

# Re-thinking policy and (multi-level) governance failure: What went wrong and why in the reception of Ukrainian refugees in Italy?

Matteo Bassoli<sup>1</sup>  | Francesca Campomori<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>University of Padua, Padova, Italy

<sup>2</sup>Ca Foscari Venice University, Venezia, Italy

## Correspondence

Matteo Bassoli.

Email: [matteo.bassoli@unipd.it](mailto:matteo.bassoli@unipd.it)

## Abstract

Following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and the arrival of 170,000 refugees, the already fragile Italian refugee system was forced to undergo major re-structuring and expansion. Re-organisation included the adoption of partially new multi-level governance relationships, as well as political instruments. Despite the widespread positive attitude of public opinion toward the Ukrainian refugees and the bipartisan support for their reception, the outcome of the policy has been not in line with the goals the proponents set out to achieve. In fact, there have been delays, poor assistance to those who have offered to host, and, in the end, a partial waste of the economic and human resources which were devoted to the reception itself. The purpose of this article is to investigate the origin and development of the “vices” of this process, departing from the interpretive lens on policy and governance failure. Our findings consolidate the theoretical challenge to the reductive binary rhetoric on success and failure, and the classic view of failure confined to formulation and implementation. In addition, the article shows that multi-level governance dynamics are strongly relevant in explaining the “vices” of policies, particularly

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highlighting the role, until now largely disregarded, of the latent conflicts between the actors involved. The study has benefited from 38 semi-structured interviews with political actors, including third-party organisations and public actors, the analysis of political documents, and local and national media.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Following the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, the exodus of refugees to Central and Western Europe has been massive, with more than 7 million people fleeing the country. Italy was one of the main refugee destinations due to the presence of a large Ukrainian community already residing in the country (230,000 people, most of whom were women) (ISTAT, 2022). Between February and May 2022, more than 100,000 Ukrainians crossed the Italian border, 20,000 more than the total number of asylum-seekers and refugees already hosted in the reception system at the time the conflict erupted (Ministry of the Interior 2022).

The arrival of so many refugees in Italy has required the implementation of emergency housing solutions and the programming of more structured and medium-term reception interventions. This took place in a particularly favorable social and political climate (Campomori, 2022).

In fact, there has been an explosion of generosity on the part of civil society - including cash donations and the possibility of welcoming Ukrainians in private accommodation - and great openness on the part of politics, across the whole political spectrum. Already in March 2022, the Italian government had guaranteed access for Ukrainians to the reception system for asylum-seekers (also increasing the number of available places). In addition, it declared a state of national emergency and assigned *Protezione Civile*<sup>1</sup> with the task of developing a dedicated national plan for their reception and assistance. At the peak of the emergency, *Protezione Civile* hosted almost 9000 Ukrainians who had no relatives to rely on in hotels, while only 2800 out of the 15,000 foreseen in the national procurement tender (*bando pubblico*) were housed in private accommodation. During the same period, many voluntary associations, NGOs, and even individual citizens took steps to provide private accommodation for the other 160,000 thousand refugees (Bassoli and Campomori, 2022a, 2022b). However, despite the widespread positive attitude of civil society and the bipartisan support for their reception, the outcome of the policy has not been in line with the targets that the policy-makers set out to achieve. The public policy only reached a limited number of people and did not support grassroots private initiatives or local public efforts. Serious delays have emerged, in some cases poor assistance to those who have offered to host, and, ultimately, there has been a waste of the economic and human resources that were assigned for their reception.

Against this scenario, this article aims to understand why the public programme for the reception of the Ukrainian refugees resulted in such a poor performance, despite the promising premises, that is, the apparent consensus of the actors involved and adequate funding (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973)? To put it another way, our research question is: what went wrong in this programme, why did it (partially) fail notwithstanding a bipartisan consensus (the absence of political conflict) and the favourable attitude of public opinion, which made this situation very different from the so-called refugee crisis of 2014-2016? In addressing this question, we

draw on the strand of research on policy success and failures which has engaged many scholars (Howlett, 2012; Howlett et al., 2015; McConnell, 2010; Peters, 2015) since the seminal work of Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), primarily to unveil the difficult correlation between the established goals, the actions geared to achieving them, and the actual outcomes. Departing from this interpretative lens, the article uses the reception of the Ukrainian refugees as a case study that firstly allows the simplistic and reductive crude binary rhetoric on success and failure to be questioned (McConnell, 2010, p. 346), as well as the classic view of failures confined to formulation and implementation phases (Howlett et al., 2015). Secondly, in search of the determinants of the “vices” in the Ukrainian reception program, the article mobilizes the scholarship on governance (in-) capacity (Howlett et al., 2015; Howlett & Ramesh, 2014; Peters, 2015), showing that governance dynamics should be carefully considered when looking for the sources of policy failure. Departing from this literature, the article also takes a step further by focusing on multi-level governance (MLG) dynamics, and unveiling the role of latent and explicit conflicts in influencing policy failure. The scholarship on policy failure and governance has, in fact, largely neglected multi-level governance analysis, and the related dimension of conflicts between different levels of government, different public agencies, and between state and non-state actors.

We present our analysis in the context of migration policy studies. Migration scholars have reflected and discussed at length the policy gap between the objectives and the results concerning immigration policies, that is, control and regulation (Castles, 2004; Cornelius et al., 1994; Freeman, 1995; Hollifield et al., 2014). In particular, the discussion focused on the limited effectiveness of immigration policies in influencing the volume of immigration “flows”, thus failing to prevent unwanted immigration (Czaika and de Haas, 2013). The topic of policy failure is therefore central in migration literature. However, while an extensive body of literature has developed on the so-called “policy gap” concerning regulation and control, the policy failure frame has been scarcely mobilized in the case of integration policies. This does not mean that the shortcomings and limitations of integration policies have not been emphasized, as there is, indeed, a rich strand of literature on immigrant policies, which has also addressed the issue of multi-level governance (Ambrosini & Boccagni, 2015; Caponio and Correa, 2017). Rather, theoretically, there has been no reference to the categories of policy failure, meaning that there is a lack of systematic analysis of the forms taken by failure and the deeper causes. Among the reasons for this, the high level of the politicization of migration (and particularly of asylum) is most probable, which has led to a focus primarily on the dynamics of politics and conflict, which are certainly very relevant, but by no means exclusive in explaining policy “vices”. The Italian case is particularly interesting because the reception policies for refugees have consistently been described as weak and emergency-driven, often attributing these limitations to a perceived reluctance on the part of policy-makers to invest in a topic that is controversial in terms of public consensus. Instead, the reception of the Ukrainians occurred in a completely different political climate, characterized by great openness and a willingness to “do whatever it takes”. With the diminishing or mitigated influence of the “politics” variable, other elements emerge that allow us to understand policy “vices” in a wider perspective.

Ultimately, the contribution that the article intends to give is both to policy-failure literature, elaborating especially on governance (in-) capacity, and to asylum-policy studies, shedding light on what causes a policy failure other than politics and electoral consensus-related issues.

In the next section, we introduce the theoretical debate on policy and governance failure and explain why this framework is relevant to our understanding of the deficits in the reception of the Ukrainian refugees. A methodological note is then presented to introduce the empirical research, which used interviews with policy-makers and stakeholders. Subsequently, we present

our findings and address the question of why the result has been much poorer than expected. The implications of the findings for theory are suggested in the concluding sections.

## 2 | POLICY FAILURE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND MIGRATION POLICY

Since Pressman and Wildavsky's (1973) seminal work shed light on the difficulties and pitfalls of implementation, the so-called “vices” and failures in policy-making have attracted the attention of policy scholars. Policy failures appear to be pervasive: no policy sector and no country seems to be immune to the operational challenges and political traps of failure (McConnell, 2015, p. 221). The concept is central also in the migration field, especially in regulatory issues (Castles, 2004; Hollifield et al., 2014). Migration policy - the supporters of the policy failure in regulating entries argued - was unable to stop (completely) the arrival of immigrants when, between the 1970s and the early 2000s, various European states declared a “zero immigration” policy. In fact, immigration has continued to grow due to family re-unification and asylum-seekers; actually, even labor migration has not completely stopped, thanks to bilateral agreements and various foreseen exceptions. Among the main reasons for this (apparent) failure, the so-called “liberal constraint” (Hollifield, 1992) stands out, that is, the constraints exercised by liberal democratic institutions, such as international treaties, constitutions, courts, and human rights, which have acted as a deterrent factor in the implementation of a more draconian approach (Hollifield, 1992; Joppke, 1998). In the period from the 1970s to the 2000s, liberal constraint also assumed the shape of liberal economic interests that invoked more open policies on labor migration (Boswell & Geddes, 2011), thus mitigating the restrictiveness of state entry policies (Freeman, 1995; Hollifield, 1992).

It is clear from a policy-orientated approach that the discrepancy between public discourses and actual policy (the laws, regulations, and measures on paper)—which Czaika and de Haas (2013) call the *discourse gap*—may also be due to the opaqueness of the policy-making process. In fact, in addition to the stated goals of zero immigration, decision-makers had latent goals or hidden agendas that aimed to address the constraints discussed above. If we look at the outcomes of these policies from the point of view of these hidden agendas, the judgment of policy failure is bound to change.

### 2.1 | Challenging definition

The theoretical debate on policy failure has been challenged by an issue of definition, common to many other concepts in the social sciences. Defining policy failure is no straightforward task. Implementation studies following Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) did not directly capture the whole implication of the concept of policy failure, preferring to use the expressions “non-implementation” or “unsuccessful implementation” (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984). It was also pointed out that there has been a general tendency “to make occasional passing commentary on policy failure, but not doing so in any systematic or conceptually structured manner” (McConnell, 2015, p. 224). The literature on migration policy failure offers a telling example of this deficiency because the debate has been developed in the absence of a robust theoretical anchoring in the public policy literature. According to McConnell (2015, 226–230), methodological difficulties in defining policy failure can be summarized in the following: different individual

or organisational perceptions of failure (what one perceives as a failure may be interpreted as not a failure by another); different benchmarks (failure concerning what); the existence of gray areas (hidden goals and multiple goals make it difficult to evaluate failure); the question “failure for whom” (when a policy fails for some groups but brings success for others); and the variance over time (policies that failed in the short term may be successful in the longer term and vice versa).

## 2.2 | Dependent variable: Variants, degrees, and stages of policy failure

One way to deal with the difficulties of definition is to identify the main dimensions of the failure. Indeed, policies can fail in many different ways, and it is helpful to understand the differences between failures. Failure is not a dichotomic variable, and it requires investigation with respect to the dimensions of *variation* and the *level of intensity (degrees)*; it is also relevant to examine *the stages* of the policy cycle affected by a failure. The identification of variants, degrees, and stages of policy failure allows for the clarifying of its “dependent variable” (Howlett et al., 2015), moving beyond “the often crude, binary rhetoric of success and failure” (McConnell, 2010, p. 346), as well as just analysis of the two traditionally-investigated stages to examine failures, that is, formulation and implementation.

Scholars (Howlett, 2012; Leong & Howlett, 2022) have highlighted at least four descriptive dimensions along which policy failures can vary, drawing from Bovens and t’Hart’s (1996) definition of *policy fiasco* as:

A negative event that is perceived by a socially and politically significant group of people in the community to be at least partially caused by avoidable and blameworthy failures of public policy-makers (Bovens and t’Hart, 1996, p. 15).

To put it another way, a policy fiasco occurs when poor planning and poor execution co-exist, leading to very poor results (Howlett, 2012). The dimensions inferred by the above-mentioned definition are: the *extent* (Hood et al., 2000), as failure can include an entire policy regime or more specific programmes; the *duration*, as some failures are long and persistent, while others are shorter and sometimes sharper; the *visibility*, as the failure can have a lower or higher element of publicness; and the *intensity*, as the level of agreement about a policy failure may not be unanimous.<sup>2</sup> Combining these dimensions, Howlett (2012), and then Leong and Howlett (2022), proposed a taxonomy of four principal failure types (see Figure 1) based upon the magnitude (spatial and temporal) and the salience of failure. A *major failure* surfaces when all the dimensions of policy failure score high (such as climate change policy); a *minor failure*, when both salience and magnitude are low (such as policy service contract bid failure); a *focused failure* occurs when the salience is high but the magnitude is low, such as failures in controlling sports

		Magnitude (extent and duration)	
		High	Low
Salience (intensity and visibility)	High	Type I: major failure e.g. climate change (international treaty) policy failure	Type II: focused failure e.g. sports crowd control (riots) policy failure
	Low	Type III: diffuse failure e.g. anti-poverty policy failure	Type IV: minor failure e.g. policy service contract bid failure

FIGURE 1 Four types of policy failure. Source: Howlett, 2012; Leong & Howlett, 2022.

Agenda setting	Overreaching governments establishing or agreeing to establish overburdened or unattainable policy agendas.
Policy formulation	Attempting to deal with problems without investigating or researching problem causes and identifying the probable effects of policy alternatives.
Decision-making	Failing to decide on a policy within a reasonable period of time or distorting its intent through bargaining and log-rolling.
Policy implementation	Failing to deal with implementation problems including lack of resources, principle-agent problems, oversight failures, and others.
Policy evaluation	Lack of learning due to lack of, ineffective, or inappropriate policy monitoring and/or feedback processes and structures.

FIGURE 2 Common policy process failures by stage of the Policy Cycle. Source: Howlett, 2012.

riots (Leong & Howlett, 2022, p. 1387); and finally there is a *diffuse failure* when the salience is low but the magnitude is high, an example being anti-poverty policies. This typology helps us in showing that success and failure are just two extremes of a spectrum, while, in the middle, there are intermediate types whose features are interesting to observe and analyze. We argue that the case of the Ukrainian reception in Italy lies somewhere between minor and diffuse failure types (Type III and IV in Figure 1), as we will show in the following sections.

With regard to the stages of the policy cycle affected by a failure, it has been pointed out that, beyond formulation (when there is an insufficient or inappropriate identification of the causes of the problems and the effects of the policy measures) and implementation (the lack of resources, poor or ineffective engagement of multiple players with different professional logics, etc.), failures can also emerge as a consequence of *policy agendas* which, for example, may be unattainable; as a consequence of the *decision making* which fails to decide on a policy within a reasonable time; as a consequence of an *evaluation* which fails to produce learning due to ineffective policy monitoring and feedback processes and structures (McConnell, 2010; Howlett, 2012) (see Figure 2).

### 2.3 | Independent variable (Multi-level) governance failure and its implications in policy failure

From the definition of the dependent variable to the independent one, a relevant topic of the policy failure literature concerns the determinants of the failure, that is, what made a policy (partially or totally) unsuccessful. Focusing on the causes means looking at the political and socio-economic environment within which policies are being made (Peters, 2015, p. 261), as well as their interactions with other policies, as in the case of migration control policy, which is influenced by many other non-migration policies (Castles, 2004). Searching for the causes of failure, the concept of governance (in-) capacity (Bovens et al., 2001; Howlett et al., 2015; Howlett & Ramesh, 2016; Peters, 2015; Steen et al., 2015) has proved to be particularly fitting in the case of the Ukrainian reception policy, as we will show in the next sections. Departing from a definition of governance as “establishing, promoting and supporting a specific type of relationship between government and non-governmental actors in the governing process”, Howlett and Ramesh (2014, 318) identified two orders of governance incapacity (which lead to failure). The first order occurs when there is a mismatch between the governance mode in place and the nature of the problem that it is expected to address, while the second order occurs when the governance system in place is basically correct and aligned with the nature of the governance problem, but the competences and capabilities of the government seem inadequate to design and implement a policy solution.

Inspired by the argument of governance incapacity, we take one step further by arguing that a more comprehensive understanding of governance failure can take advantage of a multi-level governance (MLG) perspective. This means considering not only the relations between state and non-state actors, but also all the interactions and (attempts at) co-ordination between different levels of government, and also between different actors in the public realm (inter-institutional relations). MLG has gained momentum among migration scholars, especially in the study of immigrant integration policies (Caponio, 2022; Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2017; Scholten, 2013) and claims an improved understanding of the policy-making process. However, the weaknesses of this approach have recently been highlighted, including, in particular, the fact that both the actors and the levels of government are considered in purely institutional terms, and this leads to an (over-) emphasis on co-operation and co-ordination among actors, thus overlooking open and latent conflicts (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020). As a matter of fact, both the governance and the MLG approach under-estimate and almost ignore the “conflict variable”, which is, instead, constantly present in more or less explicit forms, and influences the overall “governance capacity”. We argue that policy effectiveness, defined as the achievement of the goal that the proponents set out to achieve (McConnell, 2015, p. 230), is also challenged when MLG relations are affected by explicit or latent conflicts due to different ways of evaluating the priorities or different interests at stake.

## 2.4 | Policy failure and the Ukrainian refugee reception

Why does the policy failure approach seem appropriate to analyze the case of the reception of the Ukrainians in Italy as part of the broader asylum policy? We argue that the Ukrainian refugee reception showed a clear gap between the stated objectives and the actual outcomes. As mentioned in the introductory section, despite a widespread welcoming atmosphere and the quick activation of both civil society and policy-makers, the number of reception places planned and the foreseen schedule were largely disregarded. The above-presented policy failure framework allows sense to be made of the mismatch between the output and the outcomes, and to look for the causes. To put it another way, this framework is helpful to answer the question of “what went wrong, and why” with the Ukrainian refugee reception, and it also enables some more general considerations to be advanced on the category of failure in asylum policies, as we will argue in the conclusion.

## 3 | RESEARCH METHODS

To describe our methods, we are using the guiding principles from Ashworth et al. (2019). Thus, we present our positioning, the qualitative choice, sampling frame, data collection, and analysis. As researchers and practitioners of migration policy, we are deeply involved in the field. One of the authors is the founder and president of a third-sector organisation (TSO) working in this field and active in the reception of the Ukrainian refugees. The other author has been researching migration policy for the past 20 years and serves as a local councilperson in a local administration. We decided to conduct qualitative research as the best method for our study due to the lack of previous empirical research in the field and the novelty of the policy.

In selecting a case for our study, we were intent on exploring migration through the lens of policy analysis. Italy presented itself as an especially fitting candidate for such scrutiny. Over the

past decade and a half, the nation has become a prominent destination for refugees, a trend that has exerted considerable pressure on governmental mechanisms to devise and execute effective reception policies. This ongoing influx has not only tested the capacity and resilience of Italy's policy frameworks but has also intensified the roles and responsibilities of various state and non-state actors across different tiers of governance. Such a complex interplay of actors and levels makes Italy an exemplary context for applying and examining the MLG approach.

The Italian case is particularly intriguing due to its highly politicized environment, which has paradoxically engendered an open landscape of support for the Ukrainian refugees. Moreover, the country's historically positive approach to emergency management serves as a backdrop for these initiatives, contributing to a fertile testing ground for the MLG framework. Notably, Italy's migration policies and practices have sparked significant public debate, attracting attention both within its borders and on the international stage. The unfolding of events in such a promising environment - marked by an established history of positive emergency response and a robust civil society engagement - provides a unique opportunity to observe the genesis and evolution of policy failures. This environment, ostensibly ripe for successful policy outcomes, offers a counter-intuitive view into the conditions under which policy initiatives may falter, thereby allowing us to dissect the paradox of policy failure amid seemingly favorable conditions.

All in all, Italy's experience serves as a critical case study in order to understand how policy failures can materialize even in environments that appear to be the most conducive to success. By dissecting the Italian context, we hope to illuminate the factors that contribute to the success or failure of policy in the realm of migration and to enrich the broader discourse on governance and policy studies.

To examine policy failure, we employed two complementary research methods: secondary documentation analysis and semi-structured interviews (see [Appendix](#)). The first method involved an analysis of the existing literature, including scholarly articles, institutional documentation, and project-related documents. Although the official documentation was abundant, the literature on the Ukrainian reception was scarce due to its novelty. The second method utilized semi-structured interviews. Our research employed a deliberate and strategic sampling frame, focusing on consortia as the primary units of analysis, in the first phase between August and November 2022. Out of the 29 consortia initially identified in the public procurement tender (Protezione Civile, 2023), we selected five, adhering to specific criteria to ensure a balanced and representative sample. Our selection criteria were based upon contractual status, size of the consortium, and geographical coverage. We opted for three consortia with signed contracts and two without. In each of the three consortia that granted us access, we conducted in-depth interviews with the lead partner and a number of other partners, as deemed necessary. The selection of additional partners for interviews was informed by initial findings and the saturation process. In addition, our research also included all the actors involved in the drafting of the national plan, as well as those mentioned in the first round of interviews. In a second phase (May-June 2023), we extended our participant pool to include the municipalities involved in the policy implementation. This decision was informed by suggestions from consortium partners and was aimed at acquiring a more complete overview of the policy implementation at local level.

The interviews were transcribed and independently coded by the authors, followed by collaborative discussions to achieve a mutual consensus on the type of policy failure described, and on the different phase of the cycle. Table 1, column one, showcases the final codes applied in this initial phase. After a second round of additional interviews, these codes laid the groundwork for the second-round coding scheme. Table 1 delineates the progression in our approach to coding, from initial codes to reported findings.



TABLE 1 The root from initial coding to findings.

Final codes -First round	Comment on code evolution	Definitive codes - Second round	Thematic findings
Administrative requests	No change in code	Administrative requests	Administrative burden
Expertize	The code was included in <i>Protezione Civile</i> approach	<i>Protezione Civile</i> approach	Rigidity of the procedure
Tender features	The code was re-assigned to timing and to uncertainty	Administrative burden <i>Protezione Civile</i> approach	Administrative burden Rigidity of the procedure
Municipal election	The code was included in timing	Electoral season	Timing
Governmental handover	The code was included in timing	Electoral season	Timing
Timing	No change in code	Timing	Timing
Summer break	The code was included in timing	Timing	Timing
Presence of animals	The code was included in badly conceived target	Target	Badly conceived target
Agency	The code was included in badly conceived target	Target	Badly conceived target
Conflict	No change in code	Conflict	Latent conflict
Conflict among TSO	The code was included in conflict	Conflict	Latent conflict
Co-production	The code was included in ANCI	ANCI	Latent conflict
Multilevel failure	The code was included in conflict	Conflict	Latent conflict
Governmental handover	The code was re-assigned to timing and to uncertainty	Timing Uncertainty	Timing Uncertainty
Extra tender	No change in code	Extra tender	Emergency
Ex ante	No change in code	Ex ante	Emergency
Easing procedure	The code was dropped		
Policy learning	The code was dropped		
Policy change	The code was dropped		Informed Table 2

#### 4 | CONTEXT: THE OUTBREAK OF THE EMERGENCY AND THE MEASURES PUT IN PLACE

Even a few days after the outbreak of the war, a large number (15,844 on March 10, 2022) of Ukrainians arrived in Italy (*Protezione Civile*, 2023). Most of them found hospitality from Ukrainian acquaintances who already lived in Italy. Others were hosted by Italian families who had relations with relatives or acquaintances of the refugees. Others found housing and social support from voluntary associations or parishes that mobilized well before public institutions did. The arrival of the Ukrainian refugees sparked an explosion of generosity that led many

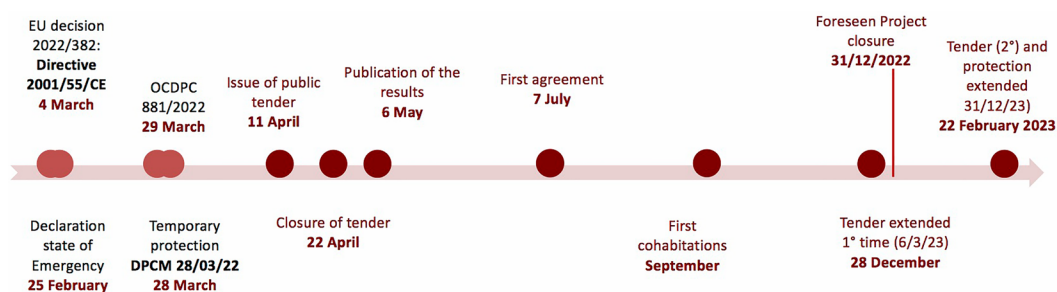


FIGURE 3 The main institutional steps in the reception of the Ukrainian refugees in Italy.

people to contact local authorities to offer homestay accommodation or entire flats for free, or to make available skills relevant for their reception (e.g., related to language). The massive amount of offers also created confusion and difficulties in processing all such requests. From the first week of March, individual citizens and TSOs began to host the Ukrainians spontaneously and informally, that is, without any economic and organisational support from public authorities, as they were still trying to find a way of coping with the emergency. The most relevant steps and decisions in the construction of the governance of the reception system were the following (see also Figure 3).

- the declaration of the state of emergency and the assignment of the co-ordination of the interventions to *Protezione Civile* (Council of Ministers Resolution February 28, 2022);
- the development of a co-ordination system which assigned an important role to the regions in their territories (Order of the Head of the *Protezione Civile* Department, OCDPC n. 872/2022);
- the decision to expand the SAI (Reception and Integration System) and the CAS (Extraordinary Reception Centers) with 9000 additional places (Law Decree No.16 of February 28, 2022; Law Decree no.115 of August 9, 2022; Decree of the Minister of Interior of August 23, 2022);
- the provision of a contribution of 300 euros per month for a maximum of 3 months for Ukrainian refugees who found a housing solution on their own (not within the reception system) (OCDPC n. 881/2022); and
- the launch of a widespread reception (including homestay accommodation and autonomous accommodation in private flats) completely dedicated to fleeing Ukrainians to be implemented through TSOs and voluntary associations (Law Decree n.21 of March 21, 2022, and then OCDPC n. 881/2022).

#### 4.1 | **Protezione civile public procurement announcement for 15,000 places in the widespread reception program**

At the end of March, *Protezione Civile* announced funding for 15,000 lodging arrangements to afford temporary protection to the Ukrainian beneficiaries. To allocate funds, it launched an open call for consortia of TSOs. The TSOs had to guarantee both the immediate availability of accommodation and a package of integration services (language courses, support for entry into the labor and housing market, etc.). The call registered 48 applications, 29 passed the vetting screen, with a total of 17,012 places immediately available, including independent apartments (57%), family accommodation (23%), and other types, such as shared flats made available by religious institutions (17%). In mid-May, therefore, after a huge organisational effort by the TSOs

**TABLE 2** State and non-state actors involved in the re-organisation of the reception system after the Ukrainian crisis.

Actors	General role in the asylum system	Specific actions for the reception of the Ukrainians
Minister of interior	Manages the overall reception system	Expanded reception system to lodge homeless ukrainians.
Prefectures (local bodies of the ministry of the Interior).	In the context of the reception system, they are responsible for creating and subcontracting the CAS (extraordinary reception centers).	In charge of finding accommodation for the ukrainians without relatives or acquaintances' support and who intend to settle in the territory of the prefecture.
<i>Protezione Civile</i> (government department, under the presidency of the council of ministers)	Responsible for emergency management (e.g., earthquakes, floods). Key actor in the 2011 “north africa emergency”, but not involved since.	Responsible actor for the organization and management of the private accommodation for ukrainians, offering lodging to 9000 people in hotels and providing a lump sum (300 euro per person) to some 90,000 ukrainians, issuing the tender for 15,000 people
ANCI	Manages and co-ordinates the reception and integration system (SAI), together with the ministry of home affairs.	Advocates for municipalities not to be marginalized in the design of the <i>Protezione Civile</i> call. ANCI put pressure on <i>Protezione Civile</i> so that the TSOs collected a formal willingness from the municipalities to enter the partnership.
Regions	Play a marginal role in the reception system.	Appointed by <i>Protezione Civile</i> as co-ordinating actors in their territory. Provided final matching between ukrainians requiring reception and the availability and resources of third-sector regional actors.
Municipalities	Responsible actors for the implementation of the SAI system, thanks to the collaboration with TSOs.	Activated to support ukrainians hosted in their territory. Involved in the SAI enlargement and had to sign the protocol for the third sector to implement private accommodation in a given territory.
Third-sector organizations (TSOs)	Manage and sometimes co-design reception system on behalf of prefectures and/or municipalities.	Hosted refugees in the aftermath of the crisis (Feb-Jun 2022) with their own resources. Answered the call for private accommodation and, from Aug 2022, started to manage private accommodation.

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Actors	General role in the asylum system	Specific actions for the reception of the Ukrainians
Citizens	In the earlier refugee crisis (2014–2016) citizens showed their willingness to activate homestay refugee reception.	Offered lodging solutions, either providing flats for private accommodation or offering to host migrants in the homestay procedure.
Owners of hotels	Hosted refugees by signing agreements with local prefectures inside the emergency reception (CAS).	Offered empty hotels (Feb is low season in seaside hotels).

Source: Marchetti 2018, Protezione Civile, 2023, various interviews.

(which had to find accommodation, available families, and obtain a formal letter of commitment from the relevant municipalities in less than 2 weeks), everything was ready for the agreements to be signed and the receptions to be started. However, from that moment on, the process - which should have been characterized by fast implementation - suffered a drastic slowdown. *Protezione Civile* requested substantial documentation, from both lead partners and individual organisations. Furthermore, the National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI) called for a leading role for the municipalities, making it necessary to sign partnership agreements with all the municipalities in which the receptions took place. Local elections (in June) further lengthened the timescales. As a result, the first agreements were only signed on 4 August, near the summer closures and with many potential hosting families on vacation. At the end of December 2022, only 14 of the 29 conventions had been activated for a total of 6676 potential places, and only a few hundred people were actually hosted. This meant, among other things, that many of the 9000 persons temporarily sheltered in hotels at the beginning of March were still in hotels in November.

## 5 | AN ANALYSIS OF THE UKRAINIAN RECEPTION'S POLICY FAILURE

Despite different levels of commitment and responsibility, we have identified nine state and non-state actors involved in the policy process of the Ukrainian reception. Table 2 shows the specific role of each, also highlighting their relationship, especially in the first phase of the emergency (until September 2022), which has significantly changed the asylum-system procedures. The table compares the role that the actors played in asylum policies before the war and any changes due to the “Ukrainian emergency”. The interviews, complemented with the analysis of documents, enabled three main manifestations of the failure to be identified, that is, three critical points which make it possible to describe the *variants*, *degrees*, and *stages* of policy failure (the “dependent variable”) (Howlett, 2012; Leong & Howlett, 2022). The recurrent issues in this regard are *the administrative burden and the rigidity of the procedure; the uncertainty related to the timing of the process; and the badly-conceived target* of the *Protezione Civile* public procurement tender. The data collected also allowed us to identify at least part of the causes of failure (the “independent variable”) (Howlett & Ramesh, 2014), that is, the *existence of latent conflicts among state actors and a disagreement between state and non-state actors* in dealing with the emergency.

## 5.1 | Features of the failure

Let us start by describing the shape that the failure has taken in the Ukrainian reception, highlighting three key features.

### 5.1.1 | Administrative burden and rigidity of the procedure

The workflow of the TSOs was slowed down by the high administrative burden. The program required numerous documents and highly bureaucratized processes compared to the pressing emergency situation. This led to delays and incomplete execution. The TSOs had to concentrate only on the larger municipalities, where it was easier to reach an agreement, compared to small towns with a weaker organisational structure and smaller population. Thus, many municipalities were left out along the process, contradicting the declared policy goal of the widespread distribution of the refugees. Three levels of constraints emerged: standard constraints; discretionary constraints; and ad hoc constraints.

The standard constraints posed a serious problem for those organisations bidding for the public procurement tender in large consortia. Each partner had to produce several documents, for example, *certificato anti-mafia* (document attesting to no known involvement with the Mafia), *fedina penale* (document attesting to not having a criminal record), and not all partners were prepared and ready for this lengthy type of procedure (Int. 4).

The second type of constraint was arbitrarily posed to the bidder by public institutions, within the general discretion of the Italian administrative system. For example, the prefecture - without being requested by the official procedure - requested the residence permits of all the foreign people managing the TSOs (Int. 4).

The last type of constraint is the ad hoc one posed by ANCI (see Table 1). The request to have the municipality formally on board slowed down the whole process; according to the consortium managers, this was “the absolute most time-consuming thing for us”. (Int. 4) Initially, *Protezione Civile* asked for a generic letter of intent, while later ANCI asked for an official partnership agreement. In some municipalities, this procedure was halted by the local elections, and, in general, it took a lot of time.

### 5.1.2 | Timing and uncertainty

The slowing of the procedures had a ripple effect. The timing of the entire process crossed the electoral cycle twice: in May, when the TSOs had to convince newly-elected mayors to sign the agreement discussed with the previous mayors, and, in October, when *Protezione Civile* had to negotiate an extension of the public procurement tender with the newly-elected national government. In both cases, the mere appointment of a new body halted the procedure, independently of the political will. The timing of the procedures, along with the uncertainty about the future, posed a serious threat to financially and socially exposed TSOs, which had already booked facilities and started to pay rent (Int. 4 and 9).

In addition, the delays had an impact in terms of the number of Ukrainians hosted, the feasibility of the whole process, and the perception of the people involved. More precisely, those citizens involved in April, but unwilling to host by August, fully epitomized the extent of the policy failure. Finally, uncertainty hindered effective policy responses, prolonged failures, and

increased their intensity because the TSOs were not able to involve new hosts and guests in the final months of 2022. The lengthy process eroded the availability of the Italian families recruited by some of the TSOs.

### 5.1.3 | Badly conceived target

The timing encountered a totally different issue, exacerbating an already challenging implementation process. The target was well-identified, but badly conceived. Although it was clear that the tender targeted hosting TSOs, families, and displaced people, it was unclear who the *eligible* refugees were (1); how much freedom of choice was going to be given to them (2); and the specificity of these beneficiaries compared to traditional asylum-seekers in Italy (3).

Regarding the potential beneficiaries, the TSOs wanted to prioritize the refugees already hosted (mostly in private accommodation) from the first weeks of March. However, this request could not be satisfied because *Protezione Civile* prioritized the refugees hosted at hotels (as they wanted to move them to “proper” accommodation). Thus, all the agreements signed in the summer were only for activating new hosting. Only later, in November 2022, one of the consortia managed to sign an agreement that included previous cohabitation. Given the delay in the policy process, the hosting families were actually only contacted in August, 5 months after their enrollment, while the refugees from Ukraine had become used to living in hotels (Int. 9 and 17). The implementation of the policy had to face both challenges simultaneously.

In general, the desired results or targets were ambiguous or unrealistic from the very beginning. The decision to move people from hotels first, giving them the option of choosing whether the solution was viable for them, could be reasonable only in the immediate aftermath of the refugee influx. After 6 months, the two goals were incompatible, thus it became difficult to develop and implement the policy.

## 5.2 | Determinants of the failure

We now move from the analysis of the manifestation of the failure to the causes that produced it (or contributed to producing it).

### 5.2.1 | Latent conflicts

Despite the general agreement and positive attitude toward the reception of the Ukrainians, the concrete policy process suffered latent conflicts between the actors, which jeopardized the results. The conflicts were not evident at first glance, and only surfaced during the interviews. A more in-depth analysis was conducted to bring them to light and to gauge their relevance in influencing the process. The first source of friction was due to the choice taken by the government to assign the responsibility for the Ukrainian reception to *Protezione Civile*, de facto removing it from the Ministry of the Interior. This decision was, apparently, neither a matter of politics, nor a matter of emergency, but a matter of “practical” convenience, combined with contingent organisational needs.

*Protezione Civile* is the institutional body that has immediate access to unlimited economic resources. The Ministry of Interior, on the other hand, must have resources

within the budget; [...] everything is much more complicated through the administrative path. *Protezione Civile* does not have these problems; it has money that it can spend immediately, even quite easily. (Int. 9)

The choice of using *Protezione Civile* resulted from previous experience. Many interviewees recalled the 2010-11 “North Africa Emergency”. Given the (perceived) huge influx of migrants, the government opted to split the system creating a parallel one: the SAI, on the one hand, and the “emergency”, on the other (which later became CAS). In March 2022, once in charge of the emergency management, *Protezione Civile* set up a third form of reception, in addition to that of the CAS and SAI.

As is also recognized by *Protezione Civile*:

The approach [used in the call] is a completely new way of implementing widespread reception. We can say that it is halfway between the CAS and the SAI model, and clearly more like the SAI one. With this new model, we wanted to relieve the municipalities and to work directly with the TSOs. (Int. 7)

Nevertheless, the fact that *Protezione Civile* was creating a form of reception as widespread and diffused as the SAI, without the involvement of the municipalities, was not appreciated by the ANCI, which feared that the municipalities were being excluded.

Honestly, from the first moment, we [ANCI] had some doubts about this new type of reception, which was very similar to the SAI network, with the only difference that it skipped the local and territorial activation [of municipalities]. (Int. 15)

In order to bring the municipalities back in and provide them with a more central role, the ANCI put pressure on *Protezione Civile* to introduce changes to the tender (see Table 1). However, this extended the timeline and imposed a further burden on the TSOs, thus creating additional tensions. In the words of an interviewee (Third Sector Organisation):

They [ANCI] did not like this call for tenders, so they went against it, too, as did the Minister of Interior too, by the way. But the Minister of Interior in a less aggressive way, while the ANCI (we are not talking about the municipalities, but about the ANCI itself), strongly opposed it. (Int. 4)

## 5.2.2 | Dealing with the emergency

Notwithstanding the fact that the situation was both perceived and declared to be an emergency, the activation by public actors at national level (particularly *Protezione Civile*, which had to find its own way to respond to a new issue, such as the reception of the refugees) has been far slower than that of the TSOs and the municipalities, who were under a wave of increasing pressure from citizens from the very first days of the conflict (Int. 3 and 34).

We started homestay well before the *Protezione Civile* announcement [...]. We took on more than 20 people in homestay accommodation, taking on the burden and responsibility of supporting them in every way. (Int. 34)

Moreover, what could have been a perfect match - an extraordinary situation managed with extraordinary policy tools - was not feasible due to administrative issues. *Protezione Civile* had to

comply with the existing procedures, and the scheduled local elections delayed the process even further.

In an emergency, one responds with emergency instruments, not ordinary instruments. If, instead, you make me use the ordinary instruments, as happened, you should not be surprised that it takes four months to carry out the procedure. (Int. 9)

## 6 | DISCUSSION: WHICH FAILURE AND WHY THE FAILURE?

The findings presented above give evidence of both the specific features of the “failure” in the reception of the Ukrainians and the causes of it. To begin with, this case seems to fall somewhere between the “minor failure” (low magnitude, low salience) and the “diffuse failure” (high magnitude, low salience) (see Figure 1). The critical issues were, in fact, gradual and quite long-lasting in relation to the length of the process, that is, it displays quite a long *duration* (Howlett (2012), but the *extent* has been in an intermediate position, in a range from large to small, since it was not a failure of the entire policy regime, but rather a failure at program level (McConnell, 2010). On the other hand, the *visibility* and the *intensity* of the failure were not particularly relevant (low prominence), since the vast majority of the Ukrainians have found hospitality with family members and acquaintances; in addition, the political climate favorable to their reception meant that there was no media attention to the specific forms of the reception, so that this information remained mainly confined to “insiders”. Moving on to where the problems originated in the policy process, that is, in which stage of the policy cycle (see Figure 2), our research reveals that the agenda-setting was a crucial point of origin and a subsequent diffusion of the problems. The critical issues in the agenda-setting phase led to a chain of problems in the subsequent phases. The assignment of the emergency to *Protezione Civile*, which culminated with the (more or less deliberate) attempt to marginalize the municipalities in the construction of the widespread reception network, caused a reaction from the ANCI which ended up immobilizing the whole procedure. The excessive administrative burden and the significant delay and uncertainty in the planned schedule, of which the TSOs complained, were largely the consequences of this evidently sub-optimal agenda-setting. Countless public policy studies have highlighted that agenda-setting and framing (the interpretation of the issue) are *political* processes and not just *technical* ones (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Cobb et al., 1976; Peters, 2015). Consequently, we argue that, in this stage of the process, conflicts arose between institutional actors (namely, the Ministry of Interior, *Protezione Civile*, and the ANCI); although not fully explicit, they were the origin of the chain of “vices” in the implementation of the program. This observation leads us to clarify the independent variable of the policy failure, which we have identified in the latent conflicts that have characterized the multi-level governance dynamics. The relationship between state actors at national level (particularly the Ministry of Interior, the ANCI, and *Protezione Civile*) is by far the most troublesome.

We have already highlighted in the introduction that the frictions were not due to profound ideological differences on the issue at stake, as frequently occurred during the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2014–2016 (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020), but came from a different understanding of the competencies and roles in dealing with the emergency. These frictions involve bureaucrats more than politicians, and do not refer to party politics. In this scenario, governance capacity is highly affected by a latent conflict, and the result is what Howlett and Ramesh (2014) define as a first order of governance incapacity, that is, the governance mode put in place is not effectively matched with the emergency as it occurred. This is well explained in these words of a member of



a TSO when he said: “*in emergencies, you must respond with flexible tools to make processes fluid.*” (Int. 9) Paraphrasing this sentence, we could say that, in an emergency, the governance system should be as fluid as possible to ensure rapid action, but the frictions between state actors relating to “who does what” (in the end, a power conflict) prevented this fluidity, causing the aforementioned chain of failures.

At the same time, the design process for the public procurement tender also brought out positive elements of co-design between public and private actors. Both *Protezione Civile* and the TSOs described this as a “virtuous process”. However, after an initial phase of enthusiasm for the virtuous co-design between public and private actors, the backlash of the latent conflicts between the public actors prevented the initial objectives from being achieved.

## 7 | CONCLUSIONS

Inspired by the policy failure scholarship, this article has analyzed the reception of the Ukrainian refugees in Italy, looking for the causes of the sub-optimal outcome. The failure of this program has been evident in terms of both benchmarking and the quality of the policy: out of 17,000 approved and available places for refugees from Ukraine, only 5000 places were finally part of the formal agreements, and even a smaller number of persons were actually hosted by the end of November 2022. Analogously, the presence in hotels has decreased from 9000 to only 5000. However, the failure was not particularly visible to public opinion because the Ukrainian refugees found hospitality mainly with family members and acquaintances. This case can be thus considered as a failure somewhere between the “diffuse” and “minor” type, following the Howlett (2012) typology. This article has also highlighted the relevance of the dynamics of multi-level governance that emerged in the agenda-setting in determining the failure. The reception of the Ukrainians is like a laboratory in which it is possible to observe the “vices” of the policy beyond party politics, which usually tend to explain all the failures in refugee policy. This “failure” was not an issue of party politics or ideological conflicts, but of the friction between state bureaucracies at national level on the interpretation of “who does what and how”. Furthermore, unlike asylum policies involving non-Ukrainian refugees, the conflict remained largely implicit (and, above all, not public), although it fundamentally undermined the effectiveness of the program. We believe that this article has made a contribution to the literature on policy failure by highlighting the concrete shape that the failure could take (overcoming superficial and generic assumptions about the existence of a failure), and, further, by clearly showing how the conflicts in multi-level governance dynamics contribute to determining the relevant “vices” in implemented policies. Finally, we recognize some gaps that could be addressed in future research. In particular, we find it significant to investigate the relation between the magnitude (extent and duration of the failure) and the stages of the policy process (Figures 1 and 2), as well as how the governance incapacity is linked to the variants of policy failure. However, studying a single case does not allow us to gauge fully these aspects, which require broader investigations.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

In accordance with Wiley policy and his ethical obligation as a researcher, Matteo Bassoli is reporting that he is the president of a third sector organization that may be remotely affected by the

research reported in the enclosed paper. He has disclosed those interests fully to Wiley, and he has in place an approved plan for managing any potential conflicts arising.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly due to the privacy of individuals that participated in the study, which are easily recognisable given their pivotal role in the policy. The data will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

## ORCID

Matteo Bassoli  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3601-9099>

Francesca Campomori  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9000-2899>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The national body which handles emergencies.

<sup>2</sup> Two other dimensions could be added (avoidability and intentionality), related to the politics of policy failure, but they are not included in the typology presented in Figure 1 since, as argued by Hood (2010), Weaver (1986) and others, they exist “over and above” (see Howlett, 2012 for details).

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## APPENDIX

### List of interviews

- 1) TT. Municipal level Interview date: August 09, 2022 Role: President - TSO
- 2) CM. County level Interview date: August 10, 2022 Role: Head of projects area - TSO
- 3) VLT. National level Interview date: August 26, 2022 Role: Program Manager - TSO
- 4) FM. National level Interview date: August 29, 2022 Role: Vice president - Third Sector Organization
- 5) MM. Municipal level Interview date: August 30, 2022 Role: Project coordinator - TSO
- 6) GZ. Municipal level Interview date: August 30, 2022 Role: Head of projects area - TSO
- 7) TP. National level Interview date: August 30, 2022 Role: Deputy Head Department - Government
- 8) SM. Municipal level Interview date: September 09, 2022 Role: Social worker - TSO
- 9) OF. National level Interview date: September 21, 2022 Role: Head Department - TSO
- 10) GC. National level Interview date: September 21, 2022 Role: Program manager - TSO
- 11) UB. Municipal level Interview date: September 26, 2022 Role: President - TSO
- 12) PO. Municipal level Interview date: September 29, 2022 Role: President - TSO
- 13) GM. Regional level Interview date: October 07, 2022 Role: Spokesperson - Government
- 14) AF. Regional level Interview date: October 07, 2022 Role: Head Department - Government
- 15) CO. National level Interview date: October 21, 2022 Role: Head Department - Public network
- 16) BS. National level Interview date: October 21, 2022 Role: Spokesperson - Public network
- 17) IR. Regional level Interview date: October 28, 2022 Role: Project coordinator - TSO
- 18) MME. Municipal level Interview date: May 05, 2023 Role: Councilor social policies - Municipality
- 19) AM. Municipal level Interview date: May 09, 2023 Role: Area manager - TSO
- 20) MC. Municipal level Interview date: May 17, 2023 Role: Councilor social policies - Municipality
- 21) SB. Municipal level Interview date: May 17, 2023 Role: Head of social services - Municipality
- 22) AB. Municipal level Interview date: May 18, 2023 Role: Social service coordinator - Municipality
- 23) MME2. Municipal level Interview date: May 19, 2023 Role: Councilor social policies - Municipality
- 24) LN. Municipal level Interview date: May 24, 2023 Role: Councilor social policies - Municipality
- 25) AM2. Municipal level Interview date: May 09, 2023 Role: Local chapter coordinator - TSO
- 26) LR. Municipal level Interview date: May 29, 2023 Role: Local chapter coordinator - TSO
- 27) CdO. Municipal level Interview date: May 24, 2023 Role: Local chapter coordinator - TSO
- 28) MV. Municipal level Interview date: May 31, 2023 Role: Local chapter coordinator - TSO
- 29) IR2. Municipal level Interview date: May 30, 2023 Role: Project coordinator - TSO
- 30) MS. Municipal level Interview date: May 30, 2023 Role: Project coordinator - TSO
- 31) SM. Municipal level Interview date: June 01, 2023 Role: Area manager - TSO
- 32) BM. Municipal level Interview date: June 01, 2023 Role: Project coordinator - TSO

- 33) BM. Municipal level Interview date: June 01, 2023 Role: Project coordinator - TSO
- 34) SC. National level Interview date: June 12, 2023 Role: Spokesperson - TSO
- 35) PF. Municipal level Interview date: June 20, 2023 Role: Head of Social Service - Municipality
- 36) FM2. Municipal level Interview date: June 22, 2023 Role: Councilperson - Municipality
- 37) FM3. National level Interview date: June 26, 2023 Role: Director - TSO
- 38) ZF. National level Interview date: July 05, 2023 Role: Civil servant - Government