and legal vacuum (Tazzioli, 2020)” (2021b, p. 6).

In a similar vein, Tazzioli (2021) draws on Feldman’s concept of the “gray area” (Feldman, 2018; see also Edkins, 2000) to highlight the inherent “opacity” informing and surrounding asylum governance practices. According to Feldman (2018), sovereignty and the gray zone are locked in a symbiotic relationship, since the gray zone is a precondition of state sovereignty, which in turn can fully reveal itself only in the latter. The gray zone, a space where rules are unclear or inconsistently enforced, is therefore a prerequisite of sovereignty itself, because a state cannot fully exercise its sovereign power unless it has some room to manoeuvre in this gray zone. Building on this assumption, Tazzioli explores opacity as a key strategy for governing refugee flows. While traditional analyses, even when critical in nature, often focus on actions that are either fully visible or completely hidden, Tazzioli (Tazzioli, 2021) points to the need to consider the deliberate use of opacity in asylum governance, and to understand it “not necessarily [as] the outcome of a coherent state strategy of obfuscation, nor [as] acts of deliberate concealment”. “Rather – she claims – opacity refers to the domain of undecidability which characterizes the grey area of migration and its legal blurriness”. In this respect, research by Kalir and Van Schendel (2017) reveals how border officers may collect data on asylum seekers in a haphazard manner, arbitrarily choosing which information to record. While this might partly stem from disinterest in maintaining comprehensive records, Tazzioli (2021) suggests this opacity also serves a strategic

purpose. That is, it enables authorities to evade accountability for potential human rights violations and legal infringements by obscuring their actions. At the same time, authorities produce opacity by concealing or omitting relevant information from asylum seekers, impeding or delaying their access to protection and reception systems. Local decrees and administrative measures are another source of opacity in asylum governance. The speed at which these policy instruments are issued, combined with the difficulty of accessing information about them, creates confusion and disorientation among people on the move, making it difficult for them to understand their rights and options. Therefore, while some uncertainty and inconsistency in refugee governance may be unavoidable due to the wide number and types of stakeholders involved, states also actively create confusion and opacity as a government tool (Eule et al., 2019; Griffiths, 2013; Whyte, 2011).

Another way in which states make use of informality for governmental purposes is through the implementation of operational and political agreements with third-state partners. Since the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’, the EU institutions and member states have consistently relied on political and operational agreements, such as the EU-Turkey agreement, with origin and transit countries to deter and divert refugee flows. These agreements hold appeal for governments due to their flexibility and streamlined procedures, which bypass some of the stricter legal and procedural constraints of formal arrangements (Longo & Fontana, 2022). However, this informality comes at a cost, reducing transparency and accountability (Cardwell & Dickson, 2023). In this respect, Cardwell and Dickson employ the concept of “formal informality” to address a “particular kind of governance... where the appearance of formality is provided by the similarity of instruments to established forms (such as international agreements) but falls short in accounting for the exact actions taken underneath them and their legal or rational connection to other instruments” (2023, p. 3125). Notably, Cardwell and Dickson note that

“operating outside established frameworks, especially in ‘crisis-mode’, can lead to unpredictable outcomes and ‘new style of discretionary governance’ (Joerges and Kreuder-Sonnen 2016; Scicluna 2018). The drift towards informality has allowed Member States to ‘create alliances outside the constraint of the EU legal and institutional framework’ and ‘unhook themselves from formulating a common EU migration and asylum policy’ (Panizzon and van Riemsdijk 2019)” (2023, p. 3124).

Drawing on Polese, we can thereby consider informality “as a way to reshape the political order of a system”, that is, “as a mode of governance” (2023, p. 343; see also Polese et al. 2017). Informality is thus better understood as “a spectrum with different shades rather than as a moment, or an opposite pole of formality” (Haid, 2017, p. 290), and this is why “research on informality always involves a relational approach to researching the state” (ibid.).

2.6. Conclusions

In these pages, I have presented the theoretical background and conceptual framework that will allow me to provide an interpretation of the data collected and to answer my research questions. Since Political Geographers examine the relation between space, politics and laws, their perspectives allowed me to consider asylum governance as an integrated system in which border, asylum and reception policies are mutually dependent. Specifically, Political Geography offers a robust framework for comprehensively addressing the first question, concerning the coexistence of processes of de-nationalization and re-nationalization. In this respect, I will use the expression *securitarian neoliberalism* to define the current mode of governing refugee flows that combines securitarian discourse and neoliberal approach.

Under these circumstances, Governance studies shed light on how the state mediates among these forces, clarifying how it interacts with, and react to, the emergence of a plural and diversified system of governance (second research question). This area of study sheds light on how national governments navigate the obstacles they encounter, both domestically and internationally. These include the challenges imposed by non-state actors, market rules, migratory pressures, and international laws. In this respect, I introduce the expression '*to keep aloof*' to describe the state's downgrading of its direct role in certain areas of policy or service provision, and its strategic use of this disengagement to orient the system in its preferred directions.

To achieve this 'dynamic equilibrium' of influence without direct involvement, states may resort to informal actors, tools and approaches to sidestep obstacles and limitations, potentially even breaking the law while avoiding official responsibilities. This necessitates operating along and beyond the boundaries of the rule of law. Highlighting the blurred lines and interdependence of formal and informal practices and actors, Informality studies scrutinize the hybridization of state and non-state sectors – the latter being subject to less public scrutiny – in governance systems, revealing how governments can exploit the ambiguity deriving from dispersed, mediated and layered inter-actions. Concurrently, they indicate that state actors themselves may resort to unclear, untraceable, and discretionary actions to create confusion and avoid being held accountable for their conduct.

In conclusion, these three approaches converge in a coherent analytical framework, offering a comprehensive and nuanced portrait of the state in asylum governance. Both neoliberalism (which emphasizes, among other things, limited state intervention and increased public-private partnerships) and securitisation (which prioritizes national security, integrity and authority) recognize the state's regulatory role. In this way, they resonate with Governance studies, which analyse how governments function by acknowledging the state's strategic dis/engagement as a way to steer the system and bypass limitations on its sovereignty. In these processes, using public-private partnerships and simplifying legal and procedural requirements become valuable tools for states to exert control 'at a distance'. Notably, since the approaches used are not limited to

addressing issues of asylum and migration at large, this theoretical framework can offer valuable insights into other policy domains, contributing to our understanding of political transformations and regime changes.

Chapter 3

Methodological Approach

“Qualitative writing becomes very much an unfolding story in which the writer gradually makes sense, not only of her data, but of the total experience of which it is an artefact. This is an interactive process in which she tries to untangle and make reflexive sense of her own presence and role in the research. The written study thus becomes a complex train of thought within which her voice and her image of others are interwoven. Therefore, ‘unlike quantitative work that can carry its meaning in its tables and summaries, qualitative work carries its meaning in its entire text... its meaning is in the reading’ (Richardson and St Pierre 2005: 959-60). The voice and person of the researcher as writer not only become a major ingredient of the written study, but have to be evident for the meaning to become clear”.

(Holliday, 2007, p. 129)

3.1. Introduction

This chapter delves into the epistemological and methodological choices that have shaped my research journey. First, I define the research paradigm, the set of assumptions and the epistemological lens that guided every step of the study, from formulating questions to interpreting results. This section will explain why I adopted an interpretive approach and conducted my investigation taking inspiration from the principles of Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2012, 2017). Second, I explore the methodological framework of the research in detail, explaining why political (Joseph et al., 2007) and relational (Desmond, 2014) ethnography is particularly well-suited to critically understand the state’s role in asylum governance. This type of approach emphasizes the inter-actions occurring ‘on the ground’ among the actors involved. Therefore, I dedicate the third part of this chapter to describing, motivating, and critically reflecting on my position and positionality as a solidararian (Rozakou, 2017b; Theodossopoulos, 2016) within the field. Finally, I discuss the specific methods employed

(participant observation, interviews and document analysis) for data collection and explain their usage and contribution across different fieldwork spaces and times.

3.2. Interpretive and grounded approach

My research process stemmed from the identification of a tension between de-nationalizing forces and re-nationalizing discourses in asylum governance. This apparent discrepancy highlighted the need to move beyond abstract assumptions and understand the everyday realities of how asylum governance unfolds on the ground. I thus adopted an interpretive approach (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2009), which aims at problematizing dominant narratives and encourages critical scrutiny of accepted routines, norms, and institutions by *grounding* them in the lived and shared experiences of those involved (Charmaz, 2012). Interpretive research challenges fixed and standardized portrayals of the world by emphasizing the sometimes unexpected divergencies between representations and experiences, as well as between official statements and actual behaviours. Accordingly, this implies that our comprehension of reality is shaped by the interactions among the researcher's and the research participants' partial yet complementary experiences, within the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which these experiences unfold (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2009). This approach allows the researcher to explore a wide array of dimensions of the social world, "including the texture and weave of everyday life, the understandings, experiences and imaginings of our research participants, the ways that social processes, institutions, discourses or relationships work, and the significance of the meanings they generate" (Mason, 2002, p. 1).

Based on these assumptions, this research aimed to comprehend reality through a process of sense-making rather than adopting a hypothesis-testing approach (Bhattacharjee, 2012). As such, I drew inspiration from the principles of Grounded Theory, particularly Charmaz's (2012) constructivist redefinition, which emphasizes the iterative relationship between data collection, theory development, and self-reflexivity. In this respect, Suddaby underlines that

"The reality of grounded theory research is always one of trying to achieve a practical middle ground between a theory-laden view of the world and an unfettered empiricism. A simple way to seize this middle ground is to pay attention to extant theory but constantly remind yourself that you are only human and that what you observe is a function of both who you are and what you hope to see" (Suddaby, 2006, p. 635).

Therefore, instead of starting with a rigid research question, my study began as an open dialogue with the people, practices, and processes I encountered as my research progressed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Notably though, as Coffey and Atkinson (1996) remark,

"The open-mindedness of the researcher should not be mistaken for the empty mindedness of the researcher who is not adequately steeped in the research traditions of

a discipline. It is after all, not very clever to rediscover the wheel, and the student or researcher who is ignorant of the relevant literature is always in danger of doing the equivalent” (p. 157).

My academic background provided a strong foundation in the fields of migration, refugee and border studies, human rights, security, and governance. This interdisciplinary knowledge base significantly informed the research process. At the same time, I have a decade-long history of engaging in both professional and volunteer work in contexts affected by human mobility in different countries and border regions. This added a further layer of practical knowledge on the issues considered in this thesis. Hence, while trying to maintain a curious attitude and to know the world by experiencing it, as suggested by Charmaz (2012), I also concur with Cutcliffe (2000, p. 1480) who posits that “no potential researcher is an empty vessel, a person with no history or background”. In light of this, I utilized my previous understanding as a flexible guide and continuously adapted it to accommodate the unexpected situations and challenges that arose.

With this understanding in mind, I started developing a preliminary coding scheme as soon as I began my ethnographic immersion, to make sense of the realities I was encountering. These initial codes subsequently evolved into the core categories that framed my analysis. For this purpose, I did not utilize data analysis software and instead relied on manual techniques such as mind maps and charts. Concepts and conceptualizations derived from both existing literature and my own intuitions and reflections matured in the field, and through constant dialogue with my research participants. Employing my own and my participants’ lived experiences as conceptual, epistemological, and methodological instruments of analysis (Cantat et al., 2019), I identified recurring themes and patterns and progressively organized them into a unitary and coherent narrative. Hence, in line with the principles of Constructivist Grounded Theory, the interpretation and analysis of data unfolded during the course of the research process (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) and proceeded abductively, in a pendular movement between induction and deduction (Burks, 1946). In this way, some concepts were dropped over the course of the research process, if they proved inadequate or misleading. Others were unpacked and explored in greater detail, giving rise to ‘families’ of concepts describing the same object/dynamic from slightly different perspectives (for example, ‘inaction’, ‘disengagement’, ‘un-involvement’, etc. to describe the state’s conduct). The final conceptual framework emerged through a combination of methods. In some cases, I combined existing concepts, such as *securitarian neoliberalism*. In other instances, I expanded the meaning of existing terms, for example, by integrating different definitions of informality. Finally, I also looked for entirely new expressions not found in the existing literature, such as ‘keep aloof’ to describe the state’s strategic (dis)engagement.

3.3. An ethnography of the state

To scrutinize the state's conduct in the sphere of asylum governance involves exploring the spatial, social, and institutional environment that shapes the meaning and impact of state actions and inactions. This necessitates a sincere acknowledgment of the multitude and variety of actors engaged in designing, executing, and challenging asylum policies, as well as the relationships they establish and maintain among each other and with governmental authorities, in different locations and times. Crucially, this also involves being sensitive to the complexities, ambiguities, and contradictions that can arise from interactions among various actors, and how these factors impact the elaboration and implementation of policy objectives. In light of this, ethnography offers a valuable approach for studying the nuances of state (un)involvement in asylum governance, as it delves into the everyday realities where the state's influence becomes perceivable *by others* (Sharma & Gupta, 2006; Tehlen et al., 2017). Ethnography can be defined as “social research based on the close-up, on-the-ground observation of people and institutions in real time and space, in which the investigator embeds herself near (or within) the phenomenon so as to detect how and why agents on the scene act, think and feel the way they do” (Wacquant, 2003, p. 5). As I will explain in detail in the last part of this chapter, this ethnographic approach relied on a combination of methods, including participant observation, qualitative interviews, and document analysis. This included both triangulation to ensure data validity and juxtaposition to compare and contrast findings from different sources (Hall, 2010).

The utilization of ethnography to examine state policy and governmental behaviours is not a widespread practice (Auyero & Jensen, 2015). Access to institutional spaces and the knowledge generated within the state apparatus largely depends on the willingness and capacity of authorities to share specific information. Employing this approach in studying the state apparatus can thus pose difficulties, particularly in contentious policy areas such as asylum and migration management. Yet, in the context of this research, ethnography provides several advantages.

Firstly, it allows us to move beyond official policies and observe ‘slices of daily life’ – or the “day-to-day intricacies” as Baiocchi would say (2005, p. 16) – where the state's role manifests, be it through its presence or absence. This ‘intimate’ observation draws insights and understanding (in)directly from the experiences, stories, and perspectives of those involved. By engaging in repeated encounters and dialogues over time, this stratified observation captures the real life dynamics informing and surrounding asylum governance, revealing its sometimes surprising and counterintuitive developments. As Joseph et al. (2007, pp. 2-3) have noticed, indeed, “[l]arge-scale political transformations have ground-level sources and effects [and] [t]he ethnographic microscope serves to capture these quite well”. In practice, this meant immersing myself in the field, establishing a routine within its daily rhythms, and living and breathing the realities alongside those that co-participate in shaping and implementing asylum governance on the ground.

Secondly, through such deep immersion, ethnography brings to the forefront the relational processes at play. As Emirbayer would say, actors cannot be separated from the transactional contexts in which they are situated (1997, pp. 287–288). These relations can be collaborative as much as conflicting, or even exist in the absence of formal structures and official interactions. Since state actors operate within a complex network involving public and private actors distributed across several scales, applying a relational approach to my ethnographic research yields novel viewpoints on the ways in which state institutions engage in the co-construction of asylum policies and practices. As conceptualized by Desmond (2014), Relational Ethnography proves to be an ideal method for examining processes that entail configurations of relations among various agents or institutions, because it prioritizes analysing fields over specific places, and processes rather than individual entities. This implies observing the subjects of study from multiple, sometimes conflicting perspectives and within broader power dynamics. Notably, by adopting a relational approach in ethnographic research, the ‘microscopic’ (Joseph et al., 2007, p. 3) observations characteristic of ethnography do not risk losing their power in the specifics and exceptions of daily life. Instead, they are put into direct relationship with the social, political, and institutional context that shapes these experiences. This is why my fieldwork, beyond focusing on the Italian-Slovenian border, also employed multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) across the Balkan route. This broader perspective allowed me to capture not just interactions between individuals and agencies in a single location, but also the multi-layered and trans-national nature of asylum governance itself.

Thirdly, an ethnographic approach helps unveiling inconsistencies and contradictions within policy processes, such as the disparities between ideologies, policy outputs and real-world practices (Joseph et al., 2007). Unlike traditional political analysis, which often fixates on formal and sanctioned interactions, an ethnography of the state delves deeper into how official rhetoric resonates and evolves within the daily lives of ordinary individuals. This entails taking “ambiguous and obscure” governance zones seriously, elevating them to the primary focus of research endeavours (Joseph et al., 2007, p. 5). Consistent with this methodology, the present study emphasizes the practical manifestation of governance on the ground, highlighting the importance of semi- and un-official spaces where it operates and faces resistance (Yashar, 1999). In other words, this research engages with the “gray zone of politics” (Auyero, 2022), including its “clandestine connections” (Auyero & Jensen, 2015, p. 362; see also Joseph et al., 2007), unregulated procedures, and informal behaviours, ultimately revealing how informality serves as a tool of governance alongside formal and institutionalized policy tools.

3.4. Solidarity as a research approach⁸

“To investigate social relations ethnographically one must, at minimum, study multiple actors and agencies who are engaged with one another (because they belong to the same field and are participants in the struggles that define its stakes) and dissimilar from one another (because they occupy objectively different positions within that field)” (Desmond, 2014, pp. 554–555).

Given the relational nature of my ethnographic research, it is particularly important to outline the perspective from which I observed the state’s management of refugee flows. In this section, I reflect on my positionality by focussing on the concept of solidarity and my engagement in the field as a solidarity actor. Being the state the primary object of my investigation, I suggest here that novel and original insights on its conduct can be drawn not only through direct observation of governing actors, but also by monitoring their behaviour and related effects ‘by proxy’. Specifically, this involves looking at the state through the eyes and experiences of a *solidarian* (Rozakou, 2017b; Theodossopoulos, 2016). ‘Solidarians’ is a term increasingly used within and outside the academia to define the volunteers, activists and professionals that engage in non-profit initiatives in support of migrants and refugees. In this respect, in this research I have used solidarity as a ‘research approach’ to produce rigorous, novel and critical knowledge on the functioning of the state in three ways. Analytically, solidarity initiatives can be seen as a ‘mirror’ of states conduct (Section 3.4.1). That is, every action or inaction by the state – be it the violation of international law or the refusal to manage the transit and arrival of migrants – elicits a response from solidarity actors. Hence, by looking at what they do we can identify, by contrast, the unmet duties and responsibilities of governing bodies. Methodologically, conducting research alongside solidarians allows access to otherwise inaccessible spaces, actors, and information because of their unmediated, continuous and transnational presence along migratory routes (Jordan & Moser, 2020) (Section 3.4.2). Finally, from an epistemological standpoint, engagement-driven research can challenge hegemonic systems of knowledge production (Davies et al., 2023), thereby opening spaces to counter prevailing discourses and effect social and political change (Picozza, 2021) (Section 3.4.3).

In the next sections, I will address these three aspects in detail and in relation to each other. Before doing that it is nonetheless fundamental to specify that my involvement in these initiatives, while serving as a valuable lens through which to examine state policies and practices, does not equate to an exclusive and unconditional endorsement of the solidarians’ perspectives, which are indeed multifaceted and cannot be simplified into a single, cohesive viewpoint. While I share many of the principles and approaches of the solidarity activists I have interacted with, their stances, like

⁸ Picozza uses the expression ‘solidarity as method’ in her book *The Coloniality of Asylum: Mobility, Autonomy and Solidarity in the Wake of Europe’s Refugee Crisis* (2021). I use a slightly different expression because the meaning I attribute to this idea shares important similarities with Picozza’s interpretation, but also includes some variations and additional elements, which I explain in these pages.

any other, are not without contradictions and complexities. This is why their approaches and discourses have been repeatedly subject to critical scrutiny and debate in the encounters and conversations between the solidararians and me⁹. Based on this informed and critical standpoint, my participation in related mobilizations, rather than compromising analytical detachment and impartiality, facilitated my research by providing direct exposure to the dynamics and experiences informing and surrounding the governance of asylum. As a matter of fact, being an active party in the arena of the border, I experienced first-hand the effects and implications of governance modes on the ground. Furthermore, participating in the everyday activities of solidarity initiatives enabled direct observation and unmediated access to governmental stakeholders, a result of my consistent presence within the field and regular interactions with research participants. Crucially, in parallel to this, my analysis of state institutions was also substantiated by a three-months research period conducted within an Italian government agency responsible for asylum procedures – as an intern at the Territorial Commission for the Recognition of International Protection in Florence –, as well as interviews with public officials and analysis of policy documents.

This approach represents a slight variation from the principles of relational ethnography as described by Desmond (2014) and Auyero (2015). However, given the inherent difficulty of closely examining the state without mediation, I suggest that taking the perspective of a solidarity actor can offer deeper and unfiltered insights on real-world governance dynamics. As such, this research digs into “the complexities and contradictions that unfold ‘on the ground’ as solidarity is practised” and interprets them “as theoretically, methodologically and epistemologically productive spaces” (Cantat et al., 2019, pp. 15–16) to understand the role of the state in asylum governance. In this regard, it is important to note that while I use these two categories to distinguish between positions I consider largely alternative, my intention is not to rigidly define the meanings of ‘state’ and ‘solidarity’ into fixed and self-sufficient categories. In a relational field, roles and relationships are not monolithic, but rather evolve over time and across different spaces, presenting themselves as processes of identification rather than static identities. State and solidarity actors describe realities that are neither internally homogeneous nor independent among each other (Fortarezza, 2023). As a matter of fact, individuals within a group may pursue both shared and personal objectives, and the boundaries of these groups themselves are fluid and ever-changing. Additionally, actors approach situations strategically, sometimes cooperating within established rules, and sometimes seeking “to change, ignore, or twist those rules” (Jasper & Duyvendak, 2015, p. 14). Therefore, when I refer to state and solidarity actors, I do so to facilitate the understanding of the phenomena described, but in full awareness of the fact that “players redefine each other through their interactions and conflicts” (Jasper & Duyvendak, 2015, p. 11),

⁹ These reflections and knowledge fall outside the scope of this research, and thus they will not be further explored in this discussion. For a more in-depth and critical debate on solidarity initiatives, and their criticalities, see Malkki (2015), Braun (2017), Fleischmann & Steinhilper (2017), Kleres (2018), Pries (2018), Sandri (2018), Vandevordt and Verschraegen, (2019a).

which in turn define the ‘boundaries’ – e.g. the conditions of possibility – of the arena within which they exist.

In the following sections, I will provide both theoretical and empirical grounding on the concepts of solidarity and solidarism, revealing how and why being a solidarity actor represents a valuable standpoint to understand state conduct in a new light. I will then reflect on my positionality and how taking the role of a solidarist has influenced my personal experience during fieldwork and what epistemic implications it entails.



Image 4 - Piazza della Libertà during the solidarity activities

3.4.1. Solidarity as an analytical ‘mirror’

Studies on solidarity are not new (Bauder & Juffs, 2020), but the political and historical context of the past couple of decades has sparked renewed interest in the topic (Giliberti & Potot, 2021; Magazzini & Desille, 2023). With several crises occurring at various governmental levels and across multiple policy fields, grassroots initiatives of social and political support among citizens and between citizens and non-citizens have proliferated across Europe (Federico & Lahusen,

2018; Kousis et al., 2021; Kousis & Lahusen, 2021; Lahusen et al., 2021). Particularly in the realm of migration and asylum, the increasingly restrictive approach of EU member states toward people on the move has prompted grassroots associations, social movements, and individual citizens to fill the void left by institutional bodies and take the lead in providing material, moral, and legal support to asylum seekers and refugees (Davies et al., 2023; Della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021; Giliberti & Potot, 2021; Rządtki, 2022; Sandelind & Ulaş, 2020; Sandri, 2018; Schwiertz & Steinhilper, 2021; Sinatti, 2019; Tazzioli & Walters, 2019; Vandevordt & Verschraegen, 2019b). The wide range of studies reflects the diverse spectrum of practical interventions and ideological viewpoints encompassed by the definition of solidarity. As a matter of fact, “solidarity means different things to different actors, takes on different shapes in different contexts, and is invoked to explain and define a wide range of practices, discourses, positionings and social relations” (Cantat et al., 2019, p. 4). Rather than trying to simplify this complexity, this research embraces the plural and multifaceted nature of solidarity groups and uses it as an analytical lens through which to understand how governmental institutions operate in practice.

When it comes to supporting people on the move¹⁰, solidarity efforts typically focus on two main areas of intervention, which in turn encompass several tasks. The first revolves around the border regime, specifically the militarization of frontiers and the phenomenon of push-backs. Push-backs are tactics employed by governmental actors to force would-be asylum seekers out of their territory. These tactics bypass established legal and procedural frameworks, including those safeguarding international protection rights (especially for minors), detention procedures, expulsion processes, and the appropriate use of force. In this context, solidararians gather testimonies of violence and violations perpetrated by state and European actors against people on the move, bringing these accounts to the attention of the public and oversight bodies responsible for monitoring and potentially penalizing such actions (Davies et al., 2023). The second area encompasses emergency support and basic assistance to people on the move throughout their migratory journey, from departure to arrival. This typically includes services such as soup kitchens, first medical care, distribution of clothes and other goods, as well as providing information on and support for accessing asylum procedures. Whether providing a hot meal, legal advice, or advocating for the recognition of rights, these initiatives respond to both the immediate necessities of those they aid and the broader political context in which they operate. Their nature defies rigid categorization because they are shaped by the relational dynamics within which they exist. For every instance of state in/action – such as illegal deportations or the absence of support services in urban transit zones – there is a re-action performed by solidararians. Hence, using my participation in solidarity initiatives as an analytical lens allowed me to bring to the surface state (mis)conducts ‘by proxy’.

¹⁰ Solidararians typically avoid differentiating between economic migrants and asylum seekers. This is both a pragmatic response to the challenges of identification in transit and emergency contexts, and a deliberate rejection of the hierarchical and discriminatory views of human mobility that these distinctions often imply.

In light of the above, in this research, the concept of solidarity encompasses those actors who intervene in the governance of refugee flows by facilitating the transit and reception of asylum seekers through alternative practices and approaches to those of state institutions, and importantly, without gaining profit from these activities¹¹. These projects can vary in terms of their religious or secular nature, their humanitarian or political orientation, their degree of institutionalisation, their sources of funding, and their organizational scope (García Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019). Along the Balkan route, solidarity manifests in various forms, from non-politicized volunteers offering food and medical care to political collectives protesting and challenging the border regime. As concerns the case of Trieste, it is worth stressing that non-professionalised solidarity has developed within a context that was already significantly influenced by the presence and competences of ‘solidarity professionals’ working in the local reception system. I refer to the social and legal operators of the Italian Consortium of Solidarity (ICS), a state-funded, private organization which developed a reception model different to the one implemented by the national government. Oftentimes, these different dimensions of solidarity, the “civic”, the “autonomous”, and the “institutional(ised)” – as categorized by García Agustín and Jørgensen (2019) – interact and cooperate among each other, both at the local and transnational levels. As a matter of fact, in Trieste, the group of volunteers and activists collaborate not only with institutionalised forms of solidarity, but also with other initiatives operating in Italy, such as the Association for Legal Studies on Immigration (ASGI)¹², and along the Balkan route, such as the network RiVolti ai Balcani¹³ and the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN)¹⁴.

Ultimately, while my positioning in the field directly links to grassroots civic and political initiatives, the concept of solidarity can be extended to describe a variety of projects that share common roots in the political dissatisfaction for and moral condemnation of the current EU asylum regime (Ambrosini, 2022). Whether directly or indirectly, the very existence of these initiatives puts in question the *status quo* (Muehlebach, 2012), because it exposes the limitations and contradictions of the neoliberal nation-state and the gratuitous violence of the border regime. Overall, practices in support of people on the move can be understood as “a morally motivated series of actions which acquires a political character [...] through their implicit opposition to the

¹¹ This is the main difference between solidarity projects on one hand, and private businesses and criminal networks on the other. The latter two entities greatly benefit from current trends in migration governance, such as securitisation and neoliberalisation, and therefore have no interest in openly challenging the role and authority of the state. In contrast, solidarians do not seek profit from their activities; instead, they typically invest their free time and personal resources into activities that could potentially be criminalized by the state.

¹² ASGI is a non-profit association founded in 1990 by a group of lawyers, legal scholars, and researchers specializing in immigration, asylum, and citizenship. ASGI conducts research, studies, and training courses, and carries out extensive monitoring and advocacy work on the rights of migrants.

¹³ The RiVolti ai Balcani network, founded in 2019 to protect the rights of those traveling the Balkan route towards the European Union, is composed of more than thirty Italian organizations and associations active in reception services, alongside journalists, artists, activists, and academics. It also involves concerned citizens who participate in various ways.

¹⁴ The Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) is a network of independent, grassroots NGOs working together to document and expose the illegality and brutality of immigration policies throughout the Balkan route and beyond the EU's borders.

ruling socio-political climate” (Vandevoordt & Verschraegen, 2019a, p. 105). As Picozza notes, indeed, “these practices are all interlinked by a search for autonomy from the state, and thus a self-organised structure, responding either to a total critique and rejection of the state as a direct oppressor of refugees or, at the very least, an acknowledgement of its failures in terms of protecting their rights” (2021, p. 27).

Because of this, governments themselves often perceive solidarity actors as hostile political entities threatening the *status quo* – particularly when their actions support a certain type of human mobility, for example, that of the economically and ethnically stigmatized. A consistent portrayal of such migration as a criminal act has led to increasing slandering and repression of actions and discourses aimed at supporting this mobility. As a consequence, in many instances, the activities of volunteers and activists are punished through administrative or criminal sanctions (Amnesty International, 2020). Intimidation and criminalization were commonplace in the spaces I traversed as a research-solidarian. In Serbia volunteers had to distribute food to people on the move covertly to avoid fines, detention, or expulsion. Similarly, Trieste welcomed me with an attempt to criminalize solidarity. On the morning I left the city at the end of my first visit, the General Investigations and Special Operations Division of the Italian state police (DIGOS) was searching the house of the two founders of Linea d’Ombra OdV – a non-profit organization that supports people on the move in Trieste and along the Balkan route. They were accused of aiding illegal immigration because they had hosted a family of asylum seekers (parents and two kids) in their house and bought train tickets for them. Interestingly though, stifling solidarity efforts may backfire, inspiring and solidifying contentious sentiments and behaviours, occasionally leading to acts of defiance against national and supranational institutions (Fortarezza, 2023).

3.4.2. Solidarity as a methodological ‘laissez-passer’

Although adopting the role of a researcher-solidarian might raise concerns about (im)partiality and subjectivity, taking this stance provided me with invaluable advantages in terms of access to the field and the actors that inhabited it. Explicating this role thus means acknowledging that these experiences have been a fundamental component of the theoretical, methodological and epistemological process that led me to develop this study. Accordingly, I chose to emphasize my involvement in solidarity initiatives by making auto-ethnography an integral part of my narrative (Bochner et al., 2000; Khosravi, 2011; Reed-Danahay, 2020) and occasionally adopting a more biographical and reflective approach (Melucci, 1998).

The first and final door I crossed in Trieste was that of a solidarian’s home. His generosity played a vital role in facilitating this research. Apart from providing accommodation when alternatives were scarce due to the pandemic of Covid-19, he introduced me to his circle of friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, who later became integral to the study. He also took me along on ‘border trips’ and offered insights into the historical and cultural intricacies of Trieste and its surroundings.

My personal background facilitated my integration into these social contexts. Prior experiences in border areas and along refugee routes helped me get in touch and build trust with solidarity networks – despite the limitations due to the pandemic and my relative unfamiliarity with the Balkan region as a migration context – encouraging them to share their experiences and perspectives openly. It is worth noting that, in contexts where human rights and safety are compromised, researchers and journalists can face distrust and resentment from those operating in the field, as they are sometimes perceived as seeking sensational stories and then disappearing. In this regard, Johnson et al. (2006) emphasises that engagement-driven research can reduce the outsider stigma while revealing “unwritten rules and complex interactions” (McMorran, 2012, p. 482). My involvement as a solidarity actor mitigated such stigma by offering my personal commitment to the cause and fostering a dialogue based on mutual respect and aligning approaches. At the same time, it allowed me to get first-hand insights into the evanescent and otherwise unscrutinizable dynamics occurring on the ground, revealing shadows and ambiguities in the unfolding of governance process, particularly in relation to state conducts.

Having established the above, my immersion in the field as a solidararian has inevitably resulted in different ‘intensities’ in my ‘vicinity’ to the actors under study. However, my participation in solidarity initiatives did not hinder my access to governmental actors. On the contrary, this access was facilitated by my daily exposure to the micro-dynamics of the border, in which solidarity and state actors interface continuously. In some cases, for instance, it was the people I met in Piazza della Libertà¹⁵, e.g. the solidarians, who directed me to or even put me in touch with institutional and political figures. Notably, access through institutional channels to law enforcement agencies has been at times challenging. This was primarily due to the fact that the nature of my research topic had recently been an uncomfortable issue for the Italian Ministry of the Interior¹⁶. Under these circumstances, the opportunity to obtain firsthand information and insights from law enforcement officials in Trieste was made possible through informal networks, word-of-mouth among participants, and their willingness to connect me with these actors. Keeping a respectful and open-minded approach, I managed to collect the perspectives of both state and solidarity actors, encompassing a wide range of political opinions on migration. Interviews with law enforcement officials and other state actors conducted in Trieste, coupled with a period of research within a government body tasked with evaluating asylum requests in Italy (see Section 3.5.2), allowed me to balance my ‘solidarity’ perspective and capture a rigorous portrait of the Italian state’s conduct in asylum governance, from both an outside and inside perspective (I will further discuss field(s) access, participants selection, and data collection in Section 3.5).

¹⁵ From now on, I will often refer to Piazza della Libertà with “the Piazza”. This stylistic choice reflects the everydayness language of my field. Among solidarians, but also with local administrators and experts, “the Piazza” is an easy way to make reference not only to the physical space of Piazza della Libertà, but also to the solidarity movement born in Trieste.

¹⁶ See the case of ‘informal readmissions’ and the subsequent condemnation of the Ministry of the Interior by the Rome Tribunal in January 2021, as detailed in Chapter 7.

Regarding access to participants, I also want to clarify that the voices of migrants have been intentionally left in the background, even though the encounters with them and the testimonies they brought to me have inevitably and deeply shaped my feelings and thoughts. During my fieldwork and thanks to my role as a solidarian, I had unmediated and regular access to people on the move. As such, I had the opportunity to know some of them more intimately and, with time, some of these connections developed into friendships. However, at this stage, my research cannot offer any concrete improvement or solution to their dire situation, hence it felt fairer not to ‘exploit’ their voices without being able to give anything in return. At the same time, I endeavoured to alleviate their difficulties as much as possible, whether by offering direct material support or by sharing their testimonies within my personal and professional networks.

In light of the above, it merits underlying that this kind of ethnographic ‘closeness’ can be demanding for a researcher. Being *present in* the field for prolonged periods of time, I became socially and emotionally involved in the lives and struggles of the research participants. This required a constant, and sometimes challenging, work of methodological self-consciousness to avoid and if necessary deconstruct my own biases and prejudices (Charmaz, 2017). This meant detecting and dissecting my worldviews, language, and actions and revealing how they affected my perception and understanding of reality (Charmaz, 2017, p. 3). As my own subjectivity became data to be analysed, auto-ethnography helped me narrate my experience within the field (Reed-Danahay, 2020) and highlight multiple states of consciousness that connect the personal to the cultural and the political (Bochner et al., 2000). The purpose of such self-narration is to question imposed identities and boundaries, emphasize the interaction between intentionality and structure, and consequently challenge dominant representations of reality (Khosravi, 2011).

3.4.3. Solidarity as ‘epistemic friction’

De Genova argues that “there is no neutral vantage point” (2013b, p. 252) when studying migration and refugee flows. On these premises, Davies et al. (2023) observe that activist-researchers are inevitably drawn into the complexities of contemporary asylum regimes, because of the high stakes and blatant injustices inherent in these systems (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2022). As such, they become “part of the conflict, a party to the dispute” (De Genova, 2013b, p. 252). In Davies et al.’s words,

“We do not claim to stand apart from our research or speak from a position of indifference. To do so would be to deny our emotional experiences, including anger and frustration, after witnessing multiple instances of border injustice in the Balkans, and hearing multiple firsthand accounts of violent pushbacks at the EU border” (2023, p. 171).

In this respect, Lorde (1984) and hooks (1996) have stressed the epistemological power of emotions as sources of awareness and knowledge production. Lorde in particular underlines how anger can be a catalyst for critical thinking, especially for marginalised communities, and thus a drive for social change. Notably, embracing this perspective did not imply surrendering to emotional reactions. On the contrary, it meant consciously embracing these experiences, analytically dissecting them, and using them as a foundational element in my epistemological framework. Crucially, this also involved seeking for a balance between my responsibilities as a researcher, on the one hand, and a solidararian, on the other. In some cases, this required me to take some distance from the field, in order to preserve a critical perspective. In other circumstances, in which non-intervention in the name of ‘objective’ research would have been unethical (MacKenzie et al., 2015, p. 316), I preferred to prioritize the solidarity activity. In this way, I tried to reduce the risk of research ‘extractivism’ by offering my time and energies to the solidarity projects.

‘Engagement-driven’ research (Boni et al., 2020; Garelli & Tazzioli, 2013; Scheper-Hughes, 1995) aligns well with studies concerning social justice and power dynamics, as it seeks to counter and transform injustices (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2022). Taking on the role of a researcher-solidararian in the highly contentious field of asylum governance provided me with an invaluable opportunity to examine my subject of study, e.g. the state, through a subaltern and critical perspective. Subaltern in the sense that solidarity actors possess limited capacity to influence decision-making processes and find themselves subject to government policies, including repression and criminalization. Simultaneously, it offers a critical perspective because these initiatives are equipped and motivated to challenge and counteract existing policies and institutional approaches. By assuming this perspective, this research aims to create “epistemic friction” (Medina, 2013) with the hegemonic discourse of the state surrounding asylum governance. Medina (2013) deploys the concept of “epistemic friction” to describe the clash between dominant and marginalized knowledge systems. He argues that this conflict is essential for dismantling power structures and generating new ideas, ultimately suggesting that intellectual tension can drive social change. This involves viewing the knowledge generated within spaces of solidarity as an act of “epistemic disobedience” (Mignolo, 2011) that challenges, without dismissing, “the epistemic borderwork of the state” (Davies et al., 2023, p. 184).

In the context of this study, solidarity initiatives represent a source of epistemic friction not only because they often openly contest existing policies and power relations, as well documented in existing literature (Ambrosini, 2024; Ataç et al., 2016; Cantat et al., 2019; García Agustín & Jørgensen, 2016). They also contribute to the elaboration and diffusion of linguistic processes ‘from below’, as in the case of the widespread adoption of the expression ‘people on the move’,

popularized by solidarity activists, and migrant-coined terms like ‘game’¹⁷ and ‘jungle’¹⁸ even in academic circles, a phenomenon fostered by participatory and engaged research methodologies conducted within solidarity networks. Furthermore, and crucially, the practices and knowledge produced within these contexts represent “a form of resistance to the ontological violence” (Davies et al., 2023, p. 172) of the EU asylum regime because they bring to the surface the unpredictable, counterintuitive and otherwise undetectable ways in which the state operates in real-world dynamics. In other words, solidarity work uncovers the discrepancies between norm and practice, rhetoric and action in governmental behaviours. The unmediated and widespread presence of solidarity actors along migratory routes allows them to quickly identify inconsistencies in state policies and discourses, providing tools for more accurate analysis of asylum governance. In the context of this research, the concept of epistemic friction thus refers to the fact that solidarity initiatives act as catalysts in the disclosure and acknowledgement of those modes of governance that states try to hide, manipulate and make deliberately illegible. Namely, this thesis represents an attempt to unearth the inner and ‘intimate’ working of the state, in the everyday and real-world dynamics through which it exercises its power over refugee flows. This is particularly evident in the context of border regimes and especially when push-back practices are involved (R. Jones, 2016; Pallister-Wilkins, 2015). As Gerst argues, “contemporary political borders not only have a geographical but also an epistemic dimension” (2020, p. 145). That is, national and EU governing bodies operate in a shroud of opacity, silence, and strategic information dissemination designed to impose hegemonic narratives, suppress dissent, and obscure the injustices perpetrated at the border. In this respect, concepts such as “epistemic violence” (Spivak, 1988) and “testimonial injustice” (Fricker, 2007) effectively describe this type of systemic violence. As widely attested in this thesis, push-backs not only infringe upon the physical and legal rights of would-be asylum seekers but also aim to conceal these abuses from public view (Davies et al., 2023). This is achieved through various tactics, including denying, distorting, or withholding information on these practices, as well as avoiding data collection on pushed-back asylum seekers. It also involves creating legal ambiguity around the border regime, often by arbitrarily criminalizing refugee movements and thus predetermining asylum seekers’ testimonies and claims as untrustworthy and dismissible (Fricker, 2007). Additionally, states can prevent these people from obtaining official documentation necessary for legal recourse, shielding themselves behind a veil of unaccountability (Astuti et al., 2022). Against this background, solidarity initiatives have the capacity to expose and denounce the opacity, ambiguity and illegality of violent border practices and discourses (Davies et al., 2023). Recording, archiving, and mapping border violence – activities well diffused among solidarity initiatives along the Balkan route – challenge dominant narratives not only by shedding light on otherwise invisible

¹⁷ ‘Game’ is the way in which people on the move call their attempt to cross international borders clandestinely.

¹⁸ ‘Jungles’ is the way in which people on the move call the informal settlements built in the forests and along the railways. These settlements are usually made of camping tents donated by solidarity workers or makeshift shelters of plastic, wood, and sheet metal.

and untraceable processes, but also by amplifying marginalized voices. By refusing to silence survivors' testimonies, these practices represent a form of resistance to the "epistemic borderwork of the EU's pushback regime" (Davies et al., 2023, p. 178). The epistemic friction imbued in these initiatives is thereby amplified by their collaborative nature, with knowledge co-created by both solidarians and migrants, thus producing an example of "counter-hegemonic storytelling" (Armiero et al., 2019, p. 10). Ultimately, as Davies et al. (2023) argue, when state authorities employ obfuscation to evade accountability, amplifying the voices of push-back survivors becomes an act of political resistance.

Beyond the crucial work of monitoring and reporting border violence, this research also highlights how solidarity initiatives can provide a privileged vantage point to observe the concrete mechanisms of reception systems. While it is true that, in distributing essential goods and providing socio-legal assistance, these actors substitute the state, relieving it of a responsibility and falling within the logic of neoliberal outsourcing (Harvey, 2011; Kearns, 1992; Pallister-Wilkins, 2020; Papada et al., 2020), they can also exercise a 'counter-steering' effect against processes of externalisation, marketization and privatization of reception services. In this respect, it is crucial to differentiate the work of solidarity groups from formal humanitarian aid (Sandri, 2018), including NGOs, INGOs and UN agencies. As a matter of fact, humanitarian organizations, tasked with "managing the undesirables" (Agier, 2011), often only alleviate the worst effects of policies without challenging the underlying systems (Fassin, 2005, 2012). Critics argue that humanitarian aid tend to transform refugees into passive victims, obscuring the political roots of their plight. Agier (2011), Fassin (2005, 2011), Khosravi (2011), and Malkki (2015), among others, contend that humanitarian practices often depoliticize and dehumanize refugees, silencing their voices and reinforcing hegemonic narratives. As such, humanitarian interventions may even reinforce security-oriented policies aimed at keeping refugees distant, while endorsing neoliberal logics that envision the outsourcing of public services to charitable non-state organizations. A clear example of this is represented by the fact that international humanitarian organizations are often entitled to manage reception centres where would-be asylum seekers are forcibly accommodated after being stopped at an international border. Located in peripheral areas, these centres are an integral part of the border regime, and thus humanitarian agencies involved in their management end up normalizing the effects of such governance model. Against this background, grassroots initiatives in solidarity with refugees provide an alternative approach. Freer from institutional and financial constraints than UN agencies and humanitarian NGOs, grassroots organizations and activist networks operate with greater flexibility (Jordan & Moser, 2020; Mitrović & Valencia, 2019). This allows them to openly challenge the underlying systems that perpetuate problematic asylum policies, a characteristic less prevalent among humanitarian organizations constrained by funding sources (Pries, 2018) and political neutrality (Makki, 2015).

3.5. Research methods and field(s)

The following sections delve into the methods I utilised throughout my research and explain how these methods were adapted to accommodate the inherent complexities of the research sites, the dynamic nature of the fieldwork timeline, and the diverse types of information I sought to capture.

3.5.1. Methods: participant observation, qualitative interviews and document analysis

For this study, I selected a combination of research methods: participant observation, qualitative interviews, and document analysis. These methods were triangulated and juxtaposed to ensure access to a wide range of information and well-rounded understanding of the processes investigated (Hall, 2010).

Participant observation immerses the researcher within the study environment, encouraging active observation and participation (Bhattacharjee, 2012). According to Balsinger and Lambelet,

“the purpose (or essence) of participant observation, from Malinowski (1922) to today, is to view and to understand events through the perspective of the people one studies. Participant observation is thus a technique of research where the incorporation of the researcher into the group he or she wants to study is a fundamental element. Researchers take part in the same situation in order to understand the contradictions, the stakes, and the social expectations that people being studied experience [...] Participation and observation conducted with reflexivity, combined with other methods for triangulation, produce data that are confident enough for extrapolation” (2014, p. 146).

This deep immersion fosters an insider’s perspective, akin to Geertz’s concept of “deep hanging out” (1998). Participant observation served as my initial point of access in each new space during the fieldwork periods. This approach allowed me to gradually familiarize myself with the field and its actors (Rabinow & William, 1987), especially considering that most of the towns and border zones were entirely new to me before starting my PhD research. Second, participant observation was used in contexts where it was difficult or impossible to conduct interviews, either because the circumstances did not allow for it or due to confidentiality obligations. Finally, this method allowed me to identify dynamics and patterns that would not have emerged from the interviews, due to their sensitivity or informal nature.

Where and when possible, I complemented my observations with qualitative interviews, “a fundamental tool for generating empirical knowledge through asking people to talk about certain themes” (Della Porta, 2014, p. 228). Crucially, participant observation captures actions, but interviews provide insight into how participants interpret and explain their behaviour. This allows researchers to see if what people say they do aligns with what is observed. Accordingly, the interview process is not one-size-fits-all. Researchers may employ a range of techniques, from casual conversation to in-depth, recorded interviews, to best suit the circumstances and encourage

open communication. My interview guide was developed after, and thanks to, initial participant observation. This allowed me to prioritize themes and questions most relevant to the field, having first gained a deeper understanding of the context, collected background information, and established rapport with potential interviewees. Purposive sampling, where I consciously selected interviewees based on criteria relevant to my research questions, was used alongside chain referral methods (snowball and respondent-driven sampling) to reach a diverse range of participants (see Appendix: List of Interviews). This combination ensured I could gather data from a wide variety of perspectives, even those from hard-to-reach populations (Bernard, 2006). I conducted 38 qualitative interviews with 32 participants. Some participants participated in more than one interview. Interviews included semi-structured, unstructured, and longitudinal formats.

Finally, document analysis “provided background information that helped me understand the sociocultural, political, and economic context” (Bowen, 2009, p. 36). Documents also proved valuable before and after interviews: informing question development and enabling data triangulation. Additionally, they allowed me to identify discrepancies and contradictions between ‘written word’ and actions. As Bowen observes,

“Document analysis, then, is not a matter of lining up a series of excerpts from printed material to convey whatever idea comes to the researcher’s mind. Rather, it is a process of evaluating documents in such a way that empirical knowledge is produced and understanding is developed. In the process, the researcher should strive for objectivity and sensitivity, and maintain balance between both” (2009, pp. 33–34).

This included government documents (laws, policies, directives, parliamentary inquiries), EU and national policy documents, legal documents (court transcripts, case files) and NGOs and international organisations’ reports.

In the next sections, I will contextualize the different applications of these methods within the various locations and timeframes that shaped my fieldwork journey (see *Table 1*).

3.5.2. Field(s): Piazza della Libertà within the Balkan Route

“The relational ethnographer has no place to lay her head, so to speak; she does not amputate social relations through the imposition of categories based on bounded places. Rather, she attempts to reconstruct a network of relations that guide everyday life, studying fields rather than places [...] If processes live in relations, in intergroup competition and collaboration, in flows between institutions and their inhabitants [...] then studying them requires abandoning the group or place as the locus classicus of ethnographic exploration and taking processes themselves as the fundamental units of analysis [...] The point is that relational ethnography necessarily sacrifices some ethnographic depth in order to investigate connections, transactions, and processes shooting through multiple contexts. Or, to put the matter more generously, relational ethnography replaces substantive depth (intimacy with a single group or place) with

relational depth (intimacy with the dynamics of a network of relations)” (Desmond, 2014, pp. 563, 565, 570).

Piazza della Libertà, in Trieste, was the focal point around which my ethnographic experience revolved. Sitting on a worn bench, with Trieste’s train station behind me, I had a front-row seat for the ‘spectacle’ (De Genova, 2013a) of the Balkan route at a time when the Covid-19 pandemic and other migratory issues dominated the Italian public debate. As a volunteer with a local grassroots organization, I frequented the square regularly for a period of almost three years and consistently participated in solidarity activities every afternoon during the summer of 2022, Monday through Saturday. Since 2019 – when the first group of volunteers started their activities – Piazza della Libertà has emerged as a vital node along the Balkan Route, serving as a meeting point for people on the move and solidarity groups. Owing to the symbolic significance the square has garnered in recent years, its benches and flowerbeds have transformed into social hubs for a segment of Trieste’s civil society¹⁹, as well as for international activists visiting the city.

During the research process, the square evolved into a second home for me whenever I was in Trieste, becoming the centre of my social and professional life. Through my daily and prolonged presence in the Piazza, I found myself engaged in countless encounters and unexpected conversations with the people who inhabit, or brush by while passing, this space. This immersion provided opportunities for me to create and then expand my network, gain access to reception system offices and structures, participate in public events and ‘closed-doors’ meetings, and accompany my participants on their journeys along and across the Italian-Slovenian border. While these experiences were not physically confined to Piazza della Libertà, the possibility for me to engage in them greatly depended on my active involvement in the solidarity activities carried on there. This allowed me to transcend the architectural boundaries of the square and expand my perspective beyond the confines of the city and state. And indeed, as an activist once told me, “Piazza della Libertà and the Bosnian border are inextricably linked, the beginning and the end of the ‘game’. There cannot be one without the other” (VA3). Hence, with the Piazza serving as a central point of reference, and keeping my focus on the Italian government, I expanded my perspective on a broader geographical area, whose boundaries were defined by the ‘steps’ – e.g. the activities, experiences and testimonies – of the individuals involved in the research process (see *Image 6*).

The fieldwork was organized into three distinct research phases, geographically separate but substantially interconnected. In the first phase, from September to December 2020, I completed an internship at the Territorial Commission for the Recognition of International Protection in Florence, one of the Italian state bodies responsible for processing asylum requests. The second phase involved a multi-sited ethnography along the Balkan route, spanning a total of three months

¹⁹ Among others, this includes those who coordinate events like the monthly Critical Mass, which used to commence from this very spot for a period, as well as visitors from Italy and across Europe, like those summoned for the Migrant Caravan direct to Maljevac, at the Croatian border, in June 2022.

between December 2020 and October 2021. Finally, I focused my ethnographic immersion on the Italian-Slovenian border and the city of Trieste, with my initial visit taking place in February 2021 and the final one in May 2023. Crucially, the first two phases provided the essential context for comprehending the third phase within the international legal framework of asylum and the broader context of the Balkan route.

- *The normative framework: 'within' the asylum regime*

The Covid-19 pandemic erupted just three months into my PhD program, severely limiting mobility and in-person interactions for an extended period. Unable to travel, I commenced my fieldwork in the city where I was living at the time, Florence. Between September and December 2020, I spent three months as an intern at the Territorial Commission for the Recognition of International Protection in the city. Territorial Commissions are state bodies that process applications for international protection. With 20 commissions throughout Italy, they include public officials and representatives from UNHCR. While the functioning of these bodies varies, they all adhere to the same legislative framework. Therefore, by actively participating in the activities of one Commission, I gained direct access to the legal and legislative sources applicable throughout the country and firsthand experience of their practical implementation²⁰.

During those months, I collected notes and reflections in my field diary, integrating them with insights and information gathered from legal documents and policy reports that the officers made available for me. Having signed a confidentiality agreement, during this time I conducted no interviews and I have not relied for my analysis on information acquired from informal conversations with officials, interpreters, and other interns, nor from sensitive and confidential documents. Building upon the data collected during the internship, I subsequently adapted and refined it to align with the specific requirements of my case study. In the third phase of fieldwork, conducted in Trieste, I met and interviewed various stakeholders including civil servants, police officers, UNHCR officials, local politicians, and practitioners involved in border management and the reception system. These formal interviews, along with several informal conversations that were conducted 'off-the-record', helped me contextualize the theoretical knowledge acquired in Florence within the lived realities of Trieste.

However, it is worth reiterating that access to informational sources within the state apparatus, and especially law enforcement agencies, has been at times challenging, and not always successful, especially in the vicinity of the northeastern border. My formal request to interview officers from the FVG border police, addressed to the Ministry of the Interior and supported by an institutional letter from my PhD supervisor, was indeed rejected. During those same months, other researchers and journalists also faced denials of access to information and informants. It is

²⁰ At the end of the internship, I drafted and presented a report on the Balkan route, which was then made available to the Commission for the analysis of the cases concerned.

reasonable to believe that this was primarily due to the fact that the nature of my/our research topic has recently become a sensitive issue for the Italian Ministry of the Interior. As I will extensively discuss in Chapter 7, the refusal of some state actors to disclose certain information or engage in particular discussions, and the consequent difficulty in assessing facts and intentions, represents in itself a salient finding of this research. The vagueness and opacity of the Italian government in matters concerning asylum management, indeed, is a constituent part of the governance framework delineated in this thesis. Recent years have seen an increase in situations where state officials have become aware of, or even participated in, potentially illegal practices against asylum seekers carried out at the behest of the state. This awareness of potential wrongdoing, on the part of both the officials and myself, shaped the boundaries of my interactions with law enforcement agencies and certain state representatives. Still, under these circumstances, it proved helpful to explain to all my participants that my intention was not to smear and embarrass, but rather to give nuance and depth to the description of my field by considering different and sometimes conflictual perspectives.

- *The transnational background: travelling through the Balkan route*

Once I had gained a clear understanding of national and international asylum legislations, I delved into the empirical dimension of their implementation and implications. I left the offices of the institutions and moved onto the ‘field’ and became a volunteer in different border zones along the Balkan route. I spent one month in Serbia, near the border with Croatia (December 2020-January 2021), another month in Greece (August 2021), slightly less than two weeks on the Bosnian border with Croatia (October 2021), and a one-day trip to Slovenia²¹. My primary field research references were solidarity movements working alongside the Balkan routes. These organizations provide assistance and advocate for political action in support of people on the move. My volunteer role adapted to each context. While I formally volunteered with a solidarity movement in Serbia, in Greece and BiH I relied on this network for conducting participant observation, ensuring my availability for project needs in a more informal and occasional way. This multi-sited (Marcus 1995) and longitudinal (Berckmoes et al., 2021) approach guided me through different hubs of the Balkan route, allowing me to monitor processes over time and across multiple locations. Importantly, it is not uncommon for solidarity workers to encounter the same migrants at different stages of their journey. Faces reappear, and life stories unfold across discontinuous geographies, contributing to a multi-dimensional and ever-evolving landscape. Therefore, this approach allowed me to trace “histories in different parts of the globalized world and searching for unexpected connections between places and contexts” (Rydzewski, 2020, p. 79).

²¹ Participation in the meeting between local and regional activists and the Zapatista Movement delegation visiting Europe.

Volunteer activities demanded full-time engagement, leaving limited time and energy for data collection and reflection. However, they were crucial for me to witness and understand the complexities and contradictions arising from asylum management ‘on the ground’ within and across border regions. Due to the frenetic pace of activities and the associated fatigue, both mine and that of my participants, during the time spent along the Balkan route I conducted very few interviews. Nevertheless, informal and unrecorded interactions became a valuable learning opportunity. By observing the dynamics around me and engaging in countless conversations, I acquired a wealth of information from the situations I experienced and the people I met. The emotions and reflections arising from these encounters found expression in an extensive field diary, comprised of descriptions, drawings, maps, photos, transcripts of brief dialogues, and other information acquired in non-institutional settings. Meanwhile, to strengthen my preparation and contextual understanding, I extensively reviewed reports from grassroots and international organizations and regional solidarity networks, alongside analysing EU and national policy documents.

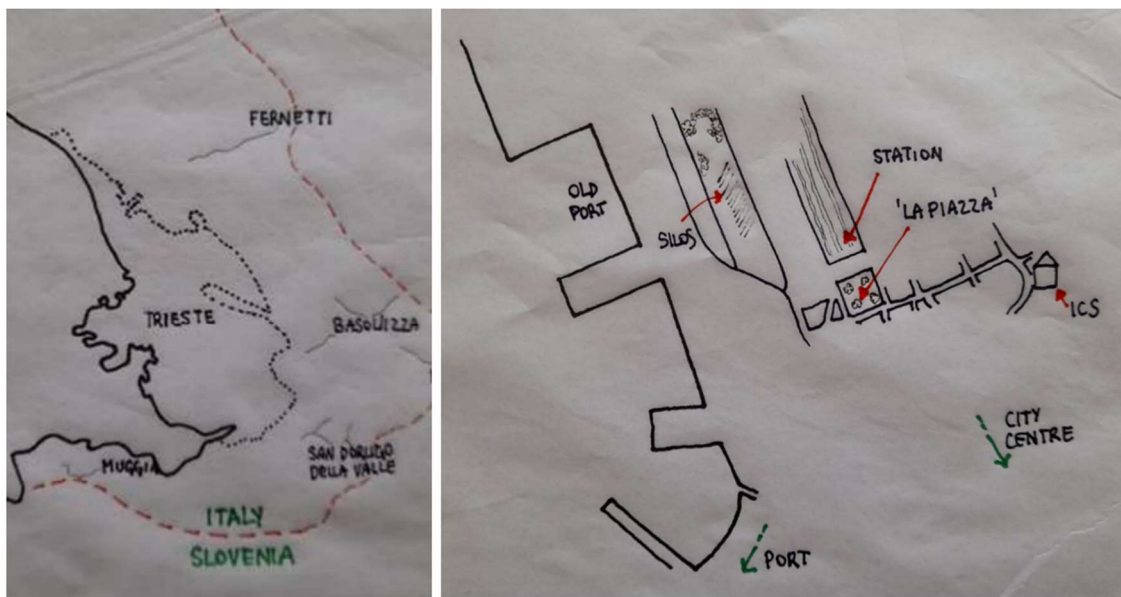


Image 5 – Drawings of the Italian-Slovenian border and Trieste's city centre (source: Field diary)

- *The main case study: Piazza Della Libertà in Trieste*

With this knowledge in my pocket, I entered into Piazza della Libertà, in Trieste, where the Balkan Route ‘ends’. Upon crossing the Italian-Slovenian border, migrants leave the Balkans at their back and enter into the hearth of Europe. Past Trieste, they disperse through multiple sub-routes that cross northern Italy and branch off towards the centre and north of the continent.

The fieldwork in Trieste commenced in February 2021, coinciding with the Covid-19 pandemic. The limitations enforced to prevent and contain the spread of the pandemic (such as ‘closing’

international borders and drastically reducing commercial and tourist transport) significantly impacted the Balkan route, leading to a slowdown in the flow of people. Additionally, restrictions on mobility and interactions affected both civil society and public officials. As a result, upon arrival in Trieste, I encountered a city with a significantly reduced migrant presence and only few individuals engaged in solidarity activities. The deserted streets were dominated by municipal police cars, with most shops and services remaining closed. This ‘stand-by’ phase provided me with an opportunity to enter the field in a context of relative calm, vastly different from the anticipated increase in arrivals during spring and summer.

Throughout my fieldwork, I made regular visits to Trieste to monitor seasonal variations (February 2021, March-April 2021, June-July 2021, September-October 2021; February 2022, April-May 2022, June 2022, June 2023), with durations ranging from 2 weeks to 2 months. While the ethnographic research primarily focused on the time frame of my fieldwork, the analysis was contextualized by examining the period from the early 2010s, capturing the onset of what would evolve into the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’.

For almost all of 2021, I concentrated on participant observation and took part, on a daily basis, in the activities carried out by the volunteers in the Piazza. Informal and convivial moments throughout the day, before, during, and after service hours, provided opportunities to meet with participants and discuss various issues, enriching the analysis with their precious insights and inputs. Participant observation did not only mean volunteering in the Piazza: it also involved participating in assemblies and meetings among volunteers and activists, meeting experts and local administrators, visiting reception centres and relevant locations along the route and the frontier, and travelling along and beyond the Italian-Slovenian border. From September 2021, while keeping in contact with the solidararians and remaining available for supporting their activities and initiatives, I focused on gathering interviews. I collected 36 semi-structured interviews with volunteers and activists, social operators, practitioners and lawyers, state officials and police officers, local and regional politicians. This enabled me to delve deeply into specific issues, gaining insights into how the actors involved perceive themselves and other stakeholders within the field. Some participants allowed me to record, others did not; some preferred to have their personal data anonymized.

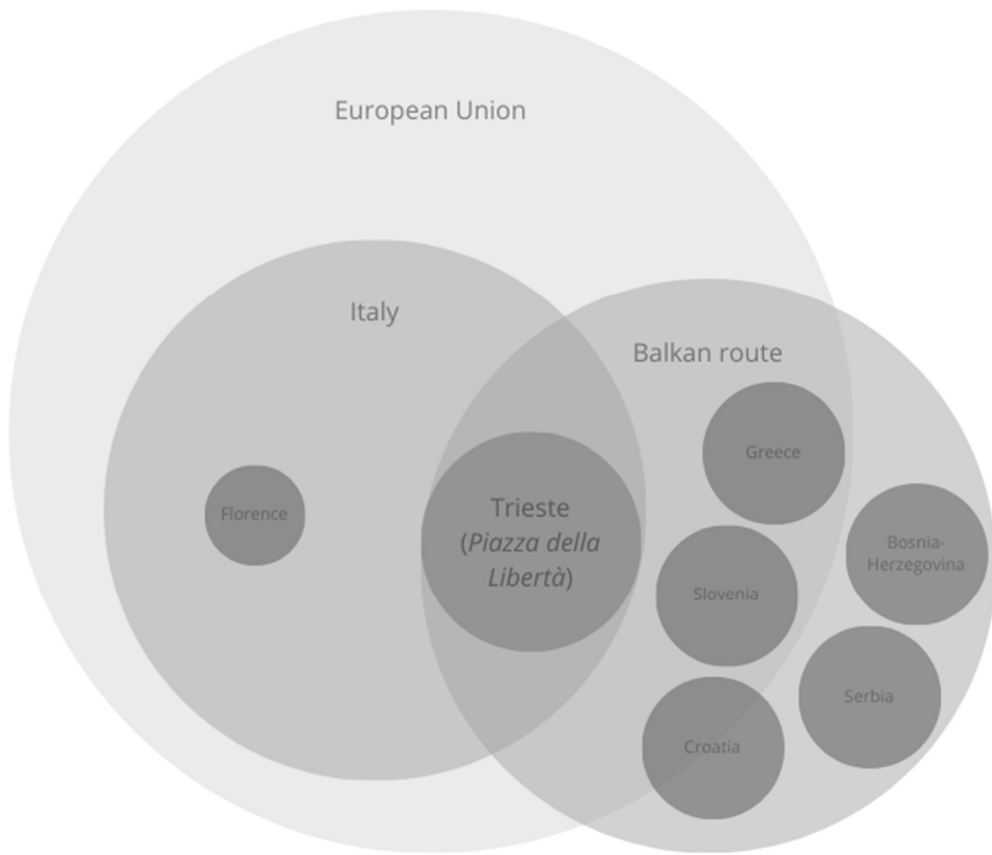


Image 6 - Diagram of the fields of analysis and locations

Table 1 - Fieldwork summary

Phase of fieldwork	Location(s)	Timeframe	Methods (by relevance)	Purpose
<i>The normative framework: 'within' the asylum regime</i>	Territorial Commission for the Recognition of International Protection (Florence, Italy)	September-December 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Document analysis (policy and legal documents, international organizations and NGOs' reports) - Participant observation, later integrated with interviews with state officers in Trieste 	To understand how the current state of EU migration governance came to be, we need to analyze the legal and institutional framework that regulates it. This analysis helps us identify the 'conditions of possibility' that shaped the current situation.
<i>The transnational background: traveling through the Balkan route</i>	Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Slovenia, Greece	December 2020-October 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participant observation - Document analysis (international organizations, NGOs and activists' reports) - Informal conversations and two unrecorded interviews 	A thorough understanding of the regional context is crucial to identify possible similarities and symmetries in migration governance between EU and non-EU countries.
<i>The main case study: Piazza della Libertà in Trieste the main case study: Piazza della Libertà in Trieste</i>	Trieste and other locations at the Italian-Slovenian border	February 2021-May 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interviews with 30 local actors - Participant observation - Document analysis (policy and legal documents, international organizations and NGOs' reports) 	By closely examining local dynamics and interactions within border zones, we can gain a deeper understanding of the roles and practices of various actors involved. This on-the-ground perspective allows us to observe how migration governance actually functions and potentially identify discrepancies between official rules and the practices employed.

PART II
Empirics

Chapter 4

Setting the Stage: the EU Asylum Regime

“A major part of the problem is the lack of policy imagination and political will, with European member states still refusing to embrace a EU-wide migration policy based on the principles of solidarity, assistance and a limited sacrificing of national sovereignty”.

(Campisi & Sottilotta, 2022, p. 4)

4.1. Introduction

Building on the analytical framework established in Part I, Part II presents the empirical data collected during almost three years of fieldwork. I will start by introducing a macro-level examination of asylum governance in Europe and I will then progressively narrow the focus to micro-realities at the local level in various countries along the Balkan route. This will provide the ideological, normative and political contextualization for my main case study, Italy.

This first empirical chapter explores the institutional, legislative, and political foundations of the asylum regime in Europe, with particular emphasis on the events informing and surrounding the development of the so-called Balkan route. This comprehensive picture is built upon a foundation of existing research, along with my own analysis of policy and legal documents, and interviews I conducted. In the first part of the chapter, I discuss the historical and ideological developments that have shaped immigration, border and asylum policies in the EU over the last few decades. Understanding this supranational context is crucial for analysing national approaches to refugee governance in Europe, because the European Union constitutes a very special assemblage in which supranational and national powers and interests converge (and diverge) in the definition of policies and laws. The second part of the chapter delves into how this normative framework contributes to understanding the emergence and transformation of the Balkan route, particularly since 2015 – considered a turning point for the EU because of the start of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’.

4.2. The migration-security nexus

The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees laid a foundation for refugee protection after World War II, primarily for Europeans. However, the European Union itself would not commit to a Common European Asylum System for full and inclusive application of the Geneva Convention until the new millennium. Although the issue of borders – specifically, who can cross them and under what conditions – has been at the heart of the European supranational experiment since its origins, the management of refugee flows and human mobility at large entered the EU agenda relatively late, gradually, and not always coherently (Longo, 2016). Especially forced displacement from non-EU countries remained a peripheral issue for a very long time. Particularly for some EU member states with a long history of emigration or, at most, labour immigration, the protection and reception of asylum seekers and refugees have only recently become a pressing concern, often leading to the development of emergency-like approaches, partly stemming from the shortsightedness of various EU governments (Castelli Gattinara, 2017).

It was the Schengen Agreement in 1985 that started the debate about the management of people crossing internal and external borders of the union. The agreement establishes freedom to cross internal frontiers for all nationals of the Member States. However, Article 2.2 of the Convention for implementing the Schengen Agreement clarifies that “where public policy or national security so require a Contracting Party may, after consulting the other Contracting Parties, decide that for a limited period national border checks appropriate to the situation shall be carried out at internal borders”²². Though a first step towards a unified Europe, the agreement uphold the sovereignty of national governments over communitarian concerns, allowing them to re-establish internal border controls under security pretences.

Security concerns were also used to justify the ‘shifting’ of controls from internal to external borders. As indicated in the Convention implementing the Schengen Agreement,

“In view of the risks in the fields of security and illegal immigration, the Ministers and State Secretaries underline the need for effective external border controls [...]. With a view to implementing those uniform principles, the Contracting Parties must, in particular, promote the harmonisation of working methods for border control and surveillance” (Ivi, p.62).

With the creation of an area of free movement for European citizens, EU authorities deemed it necessary to strengthen controls along the community’s external frontiers in order to counterbalance increased internal cross-border mobility. In this way, the Schengen Agreement

²² The Schengen Acquis - Convention Implementing the Schengen Agreement of 14 June 1985 between the Governments of the States of the Benelux Economic Union, the Federal Republic of Germany and the French Republic on the Gradual Abolition of Checks at Their Common Borders, 1990.

established a correlation between external borders, identity, and security, framing cross-border activities as a primary concern for both national and community policies (Longo, 2002). As a matter of fact, ‘immigration’ and ‘security’ appear three times each in the agreement, and always together, in Title I, Art. 7 and Title II, Art. 17. As such, the Schengen Agreement elevated EU external borders to the status of material and symbolic spaces where European identity would be henceforth claimed and protected.

In this context, the creation of Trevi 1992, an informal sub-section of the Trevi group set up in 1989 by the Rhodes European Council, left a crucial imprint on the path that led to the definition of the asylum regime as we know it today (Longo, 2002). The group was not formally established by a single public document; instead it emerged through informal cooperation. It represented the initial step toward intergovernmental coordination at the European level in the fields of immigration, asylum, and judicial and police collaboration. Crucially, at the time, these areas did not fall under the official purview of the European Community. Hence, Trevi 1992 operated informally, outside established channels, and often with a degree of secrecy (Bunyan, 1993). Additionally, by bringing together ministers of the interior and justice, as well as police and intelligence officers, the approaches and competences on which the group relied were primarily focused on the prevention of and prosecution of criminal and terrorist activities. As a result, the initial collective efforts to manage immigration and forced displacement in Europe were characterized by a strong emphasis on surveillance and police-like tactics (Gabrielli et al., 2022; Huysmans, 2000), performed with limited accountability mechanisms. Moreover, this meant that private security companies and the military industry became increasingly influential players in policy-making and implementation processes (Jones, 2017).

This securitarian attitude was further consolidated in the so-called Maastricht Treaty (Treaty on European Union, 1992), the first regulatory instrument explicitly referring to the management of migratory flows to and across the EU. Rather than establishing clear and coherent guidelines, however, the treaty barely touches on immigration and asylum policies, and squeezes them within a single regulatory framework that juxtaposes borders, immigration, and crime (Longo, 2002, 2016). In this respect, Longo writes:

“The Maastricht Treaty strengthened the paradigm of internal security both by incorporating it into the context of primary law and by introducing the variable of immigration into the equation of crime and irregular immigration. In fact, the Treaty brought together, under the title dedicated to the policy of justice and internal affairs, police and judicial activities related to the fight against crime and drug trafficking, policies against irregular immigration and work, police control of foreigners, border control, and asylum and regulation of migration flows. These provisions clearly reveal the existence of an inherent flaw in the debate on combating organized crime at the Union level: the equation between immigration, irregular immigration, and crime. The consequence of this approach in terms of policy regulation is the predominantly ‘police-oriented’ nature of managing migration flows, asylum, visas, and combating irregular immigration. All these issues are placed among the concerns not related to social policies

but rather to internal security policies regulated according to the same control-inspired orientation adopted for the fight against organized crime, based on prevention and repression” (Longo, 2002, p. 140 - translated by the author).

The subsequent Treaty of Amsterdam (1997), amending the Treaty on European Union, confirmed the same approach of linking human mobility and border management to security concerns. As a matter of fact, Article B establishes the objective for the Union

“to maintain and develop [...] an area of freedom, security and justice, in which the free movement of persons is assured in conjunction with appropriate measures with respect to external border controls, asylum, immigration and the prevention and combating of crime” (Treaty of Amsterdam, 1997, p. 8).

Building on this ‘inherent flaw’ (Longo, 2002), e.g. the artificially created nexus between immigration from non-EU countries and crime, the focus of border law has shifted from protecting people to prioritizing national security. Consequently, Migration law has progressively aligned with Criminal law, increasingly relying on terms like ‘irregular’, ‘illegal’, and ‘criminal’ to describe migrants and people seeking for international protection. The legal and linguistic process of criminalization succeeded in “rendering suspicious in the eyes of the population (including public officials) the movement of persons across international borders” (Guild, 2010, p. 5), in turn justifying the widespread use of securitarian approaches (Guiraudon, 2017) that prioritize the role of the nation-state, both as the target to be protected and the actor responsible for security.

4.3. State-centred mindset and fragmented implementation

This approach found its definitive confirmation in the Treaty of Lisbon (Treaty of Lisbon Amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty Establishing the European Community, 2007), which at the time in which this research was conducted served as the main regulatory framework for asylum within the European Union. Within a single normative body, the treaty addresses three different policy areas: asylum policies, border management, and labour migration (Chapter 2 of the Treaty). As Longo (2002, 2016) argues, this creates a problematic intertwining between three policy areas with distinct targets, logics, implementers, and objectives. This intertwining contributes to an increasing convergence in the approaches used to address regular and irregular forms of migration, hence consolidating in the public debate the perception that most non-EU migrants are criminals. By combining policies to counter illicit cross-border activities with measures to manage the protection of asylum seekers, the treaty not only perpetuates the correlation between immigration and crime but also envisages a complex regulatory apparatus involving different levels and areas of government. Despite the ambition to create a legislative tool capable of harmonizing these policy areas among member states, the result has been to make the management of refugee flows more fragmented and complex. Namely, the Lisbon Treaty

established the legal framework for the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) aiming for coordinated and uniform management of asylum claims across EU countries. However, border control and reception policies remained within the authority of individual member states, leading to a problem of ‘schizophrenia’ within the system. While asylum was collectively recognised in theory, the actual implementation of this policy field has suffered from the individual choices made by member states regarding the control of their frontiers and the management of the people present on their territory. Over the last few decades, EU member states’ policies and implementation procedures for protecting and receiving asylum seekers and refugees have developed in significantly different ways. These variations stem from a variety of factors, including the geographical position of countries, electoral preferences, national legal frameworks and institutional stability. The ‘flexible’ and dispersed implementation system established by the Lisbon Treaty has allowed these differences to translate into state-centric and opportunistic approaches to refugee governance across the continent. This has created a mismatch between the supranationally sanctioned right to asylum and the way actual responsibility for those seeking protection is allocated among governments.

By delegating the management of borders, as well as the reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees, to member states, the Treaty left governments with a great margin of discretion and the possibility to reduce their involvement in matters of international protection. As will be discussed in the following chapters, the ability to selectively ‘close’ borders and to outsource certain reception functions to third parties, effectively limits people’s access to asylum procedures, ultimately saving the state work. Notably, neoliberal logics of public-private partnership, efficiency, and cost-reduction have played a key role in shaping and sustaining this process of state disengagement (Bhagat & Soederberg, 2019; Darling, 2016b, 2016a; Novak, 2019). One of the consequences of this has been that the division of tasks concerning asylum governance and the number of actors involved in these tasks have increased (Gill, 2016b). This growing mediation between decision-makers and implementers led to the widespread involvement of non-governmental and private entities in traditionally public policy areas. In this respect, it is worth noting that non-state actors are usually less strictly bound by human rights law than the state. Therefore, the partial or complete delegation of functions to these actors can lead to a weakening of monitoring and accountability mechanisms (Novak, 2019).

Ultimately, by leaving “too much scope for member states to evade or water down their responsibilities” (Geddes, 2016, p. 157), the Lisbon Treaty created an environment where upholding standards of protection for asylum seekers and refugees became more challenging, and prosecuting violations of their rights became more difficult (Toner, 2014). Developing on these premises, the gap between theory and practice in the EU asylum regime “has become so pronounced that Europe’s migration regime has been characterized as a virtual realm wherein imperatives, logics, norms, and directives are often never even traceable to a single source” (Gill, 2016b, p. 45; see also Bigo & Tsukala, 2008). Consequently, with the exponential rise in refugee

flows since 2015, collaborative and coordinated policies among affected states have become increasingly difficult to achieve. The events and movements that have revived the Balkan route in the last decade are a clear example of this.

4.4. Morphology of the Balkan route

At the onset of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’, in 2015, migratory flows in South-Eastern Europe were primarily concentrated in the eastern part of the region, spanning from Bulgaria and Romania to Hungary, with Austria serving as the main entry point into Europe. With insecurity and instability rising in North Africa, Syria, and Afghanistan, the number of displaced people transiting through this area in their journey towards Europe increased dramatically, imposing an unprecedented challenge to the states of the region. Unable and unwilling to manage this presence, most governments opted for a ‘no-policy-policy’ (Nassar & Stel, 2019), effectively preventing asylum seekers from entering, or remaining too long, in their territories. In the summer of 2015, Hungary closed its border with Serbia, declared a state of emergency, and commenced construction of the notorious ‘Orban wall’²³. Similarly, Bulgaria started implementing stricter asylum policies, allowing for detention of asylum seekers and justification for rejection of asylum claims without interviews. At the same time, the government initiated the construction of a border fence, deployed the army, and started implementing push-backs at the border²⁴.

As a reaction to these policies, people on the move sought alternative routes through Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, and more recently, Albania (Fedele & Garofalo, 2019; Weber, 2007). Here, the narrative repeated itself as political and social tensions travelled alongside irregular migrants. In autumn 2015, Croatia closed its borders with Serbia²⁵, sparking a dispute that led to a mutual embargo on the passage of trucks and goods between the two countries²⁶. In February 2016, the Slovenian government activated Article 37 of the Defence Act, granting extraordinary police powers to the army for the broad protection of the border (OHCHR, 2020). Meanwhile, in January 2016, Denmark, France, Germany, Austria, Norway, and Sweden re-activated internal border controls.

The migratory pressure strained already volatile political and social situations – still recovering from the traumas of the 1990s’ war –, contributing to an eruption of tensions and conflicts across the region (Fruscione, 2021). Particularly, during the period covered by this research, social and political tensions reignited in BiH. At the end of 2021, with authorities registering 16.000 arrivals in a country of slightly more than 3 million inhabitants, the international community warned that “the country [was] in imminent danger of breaking apart, and there [was] a ‘very real’ prospect

²³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/17/hungary-closes-border-serbia-starts-building-fence-bar-migrants>

²⁴ <https://www.meltingpot.org/en/2016/02/changes-in-bulgarias-detention-and-deportation-system/>

²⁵ https://www.ansa.it/english/news/2015/09/18/migrants-croatia-closed-border-crossings-with-serbia_be2e2cdd-350e-44d1-9af6-38eb5b67c04e.html

²⁶ <https://www.politico.eu/article/migration-serbia-croatia-refugees-yugoslavia-borders/>

of a return to conflict” (Borger, 2021)²⁷. Balkan countries undoubtedly face unique challenges due to their turbulent recent past, and this has understandably contributed to a poor management of asylum seekers and refugees across the region. Nonetheless, the following chapters will reveal the continuity and repetitiveness of certain modes of governance inside and outside the European Union. This type of governance, I will show, entails the physical and legal removal of asylum seekers from states’ territories and areas of responsibility, often involving ‘dumping’ them into another country or leaving third parties to deal with those deemed ‘non-removable’ (Davies et al., 2017).

It is nonetheless worth noting that, prior to 2016, an informal collaboration between the EU and regional governments had facilitated the creation of an ‘humanitarian corridor’ which allowed refugees to continue their journey through the Balkans, alleviating the pressure on these already vulnerable states (Žagar et al., 2018). Nonetheless, these efforts towards collaborative management were quickly abandoned, and refugee flows ended up being regulated through a purely emergency approach, implemented informally and according to national interests (Gjergji, 2018) – as shown in the following excerpt of an interview with a social operator working in the reception system.

Field diary, April 2021, Italy

I met Andrej at the headquarters of the Italian Consortium of Solidarity, where he worked as a social operator. When I entered his office, he was busy compiling and analysing data for the annual report on ICS’s reception system, which included trends and statistics from the previous year. During our conversation, Andrej shared several valuable insights. One of them particularly resonated with me due to its vivid portrayal of the interplay between securitarian concerns and limited public intervention in reception services. His reflections suggest that this type of governance implies a nation-state-centric logic with fragmented implementation mechanisms. As emerges in his words, this state of affairs ultimately contributes to the systemic violation of refugees’ dignity and safety. He said to me:

“...I can’t recall who said this, but someone once remarked that individual rationality often leads to collective irrationality. This resonates with the situation we see today. States, in their pursuit of individual rationality, have sought to close their borders. However, this has resulted in a state of collective irrationality. The level of control required to achieve border closures inevitably leads to a more violent response. Meanwhile, little has been done to support people in transit, aside from a few

²⁷ Despite ongoing efforts towards democratization, remnants of the Balkan war still influence social and political dynamics in the region, sometimes manifesting in the attitudes of public officials. According to an officer from an international humanitarian agency with experience on the Balkan route that I met in Trieste, law enforcement and security services in the former Yugoslavia may still harbor a wartime mindset. Given that international funding in recent years has largely flowed into the budgets of state security agencies, the officer warned that “entrusting these agencies with managing migratory flows should prompt caution”.

exceptions. I believe that if there had been more supportive interventions, the current situation would likely be different, and there may have been fewer policies of containment. Ironically, this would have made policies of containment even more efficient... Providing reception services and opportunities for migrants to rest reduces border pressure and slows down the flow of migrants. This doesn't mean they need to stay there indefinitely. If their goal is to reach [another country], they can continue their journey afterwards. The point is, they're forced to rush their journeys now, risking death, while instead they could have the chance to take a break for two weeks or two months, recover, and then travel another 100 km, knowing they'll find support elsewhere... instead of experiencing trauma and violence, and facing constant push-backs... And yet, the need for each state to rationalize its actions and impose more controls has resulted in violence being the only solution, because you can't stop people with words alone. As the need for control intensifies, so does the level of force used – from batons to dogs to drones. From a moral standpoint, it's sheer madness. I'm not one of those who say that people can cross all the borders they want without documents, it's not my style and I don't think it's correct. But there is a way and a way... There are so many alternative solutions to what is happening now... ” (SW3).

4.5. The crisis of EU solidarity

Since the outbreak of the refugee crisis, the only coordinated attempt by EU member states to share the responsibility of refugee flows involved a relocation mechanism, in 2016, aiming to redistribute 120.000 asylum seekers over two years from border states, such as Italy, Greece, and Hungary, to other EU member states. The redistribution was planned on a key considering factors like population, national income, numbers of asylum applicants, and unemployment rates. Nonetheless, the mechanism failed as states refused to act in solidarity with each other (Bauböck, 2018): by April 2017, only around 16.000 asylum seekers had been relocated (Brsakoska Bazerkoska, 2017; Guild et al., 2017).

Unable and often unwilling to cooperate, European countries opted to shift the responsibility elsewhere. In 2016, the so-called EU-Turkey deal formalized the closure of the Balkan route and led to a problematic delegation of powers to the authoritarian Turkish government (Clementi & Saccora, 2016). The EU provided financial and logistical support to Turkey to curb the flow of people crossing the Aegean Sea towards Greece. The agreement explicitly conflates irregular immigration with refugee flows and specifies that “all new irregular migrants who have made the crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands as of March 20, 2016, will be repatriated to Turkey” and that “once the irregular crossings between Turkey and the EU have ended, or at least drastically and sustainably reduced, a voluntary humanitarian admission program will be activated”²⁸. While the official aim of the deal was to ‘speed up’ the management of asylum requests through exceptional and ultra-rapid procedures, the failure of the relocation mechanism

²⁸ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/>

outlined in the agreement resulted in a massive blockage. Approximately 60.000 people remained stranded in the Balkan region (Astuti et al., 2020), and since then, many more have been forced into a condition of precarious immobility (Darling, 2016b; Tazzioli, 2020b; Turner, 2007), trapped in countries where they cannot or do not want to apply for asylum and bound to a slow, cyclical, and invisible pilgrimage in search of a traversable border (Omizzolo, 2021). Asked about the effects of the EU-Turkey agreement, one of the volunteers I met in Serbia admitted that

“...in a way, yes, the EU-Turkey deal did have an effect... if we look at the numbers, I think it did have an effect. But the question is, is that really the goal? Those people still exist, they just exist somewhere outside of Europe. And, I mean, I don't know if this is just my perception because I came to know more, but the number of deaths from last year along the Balkan route is absolutely insane. In August [2020], when I was at the Serbian-Bosnian border...in that week, we got informed by the police of at least seven bodies being found along the river, in an area of more or less 30 km. It is an average of more than one person per day”(VA7).

Despite diverting the refugee flow from EU borders, the formal ‘closure’ of the Balkan route could not completely stop it. Faced with restricted movement, people on the move forged alternative routes, scattering across the region. Thus, while the EU-Turkey agreement fulfilled the objective of keeping part of the flows outside the EU, the Balkan route did not cease to exist and people continued to move in an increasingly uncoordinated and clandestine manner. The direct consequence of this has been that the journey to Europe has become “once again dangerous and expensive, even in terms of lives” (Astuti et al., 2020, p. 10).

The EU-Turkey deal represents one of the most emblematic attempts made by the European institutions to securitise human mobility while delegating its management to third parties²⁹. As we will see in the next chapter, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia have similarly received financial and operational support from EU institutions to counter irregular immigration, reinforce border controls, and prevent access to EU asylum systems. This involved the intervention of Frontex³⁰ as a partner to national law enforcement agencies, and the creation of large detention centres, officially under national government supervision but in practice managed by international organizations and private service providers (Astuti et al., 2020). While these policies indicate EU governments’ retreat from actual management of asylum seekers and refugees, they also reveal an active attempt to manage human mobility by steering the flows away. This has led to a dispersion of responsibilities among national governments, none of which finding effective solutions for the thousands of people transiting through the region. Ultimately, this has resulted in situations of tension, as well as discomfort for both people on the move and local communities. The following two excerpts from my field diaries exemplify these issues.

²⁹ https://umap.openstreetmap.fr/en/map/eu-external-migration-policy-tools__783920#3/34.09/23.91

³⁰ <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/about-frontex/who-we-are/tasks-mission/>

During the first weeks of field-work in Trieste, I met a state official involved in immigration and asylum matters. This person shared with me their ‘insider perspective’ and valuable reflections on the asylum regime and the impact of the EU-Turkey deal on the management of the Balkan route. Below a short transcription of my memories of the conversation, which was not recorded and has been anonymised upon request of the informant.

The EU-Turkey deal, he tells me, imposed a limit to the collective will and effort to develop a coordinated strategy among countries and institutions. The indirect effect of the agreement was the formation of ‘funnels’ and ‘plugs’ along the border of the states involved. Turkey has become a huge ‘bottleneck’ between East and West, but once migrants overstep it, flows become scattered. “The flow has gone crazy”, he says, “and multiple routes emerged, involving other countries beyond Turkey”. Increased pressure on these countries led them to the adoption of similar control practices, “to trench themselves”, causing the flows to spread even more. This is why we can speak of several Balkan routes, he underlines. What has changed, he continues, is the distribution of responsibilities. Before the 2015 ‘crisis’, the EU praised the contribution of front-line states while portraying the phenomenon as exceptional and static. However, the ‘crisis of the route’ overturned this vision because ‘all countries have become border countries’³¹. In recent years, for example, Bosnia-Herzegovina has become “a limbo zone”, the official tells me – and particularly the town of Bihać.

While he is telling me this, I cannot help but think about the Amnesty International report that I was reading a few weeks earlier. It documented serious shortcomings in the Bosnian asylum system³². Along with other non-governmental organizations, Amnesty International reported difficulties faced by asylum seekers in accessing international protection procedures in the country, highlighting how these challenges forced people to wait exhaustingly, sometimes for years.

Ultimately, while the agreement succeeded in slowing down arrivals to European countries, migrants were not eliminated, the official stresses. They remained trapped in the region, forced to find alternative routes to continue their journeys in search of safety and autonomy. As a result of these changes, previously uninvolved countries became more involved. Thus, while the deal aimed for greater centralization of control at the EU level, the actual outcome has been a further dispersion of the route and the increased involvement of various state and non-state actors. To make matters worse, the officer concludes, there are no mechanisms in place to sanction sovereigntist and autonomist stances of certain states (SOMI).

³¹ In this regard, s/he recommends me to read the book *Di terra e di mare*, by Marzia Alati (Sensibili alle Foglie, 2014).

³²<https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/bosnia-and-herzegovina/report-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>

The EU's focus on bolstering regional security apparatuses has effectively militarized the Balkan route, but paradoxically failed to enhance safety for all (Liperi, 2019), fuelling geopolitical and social tensions within and between the affected states. As noted by the official quoted in the previous excerpt, the EU-Turkey deal put a unprecedented burden on frontline and transit countries like Greece, tasked with filtering arrivals. As a consequence, the governments of these countries have tried to shift responsibility, preventing asylum seekers from entering their territories or pushing them on to others. This has generated situations of geopolitical tensions, such as a mutual embargo between Serbia and Croatia in 2015 (Chapter 5). At the same time, the criminalization of this type of mobility has legitimized social exclusion, pushing migrants to the fringes of society and into isolated, neglected spaces. This not only restricts their movement but also hinders positive interactions between them and host communities. These isolated spaces become breeding grounds for marginalization, social unease, and thus insecurity, impacting everyone involved. The following excerpt from my field diary in Greece exemplifies this.

As my fieldwork in Greece commences, I decide to 'map' the area and take a walk to identify the city's 'migration sites'. I'm in a small coastal town, an important hub for tourist and commercial ships largely used by would-be asylum seekers to cross the sea towards other European destinations.

The sun is relentless, beating down on my legs. I take the train from downtown, one stop to the port. Gradually, the city begins to transform, to appear more desolate with its abandoned and dilapidated buildings. I get off the train. It's sweltering. I walk along the port. With each step closer, the telltale signs of migrant presence become unmistakable, despite the apparent absence of any migrants themselves. I don't see them, but I can feel their presence. I recognize their traces. I recognize the discarded clothes and shoes. I recognize the Arabic writings on the walls. I recognize the silence. A sultry silence, broken only by the sound of cicadas and the few passing cars, which become fewer and fewer as I leave the city behind.



Image 7 - Traces of migrants' passage (source: Field diary)

Walking, a sense of unease washes over me. This morning, a friend who volunteered here before discouraged me from visiting this area alone. She doesn't think it's a good idea for me to go by myself, even though she knows I have some experience with these situations. I don't feel safe...

I walk, and the heat is brutal. Beside me, the port with its enormous ships. Almost mocking. I notice the bitter irony of the fences. We have similar ones in Italy: those transparent panels with the silhouettes of birds in flight printed on them. Birds in flight: perhaps one of the most classic and emblematic images of freedom. I smile bitterly. What freedom? And whose? The silhouettes continue to fly for a few kilometres, suspended in stillness. And beyond, I hadn't noticed it right away, I see it, the barbed wire. That barbed wire that seems to accompany me at every step of my search. Along the borders with Croatia, in Trieste, all around the main squat, and here, along the port on one side, and the abandoned factories on the other. Birds in flight behind barbed wire. I keep walking...

I glimpse the first squat...A large building with a peeling facade and not a single window still intact. The iron trim has taken on the typical reddish-brown colour of rust. It looks empty. But it's not. I peer through the bars of the fence, looking for movement. Looking for lives. And there it is, a life in an everyday gesture. On the roof of the building, a small figure, a man, perhaps a boy, is wringing out a shirt, probably after washing it. It could be a frame from a Neorealist Italian film. Poetic, in its own way. After all, the gestures of everyday life are always the same, whether you're in an apartment in Florence or a squat on the borders of Europe, clothes still have to be wrung out before they can be hung up.



Image 8 - Peeking into the squat (source: Field diary)

I stand before the entrance, debating internally if entering serves a purpose. I've never been a fan of 'humanitarian tourism'. I have nothing to offer in exchange for the hospitality I might receive. I don't have any ready questions, or rather, I have a thousand, but they're still unformed. And my friend's advice echoes in my mind: "I would avoid going there alone". As these words echo, I think that our freedom ends where theirs ends too, that of the migrants. That our security is diminished where theirs is denied. Where barbed wire creates an inside and an outside. Where cameras decide what is legal and what is illegal.

4.6. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum: fresh start or politics as usual?

Over the last few years, timid attempts have been made to advance a more coordinated system of solidarity and responsibility sharing among EU Member States, while at the same time providing effective guarantees to those seeking international protection. In most cases, however, these efforts have failed to produce the expected outcomes, with systems of implementation remaining deficient, safeguards insufficient, and the attainment of targets not compulsory. In this respect, Santos Vara notes that “[t]he EU has not been able to provide for adequate measures of solidarity, trying to address migration emergencies through temporary and *ad hoc* solutions” (2022, p. 1245), and highlights the prolonged delay in implementing the reform of the CEAS due to disagreements among Member States. The European Commission’s most recent attempt to address this situation is the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, a complex package of reforms adopted in May 2024³³. Despite the fact that the timing of my research did not permit a comprehensive analysis of the Pact, which came into force during the final months of writing the thesis, it is nonetheless worth considering certain aspects of this legislative package relevant for this study. Namely, by examining the flourishing body of research on the issue, it is possible to highlight relevant continuities with previous policies and explore potential developments in European asylum governance, especially as far as concerns the role of national governments.

Following years of stagnation in the reform of the CEAS, the Pact was introduced to rectify the longstanding dysfunction of the EU asylum regime, characterized by a lack of coordination among Member States, each pursuing policies based on their own priorities rather than shared responsibility and solidarity mechanisms (Bendel, 2021; Mouzourakis, 2020; Tsourdi & Costello, 2020). Still, despite official declarations of a “fresh start” for EU asylum and migration policy, academics, practitioners and solidarity actors have identified significant continuities with previous approaches, and even evidence of worsening existing problems. Concerns and criticisms over the effects of the implementation of the Pact have been raised repeatedly and vehemently by

³³<https://ecre.org/adoption-of-eu-pact-on-migration-and-asylum/#:~:text=The%20EU%20Pact%20on%20Migration,end%20of%20the%20current%20mandate.>

solidarity networks and human rights organizations³⁴, denouncing the “devastating implications”³⁵, “shameful”³⁶ “blow to the right to asylum”³⁷ and “surge in suffering”³⁸ implied in the reform package. Studies on the subject have corroborated these concerns, highlighting the inevitable risk that the New Pact will lead to a further deterioration of living conditions for asylum seekers and migrants in general (Carrera & Geddes, 2021; EuroMed Rights, 2020; Gazi, 2021; Stefan & Cortinovic, 2020; Thym & Odysseus Academic Network, 2022). Below are some of the reasons for this.

The New Pact on Migration and Asylum prioritizes a securitarian approach to human mobility (Salvati, 2021), underscoring the critical need for “robust and fair management of external borders”³⁹. Accordingly, the legislative package strengthens border control and return policies for individuals deemed “unlikely to need protection, [who] mislead the authorities, or [who] present a security risk”⁴⁰. Particularly relevant in this regard is the Screening Regulation proposed in the Pact, which officially aims at fostering swift and effective screening of people arriving at the borders of Europe – requiring identity, health, and security checks within five days – and their rapid channelling either to asylum or return procedures. In this way, despite physical presence in the EU, individuals remain outside the formal admission process and are likely subject to detention until screening is complete. This process risks denying asylum seekers access to legal procedures and potentially leading to immediate return, violating fundamental rights such as liberty, asylum, appeal, and legal aid (EuroMed Rights, 2020). In other words, streamlining asylum and return processes will realistically lead to the detriment of thorough assessments and accountability mechanisms. Notably, despite the regulation mandating the establishment of monitoring bodies, the specific implementation of these bodies is left to the discretion of each member state (Mouzourakis, 2020). In this respect, Stefan and Cortinovic (2020) highlight a crucial implementation gap with respect to push-back practices in border zones. The regulation indeed proposes the establishment of an Independent Mechanism to oversee the adherence to EU and international human rights standards during the pre-entry screening process. This mechanism is intended to ensure the swift and effective redress of fundamental rights violations, such as those pertaining to access to asylum procedures and the prohibition of refoulement, which may arise during this phase. However, the scope of the proposed mechanism is unduly limited, since it

³⁴ <https://www.nonamekitchen.org/why-no-name-kitchen-is-fighting-the-new-european-pact-on-migration-and-asylum/>; <https://picum.org/blog/81-civil-society-organisations-call-on-meps-to-vote-down-harmful-eu-migration-pact/>; <https://www.adl-zavidovici.eu/2024/02/09/rivolti-ai-balceni-il-patto-europeo-migrazioni-e-asilo-non-deve-essere-votato/>; <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/bloc-notes/Nuovo-Patto-su-migrazione-e-asilo-una-vergogna>

³⁵ <https://picum.org/about-us/>

³⁶ <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/bloc-notes/Nuovo-Patto-su-migrazione-e-asilo-una-vergogna>

³⁷ <https://borderviolence.eu/reports/new-pact-on-migration-and-asylum-european-parliament-concedes-to-council-position-in-a-devastating-blow-to-the-right-to-asylum/>

³⁸ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/12/eu-migration-pact-agreement-will-lead-to-a-surge-in-suffering/>

³⁹ <https://euaa.europa.eu/asylum-report-2022/212-pact-migration-and-asylum>

⁴⁰ https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en#the-four-pillars-of-the-new-migration-and-asylum-policy

overlooks the critical importance of monitoring border procedures that occur both prior to and subsequent to the screening stage. Moreover, while designating the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) to provide guidance on ensuring the mechanism's independence, as well as to develop monitoring methodologies and training programs, the Commission's proposal falls short of explicitly defining the degree of independence that the mechanism must maintain from the entities it is tasked with overseeing (Stefan & Cortinovis, 2020). This ambiguity is particularly problematic in contexts characterized by systemic denial of responsibility by institutional and governmental actors for push-backs and other border violations, often executed in remote and inaccessible areas to evade public scrutiny (see Chapter 5 and 7). (Lack of) monitoring mechanisms and accountability guarantees has also raised concerns over the increased emphasis put by the Pact on cooperation with third-countries for both screening and return procedures. Namely, particularly in the area of return and readmission policies, it has been noted that the New Pact overlooks "the practical human rights implications stemming from the increasing number of informal arrangements [with third parties] on return and readmission, which are concluded in the absence of due democratic scrutiny and parliamentary oversight and are not subject to judicial scrutiny" (Santos Vara, 2022, p. 1258).

At the same time, the New Pact offers scant attention to reception policies, and when it does it exhibits significant shortcomings with potentially detrimental consequences for asylum seekers. As a consequence of the screening mechanism, for instance, the package may favour the proliferation of detention-like facilities for accommodating would-be asylum seekers at the margins or outside states' territory (Campesi, 2021). This could reinforce the widely criticized hotspot approach, further weakening monitoring and accountability mechanisms. Consequently, asylum seekers' living conditions and rights, including access to fair procedures, would be jeopardized (Thym, 2022). Moreover, Campesi (2021) notes that, unlike the previous hotspot approach, which was limited to crisis situations and frontline states, the new border management mechanism aims to implement pre-entry screening and border procedures consistently, regardless of migratory pressure. This will likely "result in huge camps at the external borders with protracted limbo situations" (Thym, 2022, p. 30). Furthermore, by conditioning access to essential reception services on the completion of screening procedures, the Pact risks creating a two-tier system that marginalizes those in the initial stages of the asylum process (Mouzourakis, 2020). Finally, even though the Pact ostensibly expands certain services – such as the provision of hygiene product, equal treatment as nationals as regards some working conditions and social security benefits – it concurrently introduces measures that can curtail asylum seekers' autonomy and independence (Slingenberg, 2021). In this regard, Slingenberg notes that "Member States will have more possibilities (or even obligations) to interfere with applicants lives and limit their autonomy, by determining their place of residence, withholding a daily expenses allowance, subjecting applicants to integration measures and exclude them from the labour market" (2021, p. 321).

Not only does the Pact herald a severe curtailment of protection and reception possibilities for asylum seekers, but it also underscores the repetition and entrenchment of governance mechanisms that, while ostensibly transnational, are in reality shaped and circumscribed by the capabilities and inclinations of individual states. Despite its stated goal of fostering responsibility-sharing and coordinated refugee management among Member States, the Pact ultimately adheres to the traditional approach to European migration policy: imbued with securitarian attitudes that ‘sacralise’ national borders, ultimately legitimising governments to decide if and to what extent engage directly in the protection and reception of asylum seekers and refugees. Preliminary screening, cooperation with third countries for returns and readmissions, and the reduction of services and rights associated with public reception and integration systems, once again demonstrate European governments’ inclination to manage migration flows ‘by proxy’. This entails maintaining asylum seekers at a distance from their territorial, jurisdictional, and administrative domains, while at the same time preserving the indirect authority to curb, redirect and invisibilise undesired flows. The New Pact has *de facto* institutionalised this approach, creating the conditions for states to further outsource responsibilities and functions to third parties while streamlining procedures and limit bureaucratic and administrative constraints, ultimately evading scrutiny and accountability. Overall, “[t]he proposals exacerbate fragmentation of an already complex set of rules, relinquish space occupied by EU law to national prerogative, and afford States an extensive margin to derogate from established standards in loosely defined circumstances of crisis and force majeure” (Mouzourakis, 2020, p. 2). Overall, despite the Pact explicitly encourages solidarity between Member States, this remains a vague and ambiguous indication given the ‘flexibility’ and ‘voluntariness’ of the mechanisms proposed to achieve such solidarity (Bendel, 2021; Thym & Odysseus Academic Network, 2022). The recommendations contained in the Pact are indeed not legally binding (Bendel, 2021; Kuźelewska & Piekutowska, 2021; Santos Vara, 2022). As noted by Bendel, “[i]nstead of presenting a new idea of solidarity, [...] [the Pact] relies more on the logics of ‘flexible solutions’ based on nationalistic interests” (2021, p. 258). Due to EU governments significantly different experiences with and attitudes towards refugee flows, Kuźelewska and Piekutowska stress that the New Pact on Migration and Asylum “should be seen as a very ambitious plan which implementation in the near future is unrealistic” (2021, p. 34). As a matter of fact, the package obtained relative support by European governments precisely and solely because it respected their “red lines” (Thym, 2022, p. 13), that is, it leaves them “legislative and practical leeway on crucial matters” (Ivi, p. 23), which ultimately results in their attempt to “minimis[e] the number of asylum applications” (Ivi, p. 18). Notably, already in October 2023, the International Rescue Committee had warned that

“If the Pact is adopted unchanged, the responsibility for receiving refugees will continue to lie largely with the member states at the EU’s external borders. As a result, pushbacks and violence at the borders are likely to increase... Meanwhile, giving countries the opportunity to ignore or bypass the rules whenever a ‘crisis’ occurs undermines the idea

of a common European response to migration, resulting in less solidarity and even more disorder”⁴¹.

In this concern, De Bruycker observes that the pact does not offer tools to reconcile different views, but rather it represents a “compromise made of contradictory elements”, reflecting not “a consensus, but actually a disagreement between Member States” (De Bruycker, 2022, p. 36).

4.7. Conclusions

Despite the political pressure exerted by European institutions since the creation of the Schengen Area, Member States, and particularly border countries, have maintained their margin of freedom to promote their preferred understanding and management of refugee flows (Longo, 2016; Pinyol-Jiménez, 2019), with the overall objective of limiting the number of asylum claims under their jurisdiction, generally at the detriment of asylum seekers and refugees’ rights.

The EU’s asylum regime frames immigration and asylum as security concerns, placing the responsibility of managing these issues on individual member states. This is evident from the legislative and political developments that have accompanied the European Union since its inception, with a growing convergence of policies related to human mobility, border protection, and the fight against organized crime. Given the close correlation of these issues with those of national security and state sovereignty, European governments have remained the primary decision-makers on asylum matters, despite this not necessarily having led to an effective and consistent commitment on their part to manage these flows directly and according to international standards. Largely free from legally binding obligations from the EU, Member States manage to navigate legislative and bureaucratic constraints by outsourcing protection and reception tasks to non- and third-state actors, while at the same time streamlining procedures and focussing on a rapid and flexible management of the flows under their purview. In this way, European states maintain a high degree of autonomy and authority over asylum-related issues, but they do so in a context increasingly characterized by limited public scrutiny and accountability mechanisms. This mode of governance will be explored in the detail in the next chapters, revealing what I define as a *securitarian neoliberalism*, that is, a mode of governing migration focused on national security and mobility restrictions, in which governments increasingly externalise the performance of related tasks to third- and non-state actors in a context of shrinking democratic scrutiny. Balancing security concerns with neoliberal principles, governments have increasingly outsourced protection and reception tasks to non-state actors and confined them within informal spaces and dynamics, creating a system of remote control over asylum seekers. Zooming in on the regional dynamics, the following chapters exposes how EU and non-EU governments alike have embraced

⁴¹ <https://www.rescue.org/eu/article/what-eu-pact-migration-and-asylum>

this mode of governance in order to strategically steer refugee flows away from their areas of responsibility.

Chapter 5

Understanding the Context: Journey Along the Balkan Route

I am travelling on a bus heading to Serbia, where I will spend a month as a volunteer in a solidarity initiative. On the bus with me there is Miriam, another volunteer of the same organization. We are both checking the news: the Lipa camp – one of the main reception centres in BiH – is on fire, and the migrants that were accommodated there have just remained with no place to go in the midst of the freezing Bosnian winter. The camp is one of the most famous governmental ‘reception centres’ along the Balkan route and the fire left around 1.400 people without shelter, food and water, let alone information on what would have happened to them. Aware of my Balkan route volunteer work, several friends texted me in the following days, asking suggestions on how to help. They offered to contribute through financial donations or providing food and clothes. In the meantime, EU institutions and international agencies seemed to be struggling to implement a coordinated and solidaristic response. The migrants in the area waited for days before being relocated to another camp. Meanwhile, many others chose to leave the site and seek informal accommodation elsewhere. If anything, the dissemination through the media of the tragic and deplorable conditions in which these people had been forced to live contributed to spreading awareness and concern about the ‘re-ignited’ Balkan route.

(Field diary, December 2020)

5.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I summarised the main trends that have shaped the elaboration and evolution of the asylum regime in Europe and particularly its implementation across the Balkan region. Now, it is time to narrow the focus and ‘take to the field’ to observe more closely the implications of this type of governance on the ground, and how national governments have adapted and contributed to it. For this purpose, the chapter zooms in on border zones along the Balkan route, in Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, and Greece. It is in these places that my fieldwork began, and without knowledge of these contexts, it would not have been

possible for me to add nuance and depth to my main case study, Italy. I visited some of these zones myself, collecting ethnographic material through participant observation, informal conversations and semi-structured interviews. For the countries I did not visit, I gathered information from reports by NGOs, solidarity networks, and international organizations, as well as national and EU policy documents.

In the coming sections, I will explore the spectrum of policies and practices implemented in these border spaces. This includes examining the actors, their actions, and the interactions among them that determine how these spaces – and the people who traverse them – are governed, or left ungoverned. For this purpose, I keep together different levels of analysis: the EU asylum regime remains in the background, providing the material and immaterial preconditions to understand local practices and processes. In this way, the conduct of the states involved will be revealed in relation to supra- and sub- national dynamics, and not as independent and self-sufficient. At the same time, by looking at the contributions of non-governmental actors in this multi-level system of governance, I contextualize state conducts within a plural yet integrated arena, in which policies are constructed and enacted through the interaction of public and private entities. Finally, it is important to consider that the Balkan route consists of the stretch of land that starts from the shores of Turkey, branches off through Greece, and crosses South-Eastern Europe. As such, it includes both EU and non-EU states, meaning that asylum seekers found themselves crossing internal and external Schengen borders several times. Including observations from both EU and non-EU countries within the scope of this research allows to capture the continuity and interdependence of asylum policies regardless of the specific membership status or institutional setting of individual states. This helped me develop an integrated and comprehensive analysis across and ‘despite’ national borders and differences.

5.2. Securitarian neoliberalism in Lipa camp

The Lipa reception camp was established in March 2020, supposedly as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Located on a highland approximately 30 km from Bihać, the nearest town, and 20 km from the Croatian border, the camp was funded by the European Union and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). It was jointly managed by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the Service for Foreigners’ Affairs (SFA) of the Bosnian Ministry of Security, both receiving funding from the EU for this purpose. However, in December 2020, the IOM announced the closure of the camp, citing the Bosnian authorities’ failure to address repeated appeals for basic services (Kovacevic, 2020). In this context, the network RiVolti ai Balcani reported that local authorities adopted a ‘non-action policy’ – which strongly resonates with Nassar and Stel (2019) concept of ‘no-policy-policy’ – including the violation of agreements with the IOM. These agreements specified that the Bosnian authorities were responsible for providing water and electricity connections (Brambilla et al., 2020), but consistently failed to comply with

these provisions. The official closure of the camp occurred on December 23rd, 2020, just before the fire broke out, the reasons for which were never determined.

Interestingly, only a few days before, on December 16th, the European Commission had approved a 25 million euros assistance package to aid Bosnia and Herzegovina in managing migration. This additional funding supplemented the over 300 million euros allocated by the EU between 2018 and 2020 to support the Bosnian government in managing refugee flows. At the beginning of 2021, the Bosnian army set up a few emergency tents on the remains of the burned Lipa camp, where migrants had been left to fend for themselves on a freezing plateau, with the police preventing them from reaching Bihać (Brambilla et al., 2020). Within a year, and not without delays, the camp was rebuilt with EU funding, but also with the economic contribution of the German Federal Agency for Technical Relief (Technisches Hilfswerk), the Austrian Federal Ministry of Interior, the Austrian Development Agency, the Swiss Government, the Holy See, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, and the Council of Europe Development Bank⁴². In the meantime, the Bosnian Council of Ministers decided that Lipa would be converted into an official reception centre directly managed by the government and with technical support from the IOM. However, during 2021, the actual management of the camp was progressively handed from international organisations to private service providers, such as the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD). The ICMPD is a private organisation based in Vienna and headed by the conservative Austrian ex-vice chancellor and former Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) leader Michael Spindelegger⁴³. The involvement of the company grew over time and in May 2022 the ICMPD received 500.000 euros by the European Commission for the "Extension of the multi-purpose reception centre at Lipa in line with European and international standards", with the specific objective of "improv[ing] capacities for the accommodation of migrants in temporary reception centres in Bosnia and Herzegovina by establishment of the temporary detention facilities"⁴⁴. The whole project was criticised by several NGOs and human rights groups, preoccupied that it would have led to the creation of a detention and repatriation centre. ICMPD denied the allegations and filed a defamation lawsuit against an activist who had compared the detention unit in Lipa to an 'Austrian Guantanamo'⁴⁵.

The vicissitudes of the Lipa camp expose the nature of a governance model in which national governments reclaim their political authority but do not actively engage in the management and protection of asylum seekers and refugees. Although officially under the authority of the Bosnian government, the actual administration of the camp has been outsourced to international organizations and private service providers – the latter often lacking the necessary expertise in matters related to the protection and reception of asylum seekers and refugees. While obtaining

⁴² <https://www.iom.int/news/tragedy-opportunity-new-centre-help-stranded-migrants-opens-bosnia-and-herzegovina>

⁴³ <https://digit.site36.net/2023/05/22/bosnian-refugee-camp-lipa-dispute-over-austrian-guantanamo/>

⁴⁴ https://fragdenstaat.de/dokumente/237848-mprc_lipa_may_2022/

⁴⁵ <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/07/18/austrian-international-organisation-trying-to-silence-critics-of-bosnian-migrant-centre/>

clear and comprehensive information on the division of responsibilities within the camp is challenging, solidarity organizations with a consistent presence on the ground have continued to report the undignified conditions faced by people on the move in Lipa. Based on information collected informally in non-institutional settings, volunteers and activists have attempted to provide a picture of the situation, as in the case of the following update published on No Name Kitchen's⁴⁶ Blog, *News from the Field*, in August 2022.

“Functioning according to logics of profit, the camp benefits from the expansion of people on the move who are detained there. This logic is well reflected also in the language used by IOM personnel. People on the move are indeed referred to as ‘customers’ and the buses that transport pushbacked people are defined as a ‘shuttle bus service’ [...] Despite the high amount of money invested into it, however, residents at Lipa continue to lack the most fundamental services for a life with dignity. As part of the prison-industrial complex (PIX), Lipa camp exists for the economic interests of governments and private companies, but most of all for the maintenance of the racial borders of Fortress Europe. Widespread allegations point to the fact that the more people reside in the camp, the higher the financial gains for Lipa’s management, which since 2021 has passed under the control of the Service for Foreigner’s Affairs (SFA). The increased number of evictions from squats, taking place in the immediate aftermath of Lipa’s [re]opening in November 2021, might indeed point to the validity of this claim. Notably, on May 2021, the eviction of Dom Penzionera, a former abandoned nursing home in Bihać hosting at the time around 250 [people on the move], resulted in their immediate transportation into the camp. As of today, when people get evicted from squats in Bihać they are forcefully moved into Lipa or Borici camps. Further investigations remain necessary to have a more encompassing understanding of Lipa Camp’s management. In regard to our current understanding, however, it remains that the several forms of violence that are perpetrated within its fences are in direct contrast to the liberal self-representation of the EU as protector of human rights and fundamental liberties. The words and lived experiences of those who are constrained there provide evidence to this claim”⁴⁷.

By connecting the dots between border and reception policies, the existence of the Lipa camp testifies about the physical, moral and legal abandonment of people on the move resulting from the convergence of securitarian approaches and neoliberal modes of government. As we saw in this paragraph, in fact, these centres are normally managed by third-party, and often private actors, with the result of ‘de-responsibilising’ state bodies from asylum management. In this context, reception and border policies are strictly connected, because the physical removal of asylum seekers from one state to another, as well as from the public space to remote locations, relies on the existence of reception-detention centres in which these people are deprived of their rights and violently invisibilised. These facilities have been designed in combination with EU’s politics and

⁴⁶ No Name Kitchen is an independent movement working along the Balkans and Mediterranean routes to provide humanitarian assistance and promote policy change for migrants facing challenging journeys and violent pushbacks. Their projects are active in Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Italy, and Spain.

⁴⁷ <https://www.nonamekitchen.org/life-at-the-margins-testimonies-from-lipa-camp/>

practices of border surveillance and violence to gain control over large numbers of migrants and to prevent them from approaching the European Union, its institutions and the rights they are supposed to provide for.

5.3. Waiting in Bihać, springboard to Europe

Just a few kilometres away from Lipa is Bihać, a small Bosnian town bordering Croatia. At the time when this research took place, Bihać served as the ultimate stepping stone for people seeking refuge through the southeastern borders of Europe. The majority of asylum seekers arriving at the Italian-Slovenian border have passed through Bihać at least once, and if not, likely through Velika Kladuša, only 50 km further north.

During the 1990s conflicts, Bihać endured a brutal siege by the Serbian army. This experience left deep scars on the local population but also fostered a sense of understanding and empathy for those suffering from war and displacement. In a 2019 interview, the then Imam of Bihać recalled how the first migrant groups received support and solidarity from local communities. “The Islamic communities were the first to assist the migrants, who initially even slept in the mosques”, he explained. “The survivors of the war remember their own experience as refugees and feel a strong empathy towards migrants, knowing what it means to leave everything behind” (Camilli, 2019). Nevertheless, since 2015 the country of around 3 million people has witnessed the transit of hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees. As years passed, the lack of realistic and sustainable solutions from the competent institutions and the ‘emergency environment’ generated by the presence of international humanitarian organizations, made the tension escalate. At the end of 2019 the Una-Sana canton was hosting at least 6.000 people on the move⁴⁸. Less than half of them were accommodated in government reception centres, while the majority lived in informal settlements like abandoned buildings or factories, or in tents at the informal ‘Vučjak camp’⁴⁹.

Vučjak camp was a slum built on a former landfill, at a point where the front line passed during the ‘90s war, 11 km from the existing border with Croatia. Since 2019, when the administration of Bihać decided to ‘cleanse’ the residential area and coercively relocated the migrants outside of the city centre, several hundreds of people have settled there, in extremely poor conditions. The choice to expel people on the move from the inhabited centre was notably political. It was taken by the then mayor of Bihać during the elections period to win the support of local residents. The vice-mayor, in that occasion, explained that the administration had taken such a decision aiming to urge a response from Sarajevo and Bruxelles:

⁴⁸<https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/latest/bosnia-and-herzegovina-migrants-and-refugees-danger-winter-approaches>

⁴⁹<https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/latest/bosnia-and-herzegovina-migrants-and-refugees-danger-winter-approaches>

“We set up the Vučjak camp to make the EU and central government understand that there aren’t anymore the conditions to host refugees in Bihać, that they must wake up and find a solution. But we’re still waiting: neither the EU nor the central government lifted a finger... As a city, we took charge of certain expenditures, from the transport of drinking water to the camp, to medical expenses, to the garbage collection, but we receive no funding from the central state, which should have jurisdiction on this kind of situations related to immigration. Citizens don’t know this, and thus they blame us [the local administration], but this is not our responsibility ... we’ve been left alone” (Camilli, 2019 – translated by the author).

The passage underscores the multi-scalar nature of asylum governance. Local, national, and European levels are involved in the management of the flows, in theory, but they often lack a coordinated and shared perspective. This results in tensions among the bodies involved and inconsistencies in the provision of services and protection to asylum seekers. In the case in question, local authorities felt compelled to deal with the refugee issue without having the necessary support from national authorities. The resulting frustration amplified the electorate’s growing discontent, and both factors contributed to framing these mobilities as an emergency issue and migrants as a burden to be reluctantly tolerated, at best. Nevertheless, it is crucial to underline that the attitude of Bišćani has at times been manipulated for political opportunism, without genuine consideration for their actual concerns. While reasonably overwhelmed by the presence of thousands of people in distress, Bišćani did not blame migrants for the situation, but rather “the irresponsive Bosnian state and passive, hypocritical, and moralizing Europe” (Hromadžić, 2020, p. 178) – which has contributed millions of euros to address the refugee crisis since 2018 but has yet to offer a lasting and sustainable solution.

This type of criticisms found echo in the analyses of the political context provided by local and international NGOs. In 2021, while commenting on BiH’s application for membership in the European Union, Amnesty International directly addressed the EU Commission, emphasizing severe limitations in the country’s asylum system and explicitly referencing the lack of political initiative and organizational capacity on the part of the Bosnian government.

“BiH Ministry of Security, including its Sector for Asylum (SA) and Service for Foreigners’ Affairs (SFA), is responsible for coordinating migration matters in BiH. Yet, the Ministry has not been able to coordinate activities with the authorities at other levels, identify additional suitable facilities for accommodation of new arrivals or ensure that their urgent protection needs are met. Despite the predictable humanitarian emergency in the winter months of 2020 and the lack of reception capacities, the Ministry was late to engage and show leadership to find solution for thousands of people who were sleeping outside of official reception centres in December or were to be evicted from the existing ones by the local authorities. ...both state and local authorities continue to outsource their responsibilities to the international community and civil society, who have managed, or managed jointly with other authorities, five out of eight reception centres across BiH. Where the authorities have assumed limited responsibility for the reception, as in the case of the provisional camp Lipa, the transition from IOM to Service

of Foreigners' Affairs took place hastily without ensuring that the Service had resources, expertise and the capacity to assume such responsibility without the support of international organisations, [failing] to provide the minimal standards of protection and assistance. Local authorities, particularly in Una-Sana Canton, doubled down on passing restrictive and discriminatory measures targeting migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees on their territory” (Amnesty International, 2017).

In such circumstances, people on the move have been left with no decent accommodation and no possibility to access basic legal and social services. As a consequence, their presence became more visible and, at a certain point, too bulky for a small community which was still recovering from the destruction of the war, emotionally and economically.

Since the end of the conflicts, Bihać has in fact lived mainly on tourism. The Una river sinuously flows through the charming city centre, and on its banks the ducks used to scamper around happily and carefreely. Just outside the town, vast and luxuriant landscapes open up, rich in forests, waterways, and natural reserves. With the arrival of the Balkan route, however, the image of this pleasant place has changed. In the centre of Bihać, on the banks of the Una river, alongside the ducks, there are now small groups of migrants washing and doing the laundry, or just resting in the shade of the beautiful vegetation. Overlooking the river stands out the *Dom penzionera*, a never completed socialist retirement home that became, for a few years, the biggest squat for migrants in the city. Several hundreds of people have lived there for short or prolonged periods of time and there is record of at least two deaths from accidents caused by the unsafe conditions of the building. In 2021, the *Dom penzionera* was definitively evicted and when I visited Bihać, in October 2021, the entrances to the building were walled and fenced off. At that time, most migrants were staying on the outskirts of the city and in the woods of the canton, where new ‘jungles’ constantly rise from the ashes of the ones already destroyed by the police or by anti-immigrants groups. The tourism and hospitality economy of the canton has inevitably been affected, triggering fears, distress and re-traumatisation among its inhabitants. Fearful of the prospect of losing the precarious economic stability they had attained since the end of the war, the residents of Bihać started pressuring their local administration to take steps to minimize the presence, or at least the visibility, of these ‘inconvenient’ individuals. Ultimately, the ostracization of migrants from urban centres resulted in greater vulnerability for them and lower socio-economic benefits for the local population. One of the volunteers that I met on the route described the situation as counterproductive for both transiting and resident people. “If that money [e.g. EU funding] had been used for a widespread hospitality project, involving the payment of rent to Bosnian citizens willing to host those in need, it could have benefited the local economy and facilitated the inclusion and empowerment of these individuals [migrants]. This approach could have helped alleviate the climate of animosity. How can I, with only a high school diploma, understand this, but those who are in charge cannot?!” (VA3). Instead, and paradoxically, asylum seekers and refugees are forced to try these ‘games of violence’ (Medecins Sans Frontieres, 2017)

endless times and, in the case they are successful, to retrace the same paths that Biščani used to illegally cross during the war, through Croatia, heading to Slovenia and Italy to find safety and security (Hromadžić, 2020).



Image 9 - The Una river and the Dom Penzionera in Bihac (photo by Giulio Zeriali)

The transformation of Bihac

“The main public spaces – parks and the river’s banks – are layered with groups of devastated people, the ‘global outcasts’ or ‘human flow’. They are mostly young males, products of war-generated violences and of ‘savage sorting’ – the destruction of more traditional forms of capitalism by more advanced capitalist forms in much of the world... They are sitting in parks, usually on the grass, suspended in their waiting to cross into the EU. Some are sleeping in larger groups next to each other, the bags, their only possessions, under their heads. Stray dogs, another symbol of Bihac’s post-war ‘transition’, are roaming around them. While walking next to these sleeping and resting bodies, I start to grasp and embody the seemingly contradicting sentiment that people in Bihac have been articulating for months: on the one hand, there is a genuine empathy and desire to help the unfortunate people on the move whose lives were transformed – by global capitalist economies and contemporary warfare – into the ‘scum of the Earth’... On the other hand, the local people, devastated by catastrophic unemployment and political impasse, are genuinely terrified of ‘losing’ the last places that bring moments of joy and an appearance of ‘normalcy’... to town: its beautiful river Una and numerous other public spaces of socialization, such as parks and

pedestrian streets dotted with coffee shops. The sight of ‘elsewhere’ people, who out of necessity and misery ‘colonized’ Bihać’s public spaces and river banks, and their undeniable, evident suffering felt devastating, unbearable, and dystopic to many people. This convergence created the ‘limit’ – existential, emotional, and semantic” (Hromadžić, 2020, p. 166).



Image 10 - The interior and exterior of the Dom Penzionera (photos by Giulio Zeriali)

5.4. ‘Counter-steering’ solidarity, accounts from BiH and Serbia

At the time of my visit, in Bihać and Velika Kladuša there was a composite community of solidarians, made up of both locals and internationals organised in non-governmental organizations, grassroots associations and activist networks. They were active in different hubs of the route and constantly collaborated among each others and with other international initiatives. They provided people on the move with what they need to try the ‘game’ and to survive between

one game and another. The militarisation of borders, in fact, made transit more difficult and slower.

In this context, push-backs have become a widespread yet highly controversial practice. These coercive procedures, typically carried out informally and at the discretion of border police officers, involve forcefully removing migrants from a country's national territory. People on the move, including asylum seekers, are often sent back to the country they recently crossed, without any access to proper asylum procedures or individual assessments of their protection needs. While officially targeting irregular migrants lacking proper documentation, the practice has also ensnared people who had explicitly expressed their intention to claim asylum. Beyond the blatant disregard for asylum rights, push-backs often involve violent tactics like physical force, beatings, intimidation, and confiscation or destruction of personal belongings. The systematization of these practices along the Balkan route traps people on the move in a cycle of vulnerability and despair. Forced back across borders after enduring violence, they struggle to access basic necessities in the countries they are returned to. With their previous attempts thwarted and resources depleted, each push-back throws migrants back to 'square one', facing months or even years of renewed struggle and uncertainty (Tazzioli, 2021). "Trying the game ten times means having remained stuck for a few years in Bosnia", told me a social worker in Trieste (SW7). In this seemingly hopeless situation, the tireless efforts of solidarity networks prove indispensable. These groups act as lifelines, keeping the flow of hope and support alive for migrants trapped in these painful realities: caught between a heavily fortified border ahead and a state unwilling to make their stay tolerable behind.

Similar dynamics to those unfolding in BiH can be observed in other key points along the route. During my month as a volunteer in a small Serbian town bordering Croatia, I had numerous conversations with fellow volunteers and activists. Two of them, in particular, assisted me in retracing the recent history of this border region. They had volunteered there in previous years and had firsthand experience witnessing the gradual deterioration of the situation. Anna told me about her first voluntary experience, when the 'Big squat' still existed. This was an abandoned and decaying building that, between 2017 and 2019, hosted thousands of migrants. In the eyes of the volunteer, that place was 'beautiful' if compared to the jungles where the migrants were hiding at the time of our conversation. Despite its precarious conditions, that squat constituted not only a shelter, but also a space for encounter and socialization which allowed solidarians to create relationships of trust with people on the move and, therefore, to make a greater contribution in terms of moral, material and legal support. Both volunteers recounted numerous moments of sharing and leisure experienced in the squat, along with the sense of community that, however ephemeral, provided some semblance of 'normality'. Above all, the intimacy of these encounters helps dismantle the stigmatization of irregularised migrants. Instead of being perceived as criminals or victims, this type of interactions sheds light on the fears and aspirations of the former, restoring a sense of humanity to their otherwise dehumanizing migratory journey.

In recent years, however, solidarity has become a complex matter. During my time as a volunteer in Serbia, the distribution of essential goods to people in transit was often subjected to stops and checks by the police. In some cases, these encounters between volunteers and police officers resulted in verbal and physical aggression from the latter towards the former, and in some instances, expulsion letters were issued ordering the volunteers to leave the country. Similar incidents have also occurred in other parts of the Balkan route (BVMN, 2023). Even local residents, who had previously tolerated migrants and solidarity efforts, now viewed us with suspicion and annoyance as we hurriedly purchased food and clothes in the streets of the town to distribute them in squats. Several ‘incidents’ marred the month I spent in Serbia. We faced escalating hostility from anti-immigrant groups, who organized actions aimed at disrupting our efforts to support people on the move – such as vandalizing our van by stealing the license plate, smashing the windows, and drawing swastikas on it. Despite seeking assistance from local law enforcement on these occasions, their support was minimal. Instead, several volunteers from the group I was part of experienced intimidations or assaults by the police, some of which resulted in orders of expulsion from the country. Some volunteers complied and left, others ignored the expulsion order, considering this refusal a necessary act of protest and resistance. In this climate of tension, a few days after my arrival in Serbia, one of the volunteers that had ignored the order of expulsion was stopped by the Serbian police during a distribution of food, taken to the police station, expelled from the country without any legal representation, and abandoned in a gas station a few kilometres over the border, in Croatia.

According to several volunteers from various organizations whom I met along the route, Serbia’s drastic transformation from a relatively safe haven for migrants and their supporters to another hurdle in the EU border regime began in the years following the implementation of the EU-Turkey agreement. The ‘closure’ of the Balkan route led to a dramatic increase in the number of irregular migrants stranded in Serbia and coincided with a rise in police repression against them. At the beginning of 2020, the Big squat in the area was evicted once and for all, returning to be the empty skeleton of a forgotten building. Asked about the reasons of this event, Anna explained the eviction of the squat as part of a wider political project involving the EU and the Serbian government.

This is my personal interpretation, but I know that at the beginning of December 2019 there was a deal set up between the EU and Serbia⁵⁰, according to which the EU would provide funds to the Serbian government according to the number of people on the move that were in the country. So, in my interpretation, at that time it was very beneficial for the Serbian government to push as many people as they could into governmental camps, where they are registered. This is why, in my opinion, the eviction of the squat really happened. Even if the media used minor episodes of thefts allegedly committed by people on the move as an excuse to say that it was dangerous to have them outside of the official

⁵⁰ https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-02/RS_RM_Cover.pdf

camps...[In the meantime] push-backs have increased in number and have become more violent... Before then, Serbia was considered a bit like a safe heaven for refugees in comparison to other countries like Hungary or Croatia, that were already extremely violent against people on the move. But I think during the last year and a half Serbia has slowly but surely gone to the same levels of violence (NA7).

This type of dynamic reveals the coexistence and co-dependency of security rhetoric, which translates into the militarization of borders and the criminalization of migrants, and profit-driven logics. The Serbian government's control of flows and the reception of asylum seekers and refugees in camps are therefore not the result of policies aimed at protecting them, but rather of opportunistic interests in which the government enriches itself with European funds without actually investing them in services and infrastructure that guarantee a dignified life for people on the move.

In line with the issues discussed so far, the following excerpts from my field diary exemplify the physical and moral abandonment of asylum seekers and refugees by state bodies in different locations of the Balkan route. These excerpts vividly illustrate how this abandonment jeopardizes the safety of these individuals, regardless of their legal status (regular or irregular) or the type of settlement (governmental or informal) in which they reside.

Field diary, January 2021, Serbia

When we, the volunteers, met Ibrahim, he was 15 years old and living with a group of around twenty teenagers in an abandoned and crumbling farmhouse a few kilometres from the Croatian border. He had left his home in Afghanistan a few months earlier. From the outset of his journey, Ibrahim had exhibited symptoms of a lung infection, which worsened inevitably due to the brutal conditions in which he was forced to spend the winter. Even for us volunteers, accommodated in a house worthy of the name, those weeks were challenging. Most of the windows in our house were broken, allowing icy blasts to penetrate. There was no heating system and a limited amount of hot water. It was what the organization could afford with its budget, fed by donations and fundraising campaigns. In early January 2021, temperatures dropped well below zero degrees, to minus 10, and the incessant rain and snow interfered with even the simplest tasks, such as driving to the jungles or washing the pots and cutlery we used to cook for people on the move, as water froze in the pipes.

Clearly, we were privileged compared to Ibrahim and his travel companions. In the squat where he lived, there was no running water, electricity, or heating whatsoever. To be precise, there were not even doors or windows, and a section of the roof was missing. Under these circumstances, Ibrahim's lung infection continued to worsen, culminating in a respiratory crisis on New Year's Eve. On that occasion, we the volunteers had been invited by 'the guys'⁵¹ to spend that night in the squat and to

⁵¹ During the experiences as a volunteer along the Balkan route, it was common practice to refer to people on the move as 'the guys', because most of these people were young, single men.

celebrate together the beginning of the new year. They wanted to cook for us kabuli palaw, a traditional Afghan meal made with rice, chicken and a combination of spices whose ineffable flavour can only come from generations of home cooking. To contribute as good guests, we took care of the groceries. Aside from being polite, this arrangement was also more secure. Running errands can be risky for people on the move. Their settlements are typically located outside urban areas, requiring them to walk several kilometres to reach the nearest supermarkets. Long walks increase the chances of encountering the police, potentially leading to being taken to governmental camps. It also drains their physical energy, which would be better preserved for trying the 'game'. And still, despite all this, migrants cannot even be certain that they will get what they need. Some local businesses, in fact, refuse to attend them, including some pharmacies.

While his fellow travellers were mixing flavours on the ground floor of the farmhouse, jumping around at the rhythm of their favourite songs, Ibrahim was convulsing upstairs. The situation was dramatic and deeply confusing. We did not really know what to do. None of us volunteers had any specific medical competence and our Health focal point was not a professional doctor or nurse – participating in solidarity initiatives requires a certain flexibility in terms of time and mobility, hence, quite often, it is not professionals or experts that perform such activities.

The most obvious choice would have been to immediately take Ibrahim to the closest hospital, but, absurdly, this was the last option available. Firstly, we couldn't transport him in the organization's van. In Serbia, transporting a person with irregular legal status in your vehicle may result in being charged with human smuggling. Public transportation is extremely limited, and taxi drivers either refuse to transport people on the move or demand unreasonably high prices. Thus, Ibrahim would have been expected to walk for kilometres, in such precarious conditions, to reach a medical centre. Furthermore, he could realistically be denied assistance if and when he arrives at the hospital. This is actually quite standard in areas affected by a consistent presence of 'irregulars'. One of the excuses used by medical personnel in Serbian hospitals to deny access to care to people on the move is that migrants should be registered and housed in official camps where medical services are supposedly provided. However, migrants accommodated in different camps along the Balkan route testify to the inhumane and degrading conditions of these facilities. Governmental camps often provide scant and inadequately nutritious food, with rooms housing dozens of people on unstable bunk beds. Although medical care is theoretically available, it is often insufficient and inadequate in practice. Additionally, psychiatric drugs are frequently administered to migrants to 'keep them quiet', leading to the development of addictions and actual mental health issues. Moreover, governmental camps are heavily surveilled and located further from the border compared to informal settlements established by people on the move. Therefore, migrants usually prefer to avoid these camps as much as possible. If they end up there, it is typically for two reasons: either they have been forcibly taken there by the police, or they could no longer tolerate the conditions outside, especially during winter, and therefore choose to voluntarily enter governmental camps to have, at the very least, a roof over their heads.

Ibrahim was among the young travellers who preferred an informal and unsafe squat over the questionable services offered by official camps. Abandoned by institutions and 'entrusted' to the eager but inexperienced hands of the volunteers, Ibrahim was likely to die that night. He was strong enough to survive though. He drank the herbs

infusion that one of the volunteer had prepared, swallowed an antipyretic, and slept until the day after, when it was decided he needed to be brought to the hospital. Of course, to no avail. The public hospital personnel refused to take care of him.

Field diary, August 2021, Greece

With some surprise, thinking back to what I saw in Serbia, I notice that a good part of the people who live in the informal camps of the city are actually ‘regulars’, that is, they have a regular document and legal status. This typically comes from having started the asylum procedure in Greece. The fact that many of them have regular status should imply access to public support. However, this rule is rarely fully respected, and they end up depending on informal survival strategies. This regular status, at least, allows us to provide greater support in our volunteer capacity.

The other day I experienced first-hand these dynamics, when I accompanied Ismail, a young boy with a bad tooth pain, to the hospital. After a lengthy and challenging negotiation with the hospital admissions, we were admitted to the waiting room. We were sent to another building, even more dilapidated than the first, with half-torn sheets on the walls, malfunctioning lights, and dirty floors – undeniable remnants of a welfare system shattered by the economic crisis. Finally, we were ushered into the dentist’s office, only to be met with a very unwelcoming atmosphere.

The first 15 minutes of the visit were spent trying to convince the dentist to examine and treat Ismail. The doctor didn’t even look at him, let alone speak to him. Instead, he addressed me with an aggressive tone and a judgmental gaze, asking questions about Ismail as if he wasn’t even there. ‘Where does he live?’ ‘Why is he here?’ and, most notably, ‘Why are you helping him?’ It was clear that he understood English but pretended not to when it suited him. He seemed really bothered by the fact that I was assisting a migrant, and appeared to insinuate that I was either a criminal or a woman of easy virtue. ‘What organization are you part of?’ ‘How do you know him?’ ‘What kind of relationship do you have with him?’ But I had nothing else to do that day, so why give up? I held onto the chair and demanded that he sees his patient, as prescribed by Greek law. We won the battle, and the boy finally sat on the examination table, under the blinding neon light. However, I quickly realized it was a Pyrrhic victory, and that the doctor was about to teach us a lesson: ‘Don’t come back here again’. Ismail screamed and writhed in pain. It seemed like he hadn’t received anaesthesia, or the dose was not enough. The doctor treated him with carelessness. Ismail had his teeth extracted, received a prescription for medicines, and was given a look of contempt as we left – still a bit shocked – the room.

5.5. Rushing through Croatia, the EU watchdog

The injection of EU funding in the security apparatuses of ‘partner’ Balkan countries led to a massive militarization of the region and a systematic use of violence as a tool of control, without this making the area actually safer or more secure (Liperi, 2019). Formal and informal agreements between EU institutions and MSs and the governments of the region institutionalised these

collaborations, leveraging the power imbalance and the desire of some Balkan states to join the Schengen Area. Namely, these agreements called for a demonstration of preparation and ability of these states to assume responsibility for the control of the external borders on behalf of the Schengen states⁵². As such, a certain ‘treatment’ reserved to people on the move has been a condition for continuing to favour the negotiations that would allow these countries to enter the Union (Astuti et al., 2020). It is in this context that push-backs and chain-readmissions become common practice. Push-backs consist in intercepting people who try to cross a border and preventing them from physically and legally accessing systems of protection in a determined country, instead sending them back to the territory of another state, usually the neighbouring one. These readmissions often occur ‘in chain’, for example from Italy to Slovenia to Croatia, up to BiH and Serbia. More often than not, these push-backs occur in the shadows, leaving no official record despite being carried out by government officials. The criteria for such actions are generally discretionary and unpredictable, breeding confusion and disorientation among people on the move (Griffiths, 2013; Tazzioli, 2021). As a result, migrants develop a deep distrust of institutions, often refraining from seeking support or applying for protection in the state where they find themselves.

Croatia played a crucial role in the implementation of this violent system of governance, protecting Europe’s borders despite only officially becoming a member of the Schengen Area in 2023. Since 2017, the government of Zagreb has been a beneficiary of over 108 million euros under EU’s Asylum Migration and International Fund (AMIF) and has received an additional 23.3 million euros in emergency assistance for migration and border management⁵³. Emergency assistance to Croatia largely covered operational costs, including the salaries of police forces repeatedly accused of illegal returns and abuses of migrants and asylum seekers⁵⁴. Between June 2019 and September 2021, more than 30.000 push-backs were recorded from Croatia, some of which perpetrated with the use of weapons for intimidating but also offensive purposes⁵⁵. *The Guardian*, in an article published on 12 May 2020, denounced the way in which the heads of asylum seekers were branded by the Croatian police with crosses when intercepted in the attempt to pass through the border from Bosnia (Tondo, 2020a). On 21 October 2020, the same newspaper published what had been collected by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) about the brutal pushbacks carried out on the Croatian border between 12 and 16 October 2020, reporting some of the terrible tortures inflicted on migrants to work of the Croatian police, documented by the DRC and defined as “nauseating” and “shocking”. Migrants reported cuts, burns, punch marks,

⁵² https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/schengen-borders-and-visa/schengen-area_en

⁵³ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/11/eu-inquiry-into-european-complicity-in-croatian-border-violence-against-migrants-and-refugees-significant/>

⁵⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/11/eu-inquiry-into-european-complicity-in-croatian-border-violence-against-migrants-and-refugees-significant/>

⁵⁵ <https://ecre.org/balkan-route-tens-of-thousands-pushed-back-from-croatia-evidence-of-pushbacks-and-border-violence-in-romania-presented-to-un-rights-body-stonewalling-of-asylum-seekers-in-serbia-a/>

kicks, and medical reports confirmed that the injuries on their bodies were compatible with the use of whips and with violent sexual abuse (Tondo, 2020b).

Italy too played a role in these Croatian cruel games. From 2019, the Italian firm Leonardo Finmeccanica (formerly AgustaWestland) sold to the Croatian government two helicopters for the purpose of border and maritime control. Leonardo Finmeccanica is a private company specialized in military and security products. The Italian government owns 30% stake in the firm and the company's board of directors includes several Italian politicians and public officials⁵⁶. Notably, the security industry wields considerable economic influence in Italy (although precise quantification presents challenges), bringing to light the collaborative networks between government and non-state actors in shaping and executing policies (Davitti, 2019; Menz, 2011). The two helicopters were financed for the Croatian Ministry of the Interior by the European Commission via the Schengen Facility Instrument, with each helicopter costing around 15 millions euros. According to the official webpage of Leonardo, the choice was made by “the customer”, e.g. Croatia, through a comprehensive evaluation process to get “the best value solution to meet its demanding mission and safety requirements”⁵⁷. In 2021, the customer managed to meet its demanding mission and convinced Brussels of its capacity to effectively manage its portion of European external borders, winning its entry into the Schengen Area. Just a few months earlier, however, Amnesty International had declared: “Over the years, Amnesty International and other organizations have documented numerous violations, including beatings and torture of migrants and asylum-seekers by Croatian police, whose salaries may have been paid for by EU funds”⁵⁸.

Push-backs have transformed the Croatian border into a lawless zone, fraught with danger for migrants and ripe for exploitation by smuggling networks. On the other side of the border, in BiH and Serbia, migrants wait for weeks or even months for the right opportunity to attempt the ‘game’. But in most cases, the Croatian police thwart these attempts, forcing migrants to either take refuge in the jungles or return to government reception centres to rest and plan their next try. When migrants manage to cross, they travel through Croatia hastily, haunted by the violence they have already endured and aware that Croatia offers no safe haven. Notably though, as Croatia started the process to enter the Schengen Area, police violence against them appeared to decrease significantly. In 2022, among the solidarians in Trieste there was a rumour that the Croatian police no longer pushed asylum seekers back to BiH and Serbia. Some asylum seekers had arrived in Italy with an expulsion order allegedly issued by Croatian authorities and which gave them a few days to leave the country, basically the time necessary to walk to the Slovenian border – therefore, becoming a matter of competence for the Slovenian authorities.

⁵⁶ <https://www.leonardo.com/it/investors/corporate-governance/board-of-directors/composition>

⁵⁷ <https://www.leonardo.com/it/press-release-detail/-/detail/aw1221-aw139-croatian-police>

⁵⁸ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/11/eu-inquiry-into-european-complicity-in-croatian-border-violence-against-migrants-and-refugees-significant/>

5.6. Steering the flow away, Slovenia as border zone

If and when asylum seekers succeeded in eluding the Croatian police and cross into Slovenia, they entered the EU. Slovenia joined the Schengen Area in 2007. Consequently, until 2021⁵⁹, the border between Bosnia and Croatia served as the last opportunity for EU institutions to ‘legitimately’ block the flows: “after that border, the EU extends seamlessly, and there is not much more to do” (Omizzolo, 2021).

Refugee pressure on Slovenia has steadily increased in recent years, with asylum applications rising from less than 300 in 2015 to around 3.800 in 2019 and 3.500 in 2020⁶⁰. Despite this, recognition rates have remained very low, averaging only 5%⁶¹. Given Slovenia’s area of approximately 20.000 km² and a population just over 2 million, it is understandable that the country was ill-prepared to handle such a rapid surge in individuals requiring protection and reception services. The situation deteriorated in 2020 when Italy began implementing ‘informal readmissions’ of irregular migrants intercepted at or near its northeastern border. Exacerbated by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent limitations imposed on mobility, the ‘closure’ of the Italian border left Slovenia between a rock and a hard place. Facing pressure from two sides – the influx of migrants other countries refused to accept and ‘pushed forward’ and the ‘return flow’ of informally readmitted asylum seekers due to the militarization of the North-Eastern Italian border – the Slovenian government also adopted a policy of disengagement. This approach reportedly involved either rejecting asylum seekers to Croatia through informal procedures or allowing some of them to pass through to Italy undocumented. Either way, without a dedicated intervention from Slovenian institutions to manage these individuals in transit and address their needs.

Despite this deflection of responsibility, it is worth noting the underlying coordination, albeit informal, among the governments involved, with police forces being at the forefront of coordinating these efforts. Although Slovenia’s entry into Schengen led to the elimination of controls at internal borders, the introduction of the so-called ‘mixed patrols’ (*pattuglie miste*) allowed Italian and Slovenian law enforcement agencies to exchange information and plan joint interventions, including in the field of migration and border control. The first forms of collaboration between Italy and Slovenia on border management date back to the early 2000s. As reported by one of the police officers that I have interviewed in Trieste (POL1), in the last decades, most activities to combat irregular immigration have been based on the strengthening of police

⁵⁹ Then Croatia also joined the Schengen Area, replacing Slovenia as the frontline country and the primary entry point for migratory flows.

⁶⁰ <https://migrants-refugees.va/it/blog/country-profile/slovenia/>

⁶¹ <https://migrants-refugees.va/it/blog/country-profile/slovenia/>

collaboration through cross-border cooperation agreements, such as the one signed in 2014⁶². The same interviewee recounts that, in 2005 – well before the beginning of the ‘refugee crisis’ – the Thörl Maglern cooperation centre was established on the basis of a trilateral agreement between Italy and the governments of Austria and Slovenia for the purpose of transnational investigative exchanges. “If you cross the border in Tarvisio”, he said, “after 100m there is a building where Italian, Austrian and Slovenian policemen work. It is a small Interpol, let’s call it that, where all the peripheral offices of the various countries support each other and exchange information in a more flexible, more fluid, simpler way”. While, on the one hand, police cooperation has favoured a more ‘flexible’ management of controls, on the other, it is reasonable to think that it has also contributed to further securitize the issue, approaching it, once again, as a matter of public security rather than people’s safety. Again in the early 2010s, there was a significant enhancement in cross-border cooperation between the police forces of Italy and Slovenia. According to the same police officer, this cooperation intensified notably – marked by numerous meetings between the involved parties and the reinforcement of mixed patrols – with the aim of making Slovenia more involved in managing the migrant influx passing through its territory. The officer expressed his impression that, especially at the beginning, the Slovenian government displayed negligence in controlling the flows, likely attempting selective blocking while permitting some individuals to pass. In response, he said, the Italian police made numerous efforts to ‘involve’ Slovenia and hold it accountable for the people transiting its territory, thereby emphasizing the responsibility of the Slovenian government in addressing the issue before it reached Italy⁶³.

In response to growing pressures, in 2020, the Slovenian government (re)activated Article 37 of the Defence Act – granting extraordinary police powers to the army for the broad protection of the border – as part of the security policies adopted to limit the risks associated with the Covid-19 pandemic⁶⁴. The scope of the border region under the army’s jurisdiction is established by the Slovenian Parliament, and thus, “if the parliament designates a 40km border area, it effectively covers the entire country”, commented one of the social workers I met in Trieste (SW3). While the initial intention was to provide extra assistance to the local population during the health crisis, the military eventually assumed roles related to monitoring and defending the national territory. This resulted in various instances of tension between the governments involved and, in extreme cases, situations verging on the paradoxical, as shown by the following excerpt from an interview with a social worker in Trieste.

“There was a dispute, almost a year ago now, because a boy with dual citizenship, living in Slovenia, was stopped by the Slovenian army at the border and treated as an

⁶² <https://www.regione.fvg.it/rafvfg/cms/RAFVFG/fondi-europei-fvg-internazionale/cooperazione-territoriale-europea-2014-2020/FOGLIA31/>

⁶³ In addition to this alleged negligence, we need to consider the fact that Slovenia has a predominantly mountainous and forested landscape, with 60% of the country covered by forests. Therefore, territorial control is at best complicated.

⁶⁴ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/P-9-2020-002508_EN.html;
<https://borderviolence.eu/reports/letter-to-the-commission-on-the-proposed-deployment-of-slovenian-army/>

immigrant. He had a gun barrel pointed at him and was forced to kneel. Allegedly, he repeated phrases like 'Look, I speak your language' and 'I have citizenship'. The army was alone in that situation, which posed one of the problems. Initially, Slovenian spokespersons denied that the army was there alone, attempting to suggest that there was also a police patrol present. This led to diplomatic exchanges, with the Italian ambassador seeking explanations from the Slovenian government, and vice versa. Additionally, the Slovenian premier posted a tweet exposing the boy to the public because he had personalized his Facebook profile picture with an inscription like 'Long live the partisans', portraying him as a dangerous 'Antifa' subversive. This occurred on the official account of the Slovenian premier. This was the climate at one point on the border in 2020. This generate a long debate, also because, in Slovenia as in Italy, the Constitution does not allow the use of the army to monitor the border" (SW3).

This incident was particularly significant for residents in the area, given that the border has been remarkably porous for Italian and Slovenian citizens in recent decades. Triestinis are well aware of this when crossing for cheaper petrol or holidaying in the neighbouring country. Similarly, Slovenians experience this permeability when coming to Italy for shopping, family visits, or even prolonged stays. In this context, one of the regional representatives that I have interviewed in 2021 highlighted to me that “in Friuli-Venezia Giulia there are always at least 5.000 foreigners a day who do not live here. Even 10.000. They come to visit relatives and generally stay here for 1-3 months. And no one notices them, so why do we despair over three thousand asylum seekers...?!” (RG1). The politician’s question, clearly rhetorical, highlights the crucial role of representations in asylum policies, and in particular, the weight of racial and ethnic profiling carried out by public officials and embedded in the local population’s common sense. The foreigners he refers to primarily come from Balkan countries, and their presence has become normalized over the last few decades, causing no tension. In contrast, non-white asylum seekers arriving at the Italian-Slovenian border have been consistently stigmatized as dangerous and undeserving.

5.7. Conclusions

Traveling the Balkan route, these pages reveal a regional governance model that, despite its fragmented and nation-centred nature, exhibits a degree of systemic integration. This model blends security concerns with neoliberal economic principles. On the one hand, the correlation within the EU asylum regime between border-crossing, immigration, and crime has led to the securitisation of borders and the adoption of ‘police-like’ approaches for managing human flows. This has stigmatized asylum seekers as unwanted and undeserving, often resulting in their physical and legal removal, either from one country to another or from public spaces to less visible locations. For this purpose, on the other hand, the EU has funded the creation of large reception centres with increasingly restrictive and punitive conditions. Despite being commonly labelled as ‘governmental camps’, EU-funded reception centres are typically administered by international

organizations and serviced by specialized suppliers and the third sector. In the meantime, little effort has been made to develop public policies that could facilitate constructive relationships and durable solutions among people in transit and local communities. Nor has the work of NGOs and grassroots organizations been facilitated, which could have helped keep the flow in motion while countering the presence of criminal networks. Rather, informal and criminal economies bloomed in the proximity of large reception centres near the borders. According to the approximations made by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, in 2020, the smuggling of migrants in the border area between BiH and Croatia – one of the most militarized regions – was worth from 7 to 10.5 million euros, with the vast majority of these profits generated in the canton of Una-Sana, where the EU-funded Lipa camp was based (Kemp et al., 2021).

These dynamics collectively fostered a widespread perception of a regional refugee crisis, leading to a prioritization of short-term fixes over long-term solutions. Fuelled by this sense of emergency, governments further securitized the issue, portraying asylum seekers as problematic threats. This framing, in turn, paved the way for justifying even greater reductions in support for protecting and accommodating them, with efficiency and cost-reduction becoming the primary concerns. Within this framework, border and reception policies are inherently linked, both ultimately serving governments' purpose to control refugee flows by restricting access to asylum procedures and hindering access to basic services. Variations exist in how this model is implemented, depending on the specific context. However, similarities stand out and become increasingly evident over time.

By strategically mediating between securitarian and neoliberal trends, EU and non-EU governments alike played a key role in initiating and sustaining these processes. By 'sealing' their borders and reducing public support to the minimum, they made their territories extremely inhospitable for people on the move, thus pushing them away. The stories of Ibrahim and Ismail, among many others, are emblematic of how the lack of support and even basic services renders the journey extremely difficult and perilous – achieving, in a perverse manner, the objective of slowing down the flows. Crucially, solidarity networks scattered across the region played an indispensable role in preventing the situation from worsening even more, effectively compensating for the near-complete lack of state support. In the void left by government institutions, in fact, groups of volunteers and humanitarian organizations reacted with enthusiasm, managing to compensate for European and states' deficiencies with the support of local populations.

This chapter has been designed to accompany the reader across the Balkan route, journeying 'shoulder to shoulder' with migrants and asylum seekers, from the heart of the route in Bosnia and Serbia, following them through Croatia and Slovenia, and up to the peaks of the Karst⁶⁵ in Italy. Reaching this border – with the Balkan route behind us and the gulf of Trieste opening

⁶⁵ The Carso is a historical region, a rocky limestone plateau that extends across Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Slovenia, and Croatia.

before our eyes – in the next chapters we will delve deep into the micro-realities and routines of asylum governance in Trieste. By looking at border and reception policies as intertwined processes, I will unveil analogous dynamics of strategic non-involvement and dis-engagement. By examining these processes on the ground, we will reveal another key aspect: government actors increasingly resort to informality as a strategic tool to adapt to international and domestic constraints while preserving their capacity to exert power and authority over refugees and their movement.

Chapter 6

Centring the Perspective: the Italian Asylum Regime

“Italy has been caught unprepared to handle the large number of migrants [e.g. asylum seekers] arriving in the country over the past years” (CO1).

6.1. Introduction

After enduring journeys spanning months or even years and crossing the Balkans, asylum seekers arrive at the Italian border, threading through forests and valleys in their quest to reach the heart of Europe. Envisioning ourselves on the Karst, gazing down toward the Gulf of Trieste, this chapter offers an ‘aerial perspective’ on the Italian asylum regime. From this viewpoint, we gain insight into the geographical and historical complexities that have positioned Trieste as a pivotal hub and an essential focal point in discussions about asylum governance and the role of the state in these dynamics.

In the following pages, I will provide an overview of the emergence and establishment of the Italian asylum apparatus, examining the interaction between these processes and refugee flows in and from the Balkans (Cocco, 2017; Papadopoulos, 2007). In fact, asylum governance in Italy, and specifically its reception system, has been deeply influenced by its proximity to the Balkan region, although not exclusively. The significant surge in asylum seekers arriving by land and sea from the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s marked the beginning of the first of several ‘migrant emergencies’ on the peninsula. The Italian asylum system began to take on its current form in those years, with the border city of Trieste playing a pivotal role in these developments. Combining ethnographic material collected through participant observations and semi-structured interviews with existing literature, this chapter examines the interplay between regional, national, and local dynamics, providing a foundation for an in-depth analysis of recent events at the Italian-Slovenian border, which will be the main topic of the last empirical chapter. This exploration of interconnected factors provide context and complexity to the understanding of the practices and

processes through which refugee flows have been governed in Trieste and its surroundings over the last few years.

6.2. The Italian asylum regime, a story rooted in the Balkans

Italy has been relatively slow in addressing asylum matters when compared to other European nations (Trauner, 2016; Zaun, 2017). Notably, over the decades, even with the integration of European regulations into domestic legislation, this has been primarily motivated by Italy's desire to guarantee, and then reinforce, its membership in the Schengen Area (Paoli, 2018), or by the pressures exerted by European institutions and other governments – rather than by a genuine commitment to restructuring its national policies and strategies to effectively address asylum-seeking (Ponzo, 2023). From the very beginning, the country's approach has been reactive rather than systemic, and more focused on serving as a transit point than as a destination for managing the arrival and reception of individuals seeking international protection. For decades, Italy played the role of a intermediary in resettling refugees from the East – mainly the Soviet Union and Israel – to Western nations – including the US and Australia (Hein, 2010). This contributed to the perception of refugee arrivals as a temporary issue, resulting in an underdeveloped asylum system, reliant on *ad hoc* emergency measures and limited forms of protection. Accordingly, Italian policies have often encouraged refugees to move to other EU countries (so-called 'secondary movements'), prioritized temporary protection statuses over permanent asylum, and limited state-led reception systems to the minimum, instead fostering bottom-up and non-state forms of initiatives for refugee support (Ponzo, 2023). This had crucial consequences on asylum seekers and refugees, whose access to rights and benefits has been significantly limited.

The early 1990s marked a turning point in the evolution of the Italian asylum regime, driven by both increasing pressure from European institutions for Italy to assume a more active role in managing refugee flows (Paoli, 2018) and the growing influx of asylum seekers from the Balkan region (Bona, 2016). With the outbreak of the conflicts that would lead to the collapse of Yugoslavia, Italy became the second European country for arrivals of Balkan refugees, and between 1992 and 1995 approximately 80.000 refugees settled in the Italian territory, creating a ratio of asylum seekers to residents very similar to today's figures⁶⁶. This represented Italy's first major refugee crisis and the approach implemented to address it fundamentally shaped the country's asylum policies for decades to come. Prior to the 1990s, the country had not consistently developed comprehensive policies to address refugee flows, despite the Italian Constitution guaranteeing the right to asylum as defined by the Geneva Convention and Protocol of New York⁶⁷. The first normative tool on this matter was the so-called Martelli Law (Law 39/1990), which introduced Italy's first comprehensive immigration legislation. Although the Law

⁶⁶ <https://www.unhcr.org/us/media/populations-concern-unhcr-statistical-overview-1996>

⁶⁷ <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/4ec262df9.pdf>

encompassed very different policy areas – including labour migration, family reunification, and procedures for asylum seekers, and thus replicating the same ambiguous approach towards mobility, border and security management found in European legislation at the national level – it represented the first actual attempt to formalize Italy’s response to refugee flows, bringing the country’s approach into line with international standards (Bona & Marchetti, 2017). And yet, as the Balkan refugee crisis unfolded over the following years, the approach of the Italian government has remained short-sighted and crisis-like.

Despite the provisions entailed in Law 39/1990, during the Balkan exodus Italian authorities prioritized an emergency approach, minimizing their own involvement in managing the situation by accelerating procedures and limiting the recognition of refugee status, wherever feasible, to avoid the provision of the associated services (Bona & Marchetti, 2017; Ponzo, 2023). Rather than invest in building adequate reception facilities within Italy, the government pursued a strategy of “regionalizing the emergency” (Bona, 2016). This essentially meant shifting the burden to neighbouring countries. Under this approach, the Italian government allocated resources to establish reception camps in Croatia and Slovenia, in the attempt to contain the flow of refugees within former Yugoslavia and prevent their mass arrival on Italian soil (Bona, 2016) – an approach consolidated over subsequent governments and particularly evident in the current one which, upon taking office, has promptly initiated efforts to create reception centers in neighbouring countries, such as Tunisia and Albania. Meanwhile, to deal with the arrivals that could not be prevented, in September 1992, Law 390/1992 was enacted to provide temporary protection⁶⁸ to Yugoslav ‘*sfollati*’. The Italian term ‘*sfollati*’, while linguistically similar to ‘refugee’, did not carry the same legal weight. As a matter of fact, Law 390/1992 granted asylum seekers a form of temporary humanitarian protection, less extensive than refugee status. Said simply, the law expedited the process while limiting guarantees for those seeking refuge. Though initially intended for Yugoslav refugees, this law became a key normative tool for years to come, orienting Italian asylum policies towards short-term solutions rather than long-term considerations. As Bona explains,

“The legislation provided for a rapid response to the emergency by ensuring, as desired by the UNHCR, a minimum and temporary level of protection which would have been sufficient if the crisis had not continued. This approach was based on the same assumptions that sustained the regionalisation of the emergency approach: that is the belief that the emergency would be solved quickly without requiring long-term measures” (Bona, 2016, p. 104 - translated by the author).

The lack of a comprehensive legal framework (Zincone, 2006) was compounded by implementation challenges, especially in terms of reception and integration services, including

⁶⁸ Interestingly, the same type of temporary protection (Temporary Protection Directive - TPD) has been triggered to address the flow of refugees fleeing the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (<https://mixedmigration.org/temporary-protection-ukrainian-refugees/>).

inadequate resource allocation and a shortage of qualified personnel to handle asylum matters (Ponzo, 2023). These shortcomings have persisted until very recently and, to some extent, continue to impact asylum institutions in the country. In the context of the Balkan refugee flows, despite promising 80.000 reception places, the government only accommodated 2.000 people in state-led camps (Hein, 2010). Management was largely delegated to local administrations and the third sector, such as NGOs and religious organizations, though often without providing them with adequate resources. Consequently, public reception standards remained poor, with limited access to basic necessities and healthcare. Integration projects were virtually non-existent, starkly contrasting official promises. As Bona argues (2016), this approach laid the foundation for a ‘de-nationalized’ reception system characterized by a strong assistentialist approach and the social, economic, and cultural marginalization of foreigners in the long term. Following this experience, the Italian asylum regime has remained largely reactive, with subsequent governments proposing *ad hoc* responses for each specific migration challenge (Ponzo, 2023).

Crucially, this state of affairs prompted grassroots associations and specific segments of civil society to intervene and fill the gap left by the state.

“Faced with reports of the tragic conditions experienced by refugees in the large reception centres in Italy and in the refugee camps set up in Slovenia and Croatia, the first initiatives of spontaneous solidarity were organized with the aim of welcoming the refugees by placing them in an ordinary environment, managed by local authorities and associations, avoiding the logic of large camps” (Bona, 2016, p. 106).

These grassroots initiatives stemmed from local communities and operated independently from the state, fuelled by the proactive efforts of various entities. Municipalities, parishes, and private organizations all played a crucial role. The intervention was thereby ‘transversal’, meaning it transcended traditional divides and encouraged participation from diverse groups (Bona, 2016). Radical leftists collaborated with Catholic associations, pacifists joined hands with trade unions and non-violent activists, all united in their response to the unfolding humanitarian crisis. In this context, the Italian Consortium of Solidarity played a key role. ICS is a private, secular, and charitable organization that has been operating in Trieste and Friuli-Venezia Giulia since the early 1990s, providing support to asylum seekers and refugees. Established in 1993, ICS aimed to promote and coordinate the reception and integration of displaced populations fleeing the war-torn territories of the former Yugoslavia. Instead of adopting the government’s emergency-based approach, the Consortium pioneered a system of ‘spread hospitality’ (e.g. *accoglienza diffusa*) that would inspire, in the early 2000s, the creation of the national System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR), what has come to be known as ‘second reception’. By housing refugees in apartments distributed throughout the city, rather than confining them in large, isolated structures, and by promoting their autonomy and self-reliance, ICS fostered a climate of trust and understanding between locals and newcomers. This approach led to social, economic, and cultural

enrichment for both sides, ultimately ‘normalizing’ the presence of the border and the people crossing it.

The involvement of non-state actors in reception and integration projects, and the subsequent decentralization of asylum governance, has since become a defining feature of the Italian asylum regime. Namely, the experiences from that period helped define the Italian reception system in two complementary areas, known as first and second reception (Campesi, 2018). In principle, first reception of asylum seekers remains the responsibility of the state. It includes accommodation in large structures for short periods and ensuring basic needs such as food, clothing, healthcare, psychological support, and legal guidance. Second reception, on the other hand, was inspired by the Triestine experiment of ‘widespread hospitality’, which operates as a publicly funded network involving local authorities, third sector organizations, and NGOs, with the state being expected to provide legal and operational guidelines. SPRAR initiatives are undertaken voluntarily by local authorities in response to periodic tenders issued by the Ministry of the Interior, which is theoretically responsible for the majority of funding. This arrangement was also influenced by the administrative structure of the country, which recognizes four types of territorial entities (state, regions, provinces, and municipalities) with specific powers and functions. Under these circumstances, while immigration legislation falls under the jurisdiction of the state, municipalities serve as the primary institutional contact for asylum seekers on the ground. Thus, the provision of social and legal services largely depends on the initiatives, or lack thereof, of these bodies, which in turn often rely on the expertise and resources of the third sector.

6.3. Keeping the emergency alive

Subsequent years witnessed a continuation of Italy’s reactive approach to refugee flows. Embracing a suspicious attitude towards asylum seekers, subsequent governments demonstrated a reluctance to assume direct responsibility for their protection and reception, and a persistent effort to delegate responsibility to sub-, supra-, third-, and non-state entities. In line with this, the Turco-Napolitano Law (Law 40/1998) represented an important step towards systematizing Italy’s asylum governance in securitarian terms. Namely, the Law’s main goal was to manage irregular migration by tightening border controls. This involved increased visa requirements, enhanced police powers to control immigration flows, the establishment of detention centres for undocumented migrants, harsher sanctions for those facilitating irregular migration, streamlined procedures for expelling undocumented migrants, and restrictions on the movement of undocumented migrants within Italy (Bello, 2022a)⁶⁹.

⁶⁹ In the same year, the Testo Unico sull’Immigrazione (legislative decree n. 286/1998) aimed to consolidate and reform various existing laws dealing with immigration and the rights of foreign nationals. This landmark legislation established basic rights for foreign nationals, emphasized integration, and sought a balance between managing migration and upholding human rights. It established various residence permit types, facilitated family reunification, guaranteed access to social services, and outlined asylum procedures. This legislation marked a shift towards a more comprehensive and rights-oriented approach to immigration. Nonetheless, the Testo Unico faced implementation

Simultaneously, the 1997 Dublin Convention, which designated the first country of entry as responsible for processing asylum claims, spurred the development of a standardized asylum reception system in Italy. This resulted in the establishment of Shared Action (*Azione Comune*) in 1999 (Bona & Marchetti, 2017; Marchetti, 2014), a network of public and private entities, co-funded by the European Commission, and promoting decentralized integration and reception services managed by local authorities (OECD, 2019; Ponzo, 2023). Shared Action evolved into the National Asylum Program (PNA) in 2000, formalized through a memorandum with the Interior Ministry, UNHCR, and ANCI (National Association of Italian Municipality) (Hein, 2010; Marchetti, 2014). The 2002 so-called Bossi-Fini Law (Law 189/2002) further solidified the PNA, renaming it SPRAR (Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees). While widely considered a positive model, SPRAR has consistently faced challenges related to insufficient capacity and uneven geographical distribution due to its decentralized and voluntary nature (Ponzo, 2023). Despite changes in nomenclature and features⁷⁰, the core structure of Italy's reception system has remained largely unchanged. The Bossi-Fini Law also established territorial commissions for asylum claims processing (Territorial Commissions for the Recognition of International Protection)⁷¹, while introducing stricter immigration controls and a fast-track asylum procedure (Hein, 2010; Marchetti, 2014).

In the early 2000s, Italy intensified efforts to align its asylum policies with the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) by implementing relevant EU directives (Finotelli, 2018; Ponzo, 2023). And yet, despite European pressures to align with stricter asylum standards, Italy's underlying policy framework remained unchanged and the old emergency response model re-emerged in 2011 amidst the influx of refugees triggered by the Arab Springs. In that occasion, the Italian government declared a state of humanitarian emergency, labelling it as the 'North Africa Emergency'. As already mentioned in the prologue of this thesis, this approach was primarily aimed at keeping asylum seekers at bay, either through return and repatriation policies or by granting them temporary forms of protection that would have encouraged and allowed them to continue their journey towards other European countries (Manconi & Anastasia, 2012). For those who managed to enter the Italian territory and remain there, the government set up, once again, large and isolated centres, outside the ordinary reception system and under the administration of the Civil Protection Service (see Chapter 7, Section 2). However, fostering secondary movements and adopting *ad hoc* reception solutions not only proved ineffective to manage the unplanned

challenges and ongoing debates surrounding its effectiveness in achieving both security and social inclusion (Dal Lago, 2012).

⁷⁰ The SPRAR was reformed in 2018, becoming the System of Protection for Holders of International Protection and for Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (SIPROIMI), and again in 2020, becoming the System of Reception and Integration (SAI).

⁷¹ Due to the increased number of registered asylum claims in Italy, in 2014, Law 146/2014 increased the number of Territorial Commissions for the Recognition of International Protection from 10 to 20, and established that their members had to undergo a dedicated training delivered by UNHCR and EASO. The process for increasing the efficiency of asylum procedures accelerated with Legislative Decree 220/2017 (called the Minniti-Orlando Decree), converted into Law 46/2017 (Roman, 2000).

surge in flows boosted by the geopolitical instability in North Africa first and the Middle East later (Ponzo, 2023), but also exacerbated tensions with the EU and other member states, particularly those sharing a border. On the one hand, Italian governments increasingly addressed the EU and other Member states asking for support in managing the arrivals – a rhetoric still popular in current debates. On the other, European institutions and governments blamed Italy for its incapacity or unwillingness to manage the flows arriving at its borders⁷². As a consequence of this, between September and October 2015, neighbouring countries suspended Schengen and restarted border controls, with Germany and Austria blaming Italy and Greece for their incapacity to apply external border controls (Ponzo, 2023). With the aim of mitigating these tensions and managing yet another ‘refugee crisis’, in 2015 border countries such as Italy and Greece accepted the adoption of the so-called hotspot approach at disembarkation ports, in cooperation with EU agencies (Frontex, EASO, EUROPOL) and international organisations (IOM and UNHCR) (Dimitriadi, 2017; Ponzo, 2023). While the number of asylum applicants fingerprinted and registered in Italy grew significantly, the relocation of asylum seekers envisioned in this approach was poorly implemented by other Member States. Under these circumstances, migrants started to apply for asylum in Italy and then moved towards other Member States on an irregular basis to seek better opportunities (Hatziprokopiou et al., 2021).

Despite several legislative attempts, both at the national and supranational level, over the last few decades, Italian authorities have consistently demonstrated a “chronic unpreparedness” in coping with refugee flows (Castelli Gattinara, 2017). As a result, they have failed to offer lasting and effective solutions for both asylum seekers and the communities hosting them. Instead, asylum seekers and refugees have often been portrayed as threats or burdens to the country’s social, political and economic stability (Berry et al., 2016; Castelli Gattinara, 2017). Politicians, irrespective of their political affiliations, have consistently portrayed immigration as an emergency situation. Right-wing parties, in particular, have effectively capitalized on the perception of a nexus between immigration and insecurity (Campo et al., 2021), often depicting asylum seekers as criminals or moochers (Carvalho, 2013). Meanwhile, their left-wing counterparts have struggled to present convincing alternatives and, instead, have contributed to further securitizing the issue (Castelli Gattinara, 2017). Both sides have exploited immigration for electoral gain, enacting restrictive measures to deter migrant arrivals, forging controversial agreements with transit countries, and expanding immigrant detention while simultaneously dismantling the national reception system. This trend began with Silvio Berlusconi’s administration (2008-2011) and peaked during the Salvini administration’s ‘closing ports’ policy (2018-2019). Meanwhile, NGOs engaged in search and rescue operations and civil support for people on the move have faced increasing criminalization (Bontempelli, 2017; Pusterla, 2021).

⁷² For a detailed analysis of these events, particularly but not exclusively those related to the Central Mediterranean route, see Ponzo (2023) and Guild et al. (2017).

Currently, under the far-right government of Giorgia Meloni, this attitude has intensified to unprecedented levels, with Meloni adopting an even more extreme rhetoric compared to her right-wing allies (Campisi & Sottilotta, 2022). Since taking office in Autumn 2022, Meloni's government has implemented measures to further tighten border and reception policies. Within the first year, it has curtailed the already limited activities of search and rescue NGOs in the Mediterranean and reduced resources for reception systems, while allocating substantial funds for privately-run detention centres (Camilli, 2023b, 2023c; Poli, 2023). Additionally, the government has increased cooperation with transit and neighbouring countries to outsource the management of refugee flows (Camilli, 2023a; Fatigante, 2023). These measures have raised serious concerns regarding compliance with specific constitutional and international laws (D'Alessandro, 2023). For example, the Cutro Law (2023) might be incompatible with international asylum and human rights frameworks (Balsamo, 2023; Spagnolo, 2023). Concerns about potential violations of international human rights law arise from proposed policies extending detention times, expediting border procedures, and restricting integration measures and protections for vulnerable groups, including unaccompanied minors. Ongoing legal challenges and debates highlight the complexities surrounding the law's interpretation and its potential impact on individuals seeking refuge in Italy (Vassallo Paleologo, 2024).

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that several of the most drastic proclamations made by Italian politicians in recent years have not been fully implemented. For instance, one of the most contentious aspects of the current Italian government's policies concerns the agreement with Albania for the construction of Italian-funded migrant detention centres on Albanian territory. In August 2024, the Italian government attributed the delays in the operation of these facilities to geological and climatic factors⁷³, disregarding the repeated criticisms from both humanitarian organizations and national and international judicial bodies⁷⁴. Meanwhile, other measures have been adopted without undergoing processes of public and democratic scrutiny. During his electoral campaign, Matteo Salvini promised to expel half a million migrants from Italy if elected. Needless to say, this promise came to nothing "due to the exorbitant costs of such an operation, the lack of bilateral agreements with the countries of origin and the clear infringement of international law such action would entail" (Campisi & Sottilotta, 2022, p. 3). Yet, Salvini's ambition to expel undesired migrants has found partial realization a few years later, when the Ministry of the Interior instructed border police in FVG to 'informally' return asylum seekers intercepted at the Italian North-Eastern border to Slovenia. This decision was made despite the exorbitant costs and human resources required for such operations, as well as the lack of legal and procedural safeguards for implementing these measures.

⁷³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BFQ_XXBsHeI

⁷⁴ <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Albania/Migranti-tutti-i-dubbi-sull-accordo-Rama-Meloni-231441>

6.4. The north-eastern border, between normality and emergency

Although the influx of forced migrants arriving from the East and transiting through the northeastern border of Italy has significantly influenced the country's asylum regime, and notwithstanding the importance of this border region in Italy's domestic and international affairs (see next Section), recent years have seen a marked concentration of attention on the Central Mediterranean route and a relative lack of interest for the Balkan route. This trend is evident in both scholarly research and the priorities of Italian national politics. Namely, despite the heightened attention from Italian politicians on immigration, the government has often shown negligence and inconsistency in addressing refugee flows particularly at the North-Eastern border. Local administrators and public officials I met in Trieste have repeatedly expressed concerns and frustration over the lack of support from the central government in response to increased asylum seeker arrivals from the Balkan route. For years, they told me, Rome paid little to no attention to the issue, both due to external factors and political negligence. During the 're-opening' of the Balkan route, in 2015-2016, the Italian government was indeed preoccupied with major refugee flows from the Central Mediterranean route, diverting resources to the South. Despite urgent requests for support from the local administration in Trieste, the government in Rome largely ignored the situation at the North-Eastern border. An officer from the Court of Trieste put it this way:

“Rome is distant, and Italy is wide and long, with several problems... At the time, the Balkan route was not evident in Rome, so much so that for a long time we were part of the system of redistribution of asylum seekers arriving by sea from the South. We tried in every way to make them [the national authorities] understand that it was not possible to manage both the arrivals [from the Balkan Route] and the redistribution quotas [from southern shores]... In one occasion, I decided to take a plane at my own expense and I went to Rome, asking to speak with the Prefect. I arrived there around 9, I sat down, and [...] I told them that I would have not leave until I had talked to him. Then, I spoke to him for 10 minutes, but I managed to give him a dossier [on the situation at the northeastern border] and I asked him to read it carefully, because we needed to find a solution in Trieste. That day there was an explosive situation in Trieste... so I felt like doing this” (CO2).

Finally, after much effort, “the Ministry... began to understand that Trieste was a sort of small Lampedusa, a Lampedusa of the North, so to speak” – commented a state official with years of experience in immigration matters (SOM2).

Notwithstanding the understandable preoccupations expressed by local practitioners, it is worth noting that until 2018-2019 the impact of the flows of asylum seekers through the territory was not severe enough to trigger a state of emergency. While arrivals from the Balkan route had been steadily increasing since the early 2000s, the transient nature of these flows meant they went relatively unnoticed and did not significantly impact the local population, accustomed to dealing

with the presence of the border and constant transit of people over decades. A social worker I spoke with in Trieste elaborated on this point.

“You know, the border is right here – and it’s a border that has always been dynamic, never static. The local population has constantly lived with this reality, experiencing waves of migration, like during the Balkan wars. So, we’ve always encountered the most human aspect of migration. I mean, your neighbour just escaped from the bombs; these are experiences that shape a community. Then, maybe paradoxically, people vote for Lega because they say ‘Italians first’, but they still smile at their neighbour even if he’s not Italian. These are the paradoxes of this territory. In any case, these situations have generated a sort of social ‘antibody’ that prevents certain drifts. We are a transit region, a stopover at the end of the Balkan route. Thus, despite the numerous articles published every summer about border controls and migrants being stopped, and the police complaints, in reality, the flow passes through. Local people know that there’s no need to bother because migrants just have to take a train and leave. They don’t stay here, nor do they have an impact on the life of this territory. Honestly, I think that, even if we will never have proof of it, the order [...] is ‘stop a certain amount [of migrants], but also let some pass’, basically because they can’t take care of everyone. And thus, they turn a blind eye” (SW7).

The excerpt shows how the transit of foreigners through the Trieste territory is a normal part of life for the local residents, given the city’s border position. According to the social worker, the national government itself was aware that it could not really prevent this phenomenon. Therefore, despite the political instrumentalization of the issue, it is likely that the Italian government has deliberately “turned a blind eye” to the Trieste border, hoping thus to avoid having to deal with arrivals. In this light, the emergency in Trieste was actually artificially created rather than experienced firsthand by the inhabitants of the territory.

6.5. Echoes of the past, ‘border syndrome’ then as now

The propensity of Triestini to normalize the border probably stems from the region’s modern history as a constant transit zone. While a deep dive into Trieste’s past is beyond this thesis, a brief historical glimpse can illuminate how the border became both a source of apprehension and a point of reference – in both cases, playing a fundamental role in the city’s geopolitical and cultural positioning.

The onset of ‘modernity’ in Trieste can be traced back to 1719 when the Habsburg Empire – of which, at the time, Trieste was a part – declared the city a free port. This proclamation marked a significant turning point, propelling the once modest village into a thriving commercial centre strategically positioned between East and West, the European interior, and the Mediterranean. This gave Trieste a new face, the one of “a centre that attracts towards itself, with the resources it possesses and the prospects it offers, new inhabitants, coming from the sea and from the interior. This migratory flow will become one of the constants of Trieste’s history...” (Ara & Magris, 1982,

p. 25 - translated by the author). As such, Trieste rapidly became a multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan city. However, the cultural and political landscape remained fractured, with different nationalities and ethnicities largely isolated within niches that coexisted but rarely interacted with one another (Ara & Magris, 1982). To this very day, the city centre reveals the image of a complex, multi-layered and multicultural community. Just steps from Piazza dell'Unità d'Italia (Unity of Italy Square), the main square dominated by the Austrian Long Tenancy Palace, stands the Jewish synagogue. The air around it carries the enticing aromas of *burek* and other Slavic delicacies wafting from nearby Balkan bakeries. Despite sharing the same urban space, these different cultures remain largely separate, each closed inside its homes and rooted in its traditions. The former director of Caritas FVG⁷⁵ delved into this issue with particular interest. Discussing Trieste's reception system and pondering the extent of genuine solidarity towards foreigners among its residents, he encouraged me to explore the social complexities of this 'citizenship' within its everyday spaces.

“Trieste is truly a cosmopolitan city, where cultures, religions, and ethnic groups converge. Simply look at the doorbells of any building in the city, and you'll immediately discern its residents by their surnames. Everyone here is accustomed to the unusual aroma of desserts from the neighbour next door, the Turkish cuisine that is unpleasant to smell, and the Muslims who wake early during Ramadan. For the city, this diversity isn't a problem, because Trieste is profoundly 'secular', but perhaps in the wrong sense of the term. It's secular in the sense that the prevailing attitude is 'do as you please, as long as you don't intrude on others'. While this is not exactly hospitality, it does reflect a level of tolerance” (CRT1).

While the city's rich tapestry of cultures has been a source of pride for many Triestini, it also represented a challenge in forging a unified sense of identity. The very richness of Trieste's identity, as Bialasiewicz & Minca (2010) point out, makes a single, unified story challenging to achieve. This historical difficulty has, at times, fostered a sense of Triestine exceptionalism, distinctness from the rest of Italy, and even tension with the national government. The Italian irredentist movement is one of the products of this contested identity. The movement originated in 1866 during Austrian rule and advocated, in nationalist terms, for the reunification of territories and populations considered culturally and historically Italian to the rest of the peninsula. Even after the end of Austrian rule, however, irredentist ideologies continued to exist and adapt to changing circumstances. In the twentieth century, Mussolini's Fascist regime exploited irredentism for nationalist propaganda, pushing for the forced Italianization of non-Italian minorities. Later, in the early nineties, irredentist sentiments resurfaced in response to the dissolution of Yugoslavia. These sentiments, never fully suppressed, continued to shape the

⁷⁵ Caritas is a large confederation of Catholic charity organizations operating in over 200 countries, constituting one of the largest international humanitarian aid networks worldwide. Caritas FVG is one of the Italian regional sub-networks of this entity.

political discourse of certain factions within the Italian Right until recently. Notably, upon the passing of Silvio Berlusconi (June 2023), founder of the centre-right party Forza Italia and Prime Minister of Italy for three times (1994-1995, 2001-2006, 2008-2011), the main newspaper in Trieste, *Il Piccolo*, published an open letter he had written in March 2023 ahead of regional elections. In this letter, Berlusconi invoked “the tenacious will of the Trieste people to reunite with the motherland in the post-war years”, portraying Trieste and its territory as “symbols of love for Italy”⁷⁶. Evoking irredentist arguments, Berlusconi addressed the people of Trieste, emphasizing the city’s “natural function” as a gateway to the sea of Central Europe and a pivotal point for Balkan-European relations, while also asserting that Trieste’s culture and identity remain proudly Italian. Echoing themes initially associated with irredentism and later with fascism, these words underscore the ambivalent nature of Trieste’s identity, caught in the tension between nationalist fervour and cosmopolitan ambition. Interestingly, Ballinger claims that the simultaneous embrace of nationalist and cosmopolitan positions by several local politicians and intellectuals only appears problematic if we view nationalism and cosmopolitanism as all-encompassing identities, rather than as interconnected ideologies from which individuals can draw in different contexts (2003, p. 93).

The ongoing tension between these stances is closely linked to the creation of the Italian state, in 1866, which brought attention to the existence and ‘correct’ demarcation of the border, as well as to Trieste’s role as a battleground for affirming Italian identity. In this respect, Bialasiewicz and Minca write:

“The ‘placing’ of Trieste as a ‘frontier’ city comes as the nascent Italian state begins to consolidate its national body and identify in the ‘spaces of the East’ (that is, in Trieste and the Istrian/Dalmatian coast) the crucial missing pieces necessary to the completion of the process of national territorialisation. In the imaginations of the Italian irredentists outside Trieste, the city becomes a symbol of Italian unity (together with the Trentino region), with influential propagandists like Giuseppe Mazzini demanding that the city be returned to the ‘motherland’ [...] It is also in the late 1800s that the question of the ‘right’ tracing of the border at Trieste first presents itself: a question that from that moment on will determine the fate and fortunes of the Adriatic city and that will come to coincide with a shifting series of fractures and lines of division between nations, classes, and ideological blocs” (Bialasiewicz & Minca, 2010, pp. 1087–1088).

This ‘border syndrome’, as Verginella called it (2008), continued to simmer beneath the surface, only to erupt once again in the first decades of the twentieth century. During this time, local irredentism found resonance in the nationalist discourse of Mussolini’s Fascism. Under the regime, Trieste became a symbol of a united Italy, and its reconnection to the motherland was once again transformed into a political necessity and ideological pretext. The emergence of ‘border fascism’ (Verginella, 2008) imposed forced Italianization of Trieste and the de-

⁷⁶https://ilpiccolo.gelocal.it/trieste/cronaca/2023/06/12/news/lettera_aperta_silvio_berlusconi_il_piccolo_trieste-12854367/

nationalization of foreign minorities, particularly Slavic ones. And yet, the liberation of Trieste from Nazi occupation was largely aided by Yugoslav partisan forces. After a brief Yugoslav occupation, the city came under Anglo-American administration (1945-54) pending assignment to a national government. This period marked a decade of cultural and political limbo for Trieste, intensifying a sense of disorientation and loss. For almost ten years, “the city and its inhabitants [were] suspended between two radically different worlds, belonging to no state, with no control over their destiny, at the mercy of the vagaries of international geopolitics” (Bialasiewicz & Minca, 2010, p. 1097) (for an account of those years, see also Ballinger, 2003; DiNardo, 1997; Rabel, 1988; Sluga, 2001). The London Memorandum (1954) brought an end to this uncertainty, definitively handing over Trieste to the Italian government.

The formal definition of the border raised new geopolitical and ideological expectations, yet it at least allowed the people of Trieste to ‘put their souls at peace’. In many ways, “the fixity of the border, paradoxically, served to pacify the political situation in the city. The ‘hard’ border, in a sense, gathered within it the ideological and national struggles, leaving people to simply “get on with their lives” (Bialasiewicz & Minca, 2010, p. 1098). The 1975 signing of the Treaty of Osimo reignited tensions between the central government and Trieste over the border issue. The treaty proposed a cross-border free-trade zone, but many Triestini saw this as further proof of Rome’s inability to grasp Trieste’s complexities. This perception of being misunderstood fuelled the rise of autonomist movements like *Lista per Trieste*, founded in 1975. Though the party itself dissolved, the sentiments it embodied persist.

Over the last few decades, it became evident that the border served a more formal than substantive function in the everyday lives of Triestini. Starting from the 1960s and increasingly so from the 1970s, crossing the border in both directions became a common, if not daily, practice for many inhabitants of the region. Trade, tourism, and work facilitated the movement of people from one side of the border to the other. Through these interactions with their neighbouring country, many people in Trieste have come to see people ‘beyond’ the border as both the key difference that sets them apart and someone they interact with on a daily basis. In this sense, the border appears to evoke both apprehension and a sense of openness⁷⁷. In the often unsuccessful quest for political homogeneity, the border has become the reference point by which to orientate the city’s identity. And therefore, the dismantling of the border in 2007 elicited mixed reactions. The annexation of Slovenia to the Schengen Area and the resulting loss of significance of the frontier, aroused open demonstrations of euphoria among the people of Trieste and the inhabitants of the Karst, who viewed it as a sign of a new Europe without borders. However, some observers have also noted a more hidden sense of disorientation. Reflecting on these ambivalent sentiments among locals, Triestine historian Pupo (2007) suggested,

⁷⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11ai-LPnmC0&t=950s>

“maybe [they] are simply mourning the loss of that endless trove of anecdotes, jokes and stories linked to the border that every Triestine could draw upon. Or perhaps it is the sudden sensation that their entire way of being would have to be re-thought: a way of being that had made of the border both a precious resource but also a very useful alibi; an alibi that covered a whole variety of failures. Or the distinct feeling that a certain part of history had ended” (p. 7 - translated by Bialasiewicz & Minca, 2010).

For the entire previous century, the border had served as a convenient explanation for everything related to Trieste’s unique situation, both its limitations and its advantages. This constant reference point, while sometimes threatening, also provided a sense of stability. Perhaps for this reason, the ‘forced reopening’ of the border marked by the resumption of flows from the Balkan route has allowed a political faction in Trieste to easily leverage old concerns and anxieties to legitimize stricter policies.

It would be risky to impose a symmetry between this ambivalent spirit, torn between ideological nationalism and cosmopolitan liberalism, and the mode of governance I have described as *securitarian neoliberalism*, in which the national ideal coexists with neoliberal approaches. However, it is legitimate to imagine that the historical peculiarities of the Trieste region have served as a sounding board for these seemingly contradictory approaches. In this sense, Trieste offers a privileged vantage point, because in its peculiarity it allows us to vividly grasp, at the microscopic level, the unfolding of macroscopic processes of reconfiguration that involve the state (un)involvement in asylum governance. The following vignette, based on an interview with a local government official, allows us to identify a continuity between Trieste’s historical past and the current asylum and immigration policies implemented by the administration.

Field diary, June 2022, Trieste

Inside the Town Hall overlooking Piazza dell’Unità d’Italia, I have an interview scheduled with a public official of the local government. Despite the anti-Covid masks we wear for safety, I can feel his smile behind the little rectangle of blue fabric, which proudly displays a miniature Italian flag on the side. His demeanour conveys a genuine desire to make a positive impact, and he introduces himself: ‘As you may have seen, I come from Fratelli d’Italia⁷⁸’. Driven more by personal curiosity than research motives, I ask him if he would like to tell me about his political and personal background.

“I am a freelance consultant and trainer [for private companies] ...Still, I carry with me, and I always say this because it is important to me from a political point of view, my military training. I stayed in the army for two years after my conscription. It was my first work experience and I must say also the most

⁷⁸ The party founded by Silvio Berlusconi in 2012.

significant one, which formed and educated me. It instilled in me a strong sense of duty ('spirito di servizio'), which is also why I accepted this position. It wasn't just a political decision, but a spirit of service. Besides, I have a degree in contemporary history...this also had an impact on my political views, because I became passionate about Italian contemporary political history... All of this led me to pursue politics and ultimately accept this role. You see, I felt a moral obligation to champion the ideas I've studied, ideas that need to be carried forward. And when an opportunity arises, you take it, simple as that".

The ideas he refers to are the ones of Giuseppe Mazzini, a patriot during the Italian Risorgimento whose considerations were later appropriated also by irredentist movements. Building on his interpretation of such ideas, the official explains to me his political view on immigration.

"Immigration was one of the first issues I tackled because it's clearly sensitive for our political side... There's a lot of talk about multiculturalism and multiethnicity, but to me, they're two distinct things. A multiethnic society doesn't concern me, but a multicultural one risks being multi-national, potentially leading to situations where everyone believes they have more rights than others: the majority due to its numerical superiority, and the minority due to its status as a minority... This undermines coexistence, making it difficult to establish a legitimate order or system that is accepted by everyone... There's often confusion between multiethnic and multicultural, just as there's confusion between ethnicity, nationality, and citizenship – three similar concepts often treated as synonyms, but which are distinct. Ethnicity refers to traits inherited from biological parents – such as those that many people call race, but I've never been sure if race actually exists – and pertains solely to physical characteristics unrelated to an individual's or population's political life. Citizenship, on the other hand, is a bureaucratic status determined by a state's laws. In between, I would argue, lies nationality – the sense of identity one feels. Let me bring in another concept: 'jus soli'⁷⁹, which is partly related. By separating nationality from citizenship, you risk creating a society where laws are only legitimized by small segments, undermining the foundation upon which laws are built, the unwritten principles that inspire constitutions. These unwritten laws, which belong to the people in a Mazzinian sense, become the constitution... That's why promoting the national idea is important to me, as it instils a sense of belonging... I'll quote Mazzini again – you'll understand that I'm a Mazziniano. When you create societies based on globalism, you either can't govern them or are forced to do so by coercion... But, and here's my personal view, promoting nationality isn't about promoting something closed – there's also biological nationalism, which exists but isn't my stance – it's about recognizing that nationality is always evolving... So, the concept of nationality is dynamic, but it needs to be protected. Without protection, you risk destabilizing foundational principles and regulations... That's why I believe

⁷⁹ He refers to the hot-button topic of citizenship in Italy, outlining the arguments for and against automatic citizenship for anyone born in the country (*jus soli*) compared to citizenship based on ancestry (*jus sanguinis*). Italy currently relies on *jus sanguinis*, granting citizenship based on Italian ancestry. This prioritizes national identity and family ties, but critics argue it excludes children born and raised in Italy to non-Italian parents. *Jus soli*, offering automatic citizenship to anyone born in Italy, is debated for fostering integration and attracting talent, but opponents fear it incentivizes immigration and dilutes national identity.

immigration must be managed – to preserve this. It's not about skin colour or religion – then, as far as the aspect of religion is concerned, it's not so much about religion as it is about religiousness. Not the god you refer to, but what you place in your home or around the city to worship or believe in that god. It's about how you live it, not the doctrine. But that's a different matter..." (LG2).

The public official stresses the need to manage migration in order to preserve the integrity of the nation, while also hinting at more liberal principles (as evident in his statement that 'the concept of nationality is dynamic, but it needs to be protected'). This mentality seems to have an echo in the ways in which migration and asylum policies have been developed and implemented in Trieste. The city is almost a paradox: a vibrant multicultural society coexisting alongside persistent xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment. When applied to refugee governance this has yielded some surprising results. Trieste is indeed one of the most successful examples in Italy of a 'bottom-up' reception system. However, this positive development has been marred by the reality that, for several months between 2019 and 2020, asylum seekers arriving at the border were unlawfully and silently denied access to protection systems.

A few minutes later, during the same conversation, the officer will reiterate the importance of managing immigration and doing so in a coordinated and coherent manner, regardless of the political line taken. However, he will have to admit that national policy has shown little interest in fulfilling this task.

"If we could establish a model that actually works, even with all our ideological differences, at least we'd have something functioning. Unfortunately, there's a sense that neither side has a viable approach. Look, nobody has a perfect solution, but sometimes it feels like there's no effort to find one at all. As a politician, I see a lot of 'wait and see' attitudes. This lack of initiative breeds negativity among the public towards the issues themselves" (LG2).

6.6. Conclusions

Weaving together the local and the transnational, the past and the present, this chapter introduced us to the Italian national context, putting emphasis on the crucial role played by the border city of Trieste in shaping the government's discourse on national identity, borders and immigration. By examining the relationship between recent Balkan migratory events and the evolution of Italy's asylum system, and highlighting the role of the Italian-Slovenian border in shaping these processes, a persisting trend was revealed. Since the initial influx of refugees from the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the Italian government has consistently demonstrated its inability and unwillingness to provide systemic and long-term solutions. Politically, the focus on emergency-based approaches skewed the perception of refugee flows, framing them primarily as security threats to national identity and integrity. Practically, shortsighted emergency responses, prioritizing *ad hoc* measures over prevention and long-term solutions, led to a patchwork of overlapping and contradictory asylum and immigration regulations. The rhetoric of the 'invasion' and of an 'unmanageable' situation has justified the increased reliance on non-state resources and

capacities to facilitate and expedite the work of the government. This delegation of responsibilities to sub-state and non-state actors contributed to even greater fragmentation in asylum management. Concurrently, the recurrent declarations of a ‘migratory emergency’ have enabled the swift enactment of ever new norms through simplified procedures. This approach has intensified historical tensions between local and national authorities, with local officials feeling neglected and misunderstood by the national government. Simultaneously, it has strained relations with European institutions and other member states, which have criticized Italy’s hands-off approach while in turn offering insufficient support. In both cases, the Italian government has consistently sought to manage refugee flows without implementing sustainable asylum policies. In this context, Trieste emerged as a crucial space for experimentation – not only for top-down policies, but also for bottom-up initiatives that offered compelling alternative approaches to refugee flows compared to those of state institutions. These aspects will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, using Trieste as a ‘magnifying glass’ to observe up close and in-the-making the unfolding of these processes on the ground.

Chapter 7

Digging in the Detail: Trieste and the Italian-Slovenian Border

“Here we come to the regional and municipal contexts. So, Covid starts, push-backs start and, at the same time, the centre-right council in Trieste made the decision to dismantle or at least significantly modify some services previously geared towards this group of people, the people in transit.

Thus, the implementation of push-backs coincided with the dismantling of the local micro-welfare ... Let me explain...

The Security Decrees introduced by Salvini in 2018 brought about a restructuring of the reception system, leading to significant changes, ...[including] a staggering reduction in the number of reception placesThe issue of push-backs intertwines with this process – then, of course, there was also Covid...but push-backs were employed to further diminish the need for places in the reception system, aiming to reduce costs and eliminate certain provisions.

Thus, they served a dual purpose, ideological and practical. They clearly signalled support for a well-known anti-immigration political viewpoint. Simultaneously, they aimed to decrease the financial burden by reducing the number of people in the reception system and its ongoing costs...

However, they did this within a mechanism of blatant illegality, because push-backs were justified through a police agreement that predates Dublin [e.g. Dublin III Regulation]. The situation was handled very poorly... There was inconsistency ...In essence, push-backs are part of a broader strategy that involves reducing the capacity of the reception system through unlawful practices. This strategy primarily relies on budget cuts, as exemplified by the specific situation in Trieste, which is now experiencing the negative consequences thereof...”(SW2).

7.1. Introduction

In this final empirical chapter, I closely examine the dynamics that have occurred at the Italian-Slovenian border, particularly in Trieste, over the last couple of decades, with a specific focus on the period since the outbreak of the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’. The aim of this chapter is to expose the everyday life dynamics (Joseph et al., 2007) of asylum governance, thereby unveiling the “clandestine” (Auyero & Jensen, 2015), “opaque” (Tazzioli, 2021), and “ambiguous” (Haid,

2017) (in)actions through which the state manifests beyond its institutional guise. Using a rich array of observations and testimonies, I will describe and discuss the actions, inactions, and reactions of local actors in their everyday experience of the border, revealing, ‘in filigree’, the role of the state in asylum governance.

For this purpose, I will ‘unpack’ the Italian asylum regime and scrutinize it through two key policy areas: reception services and border control. This type of analysis will not isolate these areas but rather highlight their complementarity and mutual reinforcement. I will first examine the impact and implications of the 2018 so-called ‘Security Decrees’ on primary, secondary, and low-threshold reception services in Trieste, revealing a progressive contraction of state and public support in the provision of these services and the increasingly evident intervention of non-state actors, such as the municipality, private businesses, and particularly solidarity initiatives. Then, I will shift the focus on the border and on the ‘readmissions affair’ which, under directive of the Ministry of the Interior in May 2020, involved the discretionary and unrecorded push-back of asylum seekers to Slovenia.

By examining these two political events together, this chapter not only confirms what has already been observed in other border areas along the route: namely, that the governance of asylum is characterized by the coexistence of securitarian nationalism and neoliberal denationalization; and that this leads to emergency-based, exceptional and illiberal modes of governance (Castelli Gattinara, 2017). It also offers a more in-depth perspective on how the actions, or lack of actions, of the government act as a ‘steering’ force on migratory processes and their management (Geddes, 2022). Namely, it allows us to investigate in detail the practices, procedures, and methods through which the state exercises this role, uncovering its informal, unregulated, and thus unaccountable modes of governing refugee flows.

7.2. Throwing a wrench into the reception system

Throughout history, the liminal geography of Trieste combined with the need to make up for the state’s negligence has fostered the emergence of a unique civic landscape in the city, with the development of independent local institutions and networks and the production of various socio-cultural experiments that have often set an example for the whole country (Gallio & Cogliati Dezza, 2018; Mezzina, 2014)⁸⁰. As an activist and social worker in Trieste once told me, “If in the 1960s, in Turin, it was very easy to end up working as a Fiat worker, in Trieste for forty years

⁸⁰ For instance, the ‘Basaglia Model’, or ‘Trieste Model’, revolutionized mental healthcare in Italy starting in the 1970s. Inspired by psychiatrist Franco Basaglia, this approach challenged traditional practices by dismantling large psychiatric hospitals. This ‘anti-institutionalization’ emphasized integrating those with mental illness back into society. The model championed human rights, viewing patients as citizens deserving of respect and dignity. Deinstitutionalization went hand-in-hand with social inclusion; support services, housing, and employment opportunities facilitated reintegration. Decision-making about treatment became more democratic, with collaboration between professionals and patients (Foot, 2014; Morzycka - Markowska et al., 2015; Scavuzzo, 2021).

it has been very easy to end up working as a social worker. This city is like that. It has phenomenal characteristics from this point of view” (SW7).

With particular regard to the management of refugee flows, the border town has acted as the flagship of the Italian reception system (Bona, 2016), with the ICS-promoted ‘widespread hospitality’ program for second reception serving as a model for the national SPRAR initiative. This model places asylum seekers in private homes or apartments, rather than housing them in large, centralized refugee camps. This has significantly eased the integration of asylum seekers and simultaneously strengthened the local economy – in fact, many of the apartments used for reception are owned by private individuals who have profited from renting them out. Additionally, ICS provides legal and social assistance to asylum seekers and refugees, organizes public events on protection and reception issues, collects and analyses data on the Balkan route and the reception system in Trieste, and collaborates with solidarity networks such as the Association for Legal Studies on Immigration (ASGI) and the network RiVolti ai Balcani. Over time, the Consortium has become a logistics partner for UNHCR and a reliable intermediary with government institutions. Despite this, ICS has maintained an independent approach, sometimes openly challenging the political establishment and advocating for critical reforms. Overall, ICS’ decades-long efforts in fostering an ethos of solidarity within the city are likely to have significantly influenced civil and political engagement in migration issues, helping normalizing the presence of the border and the people crossing it. In this respect, an officer of the Court of Trieste emphasized how the region’s unique characteristics facilitated a proactive and effective management of refugee flows.

“This region is genetically different in many respects from the rest of Italy. We still have a functioning administration, and there is a widespread sense of civic duty, as you may have noticed while visiting Trieste. This has led to the creation of a very virtuous cycle in ‘old-style’ reception, known as ‘widespread hospitality’. There has been excellent intervention from the regional authorities, local welfare structures⁸¹, and volunteers. However, when the government made decisions to reduce the reception system, problems arose – problems that you are seeing now” (CO1).

The government decisions to which the officer is referring date back to 2018, when the Italian reception system underwent a significant transformation with the introduction of Decree Law 113/2018, commonly known as the ‘Security Decrees’. While ostensibly aimed at enhancing security, these decrees arguably led to increased irregularisation of migrants and asylum seekers, undermining integration efforts and heightening social tensions

⁸¹ Among cities with over 200.000 inhabitants in Italy, Trieste is one of the first for social spending per capita (<https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2014/10/10/servizi-sociali-trieste-prima-per-spesa-pro-capite-palermo-e-napoli-agli-ultimi-posti/1149462/>).

(Terlizzi, 2020). The SPRAR system was replaced by Siproimi⁸², the Italian system for the protection of international protection holders and unaccompanied foreign minors. This change restricted access to second reception for those granted asylum, forcing asylum seekers to await application outcomes in CAS (Extraordinary Reception Centers) (see Novak, 2019). CAS are typically large, isolated facilities with limited support services, making them unsuitable for long-term stays. These structures were introduced by Law 142/2015 as a way to accommodate asylum seekers when primary and secondary reception centres are full. Initially intended as a backup solution, CAS have now become routine. According to data from the ministerial report on the functioning of the reception system for foreigners in 2018, the first reception network included 13 government centres and 102 CAS, hosting the majority of asylum seekers. Notably, the management of CAS in Italy is a complex and multi-layered system. The overall responsibility for these structures lies with the Ministry of Interior; however, the day-to-day management of these facilities is typically outsourced to private companies, cooperatives of non-profit organizations. The Ministry of Interior's Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration sets the standards for CAS facilities and services, and it also oversees the allocation of funding. At the regional level, the Prefectures are responsible for implementing the system. It is important to note that between 2011 and 2016, the left-wing municipal government in Trieste recognized the slow distribution of funds for CAS by the prefecture and thus committed to covering some of the costs themselves. However, when the centre-right regained control of Trieste's government, this measure was immediately revoked. Deep cuts to public funding for reception centers reduced their capacity and compromised the quality of care for asylum seekers, a situation further compromised by the growing involvement of private investors, interested in profit more than in protection matters.

Overall, the reform, "*de facto*, has abolished the phase of second reception" (Terlizzi, 2020, p. 22) and irreparably compromised the quality of the state-led first reception. Predictably, this led to a 'crisis of the reception system' (*crisi dell'accoglienza*) (Centri d'Italia, 2022), which was then politically exploited to justify harsher anti-immigrant rhetoric and stricter policies. Additionally, the decrees expedited the detention and expulsion of those would-be asylum seekers deemed undeserving of protection, fostering a hostile environment for migrants and potentially exacerbating social tensions and discrimination. Concurrently, solidarity actions aiding irregularised migrants faced significant criminalization (Pusterla, 2021). In recent years, successive Italian governments have worked to delegitimize and obstruct solidarity initiatives supporting the transit and arrival of asylum seekers, even when these efforts are crucial for safeguarding lives and rights. The prosecution of Carola Rakete and the blocking of search-and-rescue vessels in the Mediterranean exemplify the Italian government's determination to prevent asylum seekers from reaching its territory and accessing its areas of jurisdiction. Notably, the first

⁸² Then converted into SAI (Reception and Integration System) in 2020.

decree issued by the new Italian government (decree-law 1/2023, so-called ‘decree NGOs’) proposed that asylum seekers could submit their refugee claims directly on NGO rescue vessels, thereby transferring responsibility for processing these claims to the flag state of the NGO, in direct contravention of EU law (Segalla et al., 2023)⁸³.

Similar attempts to criminalize aid for migrants in transit have occurred at the North-Eastern border, as evidenced by the case against the founders of Linea d’Ombra OdV in Trieste. Indeed, testimonies from various sources corroborate an unprecedented sense of distrust towards the reception system in the years following the reform, a departure from the city’s tradition of solidarity with refugees. Several interviewees allege that local politicians embraced the national government’s rhetoric and deliberately attempted to cultivate a climate of “fear and panic” (ICS1). Their aim, it seems, was to dissuade asylum seekers from settling in the area and deter locals from helping with their arrival and passage. This contrived attempt to manufacture an emergency, despite the promising initial conditions in Trieste, is well-illustrated in this excerpt from an interview with a social worker in Trieste:

“Trieste was the only reality in Italy where the border was normalized. Everything that is happening now is artfully created. I am referring to the attempt to deconstruct the forms of local welfare. These were essential because they have always allowed us to avoid situations of emergency. Instead, they have put grains of sand in the system to jam it, to produce this type of emergency...now the reception system is in distress” (SW2).

Contrary to being a sudden and unforeseen shift, many interviewees recall how this progression had already begun in the years leading up to the ‘Security Decrees’, primarily driven by political sentiments rather than actual problems. An officer of the Court of Trieste recounts:

“The truth is, the challenges we faced back then [pre-2015’s refugee crisis] weren’t primarily practical. Instead, they were largely fuelled by speculation and political wrangling, especially from the Lega and other centre-right parties. They launched a relentless campaign stirring up public fear and spreading misinformation to paint the situation worse than it was. They even created a special commission... whose sole purpose was to scrutinize every cent spent and every detail of the reception program. Truly an unprecedented move. Their aim was to spark a political controversy far exceeding the actual issues within the city. In reality, the system we had in place was doing a decent job of integrating people, even though it was difficult [...] However, I believe that the number of apartments or structures for widespread reception has been reduced, and instead the slightly peripheral structures, of larger dimensions, have increased. Which from my point of view favors much less integration, like for example the possibility of learning the language etc... I know this because I know many people who teach Italian to foreigners. It has become a fairly common volunteer activity here in Trieste...” (CO2).

⁸³ <https://www.asgi.it/asilo-e-protezione-internazionale/controla-costituzione-le-ong-e-i-diritti-umani-linsostenibile-fragilita-del-decreto-legge-n-1-2023/>

Over recent years, government reforms have prioritized a security-focused approach to managing refugee flows, resulting in an emergency-like management style. This shift coincided with a growing narrative depicting people on the move as a threat to both public safety and national finances. Importantly, in Trieste, the model proposed by the ‘Security Decrees’ was mitigated by the presence of a consolidated reception system and a strong culture of solidarity. However, as emphasized by the President of ICS, this achievement was only possible thanks to the determination of the third sector and the solidarity network⁸⁴.

7.3. (Failed) securitarian neoliberalism in Casa Malala

The Italian government’s policy choices over the last few decades stemmed from a combination of ideology and economic factors. The focus on security and the portrayal of asylum seekers as threats led public administrations and citizens to view their support as a drain on resources (Castelli Gattinara, 2017). These processes involved not only the SPRAR system but also first reception services, as well exemplified by the events at Casa Malala. The events surrounding this first reception centre hold particular significance, as they unveil a method for governing migration that aims to concentrate asylum seekers in prison-like camps while reducing public expenditure through the outsourcing and privatization of their management.

Established in 2016, Casa Malala is a first reception centre occupying a converted former barracks of the Financial Guard. Located just meters from the critical Ferneti border crossing with Slovenia, the facility was originally intended for short-term stays before integration into the local reception system. Over the years, Caritas FVG and ICS jointly managed Casa Malala through a shared agreement. However, in 2019, three private entities entered the tender competition, including ORS Italia (Organization for Refugee Services). The ORS group manages reception centres for asylum seekers and migrants across Europe. By the end of 2020, it was the sole manager of all first reception centres in Austria. Notably, ORS has an Advisory Committee composed of several political figures, with the former Swiss Minister of Justice, Police, and Migration serving as the president of this committee. Additionally, the leader of the Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) since 2016 – the same private company contracted by the EU Commission in Bosnia at Lipa – is also a member of ORS.

As the influence of ORS grew across Europe, several NGOs and activist networks started questioning the ethical implications of privatizing asylum reception, citing concerns about profit motives, conflicts of interest, and a lack of transparency in ORS-managed centres⁸⁵. These criticisms have been linked to substandard living conditions and human rights violations within ORS facilities. Aware of this, when the company submitted its bid for the Casa Malala tender, ICS

⁸⁴ <https://www.openpolis.it/esercizi/friuli-venezia-giulia-la-crisi-dellaccoglienza-diffusa/>

⁸⁵ Accessing information about ORS and its operations is challenging, as I have personally experienced during my research.

and Caritas FVG promptly objected, raising concerns regarding the company's lack of prior experience in the country and its questionable staffing and budgeting practices, such as a high reliance on inexperienced personnel and low-cost meal provisions for people accommodated in their centres. In this respect, the former director of Caritas FVG expressed strong criticism.

“I’ll state something, acknowledging the responsibility for my words as they are recorded. The manner in which tender competitions⁸⁶ are structured seems to be a legal loophole allowing illegal individuals to enter the system. I am sorry to say this, but that’s how I perceive it. Look into who ORS is, and I reiterate, these are concrete facts reported by the media: ORS won the tender for managing a reception centre in Sardinia, and subsequently, irregular arrivals increased in Sardinia. How is that possible? It appears to me that there may be a larger system at play here” (CRT1) (see also Liverani, 2020).

Notwithstanding these concerns, ORS secured first place in the 2019 tender selection process by offering a substantial 14% discount on the initial auction price. This prompted legal action from ICS against the Trieste Prefecture and the Ministry of the Interior. The lawsuit ultimately led to the exclusion of ORS from the tender competition and the subsequent re-allocation of Casa Malala’s management contract to ICS and Caritas FVG. Following my inquiry about ORS and the local solidarity network’s ‘resistance’, an ICS operator emphasized the inherent ambiguity and lack of transparency surrounding these events, as the following conversation elucidates:

“ICS: In essence, we consciously decided against letting the facility fall into the hands of questionable individuals or being handed over to the border police.

Me: Was that the other option?

ICS: Yes, it was the desire of the border police to have a facility capable of implementing accelerated procedures⁸⁷.

Me: And were the questionable individuals those from ORS?

ICS: Among others. [...] Essentially, ORS Italia was not only inactive but also had labour cost profiles suggesting pure exploitation. This seemed to be a politically motivated move, someone made the call.

Me: Was it someone from the local administration?

ICS: No, it’s more likely on a national level. This incident reflects a quintessential Italian scenario. ORS’ references in Italy are illustrious unknowns, and their political

⁸⁶ The tender selection process refers to the procedure through which organizations or companies compete to win a contract or project by submitting bids or proposals. It involves evaluating the bids based on various criteria such as price, quality, and compliance with requirements, and selecting the most suitable bid or proposal for the contract. This process is often used by government agencies, businesses, or other entities to procure goods or services from external providers in a fair and transparent manner.

⁸⁷ In this respect, a social worker in Trieste emphasized the fact that press releases from the police union (SAP) and others suggest they viewed Casa Malala as a place to conduct migrant selection, similar to a hotspot.

affiliations remain unclear. However, they participated in various tenders and secured the CPR⁸⁸ of Macomer in Sardinia and possibly a CAS in the same region. If you search for CPR Macomer online, for instance in L'Unione Sarda, you'll find numerous articles exposing their 'criminal' management⁸⁹. Further research into ORS's activities in other European countries reveals even worse situations, that is their involvement in sponsoring private prisons, for clarity..." (SW2).

Despite the resilience of Trieste's solidarity networks, there have been notable changes at Casa Malala in recent years. The centre was initially envisioned as a temporary stepping stone to integration, with asylum seekers voluntarily engaging with competent institutions to enter the asylum procedure and reception system. However, in recent years, Casa Malala has primarily operated as a first-aid centre, where asylum seekers are coercively brought by police officers and promptly transferred to other programs across the country. Indeed, in July 2018, the Ministry of Interior implemented a large-scale relocation plan. This marked a significant shift at the north-eastern border, as it offered pre-arranged accommodation for new arrivals, easing the daily scramble for local authorities to find housing. While some social workers praised the relocation plan as a step towards government responsibility for refugee management, others expressed concerns about the government's motives and commitment. For example, a public official I interviewed believed that "the purpose of the government was to disrupt the ICS-run system: without new arrivals, Trieste's reception facilities would have emptied entirely" (SOM2). However, arrivals continued and even increased, making Casa Malala's function as a sorting centre for nationwide relocations increasingly burdensome. Additionally, despite the Prefecture of Trieste coordinating the relocations, it had to rely on private buses for transfers, paying hefty rental fees to business companies since no government agency, including the police, provided transportation (SOM2). Moreover, numerous social workers have expressed perplexity regarding the practice of transferring asylum seekers to southern regions of Italy, which already experience a high volume of direct arrivals. Over the years, this has led to paradoxical scenarios where asylum seekers coming from the Balkan Route were moved to regions like Sicily and Calabria, where the management of reception centres, unlike in Trieste, has faced widespread criticism due to substandard living conditions and the documented infiltration of criminal elements and other opaque actors (ASGI & Spazi Circolari, 2023; Medecins Sans Frontieres, 2010; Nadeau, 2018). Consequently, the semblance of coordination provided for by the relocation plan resulted in more disorganization, increased workload for local entities, and more confusion and disorientation for asylum seekers.

⁸⁸ Repatriation Detention Centres, also known as Centri di Permanenza per i Rimpatri in Italian, are facilities used in Italy to hold migrants awaiting deportation. These centres are intended to function as temporary holding spaces. However, over the years, significant concerns have emerged, not only regarding the extended detention periods for some migrants but also the undignified conditions in which they are forced to live.

⁸⁹<https://www.unionesarda.it/news-sardegna/cagliari/migranti-a-monastir-affari-amp-intrighi-s1itan4r>;
<https://www.unionesarda.it/news-sardegna/cagliari/il-business-svizzero-nell-inferno-di-monastir-ms4k4050>

Combined with the effects of the ‘Security Decrees’, this situation has ultimately served to impede the smooth operation of the reception system, as shown in the following excerpt from the statistical report on the Trieste reception system, published by ICS at the end of 2019:

“...ICS and the Caritas Diocesan Foundation of Trieste confirm the serious concerns already expressed regarding the drastically insufficient and inadequate provisions contained in the new management specifications for collective reception facilities issued by the Ministry of the Interior, which do not even take into account the particularities of high-impact structures such as Casa Malala. These deficiencies in planning (consider, for example, the provision for fewer than two daytime operators, only one nighttime operator, a linguistic mediation service reduced to a few minutes per guest per week, and the absence of psychological support services) could have serious consequences for the management of such a complex system in the case of facilities with high turnover rates like Casa Malala” (Consorzio Italiano di Solidarietà, 2019).

This state of affairs illustrates the Italian authorities’ preference for ideological solutions over practical ones. As of today, the system of the first reception is in a state of collapse. Hundreds of asylum seekers are forced to live on the streets while waiting for months to enter shelters or be relocated.

7.4. Denying services, forcing people away

During the period considered in this research, most of the people arriving to Trieste from the Balkan route were in transit, that is, they intended to continue their journey to other Italian or European cities. Until 2018, this pattern was primarily driven by asylum seekers aiming to reach countries such as Germany and France, where they could tap into established social networks and find better job opportunities. However, this trend has intensified significantly since the implementation of the 2018 ‘Security Decrees’. The gradual breakdown of the reception system, coupled with a mounting climate of suspicion towards foreigners (and the militarization of the border from late 2019 onwards – in the following Sections), has rendered Trieste increasingly unwelcoming for people on the move, which thereby preferred to leave the border city behind as soon as possible, and without being identified by the authorities. Because of the Dublin III Regulation, which requires asylum seekers to lodge their first application for international protection in the first European country they set foot on, people aiming to reach other destinations must do so without being intercepted and registered. This situation forced asylum seekers to avoid the official support services offered in Trieste, as using them would result in their identification within the Eurodac⁹⁰ system and subsequent restrictions on their freedom of movement. This often included services offered by Caritas FVG and ICS as well. Indeed, while not directly run

⁹⁰ EURODAC is an acronym for European Asylum Dactyloscopy Database. Since 2000, it has been the European database of fingerprints for those who apply for asylum and for those who have entered or stayed irregularly in the territory of the European Union.

by the government, these organizations primarily focus on helping immigrants with documented legal status and thus access to government support. As such, their services are generally not intended for undocumented immigrants.

Still, Italian law acknowledges social and healthcare services for undocumented migrants, so-called low-threshold services – although these are limited compared to those available to documented immigrants. They typically require minimal documentation and focus on basic human needs. Examples include emergency shelters, soup kitchens, basic medical care, legal and social advice, drop-in centres, and street outreach programs. These services are often run by NGOs and migrant support organizations, and funded by private donations. However, how easily migrants can access them depends heavily on the attitudes of local authorities. Since 2018, particularly following the implementation of the ‘Security Decrees’, the municipality of Trieste has increased restrictions on low-threshold services. Citing concerns about health (particularly during the times of the Covid-19 pandemic), safety, and budgets, first-aid facilities and basic assistance programs have been either shut down or reduced in size. Discussing this matter, one of the ICS operators I encountered in 2021 summarized the sequence of events that had unfolded in Trieste in recent years in the following manner:

“For the past 15 years, centre-right politics have dominated Trieste, with a brief break from 2011 to 2016 when the centre-left held power. Initially, the centre-right took a hands-off approach to migrants, essentially saying ‘don’t cause trouble and we won’t bother you’. This was partly due to the low number of migrants at the time. However, their return to power in 2016 marked a clear shift. Aligning with the League party, they implemented policies aimed at marginalizing migrants and anyone experiencing poverty. They reduced funding for migrant reception programs, which included cutting placements in the SPRAR program and withdrawing financial guarantees for CAS centres, which the previous left-wing administration had provided. They increased restrictions on movement, implementing measures like the Urban DASPO⁹¹ (prohibition from accessing sporting events) and fines for begging, aimed to limit public space access for certain groups. There were also symbolic actions, such as when a Lega deputy mayor filmed himself discarding the blankets for the homeless...This was their general approach. One notable action was the closure of a Day Centre under the pretext of converting it into a youth centre, despite this being located in an area seldom frequented by young people, or anyone else. However, it had served as a peaceful refuge for people in transit and those without stable housing [migrants and the homeless], because it is just next to the train station in tranquil surroundings. Interestingly, the building housing the day centre is owned by a banking foundation, which not only opted to keep it operational but also agreed to cover the salaries of the cooperative’s staff for a period, allowing the centre to reopen. Additionally, there was an emergency dormitory in the train station, which was also closed during the pandemic. Plans to close it were already

⁹¹ The Urban DASPO (Divieto di Accesso alle Aree Sostamento e Pedonali - Prohibition of Access to Parking and Pedestrian Areas) is defined by law as a “measure to protect the decorum of particular places”. In practice, a mayor – in conjunction with the prefect (a government representative in a province) – can issue fines and establish a ban on access to certain areas of the city for those who “engage in conduct that limits the free accessibility and use” of transportation infrastructure (roads, squares, railways, and airports). The Urban DASPO is essentially a ban on access for a single person in certain zones, issued by order of the Police Commissioner.

in motion before the pandemic, but the health crisis provided a perfect justification”
(SW3).

A public official involved in solidarity and reception efforts in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region explained to me that several reception and integration projects were shut down due to being deemed inefficient in their use of resources. Since many of those passing through Trieste utilized these services without intending to stay or integrate, the local administration used this as evidence to argue that these individuals were not genuinely in need or deserving. Consequently, allocating public resources to assist them was considered counterproductive.

Notably, this has inevitably created greater discomfort, both for transit migrants and residents. Cast out into a hostile environment, migrants have become increasingly reliant on smuggling networks, which have flourished in what was once a haven (relatively) free from criminal elements. Additionally, due to the absence of dedicated shelters and basic services, migrants have been compelled to establish their own informal settlements and gathering points in various urban locations. For instance, Piazza della Libertà, just in front of the train station, has become a necessary hub for rest, food, sleep, and other basic needs. This transformation has unsurprisingly led to increased ‘messiness’ in the square, sparking complaints from residents about cleanliness, public order, and safety. Citing these complaints, the Trieste administration has repeatedly called for greater control over the flows, with the mayor repeatedly threatening to ‘fence off’ the Piazza to prevent irregular migrants from staying there⁹². But then again, talk has not translated into action. Proposed solutions to the problem never materialized, leaving those on the ground to grapple with the harsh realities. The lack of planning and foresight by institutions led to the rise of informal economies, practices, and spaces.

In this bleak picture, a bottom-up solidarity initiative flourished in 2019 in Piazza della Libertà, thanks to the gumption of a retired couple that started noticing more and more people transiting through the city, without local institutions providing any kind of material and legal support. One of the social workers I interviewed described the situation as follows:

“There is a lack of everything here. There are no public toilets⁹³, no showers. People arrive after travelling for at least 15 days, sometimes a month, and they are in disastrous conditions...Then there is no social helpdesk, even just to distribute leaflets to explain what asylum means, where to go and ask for it, etc. These are big deficiencies. What the volunteers do is the work that the state should do” (SW9).

Waiting for the people arriving by foot from the Balkan route, the first group of solidararians started gathering in Piazza della Libertà every day at the same hour and improvising basic reception

⁹² <https://triestecafe.it/it/news/politica/recinzione-piazza-liberta-da-dipiazza-proposta-inaccettabile-che-nasconde-l-assenza-di-soluzioni-concrete-12-luglio-2022.html>

⁹³ The municipality of Trieste installed the first public toilets in Piazza della Libertà at the end of December 2023 (https://ilpiccolo.gelocal.it/trieste/cronaca/2023/12/29/news/piazza_liberta_arrivano_servizi_igienici_trieste-13961484/).

services for them. Over the years, some of the volunteers formalized their commitment by forming the association Linea d’Ombra OdV, which has grown thanks to generous donations from private citizens and other solidarity organizations. At present, this and other associations, as well as individual citizens who have independently taken part in the initiatives, offer a range of services to people in transit and to those who have expressed their intention to apply for asylum but are still waiting to be entered into the reception system – services that ideally should be provided by public institutions. This includes medical assistance, distribution of food and drinks, as well as backpacks containing a ‘survival kit’ with essential supplies – including sanitizing gel and face masks during the pandemic. In addition to local efforts, volunteers and activists extended their support beyond Piazza della Libertà, organizing trips along the Balkan route to aid people on the move in makeshift shelters, strengthen solidarity networks, and ultimately expose the continuity and systematic nature of the violence produced by the EU asylum regime. As an activist recounts,

“In Trieste we welcome those who arrive and in Bosnia we support them before their departure...: Piazza della Libertà and the Bosnian border are inextricably linked, the beginning and the end of the ‘game’. There cannot be one without the other” (VA3).

Once migrants’ basic needs are addressed, volunteers in Piazza della Libertà offer them information about their rights and available services. Certain social workers and cultural mediators have played a crucial role in this effort, offering their time and competences to provide free legal assistance. A regular at the Piazza, who exercise both a professional and a voluntary role, explained the situation to me.

“Since I started working for [association name]... I have been present in the Piazza every day... I am professionally responsible for providing correct information: what it means to apply for asylum, how to do it and where. In the Piazza, however, many people are in transit, they want to go to the Nordic countries. Therefore, [my association] relies on a network that also includes other key points along the route [to central and northern Europe]... I direct migrants to these places, where they can have temporary accommodation without being exploited [by smugglers].⁹⁴ ...[In fact], the smugglers have told me on several occasions that I’m making things difficult for them... This means that they’ve realized that the network is ‘broken’, that we’ve blocked their business... Then, as a volunteer, I do everything, from collecting information to interpreting when needed. We do a bit of everything in the Piazza...” (SW9).

⁹⁴ It is no coincidence that several interpreters and mediators who have worked in Piazza della Libertà have been subjected to insults, threats, and in at least one case physical assaults by smugglers, who are irritated and threatened by the solidarity efforts that make migrants (more) independent of their services.

These types of interactions have become particularly important as they enable solidararians to gain insight into the various abuses experienced by migrants on their journey to Trieste, whether at the hands of criminal actors or state officials. Starting in the latter months of 2019, NGOs and solidarity networks along the Balkan route began sharing accounts of unlawful practices committed by the Italian police against asylum seekers at the northeastern border. Recognizing the recurring nature of these incidents, volunteers and activists have begun combining their assistance efforts with monitoring and reporting activities. The need to address these two needs simultaneously underscores the close correlation between border and reception policies in asylum governance, a connection pre-emptively recognized by volunteers and solidarity workers who are at the forefront of addressing related challenges.



Image 11 - Piazza della Libertà during the solidarity activities (source: Linea d'Ombra OdV)

Field diary, June 2021, Italy

It's the 2nd of June, 2021, and I am back in Trieste. Covid restrictions have finally fallen and with the summer approaching arrivals from the Balkan route have started to rise again. After a cold and controversial winter, Piazza della Libertà has returned to be animated by migrants, solidararians and passeurs. Police observe from afar. I stop by the square just to say "Hi!" to the volunteers. It's 5:30 pm and the solidarity activities have just begun. They will continue well after sunset. A few long-awaited hugs after months of social distance, and I am back in my car, headed to Viale Miramare, where I will meet some friends from 'the Piazza'. The appointment is at a little bar hidden behind a blue gate. I run inside and the sweet smell of the wisteria pergola confirms me that summer is coming. From a corner booth, Srečko waves at

me. He's a consummate social operator, with extensive experience working with asylum seekers and refugees, and my host for the next two months. At the table with him there is the little 'Balkan route crew': social operators, activists and volunteers involved in various ways in solidarity initiatives towards people on the move, in Trieste and across the Balkans.

I have just enough time to order a beer and sit that my phone rings. I'd rather just ignore it, but after all I'm doing fieldwork, and you never know which kind of information can come with a simple phone call. I answer. I need a few seconds to understand. On the other end of the line there's Rashid, my Afghan friend that I met few months before at the Serbian border with Croatia.

We met in quite unpleasant circumstances. He had fled Afghanistan because his life had been threatened several times, and he was looking for safety, security and, "Inshallah!", someone to love in Europe. At the time of our encounter, he was leaving in a small jungle along the railway, a few kilometres from the border with Croatia, in the middle of a desolate plain, snowy and muddy. The organization I was volunteering with provides material support to people on the move while collecting testimonies of violences and violations perpetrated against them by state authorities and xenophobic groups. Rashid was living with a small group of 'travel companions', among them a couple of passeur. Their days passed monotonously, smoking cigarettes around a fire fed by plastic waste and wet woods. They had been stuck there for a few months, trying to cross the border into Croatia and repeatedly pushed-back by frontier guards. To afford this leg of the route, Rashid had worked for a few years in Turkey, in textile factories. He was an excellent tailor: he showed me some of his creations. Yet, it was January 2021, money was short, and many more 'games' and push-backs were to come.

Once I came back to Italy, we kept in touch through messages and video calls, and while my hopes for him often vacillated, his always remained strong.

"Hello, my dear!" – I answer the phone, expecting his usual joyful voice and some news from Serbia. But on the other side there are just whispers and irregular silences. I pick some words and jump up: he is in the woods behind Muggia, a little border town a few kilometres from Trieste. He has just crossed the frontier and he is hiding in the woods. I understand he is not alone, probably with 2 or 3 friends. They don't know where to go. They need directions for the closest and safest bus stop.

This basic exchange takes over half an hour. The line continues to fall and sometimes he has to hang for fear of being heard. If so, he might be intercepted and detained by Italian authorities. Push-backs from Italy to Slovenia are officially suspended since January 2021, but he is still understandably sceptical and fearful. I can only say "Good luck" and wish to see him the day after in the Piazza.

He calls me back in the morning. He is in Milan, in front of the main train station. He tells me they preferred to keep traveling during the night, to avoid the light and controls, and to leave the border behind as quickly as possible. I know that train station very well: it's the main of my hometown and I volunteered there for a while during the 'long summers of migration', in 2015. Then as now, this is one of the main migratory hubs in Northern Italy. Migrants come from South and East, and move forward to the North and West of Europe.

Rashid is fine, under a tree that shelters him from the heat. But they need to find a place to sleep, just for one night before leaving again to France. Plus, they have no money and can't buy food, nor cigarettes – a common help among migrants to combat hunger and boredom. I take action and start contacting secular and religious organizations in Milan, anything and anyone that could host them. In the meantime, I ask the support of some friends who live there, and one of them offers to bring food and some sanitary products. Another will go in the evening, with the volunteers of the association he is part of, and bring sleeping bags and a few more things. From the reception structures, no availability: either they are full or they do not accept 'irregulars'. At the end, I have to tell Rashid to stay there, at the station. It is not a decent solution, but it is safer for them than going around the city looking for another accommodation. Train stations are by definition places of transit, and as such they represent a kind of safe space that mitigates the difference between locals and foreigners.

The last time we talked, Rashid was in Paris, still waiting for his documents and for a decent job opportunity.



*Image 12 - The night I met Rashid
(source: Field diary)*

7.5. The 'informal readmissions' affair

On the same night I encountered Rashid, I also met Hussein. We were in Serbia, in January 2021, in a small jungle along the railway. At the time, Hussein was 17 years old, more or less. He had left Afghanistan 5 years earlier. He could not live there, he told me: "I wanted to study but it was not possible there, in my country there are the Talibans and they come to schools to recruit kids. It happened to me too, they came to my school but I told them I didn't want to join. And, also, the school is not good there, the quality of the teaching is not good" (transposition of conversation). After five years, Hussein arrived in Serbia, a stone's throw from the EU. Yet, he was stuck, suspended a few kilometres from Croatia. He attempted the game into Europe more times than the number of his age, but he was always pushed back. He had recently moved to that area to try a different access. And indeed that place brought him luck, as he later said. The day after our encounter, while I was traveling back to Italy on a bus, he managed to slip into a truck and, after 24 hours without eating, drinking or sleeping, he arrived in Italy, in Gorizia, 40 km from Trieste. He texted me a couple of days later and asked me about my travel, if I was safe and sound in

Florence. Only after checking on me, he revealed he was in Italy as well, ‘safe and sound’, and that we had travelled ‘together’, on the same night. Despite ‘being lucky’, Hussein risked being pushed-back by the discretionary and ambiguous power of border practices. He told me that as soon as he got off the truck (probably in a gas station near Gorizia) he started walking along the railway, hoping it was the right direction. At the train station of Gorizia he was stopped by the police, but he was lucky once again, he said. The policeman who stopped him, in fact, immediately threatened to send him back to Slovenia – “he wanted to deport me”, he told me. But then there was a turn shift and the police officer who came after the first one “was good” and brought Hussein to the reception centre for unaccompanied minors. When this happened it was January 2021, in the midst of the pandemic. Hussein had to remain in fiduciary isolation for a few weeks. During his remaining time in Italy, he often asked for my advice on what to do. His family, who had invested a lot of money to finance his migration, expected him to reach Germany, one of the most popular destinations for Afghans seeking protection and job opportunities. Italy, as many migrants know, is not quite the promised land in terms of social and economic opportunities. Though, back then, Afghan unaccompanied minors had a good chance of obtaining asylum and state support. Moreover, exhaustion was catching up to Hussein, and he seemed tempted to end his journey in Italy. There’s a heavy weight that comes with advising someone on a choice that will forever shape their life. Ultimately, I told him the decision was his, but to consider that, presumably, staying would have been safer for him. Less than a month after arriving in Italy, Hussein was back on the move, heading for Germany. Family pressure and the lingering fear of being ‘deported’ back to the Balkan route proved stronger influences. Although readmissions were officially suspended at the time, stories lingered among migrants of people being returned from Trieste to Bosnia just a few months earlier. The majority of those who arrived at the northeastern border between 2020 and 2021, therefore, tried to stay there as little as possible.

Personal stories of this nature are commonplace among those traversing the Balkan route. Any solidarian with experience in border regions has, at some point, encountered individuals struggling with confusion, disorientation, and exhaustion, forced to take life-defining decisions in the absolute lack of any guarantee or certainty (Davies et al., 2023; Tazzioli, 2020b, 2021). By listening to the stories of people on the move, the push-backs they have suffered, and the difficulties they encounter in trying to access the most basic necessities, volunteers and activists are updated in real time on the evolution of policies and practices implemented by state actors in the field. Additionally, thanks to their strong regional connections, solidararians can swiftly share and compare information collected along different parts of the route, ultimately piecing together a comprehensive picture of the overall scenario.

Starting in late 2019, reports from migrants reaching Italy, specifically Trieste, who were then intercepted by Italian police and pushed back to Slovenia despite asylum requests, prompted solidarity networks to begin monitoring chain push-backs from the Italian border zone. This type of activity among solidarity networks had begun to emerge as early as 2016 and 2017, when levels

of violence in the region had exponentially increased as a result of the formal ‘closure’ of the Balkan route outlined in the EU-Turkey agreement. Beyond providing basic necessities to those in transit, volunteers and activists began collecting testimonies of unlawful practices perpetrated against migrants and asylum seekers. These reports shed light on key aspects of push-backs, including the countries involved, the number of individuals affected, the geographic coordinates of each incident, the involvement of law enforcement personnel, and the types of violence endured (Davies et al., 2023). The information gathered in this way not only amplifies the voices of the silenced, but also becomes crucial evidence for political and legal challenges against the perpetrators. For example, when a member of the Italian Parliament, in July 2020, presented an urgent interpellation to the Italian Parliament to discuss *refoulement* practices at the Italian-Slovenian border, he cited reports from solidarity networks such as RiVolti ai Balcani and the Border Violence Monitoring Network. The BVMN is a horizontally structured coalition of grassroots NGOs that collects reports of border and internal violence along the Balkan route and utilizes them to expose the illegality and brutality of asylum policies inside and outside the EU. The network managed to collect hundreds of testimonies of collective and chain push-backs and, with the assistance of lawyers, journalists, and some political figures, they used this information to bring their concerns to the attention of the European Commission. In December 2020, the BVMN released the *Black Book of Pushbacks*, a two-volume work containing a total of 892 group testimonials detailing the violations and violence experienced by 12.654 people transiting through the Balkan route. The book was presented by Left members of the European Parliament to EU Commissioner for Asylum with the precise intent of denouncing the systematic nature of these practices through the analysis of patterns and photo evidence (Tondo, 2020c).

An updated and expanded version of the *Black Book* in four volumes was released in December 2022. Among the almost 800 pages that make up the collection, there is the testimony of a chain readmission from Italy to Serbia, gathered by volunteers of Fresh Response⁹⁵, a grassroots independent NGO active in Serbia since the summer of 2016. Fresh Response is member of the BVMN. Based on the testimony collected by social workers and volunteers, lawyers from ASGI together with a journalist presented an appeal to the Human Rights and Immigration Section of the Ordinary Court of Rome for the alleged ‘informal readmission’ to Slovenia, and consequent chain push-back to Serbia through Croatia, of a Pakistani asylum seeker, in July 2020. This legal action was successful and in January 2021 the Court of Rome declared illegal the practices committed by the Italian border police and condemned the Ministry of Interior for giving the indication to the border police in the first place⁹⁶. Since then, ‘informal readmissions’ have been officially suspended – although, as we will see soon, never abandoned as a goal of some policy-makers. This success was made possible by a multi-level collaboration among different solidarity actors distributed across the Balkan route, organized both in informal networks and formal

⁹⁵ <https://borderviolence.eu/testimonies/july-15-2020-0000-piazza-liberta-trieste/>

⁹⁶ <https://www.asgi.it/allontamento-espulsione/bosnia-diritto-asilo-italia/>

institutions. The same ASGI defined the sentence of the Court of Rome as “the result of a network work that has involved various subjects active in the contrast of violence against people on the move along the Balkan route” including, among others, journalists, the network RiVolti ai Balcani, the NGO Along the Balkan route, the Legal Centre for the Protection of Human Rights and the Environment, the Medea project of ASGI, ICS Ufficio Rifugiati, Linea d’Ombra OdV, the Zagreb Peace Centre, and “all the activists who act for protecting human rights in Bosnia-Herzegovina and along the routes travelled by people in transit”⁹⁷.

7.6. Dismantling the asylum right

Building on the work of these solidarity actors, the Court of Rome was able to assess the facts. In spring 2020, the Italian Ministry of the Interior instructed the Prefecture of Trieste to implement ‘informal readmissions’ to Slovenia for irregular migrants intercepted within 10 km of the border area and within 24 hours of their alleged entry. The Ministry substantiated this directive by referencing a mutual agreement between Italy and Slovenia dating back to 1996, which provided guidelines for readmitting citizens of both contracting states as well as citizens of third states to the territories of both nations. To enforce this directive, mixed patrols were organized with personnel from both Slovenian and Italian police forces. As a lawyer from ASGI later explained to me, these patrols operated 10 times a month, with 3 operations in Italy and 7 in Slovenia, likely aimed at intercepting refugee flows before they reached Italian territory. In January 2021, the Court of Rome validated the concerns voiced by associations and networks of NGOs, asserting that ‘informal readmissions’ were not acceptable under international and constitutional law (for a detailed analysis, see Astuti et al., 2022; Di Pascale, 2021).

First and foremost, the 1996 intergovernmental agreement was never ratified, meaning it lacks formal recognition and is not legally binding for the contracting states. Besides, it does not authorize changes or exceptions to subsequent national and international regulations, including the 1951 Geneva Convention. The fact that the Italian government had returned asylum seekers to the territory of another state was thus in breach of the right of asylum, enshrined in Article 10 of Italy’s Constitution, and other related rights.

One of the police officers I interviewed for this research provided more details on the issue. He explained to me that the directive sent by the Ministry of Interior to the Prefecture of Trieste in May 2020 instructed the border police to hand over to the Slovenian police “all those who entered Italy irregularly and who were not minors, families, or individuals in difficulty”, or differently said “adult single males in optimal physical condition” (POL2)⁹⁸. Yet, according to international

⁹⁷<https://www.asgi.it/media/comunicati-stampa/rotta-balcanica-riammissioni-a-catena-condannato-il-ministero-risarcimento/>

⁹⁸ Regarding the reference to the ‘optimal physical state’ of those readmitted, my own observations during my time in Trieste, along with interviewee accounts, all contradict this notion. After enduring grueling journeys on foot, often spanning tens of kilometers, without proper equipment and with limited access to food and water, individuals typically

law, access to the asylum procedure must be guaranteed to every person who may be in need of international protection, regardless of their gender, age, or state of health. Importantly, international guidelines specify that it is not even necessary for the applicant for international protection to use the exact words ‘asylum’ or ‘refugee’, as “any manifestation [...] of fear of persecution or serious harm in the event of refoulement is considered a request” and must be formalized as such (EASO & Frontex, 2016). Thus, in order to ensure the effective upholding of the right to asylum, clear and comprehensive information regarding asylum procedures must be disseminated to all individuals, irrespective of their expressed intention to seek international protection⁹⁹. Based on testimonies collected by the BVMN, corroborated by my conversations with migrants, solidararians, and interpreters, ‘informal readmissions’ from Italy to Slovenia involved a troubling lack of information on asylum procedures for potential asylum seekers. Information was either poorly communicated or completely denied. In this regard, one of the policemen I interviewed mentioned that the IOM had supplied the border police with “very good and highly trained cultural and linguistic mediators” to assist the agents in these matters (POL2). Notably though, other sources shared with me their concerns regarding the performance of these mediators, which allegedly had spoken to people willing to apply for asylum, and yet these individuals were nonetheless readmitted to Slovenia.

Local and national authorities have often justified these practices by citing the irregular status of the people intercepted on the Karst and returned to Slovenia. Said simply, readmissions were justified because the migrants were seen as being there illegally in the first place. Importantly though, Article 31 of the Geneva Convention recognizes the right of asylum seekers to enter a country irregularly, provided they promptly present themselves to the authorities and give valid reasons for their irregular entry or stay. People arriving via the Balkan route have typically fled their countries because their governments are no longer able or willing to protect them, let alone provide them with regular travel documents. Moreover, if they did possess passports, these documents are often stolen or destroyed along the journey, frequently by border guards. This means that it is nearly impossible for asylum seekers to arrive at their destination through regular channels. Thus, exploiting the irregularity of migrants to legitimize these harsh policies is not only illegal but also unreasonable. Yet, it has fuelled public acceptance of these conducts. During the months when readmissions were occurring, Trieste newspapers extensively published alarming updates regarding apprehensions of irregular migrants – to be noted, rarely referred to as asylum seekers – potentially causing trouble and carrying viruses, particularly Covid-19. The fact that most of these people were single young men bolstered the perception of an invasion by undeserving and scrounger foreigners.

arrive in a state of physical and emotional exhaustion, with sore feet and dehydration being just some of the common consequences.

⁹⁹ Directive 2013/32/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection status (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013L0032&from=sk>).

In addition to this, ‘informal readmissions’ breach the principle of *non-refoulement*, which guarantees that no one should be returned to a country where they risk facing torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. In July 2020, responding to an urgent interpellation by the member of parliament Riccardo Magi, the undersecretary of the Italian Ministry of the Interior claimed that asylum seekers were indeed rejected to Slovenia and Croatia, but argued this was acceptable as these were EU countries and therefore to be considered “intrinsicly safe”¹⁰⁰. Although the Ministry of the Interior has repeatedly justified push-backs from its territory by appealing to the equation European country equal safe country¹⁰¹, as early as 2020 testimonies circulated on the fact that readmissions into Slovenia were part of a well-oiled mechanism of chain push-backs towards Croatia, BiH and Serbia. In these countries, already from 2019, both NGOs (Amnesty International, 2019) and European agencies¹⁰² had recorded serious abuses against people on the move and limitations to the right of asylum. In light on this, the Court of Rome recognized that the Ministry of the Interior must have been aware that readmission to Slovenian territory could result in indirect refoulement to Croatia, Bosnia, or Serbia, exposing individuals to the risk of punishment and other irreparable harm. The Italian police themselves were aware of this, as a police officer corroborated when he told me: “In this chain where Slovenia readmitted people to Croatia and Croatia to Serbia, we all know very well what happened, because we received videos and reports”. In front of the evidence, in January 2021, a few days before the sentence of the Court of Rome was issued, the Ministry of Interior retracted, stating that people who had expressed their intention to apply for asylum were not being readmitted to Slovenia.

7.7. Informality as a tool of governance

Despite the well-documented instances of illegality surrounding ‘informal readmissions’, it is relevant to notice that the removal of asylum seekers from one state’s territory is not illegitimate *per se*. Notoriously, the Dublin III Regulation establishes that EU states can transfer asylum seekers back to the EU country of first entry, which is deemed responsible for receiving their claim and verify if they possess the prerequisites to obtain asylum. Given the geographical position of Trieste, people intercepted in this border zone have usually passed through Slovenia already. As such, the Italian state may have the right to return them to the Slovenian police. However, this kind of procedure is expensive in time and resources, while the 1996 inter-governmental agreement “achieves the same result in the short term”, a police officer commented. The agreement indeed provides for simplified procedures that relieve state officials from burdensome

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdDNZRlcCeo>

¹⁰¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013L0032>

¹⁰² Letter of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe to the Chairman of the Council of Ministers and the Minister for Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina, dated December 7, 2020 (<https://rm.coe.int/commdh-2020-30-letter-to-the-authorities-of-bosnia-and-herzegovina-en/1680a099b6>).

bureaucratic and administrative measures. However, this does not diminish the importance of formalizing and officially establishing these procedures.

Remarkably, in a note dated June 2020, ASGI highlighted how the expression ‘without formalities’ (art. 6) contained in the Agreement “certainly cannot be understood in the sense that the readmission can take place without the issue of an administrative provision as it is indisputable that the action carried out by the public security through the forced accompaniment in Slovenia produces effects on the legal situation of the subjects concerned” (ASGI, 2020). And yet, the Ministry of the Interior has interpreted the expression ‘without formalities’ in an overly broad manner, resulting in the neglect of data recording on rejected individuals and the withholding of official documentation from those directly affected – a practice well-documented by other research (Davies et al., 2023; Tazzioli, 2020c, 2020a). As emerged from the investigations, readmissions from Italy to Slovenia took place without any type of formal provision being issued to those concerned. “People would be transferred without any knowledge of the process”, summarized one of the attorneys involved in the legal case. This violates the right of a person to appeal a decision affecting their legal status, such as the right of defence protected by Article 24 of the Italian Constitution, and the right to an effective remedy protected by Article 47 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and Article 13 of the European Court of Human Rights.

The lack of official documentation *for* asylum seekers was often compounded by a rough data collection *on* them. As per a lawyer from ASGI, information regarding individuals readmitted to Slovenia was not consistently collected and stored rigorously, let alone shared transparently. In February 2021, the magazine *Altræconomia* submitted a request for civic access to data on readmissions to the Central Directorate of Immigration and Border Police. The directorate replied that they did not hold any information on persons subject to readmissions who would instead have expressed the will to access the procedure for the recognition of international protection in Italy. The only data provided was the total of “active readmissions”: 1.294 in 2020 (Facchini, 2021). Without any written documentation of the readmission and invisible in official records, rejected asylum seekers became phantoms and tracking their forced removal from Italian territory nearly impossible. Then, in March 2021, the then Ministry of Interior signed a decree which declared “inaccessible” documents relating to border and immigration management, including cooperation with Frontex, as well as “reports and any other document relating to problems concerning the border areas”¹⁰³. Sharing such knowledge, it was stated, “may jeopardize security, national defense or international relations” (Facchini, 2022). Referring to this decree, the Cabinet of the Ministry of the Interior denied the civic access presented by *Altræconomia* on 6 December 2022, for reasons of police cooperation and for the risk “of concrete prejudice” to the “integrity of international relations” with Slovenia and Austria¹⁰⁴. Leveraging national and international

¹⁰³ https://www.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/2022-03/dm_atti_sottratti_accesso_16-03-2022.pdf

¹⁰⁴ https://altreconomia.it/app/uploads/2023/05/0001_22-12-2022_1023.pdf

security concerns, Italian authorities tried to justify the ‘opacity’ (Tazzioli, 2021) and ‘strategic ambiguity’ (Stel, 2021b) of their illicit conducts.

In this respect, it is worth mentioning that at the beginning of 2022, I submitted a formal request to the Italian Ministry of Interior to conduct interviews with border police officials in Trieste. The request was supported by a letter from my PhD supervisor which specified (1) that the aim of the research was exclusively scientific and not journalistic; (2) that it would have respected the ethical rules of social research; and (3) that the interviews would have not concerned specific cases of investigative matter, but rather the evaluation of the general situation. The letter also made reference to the fact that, within my faculty “research activities have already been carried out with the police and the judiciary, always in a profitable way with the full satisfaction of all the parties involved”. Nevertheless, the Ministry’s response was negative and it was communicated to me through unofficial channels, that is by a phone call from a police officer. To this and other requests made by journalists and researchers, the Italian government has continued to respond with silence or partial and contradictory answers.

In addition to fostering opacity, both the Italian government and authorities in Trieste have utilized ‘strategic ambiguity’ to address the issue (Stel, 2021b). One of the ASGI’s lawyers I spoke with suggested that deliberate manipulation of rules and definitions has been employed by the government and local administration in Trieste to justify their actions. For instance, supporters of readmissions have repeatedly misquoted directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council, so-called *direttiva rimpatri*, e.g. return directive. This directive says that if a state A has a *readmissions* agreement with state B to transfer an illegal third-country national, and if state B is responsible for *returning* this person to his country of origin, state B is responsible for issuing the return order. ASGI attorneys argue that the administration in Trieste used this provision to justify not issuing any formal orders, a claim they disputed, maintaining that readmission and return are distinct processes. The delegation of responsibility outlined in the ‘return directive’ pertains solely to return procedures, for which State B is both formally and substantively responsible, but not for readmissions from State A to State B¹⁰⁵.

Finally, readmissions imply a form of accompaniment to the border, which has been qualified as a restrictive measure of personal freedom by the Constitutional Court in the sentence no. 105/2001¹⁰⁶. Unlike expulsion and extradition, the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) does not acknowledge the possibility of restricting someone’s personal freedom for the purpose of readmission (Article 5 and 19). And even assuming that readmission and expulsion or extradition are the same, in Italy expulsion and extradition orders are executed through CPRs,

¹⁰⁵ DIRECTIVE 2008/115/EC OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 16 December 2008 on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals, Official Journal of the European Union, 24 December 2008 (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32008L0115>).

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.cortecostituzionale.it/actionSchedaPronuncia.do?anno=2001&numero=105>

which require judicial validation. In the case of informal readmissions, “the judicial authority is never involved; they know nothing about it” (ASGI1), reiterated an ASGI lawyer.

The lack of transparency and rigorousness has been the *leit motiv* of the ‘readmissions affair’, and to this day it limits – at least partially – the possibility to understand what happened and to prevent it from happening again.

7.8. Confusion and omerta

Despite the Court of Rome highlighting numerous legal issues with informal readmissions in its January 2021 ruling, the debate about their practicality continued. The president of ICS noted the persistent “desire not to accept this situation” in Trieste, with attempts to declare it a temporary measure (ICS1). Politicians continued advocating for the resumption of readmissions, disregarding clear legal obstacles. A new court order, on May 3rd 2021, offered the pretext to reopen the debate. With regard to the appeal presented by the Pakistani citizen in 2020, the Court returned to express itself and established that there was not enough evidence that this person had actually ever arrived to Italy. While the national press paid almost no attention to the news, newspapers in Trieste depicted the event as an acquittal of the Ministry of Interior and the Pakistani citizen as a liar¹⁰⁷. Discrediting the testimonies of migrants, especially when they are in an irregular situation, is a well-established practice that allows institutions to divert attention and undermine the credibility of these individuals, particularly when they report violations and other illicit acts committed by state actors (Davies et al., 2023; Fricker, 2007). On that occasion, the FVG Regional Councilor for Local Government, Public Functions, Security and Immigration expressed his “dismay” at the episode¹⁰⁸. “We expected an apology – he publicly stated – from those who had ridden a case that deeply harmed the honour of the Police and which has now proven to be totally false” (Ibid.). In this context, ASGI lawyers reiterated that at no time since January 2021 had the Court of Rome returned to express itself on the legitimacy of informal readmissions of asylum seekers¹⁰⁹. An ASGI lawyer explained to me that,

“Upon appeal, the Court of Rome determined that there was insufficient evidence to substantiate the individual’s actual readmission. However, the court did not address the legality or illegality of readmissions. The Ministry of the Interior frequently cited this subsequent decision to discredit the initial ruling, insinuating that the court had invalidated the prior order declaring readmissions unlawful. In truth, the court’s ruling only pertained to the specific case in question” (ASGI1).

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.triesteprema.it/cronaca/sentenza-roma-migrante-picchiato.html>

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.triestecafe.it/it/news/cronaca/migranti-roboti-sconcerto-parole-schiavone-su-cittadino-pakistano-10-maggio-2021.html>

¹⁰⁹ <https://www.asgi.it/asilo-e-protezione-internazionale/rotta-balcenica-tribunale-roma/>

Nonetheless, on May 10th, 2021, the Autonomous Police Syndicate (SAP) republished on its webpage the article of *Il Giornale* entitled “Pakistani idol of NGOs gets sentenced”, declaring that the judicial authority had finally “unmasked the mud-slinging” set in motion against law enforcement agencies¹¹⁰. The prefect of Trieste also joined the chorus of voices and, on June 10 in the Trieste Police Headquarters, he declared to the press: “The associations that speak of refoulement are wrong, because that is done between external borders and I understand that we are in Europe, hence we are talking about readmission” (Giraldi, 2021)¹¹¹ – with this stating demonstrating his ignorance on the legal categories he implemented or, worse, simple bad faith. He added that readmissions were still suspended, but that they could restart due to the recent developments. Six months later, the FVG Region purchased, at the request of the Prefecture, 65 camera traps to be allocated to the Border Police for the creation of a “technological wall” (De Mori, 2022). When I questioned a right-wing FVG regional representative on the issue of camera traps, he explained to me that they were meant to provide technological instruments to the police to monitor transit of irregular migrants on the Karst. He specified that the request for these tools had been made when readmissions were still active, but that in any case the cameras could also have the function of facilitating the identification of criminal networks¹¹². When I asked him how this purchase could be reconciled with the ruling of the Court of Rome, which among other things had reiterated that systematic controls at internal borders of the EU are contrary to the provisions of the Schengen Treaty, he replied:

“At the moment, we are at a standstill, because no one wants to take responsibility for reactivating readmissions, this is the reality ... I wonder why readmissions made on the basis of an international agreement can no longer be done between Italy and Slovenia, but they can still be done between France and Italy, since we live under the same roof and the regulations are the same. France is within the EU as much as Italy, so I don't understand why in one case it can be done and in the other it cannot” (RG2).

But then again, in July 2020, the French Council of State had decreed that, by not registering the application and not examining it according to the established procedures, the French border authorities had committed a serious violation of the right to asylum.

Once again, the world of solidarity tried to contain the drift. ICS, *Altraeconomia* and RiVolti ai Balcani decided to raise attention on the topic by organizing a conference on February 9th, 2022,

¹¹⁰ <https://www.sap-nazionale.org/news/smascherata-macchina-del-fango-non-e-stato-picchiato/>

¹¹¹ <https://www.rai.it/dl/rai24/assets/template/iframe.html?dl/rai24/tgr/fvg/video/2021/11/fvg-varde-prefetto-trieste-no-pass-riammissioni-informali-slovenia-a4adbe0c-4ec9-46ca-95cf-afdc31fbac5a.html>

¹¹² However, according to a former border police executive, camera traps do not represent an actual advantage in operational terms – and he explained: “Because if the goal is to identify a particular migrant, as I said before, there are already the identification code, the fingerprints, and front and profile photos. Thus, if that’s the aim, there are already other tools... I don’t know if there are other types of use, it seems to me that we are already beyond that. Obviously, an identification made with the face of the person, the fingerprints, the biometric data, is more reliable than a camera trap that takes a picture in the middle of the woods”.

to discuss these facts within a much broader debate on the “opacity”¹¹³ of asylum policies and the use of technologies at European borders. The press conference was meant to clarify, once and for all, that informal readmissions were not legal, regardless of different political feelings and aspirations. As the president of ICS explained to me, this was necessary because

“There was still this notion that readmissions could somehow be lawful and that they had been halted for unclear reasons... The press conference was therefore a necessary step to conclude this matter, not only factually but also legally. Since then, there haven't been any public stances in favour of readmissions. Hence, we hope that this debate has been settled” (ICS1).

Despite the hopes expressed by the president of ICS, in November 2022, the newly elected Meloni government, through the mouth of the Minister of the Interior, ‘took responsibility’ – as hoped by the regional representative I interviewed – and declared that readmissions would be reactivated soon (though at the moment they are still officially suspended).

One of the reasons why it has been, and still is, so difficult to put an end to the debate on readmissions is the silence of United Nations agencies, such as the UNHCR and the IOM. During the time when readmissions were active, the UNHCR and IOM did not maintain a permanent presence in Trieste, except for the UNHCR officers working in the Territorial Commission for the Recognition of International Protection. Despite early allegations made by NGOs and some politicians in the spring of 2020, it took a few months for the UN agencies to organize a joint mission at the northeastern border¹¹⁴. Begun in September, the mission ended after just one month – prematurely, according to some informants – and the only official statement was provided by the agencies in January 2021, after the Court ruling had been already issued. In the statement released on January 29th, 2021, the UNHCR acknowledged that “States are obliged to admit onto their territory those who apply for asylum at their borders, at least for the duration of the examination of the application itself [and that] It is at this stage that all the assistance and information services required by law in Italy must be provided”¹¹⁵. However, no explicit reference was made to ‘informal readmissions’ and to the violations of the right of asylum committed by the Italian government and its officers. Queried about the issue during a conference organized by the network RiVolti ai Balcani in November 2020, a UNHCR representative publicly admitted that the situation at the Italian-Slovenian border was complex, but also that it was not very clear what was happening¹¹⁶. And yet, UNHCR officials taking part in the mission met both the Prefecture and the Border Police and conducted observations in the field. An informant confessed

¹¹³ https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=1023996281521105

¹¹⁴ <https://www.unhcr.org/it/notizie-storie/comunicati-stampa/missione-oim-unhcr-al-confine-nord-est-migliorare-assistenza-e-protezione-per-chi-arriva-dalla-rotta-balcanica/>

¹¹⁵ <https://www.unhcr.org/it/notizie-storie/comunicati-stampa/missione-oim-unhcr-al-confine-nord-est-migliorare-assistenza-e-protezione-per-chi-arriva-dalla-rotta-balcanica/>

¹¹⁶ <https://fb.watch/mkw5mrXepk/>

that during closed-door meetings with representatives of the reception system in Trieste, UNHCR officers could not help but admit that the situation was ‘out of control’. Nevertheless, the agency justified their lack of public position on the matter by citing a ‘lack of evidence’. This assertion was contradictory in itself, as readmissions were carried out ‘informally’ and without leaving a trace.

“The problem – the president of ICS stressed – is that no feedback was sought regarding what the agency observed and did during the border mission, thus no stance was taken on the agency’s role in relation to this illegality. But – he rhetorically asks – what could be more serious for the UNHCR’s mandate than a country that refuses asylum applications?” (ICS1). In the months following these events, the presence of UN agencies on the border remained sporadic and very discreet, at least until the ‘Ukrainian emergency’ broke out. At that point, in April 2022, UNHCR and UNICEF activated two support spaces for minors, women, families and other people with specific needs¹¹⁷. A “belated” intervention, according to the president of ICS,

“because the agency remained silent when action was needed. They should have publicly voiced a clear position against informal readmissions. This stance would have likely expedited the end of this illegal practice and clarified the issue for the public and politicians. The problem was that for over a year, the legality of readmissions remained a topic of debate. It shouldn’t have been an opinion-based discussion. It’s a legal matter, and their silence was highly detrimental. Upholding international asylum law requires clear communication about permissible and legitimate actions. By staying silent, they allowed the issue to fester in a gray area... in this historical period, the right to asylum is being eroded also by the fact that certain behaviours are being overlooked and not sanctioned” (ICS1).

7.9. Cutting resources and responsibilities

This ambiguous approach to governance extended beyond migrants and refugees, affecting even those entrusted with implementing government directives. Communication and coordination between the centre, e.g. Ministry of Interior, and the periphery, e.g. implementing bodies in Trieste, were indeed vague and often incoherent. Notably, border police were among the first to complain about the situation, pointing at the lack of clarity, resources and safeguards to ensure adherence to safety and accountability standards. As early as the summer of 2020, police operators in Trieste started expressing doubts regarding the applicability and legitimacy of the 1996 agreement. Police unions, in particular, claimed the need for agents to operate within legal, regular, and safe parameters. Facing accusations from NGOs, human rights lawyers, and certain politicians, the Italian Unitary Union of Police Workers (SIULP) sent a letter to the Ministry of the Interior in July 2020, seeking clarification on the purpose and operational criteria for informal

¹¹⁷<https://www.unhcr.org/it/notizie-storie/comunicati-stampa/emergenza-ucraina-unhcr-e-unicef-attivano-due-blue-dot-in-friuli-venezia-giulia-per-fornire-informativa-e-supporto-ai-rifugiati-in-fuga-dallucraina-in-arrivo-in-italia/>

readmissions. However, the government's responses throughout 2020 remained partial and elusive. Frustrated by this situation, SIULP once again addressed the Ministry of Interior on January 12th, 2021, with a public letter directed to Minister Lamorgese¹¹⁸.

“Most esteemed Minister,

the question of the readmission of migrant citizens who access the Italian territory from the so-called Balkan route has been the subject of heated public debate for months.

[...]

In fact, the growing operational criticalities determined not only by the inadequacy of human and logistical-instrumental resources, but mostly by the absence of clear provisions regarding the operating procedures to be followed to carry out readmissions, have been the subject of numerous, sincere reports from our provincial secretariats of reference...

[...]

And therefore... we are forced to point out that our, today much more binding, request to unravel the intricately tangled regulatory that governs readmissions to Slovenia also remained unresolved as well as the operating procedures to be followed that today NGOs, but now also politicians, declare to be illegitimate.

[...]

... the policemen cannot be further left at the mercy of interpretive uncertainties. They cannot be forced to orient themselves in a regulatory mass whose untangling should be perceived as a dutiful assumption of responsibility by those who have the prescribed political and institutional competences”.

Yet, once again, questions and concerns remained unanswered, generating further frustration and irritation. During our encounter in the police headquarters in Trieste, a member of the police union shared personal and collective feelings about the situation.

“We need to be enabled to work in a correct and clear way, but this has not always happened, even though we have asked the centre for operational protocols. When I say ‘centre’ I mean the Ministry of the Interior... Well, answers were conflicting. I watched some parliamentary interpellations...and, two months apart, answers have been antithetical: the first time they said that readmissions could be done and that everything was fine; the second time they said that asylum seekers cannot be readmitted. At the end of the day, policemen were left ‘holding the baby’ in this chaos in which there is no clarity ... And this is not good, because we, as a union and worker protection structure, have always asked for maximum clarity and [the possibility to] operate in the maximum security of everyone... And these answers have not always arrived...” (POL3).

I asked him what he thought was the reason for this confusion, and he replied:

“Saying that [readmissions] can be done means taking responsibility for them, it means putting pen to paper that they can be done...” (POL3).

¹¹⁸ <https://siulp.it/rotta-balkanica-riammissioni-criticita/>

The government's lack of clear guidelines and resource allocation made implementing readmissions challenging for the police. This placed additional strain on already understaffed border offices, with the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbating the situation by imposing further limitations and tensions. This diverted resources from the city centre to the border area, drawing upon personnel already engaged in duties at the Police Headquarters. The shift in responsibilities has weakened investigative and counter-criminal efforts. One police officer expressed particular regret over this, stating: "I believe this has hindered serious investigative work on criminal networks because there were too many other tasks to attend to" (POL1). Hence, the securitisation of the border ironically ended up benefiting criminal networks.

To support the increased workload, the Ministry of Interior reinforced the border with the army. However, the façade of increased security quickly crumbled. The former deputy mayor of Trieste described this deployment of military personnel as a purely "demonstrative action", while a police officer referred to it as "yet another show", adding that "it's all grist for the propaganda mill". Border controls are usually conducted by civilian police forces, and in Italy the army cannot perform these functions. So, why are they there? – I asked the police officer. In his opinion, "it was probably disturbing to see migrants descending from the Karst towards the city centre by themselves..." – in other words, the army was sent to give the impression of tight control over the border, but in reality, their contribution was minimal.

In this respect, it is worth noting that the lack of a centralized coordination has led to instances where both state and non-state stakeholders have found themselves compelled to operate beyond their official roles and formal responsibilities. Border police officers reported their growing involvement in first reception tasks, such as collecting donations from Caritas FVG and distributing them to asylum seekers intercepted during border patrols – emphasizing that this has become a routine task for both state and border police. In this respect, a police officer recalled, in our conversation, calling the director of Caritas FVG "at any time of day or night to arrange for meals, water, and other necessities" (POL2). While highlighting the remarkable ability of local stakeholders to improvise with the resources at hand, the following excerpt from the interview with the former director of Caritas FVG also exposes the contradictions of this state of affairs, revealing the government's unwillingness to provide sufficient resources for handling the influx in the border area.

"To be honest, the relationship [with the police] is so deep that it's us, it's Caritas, that provide them with essential items. We provide water, snacks, food, diapers, creams, soaps for children, and everything else needed for the initial reception of people... Even the water bottles handed out by police at the border come from Caritas. Frankly, couldn't the state provide three pallets of water in August? It's the least they could do, wouldn't you say? And yet they don't... On the other hand, I have to say that we have very good relations with the local entities, including the Municipality of Trieste. Honestly, we work a lot with the Municipality, also in a very informal way, in the sense that sometimes a

phone call is enough...even if, wait... cordiality does not exempt from administrative correctness and everything else...” (CRTI).

7.10. Conclusions

The excerpt from an interview with a social operator that I quoted at the beginning of this chapter underscores the interconnectedness and interdependence of border policies and reception strategies, which simultaneously perpetuate securitarian and nationalist rhetoric while embracing neoliberal managerial approaches focused on reducing state direct involvement. Bringing together these two policy areas, the snapshots of ‘daily life’ at the border presented in the previous pages confirms the presence of a governance model that, ideologically, re-nationalizes the issue of asylum while, operationally, de-nationalizes it. And indeed, as the interviewee pointed out, push-backs served a dual purpose. They reinforced an ideological stance, like portraying asylum seekers as invaders, and, combined with the shrinking reception system, achieved the practical goal of discouraging people from staying in Trieste or even using it as a transit point. The simultaneous reduction of services and tightening of border controls are two sides of the same coin, facilitating the state’s disengagement from its responsibility to protect asylum seekers and refugees, while still exerting indirect control over their movements (Darling, 2016a; Gill et al., 2016; Tazzioli, 2020b).

Importantly, this combined approach has also been implemented to manufacture a climate of crisis, encouraging emergency-like management of the situation. For instance, particularly during the summer of 2021, there was an exponential increase in the number of migrants intercepted on the Karst plateau. These people were then coercively taken to first reception centres for fiduciary isolation due to Covid-19. In this way, their presence was formalized in the Eurodac system. Talking to other solidararians, we quickly realized that the increased border control, and therefore the number of interceptions, would have soon lead to a congestion of the first reception system. Consequently, those who genuinely wanted to apply for asylum would be forced to endure long waits without adequate support – and potentially to abandon the process due to a lack of livelihood. “It almost seems like they are doing it on purpose”, we said to each other one day, “so that they can declare a state of emergency” (Field diary, June 2021). Unfortunately, our fears have been realized. Since 2023, the situation in Trieste has dramatically deteriorated, with peaks of hundreds of asylum seekers forced to wait for months in rotten buildings to be taken into care in the public reception system, and the municipality complaining for the urban decay and periodically threatening to evict the informal settlements.

As mentioned repeatedly, ‘states of emergency’ favor simplified, accelerated management that is less constrained by legal and procedural limitations (Gatta, 2019; Novak, 2019). Simply put, hence, they foster the *informalization* of asylum governance. In this respect, the interview also effectively suggests that the state reconciles opposing approaches through the use informality as a tool of governance, often manifesting as “inconsistency” and “blatant illegality”. The term

‘informality’ is used here as a broad category encompassing ambiguous policies (Stel, 2021b), practices that lack regulation and record-keeping, and decisions made with unchecked discretion and little transparency (Tazzioli, 2021); as well as the progressive de-nationalization of services and the reduction of public resources allocated to them (Castelli Gattinara, 2017). This becomes increasingly evident as one delves into the everyday spaces of the border, which indeed reveal an increasing de-institutionalization and de-statalisation of the governance system: amid the Karst woods, where informal readmissions of asylum seekers reveal a spectrum of conducts from discretion to outright illegality; within public offices, where clear information and precise directives for managing procedures are lacking, along with adequate resources; and in Piazza della Libertà, where the absence of government support for people on the move has largely been filled by grassroots solidarity initiatives, often spontaneous and not institutionalized. The informalization of asylum policies and practices is thus evident in the ambiguous handling of readmissions, including the use of inadequate legal instruments, the modes of implementation of these procedures, and the public discourse surrounding them. Reception policies, on the other hand, have become informalized through the gradual de-nationalization and de-institutionalization of the processes, spaces, and actors involved in providing these services. In light of this, informalization extends beyond the mere management of flows to encompass the interactions among the various involved actors.

In light of the above, observations and testimonies collected in Trieste reveal a governance landscape in which the Italian state oscillates between bold rhetoric asserting control over refugee flows and a lack of substantive action to realize such control. Examining both reception and border policies sheds light on this ambivalence. While the state portrays asylum-related issues as a security concern, emphasizing national control (renationalization), its actual handling of refugee flows is minimal, signalling a retreat from national responsibility (de-nationalization) and a shift towards neoliberal principles. Nevertheless, these approaches converge on key points, including framing asylum seekers as problematic, relying on emergency measures, and favoring simplified, less transparent operational methods.

Crucially, in these processes, the state remains the steering force, shaping how other actors navigate the daily management of asylum through decrees, directives, and selective resource allocation, all while maintaining a hands-off approach. This has resulted in slowdowns and dysfunctions within the asylum system, leading to fewer guarantees and support for asylum seekers and refugees, increased workload and responsibilities for executive bodies, and greater discomfort for transit and receiving communities. While the system in Trieste has demonstrably handled past refugee emergencies, the situation has deteriorated in recent years. Local and national authorities have exhibited “almost zero planning” – as commented by a state officer (SOM2) – and an unwillingness or inability to develop “any permanent solution” – as stressed by a police officer (POL3). Nevertheless, amidst this unsettling context, it is crucial to acknowledge the containment effect initiated by diverse solidarity actors, ranging from more institutionalized

entities like ICS to less structured groups such as those in Piazza della Libertà. Unlike in other scenarios, the solidarity network in Trieste has succeeded in mitigating, and at times, even reversing, the government's course of action. Using the work of solidarity networks as a lens, the ethnographic accounts in these pages unveil not only what the state should do, but in fact does not, but also the gap between government claims and actions.

PART III
Discussion and Conclusion

Chapter 8

Discussion: (Re)positioning the State in Asylum Governance

“If I can’t push them back, if I can’t stop them, if I can’t do anything at all, I would make the police available with buses to escort them directly to France. The problem is that then France sends them back, and we’re back to square one” (RG2).

“Honestly, I think that, even if we will never have proof of it, the order [...] is ‘stop a certain amount [of migrants], but also let some pass’, basically because they can’t take care of everyone. And thus, they turn a blind eye” (SW7).

8.1. Introduction

Building on the empirical material presented in the previous chapters, this chapter discusses the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological contributions of this research. In the following pages, I will systematize the analytical framework that I developed throughout the research process to understand the role of the state in asylum governance.

Returning to my three research questions, in Section 8.2, I will discuss my findings through the lens of the three chosen literatures. This analysis will allow me to justify the concepts I have chosen to conceptualize different aspects of governance and the role of the state within it. Specifically, Section 8.2.1 answers the first research question – e.g. How can de-nationalization and re-nationalization coexist in asylum governance? – by proposing the concept of *securitarian neoliberalism*, developed through the explorations of Political Geography studies on border, protection and reception policies. Section 8.2.2 addresses the second research question – e.g. What is the role of the state in these processes? – and proposes a novel expression, *‘to keep aloof’*, to describe how the state navigates the system. Drawing inspiration from the concept of ‘steering’ used in Governance studies, this original conceptualization better captures the complexities of the state’s role and its ambiguous functioning in practice. Finally, Section 8.2.3 answers the third research question – e.g. How does this role manifest in practice?. Drawing on Informality Studies,

I analyze how de-institutionalization and de-regulation processes contribute to the *informalization* of asylum governance. I will then discuss the contribution of this study to existing theories and areas of study, particularly Migration and Refugee studies (Section 8.3). I will highlight how my findings build upon existing literature and enrich it by refining our focus on the actions and inactions of national governments. Finally, in Section 8.4, I will reflect on the methodological and epistemological contribution provided by my specific positioning within this field of research. I will discuss my active and engaged participation in the research process as a solidarity actor, stressing how this has allowed me to better capture the intricacies and nuances of the asylum “battleground” (Ambrosini, 2021).

8.2. Conceptualizing the state in asylum governance

This research stemmed from the apparent contradiction between a tendency towards the de-nationalization of asylum governance, mainly manifested through the growing involvement of non-state actors in its elaboration and implementation, and a political attitude on the side of governmental actors themselves to re-nationalize it, by performing an increasingly securitarian and nationalist approach to human mobility. Recent literature has accurately described a trend towards a more plural and multi-scalar governance system, with control over refugee flows being increasingly distributed among state and non-state, formal and informal actors (Ambrosini, 2021; Caponio & Borkert, 2010; Caponio & Ponzo, 2022; Gammeltoft-Hansen & Nyberg Sørensen, 2013; Guiraudon, 2000). At the same time, national governments have been re-claiming this policy sector as fundamental to affirming their authority and power (Campisi & Sottillotta, 2022; Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010; Grinan-Moutinho, 2022; Massey, 2020). In light of this, my project aimed to understand, first, if and how these apparently opposing trends can coexist; second, what kind of authority and functions the state has in these processes; and, third, how this role maintains and manifests itself on the ground. In what comes next, I will discuss the analytical framework that allowed me to give answers to these questions (see *Table 2*).

In this regard, before proceeding, it is important to reiterate two points. The first concerns the relation between the existing literature and my research. Rather than being dismissed, the former was utilized as a foundational analytical framework for a more focused examination of the role of the state in a hybrid, multilevel and dispersed governance system. The question is not therefore whether the state remains an influential actor in governance processes, but rather *how* its role persists and adapts to emerging circumstances and new actors. Concurrently, the second point I want to emphasize relates to the ‘evaluation’ of governance systems. While this research highlights the violations of refugees’ rights deriving from state negligence, this is not to claim that a fully centralized, state-led governance model would necessarily produce better results in terms of migrants’ safety and dignity. Asylum governance is not inherently better or worse when performed by state entities – although, in theory, public actors should adhere to higher standards

of liability. Instead, what this research aims to highlight is the gap between legal obligations, stated intentions, and actual behaviours of governmental actors, and how this gap produces further insecurity, physical and legal, for asylum seekers.

8.2.1. Securitarian neoliberalism

“...pushbacks were employed to further diminish the need for places in the reception system, aiming to reduce costs and eliminate certain provisions. Thus, they served a dual purpose, ideological and practical. They clearly signalled support for a well-known anti-immigration political viewpoint. Simultaneously, they aimed to decrease the financial burden by reducing the number of people in the reception system and its ongoing costs” (SW2).

Political Geography offers valuable insights to understand how nationalist claims and neoliberal logics can coexist. Its comprehensive approach, combining political, legal, and spatial elements, reveals the continuity and interdependence of border and reception policies. As such, Political Geography has been used to examine the securitisation of migration and national borders (De Genova, 2010; Mountz, 2011, 2014), as well as the neoliberalisation of asylum policies (and reception services (Darling, 2016b; Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2019; Fontanari, 2022b; Novak, 2019). Additionally, research in this field has focused on the convergence of these trends in practices aimed at physically and legally containing undesired asylum seekers, such as in detention centres (Sparke, 2006) and ‘hotspots’ (Pallister-Wilkins, 2020). Political Geography can therefore be a fruitful lens through which to investigate the interconnections and overlappings between securitarian nationalism and neoliberal denationalization in asylum governance. I suggest to describe this type of governance, which combines national security discourses and both formal and informal public-private partnerships, as *securitarian neoliberalism*. This term refers to the combination of state-centred politics prioritizing border defence and national security, and neoliberal approaches that foster collaboration between public and private, formal and informal actors in an increasingly deregulated and profit-oriented way of governance..

Travelling along the Balkan route, through both EU and non-EU countries like Greece, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Slovenia, these combined approaches manifest in a governance system that keeps asylum seekers at bay. This system restricts their freedom of movement and hinders their ability to access protection systems. By militarizing borders in a securitarian fashion, governments expel asylum seekers and deny them access to asylum procedures and essential services, including reception facilities. In this respect, it is essential to clarify that border securitisation does not equate to entirely sealing off a country’s borders. Such a policy is not only impractical but also counterproductive, as many governments rely on foreign labour, often undocumented and underpaid, to sustain their economies and fill labour shortages (Ambrosini, 2020; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). Additionally, the actual management of these

people has been significantly delegated to non-state actors, including private companies (like the ICMDP), international organizations (like the IOM), and NGOs and civil society initiatives (such as the associations I volunteered with). It is important to highlight that while all these actors participate in governance processes as a consequence of the state's strategic disengagement, their motivations, approaches, and objectives vary widely – ranging from profit-driven endeavours to selfless acts of solidarity, and from humanitarian agencies aligned with governmental policies to grassroots movements explicitly challenging the asylum regime. Consequently, while neoliberalism in asylum can be interpreted as a hybridization process outsourcing state functions and weakening accountability mechanisms, the dynamics it generates do not necessarily reinforce this state of affairs, and instead can also generate opportunities for critical actors to mitigate or at least denounce the state's disengagement from its duties and responsibilities. At the same time, however, the neoliberalisation of asylum governance has allowed private companies to make enormous profits: not only from providing reception services, but also from the nationalist project of militarization of borders – for example, Leonardo Finmeccanica selling security equipment to Croatia (Jacobs, 2023). This, in turn, has translated into greater influence for these companies over the decision-making processes related to asylum management in the region. Still, in spite of the growing power of private actors and the emergence of opposition from solidarity movements governments retain the ability to determine the range of actions these actors can take – by deciding who to award contracts to and how to distribute funding, for instance – and to 'steer' them at their advantage – as when they allow the latter to directly assume responsibility for managing refugee flows, as long as this does not interfere with its political goals. Ultimately, maintaining indirect control over the movement of people, but with selective intervention in the implementation of such control, both legally and practically, states seek to remove asylum seekers from their territory and jurisdiction, as the opening quotes illustrate.

The Lipa camp, a detention-like facility on the Bosnian border with Croatia, vividly exemplifies this securitarian neoliberalism. This centre operates at the crossroads of border control and reception policies. People stranded in Bosnia due to the militarized border with Croatia are accommodated into this isolated and inaccessible facility. European funds are allocated by the Bosnian state to third parties, including international organizations and private companies, to manage the centre. This has translated into substandard living conditions for asylum seekers and limited monitoring over violations of their rights. As such, several people on the move prefer to avoid these government-run centres. However, having no other formal place to go, they end up occupying public spaces in spontaneous ways that can be straining on local resources (such as exemplified by the Vučjak camp in the Una-Sana canton and the informal settlements I visited in Bosnia, Serbia, Greece). As demonstrated by the situation in Bihač, just a few kilometres from Lipa camp, the unmanaged presence of foreigners in territories already facing their own difficulties has fuelled frustration and insecurity among the local population. This has fostered a sense of crisis that has justified the municipality resorting to emergency measures, focusing on

removing and hiding the problem, rather than addressing it through a structured and long-term approach.

Similar dynamics have been observed at the Italian border with Slovenia, particularly in relation to the events surrounding the first reception centre Casa Malala. Here too, the 'closure' of the border and the securitisation of migration attracted private companies involved in the management of asylum seekers reception and detention centres, such as ORS Italia. The key difference between Bihač and Trieste lies in the strong solidarity networks built up over decades in the latter. This community of social workers, volunteers, and charitable organizations has managed to partially offset the state's neglect and disengagement from protecting and receiving asylum seekers and other people on the move. As a matter of fact, their initiatives have successfully stopped informal readmissions and contained the involvement of private security companies in managing reception. Critically, their presence has also limited the spread of criminal networks.

This type of governance has spread across the entire Balkan region, encompassing both EU and non-EU countries. Notably, even though some of the countries considered in this thesis lie outside the European Union and operate under distinct institutional and legal frameworks, the EU's model for managing human mobility has profoundly impacted the policies and politics of its neighbouring countries. Exerting leverage in the form of funding and political validation, EU countries and institutions managed to 'export' and refine their modes of governance outside EU borders, thus benefiting from fewer and less strict bureaucratic and juridical constraints. Importantly, these asylum management methods are rooted in an ideological and organizational framework that has remained largely unchanged since the inception of the Schengen project. Particularly since the Maastricht Treaty, European migration governance has consolidated immigration, asylum, and border control under a security lens (Huysmans, 2000). This resulted in policies prioritizing surveillance and containment of people on the move over the protection of migrants and asylum seekers. Within this ideological framework, member states have retained significant control over managing refugee flows, despite the Common European Asylum System (Lisbon Treaty) aiming to unify protection across member states (Longo, 2002, 2016). This flexibility have allowed European governments to interpret regulations loosely and prioritize national(ist) concerns over international standards. Additionally, states have been granted the possibility to outsource part of these functions to third-party actors, not necessarily public or governmental. This has further fragmented the system, sparking major criticisms regarding the neglect of rights of people on the move and the (lack of) seriousness with which member states undertake to guarantee them (Bigo & Tsukala, 2008; Geddes, 2016). Thus, as further demonstrated by the New Pact of Asylum, the European asylum regime has created the conditions for states to perpetuate nationalist discourses while increasingly outsourcing public functions to third, sub-, supra- and non-state actors.

While this situation may appear paradoxical, it arises from the shared logics of nationalism and neoliberalism. Indeed, both approaches tend to frame asylum seekers and refugees in problematic terms. As noted by Joppke, liberal descriptions of foreign nationals as desirable/undesirable “may differ in degree, but not in kind from the ‘fake’ or ‘bogus’ refugees conjured up by the radical right” (2021, p. 74). At the same time, and because of this framing, both approaches foster an emergency-like management of asylum – for example through the use of semi- or in-formal policy and legal instruments, or by eliminating scrutiny over the disbursement of resources (Novak, 2019; Vrenna & Biondi dal Monte, 2011). Moreover, Lueck et al. suggest that neoliberal and nationalist processes are compatible because “both ultimately [aim] at protecting the sovereignty of the nation-state” (Lueck et al., 2015). That is,

“both theories take the nation-state as a crucial point for departure (albeit on the one hand as an aim in itself and on the other as a ‘benchmark’). In relation to migration, this means that both theories promote the restriction of migration to only those considered ‘desirable’ to the nation itself, with restrictions and penalties for all other attempted migrations” (Lueck et al., 2015, pp. 610–611).

Ultimately, “the neoliberal state needs nationalism of a certain sort to survive” (Harvey, 2011, p. 84), and “in order to maintain social order (such as who will receive support from the nation-state and who will not)” (Lueck et al., 2015, p. 610; see also Davidson, 2009; Greenfeld, 2003). Hence, under certain circumstances “neoliberal values may actually be dependent on nationalist policies” (Harvey, 2011, p. 84). At the same time, nationalism is not necessarily contrary to neoliberal principles (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2019). Bonanno, for example, notes that “right-wing populism has not displaced domestic neoliberal regimes or the global system” (2020, p. 19); if anything, “nationalists have used neoliberal policies for nationalist goals and vice versa” (Lueck et al., 2015, p. 610; see also Harmes, 2012). Rather than condemning neoliberal capitalism *per se*, right-wing populism targets liberal democratic institutions and accuse them of inefficiency and incompetency, hence demanding for their restructuring usually along less democratic lines. In a similar perspective, Springer underlines that “authoritarian leaders may appropriate neoliberal concerns for market security as a rationale for their violent and repressive actions” (2011, p. 91). In this respect, it is worth noting that recent opinions from both academic researchers (Berberoglu, 2021) and journalists (Jones, 2023) have warned of an ongoing process of ‘regime change’ in Western democracies. These analyses describe the emergence of an “authoritarian neoliberalism” (Biebricher, 2020) or “authoritarian capitalism”, that is “an authoritarian version of the same [neoliberal regime], sans effective democratic institutions” (Bonanno, 2020, p. 20).

8.2.2. ‘Keeping aloof’

“Nobody here has a quick-fix solution, but sometimes the feeling is that there is not even the will to look for it...” (LG2).

Despite their actual disengagement from legal, procedural, and administrative responsibilities towards asylum seekers and refugees, national governments retain ultimate authority and power, since they are the ones responsible for designing public policies, instructing executive bodies and administering the allocation of resources. Rather than suggesting a retreat of the state, securitarian neoliberalism indicates for a strategic distancing performed by government institutions. When, for example, state actors disengage from their legal responsibilities towards asylum seekers by readmitting them informally to another country, they manage to keep these flows at a distance, to push them ‘back’ and force other states to deal with them. In this way, informal readmissions and push-backs testify for the attempt of states to (re)gain control over refugee flows through forced (im)mobility and beyond detention (Tazzioli, 2018a, 2020b). In other words, “migrants are moved not to detain them but to push them further away” (Gill, 2016a) and “in most cases, these unofficial or indirect forced displacements take place as part of a grey area of non-registered state’s practices” (Tazzioli, 2020a; see also Mountz, 2014). Similarly, the de-nationalization of reception services forces people on the move, including asylum seekers, to rely on non-state service providers for basic necessities, including both formal and informal actors. However, given the limited capacities of these entities (as in grassroots civil initiatives) or their lack of commitment to human rights (as in private businesses), the selective scarcity of state-led support compels migrants to further continue their journeys towards destinations that might better meet their needs and aspirations. In this way, flows are redirected or dispersed to rationalize minimal government involvement.

This thesis examines several border areas, and in all of them, analogous patterns emerge. The vast majority of migrants encountered in these places have no intention of staying. Given the level of militarization in these border regions, this comes as no surprise. These areas create incredibly harsh environments for documented and undocumented migrants alike. Constant persecution fosters a sense of danger, hostility, and instability, thus compelling them to leave as soon as possible. At the same time, the public support systems available in these areas are simply inadequate. Whether national governments, international organizations, or private entities run them, the services offered are so poor that any attempt to regularize one’s status or integrate into society becomes impractical. In this way, the social fabric remains impermeable to the inclusion of these foreigners. Even EU countries, which promise better conditions on paper for asylum seekers, falls short in reality. Public institutions are reluctant to provide basic services, ranging from healthcare to processing paperwork. Delays in asylum procedures drag on indefinitely, and people on the move face limited or even denied access to medical care. This situation effectively pushes away even those who might otherwise consider starting a new life in countries like Greece and Italy, forcing them into the shadows of irregularity.

In this respect, the case of Italy is exemplary, testifying for a mode of governing asylum through non-governing it (Tazzioli, 2020c). This approach reflects a long-standing pattern in Italian

asylum policy, characterized by a ‘no-policy-policy’ approach (Stel, 2021b) that pretends to address relevant issues while *de facto* contracting the state’s direct engagement in them. Instead of directly addressing the issue, the Italian state has repeatedly and consistently prioritized ‘moving’ the problem away. On the one hand, Italian governments have signed several bilateral agreements with neighbouring and transit countries (including Libya, Tunisia, Niger, Albania and Slovenia) in order to deter arrivals and facilitate repatriations. These agreements often evade scrutiny and transparent public disclosure, taking on informal characteristics (see ‘informal readmissions’). Notably, this “process of ‘deformalisation’ and ‘informalisation’ of international agreements contributes to bringing migration law back to an intergovernmental method” (Olivito, 2020, p. 113). On the other hand, the state-led reception system has been progressively dismantled (or weakened), such as through the provisions entailed by the ‘Security Decrees’, driven by logics of cost-reduction and efficiency. The reduction in reception and integration services entailed by such provisions has made Italy a challenging place for asylum seekers and refugees, leading many to leave towards other European countries, or to stay but avoiding interaction with public institutions, opting instead to occupy informal and marginalized social spaces.

Notably, in all these cases, governments do not passively disengage from these areas of governance, that is they do not merely cease to legislate, direct their executive branches, or allocate resources according to their own interests. Instead, they use their decisional powers and capacities to minimize their direct intervention in managing refugee flows. In all these cases, indeed, the transfer of responsibilities to non- and third-state actors is achieved through legislative (such as the ‘Security Decrees’) and policy (such as the ‘informal readmissions’ directive) tools through which national governments determine – in line with their preferences – how and to what extent these flows are managed.

In Trieste, I was able to observe these dynamics in their everyday unfolding, and to examine them with particular clarity due to the strong contrast between the city’s past as a functioning model of reception and integration and its current state – yet another place of transit and waiting for dozens of people excluded from the most basic services. This transition of Trieste from a once-efficient model into the current humanitarian emergency was indeed forcibly driven by two decisions of the Italian government: the so-called ‘Security Decrees’ of 2018 and the directive on ‘informal readmissions’ of 2020. Even though these government measures bypassed long-term and sustainable solutions for both migrants and local communities, they still had a significant impact not only on refugee flows but also on the other actors involved in governance matters. Notably, both instruments, decrees and directive, are typically used for emergency situations due to their flexibility and speed (Novak, 2019). On the one hand, the ‘Security Decrees’ of 2018 have significantly reduced the state-led first reception system and resources for the locally-managed second reception, while further institutionalizing a securitarian attitude towards foreigners. In Trieste, this has led to the erosion of the city’s ‘widespread hospitality’ system and the dismantling of essential first reception and low-threshold services. In this way, the decrees have incentivized

large private security companies to bid on contracts for managing reception facilities, as exemplified by the events of Casa Malala. In parallel, in 2020, the directive on ‘informal readmissions’ sent by the Italian Ministry of Interior to the border police prevented thousands of asylum seekers from accessing international protection procedures in Italy, *de facto* ‘shifting the burden’ to Slovenia, or pressuring them to continue their journey as quickly and discreetly as possible towards other destinations. The readmissions discussion painted a picture of a highly surveilled border. However, in reality, police officers applied the directive in an unclear and highly discretionary manner, also because the government itself had not provided adequate information, tools, and resources for the prescribed task. These procedures have remained shrouded in ambiguity, hindering proper monitoring, regulation, and accountability for the violations they entailed.

In light of the above, Governance studies provide valuable analytical tools to explain the state’s conduct in plural and multi-scalar governance systems. With the spread of globalization, these studies have focused on the changing role of national government in both domestic and international arenas (Pierre, 2000; Pierre & Peters, 2021; Sassen, 1996, 2005). In doing so, they emphasize the enduring role of states in shaping policy, allocating resources, and coordinating with other actors. However, they also stress that this role has evolved into a ‘steering role’, one that does not necessarily involve direct state intervention in policy matters, but rather their capacity to set the rules for how other actors can ‘move’ within the system. In this regard, Pierre writes that today governance is “about how to maintain the steering role of political institutions despite the internal and external challenges to the state” (Pierre, 2000, p. 4). In the context of this research, this involves the state setting the overall framework for asylum policies and practices while delegating, dispersing and streamlining the implementation of related tasks. This translates into a form of government ‘by proxy’. That is, governing asylum by refusing to manage asylum seekers, ‘steering’ them away from national territory and jurisdiction. State actors disengage, or avoid engagement altogether, from specific fields concerning the protection and reception of asylum seekers and refugees. In this way, the state’s authority does not vanish; it simply adapts. Instead of directly managing everything, the state continues to coordinate processes and set the overall direction, while scaling back its financial burden, range of duties, and legal responsibilities. Concurrently, states maintain the capacity to ‘set the boundaries’ of the discursive field in which asylum is discussed, claimed and restrained (for further elaboration on the issue of intentionality see Conclusion). In this concern, Geddes observes that “States remain central to migration governance because it is the borders of states that define international migration as a social and political concern” (2022, p. 313).

The transition from government to governance in Migration and Refugee studies should be thereby understood as the consolidation of modes of governing that rely less on imposing rules (direct regulation) and more on guiding and influencing the behaviour of various stakeholders (‘steering’) (Betts, 2011; Geddes, 2022, p. 20; see also Geddes et al., 2019; Levi-Faur, 2012;

Pierre, 2000). As this transformative process unfolds, the state does not withdraw passively – that is, it is not simply indifferent to asylum-related issues – but rather selectively adjusts its involvement to control them at a ‘safe distance’. As such, the state simultaneously retreats and advances (Blanco et al., 2014; Newman, 2014). In response to this growing ambivalence, my thesis introduces the novel concept of ‘keeping aloof’ as a nuanced lens to understand the conduct of government actors. The concept of ‘aloofness’ is absent from studies in Sociology and Political Science. The few references to this term in the literature belong to the field of psychology and are limited to observing its effects at the interpersonal level. However, the etymological roots of this concept can offer an original analytical key to summarize what has been recounted in this thesis¹¹⁹. In common use, ‘aloof’ describes someone maintaining a distance from something or someone else. As such, it indicates that someone has little interest in getting involved in a dynamic or a process. This, in turn, makes them appear unapproachable¹²⁰. When applied to the state behaviour in refugee governance, this concept could illustrate the tendency of national governments to ‘retreat’ from the management of people on the move, either by disengaging from duties that they have once performed, or by avoiding this involvement altogether. This further widens the gap between state actors and asylum seekers, making the former inaccessible to the latter (Borelli et al., 2023). In this perspective, aloofness would translate to the state’s inaction, suggesting a degree of passivity and apathy on the part of this institution. Nevertheless, this does not exactly align with the findings of this study, which rather suggest government interests being intentionally, although obliquely, pursued. Interestingly enough, the word’s origins also connect to nautical terminology, providing a more accurate and nuanced description of these processes. Namely, ‘to keep aloof’ means to sail strategically against the wind to maintain control and avoid getting pushed towards hazards. Applied to the conduct of the state in relation to border and reception policies, this expression can indicate that the state navigates constraints and opportunities faced in this policy field by strategically adapting to such conditions. The ‘wind’ against which the state sails is represented by the socio-economic, geopolitical and judicial transformations occurring at both the international and domestic levels, within a plural and multi-scalar arena of actors (Sassen, 1996). Rather than succumbing to these transformations, the state tactically embraces them and adapts its role accordingly. Ultimately, it is by selectively (dis)engaging in specific policy areas that governments adapt and resist to new and challenging scenarios, including the increase in refugee flows. The contraction of the reception system is the most visible example of this, as state policies have consistently reduced public funded services and facilities thereby leaving space for non-state actors to intervene and, simultaneously, influencing if and where migrants decide to stop and apply for asylum. Ultimately, by ‘keeping aloof’, states still exercise an indirect authority over both refugee flows and the other actors involved in asylum governance. This expression thus elucidates in a fresh

¹¹⁹ <https://blog.oup.com/2020/04/keeping-social-distance-the-story-of-aloof/>

¹²⁰ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/aloof>

and compelling manner how the state ‘surrenders to the current’, embracing the paradigm shift from government to governance, while ensuring it remains in control of the overall direction. The added value of this concept compared to that of ‘steering’ is that while ‘steering’ evokes the image of a state that ‘orchestrates’ the system – albeit through collaboration and compromises on its own authority – the one of ‘keeping aloof’ evokes the idea that the state itself is inserted into a dense network of ‘steering’ currents, produced by different actors on different levels and in different ways. While allowing themselves to be influenced by these forces, governments manage to use them to their advantage, exploiting the ‘movement’ they create. For this purpose, however, formal authority is not enough (Pierre, 2000; Pierre & Peters, 2021), and governing bodies have increasingly relied on informal mechanisms of power to skirt and circumvent constraining legal structures and operational standards.

8.2.3. Informalization

“...in recent years, we have noticed the existence of a sort of grey area, in which the law fades away, doesn’t exist, is denied, and contradicted. The actions taken by the public administration are extremely opaque...These are issues that have been already largely resolved on a legal level, but in reality they are not solved at all”¹²¹.

This quote by the president of ICS, delivered at an online conference titled *The Dirty Border* (e.g. *La sporca frontiera*), highlights the pervasive use of opacity (Tazzioli, 2021), ambiguity (Stel, 2021b), and discretion (Davies et al., 2023) in state actions related to asylum governance, particularly in border zones. The state’s ability to steer the system without getting its ‘hands dirty’ relies crucially on the capacity of government institutions to evade monitoring and accountability mechanisms. To achieve this, government actors resort to public-private partnerships, as well as informal, semi-official, and unrecorded practices and procedures to bypass public and democratic scrutiny, allowing them to operate without leaving a trace of potential misconduct. In this research, I thus use the concept of informality and informalization to describe a mode of governance that increasingly depends on a complex interplay of formal and informal actors and relations, and that unfolds through loosely institutionalised and hard-to-monitor processes.

In the early studies on the subject, informality originally existed alongside or outside established formal regulations and institutions, such as the state. Pivotal research on informality thus suggests that informal behaviours can be understood as a strategic response (Bosma & Schutjens, 2009; Harris & Todaro, 1970; Phelps, 2021) to institutional incapacity or unwillingness to provide efficient and accessible means of sustenance to societal actors (Atesagaoglu et al., 2017; Levy, 2008). Applying this interpretation to the context of this research, we can see how, in the absence of robust state structures and public services, people on the move rely on alternative approaches

¹²¹ <https://www.facebook.com/RiVoltiAiBalcani/videos/1023996281521105>

to address the challenges they face. As discussed in the previous chapters, this includes depending on non-institutional, sometimes criminal, networks of support, as well as inhabiting marginalised and invisibilised *squats* and *jungles* that institutions ignore or pretend not to see. These informal actions and practices are characterized by their adaptive nature, representing bottom-up strategies for coping with top-down failures.

As the field of study has evolved, over the last few decades, the idea that even formal institutions use informal practices and procedures to complement their official functioning has become increasingly established. To the point that some scholars have come to argue that sovereignty itself depends on and is maintained through the creation of grey areas of governance (Feldman, 2018). Hence, the informalization of asylum governance deriving from this mode of operating should be seen not merely as the “art of bypassing the state” (Polese, 2023) by non-state actors, migrants included, but also as the state’s counterpart art of circumventing legal, bureaucratic, administrative and operational constraints posed by other stakeholders both within and outside its territory (McFarlane, 2012). That is, as an adaptive strategy to mediate between political preferences, international legislations and market imperatives. This strategy entails deliberate policy adjustments and practical implementations aimed at constructing a governance framework that blends public and private, formal and informal actors and practices. The outsourcing of functions and responsibilities traditionally reserved for the state could be defined as an ‘outward’ informalization. At the same time, in a process of ‘inward’ informalization, governments exhibit a propensity to reduce official accountability, transparency, and liability within their own administrative structures and executive branches.

As the preceding chapters have sought to illustrate, a number of practices fall under this understanding of informalization. For instance, the government-imposed reduction of publicly funded and managed reception services has led to a progressive informalization of these tasks through the involvement of actors that operate beyond the state apparatus. This includes private companies with limited accountability mechanisms (like the ICMDP and ORS), but also semi- or non-formalized civil society groups offering free support to people on the move (like the organizations I have met in Trieste and along the Balkan route). Civil initiatives and bottom-up political projects providing aid and information to people on the move rely on spontaneous and independent modes of actions, as they operate in the empty ‘spaces’ left by the state. Notably, the informality of these spaces is not merely an unintentional byproduct of state inactions, but to a certain extent governing actors tolerate and even encourage this informality to spread – provided it lessens the government’s burden without questioning its conduct (Haid, 2017). At the same time, government actions, or lack thereof, can even foster informality in relationships between formal stakeholders. As we have seen in Trieste, for example, cooperation between immigration functionaries, police officers and charitable organisations has become less formalized and more extemporaneous, precisely because the Italian government has not provided clear and rigorous distribution of information, competences and resources among them. Informality takes also the

form of ambiguous and semi-official policy tools that lack clear legal grounding, such as push-backs and ‘informal readmissions’¹²². In this respect, the Court of Rome, in the case concerning ‘informal readmissions’ involving the Italian border police, clarified that the informal removal of asylum seekers from one country to another not only violates the right of asylum and a number of other human rights, but is also illegitimate because it bypasses official procedures. This lack of formal record not only deprives the ‘pushed-back’ person of their rights but also eliminates their ability to appeal and seek justice, because responsibility for untracked actions is difficult to allocate. Moreover, as in the case of reception tasks, here too confusing and contradictory government directives – including how the government communicates with, and provide resources to, its own executive and administrative branches – contribute to deregulation and incoordination within the system. As a matter of fact, state officials in Trieste repeatedly complained about the vagueness and lack of coherent support from the government.

While acknowledging the elusive and multifaceted nature of ‘informality’, which encompasses a diverse range of actors and behaviours, its application in this context serves to elucidate – and situate along a continuum – processes of de-statalisation, de-institutionalization and de-regulation of asylum governance. Although combining various definitions and theories of informality might risk overextending the concept, it nonetheless facilitates the placement of different informal practices along a spectrum. Namely, rather than viewing them as isolated or accidental occurrences, this analytic approach underscores their interrelatedness as integral elements of a comprehensive strategy for governing refugee flows. In line with this, in this research I delved into the informal in/actions “of, within, and around [state] institutions” (Westerwinter et al., 2021, p. 4). Hence, beyond illustrating the informality generating outside of or in the absence of the state, my study sheds light on less-explored expressions of informalization within the state apparatus itself, including inter-agency coordination between decisional and implementing bodies.

Notably, both securitisation and neoliberalisation contribute to the informalization of the system. On the one side, securitarian approaches grant governments special powers and tools to face emergency situations, that is the freedom to act in a state of exception. As Haid writes, “[r]uling by zones of exception” allows the state “to place itself outside the law since it has the legal power to suspend the validity of the law” (Haid, 2017, p. 295). Importantly,

“The zones of exception are not to be misunderstood as the opposite or outside of rule and order. They are in fact an integral part thereof and span between the (seemingly) formal space of the state – with its regulations, norms and rules – and the everyday spaces

¹²² Another example of this “formal informality” (Cardwell & Dickson, 2023) can be found in the reintroduction of border controls between EU member states. This measure has been taken in several instances by EU governments over the last few years and justified by different kinds of emergencies, from the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ to the Covid-19 pandemic, to the perception of a potential terrorist threat. While the Schengen agreement allows for a temporary reintroduction of border controls under exceptional circumstances, the modalities of their reintroduction and maintenance well beyond the pre-defined timeframes or without a clear justification raise concerns about exceeding legal boundaries and legitimacy (ASGI, 2023; Astuti et al., 2022).

of policing and governing practices. Consequently, these zones of exception need to be understood as spaces of informality” (Haid, 2017, p. 295).

At the same time, the ‘neoliberalisation’ of asylum and related services has contributed to informalizing the design and application of asylum policies by enabling public-private partnerships that disperse responsibility and undermine accountability. Additionally, neoliberal modes of governance make extensive use of expedited, de-bureaucratized, and efficiency-driven procedures and operational tools. This leads to a weakening of democratic scrutiny that, as Novak argues, gears towards a “restructuring of the EU’s governance architecture and the reconfiguration of member states’ institutional apparatuses” (2019, p. 2).

Collectively, these diverse manifestations of informality contribute to a governance system characterized by opacity, ambiguity, and discretionary power, ultimately undermining public and constitutional oversight. Unlike strictly illegal actions, informality’s blurry boundaries (neither fully legal nor illegal) make it an advantageous tool to pursue questionable actions while skirting clear responsibility (Kilby, 2013; Steinberg, 2002; Stone, 2013). Hence, informality is rarely accidental (McFarlane, 2012; Polese et al., 2019; Roy, 2009; Schendel & Abraham, 2005) and more often a deliberate strategy employed by states to navigate limitations imposed by formal regulations (Westerwinter et al., 2021). This strengthens their preferred political narratives, while making their actions increasingly difficult to monitor, criticize, and hold them accountable for. In managing human flows, informality ultimately allows governments to cultivate an image of overarching power while avoiding concrete and consistent political intervention. Therefore, through the ‘informalization’ of its functions and the ‘de-regulation’ of its conducts, under certain circumstances, the state manages to retain the capacity to steer the system in its preferred direction without encountering (too much) opposition from below, above or outside its apparatus.

8.3. Refocusing the literature

My research findings neither contradict nor operate independently of existing literature on asylum governance, which I discussed earlier (Chapter 1). However, a crucial contribution of my work lies in refocusing attention on the actions (and inactions) of nation-states, in order to understand how and why their role in asylum governance has evolved in relation to other actors involved, and how this manifests in ‘real-life’ experience. In this section, I revisit this literature and engage it in a dialogue with my findings.

The concept of *securitarian neoliberalism*, for example, resonates with the Migration Industry theory’s emphasis on the interplay between security policies and market-driven approaches to migration governance. Nyberg Sørensen and Gammeltoft-Hansen (2013) explored the emergence of a powerful migration industry that thrives in the context of stricter border controls and the increasing securitisation of human mobility. As governments tighten border security and frame migration as a threat, a complex network of businesses and organizations has emerged to

capitalize on both the needs of migrants and the militarization of borders. This creates a situation where the focus on security fosters a profitable industry that benefits from restrictive policies, creating a self-perpetuating dynamic often at the expense of humane and effective migration management. Originally applied to entities profiting from cross-border migration (Hernandez-Leon, 2005), the concept of a Migration Industry has expanded to encompass actors involved in managing migration routes and flows, regardless of financial gain (Nyberg Sørensen & Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2012). While these actors are motivated differently, their involvement in migration governance is ultimately a by-product of national policy choices. Namely, the Migration Industry theory stresses the role of the state and its regulatory authority, highlighting “the continued link between the migration industry and government policies” (Nyberg Sørensen and Gammeltoft-Hansen 2012, p. 2). Namely, “[w]hile some actors [...] appear to operate entirely independent of government involvement, statist structures such as immigration policies, labor market regulation, visa requirements, border control etc. almost always remain an essential backdrop for understanding how these migration industry actors emerge and function” (ibid.). Contrary to a potential characterization of governments as passive observers, their policies actively contribute to and sustain the privatization and marketization of migration management. Through their restrictive and selective regimes, national authorities massively contribute to the establishment of the migration industry and its growth according to capitalist logics. In turn, “a functioning migration industry has become indispensable to continuation of movement, as well as serving as an extension of state control” (Collins, 2021, p. 865; see also Goh et al., 2017; Walton-Roberts, 2021). In light of this, the Migration Industry theory suggests that the outsourcing of public functions to non-state actors does not substantially diminish the authority and steering capacity of governments. Notably though, “[t]his does not mean that states and their governments have absolute control over the phenomenon under study, but rather that state policies and their intended and unanticipated consequences are an important reference point in efforts to understand the presence or disappearance of social actors and activities constituting the migration industry” (Hernandez-Leon, 2005, p. 9).

Taking this consideration a step further, the Venue-shopping approach emphasizes the strategic dimension of these processes. Namely, it describes a tendency among national policymakers to explore alternative decision-making venues when encountering obstacles within their traditional spheres, opting for venues more conducive to their preferences and objectives (Guiraudon, 2000; Kaunert et al., 2013). Therefore, while delineating a discernible shift of authority from the national sphere to other levels of governance and to private actors, this approach recognizes that the state is the ‘prime mover’ of these dynamics. As such, according to the advocates of this theory, the relocation of authority represents a strategic move by state institutions to outsource responsibilities and circumvent several obstacles, such as judicial constraints, opposition from other political actors, or challenges posed by pro-immigrant groups (Ambrosini, 2021).

This is particularly evident in the case of externalization processes which imply a delegation of responsibility on border and asylum matters to non- and third-state actors (Lavenex, 2006). Processes of externalization allow arrival and transit countries to ‘push’ refugee flows ‘away’ from their territories and jurisdictions, effectively putting in place procedures of “refoulement through remote control” (Longo & Fontana, 2022, p. 509). That is, a way to govern these flows at a distance, ‘by proxy’, without taking formal responsibility for the consequences of this control. And indeed, these dynamics usually involve the state engaging in bilateral and regional agreements with other countries, international institutions and private service providers. The nature of these collaborations varies, but particularly from the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015, political and operational strategies have taken precedence over formal, legally binding instruments, with informal readmission agreements assuming a central role (Longo & Fontana, 2022)¹²³. Policy tools designed for migration control thereby exhibit a troubling combination of “formal informality” (Cardwell & Dickson, 2023) and “strategic ambiguity” (Stel, 2021a). This lack of transparency is further exacerbated by the substantial involvement of private security companies and law enforcement agencies, which are accustomed to operating under surveillance regimes and with an “ethos of secrecy” (Bigo, 2002, pp. 65–66). Ultimately, this type of arrangements allow governments to distance themselves from controversial and irregular practices (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2018). As such, “the traversing of legal, socioeconomic and geographical boundaries is a central characteristic of [the asylum governance] and it involves the creation of spatial, socioeconomic, legal and moral spaces of liminality” (Spaan & Hillmann, 2013, p. 65). Crucially, these processes raise fundamental questions about responsibility distribution in refugee governance. This necessitates scrutiny of accountability mechanisms, the rule of law, and democratic oversight in areas like border control, reception policies, and access to asylum procedures.

To fully grasp the unfolding and implications of these phenomena, it is essential to immerse oneself in the everyday and anecdotal micro-realities through which asylum governance is managed, experienced, and contested. The ‘local turn’ in Migration studies (Caponio & Borkert, 2010; Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017a) serves this purpose by highlighting the crucial role played by local actors and directing our attention to the actions and interactions that embody this system of governance on the ground. As we delve deeper into this field, our ability to identify actors and their intentions sharpens. We also gain firsthand insight into the complex spectrum of relationships existing among them, ranging from cooperative to competitive and even contentious. However, it is important to note that local actors’ actions are ultimately shaped *in relation to* national policies. Whether they implement stricter or more welcoming policies than those set by the state, local actors are essentially responding and reacting to these national guidelines. This compels us to focus on the relational dimension of this plural and multilevel

¹²³ https://umap.openstreetmap.fr/en/map/eu-external-migration-policy-tools__783920#3/34.09/23.91

system. Accordingly, in the next section, I will discuss how framing asylum governance as a ‘battleground’ (Ambrosini, 2021) and employing solidarity as a research ‘method’ (Picozza, 2021) offered valuable and fresh analytical tools to understand the role of the state in refugee governance.

8.4. Asylum as ‘battleground’, solidarity as ‘research approach’

Beyond conceptual and theoretical considerations, this research’s contribution also lies in its methodological approach and epistemological scope. By taking the role of a research-solidarian, I developed my experiences, observations, and reflections in and on the field from the perspective of a social group positioned *in relation to* government institutions. Namely, solidarity initiatives arise *because of* and *in response to* state in/actions (Fortarezza, 2023). In this respect, the concept of ‘battleground’ proposed by Ambrosini and colleagues (Ambrosini, 2021; Dimitriadis et al., 2021) offers a valuable framework for understanding how actors’ roles, claims and objectives co-shape and co-evolve through their interactions: both direct and indirect, formal and informal, cooperative, competitive, or confrontational. The concept of battleground is indeed deeply relational and dialectical in nature, as it takes into account the interplay between actions, inactions, and reactions among different stakeholders, interests and approaches. In this perspective, each actor’s role and conduct in asylum governance are shaped by the presence (or absence) of the others.

Building upon the analytical lens provided by this approach, I used solidarity as a method to analyse the state (Fontanari, 2022a; Jordan & Moser, 2020; Picozza, 2021). In addition to directly analysing the role of state actors in asylum governance – through observations conducted in a Territorial Commission for the Recognition of International Protection, interviews with Trieste-based public officials, and policy document analysis – I complemented and enriched the analysis by bringing to the forefront the experiences of solidarians along the Balkan route. Drawing on the practices, words, and motivations of solidarity actors as theoretical, epistemological, and methodological lenses (Cantat et al., 2019, p. 16), I examined the institutional setting and statist structures with and within which these actors operate. In other words, I implemented a relational approach that allowed me to see solidarity initiatives as a ‘mirror’ reflecting, and questioning, the in/actions of governments. In this respect, two phrases about solidarity initiatives, uttered during my research, left a lasting impression on me and guided my interpretation of the facts and events I encountered. Both describe solidarity initiatives in relation to government institutions. The first one, pronounced by the former deputy mayor of Trieste, emphasizes the critical role volunteers and activists in Piazza della Libertà play in fulfilling essential functions that, ideally, the state should handle.

“They do what institutions should do but, de facto, they do not” (LG1).

The second, expressed by a social worker that also participated in activist initiatives and protests, refers to the national and local governments' attempts to silence and criminalize solidarity actors in Trieste. In his words, the true measure of the role and significance of solidarity initiatives lies in the state's response to their presence and activities.

“It is annoying that they continue to attack us politically, but this means that we are on the right side of history” (SW7).

These excerpts highlight the relational nature of asylum governance, in which solidarity initiatives tend to arise in response to the failures of existing institutions, and by filling those gaps, they challenge the very legitimacy of these institutional bodies. Solidarians provide essential assistance to people on the move (Ataç et al., 2016), *in lieu of* the state. Additionally, they collect and disseminate information of states' violations of migrants' rights and international laws (Davies et al., 2023). With their presence and through their actions, solidarity initiatives thereby expose not only the legal, social and operational disengagement of the state from matters concerning the protection and reception of asylum seekers and refugees. They are also capable of producing critical and alternative narratives on migration (García Agustín & Jørgensen, 2016), ultimately contrasting the 'epistemic violence' of the state (Spivak, 1988). The following excerpt features a social worker in Trieste who highlights why this political and epistemic friction (Davies et al., 2023) arises and how is perceived.

“Those who do the work of [name of the volunteer association], which is less formalized than that of ICS, can be a thorn in the side of authorities because they shed light on people and their needs... So, if you say, 'I'm here in the square, offering shoes or medical aid to anyone who needs it', naturally, people will come forward. Smugglers, on the other hand, have no interest in this. It's the opposite – the less visible the migrant, the better. First of all because this way the smuggler has greater control over the migrant, and secondly because this way it is less likely that the smuggler himself will be controlled. But when you work in public, in the light of day, saying 'there is a problem here, because if I offer something and people come, it means that there is a problem', it is clear that this raises uncomfortable questions, and this can be bothering. This connects to what I mentioned earlier about the right-wing wanting to move people out of sight, to the city's outskirts, for political reasons. Piazza della Libertà isn't exactly Trieste's crown jewel, but it's central, and that visibility bothers them. It has its own logic, crazy, but still a logic, from their point of view...” (SW3).

The key takeaway from this is the contrasting reactions from state and local authorities towards solidarity actors and criminal networks. Critically, both solidarity groups and smugglers 'facilitate' people on the move's journeys, compensating for inadequate state support. Nevertheless, smugglers and traffickers operate based on profit motives, indirectly benefiting from restrictive asylum policies – and often perpetuating exploitative schemes. Consequently, they have little interest in challenging state management of refugee flows or exposing the

circumstances from which they profit. At the same time, several research participants, especially among solidarity actors, have argued that the work smugglers do can sometimes even be advantageous for governments. Smugglers organize irregular border crossings, providing information, logistical support, and securing leniency from authorities through bribery. Additionally, these informal networks provide accommodation, essential goods, and some form of social support to people on the move, although often at a high cost. In this way, a volunteer noted, “they perform a smoothing function, they help keep things moving”. Because of this, he believed, “smugglers are only targeted when they become too visible or do something excessive, but they are also tolerated to a certain extent...” (VA1). Moving people from one country to another and providing basic services during the journey, smugglers *de facto* respond to a double interest of governments: on the one hand, removing unwanted people from the public space, and on the other, providing ‘reception’ services that the state is no longer providing¹²⁴.

While solidarity actors, such as NGOs and grassroots organizations, also facilitate migration by providing essential services and support to people on the move, there is a fundamental distinction between them and smuggling networks – beyond the obvious profit motive that drives the latter. Criminal networks operate in the shadows, exploiting and marginalizing migrants, rendering them invisible to society and the state. In stark contrast, solidarity groups do not hide their activities; on the contrary, they often operate in public and visible spaces. In this way, they expose the system’s inefficiencies and injustices. Even when their primary focus is providing practical assistance, solidarity initiatives inherently present an alternative to state-sanctioned narratives and solutions for migration (Ambrosini, 2022b; Dimitriadis & Ambrosini, 2023). As a result, authorities may perceive them as a threat, as evidenced by the rise in discouragement, vilification, and even violent repression of solidarity and humanitarian activities observed over the past decade (Cusumano & Villa, 2021; Fekete, 2018; Tazzioli, 2018b). The ambiguity and contradictions inherent in the relationships that state institutions establish with non-state actors, whether implicitly collaborative or explicitly conflictual, compel us to reflect on the underlying political motivations behind certain choices and behaviours. In the concluding chapter of this thesis, I will explore this aspect in more depth. Specifically, I will reflect on the state’s level of awareness and intentionality in governing asylum. This will then inform my concluding remarks on how and why solidarity initiatives function as a ‘counter-steering’ force within this political landscape, and substantiate the methodological and epistemological choice to use solidarity as a research approach within a political project that conceives knowledge production as a public good (Busso et al., 2019; Fontanari, 2022a; Massari & Pellegrino, 2019; Picozza, 2021).

¹²⁴ As we talk about Italy, we must additionally remember that this country has a significantly large informal economy. This means that Italian society heavily depends on irregular or semi-regular work, a situation that has often led to exploitative dynamics exercised over employees, especially foreign workers with a precarious legal status.

8.5. Conclusions

Taking seriously the multifaceted nature of asylum governance, my research has examined the state within a broader relational context. I used my positioning as an active party in this battleground as a privileged point from which to observe the micro-dynamics through which the state manifests its influence, detecting its presence and absences, and capturing both the overt and subtle manifestations of governance in border zones. Here, state actions and inactions are justified and carried out due to – and not despite – the presence of other stakeholders, both public and private, formal and informal. Within this complex landscape, the state's role undergoes a metamorphosis. It adapts to the realities of an ever-evolving global scenario, transitioning to new forms of influence. Mediating between securitarian nationalism, which emphasizes national security and a strong sense of national identity, and neoliberal denationalization, which promotes reduced government intervention, nation-states reaffirm their authority and political power while *de facto* disengaging from their governmental responsibilities. Notably, this mode of governance allows for greater flexibility but potentially less transparency. As such, this affects accountability mechanisms, democratic scrutiny, and ultimately, the effectiveness of the rule of law. In light of this, the use of informality as a governance technique facilitates these processes by widening the distance between decisions and actions, and between stated objectives and the actual practices through which governments intervene in political, economic, and social processes. By examining asylum governance, the various policies and actions taken by the state become a powerful illustration of its steering influence on both domestic and international politics.

Table 2 - Analysis summary

Research questions	Literature	Concepts	Empirics
How can denationalization and renationalization coexist in migration governance?	Political Geography	Securitarian neoliberalism	1) "... pushbacks were employed to further diminish the need for places in the reception system, aiming to reduce costs and eliminate certain provisions. Thus, they served a dual purpose, ideological and practical. They clearly signaled support for a well-known anti-immigration political viewpoint. Simultaneously, they aimed to decrease the financial burden by reducing the number of people in the reception system and its ongoing costs..." (SW2). 2) "As part of the prison-industrial complex (PIX), Lipa camp exists for the economic interests of governments and private companies, but most of all for the maintenance of the racial borders of Fortress Europe" ¹ .
What is the role of the state in these processes?	Governance studies	'Aloofness', 'to keep aloof'	1) "Nobody here has a quick-fix solution, but sometimes the feeling is that there is not even the will to look for it..." (LG2). 2) "...the first time they said that readmissions could be done and that everything was fine; the second time they said that asylum seekers cannot be readmitted [...] [Because] Saying that [readmissions] can be done means taking responsibility for them, it means putting pen to paper that they can be done..." (POL3).
How does this role manifest in practice?	Informality studies	Informalization	1) "...in recent years, we have noticed the existence of a sort of gray area, in which the law fades away, doesn't exist, is denied, and contradicted. The actions taken by the public administration are extremely opaque...These are issues that have been already largely resolved on a legal level, but in reality they are not solved at all" ² . 2) "People would be transferred without any knowledge of the process" (ASGII).

¹ <https://www.nonamekitchen.org/life-at-the-margins-testimonies-from-lipa-camp/>

² <https://www.facebook.com/RiVoltaAiBalcani/videos/1023996281521105>

Chapter 9

Conclusion

“Taken together with the policies on immigration and asylum [...], the culture of secrecy [...] and the backdrop of rising racism and fascism the European state institutionalises the ‘cordon sanitaire’ at its external borders and sets up draconian mechanisms for internal control which will affect the whole community. It has all the hallmarks of an authoritarian state in which power resides in the hands of officials with no democratic or legal mechanisms to call them to account. An unaccountable and secret state, removed as it is from democratic pressures, public debate and legal restraints, operates in an arbitrary and authoritarian manner. The lack of public awareness [...] has been aided by the collusion of the media which has failed to invigilate on behalf of the citizen, and by an almost total absence of critical political interest, liberal or otherwise. The absence of accountable executive action does not bode well for Europe’s future and recalls Europe’s past: ‘the violence is *authorised* [...], actions are *routinised* [...] and the victims are *dehumanised* [...]’ (Bauman, 1988)”.

(Bunyan, 1993)

9.1. Introduction

Globalization has fundamentally reshaped how public and private actors interact in the political and economic spheres, with significant consequences for those impacted by public policy (Strange, 1996). Market forces have pressured nations to loosen their borders, while international human rights laws have constrained the absolute power of national governments (Sassen, 1996). At the same time, private investors and multinational corporations have become increasingly assertive, extending their influence beyond economic and financial matters to actively participate in shaping political agendas and policy decisions. As a result, the role and power of the state appear undeniably transformed. States now operate within a complex and multi-scalar arena, and their sovereignty faces challenges from both internal and external forces. And yet, while the rise of globalization may have reshaped global power dynamics, national governments remain the

official voices of their citizens on the international stage, even when there are significant gaps between public opinion and government policies. State actors retain primary control in shaping welfare programs and determining how public services and access to rights are delivered to their citizens, as well as non-citizens. At the same time, when it comes to tackling global issues like climate change, these institutions, often working alongside private partners, are still the ones responsible for devising strategies for resource management. Notably, since October 7th, 2023, the crucial role of the nation and nationality has become once again dramatically relevant. The occupation of the Palestinian territories by the Israeli government, the legal action initiated by the South African government at the International Court of Justice, and the unwillingness of a state-based international community to recognize the autonomy and sovereignty of the Palestinian people, all bring back to the forefront the issues of national identity, the role played by national states in international relations and their responsibilities towards the population they control.

In light of this, the current state of global affairs demands a renewed attention for the state's role. This thesis delved into this issue by focusing on how states function and the methods they employ. Concentrating my research on asylum policies, in this research I have endeavoured to highlight certain salient features of states conduct which, while not generalizable to all policy areas and geographic contexts, nonetheless provide useful analytical tools for understanding the relationships between governments and the populations they control, whether citizen or non-citizen. Indeed, migration and asylum policies offer a unique vantage point, as they serve not only as a testing ground for governments to experiment with control mechanisms and approaches for the people present on their territories, but also as a platform for them to develop relationships with non-state actors, both public and private.

By combining in-depth investigation in Trieste with a transnational perspective encompassing several countries along the Balkan route, this study offers a granular yet comprehensive analysis of asylum governance in this area. Notably, the fact that several of the studies informing my analytical framework discuss analogous issues along different migratory routes attests to the widespread use of similar governance modes. The ethnographic gaze of this work unearths the nuances of actions and interactions between individuals and agencies on the ground, while simultaneously revealing the systemic and integrated nature of asylum governance across the entire region, both within and outside the EU borders. As I have endeavoured to show, this type of governance implies the coexistence of nationalist rhetoric fostering surveillance and coercion, and neoliberal imperatives reducing public scrutiny and intervention, in which government actors bypass legal structures and procedural standards. This allows them to avoid taking charge of the issue while maintaining a façade of authority. From this state of affairs emerges that the approaches adopted by both EU and non-EU states – specifically in matters concerning the management of refugee flows and the protection of asylum seekers – exhibit a growing trend towards illiberal and undemocratic modes of government.

As we conclude this exploration, in the next sections I reflect on the implications, limitations and future prospects of this study. Section 9.2 will address any constraints or challenges encountered during the research that may have affected the scope or depth of the findings, suggesting potential avenues for further and deeper exploration. As I approach the conclusions of this dissertation, I will delve into the implications of this study in two key areas. First, if and to what extent this mode of governance implies intentionality on the side of state actors (Section 9.3). And then finally, the potential for solidarity-driven initiatives, within and outside the academia, to create an epistemic friction (Davies et al., 2023; Mignolo, 2011) in processes of knowledge production and power distribution (Massari & Pellegrino, 2019) (Section 9.4).

9.2. Limitations and future horizons of the study

To begin with, the specific context and historical moment of my research, conducted during the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, presented important limitations. The pandemic's global reach, with Italy among the first and hardest-hit countries, profoundly impacted both how I conducted my research and the very environment I was studying. Beyond the limitations on physical mobility and social interaction, substantial changes were enacted in policies and procedures. Access to public offices became heavily restricted, international borders were closed, and isolation periods were imposed on asylum seekers, both in quarantine centres and on arrival vessels. Consequently, the pandemic did not merely affect my research methodology; it dramatically altered the very objects and realities I intended to study. While this research does not focus on the pandemic itself, it has been informed by various studies that have examined the topic, revealing how the 'state of emergency' surrounding Covid-19 has enabled the experimentation of new social control techniques and of extensive exercise of state authority (Aradau & Tazzioli, 2021; Baldacchino, 2021; Sanchez & Achilli, 2020).

On an analytical level, the research draws on three strands of literature: Political Geography, Governance studies, and Informality studies. This composite approach enriches and refines insights from existing Migration and Refugee studies literature. However, each of the three approaches considered has its own perspectives, conceptualizations, and internal ramifications. Therefore, for the purpose of the analysis, I had to simplify this complexity, inevitably losing some detail and depth. Future research may thus deepen each theoretical approach individually, exploring its elements and implications for the analysis of governance systems and government conduct. Moreover, since the research employed an approach grounded in experience, the concepts and theories I implemented are at least partially context-dependent and filtered through my own perceptions. At the same time, my approach, situated between a single case study and a comparative analysis, might generate some ambiguity in identifying similarities and differences across the studied locations. Hence, future research could reinforce this analytical framework by considering other contexts (both within and outside the EU), suggesting stronger comparisons,

and engaging additional scholars with diverse perspectives and research backgrounds. This would help mitigate the context-specific nature of my research and the inherent partiality of any single viewpoint, ultimately allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how asylum governance unfolds over time and across borders.

Another limitation of this study is the absence of direct perspectives from migrants themselves. This was not due to a lack of interest in their experiences, but rather the complexities of the research environment. Encounters with people on the move often occurred in challenging circumstances, such as informal settlements or brief stopovers in border zones. Additionally, I felt apprehensive about adding to their burdens by requesting their participation in research, especially considering the limited concrete benefits academia typically offers vulnerable populations due to its inherent timeframes, audiences, and methodological limitations. To avoid creating false expectations or exploiting their availability, I opted not to involve them directly. Furthermore, a language barrier existed as I do not speak the native languages of most migrants on the Balkan route. My original PhD proposal targeted research in Mexico, where I have prior experience and language fluency. However, the Covid-19 pandemic forced a shift to a more accessible region, albeit one with which I had less familiarity. Future research could and should significantly enhance the inclusion of migrants' voices, possibly among those who have reached their final destinations or achieved greater stability through progress in their international protection applications.

Finally, a personal note. For at least a decade, the topic of this research has held deep personal significance, motivating me to engage in various academic and non-academic activities to gain a deeper understanding and potentially contribute to the well-being of those impacted by negligent, violent, and unjust policies. Because of this, the research process itself has been emotionally, intellectually and physically challenging at times, particularly during direct encounters with people on the move facing hardship. These experiences undoubtedly influenced my perspective, shaping the way I framed and narrated my observations and informed my analysis. And yet, to prevent criticism of bias, it is worth stressing that this 'exposed' presence in the field has endowed this research with in-depth and detailed analysis, drawing heavily on real-world experience of the most intricate and opaque dynamics informing the governance of human mobility.

9.3. Closing the circle: a question of intention

Once the responsibilities of states in asylum governance have been clarified, it is necessary to ask whether these responsibilities stem from a precise political will or from circumstantial factors, such as economic instability, limited human resources, and a lack of competence. While the severity of violations against migrants and asylum seekers in some countries is inexcusable, even in cases of ignorance or lack of resources, simply reassigning responsibility for asylum governance 'back' to governments is not enough to understand the degree to which these actors

operate in a planned and deliberate manner. This research does not possess sufficient data to definitively answer this question, the same question De Franco poses in his graphic novel: is this a “precise and well-defined operation”, the result of a “voluntary action”? (De Franco, 2022). Still, by reflecting on the empirical data gathered during the research process in light of previous studies, we can gain valuable interpretive insights. Importantly, this question goes beyond academic debate – it is vital for those working on the front lines of the migration battleground. Solidarians supporting migrants in the first place, but also public and private officials who strive to uphold asylum rights and ensure the dignity and freedom of people on the move. Knowing whether policies and practices are deliberate or accidental is essential for crafting effective responses. While resource limitations and skill gaps can be addressed even through targeted interventions, a (lack of) political will is a more stubborn obstacle. Overcoming this challenge requires a political project focused on long-term, systemic, and structural change.

This dissertation centres on the responsibilities of national governments. It specifically examines their strategic adaptations to changing circumstances, and their capacity to turn obstacles into political and economic advantages. This reading presupposes a level of awareness and will on the side of these agents. Namely, as I have extensively stressed, the transition from government to governance “should not be viewed as a contraction or abdication of national state power” (Brenner, 2004, p. 62). As Brenner notes, in fact, the dispersion of roles and responsibilities “has frequently served as a centrally orchestrated strategy” (ibid.), offering decision-makers flexibility in protecting their interests and pursuing them at their own pace.

Nevertheless, several factors play a role in shaping how asylum governance operates and what implications it has. To begin with, non-state actors, directly or indirectly involved by states themselves, acquire agency and power as these processes unfold, thus furthering their own agenda and advancing their own procedures. In this respect, Conlon (2019) observes that neoliberal approaches to asylum governance can be “messy” and fraught with “contradictions”. Indeed, despite emphasizing rationality and effectiveness, the focus on flexibility, speed, and cost-reduction can lead to inefficiencies and even irrational outcomes. Consequently, in order to understand how neoliberal forms of governance function in real-world situations, Conlon argues for examining asylum processes through the lens of their discontinuities and dissonances. This complexity underscores why “linear narratives about state actions should be questioned and complicated in light of much more fractured, uneven and contested assemblages of sovereignty (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013)” (Tazzioli, 2021). In this respect, Tazzioli emphasizes that discussions on state intentionality tend to neglect the multiplicity of actors involved and the conflicting interests at play. In the case of Italy, the country’s specific administrative setting – characterized by a distribution of governing bodies across various levels, including state, regional, provincial, and municipal – can also contribute to confusion and discrepancies in policy implementation.

Additionally, the southern and eastern European countries examined in this study have not only recently become destinations for immigration but also occupy ‘border’ positions. Consequently, they serve as primary destinations or obligatory transit points for many migrants. Migratory pressures on the ‘unexperienced’ institutional settings of these countries have further inflamed political, social, and economic tensions in nations already grappling with decades of instability. Countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia still struggle with the turmoil stemming from the 1990s conflicts. Political uncertainty and social tensions in these countries have often led to framing various issues, like refugee flows, as emergencies. At the same time, Greece has weathered one of the most severe economic crises among European nations, an issue that has ignited significant tensions with European institutions and exasperated a large portion of the population. The economic insecurity generated by the 2007-2008 financial crisis contributed to fuelling alarmist sentiments towards foreigners also in Italy (Castelli Gattinara, 2017). This aggravated even further Italy’s fragmented political landscape, evident in its frequent government turnovers (e.g., 17 administrations between 2004 and 2023), and made it increasingly challenging to develop and maintain consistent migration and asylum policies. Furthermore, all the countries analysed in this thesis (Italy, Greece, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina) struggle with corruption and a large informal economy (Williams et al., 2017). Consequently, the emergency-like approach implemented by several of these governments should also “be read as frantic attempts [...] to regain control over migration movements” (Tazzioli, 2020b, p. 10).

Because of all these factors, real-world refugee governance is inherently complex and often marked by ambiguity. Multiple interests and different capabilities converge in this arena, weakening the accountability of individual actors while also limiting their capacity for direct control over situations. Thus, state interests and intentions inevitably become diluted within this broader and heterogeneous environment.

And nonetheless, as this research has shown, states are not monolithic entities, nor do they operate independently of other forces involved in governance processes. Instead, they strategically ‘mold’ themselves to the system. Hence, while layering, incompetence, and lack of resources are significant factors to consider when discussing the failures of the asylum regime – in the sense that these states have failed to uphold the rights of people on the move – it is crucial to recognize how these limitations have been opportunistically reframed as justifications for shirking responsibility towards migrants and refugees. The inefficiency of the system can become an alibi to further justify the perceived state of emergency, to view asylum seekers as a public threat, and to see public spending on them as a waste of resources. In this regard, it is worth taking into account that most of these countries are experiencing an alarming decline of political, social, and civil rights, alongside a revival of nationalist sentiment and far-right parties¹²⁵. The emergence of these forces tends to lead to the creation of xenophobic and discriminatory political projects. In

¹²⁵ <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>

light of the above, and despite the inherent complexity and unpredictability of asylum governance, the intentionality behind these political projects needs to be acknowledged. That is, recognizing that the (mis)management of refugee flows is not only the result of a series of circumstances, but also to a certain extent a conscious political project.

This has been clearly demonstrated in the management of the Ukrainian refugee crisis exploded in 2022. As the former director of Caritas FVG stated, the Ukrainian crisis represents a “wholly distinct chapter” in the management of European refugee flows. It has triggered an unprecedented level of political support and coordinated response among and within European states (Barhoush, 2022; Sajjad, 2022), which have activated the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) to ensure immediate protection and access to services for Ukrainian displaced persons. The Ukrainian emergency has also elicited a robust response from international agencies, such as the UNHCR, which subsequently established a permanent presence in Trieste. Furthermore, ordinary citizens have swiftly mobilized to provide support and hospitality to refugees. In response to these circumstances, the Italian government has acted proactively to address the needs of these forced migrants¹²⁶. Several social operators and public officers in Trieste commented on the issue, expressing appreciation for the ideological and pragmatic solidarity expressed by the institutions, but also legitimately perplexed by the drastic difference in approach compared to the treatment reserved to other displaced populations¹²⁷. These double standards, beyond revealing the inherently racist and discriminatory approach embedded in EU policy-making, are important to understand the role of political will in shaping and implementing asylum policies. Despite the circumstances not being different from those involving refugee flows from other parts of the world – both in terms of number of arrivals and resource constraints – European governments, Italy included, have suddenly demonstrated their capacity to effectively and humanely manage refugee flows. And so, just before leaving his office, I asked the former director of Caritas FVG: “Well, then things could have been done differently, right?” – “Of course. I mean... if we speak honestly about these issues, one cannot help but reach this conclusion” – he replied.

In light of the above, adopting a relational approach from the perspective of solidarity movements can be once again an insightful way of looking at these processes and revealing their inherently political nature. Indeed, as already discussed in Chapter 8, while solidarity efforts are often tolerated in practice, their visibility and activism trigger suspicion or even open hostility from governments. Processes of criminalization enacted by state actors are inherently political. They assume the target group poses a societal threat – a threat to the nation’s integrity and wellbeing.

¹²⁶ <https://www.openpolis.it/i-profughi-ucraini-a-15-mesi-dallinizio-della-guerra/>

¹²⁷ In this concern, the former director of Caritas FVG stressed the ideological and cultural roots of these double standards. For instance, noting that most of those arriving from Ukraine were families, women and children, that is subjects who are more challenging to classify as security threats than single, young men. Additionally, he mentioned the ethnic and religious aspect, referring to the identitarian ‘proximity’ between Europeans and Ukrainians. On top of this, people from Ukraine were mostly heading towards other European countries, or at least were convinced that the war would have ended rapidly and they would have returned to their homes soon. All these elements, and more, contributed to framing the Ukrainian as a crisis of the victims, of the real and deserving refugees.

Solidarity initiatives are then criminalized because their very existence exposes weaknesses and lack of transparency in state governance, raising questions and challenging existing structures. In the absence of any conflict with established and strategic political agendas, and if limited solely to the provision of assistance in place of a struggling state, it is difficult to conceive of solidarity being so vehemently discouraged. The potential to criminalize solidarity initiatives, effectively transforming them into political adversaries in the asylum “battleground” (Ambrosini, 2021), is contingent upon the fact that,

“In a polarized political situation, in which harsh adversarial stances against asylum seekers have gained ground in several countries, the fact of giving help to refugees in various ways appears in itself an action loaded with political meanings and consequences” (Ambrosini, 2022, p. 6).

At the same time, while some solidarity initiatives are explicitly political, many others initially have a purely humanitarian goal. Nevertheless, attempts to suppress even the most moderate expressions of solidarity can backfire, igniting passions and raising political consciousness and demands where none existed before. In this regard, several solidarians I have encountered along the way have become politically active in response to experiencing or witnessing criminalizing attacks. As a young volunteer I met in Trieste explained about her organization, solidarity “becomes political when and because it resists certain accusations”, meaning that “the very fact that it resists makes it political” (VA2). Therefore, solidarity initiatives not only unveil the political will behind government management of human mobility, but these acts of repression also trigger new political intentions. Notably, the criminalization of solidarity and the repression of dissent, impacting both citizens and non-citizens, is yet another confirmation of an ongoing shift towards undemocratic and illiberal societies.

9.5. Epilogue: solidarity as a political project

Since my first visit to Trieste, in early 2021, many things have changed, except one. New and different solidarians added to the ‘veterans’ of the Piazza and volunteers, social operators and international humanitarian officers now sit together regularly to discuss the situation at the border and plan coordinated actions. Meanwhile, some of the activists from the Piazza have joined the European Citizens’ Initiative “Stop Border Violence” (ECI SBV): one million signature to ask the European Commission to prevent torture and inhumane and degrading treatments against people on the move at EU borders¹²⁸. Informal readmissions are officially suspended and a day centre has been (re)opened a few steps from Piazza della Libertà. Everything seems different, except that the newly elected government (2022) has announced the intention to reactivate

¹²⁸ The initiative concluded in July 2024, collecting a mere 25.124 signatures across European countries. Still, a significant 16.817 were gathered in Italy (https://citizens-initiative.europa.eu/initiatives/details/2023/000001_it).

readmissions¹²⁹ and in less than a year after taking office it passed a law (50/2023) that further dismantles the reception system¹³⁰. As a matter of fact, the new day centre in Trieste is financed with ‘solidarity funds’. Among the operators, the faces of the ones who used to be in the Piazza. And yet, while *de facto* disengaging from its duties in terms of protection and reception of asylum seekers, the Italian government has successfully managed to make the situation in Trieste unbearable for people on the move. As of today, the state-run first reception system in the city is collapsing, with hundreds of asylum seekers forced to live in the Silos¹³¹, the same abandoned building next to the train station that once housed Istrian refugees and, even earlier, Jews deported to Nazi concentration camps. In the report *Abandoned Lives* – written by the Trieste associations Comunità di San Martino al Campo ODV, Consorzio Italiano di Solidarietà (ICS), Diaconia Valdese (CSD), DONK - Humanitarian Medicine ODV, International Rescue Committee Italia (IRC), and Linea d’Ombra OdV – this is how they describe the situation in Trieste during 2022:

“Although the increase in asylum applications in 2022 can certainly not be referred to as an ‘emergency’, starting from June 2022 the first-level reception system represented by two facilities of the Campo Sacro Hostel and the facility of Malala House in Ferneti quickly reached its capacity due to the slowdown in the procedures for the transfer of asylum seekers to other Italian regions. In fact, the phenomenon of asylum seekers abandoned on the streets has reached unprecedented peaks, with asylum seekers staying in the streets for 30 to 70 days before being able to access the first-level reception system provided by law [...] it should be considered that while leaving no alternative to be homeless during the warmer months represents ‘only’ abandoning people in a degrading situation, in the winter season this same abandonment exposes people to unspeakable suffering and the actual risk of death”¹³².

While governments pursue policies that keep migrants at bay by creating hostile environments, with aim of ‘pushing them away’, solidarity initiatives facilitate safe migration through the creation of safe spaces and empathetic encounters. In doing so, they challenge both security-focused and neoliberal trends while overcoming the simplistic framing of migrants as either criminals or victims. Referring to processes of securitisation, Bello highlights that these processes

¹²⁹<https://www.meltingpot.org/2022/12/trieste-nuova-direttiva-piantedosi-ripartono-le-riammissioni-illegali-in-slovenia/> - Meanwhile, since October 7, 2023, the government has reintroduced border controls with Slovenia on the grounds of national security. The manner in which these controls were reinstated and their continued implementation beyond stipulated periods or without adequate justification has led to concerns regarding potential overreach of legal authority and legitimacy.

¹³⁰ <https://www.meltingpot.org/2023/05/cosa-resta-della-prima-accoglienza-dopo-il-decreto-cutro/>

¹³¹ Despite a lack of suitable alternatives, the Trieste administration forcibly evicted residents from the Silos in June 2024. This action deprived them of their only living space, even if conditions were harsh. The Silos provided a sense of community and proximity to essential services offered by the nearby Day Centre. Following the eviction, some residents were relocated to other regions, while others chose to find their own accommodations out of fear (<https://www.meltingpot.org/2024/06/lo-sgombero-del-silos-a-trieste-non-risolve-nulla/>). Once again, the solidarity community in Trieste reacted with passion and conviction, organizing public assemblies and protests. Directly addressing the mayor of Trieste, some citizens emphasized that while “the hygienic and human conditions inside the Silos are in no way acceptable... an eviction order, with two weeks’ notice, without a short-term or long-term alternative plan, is not the solution” (<https://www.meltingpot.org/2024/06/trieste-firmata-lordinanza-per-lo-sgombero-del-silos/>).

¹³² <https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/Abandoned%20Lives%20in%20Trieste%202022-ENG.pdf>

can be both enforced and contested (Bello, 2022b; McConnon, 2022): “It is indeed possible that alternative actors, who do not hold a discriminatory cognition, with their resistance to securitisation, enact discourses, techniques and practices, and induce policies, which are rather able to de-securitize this issue” (Bello, 2022, p. 1328; Crepaz, 2022). At the same time, processes of privatization and marketization of asylum can be contained by the presence of solidarity initiatives that offer non-profit support, thus envisioning models of social coexistence and political relations based on principles of care, empathy, and solidarity (Woodly et al., 2021). Interestingly, the informal and spontaneous format and approach of many of these initiatives often become an operational and political tool through which to initiate and sustain this ‘epistemic friction’ (Medina, 2013). While in the context of this research informality has been described and analysed as a misconduct of state actors, through which they evade responsibility, it is also true that informality can be used as a counter-steering tool to contrast such drift. Namely, in many instances, it is precisely solidarians’ unmediated access to people on the move, their lack of an institutionalized and formalized approach, and their dynamic and reactive presence along the route that have allowed these initiatives to promptly and more successfully identify, denounce, and possibly contrast the unregulated and illicit actions of the state. While governments use informality as a way to bypass their protection and reception obligations towards asylum seekers and refugees, that is to ‘take a distance’ from the management of refugee flows, grassroots organizations and activist networks ‘immerse themselves’ in the informal contexts to which state (in)action relegates them precisely to counteract such trends, demanding transparency, accountability, and compliance with international standards from competent institutions.

In light of the above, solidarity initiatives not only provide a privileged vantage point to analyse the governance of asylum ‘from within’, but also exercise a counter-steering effect against and beyond the epistemic domination of governing actors (Davies et al., 2023). That is, their actions and the knowledge they produce hold governments accountable for their social responsibilities and political obligations by exposing the shortcomings, inconsistencies, and ambiguities of the institutions in question.

Although aware of the risks of conducting a ‘solidarity-driven’ type of research – including the one of implying “a binary opposition between social movements and institutions that, while recognizing the possibility and productivity of conflict, can further limit opportunities for dialogue and collaboration, even when they exist amidst many contradictions” (Busso et al., 2019, p. 98) – this approach provides relevant methodological and epistemological advantages (Picozza, 2021) in light of sociology’s function within the public sphere (Burawoy, 2021). As Massari and Pellegrini stress, “[t]his is certainly not about confusing research with the moment of a militant political-party option, but rather about making a conscious methodological choice, aware of the potential and limitations of the tools adopted for the knowledge of the social world and for the processes that it is potentially capable of activating” (2019, p. 14). The proximity and intimacy with the events informing and surrounding the governance of asylum – including the daily

interactions with the different stakeholders of the arena and first-hand observation and experience of the dynamics unfolding on the ground – provided this study with a solid and rigorous methodological and empirical foundation. The type of knowledge produced in this way, precisely because it develops out of and through the testimonies of those most directly involved – migrants *in primis* – and within non-institutional, independent and subaltern spaces, reaches a deeper understanding of policy making and implementation, “unveiling [their] inherent ambiguity” (Busso et al., 2019, p. 94). According to Busso et al., rediscovering and understanding this ambiguity “could [...] represent [...] an antidote to processes of depoliticization, favouring the assumption of responsibility by actors, feeding different and competing readings of a situation and reopening political and public arenas to the dimension of conflict in which the voices of various actors, even those marginal or excluded, can find new space” (2019, p. 95). In light of the above, the choice of conducting a solidarity-driven type of research, using participation in solidarity initiatives as a foundational method to analyse policy processes and power relations (Picozza, 2021), assumes value not only within the academia, providing fresh and intriguing perspectives on and from the field, but also contributes to bridging the gap between academic work and societal processes, bringing ‘in’ the voices of social actors and ‘out’ the critical reflections of scholars, and thus creating tools and strategies for social change. Across Europe, a massive collective effort unfolds every day, driven by thousands, to push for a change in the way human mobility, and forced displacement in particular, is currently managed. This research aims to add its voice to this chorus by providing a systemic analysis of real-life experiences. In this way, it aspires to contribute, in a small but hopefully meaningful way, to this transnational project.

References

- Abarca, G. A., & Coutin, S. B. (2018). Sovereign intimacies: The lives of documents within US state-noncitizen relationships. *American Ethnologist*, 45(1), 7–19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12595>
- Abbott, K. W., & Snidal, D. (2000). Hard and Soft Law in International Governance. *International Organization*, 54(3), 421–456. <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081800551280>
- Abrahamsen, R., & Williams, M. C. (2010). *Security Beyond the State: Private Security in International Politics* (1^a ed.). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511974441>
- Agier, M. (2011). *Managing the undesirables: Refugee camps and humanitarian government*. Polity Press.
- Alagna, F. (2023). Civil Society and Municipal Activism Around Migration in the EU: A Multi-Scalar Alliance-Making. *Geopolitics*, 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2023.2230902>
- Altin, R. (2019). Sostare ai margini: Richiedenti asilo tra confinamento e accoglienza diffusa. *Anuac*, Vol 8, 7-35 Pages. <https://doi.org/10.7340/ANUAC2239-625X-3680>
- Altin, R. (2021). The floating karst flow of migrants as a rite of passage through the Eastern European border. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 26(5), 589–607. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2021.1963560>
- Altin, R., & Degli Uberti, S. (2022). Placed in Time. Migration Policies and Temporalities of (Im)Mobility Across the Eastern European Borders. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 24(3), 439–459. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2021.2015662>
- Ambrosini, M. (2020). *L'invasione immaginaria: L'immigrazione oltre i luoghi comuni* (Prima edizione). GLF editori Laterza.
- Ambrosini, M. (2021). The battleground of asylum and immigration policies: A conceptual inquiry. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 44(3), 374–395. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2020.1836380>
- Ambrosini, M. (2022a). Confini contesi: Chiusure selettive e iniziative solidali. *REMHU: Revista Interdisciplinar da Mobilidade Humana*, 30(64), 23–42. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1980-85852503880006403>
- Ambrosini, M. (2022b). Humanitarian Help and Refugees: De-Bordering Solidarity as a Contentious Issue. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 22(3), 517–530. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2022.2059823>
- Amnesty International. (2017). *Bosnia and herzegovina. Submission for European Union Enlargement Package/Opinion, 2021*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/EUR6348842021ENGLISH.pdf>
- Amnesty International. (2019). *Pushed to the edge: Violence and abuse against refugees and migrants along Balkan Route* (EUR 05/9964/2019). Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur05/9964/2019/en/>
- Amnesty International. (2020). *Punishing compassion. Solidarity on trial in Fortress Europe* (EUR 01/1828/2020).

https://www.amnesty.be/IMG/pdf/2020_punishing_compassion_solidarity_on_trial_in_fortress_europe.pdf

- Anderson, B. (2019). New directions in migration studies: Towards methodological de-nationalism. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 7(1), 36. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-019-0140-8>
- Andreas, P. (2003). Redrawing the Line: Borders and Security in the Twenty-first Century. *International Security*, 28(2), 78–111. <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228803322761973>
- Ara, A., & Magris, C. (1982). *Trieste: Un'identità di frontiera*. Einaudi.
- Aradau, C., & Tazzioli, M. (2021). Covid-19 and rebordering the world. *Radical Philosophy*, 2(10), 3–10.
- Armiero, M., Andritsos, T., Barca, S., Brás, R., Ruiz Cauyela, S., Dedeoğlu, Ç., Di Pierri, M., Fernandes, L. D. O., Gravagno, F., Greco, L., Greyl, L., Iengo, I., Lindblom, J., Milanez, F., Pedro, S., Pappalardo, G., Petrillo, A., Portaluri, M., Privitera, E., Velegrakis, G. (2019). Toxic Bios: Toxic Autobiographies—A Public Environmental Humanities Project. *Environmental Justice*, 12(1), 7–11. <https://doi.org/10.1089/env.2018.0019>
- ASGI. (2020, giugno 5). *La riammissione informale dall'Italia alla Slovenia sulla base dell'Accordo bilaterale Italia—Slovenia e le riammissioni a catena verso la Slovenia e la Croazia*. https://www.asgi.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/documento-riammissioni-Italia-Slovenia-_5_giugno_2020.pdf
- ASGI. (2023). *Spazio Schengen: Da area di libera circolazione a labirinto*. Associazione per gli Studi Giuridici sull'Immigrazione (ASGI). <https://www.asgi.it/cittadini-unione-europea/spazio-schengen-da-area-di-libera-circolazione-a-labirinto/>
- ASGI, & Spazi Circolari. (2023). *Frontiere Multiple, diritti mancati in Calabria e Sicilia. Resoconto del sopralluogo effettuato dalli studenti della Scuola di Alta Formazione per Operatori Legali di ASGI e Spazi Circolari*. https://www.asgi.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Resoconto-sopralluogo_Calabria_Sicilia_rev.pdf
- Ashutosh, I., & Mountz, A. (2011). Migration management for the benefit of whom? Interrogating the work of the International Organization for Migration. *Citizenship Studies*, 15(1), 21–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2011.534914>
- Astuti, M., Bove, C., Brambilla, A., Clementi, A., Facchini, D., Giordani, C., Maraone, S., Pignocchi, P., Saccora, D., & Stojanova, I. (2020). *La rotta balcanica. I migranti senza diritti nel cuore dell'Europa* (Dossier Balcani).
- Astuti, M., Bove, C., Brambilla, A., Lici, A., Rizzi, E. S., Stege, U., & Stojanova, I. (2022). «Per quanto voi vi crediate assolti siete per sempre coinvolti». I diritti umani fondamentali alla prova delle frontiere interne ed esterne dell'Unione Europea. *Diritto, Immigrazione e Cittadinanza*, 1/2022.
- Ataç, I., Rygiel, K., & Stierl, M. (2016). Introduction: The Contentious Politics of Refugee and Migrant Protest and Solidarity Movements: Remaking Citizenship from the Margins. *Citizenship Studies*, 20(5), 527–544. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2016.1182681>
- Atesagaoglu, O. E., Bayram, D., & Elgin, C. (2017). Informality and structural transformation. *Central Bank Review*, 17(4), 117–126. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cbrev.2017.11.002>
- Augustova, K., Farrand-Carrapico, H., & Obradovic-Wochnik, J. (2023). Push and back: The ripple effect of EU border externalisation from Croatia to Iran. *Environment and*

Planning C: Politics and Space, 41(5), 847–865.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/23996544231163731>

- Auyero, J. (2022). Gray Zone of Politics and Social Movements. In D. Della Porta, B. Klandermans, D. McAdam, & D. A. Snow (A c. Di), *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements* (1^a ed., pp. 1–4). Wiley.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm467.pub2>
- Auyero, J., & Jensen, K. (2015). For Political Ethnographies of Urban Marginality. *City & Community*, 14(4), 359–363. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cico.12135>
- Baiocchi, G. (2005). *Militants and citizens: The politics of participatory democracy in Porto Alegre*. Stanford University Press.
- Baldacchino, G. (2021). Extra-territorial quarantine in pandemic times. *Political Geography*, 85, 102302. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102302>
- Ballinger, P. (2003). Imperial nostalgia: Mythologizing Habsburg Trieste. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 8(1), 84–101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571022000036263>
- Balsamo, O. (2023, agosto 23). Il Decreto Cutro e il potenziamento dei Centri di Permanenza per i Rimpatri (CPR). *MeltingPot*. <https://www.meltingpot.org/2023/08/il-decreto-cutro-e-il-potenziamento-dei-centri-di-permanenza-per-i-rimpatri-cpr/>
- Balsiger, P., & Lambelet, A. (2014). Participant Observation. In D. Della Porta (A c. Di), *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research* (pp. 144–172). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198719571.003.0007>
- Balzacq, T. (2008). The Policy Tools of Securitization: Information Exchange, EU Foreign and Interior Policies*. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 46(1), 75–100.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2007.00768.x>
- Barhoush, J. (2022, marzo 20). Double Standards: What the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis Reveals About Western Racism. *Amnesty International at the University of Toronto*.
<https://amnesty.sa.utoronto.ca/2022/03/20/double-standards-what-the-ukrainian-refugee-crisis-reveals-about-western-racism/>
- Barry, A., Osborne, T., & Rose, N. S. (1996). *Foucault and political reason: Liberalism, neo-liberalism and rationalities of government*. UCL press.
- Basaran, T. (2008). Security, Law, Borders: Spaces of Exclusion. *International Political Sociology*, 2(4), 339–354. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-5687.2008.00055.x>
- Bauböck, R. (2018). Europe’s commitments and failures in the refugee crisis. *European Political Science*, 17(1), 140–150. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-017-0120-0>
- Bauder, H. (2017). Sanctuary Cities: Policies and Practices in International Perspective. *International Migration*, 55(2), 174–187. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12308>
- Bauder, H., & Juffs, L. (2020). ‘Solidarity’ in the migration and refugee literature: Analysis of a concept. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46(1), 46–65.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1627862>
- Bauman, Z. (1988). Sociology after the Holocaust. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 39(4), 469–497. <https://doi.org/10.2307/590497>
- Bauman, Z. (2008). *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Repr). Polity Press.

- Bello, V. (2017). *International Migration and International Security: Why Prejudice Is a Global Security Threat* (V. Bello, A c. Di; 1^a ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315537634>
- Bello, V. (2022a). Normalizing the exception: Prejudice and discriminations in detention and extraordinary reception centres in Italy. *International Politics*, 59(3), 449–464.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-021-00290-8>
- Bello, V. (2022b). The spiralling of the securitisation of migration in the EU: From the management of a ‘crisis’ to a governance of human mobility? *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(6), 1327–1344. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1851464>
- Bendel, P. (2021). Fresh Start Or False Start? The New Pact on Migration and Asylum. In S. Carrera & A. Geddes (A c. Di), *The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum in light of the United Nations Global Compact on Refugees International Experiences on Containment and Mobility and their Impacts on Trust and Rights* (pp. 251–261). European University Institute (EUI).
- Berberoglu, B. (2021). *The global rise of authoritarianism in the 21st century: Crisis of neoliberal globalization and the nationalist response*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Berckmoes, L. H., Lindegaard, M. R., & Rodgers, D. (2021). Introduction: The Longitudinal Ethnography of Violence. *Conflict and Society*, 7(1), 96–106.
<https://doi.org/10.3167/arcs.2021.070107>
- Bernard, H. R. (2006). *Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (4th ed). AltaMira Press.
- Berry, M., Garcia-Blanco, I., & Moore, K. (2016, febbraio 11). *Press coverage of the refugee and migrant crisis in the EU: A content analysis of five European countries* [Monograph]. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.
<http://www.unhcr.org/56bb369c9.html>
- Betts, A. (2011). *Global migration governance*. Oxford university press.
- Bhagat, A. (2021). Displacement in “actually existing” racial neoliberalism: Refugee governance in Paris. *Urban Geography*, 42(5), 634–653.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2019.1659689>
- Bhagat, A., & Soederberg, S. (2019). Placing Refugees in Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Reflections from Berlin and Paris. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 118(2), 421–438.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-7381230>
- Bhattacharjee, A. (2012). *Social science research: Principles, methods, and practices* (Second edition). Anol Bhattacharjee.
- Bialasiewicz, L., & Minca, C. (2010). The ‘Border Within’: Inhabiting the Border in Trieste. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 28(6), 1084–1105.
<https://doi.org/10.1068/d2609>
- Biebricher, T. (2020). Neoliberalism and Authoritarianism. *Global Perspectives*, 1(1), 11872.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/001c.11872>
- Bigo, D. (2002). Security and Immigration: Toward a Critique of the Governmentality of Unease. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 27(1_suppl), 63–92.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/03043754020270S105>

- Bigo, D. (2014). The (in)securitization practices of the three universes of EU border control: Military/Navy – border guards/police – database analysts. *Security Dialogue*, 45(3), 209–225. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010614530459>
- Bigo, D., & Tsakala, A. (A c. Di). (2008). *Terror, insecurity and liberty: Illiberal practices of liberal regimes after 9/11*. Routledge.
- Blanco, I., Griggs, S., & Sullivan, H. (2014). Situating the local in the neoliberalisation and transformation of urban governance. *Urban Studies*, 51(15), 3129–3146. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098014549292>
- Bochner, A. P., Ellis, C., & Tillmann-Healy, L. (2000). Relationships as stories: Accounts, storied lives, evocative narratives. In K. Dindia & S. Duck (A c. Di), *Communication and Personal Relationships* (pp. 307–324). John Wiley & Sons.
- Bona, M. (2016). Gli anni novanta: Una rete di accoglienza diffusa per i profughi dell'ex Jugoslavia. *Meridiana*, 86, 97–119.
- Bona, M., & Marchetti, C. (2017). Il diritto d'asilo in Italia: Sviluppi normativi e nel sistema di accoglienza a partire dagli anni Novanta. In L. Gorgolini (A c. Di), *Le migrazioni forzate nella storia d'Italia del XX secolo* (pp. 219–250). Il Mulino.
- Bonanno, A. (2020). The Crisis of Neoliberalism, Populist Reaction, and the Rise of Authoritarian Capitalism. In *The Global Rise of Authoritarianism in the 21st Century* (pp. 15–29). Routledge.
- Boni, S., Koensler, A., & Rossi, A. (2020). *Etnografie militanti: Prospettive e dilemmi*. Meltemi.
- Bontempelli, S. (2017). Crimes of solidarity. In P. Andrisani, S. Bontempelli, S. Chiodo, A. Dotti, G. Faso, G. Naletto Grazia, & A. Rivera (A c. Di), *Chronicles of Ordinary Racism. Fourth White Paper on Racism in Italy* (pp. 32–41). Lunaria.
- Borelli, C., Poy, A., & Rué, A. (2023). Governing Asylum without “Being There”: Ghost Bureaucracy, Outsourcing, and the Unreachability of the State. *Social Sciences*, 12(3), 169. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12030169>
- Borger, J. (2021, novembre 2). Bosnia is in danger of breaking up, warns top international official. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/02/bosnia-is-in-danger-of-breaking-up-warns-eus-top-official-in-the-state>
- Bosma, N., & Schutjens, V. (2009). Determinants of Early-Stage Entrepreneurial Activity in European Regions: Distinguishing Low and High Ambition Entrepreneurship. In D. Smallbone, H. Landström, & D. Jones-Evans (A c. Di), *Entrepreneurship and Growth in Local, Regional and National Economies*. Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781849802369.00010>
- Bove, V., Efthyvoulou, G., & Navas, A. (2017). Political cycles in public expenditure: Butter vs guns. *Journal of Comparative Economics*, 45(3), 582–604. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2016.03.004>
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Brambilla, A., Clementi, A., Saccora, D., & Schiavone, G. (2020). *Bosnia ed Erzegovina, la mancata accoglienza. Dall'emergenza artificiale ai campi di confinamento finanziati dall'Unione europea*. RiVolti ai Balcani. https://www.rivoltiaibalcani.org/app/uploads/2021/07/Bosnia-ed-Erzegovina_la-mancata-accoglienza-2021.pdf

- Brambilla, C. (2015). Exploring the Critical Potential of the Borderscapes Concept. *Geopolitics*, 20(1), 14–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2014.884561>
- Braun, K. (2017). Decolonial Perspectives on Charitable Spaces of “Welcome Culture” in Germany. *Social Inclusion*, 5(3), 38–48. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v5i3.1025>
- Brenner, N. (2004). *New state spaces: Urban governance and the rescaling of statehood*. Oxford University Press.
- Brenner, N., & Theodore, N. (2002). Cities and the Geographies of “Actually Existing Neoliberalism”. *Antipode*, 34(3), 349–379. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8330.00246>
- Brsakoska Bazerkoska, J. (2017). The refugee relocation system in EU and its implications to the countries on the Western Balkans route: The aftermath of. *Revue des droits de l’homme*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.4000/revdh.3392>
- Bruff, I. (2017). Cease to exist? The European «social» model and the hardening of «soft» EU law. In C. B. Tansel (A c. Di), *States of discipline: Authoritarian neoliberalism and the contested reproduction of capitalist order* (pp. 149–169). Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Brunet-Jailly, E. (2005). Theorizing Borders: An Interdisciplinary Perspective. *Geopolitics*, 10(4), 633–649. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040500318449>
- Bunyan, T. (1993). Trevi, Europol and the European state. *Statewatching the new Europe*, 1(1), 1–15.
- Burawoy, M. (2021). *Public sociology: Between utopia and anti-utopia*. Polity.
- Burks, A. W. (1946). Peirce’s Theory of Abduction. *Philosophy of Science*, 13(4), 301–306. <https://doi.org/10.1086/286904>
- Busso, S., Caselli, D., Graziano, E., Meo, A., & Parisi, T. (2019). La ricerca applicata in sociologia come pratica emancipatrice. Dilemmi e insidie. *Quaderni di Teoria Sociale - Special issue: Emancipatory Social Science Today*, 1, 85–108.
- BVMN. (2023). *Violence within the state border. Bosnia-Herzegovina*. Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN). <https://borderviolence.eu/reports/violence-within-state-borders-bosnia-and-herzegovina-2/>
- Camilli, A. (2019, novembre 5). Una nuova crisi umanitaria in Bosnia riapre le ferite della guerra. *Internazionale*. <https://www.internazionale.it/reportage/annalisa-camilli/2019/11/05/bosnia-migranti-rota-balcanica-vujiak>
- Camilli, A. (2023a, luglio 17). Cosa prevede l’accordo tra Tunisia e Unione europea sui migranti. *Internazionale*. <https://www.internazionale.it/notizie/annalisa-camilli/2023/07/17/accordo-tunisia-unione-europea-migranti>
- Camilli, A. (2023b, ottobre 5). La stretta repressiva e securitaria della politica migratoria del governo Meloni (I parte). *MeltingPot*. <https://www.meltingpot.org/2023/10/la-stretta-repressiva-e-securitaria-della-politica-migratoria-del-governo-meloni-i-parte/>
- Camilli, A. (2023c, ottobre 9). La stretta repressiva e securitaria della politica migratoria del governo Meloni – II parte. *MeltingPot*. <https://www.meltingpot.org/2023/10/la-stretta-repressiva-e-securitaria-della-politica-migratoria-del-governo-meloni-ii-parte/>

- Campesi, G. (2018). Between containment, confinement and dispersal: The evolution of the Italian reception system before and after the 'refugee crisis'. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 23(4), 490–506. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2018.1501995>
- Campesi, G. (2021). The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum and the Dangerous Multiplication of 'Anomalous Zones' For Migration Management. In A. Geddes & S. Carrera (A c. Di), *The EU pact on migration and asylum in light of the United Nations global compact on refugees* (pp. 195–204). European University Institute (EUI).
- Campisi, J. M., & Sottilotta, C. E. (2022, settembre 22). *Italy's Far-Right and the Migration Debate: Implications for Europe* [Text]. IAI Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/italys-far-right-and-migration-debate-implications-europe>
- Campo, F., Giunti, S., & Mendola, M. (2021). The Refugee Crisis and Right-Wing Populism: Evidence from the Italian Dispersal Policy. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3780450>
- Campomori, F., & Ambrosini, M. (2020). Multilevel governance in trouble: The implementation of asylum seekers' reception in Italy as a battleground. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 8(1), 22. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-020-00178-1>
- Campomori, F., & Caponio, T. (2017). Immigrant integration policymaking in Italy: Regional policies in a multi-level governance perspective. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 83(2), 303–321. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852315611238>
- Cantat, C., Birey, T., Maczynska, E., & Sevinin, E. (2019). *Challenging the Political Across Borders: Migrants' and Solidarity Struggles*. Central European University.
- Caponio, T. (2021). Governing Migration through Multi-Level Governance? City Networks in Europe and the United States*. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 59(6), 1590–1606. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13214>
- Caponio, T., & Borkert, M. (A c. Di). (2010). *The local dimension of migration policymaking*. Amsterdam University Press.
- Caponio, T., & Jones-Correa, M. (2018). Theorising migration policy in multilevel states: The multilevel governance perspective. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(12), 1995–2010. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1341705>
- Caponio, T., & Ponzio, I. (2022). *Coping with Migrants and Refugees: Multilevel Governance across the EU* (1^a ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003129950>
- Cardwell, P. J., & Dickson, R. (2023). 'Formal informality' in EU external migration governance: The case of mobility partnerships. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(12), 3121–3139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2193743>
- Carrera, S., & Geddes, A. (A c. Di). (2021). *The EU pact on migration and asylum in light of the United Nations global compact on refugees: International experiences on containment and mobility and their impacts on trust and rights*. European University Institute (EUI). <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2870/541854>
- Carvalho, J. (2013). *Impact of Extreme Right Parties on Immigration Policy* (0 ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315885162>
- Castelli Gattinara, P. (2017). The 'refugee crisis' in Italy as a crisis of legitimacy. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 9(3), 318–331. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2017.1388639>

- Castles, S. (2003). Towards a Sociology of Forced Migration and Social Transformation. *Sociology*, 37(1), 13–34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038503037001384>
- Castles, S., Haas, H. G. de, & Miller, M. J. (2014). *The age of migration: International population movements in the modern world* (5th ed). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Centri d'Italia. (2022). *Il vuoto dell'accoglienza* (Mappe dell'accoglienza). Centri d'Italia. https://actionaid-it.imgix.net/uploads/2023/02/centri_italia_il_vuoto_accoglienza.pdf
- Ceobanu, A. M., & Escandell, X. (2010). Comparative Analyses of Public Attitudes Toward Immigrants and Immigration Using Multinational Survey Data: A Review of Theories and Research. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 36(1), 309–328. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.012809.102651>
- Charmaz, K. (2012). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis* (Repr.). Sage.
- Charmaz, K. (2017). The Power of Constructivist Grounded Theory for Critical Inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23(1), 34–45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800416657105>
- Clark, D. A., & Manchester, U. of. (2005). The Capability Approach: Its Development, Critiques and Recent Advances. *Economics Series Working Papers*, Articolo GPRG-WPS-032. <https://ideas.repec.org/p/oxf/wpaper/gprg-wps-032.html>
- Clark, S., Haw, A., & Mackenzie, L. (2024). The “good refugee” ideal: How discourses of deservingness permeate Australia’s refugee and asylum seeker narratives. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 59(1), 148–163. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajs4.255>
- Clementi, A., & Saccora, D. (2016). *Lungo la rotta balcanica. Viaggio nella storia dell'umanità del nostro tempo*. Infinito Edizioni.
- Cloke, P. J., Johnsen, S., & May, J. (2010). *Swept up lives? Re-envisioning the homeless city*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Cocco, E. (2017). Where is the European Frontier? The Balkan Migration Crisis and its Impact on Relations between the EU and the Western Balkans. *European View*, 16(2), 293–302. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12290-017-0471-5>
- Coffey, A., & Atkinson, P. (1996). *Making sense of qualitative data: Complementary research strategies*. Sage Publications.
- Coleman, M. (2005). U.S. statecraft and the U.S.–Mexico border as security/economy nexus. *Political Geography*, 24(2), 185–209. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2004.09.016>
- Collins, F. L. (2021). Geographies of migration I: Platform migration. *Progress in Human Geography*, 45(4), 866–877. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132520973445>
- Conlon, D. (2019). Contradictions and provocations of neoliberal governmentality in the US asylum seeking system. In K. Mitchell, R. Jones, & J. L. Fluri (A c. Di), *Handbook on Critical Geographies of Migration*. Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781786436030.00042>
- Consorzio Italiano di Solidarietà (ICS). (2019). *Accoglienza, non emergenza. «Casa malala» ovvero la prima accoglienza alla prova dei grandi numeri*. <https://www.icsufficiorifugiati.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/REPORTCasaMalal2019.pdf>

- Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*, 13(1), 3–21. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00988593>
- Crawley, H., & Skleparis, D. (2018). Refugees, migrants, neither, both: Categorical fetishism and the politics of bounding in Europe's 'migration crisis'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(1), 48–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1348224>
- Crepaz, K. (2022). Overcoming borders: The Europeanization of civil society activism in the 'refugee crisis'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(6), 1448–1461. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1851471>
- Crouch, C. (2011). *The strange non-death of neoliberalism* (1. publ). Polity.
- Cusumano, E., & Villa, M. (2021). From “Angels” to “Vice Smugglers”: The Criminalization of Sea Rescue NGOs in Italy. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, 27(1), 23–40. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-020-09464-1>
- Cutcliffe, J. R. (2000). Methodological issues in grounded theory. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 31(6), 1476–1484. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.2000.01430.x>
- Czaika, M., & Hobolth, M. (2014). *Deflection into irregularity? The (un) intended effects of restrictive asylum and visa policies*. International Migration Institute (IMI), Oxford Department of International Development (QEH).
- Czaika, M., & Hobolth, M. (2016). Do restrictive asylum and visa policies increase irregular migration into Europe? *European Union Politics*, 17(3), 345–365. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116516633299>
- Dal Lago, A. (2012). *Non-persone: L'esclusione dei migranti in una società globale* (Nuova ed., 5. ed). Feltrinelli.
- D'Alessandro, M. M. (2023, dicembre 14). Migranti: Sospeso l'accordo tra Italia e Albania. *Euronews*. <https://it.euronews.com/2023/12/14/migranti-stop-momentaneo-allaccordo-tra-italia-e-albania>
- Darling, J. (2016a). Asylum in Austere Times: Instability, Privatization and Experimentation within the UK Asylum Dispersal System. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 29(4), 483–505. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/few038>
- Darling, J. (2016b). Privatising asylum: Neoliberalisation, depoliticisation and the governance of forced migration. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 41(3), 230–243. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12118>
- Darling, J. (2016c). Privatising asylum: Neoliberalisation, depoliticisation and the governance of forced migration. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 41(3), Articolo 3. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12118>
- Davidson, N. (2009). Putting the nation back into 'the international'. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 22(1), 9–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557570802683920>
- Davies, T., Isakjee, A., & Dhesi, S. (2017). Violent Inaction: The Necropolitical Experience of Refugees in Europe. *Antipode*, 49(5), 1263–1284. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12325>
- Davies, T., Isakjee, A., & Obradovic-Wochnik, J. (2023). Epistemic Borderwork: Violent Pushbacks, Refugees, and the Politics of Knowledge at the EU Border. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 113(1), 169–188. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2022.2077167>

- Davitti, D. (2019). The Rise of Private Military and Security Companies in European Union Migration Policies: Implications under the UNGPs. *Business and Human Rights Journal*, 4(1), 33–53. <https://doi.org/10.1017/bhj.2018.21>
- De Bruycker, P. D. (2022). The New Pact on Migration and Asylum: What it is Not and What it Could Have Been. In D. Thym & Odysseus Academic Network (A c. Di), *Reforming the Common European Asylum System* (pp. 33–42). Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748931164-33>
- De Franco, A. (2022). Sopralluogo sulla SP57. In M. A. Valdivia (A c. Di), *Confini*. Napoli Monitor.
- De Genova, N. (2010). Antiterrorism, Race, and the New Frontier: American Exceptionalism, Imperial Multiculturalism, and the Global Security State. *Identities*, 17(6), 613–640. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2010.533523>
- De Genova, N. (2013a). Spectacles of migrant ‘illegality’: The scene of exclusion, the obscene of inclusion. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36(7), 1180–1198. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2013.783710>
- De Genova, N. (2013b). ‘We are of the connections’: Migration, methodological nationalism, and ‘militant research’. *Postcolonial Studies*, 16(3), 250–258. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2013.850043>
- De Genova, N. (2017). *The borders of «Europe»: Autonomy of migration, tactics of bordering*. Duke University Press.
- De Genova, N., Garelli, G., & Tazzioli, M. (A c. Di). (2018). Autonomy of Asylum? *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 117(2), 239–265. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-4374823>
- De Haas, H., Natter, K., & Vezzoli, S. (2018). Growing Restrictiveness or Changing Selection? The Nature and Evolution of Migration Policies ¹. *International Migration Review*, 52(2), 324–367. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imre.12288>
- De Mori, C. (2022, gennaio 21). Clandestini dai Balcani, il Friuli Venezia Giulia compra 65 fototrappole: «Un muro tecnologico». *Il Gazzettino.it*. https://www.ilgazzettino.it/nordest/udine/fototrappole_confine_friuli_venezia_giulia_clandestini_balcani-6453370.html
- Della Porta, D. (2014). *Methodological practices in social movement research* (First edition). Oxford University Press.
- Della Porta, D., & Steinhilper, E. (2021). Introduction: Solidarities in Motion: Hybridity and Change in Migrant Support Practices. *Critical Sociology*, 47(2), 175–185. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920520952143>
- Desmond, M. (2014). Relational ethnography. *Theory and Society*, 43(5), 547–579. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-014-9232-5>
- Di Pascale, A. (2021, febbraio 9). Riammissioni informali e violazione del diritto di asilo. *Questione giustizia*. <https://www.questionegiustizia.it/articolo/riammissioni-informali-e-violazione-del-diritto-di-asilo>
- Dickson, A. (2015). Distancing Asylum Seekers from the State: Australia’s evolving political geography of immigration and border control. *Australian Geographer*, 46(4), 437–454. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049182.2015.1066240>

- Dikeç, M. (2009). The ‘Where’ of Asylum. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 27(2), 183–189. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d2702ec>
- Dimitriadi, A. (2017). Governing irregular migration at the margins of Europe. The case of hotspots on the Greek islands. *Etnografia e ricerca qualitativa*, 1, 75–96. <https://doi.org/10.3240/86888>
- Dimitriadis, I., & Ambrosini, M. (2023). De-Bordering Solidarity: Civil Society Actors Assisting Refused Asylum Seekers in Small Cities. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 36(3), 430–448. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feac048>
- Dimitriadis, I., Hajer, M. H. J., Fontanari, E., & Ambrosini, M. (2021). Local “Battlegrounds”. Relocating Multi-Level and Multi-Actor Governance of Immigration. *Revue européenne des migrations internationales*, 37(1–2), 251–275. <https://doi.org/10.4000/remi.18552>
- DiNardo, R. S. (1997). Glimpse of an Old World Order? Reconsidering the Trieste Crisis of 1945. *Diplomatic History*, 21(3), 365–381. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7709.00077>
- Dutt, A., & Kohfeldt, D. (2019). Assessing the Relationship between Neoliberal Ideology and Reactions to Central American Asylum Seekers in the United States. *Journal of Social Issues*, 75(1), 134–152. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12312>
- Düvell, F. (2011). Paths into Irregularity: The Legal and Political Construction of Irregular Migration. *European Journal of Migration and Law*, 13(3), 275–295. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157181611X587856>
- Duyvendak, J. W., & Jasper, J. M. (2015). *Breaking Down the State: Protestors Engaged*. Amsterdam University Press.
- EASO & FRONTEX. (2016). *Practical guide: Access to the asylum procedure*. Publications Office. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2847/34427>
- Edkins, J. (2000). Sovereign Power, Zones of Indistinction, and the Camp. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 25(1), 3–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/030437540002500102>
- Emirbayer, M. (1997). Manifesto for a Relational Sociology. *American Journal of Sociology*, 103(2), 281–317. <https://doi.org/10.1086/231209>
- Eule, T. G., Borrelli, L. M., Lindberg, A., & Wyss, A. (2019). *Migrants before the law: Contested migration control in Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- EuroMed Rights. (2020). *Analysis of the New EU Pact on Migration and Asylum: A “fresh start” for human rights violations*. https://euromedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Analysis-of-Asylum-and-Migration-Pact_Final_Clickable.pdf
- Faber, D., & Schlegel, C. (2017). Give Me Shelter from the Storm: Framing the Climate Refugee Crisis in the Context of Neoliberal Capitalism. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 28(3), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2017.1356494>
- Facchini, D. (2021, febbraio 24). Rotta balcanica: Se il Viminale non dice quanti richiedenti asilo sono stati respinti. *Altreconomia*. <https://altreconomia.it/rotta-balcanica-se-il-viminale-non-dice-quanti-richiedenti-asilo-sono-stati-respinti/>
- Facchini, D. (2022, luglio 22). Il decreto del ministero dell’Interno che azzera la trasparenza sulle frontiere. *Altreconomia*. <https://altreconomia.it/il-decreto-del-ministero-dellinterno-che-azzera-la-trasparenza-sulle-frontiere/>

- Fassin, D. (2005). Compassion and Repression: The Moral Economy of Immigration Policies in France. *Cultural Anthropology*, 20(3), 362–387.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/can.2005.20.3.362>
- Fassin, D. (2011). Policing Borders, Producing Boundaries. The Governmentality of Immigration in Dark Times. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40(1), 213–226.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145847>
- Fassin, D. (2012). *Humanitarian reason: A moral history of the present times*. University of California Press.
- Fatigante, E. (2023, novembre 6). Migranti. Patto Roma-Tirana: I salvati da navi italiane «esportati» in Albania. *Avvenire*. <https://www.avvenire.it/attualita/pagine/migranti-il-soccorso-albanesesulla-gestione-dei>
- Fausser, M. (2019). The Emergence of Urban Border Spaces in Europe. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 34(4), 605–622. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2017.1402195>
- Fedele, V., & Garofalo, S. (2019). Il Mediterraneo e le sue frontiere: La rotta balcanica. *Occhiali*, 5, 142–147.
- Federico, V., & Lahusen, C. (A c. Di). (2018). *Solidarity as a Public Virtue?: Law and Public Policies in the European Union*. Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG.
<https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845290058>
- Fekete, L. (2018). Migrants, borders and the criminalisation of solidarity in the EU. *Race & Class*, 59(4), 65–83. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396818756793>
- Feldman, G. (2018). *The gray zone: Sovereignty, human smuggling, and undercover police investigation in Europe*. Stanford University Press.
- Ferdoush, A. (2018). Seeing Borders Through the Lens of Structuration: A Theoretical Framework. *Geopolitics*, 23(1), 180–200.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1341406>
- Ferguson, J., & Gupta, A. (2002). Spatializing States: Toward an Ethnography of Neoliberal Governmentality. *American Ethnologist*, 29(4), 981–1002.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2002.29.4.981>
- Finotelli, C. (2018). Southern Europe: Twenty-Five Years of Immigration Control on the Waterfront. In F. Trauner & A. Ripoll (A c. Di), *The Routledge Handbook of Justice and Home Affairs Research* (pp. 240–252). Routledge.
- Fleischmann, L., & Steinhilper, E. (2017). The Myth of Apolitical Volunteering for Refugees: German Welcome Culture and a New Dispositif of Helping. *Social Inclusion*, 5(3), 17–27. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v5i3.945>
- Fontana, I., & Rosina, M. (2024). The Tools of External Migration Policy in the EU Member States: The Case of Italy. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, jcms.13581.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13581>
- Fontanari, E. (2022a). Dentro e fuori l'accademia. Le sfide delle etnografie militanti nell'università neoliberale. *Etnografia e ricerca qualitativa*, 3, 495–502.
- Fontanari, E. (2022b). The Neoliberal Asylum. The Ausbildungsduhlung in Germany: Rejected Asylum-Seekers Put to Work between Control and Integration. *Sociologica*, 117-147 Pages. <https://doi.org/10.6092/ISSN.1971-8853/12689>

- Fontanari, E., & Borri, G. (2018). Introduction. Civil society on the edge: Actions in support and against refugees in Italy and Germany. *MONDI MIGRANTI*, 2017/3. <https://doi.org/10.3280/MM2017-003002>
- Foot, J. (2014). Franco Basaglia and the radical psychiatry movement in Italy, 1961–78. *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 2(2), 235–249. <https://doi.org/10.1332/204986014X14002292074708>
- Fortarezza, F. (2023). «They Do What Institutions Should Do»: Border Solidarity in the Light of an Institutional Crisis (Versione 1.0) [Dataset]. [object Object]. <https://doi.org/10.1285/I20356609V16I3P490>
- Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press.
- Fruscione, G. (2021, novembre 19). Se in Bosnia torna l'incubo della guerra. *Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI)*. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/se-bosnia-torna-lincubo-della-guerra-32394>
- Gabrielli, L., Garcés-Masareñas, B., & Ribera-Almandoz, O. (2022). Between Discipline and Neglect: The Regulation of Asylum Accommodation in Spain. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 35(1), 262–281. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feab049>
- Gallio, G., & Cogliati Dezza, M. G. (2018). *La città che cura: Microaree e periferie della salute*. Alpha & Beta.
- Gammeltoft-Hansen, T., & Nyberg Sørensen, N. (A c. Di). (2013). *The migration industry and the commercialization of international migration*. Routledge.
- Gammeltoft-Hansen, T., & Sørensen, N. N. (A c. Di). (2013). *The migration industry and the commercialization of international migration*. Routledge.
- García Agustín, Ó., & Jørgensen, M. B. (A c. Di). (2016). *Solidarity without borders: Gramscian perspectives on migration and civil society alliances*. Pluto Press.
- García Agustín, Ó., & Jørgensen, M. B. (2019). *Solidarity and the «Refugee Crisis» in Europe*. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91848-8>
- Garelli, G., & Tazzioli, M. (2013). Challenging the discipline of migration: Militant research in migration studies, an introduction. *Postcolonial Studies*, 16(3), 245–249. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2013.850041>
- Garnier, A. (2023). UNHCR and the transformation of global refugee governance: The case of refugee resettlement. In A. Pécoud & H. Thiollet (A c. Di), *Research Handbook on the Institutions of Global Migration Governance* (pp. 50–62). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789908077.00011>
- Gatta, F. L. (2019). Migration and the Rule of (Human Rights) Law: Two ‘Crises’ Looking in the Same Mirror. *Croatian Yearbook of European Law and Policy*, 15(1). <https://doi.org/10.3935/cyelp.15.2019.346>
- Gazi, T. (2021). The New Pact on Migration and Asylum: Supporting or Constraining Rights of Vulnerable Groups? [Text/html,PDF]. *European Papers - A Journal on Law and Integration*, 2021 6, 167175. <https://doi.org/10.15166/2499-8249/460>
- Geddes, A. (2016). *The politics of migration and immigration in Europe*. Sage Publications.

- Geddes, A. (2022). Migration Governance. In P. Scholten (A c. Di), *Introduction to Migration Studies* (pp. 311–323). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92377-8_20
- Geddes, A., & Pettrachin, A. (2020). Italian migration policy and politics: Exacerbating paradoxes. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 12(2), 227–242. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2020.1744918>
- Geddes, A., Vera Espinoza, M., Hadj Abdou, L., & Brumat, L. (2019). Introduction: The dynamics of regional migration governance. In A. Geddes, M. Vera Espinoza, L. Hadj Abdou, & L. Brumat (A c. Di), *The Dynamics of Regional Migration Governance*. Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781788119948.00006>
- Geertz, C. (1998). Deep Hanging Out 45.16 (1998): 69–72. *New York Review of Books*, 45(16), 69–72.
- Geiger, M., & Pécoud, A. (2010). The Politics of International Migration Management. In M. Geiger & A. Pécoud (A c. Di), *The Politics of International Migration Management* (pp. 1–20). Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230294882_1
- Gerst, D. (2020). Epistemic border struggles: Exposing, legitimizing, and diversifying border knowledge at a security conference. In C. Wille & B. Nienaber (A c. Di), *Border Experiences in Europe* (pp. 143–166). Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845295671-143>
- Giliberti, L., & Potot, S. (2021). Verso i solidarity studies. Nuove prospettive di ricerca su migrazioni e frontiere. *MONDI MIGRANTI*, 3, 25–41. <https://doi.org/10.3280/MM2021-003002>
- Gill, N. (2009). Governmental mobility: The power effects of the movement of detained asylum seekers around Britain's detention estate. *Political Geography*, 28(3), 186–196. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2009.05.003>
- Gill, N. (2016a). *Carceral Spaces* (D. Moran, A c. Di; 0 ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315570860>
- Gill, N. (2016b). *Nothing personal: Geographies of governing and activism in the British asylum system*. Wiley Blackwell.
- Gill, N., Conlon, D., Moran, D., & Burrige, A. (2016). Carceral circuitry: New directions in carceral geography. *Progress in Human Geography*, 42(2), 183–204. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132516671823>
- Gill, N., Johnstone, P., & Williams, A. (2012). Towards a geography of tolerance: Post-politics and political forms of toleration. *Political Geography*, 31(8), 509–518. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2012.10.008>
- Giraldi, N. (2021, giugno 10). Rotta balcanica e migranti, la Frontiera «apre» ad una possibile ripresa delle riammissioni in Slovenia. *Triesteprema*. <https://www.triesteprema.it/cronaca/rotta-balcanica-riammissioni-giugno-2021.html>
- Giugni, M., & Passy, F. (2004). Migrant mobilization between political institutions and citizenship regimes: A comparison of France and Switzerland. *European Journal of Political Research*, 43(1), 51–82. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2004.00145.x>
- Gjergji, I. (2018). *La governance delle migrazioni, ovvero il metodo toyota nella gestione pubblica di un fenomeno* (Quaderno n. 5; Master in immigrazione, genere, modelli familiari e strategie di integrazione, pp. 27–54).

- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Aldine.
- Godfrey, R., Brewis, J., Grady, J., & Grocott, C. (2014). The private military industry and neoliberal imperialism: Mapping the terrain. *Organization*, 21(1), 106–125. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508412470731>
- Goh, C., Wee, K., & Yeoh, B. S. A. (2017). Migration governance and the migration industry in Asia: Moving domestic workers from Indonesia to Singapore. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 17(3), 401–433. <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcx010>
- González, Y. M. (2020). *Authoritarian Police in Democracy: Contested Security in Latin America* (1^a ed.). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108907330>
- Green, B. A. (2020). Drowning In Neoliberal Lies: State Responses Towards People Seeking Asylum. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 50(3), 908–925. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcz070>
- Greenfeld, L. (2003). *The spirit of capitalism: Nationalism and economic growth* (1. paperback ed., 2. print). Harvard Univ. Press.
- Griffiths, M. (2013). Living with Uncertainty. *Journal of Legal Anthropology*, 1(3), 263–286. <https://doi.org/10.3167/jla.2013.010301>
- Grinan-Moutinho, H. (2022). An analysis of the anti-immigration discourse during the official 2016 Brexit referendum campaign. *Observatoire de la société britannique*, 29, 65–87. <https://doi.org/10.4000/osb.5821>
- Guild, E. (2010). *Criminalisation of migration in Europe: Human rights implications*. Commissioner for Human Rights, Council of Europe.
- Guild, E., Costello, C., & Moreno-Lax, V. (2017). *Implementation of the 2015 Council Decisions establishing provisional measures in the area of international protection for the benefit of Italy and of Greece*. Study. PE 583 132. CEPS Research Report, March 2017. European Parliament.
- Guiraudon, V. (2000). European Integration and Migration Policy: Vertical Policy-making as Venue Shopping. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 38(2), 251–271. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00219>
- Guiraudon, V. (2002). Before the EU Border: Remote Control of the “Huddled Masses”. In K. Groenendijk, E. Guild, & P. Minderhoud (A c. Di), *In Search of Europe’s Borders* (pp. 191–214). Brill | Nijhoff. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004481510_012
- Guiraudon, V. (2017). The 2015 refugee crisis was not a turning point: Explaining policy inertia in EU border control. *European Political Science*, 17(1), 151–160. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-017-0123-x>
- Guiraudon, V., & Lahav, G. (2000). A Reappraisal of the State Sovereignty Debate: The Case of Migration Control. *Comparative Political Studies*, 33(2), 163–195. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414000033002001>
- Haid, C. G. (2017). The Janus face of urban governance: State, informality and ambiguity in Berlin. *Current Sociology*, 65(2), 289–301. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392116657299>
- Hall, S. (2010). Picturing difference: Juxtaposition, collage and layering of a multiethnic street. *Anthropology Matters*, 12(1), 1–17.

- Harmes, A. (2012). The rise of neoliberal nationalism. *Review of International Political Economy*, 19(1), 59–86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2010.507132>
- Harris, J. R., & Todaro, M. P. (1970). Migration, unemployment and development: A two-sector analysis. *The American economic review*, 60(1), 126–142.
- Harvey, D. (2011). *A brief history of neoliberalism* (1. publ. in paperback, reprint. (twice)). Oxford Univ. Press.
- Hatziprokopiou, P., Papatzani, E., Pastore, F., & Roman, E. (2021). «Constrained mobility»: A feature of protracted displacement in Greece and Italy. *Forced Migration Review*, 68, 59–62.
- Hein, C. (2010). *Rifugiati: Vent'anni di storia del diritto d'asilo in Italia*. Donzelli.
- Hernandez-Leon, R. (2005). *The migration industry in the Mexico-US migratory system*. UCLA: California Center for Population Research.
- Heyer, K. (2022). Keeping migrants at the margins. Governing through ambiguity and the politics of discretion in the post-2015 EUropean migration and border regime. *Political Geography*, 97, 102643. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102643>
- Holliday, A. (2007). *Doing and Writing Qualitative Research*. SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446287958>
- Hollifield, J. F. (2004). The Emerging Migration State. *International Migration Review*, 38(3), 885–912. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2004.tb00223.x>
- hooks, bell. (1996). *Killing rage: Ending racism*. Penguin.
- Hromadžić, A. (2020). Notes from the Field. 'Migrant Crisis' in Bihać, Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Movements. Journal for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies*, 5(1), 163–180.
- Huysmans, J. (2000). The European Union and the Securitization of Migration. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 38(5), 751–777. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00263>
- Huysmans, J., & Squire, V. (2009). Migration and security. In V. Mauer & M. Dunn Cavelty (A c. Di), *The Routledge Handbook of Security Studies* (pp. 185–195). Routledge.
- Indelicato, A., Martín, J. C., & Scuderi, R. (2023). A comparison of attitudes towards immigrants from the perspective of the political party vote. *Heliyon*, 9(3), e14089. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e14089>
- Jasper, J. M., & Duyvendak, J. W. (2015). *Players and arenas: The interactive dynamics of protest*. Amsterdam university press.
- Johnson, J. C., Avenarius, C., & Weatherford, J. (2006). The Active Participant-Observer: Applying Social Role Analysis to Participant Observation. *Field Methods*, 18(2), 111–134. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05285928>
- Jones, C. (2017). *Market Forces: The development of the EU Security-Industrial Complex*. Transnationalinstitute.
- Jones, O. (2023, maggio 31). Across Europe, the far right is rising. That it seems normal is all the more terrifying This article is more than 10 months old. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/may/31/across-europe-the-far-right-is-rising-that-it-seems-normal-is-all-the-more-terrifying>

- Jones, R. (2016). *Violent borders: Refugees and the right to move*. Verso.
- Joppke, C. (2021). Immigration Policy in the Crossfire of Neoliberalism and Neonationalism. *Swiss Journal of Sociology*, 47(1), 71–92. <https://doi.org/10.2478/sjs-2021-0007>
- Jordan, J., & Moser, S. (2020). Researching migrants in informal transit camps along the Balkan Route: Reflections on volunteer activism, access, and reciprocity. *Area*, 52(3), 566–574. <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12614>
- Joseph, L., Mahler, M., & Auyero, J. (2007). *New perspectives in political ethnography*. Springer.
- Kalir, B., & Van Schendel, W. (2017). Introduction: Nonrecording states between legibility and looking away. *Focaal*, 2017(77), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2017.770101>
- Kallius, A., Monterescu, D., & Rajaram, P. K. (2016). Immobilizing mobility: Border ethnography, illiberal democracy, and the politics of the “refugee crisis” in Hungary. *American Ethnologist*, 43(1), 25–37. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12260>
- Kaufmann, D. (2019). Comparing Urban Citizenship, Sanctuary Cities, Local Bureaucratic Membership, and Regularizations. *Public Administration Review*, 79(3), 443–446. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13029>
- Kaunert, C., Léonard, S., & Hoffmann, U. (2013). Venue-Shopping and the Role of Non-governmental Organisations in the Development of the European Union Asylum Policy. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 1(1), 179–200. <https://doi.org/10.5117/CMS2013.1.KAUN>
- Kearns, A. J. (1992). Active Citizenship and Urban Governance. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 17(1), 20. <https://doi.org/10.2307/622634>
- Kemp, W., Amerhauser, K., & Scaturro, R. (2021). *Spot Prices. Analyzing flows of people, drugs and money in the Western Balkans* [Research Report]. Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime. <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/western-balkans-crime-hotspots-3/>
- Khosravi, S. (2011). *«Illegal» traveller: An auto-ethnography of borders* (1. publ. in paperback). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kilby, C. (2013). An Empirical Assessment of Informal Influence in the World Bank. *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 61(2), 431–464. <https://doi.org/10.1086/668278>
- Kleres, J. (2018). Feeling the Refugee Crisis: Civic Mobilizations in Germany. *MONDI MIGRANTI*, 3, 137–160. <https://doi.org/10.3280/MM2017-003007>
- Kofman, E. (2004). Family-related migration: A critical review of European Studies. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 30(2), 243–262. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183042000200687>
- Kousis, M., & Lahusen, C. (2021). Introduction: Comparative European Perspectives on Transnational Solidarity Organisations. *Sociological Research Online*, 26(3), 620–627. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780419872215>
- Kousis, M., Paschou, M., & Loukakis, A. (2021). Transnational Solidarity Organisations and their Main Features, before and since 2008: Adaptive and/or Autonomous? *Sociological Research Online*, 26(3), 672–694. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13607804211032240>

- Kovacevic, D. (2020, dicembre 18). IOM Closes Migrant Camp After Bosnia Ignores Warnings. *BalkanInsight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/12/18/iom-closes-migrant-camp-after-bosnia-ignores-warnings/>
- Kunz, R., Lavenex, S., & Panizzon, M. (A c. Di). (2012). *Multilayered migration governance: The promise of partnership* (1. issued in paperback). Routledge.
- Kuźelewska, E., & Piekutowska, A. (2021). The EU Member States' Diverging Experiences and Policies on Refugees and the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. *Białostockie Studia Prawnicze*, 26(1), 23–36. <https://doi.org/10.15290/bsp.2021.26.01.02>
- Lahav, G., & Guiraudon, V. (2006). Actors and venues in immigration control: Closing the gap between political demands and policy outcomes. *West European Politics*, 29(2), 201–223. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402380500512551>
- Lahusen, C., Zschache, U., & Kousis, M. (A c. Di). (2021). *Transnational Solidarity in Times of Crises: Citizen Organisations and Collective Learning in Europe*. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-49659-3>
- Larner, W. (2000). Neo-liberalism: Policy, Ideology, Governmentality. *Studies in Political Economy*, 63(1), 5–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19187033.2000.11675231>
- Lavenex, S. (2006). Shifting up and out: The foreign policy of European immigration control. *West European Politics*, 29(2), 329–350. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402380500512684>
- Lavenex, S. (2016). Multilevelling EU external governance: The role of international organizations in the diffusion of EU migration policies. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 42(4), 554–570. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2015.1102047>
- Lemberg-Pedersen, M. (2015). Losing the Right to Have Rights: EU Externalization of Border Control. In E. A. Andersen & E. M. Lassen (A c. Di), *Europe and the Americas* (pp. 393–417). Brill | Nijhoff. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004279247_016
- Lemberg-Pedersen, M. (2018). Security, industry and migration in European border control. In *The Routledge handbook of the politics of migration in Europe* (Routledge, pp. 239–250).
- Léonard, S. (2010). EU border security and migration into the European Union: FRONTEX and securitisation through practices. *European Security*, 19(2), 231–254. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2010.526937>
- Lethbridge, J. (2017). *Privatisation of migration and refugee services and other forms of state disengagement* (Public Services International (PSI)). University of Greenwich.
- Levi-Faur, D. (2012). *From “Big Government” to “Big Governance”?* Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199560530.013.0001>
- Levy, S. (2008). Good intentions, bad outcomes: Social policy, informality, and economic growth in Mexico. *Choice Reviews Online*, 46(04), 46-2199-46–2199. <https://doi.org/10.5860/CHOICE.46-2199>
- Lin, W., Lindquist, J., Xiang, B., & Yeoh, B. S. A. (2017). Migration infrastructures and the production of migrant mobilities. *Mobilities*, 12(2), 167–174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2017.1292770>
- Liperi, M. S. (2019). The EU's Externalisation of Migration Management Undermines Stabilisation in the Western Balkans. *IAI Commentaries*, 19(27).

- Liverani, L. (2020, gennaio 30). Migranti. Sbarca in Italia la multinazionale svizzera del business dell'accoglienza. *Avvenire*.
<https://www.avvenire.it/attualita/pagine/immigrazione-nel-business-dell-accoglienza-ai-migranti-sbarca-in-italia-una-multinazionale-svizzera>
- Longo, F. (2002). Identità, sicurezza, frontiere. I paradigmi della lotta alla criminalità organizzata nell'Unione Europea. *Meridiana*, 135–158.
- Longo, F. (2016). La politica di immigrazione dell'Unione Europea tra vecchie e nuove sfide. In S. Panebianco (A c. Di), *Sulle onde del Mediterraneo: Cambiamenti globali e risposte alla crisi migratoria* (pp. 47–69). EGEA.
- Longo, F., & Fontana, I. (2022). *When Securitization Spills over Across EU Borders: A Quantitative Mapping of the External Dimension of EU Migration and Asylum Policies*.
<https://www.iris.unict.it/handle/20.500.11769/540623>
- Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider*. Crossing Press.
- Lueck, K., Due, C., & Augoustinos, M. (2015). Neoliberalism and nationalism: Representations of asylum seekers in the Australian mainstream news media. *Discourse & Society*, 26(5), 608–629. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926515581159>
- MacKenzie, C. A., Christensen, J., & Turner, S. (2015). Advocating beyond the academy: Dilemmas of communicating relevant research results. *Qualitative Research*, 15(1), 105–121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794113509261>
- Magazzini, T., & Desille, A. (2023). Ma(r)king solidarity boundaries towards migrants. Individual, local and transnational experiences. *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, 16(3).
- Mainwaring, C., & Walton-Roberts, M. (2018). Governing Migration from the Margins. *Social & Legal Studies*, 27(2), 131–141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663917749990>
- Malkki, L. H. (2015). *The Need to Help: The Domestic Arts of International Humanitarianism* (p. dup;9780822375364/1). Duke University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822375364>
- Manconi, L., & Anastasia, S. (2012). *Lampedusa non è un'isola. Profughi e migranti alle porte dell'Italia.* (2012). (L'articoloTre. Rapporto sullo stato dei diritti in Italia). Associazione A Buon Diritto Onlus.
http://www.ristretti.it/commenti/2012/giugno/pdf5/dossier_lampedusa.pdf
- Marchetti, C. (2014). Rifugiati e migranti forzati in Italia: Il pendolo tra «emergenza» e «sistema». *REMHU: Revista Interdisciplinar da Mobilidade Humana*, 22(43), 53–70.
<https://doi.org/10.1590/1980-85852503880004304>
- Marcus, G. E. (1995). Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24(1), 95–117.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.24.100195.000523>
- Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative Researching*. Sage Publications.
- Massari, M., & Pellegrino, V. (2019). Emancipatory social science today. Presentazione. *Quaderni di Teoria Sociale - Special issue: Emancipatory Social Science Today, 1*, 11–14.
- Massari, Monica, & Pellegrino, V. (2019). *Quaderni di Teoria Sociale—Special Issue: Emancipatory Social Science Today* (Vol. 1).

- Massey, D. S. (2020). The Real Crisis at the Mexico-U.S. Border: A Humanitarian and Not an Immigration Emergency. *Sociological Forum*, 35(3), 787–805. <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12613>
- Mayer, M. (2017). Whose city? From Ray Pahl’s critique of the Keynesian city to the contestations around neoliberal urbanism. *The Sociological Review*, 65(2), 168–183. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12414>
- McConnon, E. (2022). People as security risks: The framing of migration in the UK security-development nexus. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(6), 1381–1397. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1851467>
- McFarlane, C. (2012). Rethinking Informality: Politics, Crisis, and the City. *Planning Theory & Practice*, 13(1), 89–108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2012.649951>
- McMorran, C. (2012). Practising workplace geographies: Embodied labour as method in human geography. *Area*, 44(4), 489–495. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4762.2012.01101.x>
- Medecins Sans Frontieres. (2010). *Al di là del muro. Viaggio nei centri per migranti in Italia. Secondo Rapporto di Medici Senza Frontiere sulle condizioni dei Centri di Identificazione ed Espulsione (CIE) e dei Centri di Accoglienza (CARA e CDA)*. <https://file.asgi.it/al.di.la.del.muro.viaggio.nei.centri.per.migranti.in.italia.pdf>
- Medecins Sans Frontieres. (2017). *Serbia. Games of Violence. Unaccompanied children and young people repeatedly abused by EU member state border authorities*. https://www.google.com/search?q=games+of+violence+MSF&rlz=1C1VDKB_itIT1020IT1020&oq=games+of+violence+MSF&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIGCAEQRRg80gEIMzYwNGowajSoAgCwAgE&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8
- Medina, J. (2013). *The epistemology of resistance: Gender and racial oppression, epistemic injustice, and resistant imaginations*. Oxford University Press.
- Melucci, A. (1998). *Verso una sociologia riflessiva*. Il Mulino.
- Menjívar, C. (2014). Immigration Law Beyond Borders: Externalizing and Internalizing Border Controls in an Era of Securitization. *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 10(1), 353–369. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-lawsocsci-110413-030842>
- Menz, G. (2011). Neo-Liberalism, Privatization and the Outsourcing of Migration Management: A Five-Country Comparison. *Competition & Change*, 15(2), 116–135. <https://doi.org/10.1179/102452911X13025292603633>
- Mescoli, E., & Roblain, A. (2021). The ambivalent relations behind civil society’s engagement in the “grey zones” of migration and integration governance: Case studies from Belgium. *Political Geography*, 91, 102477. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102477>
- Mezzadra, S., & Neilson, B. (2013). *Border as method, or, the multiplication of labor*. Duke University Press.
- Mezzina, R. (2014). Community Mental Health Care in Trieste and Beyond: An “Open Door–No Restraint” System of Care for Recovery and Citizenship. *Journal of Nervous & Mental Disease*, 202(6), 440–445. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NMD.0000000000000142>
- Mignolo, W. D. (2011). Geopolitics of sensing and knowing: On (de)coloniality, border thinking and epistemic disobedience. *Postcolonial Studies*, 14(3), 273–283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2011.613105>

- Mitchell, K., Jones, R., & Fluri, J. L. (A c. Di). (2020). *Handbook on critical geographies of migration* (Paperback edition). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Mitrović, M. S., & Vilenica, A. (2019). Enforcing and disrupting circular movement in an EU Borderscape: Housingscaping in Serbia. *Citizenship Studies*, 23(6), 540–558. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2019.1634368>
- Moran, D., Gill, N., & Conlon, D. (A c. Di). (2013). *Carceral spaces: Mobility and agency in imprisonment and migrant detention*. Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Morris, L. (2003). *Managing Migration* (0 ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203447499>
- Morzycka - Markowska, M., Drozdowicz, E., & Nasierowski, T. (2015). Deinstitutionalization in Italian psychiatry – the course and consequences Part I. The course of deinstitutionalization – the activity of Basaglia’s group. *Psychiatria Polska*, 49(2), 391–401. <https://doi.org/10.12740/PP/28615>
- Mountz, A. (2011). The enforcement archipelago: Detention, haunting, and asylum on islands. *Political Geography*, 30(3), 118–128. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2011.01.005>
- Mountz, A. (2014). Specters at the Port of Entry: Understanding State Mobilities through an Ontology of Exclusion. *Mobilities*, 6(3), 317–334.
- Mouzourakis, M. (2020). More laws, less law: The European Union’s New Pact on Migration and Asylum and the fragmentation of “asylum seeker” status. *European Law Journal*, 26(3–4), 171–180. <https://doi.org/10.1111/eulj.12378>
- Muehlebach, A. (2012). *The Moral Neoliberal: Welfare and Citizenship in Italy*. University of Chicago Press.
- Nadeau, B. L. (2018, febbraio 1). ‘Migrants are more profitable than drugs’: How the mafia infiltrated Italy’s asylum system. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/feb/01/migrants-more-profitable-than-drugs-how-mafia-infiltrated-italy-asylum-system?CMP=share_btn_tw
- Nassar, J., & Stel, N. (2019). Lebanon’s response to the Syrian refugee crisis – Institutional ambiguity as a governance strategy. *Political Geography*, 70, 44–54. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.01.005>
- Nevins, J. (2010). *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond* (0 ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203857731>
- Newman, J. (2014). Landscapes of antagonism: Local governance, neoliberalism and austerity. *Urban Studies*, 51(15), 3290–3305. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098013505159>
- Norman, K. P. (2024). Urbanization, informal governance and refugee integration in Egypt. *Globalizations*, 21(2), 287–302. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2021.1907510>
- Novak, P. (2019). The neoliberal location of asylum. *Political Geography*, 70, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.01.007>
- Nyberg Sørensen, N., & Gammeltoft-Hansen, T. (2012). *The Migration Industry and Future Directions for Migration Policy. The commercialization of migration facilitation and control functions prompt policy respons* [DIIS Policy Brief]. Danish Institute for International Studies. <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/the-migration-industry-and-future-directions-migration-policy>

- Nyers, P. (2015). Migrant Citizenships and Autonomous Mobilities. *Migration, Mobility, & Displacement*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.18357/mmdl1201513521>
- OECD. (2019). *Working Together for Local Integration of Migrants and Refugees in Rome*. OECD. <https://doi.org/10.1787/ca4d491e-en>
- OHCHR. (2020). *Concluding observations on the third periodic report of Slovenia*. <https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2FPPRiCAqhKb7yhslN%2B5BoGRvmXVc%2FieXQOwjI9f6sHYiG2Wia3A1%2F%2BX4YQOYe vPBwkYBknHaeQC%2BuK63D%2BvAKpq7cDU1zJVSSL40TcN3ipmh0VvAw3dF8GxCdwSTdS98dOQi8x0IWff4QSg%3D%3D>
- Olivito, di E. (2020). The constitutional fallouts of border management through informal and deformed external action: The case of Italy and the EU. *Diritto, Immigrazione e Cittadinanza*, 2, 113–137.
- Omizzolo, M. (2021, marzo 1). Immigrazione, rotta balcanica: La lunga marcia senza diritti. *L'Eurispes.it*. <https://www.leurispes.it/immigrazione-rotta-balcanica-la-lunga-marcia-senza-diritti/>
- Pallister-Wilkins, P. (2015). The Humanitarian Politics of European Border Policing: Frontex and Border Police in Evros. *International Political Sociology*, 9(1), 53–69. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ips.12076>
- Pallister-Wilkins, P. (2020). Hotspots and the geographies of humanitarianism. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 38(6), 991–1008. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775818754884>
- Paoli, S. (2018). La legge Turco-Napolitano: Un lasciapassare per l'Europa. *Meridiana*, 91, 121–149.
- Papada, E., Papoutsi, A., Painter, J., & Vradis, A. (2020). Pop-up governance: Transforming the management of migrant populations through humanitarian and security practices in Lesbos, Greece, 2015–2017. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 38(6), 1028–1045. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775819891167>
- Papadopoulos, A. G. (2007). Migration and human security in the Balkans. *Migration Letters*, 4(2), 95–100.
- Paynter, E. (2022). Border Crises and Migrant Deservingness: How the Refugee/Economic Migrant Binary Racializes Asylum and Affects Migrants' Navigation of Reception. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 20(2), 293–306. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2021.1980172>
- Phelps, N. A. (2021). The inventiveness of informality: An introduction. *International Development Planning Review*, 43(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.3828/idpr.2021.1>
- Phelps, N. A., & Wijaya, H. B. (2020). Growth and growth constraints in craft industry clusters: The batik industries of Central Java. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 41(2), 248–268. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjtg.12311>
- Picozza, F. (2021). *The coloniality of asylum: Mobility, autonomy and solidarity in the wake of Europe's refugee crisis*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Pierre, J. (A c. Di). (2000). *Debating governance*. Oxford University Press.
- Pierre, J. (A c. Di). (2002). *Debating governance: Authority, steering, and democracy ; grew out of a Conference on the Theories of Governance held at the Ross Priory outside*

- Glasgow in October 1997* (Reprinted). Conference on the Theories of Governance, Oxford. Oxford Univ. Press.
- Pierre, J., & Peters, B. G. (2021). *Advanced introduction to governance*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Pijnenburg, A., & Rijken, C. (2021). Moving beyond refugees and migrants: Reconceptualising the rights of people on the move. *Interventions*, 23(2), 273–293. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2020.1854107>
- Pinyol-Jiménez, G. (2019). Is It Possible to Develop a Common European Policy on Immigration and Asylum? *IEMed: Mediterranean yearbook*, 64–69.
- Polese, A. (2023). What is informality? (Mapping) “the art of bypassing the state” in Eurasian spaces - and beyond. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 64(3), 322–364. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2021.1992791>
- Polese, A., Russo, A., & Strazzari, F. (2019). Introduction: “The Good, the Bad and the Ugly”: Transnational Perspectives on the Extralegal Field. In A. Polese, A. Russo, & F. Strazzari (A c. Di), *Governance Beyond the Law* (pp. 1–26). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-05039-9_1
- Poli, C. C. (2023, ottobre 5). La stretta repressiva e securitaria della politica migratoria del governo Meloni (I parte). *MeltingPot*. <https://www.meltingpot.org/2023/10/la-stretta-repressiva-e-securitaria-della-politica-migratoria-del-governo-meloni-i-parte/>
- Ponzo, I. (2023). Looking Into Policy Change: How the Italian Asylum Regime Came of Age. In C. Finotelli & I. Ponzo (A c. Di), *Migration Control Logics and Strategies in Europe* (pp. 283–302). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-26002-5_15
- Pries, L. (2018). *Refugees, Civil Society and the State*. Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781788116534>
- Pupo, R. (2007). *Il confine scomparso: Saggi sulla storia dell’Adriatico orientale nel Novecento* (1. ed). Istituto regionale per la storia del movimento di liberazione nel Friuli Venezia Giulia.
- Pusterla, F. (2021). Legal Perspectives on Solidarity Crime in Italy. *International Migration*, 59(3), 79–95. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12740>
- Rabel, R. G. (1988). *Between East and West: Trieste, the United States, and the Cold War, 1941-1954*. Duke University Press.
- Rabinow, P., & William, S. M. (1987). The interpretive turn: A second look. In *Interpretive social science: A second look* (pp. 1–30).
- Rako, M. (2014). The post-politics of sustainability planning: Privatisation and the demise of democratic government. In W. Japhy & E. Swyngedouw (A c. Di), *The post-political and its discontents: Spaces of depoliticisation, spectres of radical politics* (pp. 25–47). Edinburgh University Press.
- Reed-Danahay, D. E. (A c. Di). (2020). *Auto/ethnography: Rewriting the self and the social*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Riles, A. (2008). The Anti-Network: Private Global Governance, Legal Knowledge, and the Legitimacy of the State. *American Journal of Comparative Law*, 56(3), 605–630. <https://doi.org/10.5131/ajcl.2007.0018>

- Riva, S., & Routon, E. (2020). Reinforcing and contesting neoliberal citizenship: Legal advocates and the asylum interview at the US–Mexico border. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, feaa066. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feaa066>
- Roger, C. B. (2020). *The origins of informality: Why the legal foundations of global governance are shifting, and why it matters*. Oxford University Press.
- Roy, A. (2009). Strangely Familiar: Planning and the Worlds of Insurgence and Informality. *Planning Theory*, 8(1), 7–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095208099294>
- Rozakou, K. (2017a). Nonrecording the “European refugee crisis” in Greece. *Focaal*, 2017(77), 36–49. <https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2017.770104>
- Rozakou, K. (2017b). Solidarians in the land of Xenios Zeus: Migrant deportability and the radicalisation of solidarity. In *Critical Times in Greece* (pp. 188–201). Routledge.
- Ruzza, S. (2014). Bloody soil, fertile land. Neo-liberismo, privatizzazione e violenza. In A. C. Vargas, J. Gonzalez Diez, & S. Pratesi (A c. Di), (*In*) *sicurezze. Sguardi sul mondo neoliberale fra antropologia, sociologia e studi politici* (pp. 75–90). Novalogos.
- Rydzewski, R. (2020). Hope, waiting, and mobility. Migrant movement in Serbia after the EU-Turkey deal. *Movements*, 5(1).
- Rzadtki, L. (2022). »We Are All Activists«: *Exploring Solidarities in Activism By, With and For Refugees and Migrants in Hamburg*. transcript Verlag. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839463499>
- Saad Filho, A. (2019). *Value and Crisis: Essays on Labour, Money and Contemporary Capitalism*. BRILL. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004393202>
- Sajjad, T. (2022). Hierarchies of Compassion: The Ukrainian Refugee Crisis and the United States’ Response. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 23(2), 191–209. <https://doi.org/10.1353/gia.2022.0031>
- Sales, R. (2002). The deserving and the undeserving? Refugees, asylum seekers and welfare in Britain. *Critical Social Policy*, 22(3), 456–478. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026101830202200305>
- Salter, M. B. (2008). When the exception becomes the rule: Borders, sovereignty, and citizenship. *Citizenship Studies*, 12(4), 365–380. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621020802184234>
- Salvati, P. (2021). The ‘inward-looking’ securitization of the EU external migration policy in the New Pact on Migration and Asylum: A critical appraisal from a perspective of international law with reference to migration from Africa. *Freedom, Security & Justice: European Legal Studies*, 2, 305–323. <https://doi.org/10.14273/UNISA-3761>
- Samers, M. (2015). *The political geography of migration*. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.3912.8167>
- Sanchez, G., & Achilli, L. (2020). Stranded: The impacts of COVID 19 on irregular migration and migrant smuggling. *Policy*, 20. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2870/42411>
- Sandelind, C., & Ulaş, L. (2020). Solidarity with Refugees: An Institutional Approach. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 51(4), 564–582. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12333>

- Sandri, E. (2018). 'Volunteer Humanitarianism': Volunteers and humanitarian aid in the Jungle refugee camp of Calais. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(1), 65–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1352467>
- Santos Vara, J. (2022). Flexible Solidarity in the New Pact on Migration and Asylum: A New Form of Differentiated Integration? [Text/html,PDF]. *European Papers - A Journal on Law and Integration*, 7(3), 1243–1263. <https://doi.org/10.15166/2499-8249/613>
- Sassen, S. (1996). *Losing control? Sovereignty in an age of globalization*. Columbia Univ. Press.
- Sassen, S. (2005). When national territory is home to the global: Old borders to novel borderings. *New Political Economy*, 10(4), 523–541. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563460500344476>
- Sassen, S. (2012). Borders, Walls, and Crumbling Sovereignty. *Political Theory*, 40(1), 116–122. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591711431428>
- Scavuzzo, G. (2021). La stanza dell'altro. Dagli spazi dell'internamento a quelli della liberazione manicomiale. *Between, Vol 11 No 22*, 191-208 Pages. <https://doi.org/10.13125/2039-6597/4693>
- Schedler, A., Diamond, L. J., & Plattner, M. F. (A c. Di). (1999). *The self-restraining state: Power and accountability in new democracies*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Schendel, W. van, & Abraham, I. (A c. Di). (2005). *Illicit flows and criminal things: States, borders, and the other side of globalization*. Indiana University Press.
- Scheper-Hughes, N. (1995). The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology. *Current Anthropology*, 36(3), 409–440. <https://doi.org/10.1086/204378>
- Schiller, N. G., & Çağlar, A. (2009). Towards a Comparative Theory of Locality in Migration Studies: Migrant Incorporation and City Scale. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 35(2), 177–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830802586179>
- Scholten, P., Engbersen, G., Ostajen, M. V., & Snel, E. (2018). Multilevel governance from below: How Dutch cities respond to intra-EU mobility. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(12), 2011–2033. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1341707>
- Scholten, P., & Penninx, R. (2016). The Multilevel Governance of Migration and Integration. In B. Garcés-Mascareñas & R. Penninx (A c. Di), *Integration Processes and Policies in Europe* (pp. 91–108). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-21674-4_6
- Schuster, L. (2005). A Sledgehammer to Crack a Nut: Deportation, Detention and Dispersal in Europe. *Social Policy & Administration*, 39(6), 606–621. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9515.2005.00459.x>
- Schwartz-Shea, P., & Yanow, D. (2009). Reading and writing as method: In search of trustworthy texts. In S. Ybema, H. Wels, & D. Yanow (A c. Di), *Organizational ethnography: Studying the complexities of everyday life* (pp. 56–82).
- Schwartz, H., & Steinhilper, E. (2021). Countering the Asylum Paradox Through Strategic Humanitarianism: Evidence from Safe Passage Activism in Germany. *Critical Sociology*, 47(2), 203–217. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920520932215>

- Sciurba, A. (2017). Categorizing migrants by undermining the right to asylum. The implementation of the 'hotspot approach' in Sicily. *Etnografia e ricerca qualitativa*, 1, 97–120. <https://doi.org/10.3240/86889>
- Seeberg, P., & Zardo, F. (2022). From Mobility Partnerships to Migration Compacts: Security implications of EU-Jordan relations and the informalization of migration governance. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(6), 1345–1362. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1851465>
- Segalla, O., Gentile, M., Di Meo, S., Delli Gatti, V., & Accardo, Y. (2023, maggio 26). Cutro non è un decreto, Cutro è una strage. Un aggiornamento a tre mesi dal naufragio di Steccato di Cutro (KR). *MeltingPot Europa*.
- Sharma, A., & Gupta, A. (A c. Di). (2006). *The anthropology of the state: A reader*. Blackwell Pub.
- Silverman, S. J. (2018). The EU's Hotspot Approach: Questionable Motivations and Unreachable Goals. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3178892>
- Sinatti, G. (2019). Humanitarianism as Politics: Civil Support Initiatives for Migrants in Milan's Hub. *Social Inclusion*, 7(2), 139–148. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v7i2.1968>
- Slingenberg, L. (2021). Political Compromise on a Recast Asylum Reception Conditions Directive: Dignity Without Autonomy? In D. Thym (A c. Di), *The Special Series of blogposts on the «New» Migration and asylum Pact* (pp. 300–324). Odysseus Network.
- Slobodian, Q. (2018). *Globalists*. Harvard University Press.
- Sluga, G. (2001). *The problem of Trieste and the Italo-Yugoslav border: Difference, identity, and sovereignty in twentieth-century Europe*. State University of New York Press.
- Spaan, E., & Hillmann, F. (2013). Migration trajectories and the migration industry. In T. Gammeltoft-Hansen & N. N. Sørensen (A c. Di), *The migration industry and the commercialization of international migration* (pp. 64–86). Routledge.
- Spagnolo, V. R. (2023, maggio 18). Migranti. Legge Cutro, l'Acnur al governo: «Criticità sul rispetto dei diritti umani». *Avvenire*. <https://www.avvenire.it/attualita/pagine/legge-cutro-l-acnur-scrive-al-governo-criticita>
- Sparke, M. B. (2006). A neoliberal nexus: Economy, security and the biopolitics of citizenship on the border. *Political Geography*, 25(2), 151–180. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2005.10.002>
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak? In , ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, 271–313. Basingstoke: Macmillan Education. In P. H. Cain & M. Harrison (A c. Di), *Imperialism* (pp. 171–219). Routledge.
- Springer, S. (2010). Neoliberalism and Geography: Expansions, Variations, Formations. *Geography Compass*, 4(8), 1025–1038. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2010.00358.x>
- Springer, S. (2011). Violence sits in places? Cultural practice, neoliberal rationalism, and virulent imaginative geographies. *Political Geography*, 30(2), 90–98. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2011.01.004>
- Squire, V. (2022). Hidden geographies of the 'Mediterranean migration crisis'. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 40(5), 1048–1063. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654420935904>

- Stefan, M., & Cortinovis, R. (2020). *Setting The Right Priorities: Is The New Pact on Migration and Asylum Addressing the Issue of Pushbacks at EU External Borders?* 25.
- Steinberg, R. H. (2002). In the Shadow of Law or Power? Consensus-Based Bargaining and Outcomes in the GATT/WTO. *International Organization*, 56(2), 339–374. <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081802320005504>
- Steinhilper, E. (2021). *Migrant Protest: Interactive Dynamics in Precarious Mobilizations*. Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.5117/9789463722223>
- Stel, N. (2021a). *Hybrid political order and the politics of uncertainty: Refugee governance in Lebanon*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Stel, N. (2021b). Uncertainty, exhaustion, and abandonment beyond South/North divides: Governing forced migration through strategic ambiguity. *Political Geography*, 88, 102391. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102391>
- Stoker, G. (1998). Public-Private Partnerships and Urban Governance. In J. Pierre (A c. Di), *Partnerships in Urban Governance* (pp. 34–51). Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-14408-2_3
- Stone, R. W. (2013). Informal governance in international organizations: Introduction to the special issue. *The Review of International Organizations*, 8(2), 121–136. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-013-9168-y>
- Storey, D. (2009). *Political Geography* (pp. 243–253). Elsevier.
- Strange, S. (1996). *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of Power in the World Economy* (1^a ed.). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511559143>
- Suddaby, R. (2006). From the Editors: What Grounded Theory is Not. *Academy of Management Journal*, 49(4), 633–642. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2006.22083020>
- Tazzioli, M. (2018a). Containment through mobility: Migrants’ spatial disobediences and the reshaping of control through the hotspot system. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(16), 2764–2779. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1401514>
- Tazzioli, M. (2018b). Crimes of solidarity: Migration and containment through rescue. *Radical Philosophy*, 2(01), 4–10.
- Tazzioli, M. (2018c). The temporal borders of asylum. Temporality of control in the EU border regime. *Political Geography*, 64, 13–22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.02.002>
- Tazzioli, M. (2020a). Disjointed knowledges, obfuscated visibility. Border controls at the French-Italian Alpine border. *Political Geography*, 79, 102155. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102155>
- Tazzioli, M. (2020b). Governing migrant mobility through mobility: Containment and dispersal at the internal frontiers of Europe. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 38(1), 3–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654419839065>
- Tazzioli, M. (2020c). *The making of migration: The biopolitics of mobility at Europe’s borders*. Sage publications.
- Tazzioli, M. (2021). “Choking without killing”: Opacity and the grey area of migration governmentality. *Political Geography*, 89, 102412. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102412>

- Tazzioli, M., & Garelli, G. (2020). Containment beyond detention: The hotspot system and disrupted migration movements across Europe. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 38(6), 1009–1027. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775818759335>
- Tazzioli, M., & Walters, W. (2019). Migration, solidarity and the limits of Europe. *Global Discourse*, 9(1), 175–190. <https://doi.org/10.1332/204378918X15453934506030>
- Tehlen, T., Vettters, L., & Von Benda-Beckmann, K. (2017). *Stategraphy. Toward a Reational Anthropology of the State* (Vol. 4). Berghahn Books.
- Terlizzi, A. (2020). *Reception Policies, Practices and Responses – Italy Country Report* (Versione v.1). [object Object]. <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.3693261>
- The Schengen Acquis - Convention Implementing the Schengen Agreement of 14 June 1985 between the Governments of the States of the Benelux Economic Union, the Federal Republic of Germany and the French Republic on the Gradual Abolition of Checks at Their Common Borders, DEU, NLD, LUX, FRA, BEL, 239 OJ L (1990). <http://data.europa.eu/eli/convention/2000/922/oj/eng>
- Theodossopoulos, D. (2016). Philanthropy or solidarity? Ethical dilemmas about humanitarianism in crisis-afflicted Greece. *Social Anthropology*, 24(2), 167–184. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12304>
- Thym, D. (2022). Never-Ending Story? Political Dynamics, Legislative Uncertainties, and Practical Drawbacks of the ‘New’ Pact on Migration and Asylum. In D. Thym & Odysseus Academic Network (A c. Di), *Reforming the Common European Asylum System* (pp. 11–32). Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748931164-11>
- Thym, D. & Odysseus Academic Network (A c. Di). (2022). *Reforming the Common European Asylum System: Opportunities, Pitfalls, and Downsides of the Commission Proposals for a New Pact on Migration and Asylum*. Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748931164>
- Tondo, L. (2020a, maggio 12). Croatian police accused of spray-painting heads of asylum seekers. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/may/12/croatian-police-accused-of-shaving-and-spray-painting-heads-of-asylum-seekers>
- Tondo, L. (2020b, ottobre 21). Croatian police accused of «sickening» assaults on migrants on Balkans trail. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/oct/21/croatian-police-accused-of-sickening-assaults-on-migrants-on-balkans-trail-bosnia>
- Tondo, L. (2020c, dicembre 23). «Black book» of thousands of illegal migrant pushbacks presented to EU. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/dec/23/black-book-of-thousands-of-migrant-pushbacks-presented-to-eu>
- Toner, H. (2014). The Lisbon Treaty and the Future of European Immigration and Asylum Law. In L. Azoulai & K. De Vries (A c. Di), *EU Migration Law* (pp. 14–40). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198708537.003.0002>
- Trauner, F. (2016). Asylum policy: The EU’s ‘crises’ and the looming policy regime failure. *Journal of European Integration*, 38(3), 311–325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2016.1140756>

- Treaty of Amsterdam Amending the Treaty on European Union, the Treaties Establishing the European Communities and Certain Related Acts, 340 OJ C (1997).
<http://data.europa.eu/eli/treaty/ams/sign/eng>
- Treaty of Lisbon Amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty Establishing the European Community, Signed at Lisbon, 13 December 2007, 306 OJ C (2007).
<http://data.europa.eu/eli/treaty/lis/sign/eng>
- Treaty on European Union (Maastricht, 7 February 1992)*. (2015, novembre 9). [Teste].
 CVCE.EU by UNI.LU; CVCE.EU by UNI.LU.
https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/treaty_on_european_union_maastricht_7_february_1992-en-2c2f2b85-14bb-4488-9ded-13f3cd04de05.html
- Tsourdi, L., & Costello, C. (2020). The Evolution of EU Law on Refugees and Asylum. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3735345>
- Turner, B. S. (2007). The Enclave Society: Towards a Sociology of Immobility. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 10(2), 287–304. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431007077807>
- Van Houtum, H., & Pijpers, R. (2007). The European Union as a Gated Community: The Two-faced Border and Immigration Regime of the EU. *Antipode*, 39(2), 291–309.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2007.00522.x>
- Vandevoordt, R., & Verschraegen, G. (2019a). Subversive Humanitarianism and Its Challenges: Notes on the Political Ambiguities of Civil Refugee Support. In M. Feischmidt, L. Pries, & C. Cantat (A c. Di), *Refugee Protection and Civil Society in Europe* (pp. 101–128). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-92741-1_4
- Vandevoordt, R., & Verschraegen, G. (2019b). The European Refugee Controversy: Civil Solidarity, Cultural Imaginaries and Political Change. *Social Inclusion*, 7(2), 48–52.
<https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v7i2.2260>
- Vassallo Paleologo, F. (2024, marzo 15). Il “Decreto Cutro” davanti alla Corte di Giustizia UE. Ci sarà un giudice a Roma o a Lussemburgo? *Associazione Diritti e Frontiere (ADIF)*.
<https://www.a-dif.org/2024/03/15/il-decreto-cutro-davanti-alla-corte-di-giustizia-ue-ci-sara-un-giudice-a-roma-o-a-lussemburgo/>
- Verginella, M. (2008). *Il confine degli altri: La questione giuliana e la memoria slovena*. Donzelli.
- Vrenna, M., & Biondi dal Monte, F. (2011). *L'emergenza “strutturale”. Alcune riflessioni a margine degli sbarchi dei migranti provenienti dal Nord Africa*. Laboratorio WISS [Welfare Innovazione Servizi e Sviluppo] Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna di Pisa.
https://old.asgi.it/home_asgi.php%3Fn=1575&l=it.html
- Wacquant, L. (2003). Ethnografeast: A Progress Report on the Practice and Promise of Ethnography. *Ethnography*, 4(1), 5–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138103004001001>
- Wæver, O. (1995). Securitization and desecuritization. In R. D. Lipschutz (A c. Di), *On security*. Columbia University Press.
- Walton-Roberts, M. (2021). Intermediaries and transnational regimes of skill: Nursing skills and competencies in the context of international migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47(10), 2323–2340. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1731988>
- Weber, L. (2007). Policing the virtual border: Punitive preemption in Australian offshore migration control. *Social Justice*, 34(2), 77–93.

- Wenzelburger, G., & Böller, F. (2020). Bomb or build? How party ideologies affect the balance of foreign aid and defence spending. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 22(1), 3–23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148119883651>
- Westerwinter, O., Abbott, K. W., & Biersteker, T. (2021). Informal governance in world politics. *The Review of International Organizations*, 16(1), 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-020-09382-1>
- Whyte, Z. (2011). Enter the myopticon: Uncertain surveillance in the Danish asylum system (Respond to this article at <http://www.therai.org.uk/at/debate>). *Anthropology Today*, 27(3), 18–21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8322.2011.00808.x>
- Williams, J. M. (2015). From humanitarian exceptionalism to contingent care: Care and enforcement at the humanitarian border. *Political Geography*, 47, 11–20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2015.01.001>
- Wilson, A. (2008). *'I felt sea-sick in the van': The movement and mobility of prisoners and the effect on their imprisonment*. Centre for Mobilities Research Research Day. Lancaster University Sociology Department.
- Wimmer, A., & Glick Schiller, N. (2002). Methodological nationalism and beyond: Nation–state building, migration and the social sciences. *Global Networks*, 2(4), 301–334. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0374.00043>
- Woodly, D., Brown, R. H., Marin, M., Threadcraft, S., Harris, C. P., Syedullah, J., & Ticktin, M. (2021). The politics of care. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 20(4), 890–925. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-021-00515-8>
- Yashar, D. J. (1999). Democracy, Indigenous Movements, and Postliberal Challenge in Latin America. *World Politics*, 52(1), 76–104. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100020037>
- Žagar, I. Ž., Kogovšek Šalamon, N., & Lukšič-Hacin, M. (A c. Di). (2018). *The disaster of European refugee policy: Perspectives from the «Balkan Route»*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Zapata-Barrero, R., Caponio, T., & Scholten, P. (2017a). Theorizing the ‘local turn’ in a multi-level governance framework of analysis: A case study in immigrant policies. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 83(2), 241–246. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852316688426>
- Zapata-Barrero, R., Caponio, T., & Scholten, P. (2017b). Theorizing the ‘local turn’ in a multi-level governance framework of analysis: A case study in immigrant policies. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 83(2), 241–246. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852316688426>
- Zapata-Barrero, R., & Yalaz, E. (2022). Qualitative Methods in Migration Research. In P. Scholten (A c. Di), *Introduction to Migration Studies* (pp. 411–423). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92377-8_25
- Zaun, N. (2017). *EU Asylum Policies: The Power of Strong Regulating States*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-39829-7>
- Zincone, G. (2006). The Making of Policies: Immigration and Immigrants in Italy. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 32(3), 347–375. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830600554775>

Appendix: List of interviews

ID	Role/position	Location and date	Follow-up	Documentation	Language
ICS1	President of ICS	Trieste, 16/02/2021	Trieste, 18/02/2022	Non-recorded; Recorded	Italian
SW1	Social worker	Trieste, 21/02/2021	Trieste, 22/02/2022	Non-recorded	Italian
SW2	Social worker	Trieste, 15/04/2021		Recorded	Italian
SW3	Social worker	Trieste, 13/04/2021		Recorded	Italian
SW4	Social worker	Trieste, 07/10/2021		Recorded	Italian
SW5	Social worker	Trieste, 07/10/2021		Recorded	Italian
SW6	Social worker	Trieste, 07/10/2021		Recorded	Italian
SW7	Social worker	Trieste, 02/10/2021		Recorded	Italian
SW8	Social worker	Trieste, 09/10/2021		Recorded	Italian
SW9	Social worker	Trieste, 09/10/2021		Recorded	Italian
VA1	Volunteer/Activist	Trieste, 16/02/2021	Trieste, 17/04/2021	Non-recorded; Recorded	Italian
VA2	Volunteer/Activist	Trieste, 07/10/2021		Recorded	Italian
VA3	Volunteer/Activist	Trieste, 08/10/2021		Recorded	Italian
VA4	Volunteer/Activist	Trieste, 07/04/2021	Trieste, 24/06/2021	Non-recorded; Recorded	English
VA5	Volunteer/Activist	Trieste, 06/10/2021		Non-recorded	Italian
VA6	Volunteer/Activist	Trieste, 08/10/2021		Recorded	Italian
VA7	Volunteer/Activist	Serbia, 29/01/2021		Non-recorded	English
DW1	Dockworker	Greece, 10/08/2021		Non-recorded	English
SOM1	State officer in migration issues	Trieste, 19/02/2021	Trieste, 06/04/2021	Non-recorded	Italian
SOM2	State officer in migration issues	Trieste, 19/02/2022		Recorded	Italian
POL1	Police officer	Trieste, 10/06/2022		Recorded	Italian
POL2	Police officer	Trieste, 09/06/2022		Recorded	Italian
POL3	Police officer	Trieste, 02/05/2022		Recorded	Italian
LG1	Politician, local government	Trieste, 16/02/2022		Recorded	Italian

LG2	Politician, local government	Trieste, 23/02/2022		Recorded	Italian
RG1	Politician, regional government	Trieste, 09/06/2022		Recorded	Italian
RG2	Politician, regional government	Trieste, 08/06/2022		Recorded	Italian
IO1	International organization officer	Trieste, 19/02/2021		Non-recorded	Italian
CO1	Court officer	Trieste, 10/06/2022		Recorded	Italian
CO2	Court officer	Trieste, 10/06/2022		Recorded	Italian
CRT1	(Former) President of Caritas FVG	Trieste, 08/06/2022		Recorded	Italian
ASGI1	ASGI Lawyer	Trieste, 15/04/2021	Trieste, 18/02/2022	Recorded	Italian