



## Full Length Article

# Migration governance in border towns: Trajectories of local border governance in Trieste and Messina

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates how border management and the spatial configuration of borderlands shape local migration governance, with a focus on the interactions between local governments and civil society actors. Drawing on a qualitative comparative analysis of two Italian border towns—Trieste, located along a land border, and Messina, a major sea-border disembarkation point—the study shows that geographical, political and institutional factors significantly influence the roles, agency and relationships of local actors. By bringing border management and border spatiality into the analysis of local migration governance, the article demonstrates how different border regimes produce distinct trajectories of cooperation, contention or disengagement between local governments and civil society actors. By foregrounding borders as key spatial and analytical lens, the article advances scholarship in political geography, border studies and local migration governance by introducing the concept of local border governance, which highlights how the border is enacted and contested in border towns through the involvement of multiple actors and the implementation of national and EU border policies.

## 1. Introduction

Over the last decade, the governance of migration in the European Union (EU) has been characterized by a growing role and involvement of both local governmental (LG) and civil society actors (CSAs), in spite of the prominence of national governments in the field (Bazurli & de Graauw, 2023). Although the ‘local turn’ in migration governance has affected cities across the continent, those situated near national borders have emerged as crucial settings for the analysis of migration dynamics. Their front-line position in receiving migration flows makes them particularly valuable to explore the complex interactions amongst the different actors involved in local migration governance. Following these empirical trends, the relationship between local governments and civil society actors has been widely addressed in the literature. The agency of civil society actors in border contexts has received attention in the literature (see for instance Cuttitta et al., 2023), yet few studies so far

have looked at the interaction between civil society actors and local governments in local migration governance by adopting a comparative perspective that places the border in the foreground. By illuminating the specificity of border towns, our study looks at the influence of border spatiality and border management as key spatial and analytical lens to understand the complex and multifaceted interplay between the different actors engaged in the local governance of migration. In this article we thus advance the scholarship on political geography and political and social science literature on border studies and local migration governance by exploring in depth how the spatial configuration of borderlands,<sup>1</sup> coupled with their management, shapes the interaction between local governments and civil society actors. This helps to better grasp the dynamics of cooperation (or lack thereof) between local governments and civil society actors in the local governance of migration in border towns. To that end, in this study we investigate the cases of Trieste and Messina, two Italian border towns affected by increased

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<sup>1</sup> We understand borderlands as hybrid spaces situated in close geographic proximity to borders and directly shaped by their presence (Del & Raffaella, 2016). Viewed through a relational lens, these are zones ‘where the opposites flow into one another, where “strangers” can be at the same time stigmatized and indiscernible from “ourselves”, where the notion of citizenship, involving at the same time community and universality, once again confronts its intrinsic antinomies’ (Balibar, 2009, p. 210).

arrivals of people on the move<sup>2</sup> in the wake of the 2014-15 so-called ‘refugee crisis’. By examining these cases, we propose a twofold argument. First, we argue that the spatial configuration of borderlands, meaning the geographical factors that distinguish land and maritime boundaries, influence – to a certain extent – the type of border management. Second, we contend that the spatial configuration of borderlands, coupled with the type of border management, shapes the interaction between local governments and civil society actors, affecting the role they play in the local governance of migration. In this effort, we consider how and why border-related institutional and management constraints and opportunities influence the agency of local governments and civil society actors, drawing on an actor-centred institutionalist approach (Scharpf, 1997). We therefore propose the concept of “local border governance”, which refers to the ways in which border control and mobility regulation are enacted and contested locally, specifically in border towns, through the involvement of multiple actors and the implementation of national and EU border policies. In border towns, local migration governance and local border governance intersect; yet, we suggest that while border spatiality and border management shape border governance directly, their effects on local migration governance are more indirect.

In what follows we bring into dialogue scholarship from political geography, local migration governance and border studies by singling out the role of border spatiality and border management in the study of local migration governance. Next, the methodology section delves into the case selection rationale and the methodological aspects of the study. Then, we present our findings and discuss them in the comparative section before drawing some conclusions.

## 2. Bringing the border into the study of local migration governance

In the study of the role of local governments in migration governance, several different and multi-disciplinary approaches have emerged within migration studies, urban studies, contentious politics, and beyond, adopting a variety of foci and providing diverse contributions. The multi-level governance literature on migration has cast light on the ‘local turn’ in migration policy (Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017), emphasizing the importance of the local dimension in migration policy-making, following in particular the enhanced autonomy and engagement of local governments in migration and integration policies (Bazurli et al., 2022). Building in part on these approaches, the ‘battleground’ of migration governance (Ambrosini, 2021) has subsequently been theorized as a contentious field in which different players interact, sometimes cooperating and in other cases clashing to influence and enforce local migration policies. Another research stream has looked at the city as a space of solidarity (and counter-solidarity), also using the concepts of ‘sanctuary’ or ‘refuge’ cities (Bauder, 2021, Ozdemir, 2022). Numerous studies have also highlighted the role of civil society actors in local migration governance. Civil society has been analysed as a diverse front composed of non-state actors, including both initiatives supporting migrants and groups opposing their reception. Within the rich literature on the role of civil society in local migration governance, some authors have especially focused on the interaction between local governments and civil society (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Alagna, 2024; Lacroix et al., 2022), while others have looked at the emergence and diffusion of migration-oriented city networks (Caponio, 2022; Lacroix & Spencer, 2022; Oomen, 2020). Overall, this rich and multi-disciplinary literature has offered important theoretical

and empirical insights on the city-migration nexus. Yet little attention so far has been paid to the impact of border management policies in shaping the local governance of migration; and, more specifically, how the geographical proximity of cities to borders and the spatial configuration of borderlands influence the trajectories of cooperation between civil society actors and local governments in border towns.

Extant scholarship has illustrated important migration-related dynamics in ‘border battlegrounds’ (Cuttitta et al., 2023; Filippi, Giliberti, and Queirolo Palmas, 2021), exploring the strategic relevance of border towns’ location (Trucco, 2022) and the role of CSAs within them (Bonizzoni & Dimitriadis, 2024). Nevertheless, scholars have yet to sufficiently engage in bridging local migration governance with a border perspective; that is, investigating how migration governance unfolds within cities situated in border regions. In this article we contribute to the literature by integrating the two, thus positing that the spatial configuration of the borderland and the types of border management contribute considerably to shape local migration governance. We then argue that the borderland, conceived of as a geographically located social system, needs to be taken into account to grasp the dynamics of interaction between local governments and civil society actors in the local governance of migration. To that end, we suggest distinguishing between local migration governance and local border governance.

Our assumption builds on the rich body of political geography and sociology literature on border studies, which has broadly engaged with the significance of borders and bordering dynamics (Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002) in the governance of migration. In critical border studies, the processual turn has led to the understanding of bordering as a dynamic process that produces social hierarchies and inequalities (Fontanari, 2018), characterized by a changing and ambivalent nature. It is for this reason that critical border scholars have decided to study borders as social processes embedded in power relations rather than material and fixed entities (Fontanari, 2018). This process entailed a shift ‘from an initial focus on borders as territorial dividing lines and political institutions to borders regarded as socio-cultural and discursive processes and practices’ (Brambilla, 2015, p. 15). From this, a plethora of new terms, approaches and definitions have been proposed, albeit at times not fully conceptualized and entailing risks of over-generalisation and over-specification (Tallis, 2023).

However, speaking of ‘bordering’ as a practice rather than ‘borderline’ as a demarcation boundary does not reduce the importance of borderlands as an intricate, geographically located social system – which is at the same time a filter and a battleground in which ‘borderwork’ is produced (cf. Van Houtum, 2021). While we fully acknowledge that processes of bordering are dispersed, we thus advocate for the consideration of borderlands as unique and complex areas of social interactions in the contentious governance of migration.

## 3. Case selection and methodology

How do the spatial configuration of the borderland and the type of border management shape local migration governance in border towns? Driven by this question, we decided to focus on two cities that can be geographically, functionally and culturally conceived as ‘border towns’. From an analytical perspective, the two cities selected show significant differences in the characteristics of borderlands and of the local migration governance – while sharing, overall, important similarities in all the other most relevant aspects. Via a qualitative comparative case study, we strove to explain how borderland spatiality and border management shape the nature of the interaction between local governments and civil society actors.

The cities of Trieste and Messina show highly significant similarities in terms of size and privileged position across the centre-periphery continuum, having a population of over 200,000 inhabitants and enjoying the status of regional capital and metropolitan city respectively. They share an overall conservative political culture and have been governed by conservative parties for a long time, with one relevant

<sup>2</sup> ‘People on the move’ and ‘migrant’ are used interchangeably in this article, referring to any person on the move, regardless of their juridical status. The terms ‘asylum seeker’ and ‘refugee’ are only used when discussing the policy framework and its implementation, where the definition of the legal status of people on the move matters in empirical and analytical terms.

exception each (in both cases, during the period considered in this study). Both cities boast a composite civil society landscape, and they were key places of entry and transit in the time frame under consideration. Trieste, located along a land border, is reached by migrants via the Balkan routes. Migrants here slip through secondary border crossings in the Karst plateau, which are less controlled than the official checkpoints. Along this frontier, border controls are discontinuous, partly because the type of terrain is inherently more difficult to monitor than, for example, the Alpine border with France. No specific EU border reception policy has been established to manage incoming migrants (Altin, & Uberti, 2021). Messina is a sea border city, serving as one of the main disembarkation ports for people rescued in the Mediterranean Sea, where arrivals became progressively controlled and contained through in-harbour operational procedures and the opening of front-line reception and detention facilities. Table 1 synthetically displays similarities and differences in the cases of Trieste and Messina.

Our analysis covers the period from 2013 to 2024. Particularly, in the case of Trieste, the timeframe of analysis ranges from 2016 – when an intensification of arrivals occurred and the situation deteriorated following the closure of the Balkan corridor (Milan, 2019) – to 2024. As for Messina, the period considered spans from 2013, when the city was first affected by a dramatic increase in the disembarkation of people rescued at sea, until the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, which heavily impacted (also) on mobility trends and policies.

Throughout this period, a common key moment can be identified: the ‘security turn’ enacted by the Conte I cabinet and the work of Matteo Salvini as Interior Minister. The 2018 so-called ‘Security Decree’ (Decree-law n. 113/2018, converted into Law n. 132/2018) caused a turnaround in migration governance, dramatically cutting down the funding and reducing the possibilities for reception and hospitality of migrants all over Italy, with significant effects both in Trieste and Messina. Border militarisation, an increase in undocumented arrivals and a rise in pushback at borders have been taking place ever since.

The article draws on 19 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with spokespersons and representatives of actors engaged in local migration governance during the period under study in both cities. The interviewees were selected to ensure diversity in terms of social and political background and roles, and they each belong to one of three main categories: local administrators, grassroots solidarity groups, and professionalized NGOs (see *List of interviews*). The interviewees have been chosen for their positions as representatives of the groups and were invited to elaborate on their role in local migration governance, their relationship with local governments and/or civil society actors, and how this changed over time. One of the authors conducted participant observation in the main locations in Trieste where solidarity actors supported people on the move and took part in several sit-ins held in solidarity with them. Research on the case of Messina benefited from the participant observation conducted by the other author throughout the entire period under scrutiny, both as a civil society activist in the municipalist platform *Cambiamo Messina dal Basso* and, during 2017-18, as Deputy-Mayor for Culture and Public Education. Documentary sources, such as newspaper articles, documents and institutional reports

were also used to corroborate interview-based findings. Relevant documents were identified through search engines. Data analysis was inductive and manually conducted collaboratively by both authors.

#### 4. Borderlands, border management and local governance in the border towns of Trieste and Messina

##### 4.1. Border management in Trieste

The borderland of Trieste has been defined as porous (Altin and degli Uberti, 2021) and characterized by a dispersed border management. As regards the spatiality of the borderland, the natural environment surrounding the city, the Karst plateau, is composed of several paths crisscrossing the mountains that, over decades, people on the move have travelled overnight almost undetected.<sup>3</sup> The overland passage of individuals fleeing from Eastern to Central Europe has often served as a migratory crossroads towards Northern Europe (Altin, 2021): migrants change trajectories and tactics along the route, like karst waters (Queirolo-Palmas & Rahola, 2020). Despite its significance as a border crossing, this land border has garnered less academic and media attention compared to the maritime border of Southern Italy (De Genova, 2017), probably due to the fact that the borderland of Trieste constitutes a much more hybrid zone territorially and geopolitically, as well as in terms of European identity and belonging (Altin, 2021).

The city holds an historical tradition of reception of displaced people, from the Italians exiled from Istria and Dalmatia after the Second World War to the refugees fleeing from former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Located at the geographical border with Slovenia, Trieste boasts an historical record of refugee reception, in which local authorities played an important role in collaboration with civil society actors – to the extent that the cooperation in the field of integrated refugee reception (*accoglienza diffusa*) inspired the creation of the national System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR) in the early 2000s. The city is thus considered a pioneer of the model of refugee reception that distributes asylum seekers throughout the territory alongside the local population (Bona, 2016). This means that the approach is not one of containment, but rather offers possibilities for asylum seekers to settle into the local community in the future (Marchetti, 2020). This unique integrated reception system – a peculiarity in Italy – worked thanks to the collaboration between the municipality and local professional NGOs, which have run the system on behalf of the Prefecture for decades (‘a system that is more convenient to maintain than to dispose of’, TS10).

With respect to border management, there are no designated front-line reception or detention facilities in the area. Their absence is often explained by the unavailability of a major military garrison in the proximity of the border that could function as a centralized reception site for asylum seekers (TS10).<sup>4</sup> Usually, families and minors seeking asylum are housed in the premises of two first-aid reception centres: *Casa Malala*, in Ferneti, close to the Slovenian border, which opened in 2016; and *Ostello di Campo Sacro*, in Prosecco/Prosek, both far away from the city centre and in isolated locations near border crossings. Both structures serve to house individuals waiting to access the local reception system, or to be transferred to other reception programmes all over

**Table 1**  
Similarities and differences between the cases of Trieste and Messina.

Contextual factors	Trieste	Messina
Inhabitants	200,000 (240,000 incl. the hinterland), status of regional capital	220,000 (600,000 incl. the hinterland), status of metropolitan city
City's political culture	Conservative, frontier fascism ( <i>fascismo di confine</i> )	Conservative (Christian democratic, liberal, right-wing)
Local government's political orientation	2011-2016 Centre-left (PD) 2016- Right-wing FI, FDI	2013-18 Left-wing 2018- Centre-right

Source: Authors' elaboration

<sup>3</sup> The Schengen agreement has been suspended between 2020 and 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In October 2023, internal land border controls with Slovenia were reintroduced owing to the increase in migratory flows and the heightened threat of terrorist attacks following the Hamas-Israel conflict. At the time of writing, in 2026, controls are still in force as the Schengen agreement is still suspended. Nevertheless, only official border crossings are subject to controls, while alpine paths are controlled only sporadically and will be difficult to monitor in any case (TS10).

<sup>4</sup> Despite several announcements made by the President of the Region, Fedriga, about the opening of a hotspot in this milieu, as planned in his electoral programme (Saracino, 2023).

the territory. But these facilities easily saturate, having a capacity of 80 and 95 people respectively and prioritising categories defined as vulnerable. In the absence of a spot in first reception facilities, or due to the choice of continuing their migratory journey, in 2015 migrants began to self-organize by squatting the Silos, a former granary building erected during the Austro-Hungarian empire and now in ruins (Altin, 2020). The Silos constituted the main makeshift camp in the city, but also the only place where migrants found shelter in dire conditions – until evictions took place and the building was sealed off by local authorities on 22 June 2024.

#### 4.2. The local government actors

From May 2011 to June 2016, the local government was run by the Democratic Party (PD), while a right-wing mayor of *Forza Italia* (FI) started his third mandate in 2016.<sup>5</sup> The Democratic Party was in office also in the Friuli Venezia-Giulia (FVG) region between 2013 and 2018, whereas the League governed the region from 2018 to 2023, and then was confirmed in 2023 under the leadership of Fedriga. For three years, between 2013 and 2016, the centre-left governed both at the municipal and regional level; while from 2018 onwards both were under the centre-right rule. In the region, the increase in migrant arrivals following the 2015 so-called ‘refugee crisis’ was met with ‘a dramatic militarisation of the border and a progressive contraction of the resources allocated for the reception and integration of foreigners’ (Fortarezza, 2023, p. 491). In 2015, local institutions reacted with the opening of an emergency reception facility located in the peripheral valley of Valmaura (Il Piccolo, 2015), on the outskirts of Trieste. There, initially, asylum seekers were provided accommodation in collaboration with the municipality, local associations and the local health district (TS09). The situation deteriorated when right-wing Dipiazza was elected mayor in 2016.

Ever since, the municipality has openly opposed the reception of migrants. In the same year, the mayor decided to entrust the management of the integrated reception system to third-sector professionalized organisations already in charge of managing the second-line reception system, such as ICS (the Italian Consortium of Solidarity), a secular organisation supporting asylum seekers since the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> Although the municipality did not completely leave the second-line reception system, this act ‘sent a political message that local authorities are against it, marking a strong break in a political path’ (TS08). From 2016 onwards, the management of migrant hospitality in Trieste therefore remained without a clear perspective. Only the intervention and strong ‘determination of the third sector’ (Openpolis, 2020) made it possible to give continuity to the reception projects (TS04) organized around widespread small reception facilities. Nevertheless, without the active involvement of the local authorities and their co-funding, the provision of services and reception places was undersized compared to the real needs.

The approval of the Security Decree (cf. above) in 2018 marked another turning point. The restrictions the decree envisaged paved the way for a further reduction of funds at a local level as well, which translated into a shutdown of first aid support for migrants. In May 2020, the municipality closed the *Help Center*, a room located inside the premises of the railway station, which had helped homeless persons and migrants for four years, reaching out to around 21,500 people in the last two years of its operation alone (TriestePrima, 2020). The *Help Center* served as an info point from which individuals could be sorted for dormitory accommodation and other health services – but the municipality did not renew the agreement with the contractor. At the same time, the daily centre run by the *San Martino al Campo* community,

located close to the train station, had to reduce its activities due to the pandemic. As a result, people on the move coming from the Western Balkans route found themselves sleeping rough – with help coming only from grassroots groups.

#### 4.3. Civil society actors

In 2019 the grassroots organisation *Linea d’Ombra* ODV (The Shadow Line) started to provide assistance to people on the move who slept rough. In collaboration with a team of healthcare professionals gathered around *La Strada Si.Cura* collective, *Linea d’Ombra* ODV offered people on the move the medical care that local institutions denied them. They reached out particularly to individuals who were excluded from front-line reception – which the state had to provide through the Prefecture. While at the same time engaging in contentious actions such as protests against border closure (examples being the Caravan for freedom of movement in 2021 and 2022), grassroots groups encouraged ‘civic and political involvement in the activities of the Piazza’ (Fortarezza, 2023, p. 500) in front of the train station, managing to attract to the square a wide array of activists, autonomous solidarity groups and volunteers from all over Italy in support of their caring activities (Milan & Martini, 2024). It was particularly in 2021 – after the founders of the organisation, an elderly couple, were charged by the Prosecutor’s Office of Trieste with collaborating with a smuggling organisation – that the solidarity movement in the city became stronger. In spite of the proceedings against the couple having been dismissed, this attempt at criminalising solidarity boosted support for volunteers in Trieste, who began to be joined by grassroots groups and individuals from all over Italy and Europe to support people on the move in the area around the train station.

#### 4.4. Local border governance in Trieste

The collaboration of professional NGOs such as ICS and Caritas with the municipality and the Prefecture had countenanced a smooth and functioning management of the front-line reception of migrants until 2018 (ICS Ufficio Rifugiati, 2019), when the number of arrivals from the Western Balkans route increased and the available places in second-line reception were reduced. The progressive withdrawal of local governments from front- and second-line reception paved the way for a strengthening of ties between different CSAs, which coordinated their efforts to keep the reception system working. In second-line reception, professionalized NGOs continued to manage the facilities devoted to integrated reception in place of the local municipality, also because no other consortium possessed the necessary resources to win the tendering process of the Prefecture to run a system that provides around 900 hospitality places scattered in small apartments all over the city (TS10). As for the front-line reception, the municipality disengaged from offering temporary accommodation to people on the move. The state, operating through the Prefecture, also slowed down the transfers of asylum seekers from Trieste to the rest of the territory, creating a situation of ‘artificial emergency’ (TS04). Consequently, the number of people sleeping rough or inside the Silos – though entitled to a place in the reception system – grew exponentially.

Grassroots groups and professional organisations then strengthened ties and started to collaborate, ranging from monitoring arrivals to supporting people on the move by providing first-level assistance, distributing food and clothes, offering medical and legal assistance, and engaging in advocacy activities. Putting together the resources derived solely from private donations (TS04, TS11), with no intervention whatsoever from the local government, in 2022 the groups collectively managed to re-open the daily centre run by the charity *Comunità di San Martino al Campo*, which agreed to share the spaces of the daily centre

<sup>5</sup> Dipiazza I and II mandates date back to 2001-06 and 2006-11 respectively.

<sup>6</sup> ICS moved from being a managing body of the system to being the main holder of the SPRAR system.

with other associations<sup>7</sup> assisting people on the move (TS11). To compensate for institutional disengagement, these actors formed an alliance informally called *la rete solidale* (solidarity network), bringing together professionalized NGOs and grassroots groups, and coordinating their efforts around meal distribution in the square. In June 2024, the municipality evicted the Silos and sealed it off, without providing an alternative shelter to people on the move. In so doing, it reiterated its disengagement, refusing to listen to the plea of civil society actors.

#### 4.5. Border management in Messina

Messina de facto became a migration border town in 2013. Following the launch of the Italian governmental search and rescue operation *Mare Nostrum*, and the concurrent deployment of civil society sea rescue ships in the Mediterranean, Messina was designated by the Ministry of Interior as one of the main disembarkation ports. Sea arrivals following search and rescue operations are inherently associated with some degree of control and containment, due to the very fact that disembarkation ports (the 'places of safety' under international law) are designated as such by the central government. However, Messina's border management presented significant elements of dispersion over 2013 and 2014. Local institutions and civil society were essentially unprepared for the arrival of migrants, both logistically and in terms of task allocation. No one was expecting this sudden centrality as a key border town, and no one knew how to deal with it, with a significant mix-up of tasks and responsibilities between the national government, represented by the local Prefecture, and the local government (ME04, ME05). In a nutshell, it was not clear who bore responsibility for disembarkation management and front-line reception (e.g. finding places and providing basic goods for front-line reception, conducting screening and providing health and legal support, etc.) (ME04, ME06, ME08).

From mid-2014 onwards, tasks and responsibilities were progressively clarified and distributed: the national government (through the Prefecture) took charge of front-line reception, whereas the LG had to deal with unaccompanied minors<sup>8</sup> and, in cooperation with the Prefecture and on a purely voluntary basis, with second-line reception. At the same time, the border management in Messina became increasingly organized, as several front-line reception and detention centres were opened and enhanced over time (see Table 2). Before reception/detention facilities became fully operational, ad hoc solutions were put in place by the local government, such as churches and schools (ME06, ME08; *Gazzetta del Sud*, 2014a, 2014b). Moreover, in-harbour procedures became increasingly organized over time, in a process of borderisation and invisibilisation. Changes in port border management were not only procedural, but also spatial: in 2017, the disembarkation area for people rescued at sea was moved from the *Marconi* pier (closer to city centre and to the cruise terminal) to the *Norimberga* pier, which was more isolated, less visible and easier to control (De Pasquale, 2017). In a similar fashion, from 2018 onwards early activities of front-line reception were moved from the disembarkation pier to the hotspot (ME06).

#### 4.6. The local government actors

In 2013 Renato Accorinti, a well-known activist in the peace, environmental and anti-mafia movements, was elected mayor of Messina, with support from a municipalist platform, a few left-wing and radical-

<sup>7</sup> Such as *Diaconia Valdese* (an association of the Waldensian Evangelical Church, a protestant organisation active in Italy and Switzerland), *DONK Humanitarian Medicine* (an association composed of volunteer healthcare workers), *International Rescue Committee Italy* (an organisation dedicated to supporting refugees in Europe since World War II).

<sup>8</sup> In the Italian legislative framework, the local government is responsible for assisting all unaccompanied minors on its territory, regardless of their nationality and legal status.

**Table 2**  
Front-line reception/detention facilities in Messina.

Front-line reception/detention facility	Main characteristics	Average number of places	Years of activity
<i>Palanebiolo</i>	University gymnasium and tent camp; originally used as relocation site from Lampedusa	250	2013-17
<i>CPA Centro Ahmed</i>	Originally meant to replace <i>Palanebiolo</i> ; eventually used only for minors, in order to avoid mixing with adults at <i>Palanebiolo</i>	120	2014-
<i>CPA Bisconte</i>	Former military barracks, located in a socio-economically marginal neighbourhood	200	2015-2020
<i>EU Hotspot Bisconte</i>	Former military barracks, located in a socio-economically marginal neighbourhood	250	2017-2020-2023-

Sources: ASGI, 2023; Mazzeo (2015); Melting Pot Europa (2016); Ministero dell'interno, n.d.; Vaccaro (2016).

left parties and numerous civil society organisations. He remained in office until 2018. New elections were then won by Cateno De Luca, a centre-right populist and independentist and former member of the Sicilian Regional Council, who stayed in office until 2022.

Within a context of unclear task allocation between national and local government, a local government whose political culture and base were particularly sensitive toward the rights of people on the move decided to fully engage with disembarkation assistance and front-line reception (ME04, ME05, ME08). Some tensions emerged between the local government and the Prefecture, which was accused of inaction and pass-the-buck tactics (ME04, ME05). However, from mid-2014 onwards, their respective roles became increasingly clear and more firmly defined. The LG's tasks were limited to unaccompanied minors and second-line reception, for example by joining the SPRAR system and taking part in the EU project *Arrival Cities* (ME05, ME06). Disembarkation and front-line reception remained in the hands of the national government, through the Interior Ministry and the Prefecture. Against this backdrop, and in spite of the political proactivity and sensitivity toward migration, the role of the local government in front-line reception became essentially symbolic or, at most, advocacy-oriented. Examples are the public stances adopted with respect to the *Palanebiolo* centre and tent camp, to the opening of a hotspot or, toward the end of Accorinti's term, against Salvini's 'closed port' policy (Galindo, 2018; Marsala, 2016).

Considering the limited reach that even a local government taking a proactive stance towards migration could have in terms of front-line reception, it is not surprising that the conservative and populist government which took office in 2018 should show such a complete lack of interest toward front-line reception. The only significant exception occurred during the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic, when De Luca fuelled public fears by disseminating information about alleged health and security crises in the Bisconte hotspot. Provocatively, he also ordered the closure of the hotspot (*Città di Messina*, 2020), even though he was well aware that he had no formal authority on it. Consequently – and as largely anticipated – the then-prefect Maria Carmela Librizzi invalidated the mayor's decree (Ministero dell'interno, 2020).

#### 4.7. Civil society actors

As soon as the first rescue ships began docking in Messina in 2013, a wide array of civil society actors engaged in migrant support. CSAs included both local and national/international initiatives. The former were mostly associated with the local anti-racist movement, and comprised leftist and anarchist groups (such as those who had been part of the *Teatro Pinelli* squat or the municipalist platform that had won the

2013 elections, *Cambiamo Messina dal Basso*), human right and politico-cultural organisations (such as *ARCI* circles and the association *Migrabal A. Sayad*) and local branches of faith-based associations (such as *Caritas Diocesana*, *Fondazione Migrantes* and *Comunità di Sant'Egidio*). National and international initiatives were mostly professionalized and included NGOs such as the Italian Red Cross, Oxfam, Save the Children, Terre des Hommes and INTERSOS (ME01, ME02, ME03, ME07).

During the first months of unclear competence allocation, most of the active CSAs were local. Their agency developed along two main lines: on the one hand, they engaged in political actions, such as protests, advocacy and awareness-raising initiatives (ME04, ME07. See also [Manti, 2013](#)). On the other hand, they also became involved in key activities of humanitarian support, which can be conceived of as 'direct social action' ([Bosi & Zamponi, 2015](#)) (ME07). During this initial phase, several individuals also autonomously participated in humanitarian actions of support, especially lawyers and medical doctors (ME04, ME08).

As border management became more contained, in 2014-15 a split took place between local grassroots actors and less political organisations, such as faith-based ones and, even more so, national and international NGOs. Access to the harbour during disembarkations was granted only to professional and pre-authorized personnel, while front-line reception no longer took place in the emergency venues identified and made available by the municipality – which, since they lacked specific access policies, several volunteers were allowed to enter (ME01, ME02, ME03, ME06, ME07). The new hotspot and CPA in the Bisconte neighbourhood were off-limits to unauthorized personnel (as was already the case for the *Palanebiolo* CAS) (ME04). Eventually, some grassroots actors disengaged, whereas others decided to exclusively focus on political mobilisation. Progressively, most of them fully demobilized, feeling overall powerless (ME07). As for the less political initiatives and national and international NGOs, they instead gained an increasingly large role in border management and migration governance, through formalized partnerships with the Prefecture and the local government (ME01, ME02, ME03, ME05, ME06, ME07).

This situation crystallized in the following years and did not significantly change, even after salient events such as the local and national elections in 2018, which led to the *Conte I* cabinet and Cateno De Luca's mayorship. The only significant exception took place in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic and was directly observed by one of the authors. In February 2020 the sea rescue ship *Sea Watch 3* landed at Messina after completing a search and rescue mission. People on the move were quarantined in the hotspot, whereas the crew was quarantined onboard. Since this was an unexpected situation, the crew had no food on board and could not cope with its basic needs for the following two weeks. National authorities did not provide any assistance, nor did the local government led by De Luca. In this emergency, a few grassroots initiatives self-organized, in coordination with *Sea Watch*, to bring the ship crew food and basic goods needed for the quarantine. Border guards and port health officials granted access to the ship and made the delivery possible.

#### 4.8. Local border governance in Messina

The relationship between the local government and civil society actors in Messina has always been complex, though it has evolved over time. When sea arrivals first spiked in 2013-14, the relationship was predominantly cooperative. As we have seen, when the first disembarkations took place and the local government took care of the coordination of most activities, organized civil society actors and individuals openly collaborated to cater for food, assistance and medical care (ME04, ME07, ME08). In this phase, even in some of the most contentious moments, local government and civil society actors seemed to work as allies (ME07).

Shortly thereafter, following the progressive marginalization of the local government in front-line reception that began in mid-2014, significant changes in the relationship between the LG and CSAs occurred.

Opportunities for cooperation in humanitarian work were limited to institutionalized and professional NGOs, who in fact kept collaborating with the local government (ME06). Grassroots initiatives, as described above, mostly limited their action to protest and advocacy. Some early signs of a cleavage became evident in the relationship between grassroots actors and the local government. Whereas the majority of CSAs considered the national government and the Prefecture as the main targets of political contention – consistently with task allocation and decision-making power in migration governance – some started developing a confrontational attitude toward the local government and accused it of disengaging, especially in relation to the appalling conditions of the *Palanebiolo* centre and tent camp. (ME04, ME05, ME07).

This cleavage crystallized as soon as the Prefecture fully took over disembarkation and front-line reception and the local government was definitively marginalized. Several local grassroots CSAs continued their political mobilisation against the national government and the Prefecture, whereas those who were already targeting the local government ramped up their confrontational attitude. Arguably, the rift and its intensification were determined by broader aspects of local politics, associated with increased criticism from a few left-wing actors in Messina toward the Accorinti government (ME07). As recalled above, a wide share of activists fully disengaged from political mobilisation, feeling powerless in a context of strong hierarchical governance in the hands of the central government.

This trajectory resulted in an essentially limited interaction between the local government and grassroots civil society actors from 2015 onwards, with only a few exceptions where collaboration took place in institutional settings – such as within the EU-funded project *Arrival Cities*, or through participation in a local Permanent table on migration (ME06). Institutionalized civil society – mostly national and international NGOs – continued working with the local government instead, both during disembarkations and in front-line reception.<sup>9</sup> Contentious mobilisation targeting the local government also dramatically decreased from 2015 onwards, with just a few instances during both Accorinti's and De Luca's mandates, mostly targeting national migration policies. However, these are but a handful of exceptions in the broader context of a local pro-migrant solidarity movement that had already concluded its cycle of contention.

#### 5. Trajectories of local border governance: a comparative assessment

As our empirical section elucidates below, local migration governance differs pronouncedly across the two cities. In Trieste, the local government and civil society actors initially collaborated to receive migrants, until the former decided to disengage. Consequently, grassroots actors and professionalized non-governmental organisations (NGOs) strengthened ties to jointly replace the local government. As for Messina, the local government and CSAs were key players at a very early stage, and collaborative dynamics emerged here too. Over time, however, the agency of the local government was strongly reduced, grassroots actors demobilized, and solidarity activities were left in the hands of an increasingly professionalized NGO sector. We posit that these different trajectories can be explained by looking at the interplay between the different spatial configurations of borderlands and the associated types of border management in these two cities.

In fact, our analysis suggests that an interplay of geographical, political and organizational factors, which we gather under the categories of "borderland spatiality" and "border management", can explain the different trajectories of collaboration between civil society actors and local governments involved in local border governance. First, as the

<sup>9</sup> Cooperation in second-line reception took place between the LG and both grassroots and institutionalized CSAs (ME06, ME07), but this is beyond the scope of the article.

empirical part illustrated, the different spatiality of borderlands facilitated the passage of migrants across the Karst plateau almost undetected (in Trieste) or in a channelled and controlled manner through disembarkation points (in Messina). In turn, this favoured a type of border management that we define as dispersed in Trieste and contained in Messina. Namely, the land border around Trieste is more difficult to be contained due to the multiple access points it provides through the unmonitored border crossings across the mountains. By contrast, the sea border of Messina appears more likely to be easily controlled, given the fixed and regulated disembarkation points. Political and organizational factors played a role as well, with EU and state border policies being implemented differently in the two contexts, as explained below.

In Trieste's borderland, border management has historically been characterized by elements of dispersion. Notwithstanding the several calls to build a fence at the border with Slovenia (Il Post, 2019), the frontier continued to be crossed almost on a daily basis, and state border controls remained loosely applied. This is also due to the fact that the city, from a historical standpoint, is considered a border town whose frontier has always been crossed in both directions (TS03). The geographical reality of a territory composed of a series of secondary border crossings in the Karst plateau makes it difficult to monitor the overnight passage of people on the move; in Messina, however, arrivals are controlled and channelled through the hotspot system. Containment attempts notwithstanding, the number of arrivals remained stable over time in Trieste. As for the political and organizational factors, the national government tried to restrain arrivals through forms of refolement such as push-backs (2018-21), until they were declared illegal; by slowing down the transfers of migrants to other cities in Italy (2022-23); and by suspending the Schengen agreement with Slovenia in 2023 for alleged 'terrorist threats' (Il Sole 24 ore, 2024). At the local level, the right-wing local government actively disengaged from migrant reception and hospitality. At first, it did so by removing from the reception system the apartments previously made available to asylum seekers in second-line reception; and later, it evicted the makeshift shelter known as Silos without providing any alternative (2024). As a result, the stance of both the Prefecture - which represents the Ministry of the Interior - and the municipality prompted the activation of the solidarity network of Trieste, which engaged at two levels: by replacing authorities in providing first-hand support to people on the move passing by Trieste, and by keeping the second-line reception system working. The shift to a right-wing local government in 2016, together with the 2018 Security Decree, further constrained the room for manoeuvre of CSAs, which were left with limited resources to sustain existing facilities. The Covid-19 pandemic worsened the situation, as the existing facilities available to assist migrants were closed for sanitary reasons. Once the pandemic was over, the municipality continued its active disengagement in the reception of migrants - a task which, they considered, fell solely upon the Prefecture.

Despite the challenging conditions, grassroots groups and professional NGOs operating independently strengthened their ties to provide first aid to people on the move and to continue exerting pressure on local authorities to assume responsibility for their reception. First reception had remained completely in the hands of grassroots groups and humanitarian organisations relying on private donations and on a network of solidarity actors all over the country. Critical points in time such as the pandemic, the criminalisation of solidarity and the disengagement of local governments represented an opportunity for volunteers and activists to strengthen their ties and openly confront local authorities and the Prefecture in the management of asylum seekers. In the meantime, they strategically called on individuals and organisations from all over Italy to reach Trieste and provide support to people on the move shunned by local and national authorities. In this first trajectory, we observe that the spatial configuration of the border, combined with a dispersed mode of border management, produced a twofold effect on local migration and border governance. On the one hand, it facilitated the disengagement of the local government, reinforced by ideological

factors and pressures from the right-wing majority of *Brothers of Italy*. On the other hand, it prompted a strengthening of ties between grassroots groups and professional NGOs, which tried to compensate for the absence of institutional commitment.

In the case of the sea-border town of Messina, controlled arrivals of people rescued at sea began as early as 2013. However, in the initial phase, border management was dispersed, and responsibilities and task allocation remained unclear. From 2014 onward, it became increasingly structured around logics of containment and securitisation. At the same time, the Prefecture assumed responsibility for disembarkations and front-line reception, in accordance with existing legislation, thereby taking the lead from the local government. The initial confusion surrounding disembarkation procedures and the allocation of tasks and responsibilities in 2013 created space for the local government to intervene actively—an opportunity that the left-wing Accorinti administration promptly seized, given its political sensitivity to the issue. The ideological affinity between the left-wing government and pro-migrant actors further strengthened their cooperative relationship. However, from mid-2014 onwards, as soon as the roles of local government and Prefecture became clearer, and border management more controlled, the room for agency of the local government waned dramatically. In a more contained border management system, the local government was overall marginalized with respect to disembarkation and front-line reception.

Likewise, the initial border management dispersion and absence of clear task allocation enhanced the agency of civil society actors. Grassroots local initiatives mobilized through protests and advocacy but also offering direct, first-hand support to migrants. A shift toward a more structured border management and clearer allocation of tasks and responsibilities resulted in the marginalization of civil society actors. Volunteerism was no longer needed, and also not even allowed, in a system that was increasingly bureaucratized, securitized and hierarchized. The subsequent disengagement of some grassroots actors - as well as the chasm among those protesting against the local government and those targeting the national one - led to a strong setback in the migrant solidarity movement in Messina. Conversely, institutionalized NGOs became formally integrated into the disembarkation and front-line reception governance. The unexpected situation stemming from the pandemic further points to the significant role played by border management in shaping the agency of civil society. In spite of a controlled and contained form of border management, some elements - paradoxically - became slightly more dispersed and open to bottom-up initiatives at a critical moment, as was the case with the *Sea Watch 3* quarantine (cf. above).

In this second trajectory, the evolving relationship between the local government and civil society actors in Messina can too be understood through the development of border management and the roles these actors assumed within it. Wherever dispersed border management created openings for intervention, the LG and CSAs collaborated tightly, initially operating in clear alignment due to shared political orientations and ideological affinities. As the pro-migrant solidarity field in Messina became internally fractured, these cooperative arrangements grew more complex. Once their room for action was significantly reduced, local government and civil society actors rarely interacted with each other.

In a nutshell, the cases considered explain how the spatial configuration of the borderland and the different forms of border management play a central role in shaping the trajectories of collaboration between local government actors and civil society organisations.

## 6. Conclusions

By incorporating the spatiality of borderlands and border management into the analysis of local migration governance, we sought to advance the scholarship in political geography, border studies and the political and social sciences by demonstrating that both the spatial configuration of the border and its management are essential

components of local migration governance – as well as directly influencing local border governance. In so doing, we assert the centrality of both borderlands and border management in developing a deeper understanding of the relationship between local governments and civil society in the local governance of migration and of border. We hence introduced the concept of “local border governance”, which refers not only to how cities handle the presence of migrants, but also to how they are directly influenced by border controls, mobility regulation, and bordering practices, involving multiple actors. This becomes particularly evident in border towns, as the analysis of the cases of Trieste and Messina demonstrates.

This article opens multiple avenues for future research. To deepen our theoretical contribution, further research could explore additional cases of border towns characterised by different spatial configurations and by diverse types of border regimes. This could further enhance the understanding of the dynamics discussed in this article. Additional scholarship could also examine in greater depth the temporal evolution of relations between civil society actors and local governments in border towns. While this article adopts a longitudinal perspective—unlike much of the existing literature, which addresses these relationships in static terms—we recognize the limitations of our temporal scope. A tailored longitudinal study could help bridge this gap and yield a more comprehensive account of how local migration and border governance evolves over time, taking into account different borderland configurations and border regimes. Besides demonstrating that spatial configurations matter in analysing local migration dynamics in border towns, our findings also show that solidarity actors constitute a heterogeneous group whose role shifts in response to border management and ideological affinities – or divergences. For this reason, further research could examine political alignment or conflicts between local governments and civil society actors, as well as the changing configuration of solidarity actors in different border towns.

#### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Chiara Milan:** Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Federico Alagna:** Writing – original draft.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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#### List of interviews

TS01, Healthcare professional, activist, La Strada Si.Cura, Trieste, 27 February 2021  
 TS02, Volunteer, ODV La Linea D'Ombra, Trieste, 27 February 2021

TS03, City Councillor, Adesso Trieste group, Trieste, 22 January 2024  
 TS04, Chairman, Consorzio Italiano di Solidarietà (ICS), Trieste, 22 January 2024  
 TS05, Regional Councillor, Democratic Party, Trieste, 23 January 2024  
 TS06, Project Officer manager, Caritas Trieste, Trieste, 27 February 2024  
 TS07, Grassroots activist, No Name Kitchen, Trieste, 11 March 2024  
 TS08, Healthcare professional, volunteer, DONK humanitarian medicine, Trieste, 28 February 2024  
 TS09, Humanitarian worker, Diaconia Valdese, Trieste, 3 June 2024  
 TS10, Humanitarian worker, International Rescue Committee, Trieste, 3 June 2024  
 TS11, Social service worker, Comunità di San Martino al Campo, Trieste, 4 June 2024  
 ME01, Humanitarian worker, Intersos, online, 10 October 2018  
 ME02, Humanitarian worker, Terre des Hommes, online, 22 October 2018  
 ME03, Humanitarian worker, Intersos, online, 23 October 2018  
 ME04, Lawyer, member of ASGI, Messina, 11 April 2024  
 ME05, Former deputy-mayor for migration policies, City of Messina, Messina, 12 April 2024  
 ME06, Migration and integration policy supervisor, City of Messina, Messina, 12 April 2024  
 ME07, Grassroots activist, Rete Antirazzista/ARCI, online, 13 April 2024  
 ME08, Volunteer medical doctor, online, 15 April 2024

#### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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