

Uneven Ground: The Asymmetric Competition between Anti-refugee and Solidarity Movements in Italy

by Lorenzo Zamponi and Pietro Castelli Gattinara

ABSTRACT

This article analyses how contrasting movements compete over the issue of migration in Italy and points out a significant role of the state in shaping this competition. While the so-called «refugee crisis» paved the way to multiple forms of action in support and against the arrival of migrants and asylum seekers, traditional social movement approaches fall short in explaining the dynamics between opposing camps, as scholars tended to focus on individual movements as isolated actors. To address this gap, we look at movement-counter-movement dynamics in the field of migration between 2015 and 2017, to understand how contrasting actors frame causes and solutions for the problems at stake. Based on new empirical data from over 30 face-to-face interviews with activists, the article shows that, while discursive opportunities trigger conflicting interpretations of the same themes, competition between the anti-refugee and solidarity camp is asymmetric, both with regard to the definition of the issue and to the identification of political opponents. We show that the ambiguous position of the centre-left government in the management of immigration in Italy between 2015 and 2017 tipped the balance of the competition in the migration battleground, ultimately giving a crucial advantage to anti-refugee actors in the promotion of hegemonic frames.

KEYWORDS *Collective action, migration, battleground, Italy, framing.*

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1. Introduction

If migration stood out for decades as one of the most heated issues in Western European public debates (see e.g. van der Brug *et al.* 2015; Eggert and Giugni 2015; Koopmans *et al.* 2005), the outburst of the so-called «refugee crisis» in 2015 was a game changer. At the supranational level, the refugee crisis put pressure on the Union's internal solidarity principle with respect to the relocation of the asylum seekers arriving in Greece and Italy (Guiraudon 2017; Bauböck 2018). At the national level, it provided new opportunities for mobilization to populist right-wing actors, setting in motion new dynamics of party competition over migration (Mudde 2016), which paved the way to the electoral breakthrough of Matteo Salvini's League (Castelli Gattinara 2017a). At the local level, it triggered left-wing as well as right-wing social movements, who mobilized either in solidarity or against asylum seekers and migrants (Ataç, Rygiel and Stierl 2016; della Porta 2018). The migration crisis thus polarized mobilization at all territorial levels, paving the way to two opposed camps: those who aimed to «defend the borders» of Europe against refugees¹, and those who engaged in support of asylum-seekers within the European solidarity movement.

The governance of migration has been aptly described as a «battleground», in which «different actors take part according to diverse economic interests, social bonds, moral values and political beliefs» and the practical governance of immigration and asylum is «influenced by these different interests and visions» (Ambrosini 2020a, 197). The «refugee crisis» led to a new wave of civil-society actions and initiatives of solidarity with people seeking asylum in the EU, which came to be known in German as «Willkommenskultur» (Hamann and Karakalyali 2016). Furthermore, it paved the way to experiences of pro-migrant activism (Monforte 2016; Tazreiter 2010; Zamponi 2017a, 2018) and anti-deportation protest (Anderson *et al.* 2011; Rosenberger and Winkler 2014). Still, it also nourished opposition by grassroots right-wing groups. Indeed, if until 2015 far right politics constituted almost exclusively a party phenomenon, various far-right movements have now emerged that are exclusively focused on extra-parliamentary politics (Mudde 2016; Castelli Gattinara and Pirro 2019). Thus

¹ We are aware of the terminological differences between the concepts of «refugee», «asylum-seeker» and «migrant», which entail different meanings and statuses in contemporary processes of differentiation and securitisation of borders (Scheel and Squire 2014; Millner 2011). Nevertheless, the current Italian debate on asylum in Italy covers the whole field of migration, with the result that distinctions between concepts very much depend on how different actors understand asylum and migration in general. Since our focus is on these actors' own frames, however, we opt to address these concepts directly in the context of the frame analysis, based on the actors' own definitions, rather than on predefined ones.

far, however, very little research has looked into the competition between these two camps (e.g. Helbling 2014). Scholarly work prioritized the study of the consequences of migration on EU politics and party competition (e.g. Odmalm and Bale 2014; Alonso and Fonseca 2012; Morales, Pilet and Ruedin 2015). As a result, little attention has been devoted to collective action and its interaction with state policies (Eggert and Giugni 2015; but see: Koopmans *et al.* 2005).

To help rectify this, this article compares two groups of actors that mobilized in the wake of the refugee crisis in Italy: civil society solidarity organizations, and right-wing anti-immigration groups. Building upon extant research on issue framing and issue politicization, the article strives to present an in-depth analysis of how competitive social movement actors conceive and represent the crisis, how they responded to its policy consequences and how they reacted to the framing choices of their opponents. What are the crucial dimensions of collective action frames promoted by the refugee solidarity and anti-refugee camps? To what extent the opposing narratives promoted by refugee solidarity and anti-refugee movements focus on similar issues, actors and explanations? How do social movement's frames respond to the initiatives of political opponents, discursive opportunities and government policy implementation?

In the following, we will first clarify how we intend to appreciate political framing, and elaborate on how we address framing choices empirically. The empirical analysis sheds light on discursive choices by competing actors in the wake of the refugee crisis. In the final discussion, we summarise the main comparative findings, suggesting that discursive opportunities and interaction with the state contributed to shaping the frames of both movements around similar resonant themes, although triggering conflicting interpretations. The analysis shows a clear movement-counter-movement dynamic between the two camps: not only the two groups take side at the opposite ends of the debate on migration, but they also engage in contrasting and reacting to each other's activities and narratives. Notably, they mobilize contrasting frames concerning core issues of Italy's economic crisis, yet without taking symmetric sides in the debate. While solidarity activists make a distinction between the government and the anti-refugee front, and deploy distinct strategies against each of them, anti-refugee activists conflate the solidarity movement with the establishment, and mobilizes simultaneously against both. Furthermore, the two camps do not share a common definition of the problem, as anti-refugee activists address immigration as a problem *per se*, while refugee solidarity activists consider it a natural phenomenon, the actual problem being the inability or unwillingness of European governments to manage it appropriately². We thus point out the asymmetric relation between

² This fundamental asymmetry is the reason behind our choice to use the asymmetric definitions of «refugee solidarity movement» and «anti-refugee movement» for the

en contrasting movements and the centre-left governments, in terms of both policies and narratives. This Janus-faced agenda of the Italian government had crucial consequences for the discursive component of the battleground of migration governance, attracting criticism from both sides and preventing the development of a unified front challenging the growing anti-refugee camp. By singling out the role of asymmetry in movement-counter-movement dynamics, our article thus paves the way to further research on power relations and the construction of discursive alliances in the public sphere, as well as on social movement outcomes. Furthermore, the article points out the impact that these dynamics have on the migration debate, suggesting that the anti-refugee camp enjoyed a structural advance in the lead-up to Salvini's electoral surge.

2. Theoretical framework

The issue of migration is often approached taking into consideration two main factors: state policy and migrants' agency. On the one hand, the tightening of immigration policies has been observed and analysed by a wide literature pointing at the role of political élites and state agencies in the securitization of migration (Bigo 2002), and at party competition for the politicization of this issue (van der Brug *et al.* 2015, Castelli Gattinara 2016). On the other, scholars underlined the role of migrants themselves in political participation, through an intense wave of organisation and mobilisation in several European countries and the US (Nicholls 2013; Bleich, Bloemraad and de Graauw 2015; Cappiali 2016). In addition, two specific groups of actors have emerged in the wake of increasingly salient public debates about migration: solidarity and anti-refugees movements (Koopmans *et al.* 2005).

The first have been a significant presence in European polities for a long time (Eggert and Giugni 2015). To explain their emergence and development, some scholars have pointed at the importance of the biographical experiences of activists, similar to the case of mobile youths (Giorgi and Raffini 2020), workplace struggles (Giorgi and Vitale 2017) or of past experiences of exile (Milan 2019). Most of the literature, however, underlines the prevalence of the political background of activists, and the importance of the interpretive frames in determining the contentious politics of citizenship and refugee solidarity (Della Porta 2018; Ataç *et al.* 2016). Anti-refugee movements have become a relevant political phenomenon only in more recent times. Until a few years ago, anti-immigration sentiments were mainly interpreted by po-

two camps: while anti-refugee activists explicitly oppose immigration, the opposite camp does not claim to abstractly support it, but instead considers it a natural phenomenon, that cannot be controlled and that demands solidarity towards those who live through it.

litical parties, and expressed through party competition rather than protest (Kriesi 1999; Hutter and Borbàth 2019). Today, however, an increasing array of actors challenge government policy on asylum and migration from the right, representing refugees as aliens who infiltrate Europe to corrode its social and cultural fabric, and challenging the solidarity movement by voicing concerns about «unlimited» and «uncontrolled» migration (Castelli Gattinara 2017b).

While the opposing sides in the battleground of migration have received increasing scholarly attention in the last few years (Siméant 1998; Passy 1998; Ambrosini 2013), the competition between these actors is still largely neglected in social movement studies. Most existing research, in fact, is either primarily interested into what motivates political actors and the media to oppose or support migration, or limited to the field of party politics (Helbling 2014; Froio 2018; van der Brug 2015). In other words, while much is known about the strategic interaction between political parties who aim to put the issue of migration on the agenda, and those who try to prevent this from happening (e.g. Meguid 2008; De Vries and Hobolt 2012; Grande *et al.* 2019), most analyses are limited to a restricted set of institutional political actors.

The scholarship on the interaction between movements and counter-movements, instead, focuses on the competition between networks of organizations, and notably on groups that share the objects of concern as the social movements that they oppose (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). So called «pro-» and «anti-» immigration movements are, obviously, very different types of organizations, but make contrasting claims on the same policy issue field, and compete with one another for the attention of the public. Anti-immigrant movements can emerge out of native citizens' feelings of economic and cultural threat, or because of ideological mobilization by nationalist and far-right groups. Solidarity movements, instead, are normally composed of activists who mobilize against exclusionary discourse and discrimination, while also often concretely attempting to improve the living conditions of migrants and refugees. Since they both generally enter the public sphere with the goal of influencing public debate and policy making, a crucial dimension of their strategic interaction is arguably linked to the way in which they frame the issue of migration³.

Political framing commonly refers to how competing actors define a given problem, thus focusing on the process of attribution of meaning which lies behind any political conflict (Snow and Benford 1988; Snow and Byrd 2007). Accordingly, framing is located in-between ideologies and claims making, in

³ Which is why we look at mobilization *on* migration, rather than *by* migrants. While we acknowledge that different migrant organizations have mobilized in the past decades in spite of marginalization and segregation in countries of residence (Eggert and Giugni 2015), we believe that the comparison of mobilizations against migration with mobilization on behalf of migrants is most suited to analyse frame competition.

that it helps linking claims to broader discourses and general worldviews. This scholarship differentiates the dimension of diagnostic framing – by which actors recognize certain occurrences as social problems – from that of prognostic framing – which instead implies the articulation of possible solutions to these problems (Tilly 2004). The first, crucial, step of political framing is thus diagnostic, as political actors engage in the construction of public problems by simplifying social complexity and by identifying social responsibilities (della Porta and Diani 2006). The prognostic phase, instead, entails developing proposals for change (Tilly 2004; della Porta and Diani 2006). In looking at the symbolic construction of the refugee crisis in Italy, we shall therefore distinguish and compare the diagnostic and prognostic dimensions within the competing narratives of refugee-solidarity and anti-refugee movements.

With this in place, we try to discern explanations that follow an actor-driven logic based on ideological and resource differences between the refugee solidarity and the anti-refugee camp, while also accounting for the impact of contextual factors and discursive opportunities. The underlying argument is that while opposing camps advance contrasting understandings of the refugee crisis, the nature of the difference between their discourses depends not only on ideology, but also on the circumstances governing competition in the public sphere. Put differently, the choice of framing strategies of the opposing camps is not only constrained by ideological commitments, but also by the social and political environment in which the competition takes place, as defined by discursive opportunities and interaction with the state.

3. Case and methods

Italy offers a paradigmatic case to study public controversies on immigration and integration (Ambrosini 2019). It is in fact among the countries most directly affected by the increase in refugee applications, and one of the EU member states most heavily involved in maritime search and rescue operations. Holding a position of crucial importance in the Mediterranean migration route, it is the second «country of first arrival» for refugees that reach Europe by sea (after Greece).

Over the past years, most political and humanitarian emergencies concerned its southern coasts and the sea dividing Italy and Libya, where thousands have died. The debates also concerned asylum seekers in Italy, which are hosted in camps and facilities⁴ made available by NGOs or private

⁴ CARA (Centres of Reception for Asylum Seekers), CAS (Centres of Extraordinary Reception), and SPRAR (System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees).

citizens in exchange of government funds. Since for most migrants Italy represents a country of transit within a longer journey to Northern Europe, the unwillingness of EU governments to relax the Dublin treaty, and the unpreparedness of the Italian authorities in coping with migrant reception, triggered a series of informal refugee camps across Italy, especially around the train stations of major cities. Tensions thus characterized the northern border, as migrants waiting for opportunities to pass into France, Austria and Switzerland concentrated in border towns lacking appropriate structures to accommodate them, while neighbouring countries strengthened the controls at their borders.

In this context, the main government party, *Partito Democratico* (Democratic Party, PD) took most of the blame for the management of migration and for the outcomes of negotiations with the EU, which – in turn – led to a progressive shift to the right of the Italian debate, as challengers intensified their anti-refugee rhetoric (Ambrosini 2019). While the Italian mainstream right has a tradition of modulating its positions on migration on the ones of the radical right *Lega Nord* (Northern League, LN, from December 2017 only League), the populist *Movimento 5 Stelle* (Five-star Movement, M5S) adopted similarly critical positions of the government's migration policy. As a result, national and local PD officials became increasingly critical towards migration, often emulating the claims by their adversaries, including calls for heavier sanctions for crimes committed by refugees residing in Italy, and administrative acts against people engaged in solidarity networks (Ambrosini 2020a).

The battleground of migration governance was thus significantly shaped by the «refugee crisis» (Ambrosetti and Papparusso 2018). Prior to 2015, the major shipwrecks of October 2013 forced the Italian government to launching the operation «Mare Nostrum», with the goal of performing search-and-rescue activities at sea. As other EU member states became involved, «Operation Triton» came into force in 2014, but its inadequacy in providing support to stranded migrants triggered the start of independent search and rescue missions operated by NGOs. Research has shown the ambiguous role of these measures, that kept together humanitarian and military components both in terms of policy (Cuttitta 2018; Tazzioli 2016) and rhetoric (Musarò 2017). The partial withdrawal of the government by the task of maritime search and rescue, that left the void NGOs filled, was also pointedly analysed by scholars (Cusumano and Pattison 2018). Under significant pressure by the increase of right-wing anti-immigration actors in the polls, the government recurred in 2017 to curbing the same NGOs through a stricter regulation of their role and a new policy based on the externalisation of maritime operations to the Libyan coastguard (Cusumano 2019) as part of a general policy shift towards bilateral agreements and new restrictions to the

right to asylum and the protection of the fundamental rights of refugees (SIR 2017). The gradual tipping toward securitization of the balance of migration policy is strongly associated to the iconic figure of Marco Minniti, minister of interior of the Gentiloni cabinet (Gargiulo 2018).

A few months after, the unprecedented success of the League at the March 2018 national election paved the way to a coalition government with the M5S, with Matteo Salvini as minister of interior in charge of migration policy. While holding the position for just one year (till August 2019), Salvini doubled down on the restrictions on search-and-rescue activities at sea, as well as on the hostility towards asylum seekers (Strazzari and Grandi 2019).

The distribution of asylum seekers in Italy described above, and the choice of this study to look at mobilization in support and against refugees, requires methodological choices enabling to address the political as well as the territorial complexity of contemporary migration politics in Italy. The article is thus based on 13 semi-structured qualitative interviews with activists engaged in anti-refugee initiatives, including local officials from anti-immigration political parties, and 21 interviews with activists engaged in different forms of collective action in solidarity with refugees. With the goal of offering a nuanced insight on the differentiated field of activism on migration in Italy, we collected information from people who had been active on refugee-related issues, and which belonged to both formal organisations and NGOs, as well as local collectives and citizen assemblies. At the same time, we addressed territorial variation in activism, looking at mobilization in different areas of the country. Refugee-solidarity activism takes place at all stages of the migration route in Italy, as interviewees have been active in the place of arrival of refugees (Lampedusa), as well as in big cities (Rome, Florence, Bologna, and Padua) and border towns (Ventimiglia, Como, the Brenner Pass). On the contrary, anti-refugee activists mainly mobilized in large metropolitan areas (Rome, Milan), a few border towns (Como), as well as smaller cities following the settlement of hosting facilities for migrants (the provinces of Ferrara and Treviso).

4. Refugee migration in Italy: Competing frames in an asymmetric battleground

Diagnostic frames

When comparing the framing of migration, a crucial element of divergence that needs attention is how groups mobilizing in support and in opposition to refugees conceive of migration in general. Most Italian activists engaged in solidarity with refugees do not consider migration to be a problem. Spe-

cifically, they do not think that the problem that they are addressing in their action is migration, but, instead, the emergencies and crises created by the mismanagement of migration by the Italian government and by the institutions of neighbouring countries and of the EU. Solidarity activists thus refuse the idea of immigration as a crisis or an emergency. Most consider it a structural process, impossible to avoid, and that needs only to be managed in the most rational and human possible way. Emergencies and crises do exist, but they are the outcome of the mismanagement of the process of immigration by governments, not of immigration *per se*. This frame is perfectly illustrated by the member of a religious congregation that was very active in solidarity with migrants in Como, at the border between Italy and Switzerland:

There is no emergency. An emergency has a beginning and an end. What has happened in Como was an emergency, and it had a solution. Then we can discuss whether the solution was the right one or not, but this was an emergency, with a beginning and an end. To manage a process is a completely different thing. And I think that the real issue, regarding immigration, is how to manage processes (Interview Z12).

To the contrary, since there is a substantial overlap between the activities of the anti-refugee movement and the agenda of the far right, anti-immigration activists consider migration inherently as a problem, while they also focus on the way European governments manage it. The far right, in fact, normally mobilizes on nativist and ethno-nationalist definitions of the nation, which make immigration problematic well beyond the specificity of the current emergency.

We must create awareness that what we are facing is not a crisis. It is an invasion. We cannot call it an emergency either: it has been lasting for too long. Every day there are new arrivals of people. And they don't come from war-ridden countries (Interview P4).

In the solidarity movement, diagnostic interpretations of the migratory phenomenon focus on socioeconomic issues and on the international level, such as global inequality and war. Activists recognise the role of European countries in contributing to the creation of the inequalities and violence from which refugees are running, through colonialism and weapon trafficking. An activist of a radical collective, belonging to the «No Border» area, expressed this view very clearly, giving voice to a broader sentiment in the movement at large:

There is a series of factors that influence the people leaving, such as the destabilisation of some area, the predation of local resources [...]. There are neo-colonial or neo-imperialistic dynamics that fuel this thing, on which there

should be an intervention. There are conflicts in which the West shares a part of responsibility. We should surely start to reason in this way. Take the colossal amounts of funds invested in security systems towards other forms of social expenditure (Interview Z10).

Movements against refugees also mobilize overwhelmingly on socio-economic factors. Our interviews show that economic issues constitute the core of the diagnostic construction of the refugee crisis. This ostensibly pragmatic interpretation of the phenomenon must be understood in the framework of the widespread emotional shock caused by the war in Syria and its consequences, which arguably made full-blown opposition to refugees a less viable option. Yet, as we shall see, the way in which socioeconomic motivations are advanced, as well as the scope and targets of framing vary considerably from the ones set out by the solidarity movement.

Solidarity movements interpret migration as a global phenomenon, or as the consequence of substantial inequalities between different areas of the world, and the responsibility on which belong to Western countries. However, as it was observed earlier, the social problem that activists in solidarity with refugees in Italy seek to address is not migration, but rather the mismanagement of the migration process by the Italian governments, by the governments of neighbouring countries and by the EU institutions. Diagnostic frames attached to this issue are unanimous among activists: the Italian government, the governments of neighbouring countries, and the EU institutions are to blame, alongside their policies creating the emergencies against which activists subsequently engage. In particular, activists tend to underline that Italy hosts a rather limited number of asylum seekers, and that the lack of sufficient structures to welcome them in a dignified way is the outcome of an administrative and political failure, as mentioned by the organisers of a march in solidarity with refugees in the Northeast of the country:

There is no invasion. I have the numbers, the 180,000 that arrived last year are nothing next to the million that went to Germany. Here Italy shows its inefficient face. We are not able to find a model of reception, because we do not want. Things should be planned in advance, there are many models of widespread reception, and it is obvious that if we close every door, that we do not know what to do when they enter (Interview Z19).

While also focusing on international factors, anti-refugee actors identify the primary cause of the «crisis» with the consequences of the Arab Spring. Yet, they do not address international crises politically, but rather interpret them as the result of the economic interests of international and national pro-migration lobbies. The idea is that interest groups who make profit of the arrival of migrants in Europe influence the EU, with the goal of replacing

national workers with low-skilled foreigners. This frame completely obfuscates the distinction between economic migrants and asylum seekers. The logic then trickles down to the national and local level, where the target are the NGOs that – allegedly – «make profit» of migration. The underlying idea is that immigration is a business for these groups. Italian authorities have in fact largely outsourced to charities, private companies and cooperatives, the job of taking care of migrants upon their arrival in the country, which paves the way to anti-refugee movements accusing them of taking advantage of European tenders. NGOs are accused of hosting asylum seekers under unsuitable hygienic and housing conditions (which implies sanitary risks for the Italians living nearby), as well as of working in tandem with smugglers during their rescue operations in the Mediterranean. By directly targeting the misconduct of pro-refugee organisations and the inappropriateness of the reception system in Italy, this frame represents the most striking form of movement-counter-movement competition in the field of refugee politics, which explicitly collapses into a single category the government, progressive left-wing parties, transnational human rights associations, and anti-racist networks.

Migration in the last years is the result of a particular project that has its origins in the Soros and Clinton foundations, together with other NGOs, which have planned this extraordinary inflow of migrants. [...]. The main causes are in some broad events like the war in Syria, but the triggering factors are linked to the organised and elitist nature of international lobbies (Interview P13).

Albeit both movements situate their interpretations at the supranational level, the way in which this is translated into clearly identifiable problems varies substantially. The anti-refugee movement puts the blame for the current state of affairs on migrants themselves, claiming that the people applying for the refugee status are not «real» asylum seekers but «normal» economic migrants. This frame has to be understood in the framework of pre-existing welfare chauvinist doctrines of the European far Right (Rydgren 2008). Immigration is as a zero-sum game opposing not only natives and non-natives, but also non-natives who come to Europe and the non-natives that stay in their country of origin. On the one hand, only «natives» should be entitled to receiving national economic resources. On the other, there are other non-natives who would be «more deserving» of receiving support. Both aspects denote an attempt to offer a pragmatic interpretation of immigration, with the goal of singling out the economic weight of the rescuing and reception operations on the Italian system. The first opposition justifies demands for national preference policies, while the second opposition is meant to shift attention away from the humanitarian logic of assistance and to justify the calls for rejecting the applications for status by asylum seekers. More specifically, this framing strategy results in the construction of a contraposition

between «bogus» refugees who are migrants who come to Italy with the goal of improving their economic status, and the asylum seekers who would really deserve the status, who are still in Syria and Africa because they don't have the resources to cross the Mediterranean.

I do not think it is ok that we welcome these people spending billions of euros, while in Africa those who are really poor are still dying. Because the ones who come here they do so because they want a better future. They pay a lot of money, they are young and they seek improvement. But the real people who is in Africa is not going well, and they're still dying. With the same money, we could help them instead (Interview P8).

Though for opposite reasons, the solidarity movement also points at the mismanagement of immigration, which means that the scope tends to be mostly limited at the national level, with the Italian government as the main actor to be blamed, although with some references to neighbouring countries and the EU. Yet, activists also focus on a third diagnostic dimension, which they consider a problem and on the causes of which they reflect: the increasingly hostile attitude towards asylum seekers in Italy. This third dimension of the issue is blamed mainly on the media, and situated at the national level:

They are talking about it the whole day on TV and in the newspapers: media, media, media. Even if I do not see them [refugees], they are everywhere. [...] The average citizen is uninformed, he hears the news, on the one hand the terrorist attacks, on the other hand the crisis, and then the migrants arrive. People feel fragile, they feel under attack, and so they try to close the door, to defend themselves, to defend their home. It is a legitimate reaction (Interview Z19).

Reflections on this issue are more likely among activists that were engaged in organising explicitly anti-racist protest events, but the movement-counter-movement dynamic is rather widespread and activists in solidarity with refugees, while refusing to qualify migration as a problem, consider the increasing hostility towards migrants as a relevant issue.

Prognostic frames

The different dimensions of migration as an issue are also present in the prognostic frames proposed by activists. For solidarity activists, in fact, since migration is not considered a problem, there are no effective solutions to propose. At this level, in ideological terms, most activists share the ideal of a borderless world, in which every individual has the right to move freely from one country to another. In general, among activists there is a widespread fe-

eling of injustice towards the existence of borders that many people directly relate to their personal experience of free travelling. From this point of view, Schengen and the diffusion of low-cost airlines have fostered a generation of people that are so used to move from one country to another, that they feel extremely unjust the fact that others are not allowed to do the same. The long history of emigration of Italians in the 19th and 20th century probably also plays a role. These feelings are widespread in the movement, independently on the ideological background of the activists.

From where do you read this process? I read it from the point of view of rights: everybody has the right to come and go, to move. If I can go wherever I want, then someone who escapes war as much more a right to go wherever he wants (Interview Z12).

I did hip-hop projects with young kids in Bologna, second generations. When they turned 18, even if they had lived in the neighbourhood with their friends, they had gone to the same school, and done the same things, played the same music, went to the same concerts... one day someone knocked at their doors and told them «You are not Italian, you have to go» (Interview Z10).

Since migration is framed as the outcome of global inequalities in diagnostic terms, proposals to address this issue are situated at the supra-national level and they aim at reducing the spread in economic conditions between the two banks of the Mediterranean.

There are contexts around us that cannot lead to anything else. You can close the borders, but world changes, it does not wait for you, they will go on arriving. [...] They cannot be stopped. What is needed is a long-term work, over the years, which will raise the level of that part of the world. I am convinced that if they had some more resources, they would not run. It is not difficult. [...] You can block them, but they will find another route, if there is not a minimum level of development. As soon as GDP increases, people do not run anymore. With the money we are spending to try to keep them out, we might help them, and give jobs to them. We have to raise the level of well-being (Interview Z19).

Differently, prognostic frames by the anti-refugee movement are predominantly located at the national, rather than international level, targeting the Italian government who is accused of neglecting to the threat posed by migration. The proposed solutions substantiating prognostic frames almost unanimously focus on the responsibility of sovereign states to put a halt to immigration to Italy and Europe. Most notably, citizens must mobilize against migration, not only to inhibit concretely the transfer of foreigners to Italian cities, but also to force governments to take action. The idea is that citizens

must act in the first place to resist cultural and identity extinction, by retaking possess of the streets, buildings, and areas of the city that have been handed over to migrants, and by reclaiming the resources that have been withdrawn from Italians and destined to foreigners.

The responsibility rests primarily on citizens. We believe that if the inhabitants of a city want to stop the arrival of a group of refugees, they can do it. You cannot just say «sorry, you must go away» and expect that they go. The people must find the strength and the persistence to say, «No, I don't agree with that» (Interview P1).

When it comes to concrete proposals for action, these narratives dwell upon the experience of other European countries that did not follow the route taken by the Italian government. Not all countries have «experience migration» in the same way, which means that it is possible for governments – even within the EU – to protect their citizens and stop immigration (Interview P13).

The rationale here is that other European countries have been suffering of immigration much less than Italy, because their governments have regained their sovereignty, opposing the EU and the imposition of open migration policy. Activists thus demand that Italy emulates Central and Eastern European countries, where the national leaders have allegedly acknowledged that migration is not useful for the progress of the nation, and have thus departed from the pro-immigration and pro-EU logic that drives mainstream politics in Western Europe.

There is a strong wind coming from the East, and especially from countries like Hungary, Poland and even Russia. They have understood that these masses of people are no use to the progress of nations, and we must contain them in a precise and rational way. When our nation states will also understand this, rather than follow a blind pro-European and pro-immigration agenda, the situation will change (Interview P1).

Similarly, solidarity activists do not articulate the ideological «no border» principle into their political agenda. In fact, while «No one is illegal» was the main slogan of protest marches in solidarity with refugees throughout 2017, the actual claims proposed by activists tended to take on a more pragmatic and gradualist fashion. Once again, the main target of the movement is the Italian government: since the diagnostic framing focuses on the administrative and political failures in managing the migratory process, in prognostic terms activists strongly push for a policy change. In particular, big governmental camps, like CARA, hubs and hotspots are strongly criticised by all the interviewees, while the SPRAR system, with refugees spread around the country in small

structures handled by municipalities, receives in general a wider appreciation. The critique towards the system and the proposal of a clear alternative is well articulated by an ARCI activist:

For many years, we have denounced the handling of immigration by the Ministry of Interior, with a logic that is almost exclusively of security. [...] Municipalities and regions should manage it, not the prefects, who are unable to do it. [...] The system of hubs and hotspots does not work. The idea that people should be identified and relocated elsewhere in Europe is not working. Not only because other European governments are not collaborating, but also because it makes no sense to take someone and transfer him to Slovakia, after he has crossed the desert and the Mediterranean, and he has landed in Sicily with a migratory project in his mind, for instance because he has relatives in France (Interview Z14).

The third dimension of the issue, the widespread racism in the Italian population, is a significant element of the movements' prognostic frames. Activists blame the government for not involving local communities in the decisions on where to host refugees, and propose democratic decision-making procedures according to which the government would «take into account the communities in which people arrive» (Interview Z19). Furthermore, the goal of influencing public opinion is strongly rooted in movements' agendas.

We opened a restaurant in which 13 of them work. [...] This is the only think that beats the awful campaign, the racism. If you show them working, you shake the prejudice of people. Having 2000 people come to our restaurant and see that there is a practical experience of integration is the best possible political intervention (Interview Z20).

Some of these elements also emerge in the discourse of anti-refugee movements, which similarly criticize the reception system and the fact that the government imposes its decisions top-down without hearing local communities. Yet, since the problem for them is not the management, but the origins of migration, the proposed measures address the structural drivers of international mobility, with the goal of inhibiting ethno-cultural mixing. By proposing to invest resources and policy efforts *outside* of Italy's territorial borders, this approach echoes the «help them at home» slogan, which was first advanced by radical right politicians, and later became an integral part of the government's policy plan to tackle the migration crisis⁵. On the one hand, this frame resonates with the idea of a «right to difference» of different national peoples in their own country (Bar-On 2011). On the other, it further corroborates the notion that

⁵ See e.g. <http://openmigration.org/en/web-review/the-10-best-articles-on-refugees-and-migration-272017/> (last access 17/04/2018).

asylum seekers who really deserve help are not the ones who arrive to Italy. Governments must thus invest resources in the economies of sending countries, rather than wasting resources in the reception system at European borders.

The government and Europe we want is one investing its economic resources in Africa; organizing the black continent; structuring its system in terms of agriculture, economy and infrastructures; thus giving an opportunity to millions and millions of people to eat and to live there... which is their fundamental right (Interview P5).

To sum up, while most episodes of collective action related to the refugee crisis took place at the local level, and mainly consisted in direct social actions during a situation of emergency, the framing of their meaning, both in diagnostic and in prognostic terms, tends to have a larger scope for both the solidarity and the anti-refugee movement. On the left, migration is considered a global phenomenon than can be shaped only by radical changes at the supra-national level, while the cause of the emergencies situations that activists addressed is found in the mismanagement of migration by the Italian government, to which the movement propose pragmatic alternatives. On the right, migration is addressed at the supranational level, but the blame for the emergency is on migrants themselves, as they compete unfairly with native peoples, as well as with other refugees that would be more deserving of international help.

5. A comparative assessment

There is not much to be surprised in finding differences in the substantive framing promoted in the two camps. Indeed, competing activists take on opposite positions on migration, informed by their respective worldviews and ideological background. Nevertheless, our analysis showed that anti-refugee and solidarity groups diverge on the very recognition of the phenomenon on which they mobilize. While the former appraise migration intrinsically as a problem and frame mobilization «against» it, the latter do not claim to mobilize «in favour» of immigration, and do not understand it as a problem but rather as a natural, unstoppable process. This creates an obvious asymmetry: rather than configuring a competition around two symmetric poles, the debate involves an anti-refugee movement contrasting a movement in solidarity with refugees. While the difference may appear irrelevant at first sight, it has crucial consequences on the structuration of the debate, as well as on the definition of goals and on the identification of allies and targets.

Notwithstanding considerable differences in terms of substantive content, furthermore, our analysis highlighted a number of significant correspon-

dences in the framing of migration across the two camps. Three elements, in particular, stand out. First, diagnostic frames on both sides focus on socio-economic issues, and address migration predominantly at the supra-national level by identifying its roots in macro-structural factors linked to the current economic system⁶. Solidarity activism focuses on Europe's neo-colonialist practices in the Global South, interpreting global inequality and weapon trafficking as the key factors generating the strain from which migrants try to escape. To the contrary, anti-refugee activism blames multinational corporations, lobbies and NGOs that make a profit out of human trafficking. The link between socio-economic factors and immigration has been addressed in previous studies on contrasting migration imageries (Ambrosini 2019), and resonates with the findings of previous studies on anti-austerity (Zamponi 2017b) and far-right movements in Italy (Castelli Gattinara 2017b).

Second, prognostic frames across the two camps converge in recognizing the centrality of the state in managing migration. While both demand the government to change migration policy radically, the direction of change takes on fundamentally opposite directions. It is little surprising to find that social actors mobilize at the level of the nation state when dealing with border policy, as this constitutes a core element of state sovereignty. Still, the centrality of national governments in prognostic frames is partially at odds with the understanding of migration as a global process with supra-national roots emerging from the analysis of diagnostic framing. On the one hand, in line with the above discussion, this seems to indicate a tendency towards the re-nationalisation of political claims in the context of the economic crisis (Zamponi and Bosi 2016). On the other, it arguably relates to the ambiguous role played by the Italian government on migration affairs, which made it susceptible of criticism from both the left and the right. In comparative terms, the Italian government is targeted by anti-refugee activism considerably more than by solidarity action. By considering migration an artificial phenomenon, in fact, anti-refugee activists expect that policy decisions at the national level could stop it altogether. To the contrary, by appraising migration as a natural consequence of global inequalities, the solidarity movement ascribes to the state only the responsibility of managing the inflow of migrants in an efficient and human way.

Finally, we could observe an asymmetry in the composition of the battleground, most notably, with respect to how each camp understands its political opponent. If solidarity activists make a distinction between the government and the anti-refugee front, and deploy distinct strategies against

⁶ As we have pointed out in the previous section, these supra-national frames are deployed in overwhelmingly local actions. This observation resonates with the extant literature on global debates and local political opportunities (della Porta *et al.* 2020; Caruso 2015; Vitale 2015) and deserves further analysis.

each of them, anti-refugee activists conflate the solidarity movement with the establishment, and mobilizes simultaneously against both. Activists mobilizing against migration thus appraise solidarity with refugees and government policy as part of the same profit-seeking plot, and, as a result, they mobilise against both homogeneously within single campaigns. Solidarity activists, instead, distinguish between the government and the anti-refugee front, differentiating their respective responsibilities in the construction of the migration emergency: while the former are accountable only for the mismanagement of migration, the latter are responsible for increasing racism and intolerance in the Italian society. The ambiguous position of the centre-left government, wavering between welcoming and securitization, made into an opponent for both camps, creating the conditions for the asymmetry we observe.

6. Conclusions

We have observed a visible competition between the refugee solidarity and the anti-refugee camps, with actors proposing contrasting frames on similar discursive levels, while being informed by a shared context. Nevertheless, this competition is asymmetric on at least two dimensions. On the one hand, the two movements rely on a different definition of the problem at stake (either immigration *per se* or its management); on the other hand, the representation of the composition of the opposing camps. While solidarity activists engage in a discursive struggle against two distinct opponents (anti-refugee groups and the government), the anti-refugee camp conflates solidarity groups and the government into a single front.

These two dimensions of asymmetry are closely intertwined. Anti-refugee activists are fighting on one unique front, directly confronting the government as the leading component of a vast camp, which includes NGOs, the EU, economic elites and refugee solidarity activists. Furthermore, they confront them on a single, homogenous issue: immigration. By contrast, refugee solidarity activists mobilize within a composite scenario. On the one hand, they are part of a widely heterogeneous and increasingly fragmented camp. On the other, they face a double opponent: they oppose the government and supranational institutions on the management of immigration, but they also engage in a broader struggle against the anti-refugee camp on whether or not immigration represents a problem *per se*. Put differently, the anti-refugee camp is advantaged for it confronts a single opponent on a single issue. The refugee solidarity camp, instead, challenges anti-refugee actors on whether or not Italy is facing an immigration emergency, and it challenges the government on how to handle this emergency. This separation between solidarity movement and government is due to contingent policy choices by the government itself, but

also due to the decreasing support for expansive migration policies by employers in times of crisis, as well as the deterioration of the traditional linkage between civil society organizations and centre-left parties.

This asymmetry has significant outcomes on the efficacy of the two camps in the public discourse. In fact, the anti-refugee camp has the chance to propose on the prognostic level solutions that respond to its diagnosis in terms of issue, scope and target: immigration is a problem, the government allows the arrival of migrants, and thus the government must shut Italy's borders. The centrality of the state on the border issue is thus empowered in prognostic terms. One of the crucial competitive advantages of the anti-refugees camps rests precisely in those highly simplified stories. By adopting circular reasoning and – often – conspiracist ideation, they offer clearly identifiable targets and an easy narrative of how people can influence change, and can thus mobilize discontent in the form of a collective revolt of ordinary citizens against the establishment. On the refugee solidarity camp, the coexistence of the «no one is illegal» ideological discourse, with limited prognostic implications, and of pragmatic state-addressing proposals on the management of immigration, makes the framing on the issue much less compelling. Similarly, solidarity activists have been unsuccessful, at least so far, in developing a communicative strategy to counter pragmatic narratives linked to public spending, which suggest the trade-off between the resources used for the reception of refugees and those available to native Italian citizens. In this respect, the disalignment between the centre-left government and the solidarity camp, due to the government's ambiguous policy, gave the anti-refugee camp the opportunity to face a divided and weakened front.

The analysis brought forward in this article allows us to draw conclusions not only on the configuration of the specific debate on migration, but also – more generally – on the dynamics of contention between opposing movements. First, we have shown that movement-counter-movement competitions are dynamic and asymmetric, depending on the configuration of the immigration battleground, the actors involved in the debate and the external context (i.e. the emergency at the borders). In so doing, we illustrated that the nature of movement interactions is crucial to understand the development of political contention. Second, we have argued that both discursive opportunities and the state play a role in shaping the battleground in which this competition take place. In fact, while the similarities in the framing of immigration by the two camps are likely to depend on similar opportunities in the Italian public discourse, the role of the state, and notably policy-making in the wake of the migrant crisis, tipped the balance of the competition, giving a crucial advantage to anti-refugee actors. In this favourable setting, multiple arguments became woven together, including the corruption of the political system, ordinary citizens' discontent and everyday security, effectively turning anti-refugee protests into the vehicle of an array of grievances, from the loss of traditional

ways of life to the demise of European culture. Further research is needed to assess whether this element is structural to the battleground of migration, or it depends on contingent policy choices. We do think that the battleground of migration tends to offer some structural advantages to anti-migration movements, such as the chance to focus on welfare competition in times of crisis to divide the public across ethnic lines. Still, we do think that policy matters, and that the choice by a progressive government to take a clear stand might make a difference, as the most recent literature (Bazurli 2019) shows.

By singling out the role of asymmetry in movement-counter-movement dynamics in the field of migration, our article offers a nuanced understanding of the construction of discursive alliances in the public sphere, illustrating how government choices and policy-making may shape the competition between contrasting actors.

Interviews

- Z1 – #overthefortress activist, Padua, 28/5/2016.
- Z2 – Mediterranean Hope activist, Lampedusa, 2/8/2016.
- Z3 – Mediterranean Hope activist, Lampedusa, 2/8/2016.
- Z4 – Forum Lampedusa Solidale activist, Lampedusa, 4/8/2016.
- Z5 – Askavusa activist, Lampedusa, 5/8/2016.
- Z6 – Baobab Experience activist, Rome, 25/8/2016.
- Z7 – EUI Refugees Initiative activist, Florence, 10/11/2016.
- Z8 – Como senza frontiere activist, Como, 11/11/2016.
- Z9 – Como senza frontiere activist, Como, 11/11/2016.
- Z10 – Solidali activist, Como, 11/11/2016.
- Z11 – Activist of informal solidarity group, Como, 12/11/2016.
- Z12 – Missionari Comboniani activist, Como, 12/11/2016.
- Z13 – LasciateCIEntrare activist, Rome, 19/1/2017.
- Z14 – ARCI activist, Rome, 21/1/2017.
- Z15 – Accoglienza Degna activist, Bologna, 25/1/2017.
- Z16 – Accoglienza Degna activist, Bologna, 25/1/2017.
- Z17 – Accoglienza Degna activist, Bologna, 25/1/2017.
- Z18 – Accoglienza Degna activist, Bologna, 25/1/2017.
- Z19 – Ritmi e danze dal mondo activist, Giavera del Montello (TV), 27/1/2017.
- Z20 – Padova Accoglie activist, Padova, 30/1/2017.
- Z21 – Student activist, Milan, 20/5/2017.
- P1 – Activist in anti-refugee mobilisation at the local level and member of Forza Nuova, Treviso, 17/1/2017.
- P2 – Activist in anti-refugee mobilisation at the local level, Abano (PD), 17/1/2017.

- P3 – Activist in anti-refugee citizens' assembly, Volpago sul Montello (TV), 18/1/2017.
- P4 – Activist in anti-refugee citizens' assembly, Volpago sul Montello (TV), 18/1/2017.
- P5 – Member of Forza Nuova – national level, Rome, 23/1/2017.
- P6 – Activist in anti-refugee campaign at the local and national level and member of Forza Nuova, Milan, 24/1/2017.
- P7 – Local administrator and member of Lega Nord, Bondeno (FE), 30/1/2017.
- P8 – Regional administrator and member of Lega Nord, Bondeno (FE), 30/1/2017.
- P9 – Activist in anti-refugee campaign at the local level and member of Lega Nord, Bondeno (FE), 30/1/2017.
- P10 – Member of Forza Nuova – local level, Ferrara, 31/1/2017.
- P11 – Activist in anti-refugee campaign at the local level, Ferrara, 31/1/2017.
- P12 – Activist in anti-refugee campaign at the local level, Ferrara, 31/1/2017.
- P13 – Member of Forza Nuova – national level, Rome, 6/2/2017.

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