



Framing Asylum at the Local Level: Experts' Narratives of Conflictual Dynamics in the Post-Reception Period in Italy

Iraklis Dimitriadis¹ · Maurizio Ambrosini²

Accepted: 11 August 2023
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Abstract

Studies on the framing of the refugee crisis have focused on media and political discourses, revealing contrasting views and an increasing politicization of immigration. However, the framing-of-asylum discourse in relation to the reception and settlement of asylum seekers in local communities has so far received less attention, especially when conflictual dynamics emerge. This article investigates the ways in which experts at different levels make sense of how the refugee crisis has unfolded in local communities in Italy. Insofar as asylum governance has become a contentious issue, it looks at conflictual situations. The research challenges the binary between humanitarian and fear frames by suggesting the prevalence of a managerialist frame focusing on a problematic implementation of asylum policies. Taking into consideration the opinions of local experts, it also reveals a shift from a fear frame to an inconvenience frame, which denies xenophobic discourses on invasion or social/public disorder in local communities, but finds other reasons to deny acceptance. The article also adds to the study of the horizontal dynamics between public and private actors, which are central, especially at the local level, and introduces refugees as subjects who actively participate in the “battleground” of asylum governance. Therefore, claims about a negotiated order between different tiers of governance within the multilevel governance approach are challenged.

Keywords Refugees · Asylum governance · Local policies · Italy · Political identities · Civil society

✉ Iraklis Dimitriadis
Iraklis.dimitriadis@unimib.it
Maurizio Ambrosini
Maurizio.ambrosini@unimi.it

¹ Department of Sociology and Social Sciences, University of Milano-Bicocca, Piazza Dell'Ateneo Nuovo, 1, 20126 Milan, Italy

² Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Milan, Via Passione 13, 20122 Milan, Italy

Introduction

In considering migration and asylum governance at the national and European levels, studies on the discursive construction of the so-called “refugee crisis” have focused, on the one hand, on how media and politicians have represented and interpreted events in relation to rescue operations, and the landing and reception of refugees and asylum seekers (RASs), and on the other hand, on how such interpretations shape migration policies and processes (Sahin-Mencutek et al., 2022). These works have largely relied on the analysis of policy documents, speeches by politicians, press, media, and political debates, and have generally highlighted two contrasting frames, that is, a humanitarian/moralistic frame and a securitization or threat frame (Boswell et al., 2021; Castelli Gattinara, 2017a; Colombo, 2018). Referring to these events, various terms have also been used to define the kind of crisis, namely “refugee crisis,” “migration crisis,” “humanitarian crisis,” “crisis of the European border,” “refugee reception crisis,” “crisis of Schengen,” and “crisis of European refugee politics” (Agustín & Jorgensen, 2019; De Genova et al., 2018; Rea et al., 2019).

Moreover, a burgeoning literature has concentrated on the framing and evaluation of practices of those who implemented policies and were engaged in asylum governance at the local level (Glorius & Doomernik, 2020; Hinger et al., 2016). Scholars have called for a local turn in migration and asylum governance, reflecting the growing relevance of the local (city) level not only in implementing migration policies, but also in drawing up its own agendas related to immigrant integration (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2009). Recently, municipalities and nongovernmental actors have assumed an active role in the migration asylum governance at the local level (Hinger et al., 2016; Spencer & Delvino, 2019; Dimitriadis et al., 2021) where the reception of RAS has also been marked by contentious aspects. However, we believe that it is crucial to shed further light on how different actors frame the unfolding of the “refugee crisis” in local communities in which asylum governance has been conflictual. Moreover, there is limited knowledge about the horizontal dynamics, that is, interactions between private and public stakeholders when dealing with, or being part of, contentious situations.

In light of the above, this article aims to answer two research questions:

- How do professional experts active at the national level (PENs) and locals with expert (professional) knowledge (LEKs) make sense of the arrival and settlement of refugees in local communities?
- What are the dynamics that emerge from the interaction between municipalities and civil society actors (CSAs)¹ in contentious situations in relation to the reception of RAS?

¹ Under the heading of civil society actors (CSAs), we include NGOs, voluntary associations, trade unions, religious institutions, social movements and spontaneous mobilizations by common citizens (Dimitriadis & Ambrosini, 2022).

Using a qualitative frame analysis (Entman, 1993) of empirical material concerning the post-reception period² in Italy and deploying the concept of “battleground” that sees asylum governance as an arena of negotiation and conflict in which different actors engage according to their own interests, values, and frameworks (Ambrosini, 2021), this article highlights the divergence from the typical binary between *humanitarian* and *fear* frames. It argues that a managerialist frame enters into discourses on asylum governance at the local level, which indicates problematic implementation of asylum policies. This article also makes a contribution to the horizontal dynamics of the multilevel governance (MLG) approach by discovering an inactive stance taken by local authorities concerning asylum issues. RASs are also considered important subjects engaged in the asylum governance at the local level.

First, the article briefly reviews studies of the representation of immigration and asylum issues and introduces the MLG approach and the concept of battleground. Second, it discusses methods and tools of analysis, and it gives information on the case study of Busto Arsizio (northern Italy) that is analyzed. Third, it analyzes empirical material by looking at the narratives of experts active at the national level and those at the local level. Finally, it discusses how the findings contribute to the strands of literature that this work restates.

Framing Immigration and Asylum Discourse: Variety of Different Context-Sensitive Frame Typologies

The analysis of properties of texts or talks about migrants is crucial in understanding migration processes. Frame analysis is one of the tools used in discourse studies and contributes to a better understanding of the discursive construction of migration and asylum questions (van Dijk, 2018). Such an analytical tool, though, should also be connected to the social, political, and material conditions that make framing processes regarding migration possible. In other words, speeches and discourses convey information about facts or representations of the speaker, but their analysis leads to an understanding of the mental models, attitudes, power position, ideologies, and contextual factors that underpin texts and talks (Nickels, 2007). Therefore, analysis of frames can reveal social and political implications of discourses on society (van Dijk, 2018).

A large body of literature on discourses around immigration and asylum has analyzed the ways in which media and politicians frame events in relation to immigration processes. Dekker and Scholten (2017) argue that there are four prevalent frames. The first is the *human-interest frame* that portrays immigrants and refugees as victims in need of compassion, help and solidarity (Nickels, 2007). The second is the *threat frame* and is used by those who attribute negative connotations to the phenomenon, thus generating anxiety among the majority population, which perceives

² By “post-reception” we mean the period following the first settlement of RASs at reception facilities, that is, the phase in which RASs have access to rights and services such as vocational training, the labor market and language courses.

immigration as a threat, both to public order (e.g., criminality, terrorism) and to social order (e.g., identity, territorial cohesion), because immigrants' cultural traits are seen as incompatible with those of the majority (Spencer & Delvino, 2019). Third, the *economic frame* emphasizes the economic losses or gains for host countries deriving from immigrants' and refugees' settlement. Discourses here regard the pressure that immigrants put on welfare systems or, on the other hand, the benefits linked to immigrants' presence, i.e., those perceived as useful such as high-skilled workers, health professionals and seasonal workers (de Haas et al., 2018). Fourth, the *managerialist frame* discusses immigration as a challenge for the governance of the consequences of the migratory process in depoliticized terms; that is, it puts little or no emphasis on whether immigration is desirable or not. With regard to RASs, Nickels (2007) also identifies a *genuineness frame* relating to the distinction between political and economic refugees, in the sense that RASs are divided into people persecuted because of their political opinions, and those who migrate for economic reasons and, therefore, do not deserve international protection, as speakers opposing immigration state (Chauvin et al., 2013). A *return home frame* also emerges in Nickel's (2007) work; that is, refugees' settlement in the host country should not be permanent, but rather they should return home whenever possible.

Turning now to the local level, similar frames are identified in the literature on the integration approach at the city level (Campomori & Caponio, 2013). A *security frame* is used by those local policymakers who intend to favor national residents instead of immigrants, while asking controls to ensure that the latter abide by the law. A second frame involving *humanitarian and human rights* discourses focuses on the vulnerability of migrants and the latter's need to be assisted. The economic dimension highlighted above is expressed through a *deserving workers frame* suggesting that migrants are needed in the local labor market (Bonizzoni, 2020), and, as such, they deserve legal status (Chauvin et al., 2013). While these three frames focus on migrants as beneficiaries, Spencer and Delvino (2019) found that framing by local policymakers may also relate to the impacts of the exclusion of (irregular) migrants on the city as a whole, i.e., how the governance of (irregular) immigration affects residents of the city and city administration. These authors introduce a *socio-economic frame* that sees the exclusion of irregular migrants as harmful for the local economy (e.g., negative image of touristic destinations), public health (exclusion from healthcare may endanger the whole population) and social cohesion, as well as hindering local policies to tackle homelessness and street prostitution. The *efficiency frame* indicates that the administration of procedures that promote the exclusion of irregular migrants is more cost-effective than inclusive policies (unregistered people make it difficult for authorities to protect minors and, in contrast, to tackle crime).

By exploring local media and/or politicians' discourses in relation to the events since the summer of 2015, two dominant frames are identified: the threat/victim and the humanitarian (Hinger et al., 2019; Pettrachin, 2020; Schammann et al., 2021). The framing process among media and politicians at the local level shares similar characteristics with the framing of immigration at the national level, as presented above (Dekker & Scholten, 2017; Nickels, 2007). Recent research, though, also concentrates on how civil society frames asylum questions. On the one hand, studies investigate discourses of NGO professionals, volunteers and citizens interested in immigration

issues. A large proportion of these pro-refugee actors represent the so-called “refugee crisis” in humanitarian terms (Dimitriadis et al., 2021). On the other hand, several works explore the framing of a set of events in relation to migration since 2015 by people opposed to immigration. For instance, Simonovits (2020) identifies two different dimensions of the “*threat frame*” deployed in Hungary, namely *realistic threats framing*, which includes discourses on safety (e.g., crime, terrorism, diseases), the labor market (e.g., laziness of refugees as workers), welfare (e.g., economic burdens due to the provision of social services) and great numbers of arrivals, and a *symbolic threats framing*, which relates to religion and the cultural traits of new arrivals. Castelli Gattinara (2017b) also finds that far-right Italian activists deny the concept of “refugee crisis” and denounce the corruption of the asylum and immigrant reception system, blaming NGOs for promoting their own economic interests. Despite distancing themselves from biological racism and avoiding the language used by traditional far-right parties and movements, they present new arrivals as an invasion (Bruno, 2016) and focus on threats connected to irregular migration regarding public order and incompatibility between locals’ and migrants’ cultural values.

Putting together different typologies, it can be said that studies on the framing of migration offer valuable insights into the ways in which the migration discourse is structured at both the national and local level through nine main frames: (1) human-interest or humanitarian; (2) threat or fear; (3) economic; (4) managerialist; (5) genuineness; (6) deservingness; (7) return home; (8) socioeconomic; (9) efficiency. On the one hand, these works show that frames are context-sensitive. On the other, they often looked at the interplay between the framing process and MLG dynamics (Campomori & Caponio, 2013; Spencer, 2018).

Having looked at the main frames deployed to speak of migration and asylum, we then explore how researchers have combined frame analysis with the MLG perspective to investigate the responses of municipalities and other private actors engaged at the local level in asylum governance since 2015/16.

The Entanglement of Local and Regional Governments with Civil Society Actors in the “Battleground” of Asylum Governance Across Europe

The study of the asylum discourse framing of the so-called “refugee crisis” in 2015/16 has often contributed to a better understanding in general of local policies concerning immigrants and migratory processes at the local level. Framing the reception of asylum seekers in pragmatic terms without ideological hues can contribute to clear policy frames (Pogliano & Ponzo, 2019) or local innovation (Geuijen et al., 2020). Similarly, when local policymakers represent the reception of RASs not only in humanitarian terms but also as an opportunity for the local economy, this can result in the engagement of adjacent municipalities as well as a number of NGOs in integration programs and initiatives (Sabchev, 2021). RAS’s reception can also be seen as an opportunity to improve integration policies, in general, and stimulate new synergies among municipalities and CSAs (Larruina et al., 2019). On the other hand, Semprebon and Pelacani (2020) show that the labeling “transit migrants” by

local authorities implies limited access to services in relation to those arriving by sea on southern Italian shores. Overall, much of this research has adopted an MLG approach that rightly points out the intersection between different policy levels in the treatment of immigration and asylum questions, namely international, national and local (vertical dimension). However, this approach hardly addresses the horizontal dimension of the governance, namely the interaction between public and non-public actors at different levels.

In focusing on vertical and horizontal interactions, several scholars added to the MLG approach by highlighting the importance of the element of negotiation among multiple actors. Hinger et al. (2016) suggested the conception of “local zones of negotiation” to understand how the asylum is produced at the local level as a result of the interaction of a variety of actors (e.g., Ministry of Interior, police asylum seekers, support groups) across space and time. By bringing the realities of RASs into local policymaking in Sweden, civil society actors can also push municipalities to undertake more inclusive integration initiatives (Fry & Islar, 2021). Yet, this research overemphasizes a “negotiated order” characterizing vertical and horizontal relationships among social actors (Ataç et al., 2023), underestimating the impacts of the conflictual dimension on migration.

To address the shortcomings of the MLG approach, we deploy the concept of “battleground,” (Ambrosini, 2021) which integrates such an approach while placing more importance on the tensions and conflicts among different institutional levels and among different actors. It perceives migration and asylum policies as a contentious field in which different actors interact, sometimes cooperating, or developing complementary activities, or clashing in various ways (Garcés-Mascreñas & Gebhardt, 2020; Mielle, 2022).

In the public domain, different levels of governance are involved, sometimes with tension between them on the vertical level. On one side, the role of sanctuary cities (Mescoli, 2021; Oomen, 2020), opposing national restrictive policies, and on the other side, that of local policies of exclusion (Ambrosini, 2019), can be highlighted. On the horizontal level, civil society actors also play a relevant role, which the concept of battleground tries to grasp. Various pro-migrant supporters are involved, activating a “debordering solidarity” (Dimitriadis & Ambrosini, 2022). Pro-migrant organizations, social movements and individuals can raise their voices through demonstrations, marches, occupation of symbolic places, hunger strikes and other forms of protest, but also, xenophobic movements try to mobilize public opinion and organize demonstrations against asylum seekers. Both sides can establish alliances and coalitions and try to influence public policies. This means, for instance, that migration policies do not always coincide with what is implemented, because tensions and conflicts between institutional authorities and CSAs may result in different solutions.

Within this battleground upon which different actors at the local level engage with their own interests, values and frames, different types of relationships between municipalities and civil society can be detected: (a) *closure vs. civil society activism*, when local authorities exhibit an explicit opposition against refugees’ reception, whereas pro-immigrant actors mobilize and organize alternative services; (b) *tolerance*, when local authorities do not act in favor of refugees, but do not prevent civil society actors from providing some forms of support and practical help; (c) *institutional activism*

Table 1 Our sample

Participants	No. of interviews	Attitude towards immigration	
		In favor	Against (not in favor)
National level			
Parties' representatives	2	1	1
Journalists	5	2	3
Scholars	9	6	3
Trade unionists	2	2	0
Lawyer	1	1	0
<i>Total</i>	19	12	7
Local level			
Local councillors	4	2	2
Journalists	3	2	1
Anti-migrant committee representative	1	0	1
Priest	1	1	0
CSO professionals	3	3	0
CSO volunteers	3	3	0
Refugee	1	1	0
<i>Total</i>	16	12	4

vs. *anti-immigrant mobilizations*, when urban governments, in contrast, take a liberal position, engaging in the reception of refugees, but they have to face the opposition of xenophobic movements and groups of citizens; (d) *cooperation*, when municipalities and civil society actors establish agreements to jointly manage reception projects and pro-refugee activities (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020).

Overall, the concept of battleground is used to offer a clearer understanding of conflictual interaction between actors and implementation dynamics at the local level, adding to studies on both the framing and governance of asylum.

Before analyzing our empirical data, some information about methods, research contexts and tools of analysis is necessary.

Methods and Analytical Tools

This article is part of the MAGYC (Migration Governance and Asylum Crises) Horizon 2020 project. It draws on 35 semi-structured in-depth interviews with experts (Table 1) on questions related to immigration and asylum in Italy. We conducted interviews with 19 experts (7 females and 12 males, almost all of them with tertiary education) active at the national level whose knowledge is linked to their institutional and professional role (e.g., scientists and policymakers); they possess an institutionalized authority to construct reality (Meuser & Nagel, 2009). We also included in our sample 16 locals (7 females and 9 males) with expertise in

immigration. While elected representatives, journalists from local newspapers and managers of reception centers meet the criterion of “institutionalized authority,” other participants, such as religious actors, members of pro-migrant associations and advocacy networks and those engaged in anti-refugee protests, are considered experts insofar as they have privileged access to information through their activities (ibid., p. 24). One refugee who resided in the *Via dei Mille* reception center and participated in protests was also interviewed. Research participants have been categorized as “in favor” of or “against” (or not in favor) immigration, using as criteria their positioning in the public debate on immigration and their affiliation with, or membership of, specific parties and institutions that state publicly their positions on immigration. Despite the fact that the sample is by no means representative, we believe that qualitative analysis of selected opinions can have a broader analytical impact on how migration discourse is structured (van Dijk, 2018). Conducting in-depth interviews makes it possible to gain deeper insights into people’s attitudes, ideologies and mental models and explore the social and political functions of those discourses in society.

While most participants were contacted through personal acquaintances or via email, some LEKs were also introduced to us through other participants. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face, and a few of them via telephone or Skype, from May 2019 to May 2020. The interviews lasted between 35 min and two and a half hours, and the majority of them were conducted in private places (organization headquarters, homes). PENs were called to reconstruct those situations where the arrival and settlement of refugees and asylum seekers in local communities were conflictual and were portrayed in media and policy discourses as a “local crisis,” an “emergency” or an “invasion” (Tronchin & Di Pasquale, 2017). They were asked to express their opinion about cases in which local communities denied or opposed the arrival and settlement of RASs, that is, what the problem was about, what the role of different actors engaged in those events was and what the solutions for such situations were. LEKs were asked: 1) to reconstruct what happened in relation to the presence of RASs in Busto Arsizio since 2014; 2) what their role and interaction with other social actors was; and 3) to share their views about the actions of local authorities, civil society and refugees themselves in relation to the events that are described in the next section.

An informed consent form was developed to give participants all the necessary details about the research. The information regarded the nature of the research, risks and potential benefits, responsibilities and confidentiality, as well as the voluntary nature of participation in the research. Answers were anonymized, coded and analyzed using MAXQDA software, which facilitates thematic analysis of qualitative data. Coding was theory driven; that is, themes (frames) were predetermined by the existing literature. Research participants’ answers were inserted into five out of the nine frames identified above in the literature review. This is because there was some overlap between the deservingness and genuineness frames in our participants’ narratives (the genuineness frame merged into deservingness), whereas the socio-economic, efficiency (Spencer & Delvino, 2019) and return home (Nickels, 2007) frames did not emerge, which confirms that the framing process is context-sensitive. As mentioned in the analytical section, an additional theme (inconvenience frame)

Table 2 Framing of asylum governance among PENs

Framing process: problems, causes, moral evaluations, remedies	In favor	Against or not in favor
Fear frame		
New arrivals in small villages can be perceived as an invasion, due to differences between them and the local population		X
Economic frame		
Anxiety, fear and discomfort regarding the unknown	(X) ^a	X
Local people oppose RASs due to poor availability of job opportunities		X
Migration provides cheap labor force, thus penalizing locals		X
(Some) TSOs make profit out of the reception of migrants	X	X
Reception of refugees is a value	X	(X) ^b
Human rights frame		
Differentiation between genuine and false asylum seekers		X
Deservingness frame		
Problematic integration for new arrivals settled into isolated (mountainous) places	X	
Managerialist frame		
Refusal of local authority to adhere to the SAI system	X	
Problematic distribution mechanisms and logistics	X	
Mismanagement by national and European authorities	X	X
Decisions on arrivals imposed aggressively by Prefectures, without previous dialogue with local communities	X	X

^aAlthough participants favorable to immigration argue that new arrivals in small villages might cause anxiety and discomfort, they often found such reactions exaggerated

^bAs previous works showed (Castelli Gattinara, 2017b), people from the far right often avoid extreme-right discourse and tend to invoke liberal values and defend democracy. This is a way to gain sympathy in the public discourse and/or highlight the incompatibility between European and Muslim values

Table 3 Framing of asylum governance among LEKs

Framing process: problems, causes, moral evaluations and remedies		In favor	Against or not in favor
Inconvenience frame	Grouping of RASs in public spaces is negative, as they do nothing all day long		X
	RASs' protests created problems in the city		X
	It was impossible for Italian families to continue residing in the same building with hundreds of RASs. It is not fair that Italian families had to be evicted		X
	RASs get drunk, become beggars wandering around the city		X
	Neighbors got annoyed by the presence of RASs		X
	It is unfair that RASs receive generous benefits		X
	New arrivals' insertion in the labor market penalizes not only Italians, but also settled migrants		X
	The organization that managed the local CAS made big profits and was corrupt	X	X
	The right of RASs to obtain an identity card by protesting	X	
	The right of refugees to good conditions at the structure	X	
Deservingness frame	Differentiation between genuine and false asylum seekers		X
	Mismanagement by the TSO in charge of the CAS center	X	X
Managerialist frame	Bad/opportunistic management by the Prefecture	X	X
	Reception centers hosting numerous RASs are problematic	X	X
	Local authorities remained rather inactive	X	X
	Local authorities delayed the issuing of identity cards, thus feeding tensions	X	X

was introduced as the fear frame did not reflect negative narratives (sentiments) of LEKs on the presence of RASs. Two separate tables were also produced (Tables 2 and 3) to compare the answers of PENs and LEKs.

To investigate participants' narratives and views, we used a qualitative frame analysis following Entman's (1993) conceptualization of framing. Frame analysis, as a "focused subvariant of discourse analysis" (Lindekilde, 2014, p. 198), has been selected out of other discourse analytical methods to answer our research questions, as it focuses on "how existing 'objects' or 'topics' are framed by different actors" (p. 201); its analytical scope is narrower. According to Entman (1993), first, frames involve the definition of problems, that is, the determination of what a subject is doing and the relative costs and benefits of this action. The definition of problems is based upon common cultural values. The second feature of a frame is the diagnosis of causes, which relates to the identification of the forces that create a specific problem. Third, frames entail the discursive construction of moral judgement, which relates to an evaluation of social actors' action and its effects. The fourth feature of frames regards the suggestion of remedies, that is, recommendations or justification of solutions (treatments) for the defined problems, and eventually prediction of their effects. A frame in a particular text performs these four framing functions, although some texts may not relate to all four of them. The selective element characterizing the process of framing involves the exertion of power by the communicators and, as such, has political effects or affects public policies. Politicians, for instance, may omit or highlight specific elements of a situation in order to promote their own interests.

In the following section, we recount the events related to the arrival of RASs in Busto Arsizio, a small city where the functioning of a big reception facility fed crisis narratives and conflicts.

Reception of Refugees in Busto Arsizio (Northern Italy)

The Italian system of reception is mainly based, in principle, on the SAI Reception and Integration System (henceforth SAI) centers, which are small reception facilities or private houses aiming to offer not only accommodation, but opportunities for integration. Local authorities are responsible for running these network projects on a voluntary basis, together with Third Sector Organizations (TSOs). In 2019, however, only 1825 municipalities (out of a total of more than 8,000) adhered to the SAI network, most of which were concentrated in southern Italy (Ambrosini, 2019). In the face of the limited willingness of local governments to run such programs, the Italian government created an extraordinary reception network, the so-called CASs (Centers of Extraordinary Reception), to provide accommodation to an increasing number of newly arrived people. CASs are managed by various private actors (mainly TSOs, but also hotel owners and other conventional employers), bypassing local authorities. Yet, local authorities and public opinion (mainly in northern Italy) resisted and opposed the creation of these facilities, thus turning the asylum governance into a "battleground" (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020).

The city of Busto Arsizio represents one of those cases across Italy where the reception of refugees has been conflictual (Lunaria, 2019). Busto Arsizio is located in northern Italy at a distance of 35 km north of Milan. It is a city of around 83,000 people, where local governments have been traditionally elected with the support of right-wing parties. The city is part of the province of Varese, where the right-wing and xenophobic (Northern) League party was founded and has politically prevailed in recent decades.

During the summer of 2014, 25 asylum seekers originating from western Africa arrived in Busto Arsizio and were hosted within the CAS in *Via dei Mille* (a street), close to the city center. The decision of the Prefect of the province of Varese to allow the opening of a reception structure had not been previously communicated to the local government. Two weeks after the opening, the mayor reacted by sending a formal letter to the Prefect arguing that the building that was to host asylum seekers was not adequate, thus asking that it be closed. This request was not approved and, after some months, more than 200 people were residing in the *Via dei Mille* CAS.

In September 2016, almost 100 refugees protested in the city center, halting the traffic. Protesters requested the issuing of identity cards by the municipality and denounced the poor conditions of the reception facility offered by the managing entity KB (TSO). Although, on the one hand, the Prefecture vowed to intervene for the issuance of identity cards, and on the other hand, the mayor declared an interest in adhering to the SAI system and taking responsibility for the reception center, nothing happened. In the meanwhile, anti-refugee mobilizations were organized by a committee called “Enough with fake refugees” (*Comitato Basta Finti Profughi*). According to the goals of the committee, citizens should have been informed about the mismanagement of the reception center. The committee also aimed to pressure the Prefecture to intervene in favor of two Italian families that lived in the same building where the CAS was located. One year after the first protest, asylum seekers hosted in the CAS abandoned the building and protested in front of the Prefecture headquarters, asking to meet the Prefect. Although these protests seemed to bear some fruit as the first identity cards were issued some weeks later, they were not effective in improving the living conditions at *Via dei Mille*. The reception facility closed in 2018 and all its inhabitants moved to other reception centers across northern Italy. The managers of the organization (KB) that ran the *Via dei Mille* reception facility are currently under investigation for counterfeit and fraud linked to the management of other CAS centers since 2017.

The following two sections include an analysis of our collected data. First, we analyze the narratives among PENs, and then we proceed with those of LEKs.

Framing Conflictual Asylum Governance

In analyzing the frames of PENs and LEKs, we first present a table containing our participants' answers, and then we delve into different frames.

Frames of PENs: Local Conflicts Mainly as the Product of Failed National and EU Migration Governance

The analysis reveals a high degree of convergence among PENs with contrasting attitudes towards immigration in “defining the problem” through a *managerialist* frame, although using different arguments or vocabulary. Five frames mainly emerge to refer to the asylum governance at the local level: *fear*, *economic*, *human rights*, *deservingness*, and *managerialist*, as Table 2 shows.

Fear Frame Conflictual situations at the local level are defined by PENs opposing immigration through a fear frame. This frame mostly concerns cases in which refugees and asylum seekers settled in localities with few residents. The latter’s fear is attributed to the fact that new arrivals are perceived as diverse; their anxieties and fear of the unknown are legitimate and have to do with threats related more to social cohesion and moral order than to public order. Through this lens, PENs opposing immigration consider the opening and functioning of reception centers in these areas to be morally unfair for the locals.

When the local (population) density increases, neighbors from ten become twenty; population doubles. [...] (New arrivals) are perceived as different. There is a cultural impact, there is an impact of discomfort [...] fears emerge from the cultural distance (between locals and migrants). (Scholar opposing immigration)

Economic Frame Conflictual cases of reception at the local level are also narrated in economic terms. On the one hand, this frame concerns the operation of TSOs engaged in the reception of RASs, but it is expressed in different terms based on participants’ attitudes towards immigration. PENs who are in favor of immigration argue that economically despicable actions of a few corrupt TSOs insensitive to the respect of human rights cause tensions in local communities and hinder the integration of RASs. Participants opposing immigration generalize such events, claiming that TSOs are engaged in the so-called “business of hospitality” and are part of a corrupt reception system. This framing is different from that of those favorable to migrants:

Hospitality is not a business. Yes, where there is money, everything can become business, even care facilities for elderly people or kindergartens. I find it absolutely improper to correlate the whole world (TSOs) to something negative. [...] Business in itself is not even a bad word, business means making profit [...] It is the opposite, if anything, of what happens in the SAI system: With all these reporting and auditing mechanisms, it is impossible to do business. (Scholar favorable towards immigration)

On the other hand, the *economic frame* discusses the arrival of RASs in terms of economic losses for locals due to limited job opportunities and the fact that new arrivals accept lower wages.

You put people (RASs in local communities) who will accept anything (working terms/conditions) in competition with people (locals) who have lost their rights, although they are Europeans. (Journalist opposing immigration)

Human Rights Frame PENs favorable to immigration portrayed RASs as people who have the right to reception. Regardless of what happened in specific cases in which the settlement of RASs' arrival created tensions in local communities, RASs' right to reception is considered an undeniable value. In addition, some experts argued that conflicts at the local level are triggered because locals do not know how migration processes and policies work. In considering what local crises consist of, one participant argues that:

It's not only a crisis of logistics – even if “crisis” is a bit slippery as a term – but it is also a moral crisis, in the sense that reception is obviously not only a logistical factor, but also, in my vision, a value. [...] sometimes, though, some people do not understand how migration works. (Journalist in favor of immigration)

Deservingness Frame PENs opposing immigration used discourses on deserving refugees to distinguish between a minority of those arriving in Italy being in need of international protection and those who try to cheat the system of reception and get a stay permit. The latter do not meet any requirement to be attributed a refugee status.

It is not true that they flee from wars; they rather flee from unexciting situations where they live in their country. There are also those who flee from wars; in this way, you also have difficulty in distinguishing one from the other (genuine/false asylum seekers). (Scholar opposing immigration)

Managerialist Frame This frame has been used by all PENs to define problems in relation to the arrival and settlement of refugees at the local level and what caused conflictual events. National asylum policies were considered inefficient, because they did not take into consideration the needs of asylum seekers (framing of those favorable to immigration) and/or the opinions of local communities (framing mainly among those opposed to immigration). However, the lack of coordination among different levels of governance also concerns the denial of adherence to the SAI system by local authorities or the latter's participation in, or support of, protests against reception centers. In general, local “crises” are seen as the result of mismanagement of asylum issues by national and European institutions. The following example is telling about this frame:

[...] there are cases of 12 migrants settled into a tiny district of six people [...]; or another example is that of 100 migrants arriving in a mountainous village of 80 residents with an average age of 78, who do not even speak Italian (they speak local dialects) [...], where the Prefecture ordered the gendarmerie to accompany the arrival of migrants over night. [...] the problem, therefore, is the lack of dialogue between local administrations and national government and such cases do not favor a serene dialogue between authorities. (Journalist favorable to immigration)

Frames of LEKs: When the Conflictual Reception of RASs Is Perceived as an Inconvenience and as Lacking Effective Management

The analysis of discursive framing of conflictual asylum governance patterns in Busto Arsizio by LEKs reveals the use of the same four out of five frames used by PENs to refer to the emergence of conflictual situations at the local level. As Table 3 shows, *managerialist*, *economic*, *human rights*, and *deservingness* frames emerge from the analysis of LEKs' narratives. Instead of a *fear* frame, though, an *inconvenience* frame is used by those actors opposing immigration.

Inconvenience Frame Instead of a threat frame, LEKs opposing immigration used an inconvenience frame to refer to the settlement of numerous migrants in a large reception facility, and to protests and mobilizations from RASs. Poor living conditions in the reception center and an inability to offer services to RASs (e.g., language courses, job opportunities) (Dimitriadis & Ambrosini, 2023) “led them to group together and spend their time in public spaces chattering and doing nothing,” as one member of the anti-refugee committee explained. This kind of grouping is “negative and inconvenient for locals and neighbors close to the reception facility.” Inconvenience also means annoyance to two Italian families who lived in the same building as almost 200 people.

We (municipality) tried to intermediate between the family and the TSO; there were heavy daily quarrels (among RASs) harming the health of that (Italian) family. (Local representative opposing immigration)

In regard to the protests of refugees claiming their right to better living conditions and to hold an ID document, mobilizations are portrayed in negative terms and are considered to have triggered the birth of the anti-refugee movement in the city, as explained by one participant:

The Committee was born after the protest of the guys of that CAS. They hung around the squares making a bit of a mess, complaining about various things, including why the municipality did not issue identity cards. (Member of the anti-refugee committee)

Economic Frame Our findings suggest an economic frame that relates to the functioning of the managing organization and the financial benefits from the hospitality offered to RASs and the negative effects of the insertion of RASs in the local economy. On the one hand, the KB TSO is defined as a corrupt organization that constitutes a case of the so-called “business of hospitality.” This is because TSOs abuse funds entitled to RASs.

I’m convinced that the famous 35 euro per day pocket money is not dedicated to them (RASs); only some euro go to their essentials. (Member of the anti-refugee committee)

On the other hand, the insertion of RASs in the labor market creates distortions as they are happy to work for very little. The acceptance of low wages or volunteering creates social dumping; that is, low-wage competition leads to wage depression and poor labor conditions for locals, even for settled migrants:

Some people argued that they (RASs) had to work for free as painters for the municipality, or as cleaners or gardeners. We’re against this either because of the wage dumping discourse [...] or because of the fact that you (municipality) can give some money to painters of the city. Why do we have to deprive locals, or even the Tunisian guy who lives here, of this money? Let’s also consider that business owners have to pay thousands of euros for taxes, vocational training, security and so on. (Member of the anti-refugee committee)

Human Rights Frame This frame emphasizes the respect for the rights of RASs. LEKs perceive those hosted at the *Via dei Mille* CAS as people abandoned and neglected by the reception system. RASs enjoyed poor living conditions and services even though these are considered basic rights. These perceptions were also common among those opposing immigration. It seems that the defense of democracy and European values among people from the far right serves not only to highlight the incompatibility between Europeans and Muslims, but also to justify their aversion to, and uncritical discrediting of, the reception system. In the words of a member of the anti-refugee committee:

Those guys (RASs) crowded in a building to do nothing; the food was disgusting. They (TSO) made them live badly. They (RASs) do not have to be put in a building in this way: They were people! (Member of the anti-refugee committee)

LEKs in favor of immigration portrayed RASs as citizens who have the right to hold identification documents. This was feasible only after RAS’s protests and meeting with the Prefect. Such protests were considered to be “the only way to obtain something (ID cards) that asylum seekers have a right to,” an elected representative claimed. These protests were organized by RASs themselves, as a refugee and other participants favorable towards them maintained. Locals seem to have given them some advice when needed:

There have been protests by RASs who went to the Busto Arsizio station and then to Varese to meet the Prefect. There were some locals there. I remember that I advised them to return to the structure, because if they wanted to obtain their rights, they had to respect the rules imposed by the TSO. [...] However, it is true that they freely organized the protests on their own. (Volunteer at a CAS facility favorable to immigrants)

Deservingness Frame One reason why LEKs with negative attitudes towards immigration recommended that national policies should adopt a stricter definition of the notion of refugees is that they differentiated between genuine and bogus RASs. Economic migrants are seen as not deserving of reception services. This element is also found at the core of the birth of the anti-refugee committee aiming to inform citizens about the falsity of economic migrants' requests.

We decided to set up this committee [...] which had different characteristics than the usual anti-refugee committee, because ours was first and foremost called "Enough with fake refugees." It expressed a criticism against those who received all these refugees and asylum seekers who were supposed to flee from wars, but they actually could not qualify to be asylum seekers, because there was no war in their countries of origin. (Member of the anti-refugee committee)

Managerialist Frame LEKs frame the arrival and settlement of RASs in their city by using a managerialist frame. First, all participants refer to the mismanagement of the *Via dei Mille* CAS by the TSO that was in charge of it. As was also the case among PENS, while those opposing immigration locate this case of mismanagement in the general framework of a corrupt reception system engaging inadequate and fraudulent TSOs, participants in favor of immigration portrayed the specific TSO as corrupt, placing, however, responsibility on the Prefecture. Although the KB association had been accused of misconduct in the past, the Prefect is blamed for having acted in an erroneous way. A journalist in favor of immigration claimed that "the choice of the Prefect was very opportunistic, because the manager of the KB cooperative was notorious for bankruptcies in the 1990s and 2000s."

Another common issue in all narratives regards the capacity of reception facilities. By either recognizing that reception centers with a limited number of applicants offer more opportunities in terms of integration (pro-migrant participants) or denouncing the inefficiencies of reception centers hosting a large number of applicants (participants opposing immigration), the latter type of facility is considered inadequate for providing beneficiaries with good living conditions and opportunities to integrate into the local community. In addition, pro-migrant participants claimed that the problem also lay in the stance of local authorities. On the one hand, the municipality did not take any responsibility regarding the reception of refugees as it did not adhere to the SAI system. On the other, the municipality is considered to remain rather inactive or to delay the issuing of ID cards. Here, the following example regarding the issuing of identity cards for RASs is telling:

None of them (local government) said: “We don’t give them (RASs) identity cards because we don’t want to.” They (local government) said: “We’ll figure out it; we’re doing so. There were some problems; we’re not sure if it’s up to us to issue the ID cards.” (Local representative favorable to immigration)

Discussion and Conclusions: When *Fear* Becomes *Inconvenience*, and Local Authorities’ Opposition to RASs Can Also Be Passive, but Harmful

This article aimed to study the ways in which experts frame conflictual situations in relation to the arrival and settlement of RASs in local communities. It revealed that experts at the national and local levels insist on a *managerialist frame* that regards the way in which either private or public actors managed asylum issues. Although previous works indicated that a left/right cleavage (pro/against migrants’ views) corresponded to a humanitarian or threat/security frame, our research showed that conflictual situations are identified mainly in management and governance terms by participants, despite the different vocabulary and arguments used by each part. Moreover, in contrast to previous research suggesting that a *managerialist frame* approaches immigration in depoliticized terms (Dekker & Scholten, 2017), our participants’ narratives reflect the politicization of the migration/refugee issue that has been highlighted in other works (Colombo, 2018; Ambrosini, 2019). The *managerialist* frame is about inefficiency in implementing policies, a lack of design, and thoughtless/imprudent decisions that do not take into consideration migrants’ and local communities’ needs and interests, thus confirming views suggesting a “crisis of the reception system,” rather than other types of crisis (Rea et al., 2019). It could be argued that this is due to the methods implemented to collect data. Given the anonymization of data, experts tried to “objectively” reconstruct facts, problems and decision-making processes and suggest solutions. They also generally avoided expressing polarized opinions, as they were not interested in influencing public opinion or competing with (political) opponents (see, for example, Hänggeli & Kriesi, 2012).

Delving into the narratives of locals with expertise on immigration, we also found an *inconvenience frame* instead of a *fear frame* used by experts on the national scale, which is also common in the framing literature on immigration by those opposing immigration. This actually means that discourses on invasion, insecurity or fears connected to the presence of RASs may find little resonance when one actually delves into what happens in local communities. In other words, fears of invasion, terrorism, criminality or violence against women who are represented as being anxious about their safety appear to be unfounded when it comes to concrete conflictual cases of settlement of RASs in local communities. Fears are reduced to inconvenience or discomfort for the residents, because RASs group together and spend all day in the parks or squares. Such discourses are also in contrast to views against RASs’ engagement in volunteering, thus weakening even more the argumentation of people opposing immigration. This difference may be due to the fact that LEKs

framed people's (and maybe their own) sentiments through a lived experience as private persons, that is, about their personal life experience in relation to their involvement in a local battleground of asylum issues.

By focusing on the case study of Busto Arsizio, this article also added to the horizontal dimension of the MLG approach/battleground concept in two ways. On the one hand, apart from NGOs and specialized organizations, other TSOs, social movements and common citizens, refugees and asylum seekers themselves are engaged in fights related to the asylum process, thus confirming recent research (Mescoli, 2021). As identified by several participants, obtaining identification documents seems to be an outcome achieved through the protests of RASs in Busto Arsizio and Varese, albeit assisted to a limited extent by locals sympathizing with them. This means that pro-migrant supporters who share a humanitarian approach to asylum governance can enhance RASs' ability to claim rights. However, RASs' agency may be constrained by the mobilization of anti-refugee committees opposing granting welfare benefits to undeserving people, according to their standpoint. Claiming that natives' (or locals') interests come first in terms of job opportunities, not annoyance and public order, such groups may target refugees and impose an anti-migrant rhetoric that further pushes local authorities to abstain from adhering to the national system of asylum governance.

On the other hand, the findings revealed a new form of interplay between public power and civil society/RASs that is close to *closure*. We argue that local authorities may remain inactive (see also Bousiou, 2021; Miellet, 2022; Schammann et al., 2021) in relation to asylum issues by not contributing to solving conflictual situations or by lingering and delaying the provision of services towards RASs. By not providing RASs with the necessary services and rights, it can be claimed that this stance is a kind of "passive opposition." This attitude could be seen as efficient by those opposing immigration, but it can also be considered harmful to RASs, as the latter are deprived of public support, despite being a vulnerable population. This stance could also be a means to signal a "problem" to the national government, that is, a call to central authorities to undertake an active role in governing migration. All in all, we can argue that disputes regard not only reception centers but also access to other rights and services that depend on the authorization of, and/or registration by, municipalities (Dimitriadis et al., 2021).

In light of the above reflections, we can expect that the recent COVID-19 pandemic and its relative restrictions had a negative impact on asylum seekers residing in reception centers, due to their exclusion from integration services that had been protracted coupled with limited opportunities to develop social relations (Bazurli & Campomori, 2022). In turn, this can trigger further marginalization of, and psychological distress in, already vulnerable subjects whose plans and aspirations have been stymied.

Data do not allow for generalizations due to the lack of representativeness of the sample, as well as the limited focus on one conflictual situation across Italy. Yet, we believe that the case of Busto Arsizio offers valuable insights into situations of conflict related to RASs' arrival and settlement that are relevant across European countries where RASs' reception has often been characterized by conflictual dynamics

(Glorius & Doornik, 2020; Rea et al., 2019; Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020). In this respect, we call for more research, deploying both quantitative and qualitative methods, on the framing of immigration issues and conflictual dynamics between public and private actors at the local level, especially in small to medium-sized cities. Such a focus should also be adopted in quantitative studies that enable a better understanding of the relevance of variables such as gender, age, education and profession to the study of such questions.

Funding Open access funding provided by Università degli Studi di Milano - Bicocca within the CRUI-CARE Agreement. This article is part of the output of the Horizon 2020 MAGYC project, which received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement no. 822806.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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