# When Asylum Policies Go Local:
## the Case of Socially-Useful Works
## for Asylum-Seekers*

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**Abstract**

The local sphere of asylum policy, during the refugee crisis, became a key area of intervention for local governments. The existing literature on the topic has largely neglected the role of political affiliation in local asylum policy-making and the implications for policy implementation of mayors' subjective understandings and decision-making. This article aims to fill these gaps by focusing on the case of 'socially useful works' (SUW) for asylum-seekers, a local policy that was defined as the Italian way to deal with the reception and integration of asylum-seekers. The article first analyses the outputs of this policy, assessing which local governments developed SUW policies, what types of measures were implemented and with what policy goals. Second, by applying insights from Weick's sensemaking approach and relying on semi-structured interviews conducted in the Veneto region, it develops an account that analyses how and why these measures were adopted. The analysis concludes, first, that mayors' party affiliations are a strong predictor of how SUW policies are (or are not) implemented. Second, it shows that mayors are not mere passive implementers: they adapt state-level guidelines to their own aims in ways that powerfully shape policy implementation and its outcomes. Third, the article shows how decisions about the implementation of SUW policies are significantly influenced by the mayors' diverse interpretations of the many anti-migrant protests against asylum-seekers, and by different identity processes, past experiences and social relations.

## 1. Introduction

Asylum policies are an interesting case for investigating the role of mayors' party affiliations in local policy-making and how mayors' aims, motivations and understandings of social and political phenomena influence their decisions with regard to policy implementation.

The local sphere of migration policy, indeed, became a key area of intervention for local governments during the refugee crisis. Reception policies are managed primarily at national level but, during the crisis, mayors had to decide whether to cooperate with national authorities or actively fight against the creation of reception centres, and could decide to develop local integration policies for asylum-seekers (Ambrosini, 2018). Not only did the crisis increase the relevance of the local sphere of asylum policy, but this also became 'an extremely contentious one' (Zapata-Barrero et al. 2017). The sharp rise in

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asylum-seeker flows in most European countries has led to widespread anti-migrant protests and high levels of political contestation around asylum, which make mayors' decisions in this field highly visible.

While an increasing number of scholarly works have recently focused on local asylum policy-making (Jorgensen, 2012; Ambrosini, 2018), most of this literature, particularly in the Italian context, neglects the role of mayors' party affiliations in local policy-making and the implications for policy implementation of mayors' aims, motivations and subjective understandings. This article aims to fill these gaps by focusing on both local policy outputs and decision-making processes and addressing the following questions. First, are mayors mere implementers of schemes decided at the national level or do they shape the policies they adopt in significant ways? And do mayors' political affiliations have any influence or impact on asylum policy adoption and implementation? Second, which elements shape mayors' decisions to adopt (or not) local asylum policies and their policy goals?

The article specifically focuses on 'socially useful work' projects for asylum-seekers (henceforth: SUW projects/ SUW policies), a key local asylum policy developed by mayors during the asylum crisis, entailing the voluntary involvement of asylum-seekers in unremunerated community service. The policy became one of the five key pillars of the agenda promoted by the Interior Minister Marco Minniti[1] which led to the structural reform of the asylum system.[2] The then chief of the Department of Civil Liberties and Immigration, Mario Morcone, defined them as 'the Italian way to deal with the reception of asylum-seekers' (Il Corriere del Veneto, 2016) and a key measure to facilitate their integration (Il Mattino, 2016). The article examines mayors' decisions to adopt and implement these policies in the northern region of Veneto, where SUW projects were widely implemented during the asylum crisis.

The article is articulated in three sections. It begins by explaining the analytical approach and methodology adopted. It then assesses policy outputs, analysing which local governments developed SUW policies, the types of measures implemented and mayors' policy goals. Finally, it accounts for these differences in policy outputs through the analysis of the specificities of mayors' decision-making approaches. The analysis shows, first, that mayors' party affiliations are a strong predictor of how SUW policies are (or are not) implemented. Second, in line with well-established findings in the literature in public policy analysis (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973), it argues that mayors are not mere passive implementers of state-level guidelines and rather adapt them to their aims, in ways that powerfully shape policy implementation. Third, it shows that mayors' decisions about how to implement SUW policies are significantly influenced by their diverse interpretations of the causes of the many anti-migrant protests around them, and by different identity processes, past experiences and social relations.

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[1] Source: https://openmigration.org/en/analyses/5-things-to-know-about-italys-plan-for-immigration/.

[2] Law Decree 13/2017, then converted into Law 46/2017.

## 2. Analytical Approach and Rationale

An increasing number of scholars have recently focused on local asylum policy-making, in Italy and beyond, teasing out some key features of local governments' responses to the asylum crisis and examining their consequences on localities (Ambrosini, 2013; Doomernik and Glorius, 2016). These studies have described a variegated reality, in which local governments follow pragmatic or rights-based approaches in managing immigration or rather decide to adopt 'policies of exclusion' (Jorgensen, 2012; Steen, 2016; Ambrosini, 2018; McMahon, 2019). Despite the increasing number of contributions in this field, at least two main gaps can be identified in such literature, which this article aims to address.

On the one hand, while this literature has focused on the explanation of the variation and effects of local asylum policy, both the role of mayors' political affiliations in local policy-making and their motivations and policy goals have been largely ignored. Most of the literature, and contributions focusing on Italy in particular, often tend to merely extrapolate assumptions about their nature from the observed decisions. Mayors' decisions are thus often assumed to be influenced by the mobilisation of local immigrant-supporting organizations or anti-migrant protests (Filomeno, 2017), by conflicts with regional and national authorities (Scholten and Pennix, 2016), or by mayors' ideological positions (Ambrosini, 2018: 117). This is despite the fact that eminent scholarly works have demonstrated how decision-making is influenced by factors that are not necessarily evident in its outputs.

On the other hand, those scholarly works that, outside the Italian context, do focus on local actors and decision-making, tend to focus on issue framing in policy disputes (Steen, 2016) and/or to move from rationalistic premises to assess actors' choices (Lidén and Nyhlén, 2015). They thus assume that asylum policies 'have an objective basis, in terms of quantifying local costs, the level of state subsidies and demographic effects on the community' (Steen, 2016: 466), and that actors' choices are 'constructed in the public discourse, and often with symbolic connotations' (ibid.). These assumptions, legitimate in other contexts, seem inappropriate for studying asylum-related decision-making processes in situations of crisis, such as the one analysed in this article. As pointed out by a number of scholars (Cohen et al., 1972; Brunsson, 1985), indeed, in such situations decisions must be taken quickly and with scant information and tend to be powerfully influenced also by actors' interpretations of the external environment, and not merely by rational or strategic considerations.

This article, therefore, aims to complement this existing literature in two main respects. First, it aims to specifically investigate the role of party affiliation in asylum policy-making, with specific focus on the Italian context. Ambrosini (2018: 117) has questioned the existence of a clear-cut distinction in Italy between centre-right administrations promoting anti-migrant policies and centre-left governments promoting inclusive policies. Steen (2016) reached similar conclusions in the Norwegian context. This article will investigate whether or not mayors affiliated with different parties in Italy implemented SUW policies and whether they did so in different ways.

Second, moving beyond the mere assessment of policy outputs, this article aims to account for such differences or lack of differences through the analysis of the specificities of mayors' decision-making processes in situations of crisis. To investigate these processes, the paper adopts an actor-centred constructivist perspective (Hay, 2012) which mainly draws concepts and ideas from Weick's sensemaking approach (1995). This

approach, rarely applied to political science (Geddes and Hadj-Abdou, 2018), provides an alternative framework for analysing the social psychological processes through which individuals understand and assign meaning to unexpected events and act upon these understandings (Helms Mills et al., 2010: 182). Importantly, it is particularly suited to examining decisions in situations of crisis (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014: 58), such as the one analysed, where local governments were suddenly asked by Prefects to identify buildings to host increasing numbers of asylum-seekers, with scant information available and under the pressure of widespread protests against asylum-seekers. Also, unlike cognitive approaches that merely focus on policy frames, the sensemaking approach connects thought and action and captures 'the practical activities of real people engaged in concrete situations of social action' (Boden, 1994: 10). It indeed addresses both the two key questions that organizations and their members have to face in situations of crisis, related not only to cognition – 'what is happening?' – but also to action – 'what should be done next?' (Mills et al., 2010: 183).

Weick's 'sensemaking framework' (1995: 18), based on some interrelated 'explanatory properties', provides a method for analysing how individuals answer these two key questions. According to Weick's first property, sensemaking is 'grounded on identity construction' (ibid.): who individuals think they are as organizational actors in a certain context influences how they interpret events and act. Secondly, Weick states that sensemaking is focused on and by 'cues' that individuals extract from the environment in order to take decisions on the relevance and acceptability of information or explanations. These extracted cues are 'seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring' (ibid.: 50), meaning that actors make choices by focusing on certain elements or events while ignoring others. According to Weick's third property, the opportunity for sensemaking, which is a comparative process, is provided by retrospection: individuals rely on familiar past experiences to interpret current events. In practical terms, this means that actors are more reluctant to project, forecast and plan solutions if these are 'decoupled from reflective action and history' (ibid.: 30). Fourth, Weick argues that sensemaking unfolds 'in a social context of other actors' and is contingent upon interactions with others (Weick et al., 2005: 409).

Analysing how these properties influence mayors' decisions provides in-depth insights into why and how mayors implemented SUW policies and their policy goals. Based on the first property, it is expected that mayors' decisions are influenced by perceptions of their institutional role, but also by their identity of members of a party or by local identity processes. The second property suggests that mayors' decisions are influenced by their perceptions of the effects of asylum-seeker reception in their municipalities. Following the third property, past experiences in managing migration flows at the local level should help mayors and city officials deal with the present situation. In the absence of such previous definitions of the situation, asylum policies are expected to be mostly implemented in a very reactive way. Finally, the last property suggests that mayors' interactions with other actors in the asylum governance system – particularly if these actors are perceived as sharing similar perspectives on the issue – are expected to influence their interpretations and decisions.

## 3. Case selection and methods

Veneto is an interesting 'extreme case' (Gerring, 2006: 89) for analysing the research questions posed by this article and generating hypotheses on the implementation of asylum policies, for at least two reasons.

First, the significant political variation within the region in 2017 (Figure 1) allows us to formulate hypotheses about the role that party affiliation plays in shaping local asylum policymaking during the refugee crisis. Veneto is one of the heartlands of the populist radical right Lega Nord (LN), which maintains a strong regionalist character in the region (Zulianello, 2019: 83). Yet the dominant position of the LN in the regional political system, in 2017, was contrasted by the centre-left Partito Democratico (PD), which controlled a significant number of municipalities, and by several independent mayors, not affiliated to any national party. These mayors are 'fringe actors', who, unlike the others, do not aspire to govern at the national level.

**Figure 1.** Political affiliation of Venetian Mayors in 2017



Source: http://www.comuniverso.it
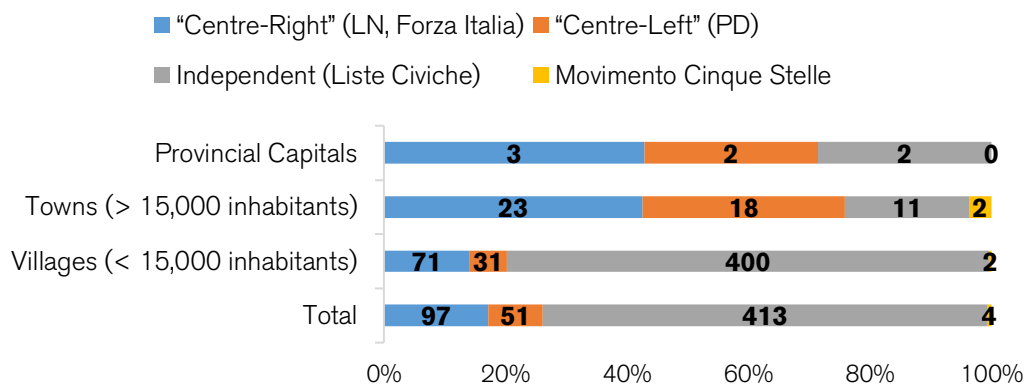
Second, the high pressure from the asylum issue allows us to analyse decision-making in situations of crisis. Veneto, in 2016-2017, was indeed characterised by a harsh political and institutional crisis around the reception of asylum-seekers. It experienced very high levels of political contestation around the issue, and the highest number of anti-migrant protests in Italy (Lunaria, 2017), often organized by 'anti-migrant committees' with no political affiliation. Also, it was characterised by a very weak reception system, with a prevalence of emergency reception centres (CAS)[3] under the control of the Prefecture, very few SPRAR[4] centres (directly managed by local authorities), and a very unequal dispersal of asylum-seekers across the region (Ministry of Interior, 2017).

The many anti-migrant protests, and pressure from anti-migrant groups, are expected to significantly influence mayors' strategies. The very strong regional identity in the region is also expected to influence decisions, particularly those of right-wing mayors.

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[3] The acronym stands for: *Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria*, Emergency Reception Centres.

[4] The acronym stands for: *Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati*, System of Protection for Asylum-Seekers and Refugees.

The article draws upon an extensive document analysis of policy documents and newspaper articles and 33 semi-structured interviews conducted in Veneto in November 2017. The sample of interviewees includes 14 mayors and deputy mayors from municipalities that hosted reception centres; ten non-party actors directly involved in the implementation of SUW policies (four civil servants, four representatives of service providers, two deputy prefects) and nine experts (four academics, three NGO representatives, two representatives of trade unions). The sample of mayors and deputy mayors (henceforth: mayors) includes three LN mayors, three PD mayors, and eight independent mayors. Independent mayors have been grouped into three categories – 'right-wing independent', 'centre-right independent' and 'centre-left independent' – using, as criteria, the definition of actors themselves as such, past membership of a party, and the external support received by parties at local elections. Interviewees were carefully chosen through a quota sampling strategy, in order to include, for each of the five groups, mayors from municipalities of different sizes (one provincial capital, one town and one village), in different provinces, and hosting different types of reception centres.[5]

Section 3 uses insights from all interviews and the document analysis to assess which local governments developed SUW policies, the types of measures implemented and mayors' policy goals. Section 4 uses insights from the 14 interviews with mayors to assess decision-making processes: following Maitlis and Christianson (2014: 62), Weick's 'sensemaking framework' has been used as a method of analysis, on the basis of which the 14 mayors were asked specific questions.

In addition, Social Network Analysis (SNA) was applied to enhance the utility and value of Weick's framework, under the assumption that social processes also shape interpretations of events (Geddes and Taylor, 2016: 588).[6] The analysis relies on data collected through structured questionnaires filled in by the interviewed mayors that implemented SUW policies, investigating their interactions with other actors in the asylum governance system, and the degree of similarity or difference in their perspectives on asylum-related issues.

## 4. SUW Policies in Veneto: the main Policy Outputs

This section assesses which local governments developed SUW policies, the types of measures implemented and mayors' policy goals.

The interview material and other sources[7] reveal that mayors' political affiliations are a strong predictor of whether local governments developed (or not) SUW policies, unlike other variables (e.g. size of municipality, province, type of reception centre hosted). SUW projects were implemented by local governments led by independent centre-left, independent centre-right and PD mayors (including the nine mayors interviewed with these political affiliations). Only a few local governments led by LN mayors developed these policies, including one of the three municipalities analysed. Most LN mayors opposed SUW projects, arguing that they entailed a disproportional

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[5] No provincial capital was governed in 2017 by a 'right-wing independent' administration. The group of 'right-wing independent' mayors, therefore, only includes two interviewees.

[6] For an overview of applications of SNA to political phenomena see: Wasserman and Faust, 1994.

[7] Sources: Il Corriere del Veneto, 2016; Vvox, 2016; Gjergji, 2017.

administrative burden for the municipality and/or that these activities should rather have been proposed to local unemployed citizens (Vvox, 2017). The two independent right-wing mayors interviewed harshly criticised and opposed SUW policies.

**Table 1.** Key features of the SUW policies implemented in the 14 municipalities analysed

| Political Affiliation of the local government | Standpoint on asylum-seekers' reception | Adoption of SUW Policies | Policy content (types of voluntary activities proposed) | Policy implementation: key features | Policy goal |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Independent right-wing (2) | Oppose | No | | | |
| Lega Nord (3) | Oppose | Only one local government | Sweeping the streets, maintaining parks, painting of public buildings | Emphasis on visibility | Short-term: increasing citizens' perception of security |
| Independent Centre-Right (3) | Do not oppose | Yes, all | Sweeping the streets, maintaining parks and gardens, assistance to disabled children. | Pragmatic approach: measures vary according to needs. | Short-term: providing services to the local population |
| Partito Democratico (3) | Do not oppose | Yes, all | Sweeping the streets, maintaining parks, painting of public buildings | Emphasis on visibility, high numbers, involvement of municipal companies. | Short-term: showing empathy for the fears of the local population; reducing social tensions. |
| Independent Centre-Left (3) | Do not oppose | Yes, all | Maintaining parks and gardens, activities in schools, nursing homes, restaurants. | Attempts to target activities to migrants' skills | Long-term: integration of asylum-seekers |

The analysis also provides information about the type of activities proposed to asylum-seekers and about mayors' policy goals, showing that, in the selected municipalities, these are both strictly linked to mayors' political affiliations. PD mayors decided to implement SUW policies with the greatest enthusiasm: as one of them explains, 'the decision was so rational that we cannot even speak of a decision-making process, everybody sustained this initiative'. All PD mayors interviewed agree that the main policy goals were twofold. The policies were implemented, first and foremost, to show the empathy of the local government for the local population, who were annoyed by seeing asylum-seekers loitering inside and outside the reception centres. As a PD mayor explains:

> We cannot deny that the rationale was that of positioning ourselves on the side of our citizens, who were annoyed by seeing migrants doing nothing for the whole day. Thus, we decided that these migrants had to give something back to the community that was hosting them (PD mayor).

Furthermore, SUW policies, in the PD mayors' view, can potentially contribute to reducing people's fears of migrants, and re-orient the political debate on the reception of asylum-seekers:

> Initially I was very sceptical (...) then I realised that these projects contributed to decreasing social tensions. As a councillor from the Five Star Movement rightly told me, 'if you see a person sweeping the street, you can't be afraid of him'; you don't see him as a potential enemy (PD Deputy mayor).

These goals clearly influence the type of work in which asylum-seekers are involved, which in PD-led municipalities only include low-skilled auxiliary jobs such as sweeping the streets, painting public buildings and maintaining parks and gardens. Also, they have significant implications for policy implementation. First, as a city official explains, SUW policies are developed in ways that make asylum-seekers' work strongly visible to the locals:

> The local government decided to develop this policy in a period when the context was quite tense, with the aim of showing to the locals that these migrants were doing something useful for the community, which was the reason why we made them work in areas where they could be highly visible (City Official).

Some PD-led local governments also organized public ceremonies during which the mayor delivered certificates to the asylum-seekers, proving their participation in SUW projects (Cervellin, 2016).

Second, these goals seem to influence the number of asylum-seekers involved in these projects and the choice of the actors involved in policy implementation:

> While others started developing these policies on a smaller scale, our mayor decided that we had to 'go big', doing something that could be visible to everybody. It didn't make much sense to develop a project just for a dozen or so asylum-seekers; we had to do something important. So, he decided to involve the municipal company to implement these projects. And everybody praised him. (...) He was not the first one to develop this policy, but he systematised it and communicated it very well (PD deputy mayor).

Interestingly, the only LN mayor interviewed that decided to promote SUW policies did so with similar goals, and with a similar emphasis on the impact of the policy on the local population. As he explains, the main goal of the policy was that of showing to the people that the local government was doing something to increase their security.

The decisions of independent centre-left and independent centre-right mayors to develop SUW policies, conversely, are driven by very different goals.

All the independent centre-left mayors interviewed explain that their goal was to foster the integration of asylum-seekers in the local community and labour market:

> The rationale behind this decision was to try to help these migrants learn a job, and to actively promote their integration in our society, thus creating the conditions to avoid social marginalisation (Independent centre-left mayor).

As another mayor puts it, 'we wanted to make asylum-seekers feel part of the community where they are hosted'. This approach seems to influence the type of activities proposed to asylum-seekers, which in these municipalities also include work in public libraries, schools, canteens and nursing homes.

Centre-right independent mayors, finally, take a more 'pragmatic approach' and mostly explain that their decisions to develop SUW policies were aimed at the provision of services to the local population that could not be provided otherwise. As one of these mayors explains:

> To be sincere with you, the main reason why we involved asylum-seekers in public utility works is because we had nobody that could perform those tasks. For instance, we involved them in the assistance of disabled children in the kindergarten, because no other local association was available. The main reason, therefore, is that we really need them (Independent centre-right mayor).

For this reason, two of these mayors suggest that the involvement of asylum-seekers in these projects should become compulsory – an idea publicly launched by the mayor of Verona, Flavio Tosi.[8]

## 5. Sensemaking Processes

This section aims to account for the differences in the implementation of SUW policies identified so far through the analysis of the specificities of decision-making approaches. Such analysis will thus provide crucial and in-depth insights into why and how mayors variously implemented SUW policies, and why mayors with different political affiliations were moved by different policy goals.

To do so, I apply Weick's 'sensemaking framework' (1995: 18) and, by investigating how Weick's four key properties of sensemaking influence mayors' strategies and decisions, I examine how individuals develop understandings about the situation around them and act upon these understandings. The four properties are clearly interlinked but, for analytical and operational reasons, their impact on mayors' decisions has been analysed separately. Each of the following sections thus provides complementary insights and clarifies different aspects of mayors' decision-making processes.

### Identity Processes

Identity construction 'is at the root of sensemaking and influences the other properties of the sensemaking process' (Helms Mills, 2003: 55). As Weick points out (1995), individual identities have various dimensions and, indeed, the interview material reveals that mayors' decisions are influenced by their institutional identity (who they think they are as institutional actors), their political identity (i.e. their party membership) and their sense of belonging to their state or region (cultural identity). The complex interaction between these dimensions helps to explain, first, the mayors' standpoints on the reception of asylum-seekers and, second, why SUW policies were developed in Veneto and became so popular there.

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[8] See link online at: http://www.veronasera.it/politica/tosi-salvini-tweet-migranti-protesta-trattato-dublino-5-gennaio-2017-.html.

Awareness of their institutional role, the interviews reveal, leads PD mayors to moderate the traditionally pro-migrant positions of their party. As one of them explained, 'being a mayor makes me more realistic, I'm more aware of the practical problems that migration flows pose and I can understand much better how people think'. Another interviewee added:

> We must be welcoming towards asylum-seekers because this is the mission of a centre-left administration (...). [However] as local government we must confront reality and try to come up with responses. This doesn't mean giving up our ideals, but adapting them to the situation (PD deputy mayor).

Their strong sense of belonging to the Italian State, however, prevents PD mayors from opposing Prefects' decisions to allocate asylum-seekers to their municipalities. As a mayor explains:

> We are convinced that local authorities, being part of the Italian State, should do their part and cooperate with national authorities so that the State can fulfil its duty to provide international protection to those who are entitled to it (PD mayor).

Most independent centre-left and independent centre-right mayors, conversely, describe their experience as local administrators as a learning process. They state that their institutional role put them in 'a privileged point of observation' and allowed them to meet experts and to better understand immigration dynamics. The three independent centre-right mayors interviewed, despite their initial scepticism about hosting asylum-seekers in their municipality, ended up changing their preferences. As one of them explains, 'my institutional role allowed me to get around mystifications and journalists' fabrications.

Instead, the very strong sense of regional belonging (and 'resentment' towards the national political class) of LN mayors and, even more, independent right-wing mayors, leads them to harshly oppose the dispersal of asylum-seekers organized by national authorities. As an independent right-wing mayor explains:

> Rome is trying by any means to destroy us (...). The only thing to do is reject the asylum-seekers, we must send them back to the sender. Rome should burst. In a metaphorical sense of course. Rome should keep all the immigrants, to really experience what it means. They should manage this problem there (Independent right-wing mayor).

The coordinator of a service provider reports that, during a meeting, an LN mayor motivated his decision to oppose the creation of a reception centre by stating: 'I want to keep eating *soppressa* [a local type of sausage] as I have always done and drinking my own wine'. Interestingly, however, two of the three LN mayors also explain that their institutional role moderated their initial, more radical, anti-migrant, positions:

> Before being elected I had a more political and ideological approach to the issue. Then, when you have to make decisions, the approach changes significantly. For instance, I was against the SPRAR system (...) but after analysing it in detail, I changed my mind. The decisions you make as a mayor, despite being partly influenced by political considerations, are more reasoned and thought out (LN mayor).

Independent right-wing mayors, unlike LN mayors, explain that their institutional role did not influence their understandings and decisions. One of them states that, were he a private citizen, he would probably be the leader of an anti-migrant committee. Another mayor explains that his opposition to the reception of asylum-seekers in his village started before he was elected and that his position has not changed since then.

The very strong sense of regional identity in Veneto also seems to explain why SUW policies became so popular there. Many mayors that do not oppose the reception of asylum-seekers, particularly PD mayors, indeed, agree that opposition to immigration in the region is largely grounded on identitarian concerns. As a PD mayor puts it, 'the Venetian identity is based on contrapositions against those who come from outside', and Venetians' 'industriousness' and 'aptitude for hard work' are some of the elements upon which such contrapositions are built. The fact that most asylum-seekers are unemployed during asylum applications, as a Deputy Prefect interviewed puts it, 'is not accepted in Venetian culture'. Making asylum-seekers work for the community, therefore, assumes, in the region, a specific symbolic value.

## Understanding the Effects of Migration Flows

To analyse which events and cues influence mayors' sensemaking processes, mayors were asked about their perceptions of the effects of asylum-seeker reception in their municipality. Table 2 illustrates the findings of a frame analysis of actors' responses, based on a typology of frames derived from the influential works of Helbling (2014: 25) and Benson and Wood (2015).

**Table 2.** Frame analysis of mayors' responses to questions investigating their perception of the effects of the reception of asylum-seekers (in bold: mayors of provincial capitals)

| | | IND/RW-1 | IND/RW-2 | LN-1 | **LN-2** | LN-3 | IND/CR-1 | IND/CR-2 | **IND/CR-3** | IND/CL-1 | IND/CL-2 | **IND/CL-3** | **PD-1** | PD-2 | PD-3 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Securitised Frames* | Crimes, Security Problems | ■ | ■ | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Risk of Health Problems | ■ | ■ | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| *Public Opinion Frames (Public Opinion is hostile towards migrants because...)* | People are inherently hostile to migrants | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | | | | | | | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| | Hostility is caused by political propaganda/media | | | | | | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | | | |
| *Administrative Frames (Management problems, due to…)* | Numbers / the complexity of the problem | ■ | ■ | | ■ | | | | | | | | ■ | ■ | |
| | Local institutional tensions / lack of coordination | | | | | | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | | ■ | |
| *Economic Frames* | Labour market competition and burden on public finance. | ■ | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Asylum reception has turned into a profitable business | | | | | | | | | | ■ | | | | |

As expected, the interview material reveals that, while describing the effects of asylum-seeker reception, most mayors focus on the many anti-migrant protests that have taken place in Veneto. Crucially, however, the five groups of mayors understand the causes of these protests in significantly different ways.

Mayors affiliated to both the LN and the PD describe anti-migrant protests and locals' hostility towards asylum-seekers as an unavoidable reaction to the presence of asylum-seekers which makes locals feel insecure. As a PD mayor explains, locals are 'hostile to migrants due to *inherent fears* of persons that are different from them'. As an LN mayor explains:

> The main effect has been a perception of insecurity among the citizens (...). People see the presence of these migrants as something that is imposed on them and that they don't know how to face (...). And this perception of insecurity risks turning into xenophobia (LN mayor).

Independent mayors, instead, frame these protests and locals' hostility as the outcome of specific events and dynamics. The two right-wing independent mayors, unlike LN mayors, adopt securitised frames and describe locals as 'under threat', because asylum-seekers commit crimes and represent a risk to public health:

> A spate of crimes has broken out; crimes are increasing, particularly those of a sexual nature (...). The asylum-seekers are causing abnormal social malaise. Some of them went to the doctor and everybody ran out of the clinic, especially older people, and the doctor didn't know which medical checks these migrants had done (Independent right-wing mayor).

Independent centre-left and independent centre-right mayors, instead, explain that the main effect of the dispersal of asylum-seekers in Veneto has been increased tension between local institutions, which has led to a very inefficient management of the reception of asylum-seekers and a high level of politicisation of the issue. The anti-migrant protests are mostly perceived by these mayors as the consequence of these institutional tensions, of the anti-migrant propaganda campaigns of the far-right, which received vast coverage in local media, and the unbalanced dispersal of asylum-seekers.

These different understandings of the effects of asylum-seeker reception on public opinion and of the causes of the anti-migrant protests, have important implications for mayors' decisions to develop (or not) SUW policies and powerfully influence the type of measures implemented. They clearly explain why PD and LN mayors, particularly concerned about public reactions to asylum-seeker reception, have developed SUW policies with the main goal of being seen to do something to address citizens' perceptions of insecurity. It also explains why they want these activities to be highly visible. A PD deputy mayor explains that she had long suggested the idea to develop SUW projects without being supported by the mayor, but that, at some point, the mayor suddenly changed his mind 'when he perceived the rising social tension around asylum-seeker reception'. Similar political and symbolic considerations influenced the only LN mayor to implement the policy. In the case of the two LN mayors that did not develop SUW policies, a similar assessment of the problem did not lead to the same solutions. Interestingly, both these mayors had to deal with a more limited number of asylum-seekers and did not perceive the citizens' sense of insecurity as undermining their public support.

Conversely, the conviction of independent centre-left and centre-right mayors that anti-migrant protests are a consequence of the inefficiencies of the reception system and of the lack of information about the issue, leads them to identify other policy solutions.[9] All of them, indeed, unlike PD mayors, actively tried to combat people's hostility through information campaigns or public events with experts. They have also taken a more pro-active role in trying to better organize the regional reception system. As one of them explains, 'what we did was to try to coordinate the reception system in our province, going beyond our formal competences'. Public opinion, therefore, plays a minor role in these mayors' decisions to develop SUW projects: as an independent centre-right mayor puts it, 'our decision had nothing to do with public opinion. I feel ashamed when I hear people around me saying that the solution is to have them clean the streets'. Also, these understandings clearly explain why these mayors are much less concerned about the visibility of SUW policies.

Finally, the analysis provides useful insights into why independent right-wing mayors so harshly oppose SUW policies: being convinced that asylum-seekers represent a real threat to public security, they oppose any initiative that allows them to get closer to the citizens.

## The Influence of Past Experiences

The analysis of the retrospective element of sensemaking provides interesting insights into why local governments propose different types of activities for asylum-seekers and why they do so with long-term or short-term policy goals.

While replying to questions designed to grasp how they made sense of the refugee crisis, most mayors do not make any reference to past events. Rather, they seem to perceive recent flows as an entirely new phenomenon, despite Veneto having received significant migrant flows in the past three decades. In line with expectations, this absence of previous definitions of the situation leads to reluctance to make plans and projections. Most mayors interviewed, indeed, describe asylum-seeking migration as an overwhelming phenomenon beyond their control and speak about the future in very anxious terms. Many are concerned about the possibility that the asylum-seekers will settle in their municipality after the asylum procedure.

This lack of planning and forecasting, at odds with the urgent need to provide solutions, suggests the potential for reactive tendencies in local asylum policy-making. Most interviewed mayors, in fact, seem to have internalized the idea of being passive respondents rather than active shapers of asylum policies. As a PD mayor explains:

> We don't have the instruments. Problems arise, and no ideas about how to deal with them have been previously developed. I think we are dealing with a matter for which we were not prepared (...). We make urgent, emergency decisions (PD mayor).

This helps to explain why most mayors implement SUW policies in a reactive manner, as emergency measures and without any long-term planning.

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[9] The analysis does not allow us to assess the cause of these different perceptions. This might be due to the presence of strong inputs from the parties or mayors' different aspirations to pursue a political career at the national level.

Conversely, the availability of past experiences in the management of asylum or similar issues helps to explain why the three independent centre-left mayors (and one of the independent centre-right mayors) implemented SUW policies with different policy goals. These four mayors, indeed, during the interview, refer to lessons from the past that helped them to make decisions during the asylum crisis. One of them explains that when the Prefect suddenly decided to send 90 asylum-seekers to his village, the previous experience of his municipality within the SPRAR system helped him to manage the unexpected event:

> After 15 years of experience with the SPRAR system, we knew that this system and the diffused reception model worked: we had to recover that model and develop it further (Independent centre-left mayor).

Importantly, these four mayors, unlike the others, are less afraid of the impact of asylum-seeking flows on their municipalities, and keener to make future projections and recommend innovative policy solutions:

> I think the most important thing is to understand that immigration is a structural phenomenon that will continue for the next 30-40 years. We have the social policy areas of disability, mental health, seniority, we have and will have the one of immigration. We must govern it through three-year programmes in a structural manner, building networks between municipalities, as we do in these other areas (Independent centre-left mayor).

Interestingly, the availability of past experiences also seems to influence the implementation of SUW policies. Three of these mayors, indeed, explicitly mention that they initially replicated similar initiatives that had been implemented in previous years with asylum-seekers hosted in the SPRAR centres or with other groups of disadvantaged individuals. Their tendency to project into the future helps to explain why they implement SUW policies with more long-term policy goals.

### Social Network Analysis

Figure 2 illustrates the findings of a social network analysis elaborated with the Gephi software using data collected through structured questionnaires filled in by the ten interviewed mayors who implemented SUW policies. The questionnaire investigates their interactions and discussions about asylum-related issues with other actors in the asylum governance system, the frequency of these interactions, and the degree of similarity or difference in actors' perspectives on asylum-related issues.[10] The four networks illustrate the connections of the different groups of mayors, with each node representing a category of actors with whom mayors discussed asylum-related issues. The size of the nodes and the weight of ties are proportional to the frequency of their interactions (the more frequent the exchange, the bigger the nodes). The colour of nodes depends on the degree of similarity of actors' perspectives on asylum-related issues (red means significant similarity, yellow means significant difference). In order to facilitate the comparison, all political actors have been positioned in the upper-left corner in all

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[10] Frequency is measured on a scale of 1-5 (occasionally; monthly; twice a month; weekly; daily). The degree of similarity of views is also measured on a scale of 1-5.

graphs; institutional actors in the upper-right corner; service providers, media and experts in the lower-right corner; and advocacy actors in the lower-left corner.

**Figure 2.** Interactions of the three independent centre-left mayors with other actors in the asylum governance system.
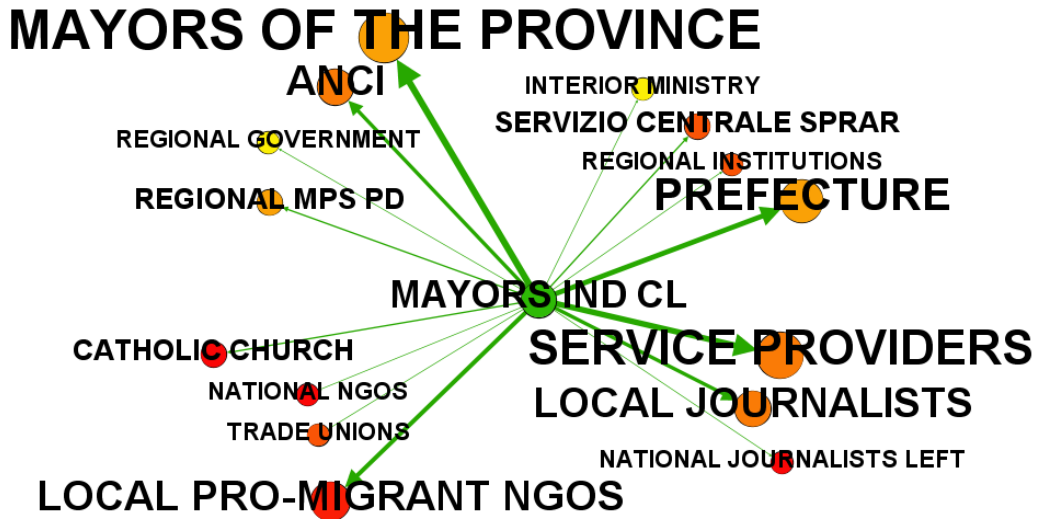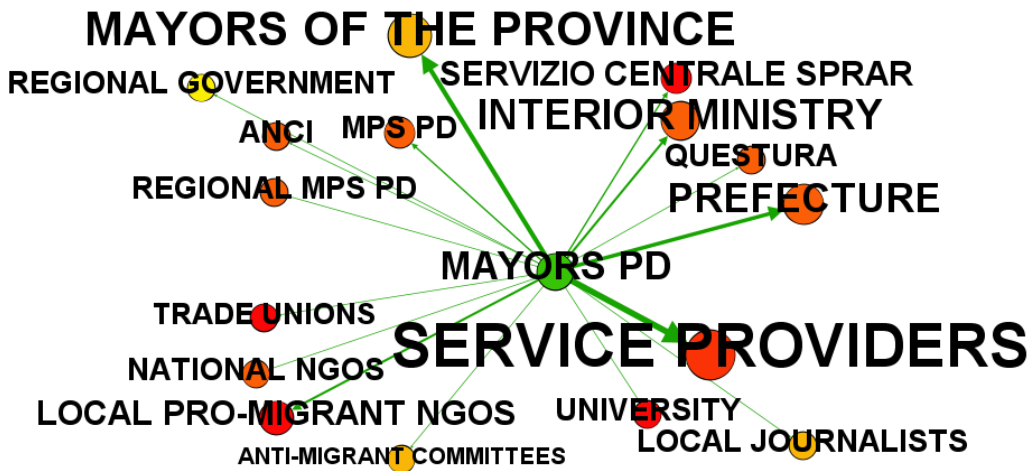


**Figure 3.** Interactions of the three PD mayors with other actors in the asylum governance system.



The SNA allows us to investigate Weick's fourth property of sensemaking, according to which sensemaking is contingent on interactions with other actors. It provides interesting information about those actors that, having frequent contacts with the mayors and sharing similar views on asylum-related issues, plausibly influence how SUW policies are implemented. Not surprisingly, all mayors have close interactions with the main actors involved in the organization of the reception system – the prefectures, and service providers – while the frequent discussions with other mayors help to explain

the quick diffusion of SUW policies. The frequency of mayors' interactions with other actors, instead, varies significantly, as does the degree of similarity of their views on asylum-related issues. Independent centre-left mayors have close relationships with local pro-migrant NGOs and other advocates of asylum-seeker reception, actors with whom they also share similar perspectives. This helps to explain why they adopt rights-based approaches while implementing SUW policies and why migrant integration is their main policy goal. PD mayors, instead, have close relationships with the Ministry of the Interior and less frequent interactions with advocacy actors, which helps to explain why they develop SUW policies in ways that seem more in line with national guidelines.

**Figure 4.** Interactions of the three independent centre-right mayors with other actors in the asylum governance system.
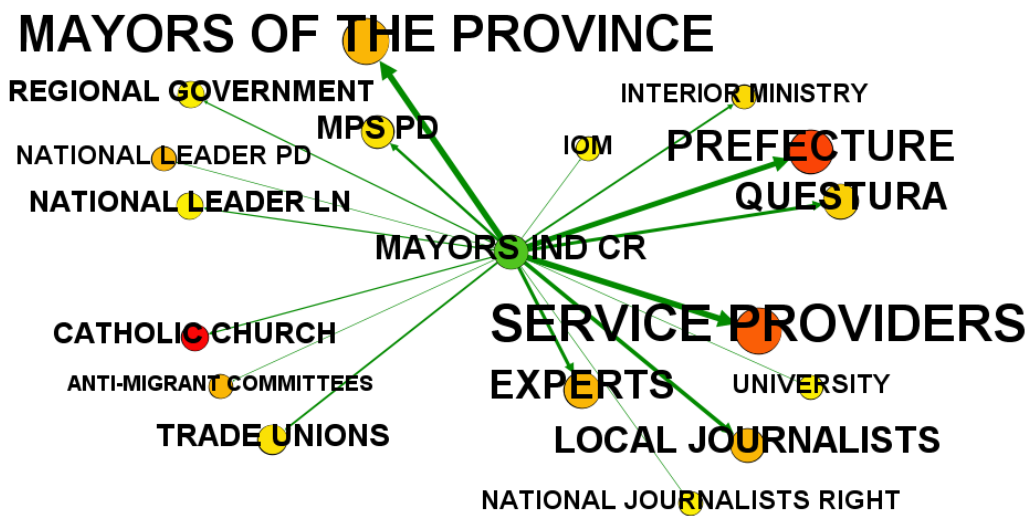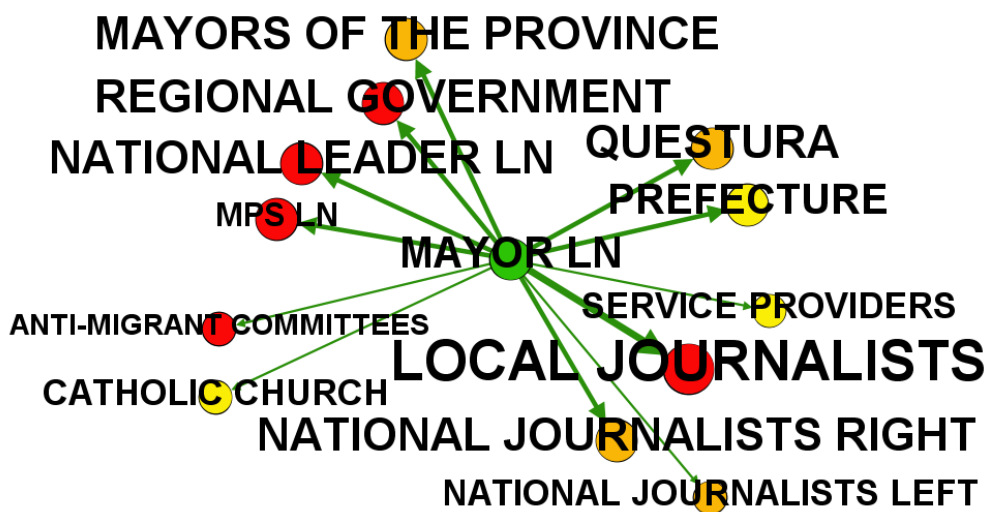


**Figure 5.** Interactions of the LN mayor that implemented SUW policies with other actors in the asylum governance system.

Independent centre-right mayors, compared to the other groups, seem to face less pressure from non-governmental actors and, rather, have close relationships with experts (e.g. researchers, experienced civil servants and practitioners). Also, they do not share similar views on asylum-related issues with any of the actors with whom they interact (with the exception of the Catholic Church). These elements help to explain their more pragmatic policy approach, less influenced by external pressures.

The close interactions of the only LN mayor to implement SUW policies with journalists, finally, seems to be linked to his willingness to be seen as opposing the Prefect's decision to allocate asylum-seekers to his municipality. After he decided to implement SUW policies, he also released several interviews on the issue to local newspapers, during which he explained that these policies were aimed at improving citizens' security.

## 6. Conclusions

This article has examined policies for the involvement of asylum-seekers in socially useful works in fourteen municipalities in Veneto, investigating how, why and with what goals this policy was developed. The main aim is to generate hypotheses for future research. The analysis leads to three main concluding remarks.

First, the article has shown that only some of the selected local administrations implemented SUW policies in Veneto and that they involved asylum-seekers in different types of activities, from very low-skilled auxiliary jobs to more professionalising activities. Importantly, it has also shown that mayors' political affiliations (more than other variables) in the selected municipalities, is a strong predictor of their decisions to implement SUW policies and of the type of measures implemented. To formulate proper generalisations, this finding should be tested in future research on a higher number of cases and in other regional and national contexts.

Second, the article has shown that mayors' policy goals also vary significantly. Mayors, therefore, do not passively implement the measures promoted by the national government. In doing so, they follow their own agenda and adapt national-level guidelines to their own aims in a way that powerfully shapes the policies developed and their outcomes. Independent centre-left mayors develop SUW policies with the aim of integrating migrants in the local community. Independent centre-right mayors adopt more pragmatic approaches. PD and LN mayors develop SUW policies with the main aim of being seen to do something to reduce citizens' perceptions of insecurity. This finding is consistent with well-established findings in the literature on public policy analysis (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973).

Third, the article sheds light on processes of meaning-production and decision-making, in order to understand how and why they decide to develop SUW policies, why they implement different types of measures and why they do so with different policy goals. To do so, it has applied insights from Weick's sensemaking approach, which is particularly relevant to the study of decision-making processes in situations of crisis. The analysis has crucially shown that mayors are not 'passive recipients of information, but active interpreters and rationalizers' (Mutz, 2007: 91). Decisions about the implementation of SUW policies are significantly influenced by mayors' diverse understandings of the anti-migrant protests around them and interpretations of their causes, by different identity processes, and by their diverse past experiences and social relations.

The decisions of PD and LN mayors to implement SUW policies are reactive responses to the protests and the perceived hostility of the local population towards migrants. Such hostility is perceived to be increased by the sight of asylum-seekers loitering within reception centres, particularly unacceptable in the Venetian society, where 'industriousness' and 'aptitude for hard work' are defining elements of a very strong sense of regional identity. Making asylum-seekers work for the community, therefore, in these mayors' eyes, is a policy that has the potential to meet locals' approval and reduce their discontent. These understandings significantly influence the implementation of SUW policies in these municipalities, which mostly involve very low-skilled jobs, highly visible to the local population.

Independent mayors, conversely, are much less influenced by public opinion. Independent centre-left mayors' decisions to develop SUW policies in ways that are primarily aimed at fostering migrants' integration seem to be significantly influenced and shaped by relevant past experiences of dealing with asylum-seeking migration and their close connections with pro-migrant NGOs. The more pragmatic policy approach of independent centre-right mayors seems to be linked with the absence of pressure from both pro-migrant and public opinion.

These findings complement and challenge the assumptions of the (scant) existing literature on local decision-making processes on asylum-related issues. It shows, indeed, that asylum policies, at least in situations of crisis, do not necessarily have 'an objective basis', in terms of quantifying local economic costs and benefits and demographic effects on the community, as shown by Steen (2016: 466). It has also illustrated the potential of applying sensemaking approaches to understand local asylum policy-making processes, compared to cognitive approaches that more narrowly focus on policy frames analysis (Lidén and Nyhlén, 2015). Following Fiss and Hirsh (2005: 31), while 'framing focuses on whose meanings win out in symbolic contests', applying sensemaking in this article has allowed us to 'shift the focus to understanding why such frame contests come into being in the first place, and over which territory they are fought'. Future research should move from these findings and further explore sensemaking processes in other contexts and policy fields.

## Disclosure statement

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