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Homeless or refugee? Civil Society Actors and the (un)making of internal borders in an Italian frontier town

Paola Bonizzoni^a and Iraklis Dimitriadis^b

^aDepartment of Social and Political Sciences, University of Milan, Milano, Italy; ^bFaculty of Political and Social Sciences, Scuola Normale Superiore, Firenze, Italy

ABSTRACT

Migrants' access to the national territory is filtered through categorisation processes that entangle the legal-administrative statuses produced by immigration controls with stratified access to social and political rights, representing a form of internal bordering. Drawing upon qualitative data on Civil Society Actors (CSAs) who provide services to homeless migrants in an Italian frontier town, this article identifies two main types of practices that can be used by CSAs to reshape internal borders: either de-institutionalising internal borders through the circulation of non-state resources or engaging with institutionalised internal borders by expanding or ensuring migrants' access to state resources through a mix of cooperation and conflict with governmental actors. The article contributes to the broader debate on the role of CSAs in drawing internal borders in frontier towns and discusses the policy implications of CSAs' actions at the local level and beyond.

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Introduction

Migrants' entry into the national territory is filtered through categorisation processes (Abdou and Zardo 2024) that intricately entangle the legal-administrative statuses produced by immigration controls with stratified access to social and political rights (Könönen 2018). This "differential inclusion" (Mezzadra and Neilson 2012), which is rooted in a plethora of legally precarious statuses (Goldring and Landolt 2013), can be conceptualised as a form of internal bordering (Bonizzoni 2020) tied to selectivity and controls over migrants' mobility within and across national borders (Dimitriadis and Fontanari 2024;

CONTACT Paola Bonizzoni ✉ paola.bonizzoni@unimi.it

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Fauser 2024). While privileged access to resources regulated by public authorities can represent an incentive to move or settle, exclusion or obstruction can operate as a disincentive, a strategy of territorial deflection played out by more or less exclusionary (local or national) governmental actors (Ambrosini 2013; Fauser 2021; Dimitriadis and Ambrosini 2024).

Recent works on the so-called “summer of welcome” (Ataç et al. 2023; Dimitriadis et al. 2021) have highlighted the crucial role that Civil Society Actors (CSAs) can play in supporting migrants’ journeys and settlement across Europe. Especially during what are perceived and constructed as exceptional times marking a “crisis” (Cantat, Pécoud, and Thiollet 2023; Mainwaring et al. 2020) the role of volunteers and activists can be especially relevant in responding to urgent needs, often by filling gaps in state support. However, CSAs can also be outsourced for the delivery of specific public services and can closely cooperate with (local or national) governmental actors (Cuttitta, Pécoud, and Phillips 2023). While some CSAs invoke the principle of neutrality and explicitly frame their engagement in apolitical terms, research on pro-migrant solidarity movements has shown that support actions can be viewed as a means to contest and counter exclusionary border regimes (Agustín and Jørgensen 2018; Bonizzoni and Hajer 2023; Queirolo Palmas and Rahola 2022).

We inquire about these issues through qualitative research carried out in Como, a medium-sized town located on the Italian side of the Swiss–Italian border. Border towns are contexts in which the processes of local welfare bordering were strikingly enacted after the so-called “long summer of migration”. While in recent years, even non-border towns have assumed the role of relevant hubs for transit migrants, territories located at the geographical boundaries of a sovereign state are especially subject to unauthorised border crossings and provide short-term shelter for those who intend to transit (Ikizoglu Erensu and Kaslı 2016). Consequently, border towns host particularly complex and stratified migrant populations, including not only settled migrants with long-term or permanent resident status but also those aiming to cross the physical, external borders of the state and migrants who were caught crossing the border illegally but are being readmitted from abroad (Filippi, Giliberti, and Queirolo Palmas 2021; Fontanari 2018). In border towns, external border controls (including tougher or softer implementation of the Schengen agreement or stricter deportation practices) can significantly affect the number and characteristics of local immigrant populations and their access to rights and resources. This is exemplified by the case of Como.

Como has increasingly played the role of hub at the intersection of intra-European, Eastern, and Southern Mediterranean migratory routes for migrants willing to continue their journeys across the Swiss–Italian border. However, the place turned into a forced stopping point in June 2016, when

Swiss authorities started implementing stricter border controls. Since then, many migrants have found themselves stuck at the border (Della Puppa and Sanò 2021), with welfare access severely curtailed by their precarious legal status and by the exclusionary approach of local governmental actors aiming to *deflect* increased migratory pressure *beyond the municipal borders*. Legal precarity in Como has taken different forms over time, often resulting in conditions of homelessness, and homeless migrants have consequently become the focus of growing support initiatives from CSAs.

In this paper, we argue that CSAs can either de-institutionalise internal borders through the circulation of non-state resources or can engage with institutionalised internal borders by expanding or ensuring migrants have access to state resources through a mix of cooperation and conflict with local governmental actors. These two practices entail different approaches to establishing distinctions regarding who should be supported, how they should be supported and for how long through decisions underpinned by diverging logics and evaluations of deservingness that may either reproduce, contest or provide alternatives to governmental categories.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section, the relevant theoretical framework for internal border drawing and the role that CSAs play in this process is discussed. Major turning points in Italian immigration and refugee (reception) policies are then analysed, and the role of CSAs in the city of Como is contextualised. Subsequently, the methods of data collection and analysis are discussed, and then the collected data are analysed. The article closes with concluding remarks and reflections.

CSAs and the drawing of internal borders in exclusionary local contexts

Conceptualising internal border drawing: accessing statuses, rights and resources

Bordering and categorisation processes are forms of ordering and classification that operate on a symbolic, sociopolitical and cultural level (Collyer and de Haas 2012; Crawley and Skleparis 2018; Pallister-Wilkins 2018). The scope of this Special Issue is to address the *internationalisation* of borders; that is, the shift of the border from the external, territorial line towards diverse sites and actors *within* the territory of the state (see Fauser 2024). By focusing on internal borders, we can observe how migration control is exercised through articulated and multilayered forms of legal-administrative categorisation that connect (migrant and residency) statuses with differentiated access to social rights – revealing how legal stratification is connected to both external and internal territorial selectivity and control (ibidem). While facilitated or privileged access to specific social resources can act as an

incentive to move or settle, exclusion from or obstruction to these same resources can function as a disincentive, a strategy of deflection involving territorial exclusion. Internal borders are played out through administrative and welfare bordering, resulting in increasingly fragmented and precarious (residency and social) rights (Ataç and Rosenberger 2019; Bendixsen 2018; El-Kayed and Hamann 2018; Guentner et al. 2016; Könönen 2018; Misje 2020; Schweitzer 2022), to which access is often regulated, provided, obstructed and mediated at the local level. This perspective allows us to chart the role of different (state and non-state) actors: from border police agents (see Borrelli 2024) to employers and landlords (see Sunata and Güngördü 2024); from social workers and immigration bureaucrats (see Fattorelli 2024) to health care frontline workers (see Di Stefano 2024) to CSAs (Pérez et al. 2021). As we discuss in the next section, the role of different types of CSAs in internal bordering can be especially relevant as it bears important consequences for the governance of migration at the local level.

This approach also holds relevant implications for understanding the *temporality* of borders (see Fauser 2024). As migrants do not exclusively face the border at the moment of their entry, the study of internal borders entails charting all those complex and repeated encounters that might lead them to achieve (or lose) access to (more-or-less precarious legal) statuses and related rights and resources. These legal-administrative journeys are characterised by periods of waiting, slowing down, stopping, accelerating and pushing forward – a process shaped by the temporalities of an evolving regulatory framework.

Negotiating the boundaries of deservingness: CSAs and internal borders

Recent works on the role of volunteers and activists during – and after – the so-called “summer of welcome” (Braun 2017; Karakayali 2019; Merikoski 2020) have illuminated the pervasive yet diverse roles that CSAs can play in supporting migrants’ journeys and settlement across Europe, as they provide critical resources, including legal-administrative support (Aubry and Schapendonk 2023).

Studies reveal the wide *heterogeneity* within the migrant support field. On one end of the spectrum, we see the more professionalised CSAs, which are sometimes outsourced for the provision of specific public services, thereby blurring the boundaries between state and non-state actors. On the other end, grassroots networks of volunteers and activists can operate more autonomously, primarily by using their own funds and (human) resources. While some CSAs explicitly claim that commitment is a form of activism contesting the border through solidarity practices, others instead openly claim it as apolitical and non-conflictive (Hernández-Carretero 2023). On one side, the literature on the criminalisation of solidarity has shown that state authorities might

actively contrast and persecute migrant support (Mainwaring and DeBono 2021), but on the other side, pro-migrant “active citizenship” has also been strongly promoted and openly celebrated by (local and national) governmental actors (Kremmel 2023), with whom CSAs can establish sustained forms of cooperation. In certain settings, engagement stems from (new or long-established) entities that are locally rooted, while in other settings, it originates from realities that extend on a transnational scale and involve more-or-less extemporaneous forms of voluntourism (Bendixsen and Sandberg 2021). This varied and contradictory picture prompts us to question how internal bordering processes can emerge and be reproduced, negotiated and challenged by different types of CSAs – on what grounds and through which means and practices.

While border scholars have emphasised that the main function of the border is to categorise and select prospective migrants, studies rooted in critical humanitarianism have observed that CSAs can also “filter” migrant needs. This may occur through direct provision of specific resources or by accompanying, redirecting and mediating migrants’ access to rights and services. These processes are guided by specific orders of priority, revealing the interweaving of care and control that characterise the unequal relations between the helper and the helped (Monforte and Maestri 2022). Migrant care can be rooted in the moral urge to relieve human suffering, but it can also be targeted at the production of “good citizens” when volunteers are engaged in promoting migrants’ autonomy through integration (Fleischmann 2019; Funk 2016; Heins and Unrau 2018).

Scholars have primarily focused on selective eligibility grounded in evaluations of vulnerability and suffering. However, research on refugee reception has unveiled that different criteria – from (il)legal statuses (Ravn et al. 2020) to moral virtues (Casati 2018) to assimilation and civic integration potential (Bonjour and Duyvendak 2018; Kirchhoff 2020; Welfens 2023) as well as perceived social danger or worthiness (Fontanari 2022) – might guide choices and distinctions regarding *who should be helped and supported* (first) and *how and for how long*. This recalls the paradoxical nature of solidarity (Cabot 2019); that is, the fact that exclusionary forms of decision making inevitably accompany the distribution of scarce resources. But it also interrogates the relationship between CSAs and (local) governmental agencies. More specifically, the extent to which the support provided by CSAs reproduces or challenges governmental logics is reflected in specific hierarchies and ideas of difference and need that potentially contrast, confront and influence bureaucratic state power (Borrelli 2022; Pérez et al. 2021; Togral koca 2019).

These issues take on particular relevance in exclusionary local contexts, where internal border drawing can be played out through local administrative practices of exclusion (see, for instance, Artero and Fontanari 2021) that aim to filter the “deserving” members of the local community (Gargiulo

2021, 2023, 2024) and to deflect the cost of social assistance towards vulnerable subjects. The role of CSAs also contributes to shaping the “welcoming” environment of sanctuary cities, enabling local authorities to adopt more inclusive approaches towards migrants (Bazurli 2019; Darling and Bauder 2019; Sabchev 2021). However, we argue that when CSAs find themselves in front of exclusionary measures— such as the refusal of local authorities to assume specific tasks or to provide specific services or the restriction of their access through the implementation of restrictive requirements — they face specific opportunities and dilemmas.

In this paper, we delve into the “messy” (Sinatti 2023) and somewhat arbitrary and contradictory nature of internal border-drawing by identifying two main sets of practices through which different kinds of CSAs deal with internal bordering drawing in the increasingly converging fields of homeless and refugee rights. On the one hand, de-institutionalizing internal borders – addressing non-entitled migrants’ needs through the circulation of non-state resources. On the other hand, engaging with institutionalised internal borders – that is, contesting, broadening or effectively guaranteeing (in case of restrictions or obstruction) migrants’ entitlement to public resources, through a mix of cooperation and conflict (Alagna 2023; Campomori and Ambrosini 2020; Caponio and Pettrachin 2023) with governmental actors.

The temporality of borders: major turning points in Italian immigration and refugee (reception) policies

As we shall discuss, the size and contours of the homeless migrant population in Como have modified over time because of major turning points in the fields of migration control and refugee reception. These shifts intersect in complex ways with the legal–administrative biographies of migrants in the territory tied to different forms of temporal controls produced by internal borders (Fauser 2024).

Since at least 2011, following the so-called “North-Africa emergency”, Italy has served as a significant transit country for migrants travelling along the Mediterranean and Balkan routes in attempts to reach other European destinations. Cities such as Milan, Como and Ventimiglia have provided temporary stops for many migrants to organise their subsequent movements and, for years, only a small minority of them sought asylum from Italian authorities. However, this dynamic underwent a shift with the progressive sealing of Schengen borders through controversial measures, including the Italy–Libya and the European Union–Turkey agreements, the introduction of the hotspot approach and the criminalisation of sea rescue operations. Push-back operations became a common strategy employed by the border police of confining states, including Switzerland. In Como, the effects of this change became clear in 2016, when hundreds of migrants found

themselves stranded in the town, unable to progress in their journeys and encountering challenges in accessing the refugee reception system, leading to a protracted condition of homelessness.

Since 2014, the Italian system of refugee reception has undergone progressive expansion, accompanied by repeated reforms. The system is highly fragmented, with facilities falling into “ordinary” and “extraordinary” structures. The ordinary system (initially known as *Spear*, later renamed *Siproimi*, finally named *SAI*) is managed by municipalities. It can outsource specific services to CSAs and typically consists of small reception facilities designed to host various categories of vulnerable migrants (asylum seekers, international protection status holders, recognised refugees and unaccompanied minors) for periods ranging from 6 to 12 months. In contrast, the extraordinary system (*Centre di Accoglienza Straordinaria, CAS*) has significantly expanded over the last decade to address the increasing number of asylum claimants who could not immediately be transferred to the ordinary system due to a lack of available space. The extraordinary system is managed through agreements between Prefectures (local branches of the Ministry of Interior) and private actors (including CSAs, hotel owners and other for-profit actors). Although initially introduced as an emergency-driven mechanism to meet – promptly and temporarily – the basic needs of newly arrived individuals, these places have become long-term residences for asylum seekers, who are hosted there during the examination of their asylum applications and even beyond if there is a positive evaluation. Despite a consistent growth in the number of asylum applications since 2014, the available space in the ordinary system has not been proportionately expanded. In contrast, the capacity of the extraordinary system surged in 2017, but has gradually decreased in the subsequent years (see [Figure 1](#)).

The quality of the services offered is also extremely uneven and scattered. Due to substantial defunding over the years, resources for integration-related projects and activities (including vocational and language training as well as psychological support) have been notably reduced. These services may even be non-existent in extraordinary reception structures institutionally designed as “waiting zones”. Consequently, it is common for refugees leaving the system to find themselves in a vulnerable and precarious situation, facing the risk of homelessness, even when legally entitled to some form of protection ([Dimitriadis 2023](#); [Sempredon 2023](#)). In 2018, the “*Salvini Decree*” (Law No. 133) limited the possibility of receiving so-called “humanitarian protection”, which had been the primary form of protection granted to asylum seekers in Italy. Thereafter, the rate of asylum rejections and the number of migrants with precarious legal statuses significantly increased, and many migrants were forced to leave the reception system, with the most vulnerable among them becoming homeless. Finally, in May 2020, in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Italian government adopted an employment-based regularisation programme ([Ambrosini 2023](#)), the first in eight

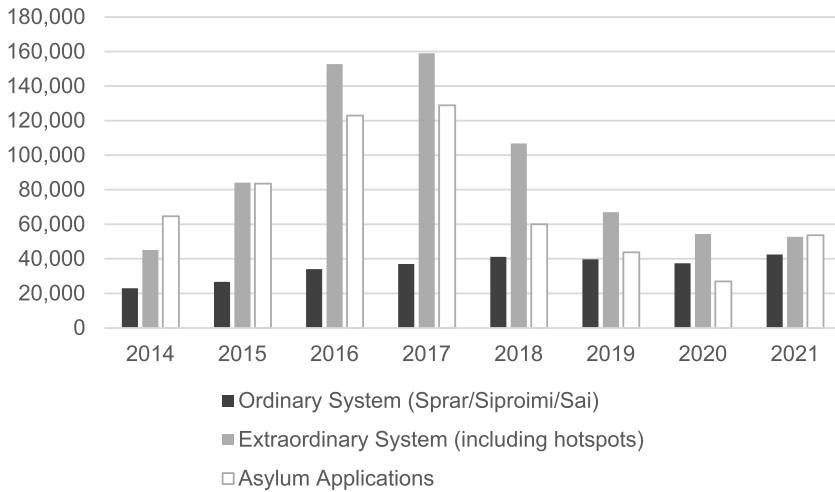


Figure 1. Number of asylum applicants and places available in the ordinary and extraordinary reception system [2014–2021].

years, as an immediate response to the pandemic-led labour market shortages experienced in *essential* sectors, thereby providing a valuable (while selective¹) window of opportunity to migrants to achieve a less precarious status – including migrants who were (rejected) asylum seekers (Bonizzoni and Artero 2023). As we shall discuss, the role of CSAs should be contextualised in this (sometimes rapidly) evolving regulatory framework that has constantly posed new challenges and opportunities for the production and negotiation of internal borders.

Methods of data collection and analysis

This study is based on 17 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with different CSAs that were conducted by the authors in two rounds between 2018 and 2021. The aim of the sampling strategy was to reflect the different profiles of the CSAs providing services to the migrant population in Como. We interviewed eight volunteers and nine professionals belonging to 12 different CSAs. These included nine professionalised CSAs, that is, organisations hiring paid staff (that sometimes operate alongside a volunteer workforce). Among these, four organisations received public funds for work outsourced to them for the provision of some services, including the management of extraordinary reception structures for refugees and asylum seekers, facilities for homeless people and vocational training projects for migrants. We also interviewed five volunteers and activists belonging to non-professionalised and grassroots groups, including an informal group of volunteer guardians of foreign unaccompanied minors², two groups of activists interested in homelessness and migration issues and one journalist working for the local media.

Some research participants were contacted through personal acquaintances; others by using the snowball sampling method. Interviewees were asked to account for their actions concerning migrants and homeless people in Como and how these actions had changed over time. The interview guidelines included questions about CSAs' motivations, how their organisations/informal groups operated and their interactions with other relevant public and private actors. We provided all participants with information on the purpose of the research, and we assured them that their anonymity would be protected by using pseudonyms and anonymising any data that might reveal their identities. Although this becomes quite challenging in small-sized contexts in which a limited number of CSAs operate, we shared our writing with research participants to ascertain that the quoted empirical material does not generate any kind of risk or the possibility of data misuse. The ethics committee of the University of Milan also approved the process of data collection and analysis on April 30, 2020 as requested by the "MAGYC Project – Migration Governance and Asylum Crisis".

This study also drew on field notes collected through instances of non-participant observations in contexts where migrants were offered advice on issues concerning their legal-administrative statuses, visits at a facility accommodating migrants and by following volunteers who approached homeless people on the streets. These data provided a more detailed understanding of volunteers' activities as well as migrant supporters' perceptions of their own actions and the actions of other stakeholders and migrants. In other words, we decided to conduct non-participant observation to gain intimate familiarity with research subjects and closer insights into the interactions between migrant supporters and migrants themselves in natural settings. The observation was overt in the sense that the research subjects knew a researcher was observing them. While pro-migrant supporters offered services to migrants, the researcher had a limited role in observing what was happening. Informal chats with pro-migrant actors were instead possible before opening and after closing of the migrant helpdesk. Micro conversations with migrants were also conducted during visits to a reception facility. In addition, secondary data was also used in our data analyses as a further source of information to more carefully contextualise the data collected through interviews. Secondary data included statistics produced by two local CSAs, news from local media, websites of organisations or informal groups assisting migrants, and legal documents.

Welcoming (homeless) migrants in an exclusionary border town – the case of Como

With a population of almost 85,000 citizens, Como is a small-sized town located at the Northern Italian border (with Switzerland). The designation of Como as "città di frontiera" ("Como as a border town") was repeatedly

invoked by the local volunteers and activists to underscore the ineluctable and long-standing character of a city where Italian local residents themselves – the so-called “frontalieri” – have ordinarily built up their lives across the Schengen border and where a growing flow of international tourists is attracted by the global allure of the lake. Como is not a city new to the migration phenomenon itself, as long-established communities have taken root there over the decades, with Romanians, Moroccans and Albanians representing over one-third of non-Italian locally registered citizens. However, in recent years – a situation that marked its peak in the summer of 2016 – the presence of migrants has been increasingly problematised and conflated with the issue of homelessness.

The homeless population in Como had grown in recent years, and it is primarily composed of migrants. Statistics provided by a non-profit organisation offering services to the homeless reveal that from 2018 to 2020, over 82% of those seeking assistance (with total numbers ranging from 1,000 to 1,200 annually) were migrants originating from Pakistan, Nigeria, El Salvador, Tunisia, Morocco, Gambia and Somalia. This composition distinctly mirrors that of refugees in Italy. Notably, more than one-third of these individuals have an irregular immigrant status, and the number of undocumented migrants among the homeless in Como has also progressively increased over time, partly as a consequence of the previously mentioned “Salvini Decree”.

In the past decade, Como has predominantly been governed by centre/right-wing parties, and these local political forces have increasingly targeted the homeless migrant population by framing it as a threat to the city’s image. At the centre of the Municipality, there are also concerns about the increasing presence of unaccompanied foreign minors, primarily due to the costs they incur by falling under the responsibility of local social services. The rise of a racialised homeless population prompted the Municipality to adopt hostile measures designed to portray the city as an unwelcoming and inhospitable border hub. In the face of this widespread aversion, local CSAs mobilised in favour of migrants, activating solidarity networks and forms of civic commitment that in synergy, but sometimes also openly in contrast, with the action of local governmental institutions provided responses to people’s needs.

Local governmental actors (the Municipality, but also local Prefectures and the police headquarters, *Questure*) have been intensely involved in forms of internal border drawing. Some of these practices gained high visibility and even prominence in the national press – thanks as well to the monitoring and contrasting role played by local CSAs. For instance, in December 2017, the Municipal Police prevented volunteers from offering breakfast to the people camped under the former church of San Francesco, and a local network of activists responded by organising a public demonstration in solidarity with migrants. Another episode dates to September 2020, when a

group of local activists filmed a councillor in the act of taking the blanket away from a homeless man, subsequently spreading the video online. The decision of the Municipality to issue ordinances against begging and rough sleeping, imposing fines on offenders, was also much debated. Other measures were of a more invisible and technical nature, and mostly concerned bureaucratic requirements and regulations tied to claiming and obtaining access to crucial resources – and required other means and resources to be successfully challenged.

Overall, Municipal authorities lacked a truly proactive attitude in terms of local integration policies addressing the growing refugee presence in the territory. As regards refugees, for instance, the Municipality has never adhered to the Ordinary Reception System and, consequently, there are only Extraordinary Reception Structures in the territory (eight reception facilities, hosting about 400 asylum seekers in 2021). In a country where the services to the homeless population are extremely scant and fragmented and their provision is mostly placed on Municipal and local CSAs, Como is no exception, as the needs of this population are primarily in the charge of a voluntary sector that has gained increasing relevance after the “crisis” of 2016.

The role that CSAs play in the increasingly intersecting field of homelessness and refugee reception in Como is varied and characterised by different levels of institutionalisation. Some of them carry out interventions under a public delegation mandate as they receive funding from the state: this includes the management of the Municipal shelter that provides year-round accommodation to legally registered residents of Como (56 people in 2021). In addition, two other facilities provide accommodation to rough sleepers during the winter months (within the so-called “Cold Emergency plan”). Unlike the Municipal shelter, these extraordinary measures, managed by two local CSAs, can also be accessible to non-registered (including undocumented) migrants, especially the facility run by a CSA that significantly relies on its own organisational resources. Another relevant institutional facility hosting homeless migrants in Como was in operation from September 2016 to October 2018 when informal settlements of transit migrants appeared in very visible places across the town. This led the local Prefecture to establish and finance a camp managed by the Red Cross (henceforth *Red Cross Camp*) in collaboration with a local CSA. This camp worked as a regional hub, temporarily hosting people interested in formalising their asylum applications, before redistributing them to other localities. The camp closed when the emergency faded away, although the phenomenon of unregistered transit people persisted, albeit to a lesser extent.

Local CSAs have also undertaken initiatives as have volunteer groups on a more independent basis. The role of religious actors is especially relevant here, as they can draw on their own resources (not only spaces but also

donations and volunteers) to temporarily provide migrants with a safe place to sleep, food, medical care, shower facilities and laundry services. Legal assistance is also provided by a local CSA, which operates with its own funds (donations, funds from tenders) within a space made available by the Municipality. Moreover, support for the homeless (migrants) is offered by informal and spontaneous initiatives triggered by groups of more-or-less organised citizens who support them through direct accommodation in private homes or through the provision of other resources (e.g. accompanying people to public services or giving advice and guidance). Several forms of hybridisation emerge among these institutional, non-institutional and informal types of support. For instance, the same organisation can operate combining public and private funds (e.g. donations) and can employ professionals alongside volunteers who engage in offering support free of charge. As we argue it is this hybridisation that enables CSAs to redefine and renegotiate internal borders through various practices.

Addressing needs and (re)constructing eligibility: CSAs and internal borders

The temporality of internal borders: towards increased stratification

The summer of 2016 represented a turning point as a number of ordinary citizens began to mobilise to provide immediate support and relief (e.g. providing food, clothes and blankets) to the thousands of homeless migrants camped in highly visible places across the town. New organisations and networks were formed (that still persist today) and support was also given by transnational groups of volunteers (e.g. Swiss pro bono lawyers or lay people) who cooperated with Italians in supporting potential border crossers as well as those that were pushed back at the border.

Subsequently, the Red Cross Camp was opened—a very large area where initially everyone was welcomed. However, at a certain point, the Prefecture began imposing arbitrary rules. Specifically, for one week, only women were allowed; then, only people from Como. In short, the criteria changed on a weekly basis.

CSA Caseworker, 29/01/2021

While the opening of the *Red Cross Camp* guaranteed asylum seekers immediate access to reception facilities — albeit on a temporary basis before being transferred outside the Municipal territorial borders of Como — protracted uncertainty still characterised those who were excluded. As testified by the caseworker interviewed, access to the camp was selective and uneven, alternatively reserved for different categories of people depending on the places available. Consequently, excluded migrants started establishing makeshift camps in other parts of the town, which became the focus of the attention

of increasingly organised groups of citizens who provided emergency relief, health care, temporary shelter and administrative and legal support on a purely voluntary basis. This was concretely done by reaching people on the street, establishing relationships of trust with them, screening their conditions and needs (e.g. identifying unaccompanied minors) and, when possible, trying to re-establish access to the resources and protection to which they were entitled.

Over the years, the characteristics of the homeless migrant population have progressively changed, revealing the temporal proliferation of forms and trajectories of exclusion (Bendixsen and Sandberg 2021) produced by internal border controls (Fauser 2024). The following can be found among this population: 1. rejected asylum seekers; 2. recognised refugees whose allocated time in reception facilities has expired; 3. previously categorised unaccompanied minors who lost access to residential structures upon entering adulthood; 4. holders of humanitarian international protection who lapsed into irregularity after losing access to the reception system under the Salvini Decree; 5. so-called “Dubliners” who continued to be sent back from the Swiss border; and 6. legally resident migrants lacking Municipal registration. The flow of transit migrants persists today – albeit to a lesser extent – and mainly includes people arriving in Italy via land through the so-called “Balkan route”. Within this complex and evolving scenario, CSAs are engaged in different practices to enable homeless unentitled migrants to access valuable right and resources, practices that we discuss in detail in the next two sections.

CSAs and internal borders: de-institutionalising support

CSAs in Como, even those receiving public funds, extensively rely on non-institutional resources to address the needs of homeless migrants. These include donations (which may also come from Swiss citizens and institutions) and spaces that are often provided by religious actors, such as parishes, or private citizens (Schwartz and Schwenken 2020). Volunteering work also plays a crucial role in supporting these initiatives. This approach aligns with what Fauser and colleagues (2023) have termed direct care, referring to “case-interested” actions meant to assist individuals in need.

As declared by interviewees working in CSAs managing an Extraordinary Reception Centre and the Municipal homeless shelter, the questions of who can be supported, how and for how long should be contextualised, first of all, by considering the institutional mandate to which CSAs receiving public funds are subject and, second, based on the varying degree of non-institutional resources that may be available to CSAs at different times.

In the Municipal shelter, registered residents in Como receive priority – this is fair, I mean ... For instance, the Municipality of Cantù [a neighbouring

Municipality] does not fund a shelter! Those with residency in a Municipality within the province were also admitted, subject to availability. However, for those coming from outside the province, an additional condition was set to prevent overcrowding the waiting list. They were given a longer waiting period. This allowed the person to decide whether to stay, wait, find an alternative or going away. Initially, this system of assessment functioned quite well. However, over time, the process has become increasingly complicated. Now, we cannot place anyone in the dormitory without the Municipality's consent, and sometimes we are forced to wait for days to receive their approval ...
CSA Caseworker, 15/04/2021

There are numerous limitations on the activities we can undertake [...] While Caritas' soup kitchen is open to everyone without requiring Prefecture approval, participation in the institutional reception system prohibits the acceptance or retention of individuals who cannot be formally included in the programme. In the realm of migration, where there is a considerable amount of work to be done but funding is severely limited, CSAs cannot extend assistance to everyone.
CSA Caseworker, 22/01/2021

When relying on their own resources, CSAs enjoy a certain degree of freedom in defining the criteria that guide them in supporting migrants. However, when resources are scant, decisions must be made regarding who to prioritise for assistance and for how long. As the following interviewee attests, determining whom to support is a complex decision that necessitates the evaluation of various criteria, which may vary from case to case.

The selection process depends on the individual, and each person has a unique set of goals. Choosing individuals is a highly complex task, given the limited availability of spaces. Typically, we prioritise those who are prepared to embark on a path or have already initiated steps towards integration. This may include individuals with language skills, those who have undergone vocational training or individuals who have previously secured employment.
CSA Caseworker, 29/01/2021

Priority may be given either to vulnerable cases, such as women, children or individuals facing disability or health-related issues, or – as the interviewee stated – to migrants with “good prospects” (Bonjour and Duyvendak 2018). This includes those with more promising language and vocational skills and/or those demonstrating the “right kind of attitude” – individuals keen on participating in activities that CSAs believe could, as stated by our interviewees, *foster autonomy*. This autonomy is meant to enable them to break free from reliance on both CSA and state support, empowering them to make independent decisions about their future lives.

Decisions regarding whom to support and how could also be influenced by “special kinds” of relationships—of an informal, friendly or intimate nature (Milan 2018; Mogstad and Rabe 2023; Monforte, Maestri, and d'Halluin 2021)—that can spontaneously arise between volunteers (rather than

professionals) and homeless migrants and that rest on the exchange of personal (rather than organisational) resources grounded in interpersonal constructions of affinity.

I have been hosting a boy at my home for two years whom I met while assisting people on the streets, and now he has become like a son to me. When we initially engaged with homeless individuals [...] we refrained from sharing our phone numbers. It is evident that when dealing with people facing addictions or psychiatric vulnerability, the dynamics of the relationship become more intricate. You enter into a connection where you offer assistance as a non-professional figure.

CSA Volunteer, 07/04/2021

You try to build human relationships that go beyond providing a blanket. With certain individuals, it becomes more than that. For instance, there is this Sudanese boy with whom we developed a strong friendship, it was someone with whom I shared a special affinity. He has been a political refugee for many years, an informed person with political alignment, and he attended university. We assisted him in a different manner than others because there was a genuine relationship – he had become a friend. Of course, it's not feasible to extend such resources to everyone.

CSA Volunteer, 18/05/2018

As these words make evident, forms of support grounded in personal ties of care and affection can significantly influence the personal trajectories of homeless migrants. However, these words also reveal an inherently exclusive and selective character rooted in complex and varying intersections of age, gender, race and class. Interestingly, the personalisation of support relationships between volunteers and migrants can become a topic of debate and tension among CSAs. Criticism usually arises from the more professionalised CSAs casting doubt on the negative effects—such as disempowerment and infantilisation (Karakayali 2019)—resulting from excessively personal and privatised forms of support. This perspective became apparent during an informal conversation with a pro bono lawyer providing legal consultancy to migrants.

Providing monetary assistance, shelter or even taking them into your home can lead to tragic situations. In some instances, individuals may end up on the streets, facing homelessness, or become involved in drug-related activities, ultimately developing drug or alcohol addiction. (Ethnographic notes at the help desk migration service, 09/04/2021)

While this highlights various forms and logics guiding CSAs de-institutionalisation of support for homeless migrants, it is not the sole approach adopted by them. As we will discuss in the next section, some CSAs are actively involved in challenging institutionalised internal borders by expanding or, in certain cases, effectively ensuring migrants' access to public resources through a mix of cooperation and conflict with local governmental actors.

Engaging with institutionalised internal borders

As previously mentioned, manifold forms of exclusion and obstruction of migrants' access to legal-administrative statuses (such as obtaining municipal registration or filing asylum requests) and related rights (such as accessing homeless or refugee public reception facilities) can be observed in Como, practices that some CSAs started to closely and directly monitor and address. Through their actions, they tried to reconstruct migrants' entitlement as well as public responsibility towards them and, when possible, find ways to broaden and expand categories of entitlement.

Due to Como's role as a border town, local authorities were particularly concerned about what was perceived as a strategic use of the asylum request (or Municipal registration) by migrants who did not have a genuine attachment to the territory. This was especially true for vulnerable migrants, such as unaccompanied minors or those with health-related issues, who would have represented a significant burden for local welfare systems. Assessing the "real" presence of migrants in the territory thus became a crucial issue, and CSAs played a relevant role in enabling homeless migrants to have access to rights mediated by the status of Municipal resident or asylum seeker – a status which they actively contributed to producing.

The police said: "If I don't have an address, how can I get him to apply for asylum?" This led to initial difficulties, as there was no explicit requirement [in the law] for a declaration of hospitality for someone intending to apply for international protection. We argued that the police should accept the application regardless. Ultimately, it became apparent that this approach was not leading to any effective result. [...] As we are not a shelter but an office, we couldn't provide a proper declaration of hospitality. Consequently, we devised a written declaration stating that the person is homeless, has no income, utilises our services, commits to staying in touch with our service weekly and accepts our address for domiciliation. We take responsibility for contacting these individuals when needed and for relaying institutional communications to them. This practice involves a weekly signature system at our office to confirm their presence on the territory. Now, the police have fully embraced this approach.

CSA Caseworker, 15/04/2021

When confronted with restrictive administrative practices imposed in legal "grey zones", such as the requirement for domiciliary proof for those seeking asylum, CSAs employed practices aimed at ensuring effective access, practices that revealed a blend of cooperation, negotiation and conflict with local governmental actors (Campomori and Ambrosini 2020). In this instance, CSAs chose to negotiate homeless migrants' access to the asylum procedure by negotiating the provision of a fictive domiciliary proof at their office's address. Through assessing and certifying migrants' vulnerability (lack of income and housing) and monitoring their presence in the

territory (via a weekly signature system), CSAs actively contributed to transforming undocumented homeless migrants into asylum seekers.

As the following interview excerpts illustrate, contentious strategies based on filing complex suits in local or national courts were also often employed to compel authorities to take charge of migrants' needs.

We have politically exposed ourselves, including in the national press recently, regarding the recent ruling of the Council of State [that] condemned the Prefecture of Como, compelling it to accept the Municipal registration of asylum seekers arriving from the Balkan route.

CSA pro bono lawyer, 20/01/2021

Municipalities often tend to disregard migrant families due to perceived high costs. In one instance, we had to resort to the Juvenile Court, filing a request for the mother and the child, hoping that social workers would also consider the father. The Juvenile Court finally mandated the Municipality to assume full responsibility for the case.

CSA caseworker, 29/01/2021

If a homeless asylum seeker submits their request for international protection but remains on the streets because the Prefecture does not place them in the reception system, we allow a reasonable amount of time to pass. Subsequently, we appeal to the TAR [Regional Administrative Court] to compel the Prefecture to admit them to a reception facility. Following several appeals of this nature, a positive practice has been established: the Prefecture now contacts us within two days and informs us, "We authorize Mr. X to access the reception system".

CSA volunteer, 15/04/2021

However, the evaluation of whether this route should be followed considered not only the strength of a particular case (especially if it was deemed strategic for instigating systemic change in both national legislation and local practices) but also the temporality of these processes. Such legal actions typically require lengthy periods and are not feasible to address the immediate needs of migrants. Since the CSA's primary objective is to reinstate access rather than to directly challenge illicit or discriminatory practices per se, choices sometimes had to be made between prioritising the "defence of the person or the defence of principle", as tellingly stated by one of our interviewees.

Filing lawsuits and negotiating institutional arrangements required competencies and relations with public actors that were not equally shared among CSAs (Bonizzoni and Hajer 2022); however, less professionalised, grassroots actors also found ways to guarantee migrants' access to statuses and public goods. For instance, some smaller and protest-oriented groups were able to gain national press attention in July 2020 when they chained themselves to the doors of public toilets in the city centre of Como to call for an extension to the opening hours of that service in favour of the homeless population.

As revealed by the following interviewee, interpersonal ties of mutual knowledge established between volunteers and migrants – in this case, an employment contract – could also convey access to crucial resources that could be mobilised to attain a more stable legal status by taking advantage of a specific window of opportunity – in this case, offered by the last regularisation programme.

I know the case of a young man currently sleeping in a dormitory, previously struggling with substance abuse. Despite being on a precarious path, he reached a point where he decided it was enough. This personal decision marked a turning point. This transformation was also facilitated by the amnesty. We were able to find out an employment opportunity for him – he was employed by the families of some of us, and his situation changed radically.
CSA volunteer, 07/04/2021

In this case, volunteers contributed to turning a homeless, undocumented migrant into a legalised (economic) migrant through the privileged channel of domestic work, showing that these processes of entitlement do not always rely on an open contestation of governmental categories of deservingness. Instead, they are actively negotiated and pragmatically navigated through the mobilisation of various resources, which varied significantly among the types of CSAs involved.

Conclusions

The article has explored the role of CSAs in providing support to homeless migrants in an Italian border town. In doing so, it contributes to the debate on the drawing of internal borders based on the observation of how migration control is exercised through complex forms of legal-administrative categorisation that connect migrant and residency statuses with stratified access to rights. The article also identifies two types of practices that CSAs can employ to (un)make internal borders.

When supporting (homeless) migrants by relying on their own resources – including funds, logistics, spaces and volunteers that sometimes extend beyond the local/national scale – CSAs de-institutionalise internal borders. In this way, CSAs can broaden the categories of people who can access key provisions (including accommodation), filling the gap left by governmental inaction or exclusionary forms of (local or national) internal bordering. However, this requires CSAs to possess consistent and stable organisational capabilities and inevitably implies setting priorities in resource allocation. When making choices regarding who to support first, and for how long, CSAs can alternatively prioritise the most vulnerable or the most promising cases, with the aim of enabling them to break free from reliance on support. Additionally, they can foster networks of support based on

interpersonal ties of affinity, driven by an intimate and affective logic rooted in complex and varying intersections of age, gender, race and class.

CSAs might also engage with institutionalised internal borders. Efforts to enable migrants access to public resources require complex technical skills as well as close and repeated cooperation with public institutions. Close governmental cooperation does not preclude CSAs from contesting internal borders in different ways, as demonstrated by the repeated individual cases brought to courts and the use of institutional settings to advance requests for a greater commitment on the part of the Municipality on the issue of migrant homelessness. However, restrictive governmental categories of deservingness are not always publicly protested and contested; sometimes, they are pragmatically navigated, especially when CSAs prioritise effective and urgent responses to the needs of particularly vulnerable subjects.

The paper has also shown how the forms of support offered vary significantly among different CSAs and how they change over time, adjusting to turning points in the fields of migration control and refugee reception as well as to the evolving legal-administrative biographies of migrants themselves. This also serves to showcase the “messy”—that is, ambivalent, and, to a certain extent, arbitrary—nature of (internal) borders, in which not only institutional actors but also CSAs actively participate. This ultimately leads to an extremely scattered assemblage of resources accessible to (homeless) migrants and refugees in the Italian territory.

Notes

1. In fact, only migrants who were (or had been) employed in care work, domestic work or agriculture could be involved in this procedure.
2. This new role was introduced by the so-called Zampa law in 2017, and its purpose is to legally represent the unaccompanied minor on Italian territory, safeguarding his or her best interests. These functions were previously the responsibility of the Municipality (through the major and social workers).

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