

“Tuscans Are Different”: The Cognitive Dimension of Local Asylum Policymaking during the 2015 European ‘Refugee Crisis’.

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Abstract: This article sheds light on the so-far neglected role of decision-makers’ subjective interpretations and cognitive factors in local asylum policymaking, complementing and challenging the existing literature explaining local policy responses to the 2015 European ‘refugee crisis’. The article asks: How and why do local decision-makers interpret the environment in which they operate? Do subjective interpretations contribute to influence local asylum policymaking, and how? To analyse these questions, I adopt an actor-centred approach grounded on framing and sensemaking theories and on Bevir and Rhodes’ concept of ‘situated agency’, and develop a methodology based on anonymous interviews and social network analysis. I apply such approach to the heuristic case of Tuscany, an Italian region where the local asylum policies produced during the ‘crisis’ cannot be convincingly explained by looking merely at structural, institutional, or strategic factors. I develop three arguments. First, at least in situations of ‘crisis’, local decision-makers are not mere passive recipients of information, but active interpreters and rationalizers, whose subjective interpretations result from framing processes and several judgement heuristics. Second, these interpretations can decisively influence local migration policymaking. Third, these interpretations can be also shaped by policy outputs, meaning that local asylum policymaking processes can have important constitutive effects.

Keywords: frames, Italy, asylum_policies, ‘refugee_crisis’, migration_politics.

Introduction

Between 2015 and 2018, during the so-called ‘2015 European refugee crisis’ (henceforth: ‘refugee crisis’), an unprecedented number of asylum-seekers arrived in the European Union and, particularly, in Italy, through the Mediterranean Sea. As in other European countries, the chronic unpreparedness of the Italian asylum system produced a chaotic management of asylum-seekers’ dispersal and reception, while authorities developed increasingly restrictive asylum policies at both the national and local levels (Castelli Gattinara 2017). The growing number of asylum applications also triggered increasing tensions, leading to high levels of politicisation of the immigration issue, widespread anti-refugee protests and the growth of anti-immigration parties (*Ibid.*).

In this context, several scholars have analysed the asylum (or ‘reception’) policies adopted by local governments during the ‘refugee crisis’, distinguishing between inclusive or exclusive local policies and passive or proactive policy approaches (Ambrosini 2018; Sabchev 2020; Schammann et al. 2021), and identifying the factors that contributed to produce these different policies. In particular, scholarly works have focused on structural or contextual factors (Rea et al. 2019; Castelli Gattinara 2017; Glorius et al. 2019; Semprebon and Pelacani 2020; Whyte et al. 2019; Zorlu 2017), institutional factors and multi-level governance arrangements (Geuijen et al. 2020; de Graauw and Vermeulen 2016), and political and strategic factors (Haselbacher 2019; Hernes 2017; Lidén and Nyhlén 2015; Martínez-Ariño et al. 2019; Myrberg 2017).

This article contributes to this debate on the drivers of local asylum policymaking, by looking specifically at how local decision-makers frame the effects of immigration, and how their understandings influence their decision-making processes, strategies and actions. These cognitive, epistemic and ideational factors have been so far largely neglected in the above-mentioned literature, which tends to (often implicitly) derive assumptions about the nature and drivers of decision-making processes back from their outputs (the policies produced) and from ‘objective’ factors such as the

institutional or structural context, actors' party affiliation, their interests. However, the environment in which local decision-makers operate, in situations of 'crisis', is far from objective and rather highly unstable and uncertain. Local elites, facing constraints on time, information and resources and high pressure for action, need to establish very quickly what is happening around them and decide what they should do next (Helms Mills et al. 2010; Mayblin 2019). Research conducted on decision-making in other policy fields has shown that, under these conditions, decisions can be powerfully driven by 'actors' interpretations of the effects of external environments' (Pierre 2000:10). It has also shown that these interpretations tend to emerge through processes of complexity reduction involving several shortcuts or 'judgement heuristics' (Druckman 2011). Despite this, we still know very little about whether and how local elites' interpretations of the effects of migration influence local policy choices.

To fill this gap, this paper reverses the analytical focus of existing works, adopting an actor-centred approach focused on the context of decision and grounded on Bevir and Rhodes' concept of 'situated agency' (2006), and asking two research questions. First, *how did local decision-makers interpret the structural and institutional environment in which they operated during the 2015 'European refugee crisis', and why did they interpret said environment in that specific way?* Second, *did these interpretations, and cognitive and ideational factors more broadly, contribute to influence local asylum policymaking, and how did they do so?* To analyse these questions, I draw concepts and ideas from framing and sensemaking theories – which, as argued in the second section, provide the best analytical tools to analyse decision-making processes in situations of 'crisis' – and develop a methodological approach based on anonymous interviews and social network analysis.

This approach is applied to the case of Italian local decision-makers and, in particular, I focus on mayors, because during the 2015 'refugee crisis' in Italy key decisions on local asylum policy were largely in their hands (Giannetto et al. 2019:26). More specifically, I explore the 'heuristic case'

(Eckstein 1975) of Tuscany, selected because of its potential to offer key insights on the role of cognitive factors in local asylum policymaking. Tuscany is a region in Central Italy with 3.3 million inhabitants, whose political system until the 1990s represented the ideal-typical case of a so-called ‘red’ political subcultureⁱ (Florida 2014:77), characterised by a strong allegiance and electoral fidelity of the local population to left-wing parties and a strong ‘organizational network’ (including parties, interest groups, cultural and aid associations) which ‘guaranteed the reproduction of the prevalent [left-wing] political identity’ (Ramella 2000:3). As explained in Section 4, the case of Tuscan local governments – for the vast majority still affiliated to centre-left post-Communist parties in 2015 – is a highly puzzling one because, unlike other Italian local governments, they mostly developed ‘inclusive’ and ‘proactive’ asylum policy approaches during the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’ (Schammann et al. 2021), which cannot be convincingly explained by merely looking at contextual, institutional or strategic factors.

The analysis conducted leads to three key findings, which contribute to the academic debate on the drivers of local migration policymaking. First, I show that at least in situations of ‘crisis’, local decision-makers are not mere ‘passive recipients of information’, but active ‘interpreters and rationalizers’ (Mutz 2011:12). While most scholars treat local elites as rational actors, local decision-makers frame problems in a way which is not a mere straightforward assessment of facts. Their interpretations are the result of framing processes, characterised by several cognitive biases, which can lead them to highlight some aspects of the situation and dismiss others, especially evidence that questions prior beliefs and conviction causing emotional discomfort. Second, local decision-makers’ policy-making strategies can be decisively influenced by their subjective interpretations of their external environment. Local policy actions are not merely driven by actors’ ideology or strategic considerations, and they are not the necessary output of different constellations of structural or contextual factors. Without claiming that cognitive factors alone can fully explain local policy outputs, these represent a so-far neglected and crucially important component of local migration

policymaking, at least in situations of ‘crisis’. Third, the case of Tuscany shows that not only subjective interpretations can be a key driver of local policy-making but they can be also shaped by local policy outputs. In other words, local asylum policymaking processes can have constitutive or structuring effects: while making sense of their environment, trying to work out ‘what is going on’ and ‘what they should do next’, local decision-makers shape it through their actions and by assessing the effects of these actions, therefore producing meaning (Geddes 2020).

The drivers of local asylum policymaking.

In the early 2000s, scholars advocated for a ‘local turn’ in immigration studies (Zapata-Barrero et al. 2017). One decade later, during the so-called 2015 European ‘refugee crisis’, European municipalities were directly involved in the governance of asylum-seekers’ reception, and several scholars focused on local asylum policymaking. These scholars identified different types of local asylum policies, categorising them as ‘inclusionary’ or ‘exclusionary’ (Ambrosini 2018; Kos, Maussen, and Doomernik 2016; Marchetti 2020), depending on whether local governments were inclined to accept or oppose asylum-seekers. They also distinguished between ‘proactive’ and ‘passive’ policymaking approaches (Sabchev 2020; Schammann et al. 2021). Following Schammann et al. (2021) proactive policymaking approaches aim to contradict, complement or surpass the existing asylum legal framework; attempt to exploit the discretion allowed by the existing legal and institutional framework for designing local governance structures and/or pursuing own policies; lead to the mobilisation of additional resources; and attempt to engage with and coordinate civil society. In contrast, passive policymaking approaches are characterised by a very strict adherence to national guidance and the formal division of competences and lack of initiative to mobilising additional resources.

Many scholars have also engaged in a debate on the factors that shape local asylum policymaking and produced these different policy responses during the ‘refugee crisis’. Three main types of factors

are identified, mostly through comparative analyses. In line with the so-called ‘localist approach’ to local migration policymaking (Filomeno 2017:19), a first strand of the literature focuses on the structural or contextual factors, such as the magnitude of asylum-seeking flows, local attitudes towards migrants, the local support for anti-immigration parties and the broader socio-economic context (Rea et al. 2019; Glorius et al. 2019; Semperebon and Pelacani 2020; Whyte et al. 2019; Zorlu 2017). A second strand focuses on institutional factors, looking at local institutions but also laws and regulations from higher levels of government, and multi-level arrangements (Geuijen et al. 2020; de Graauw and Vermeulen 2016). These works argue that local asylum policymaking can be enabled or constrained by ‘vertical’ interactions with supra-local governments and ‘horizontal’ relationships with civil society actors (Campomori and Ambrosini 2020; Sabchev 2020; Triviño-Salazar 2018), connecting to the so-called ‘relativist approach’ to local immigration policymaking and research on the multi-level governance of migration (Caponio and Jones-Correa 2018; Filomeno 2017). A third strand investigates the role of local leadership and key local actors, particularly mayors, with a focus on strategic and political factors. This scholarship assumes that local elites are rational actors who use institutions strategically to pursue their interests, decisively influencing policymaking processes and outputs (Hernes 2017; Lahdelma 2019; Lidén and Nyhlén 2015). These interests are mainly defined, according to these scholars, by actors’ ideology, party affiliation and strategic considerations (Haselbacher 2019; Martínez-Ariño et al. 2019; Myrberg 2017).

All these scholarly works tend to largely neglect – or make mere assumptions about – how local political actors frame asylum-seeking migration and interpret contextual and structural factors around them, how they make sense of their institutional environment and make decisions. This neglect of cognitive, ideational and epistemological processes, I argue, is particularly problematic in situations of ‘crisis’, which disrupt usual patterns of action inducing moments of reflection upon ideas and actions. While migration *per se* tends to be a highly complex and ambiguous issue (Boswell et al. 2011), in situations of ‘crisis’ decision-makers operate in a structural environment which tends to be

particularly uncertain, unstable and ambiguous, and they need to make decisions quickly, under constraints on time, information and resources (Helms Mills et al. 2010; Mayblin 2019). These decisions are likely based on their interpretations of (or predictions about) external structural factors, for instance related to the causes, scope and effects of migration flows. These interpretations, as existing research has shown, are far from objective (Pierre 2000), and cannot be derived ex post, from the outputs produced, because decision-making processes are often non-linear (Brunsson 2000; Cohen et al. 1972; Kingdon 2014).

This article aims to shed light on these neglected cognitive factors, conducting an analysis which, having secured direct access to local decision-makers, focuses specifically on the production of knowledge and the cognitive and epistemological processes that shape their decision-making processes. It therefore asks how and why local decision-makers interpreted the structural and institutional environment in which they operated during the 2015 ‘European refugee crisis’ and whether and how these interpretations, and cognitive and ideational factors more broadly, contributed to influence the production of local asylum policies.

To explore these questions, I develop an actor-centred analytical approach which focuses specifically on the context of decision. I assume that mayors are ‘situated actors’ (Bevir and Rhodes 2006), whose understandings are shaped by social, historical, political and organisational settings but can also shape the external environment through their actions. Consistent with these assumptions, I apply insights from framing theories and the sensemaking approach, which together provide specific analytical and conceptual tools to analyse decision-making processes in situations of ‘crisis’ (Helms Mills et al. 2010:183).

Frames are ‘interpretation schemata’ that organize experience. Several scholars have identified frames about the effects of migration in receiving societies (Benson and Wood 2015; Dekker and Scholten 2017; Helbling 2014). ‘Economic frames’ focus on the negative or positive economic consequences of immigration. ‘Securitarian frames’ focus on its effects on crime, terrorism, public

health. ‘Administrative frames’ focus on administrative effects, requirements and processes. ‘Political frames’ focus on effects on the political debate and electoral outcomes. ‘Cultural frames’ focus on the positive or negative effects of immigration on the culture, identity or demography of receiving societies. ‘Public reaction frames’ focus on its effects on public opinion. Finally, the ‘no effects frame’ defines immigration as a phenomenon that does not have relevant effects on receiving societies.

Unlike most of these cited works, I am not interested in identifying the frames used by actors in public discourses (or ‘frames in communication’; see Scheufele 1999) but, rather, on their private, cognitive frames (or ‘frames in thought’), which can be derived from anonymous interviews. In addition, I am specifically interested in the mechanisms through which understandings of policy problems are formed. I therefore apply insights derived from Druckman (2011), who argues that processes of frame emergence are characterised by several possible shortcuts or ‘judgement heuristics’. Frame emergence can be influenced by the availability and accessibility of frames (‘availability bias’) – meaning that individuals can be swayed by the information collected by the media or directly from their environment – or by pre-set powerful ideas and narratives (‘accessibility bias’). Historical analysis, whether appropriate or not, can also influence the emergence of understandings (‘representativeness bias’). An ‘anchoring bias’ occurs when judgements based on uncertain data largely depend on an initial piece of information. Furthermore, Druckman argues, individuals tend to devote extra cognitive resources to dismiss evidence that disagrees with pre-established ideas, avoiding the emotional discomfort that arises when questioning prior beliefs (see also: Tversky and Kahneman 1974).

While framing theories identify actors’ understandings and explain how they emerge, the sensemaking approach – originally developed in organizational studies (Weick 1995) but already applied in political science (Geddes and Hadj-Abdou 2018) – provides tools to examine whether and how actors’ understandings are enacted in situations of ‘crisis’ (Helms Mills et al. 2010:183).

Sensemaking can be understood as the process through which individuals work to understand and assign meaning to novel, unexpected or confusing events and through which then ‘meanings materialise, inform and constrain action’ (Weick, et al. 2005:409). It is specifically salient in situations of ambiguity or uncertainty, when a personal jolt, shock or break of routine, violating expectancies, requires individuals to ‘develop some sort of sense regarding what they are up against, what their own position is relative to what they sense, and what they need to do’ (Weick 2001:42).

Following Weick, sensemaking has four key properties. First, sensemaking is influenced by the frames established by decision-makers about the situation around them and the ‘signals and cues that they pick up from their environment’ (1995:30). In the case analysed, this means that decision-makers variously conceptualise the effects of asylum-seeking migration and these understandings influence their decisions. Second, the opportunity for sensemaking, which is a comparative process, is provided by retrospection: decision-makers rely on similar, familiar past experiences to make sense and interpret current events. They are expected to be more sceptical about planning, projecting and forecasting if these are ‘decoupled from reflective action and history’ (*Ibid.*). Third, the sensemaking process unfolds ‘in a social context of other actors’ and is contingent on the interactions with others, whether physically present or not (Weick et al. 2005:409): decision-makers often make decisions with the knowledge that these will have to be implemented, understood or approved by others (Helms Mills et al. 2010:185). Fourth, sensemaking is influenced by who decision-makers think they are in a certain context and this perceived identity can be constantly redefined by new experiences and contact with others. Importantly, Weick also argues that sensemaking is ‘ongoing’: mayors’ understandings and actions are therefore expected to potentially evolve, because of changes in the external context (leading them to pick up different signals and cues), their strategic learning and changing social relations.

Methodology.

To analyse mayors' framing and sensemaking processes, I apply a methodological approach that largely relies on interviews conducted between December 2018 and January 2019ⁱⁱ. Interviewees were selected following the principles of 'quota sampling' (Corbetta 2003:268). I interviewed 10 *centre-left decision-makers*: 9 centre-left Tuscan mayors that were in office during the 'refugee crisis' – from a mix of cities, towns and villages, across four different Tuscan provinces (Florence, Pisa, Livorno and Pistoia), and at different stages of their mandate – and a member of the regional government also affiliated to the dominant centre-left party (PD). In addition, I interviewed 20 *other actors* involved in local asylum governance: four mayors from opposition parties, four regional MPs, two MPs, three officials directly involved in the organization of asylum-seekers' reception (from the regional government, Prefectures and the organization of Tuscan municipalities ANCI) and seven civil society actors (members of civil society organizations, trade unions, associations, journalists).

Interviews included three components.

First, *all interviewees* were asked questions designed to gather contextual information about Tuscan asylum policies.

Second, *interviews with mayors and the member of the regional government* included a semi-structured component, designed to gather information about framing and sensemaking processes. To grasp mayors' frames, interviewees were asked to identify the main effects of asylum-seekers' reception in their municipality. Their answers were analysed applying frame analysis (Yanow 1996), conducted through a mixed deductive/inductive approach, i.e. starting from a list of frames identified in the literature (Benson and Wood 2015; Helbling 2014), which was partially adapted. To identify processes of frame emergence, questions were asked to assess how and why these understandings emerged: interviewees were asked which sources of information they used, which events captured their attention during the 'crisis', why they identified certain effects. To investigate sensemaking processes, mayors were asked to identify two difficult or complex decisions that they made during

the ‘refugee crisis’ and reconstruct the preceding decision-making processes. Mayors were asked about the rationale and motivations behind these decisions and the key factors that influenced them. The same questions were asked about two additional decisions identified before the interview. While the focus of the paper is on centre-left decision-makers (i.e. centre -left mayors and the member of the regional government), questions on framing were also asked to the other political actors interviewed, who were used with the aim to establish a baseline with which to compare insights about centre-left decision-makers.

Third, *all interviews* involved a short survey designed to collect quantitative data about actors’ interactions within the asylum governance system, aimed at developing a social network analysis. Interviewees were asked to quantify the frequency of their discussions on asylum-seekers’ reception with other actors throughout the ‘refugee crisis’ (2015/mid-2018) and the degree of similarity/dissimilarity of their views on the asylum issue (both measured on a scale of 1 to 5). These data were elaborated with the Gephi software.

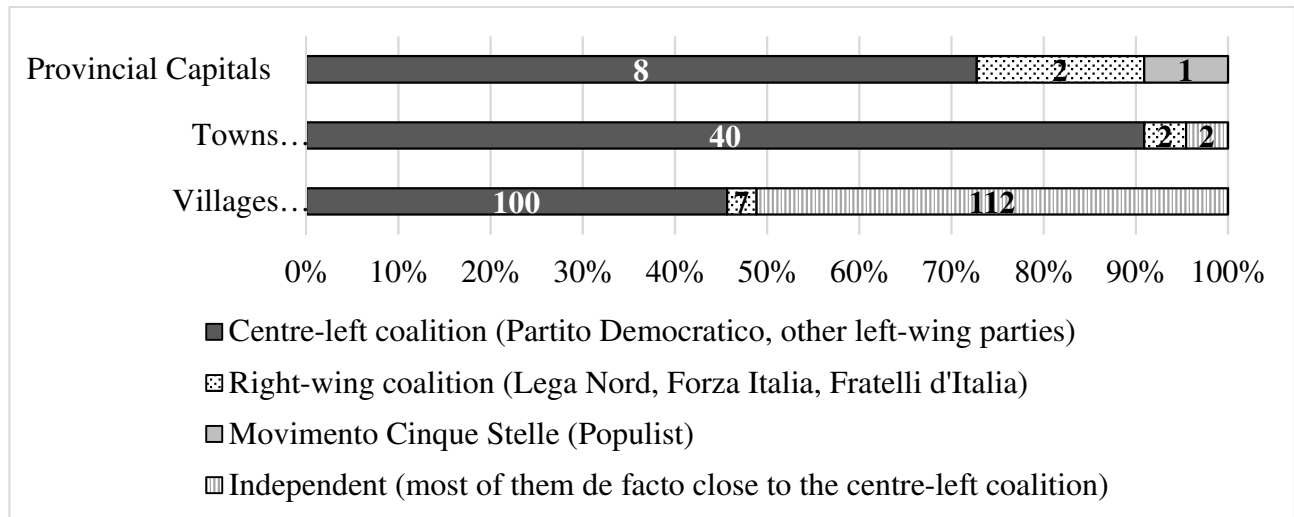
Tuscany as a puzzling ‘heuristic’ case.

Tuscany is a ‘heuristic case’ (Eckstein 1975) that allows to illustrate the role of cognitive factors in local asylum policymaking during the 2015 European ‘refugee crisis’.

The political system of this region in Central Italy until the 1990s represented the ideal-typical case of a so-called ‘red’ or ‘Communist’ political subculture (Florida 2014:77): for 40 years, Tuscan local and regional governments were controlled by left-wing parties, which were ‘able to “occupy” the public scene’, co-opting ‘new leadership resources from civil society, and preventing the emergence of an alternative ‘political class’ (Ramella 2000:20). Despite the decline of political subcultures in Italy (Caciagli 2011:98), Tuscany demonstrated a surprising electoral continuity, and in 2015 the vast

majority of its local governments were still controlled by the centre-left post-Communist Partito Democratico (PD) and its allies (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Party affiliation of Tuscan mayors in 2016.



Notes: Most of the formally independent mayors are close to the left-wing coalition.

Newspaper articles (Biella 2018; Fortini 2019), policy reports (Osservatorio Regionale per l’Immigrazione, 2020; Anci et al. 2017) and the interviews conducted suggest that most of these centre-left Tuscan local governments, unlike those of other Italian regions (another important exception being the Emilia-Romagna region), produced ‘inclusive’ and ‘proactive’ asylum policies during the ‘refugee crisis’ (Schammann et al., 2021).

According to Italian law, during the ‘refugee crisis’, the organization of asylum-seekers’ dispersal and reception was primarily a responsibility of the Prefectures (the local branches of the Ministry of Interior), which managed Italy’s main reception system – the so-called ‘extraordinary reception system’ or CAS system – hosting almost 90 percent of asylum-seekers in the country (Ministry of Interior, 2018)ⁱⁱⁱ. Despite this formal division of competences, the Tuscan centre-left regional government and local governments (through their regional organization ANCI) joined forces in 2015 with the aim to directly manage asylum-seekers’ dispersal and reception. They took concrete actions to coordinate the actors involved, exercising political pressures on the Prefectures and co-opting

NGOs they trusted (Interview, Official from Regional Government). Furthermore, local and regional governments and some NGOs created a joint platform, called *#AccoglienzaToscana* aimed at analysing existing asylum policy instruments, identifying good practices, developing innovative policy solutions and influencing national policies. The platform produced a ‘White Paper on the Policies for Asylum-Seekers’ Reception’^{iv}, which, on the one hand, advocated for a national reform of the reception system that assigned direct responsibilities to local governments and, on the other hand, outlined several policy measures to be immediately implemented by Tuscan local and regional governments. These measures entailed an organization of the CAS system around small reception structures with proportional quotas of asylum-seekers assigned to each municipality and interventions to raise the quality of the services offered.

Tuscan local and regional governments largely implemented these recommendations, despite them encroaching upon the role of the Prefectures. Unlike in most of Italy, in 2017 the 12,284 asylum-seekers in Tuscany were uniformly dispersed across the region: 83 percent of the municipalities hosted reception centres, the highest percentage in Italy (Anci, et al. 2017). Asylum-seekers were mainly hosted in small reception structures and Tuscan reception centres guaranteed high reception standards (Biella 2018). These actions were also combined with proactive stances towards public opinion by centre-left politicians:

After the Tuscan reception model was structured, Tuscan local authorities bragged about it (...). There was some pathetic exhibitionism. Mayors started to talk proudly about how good they were in developing initiatives of different kinds, even proposing as new some policies that elsewhere had been developed already ten years ago (local journalist).

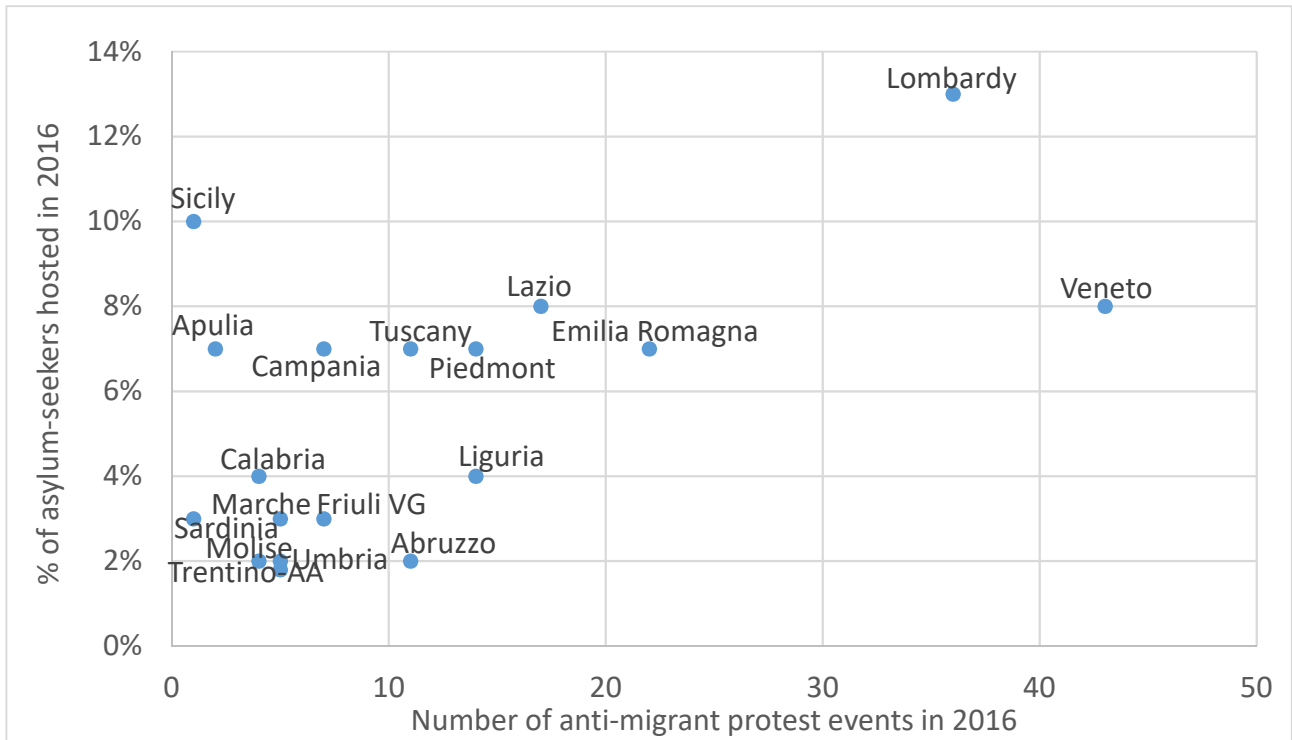
During the ‘crisis’, anti-immigration radical right parties (*Lega* and *Fratelli d’Italia*), previously at the margins of the political system, increased their local consensus and, for the first time in the region’s history, won local elections held in several Tuscan municipalities (Testa 2018). Despite this, most centre-left decision-makers did not modify their inclusive and proactive policy approach and

some centre-left mayors are even reported to have adopted more proactive stances to public opinion after 2016:

It's true that anti-immigration parties grew in Tuscany, but this really strengthened the network of actors that had the opposite perspective. The hard core of institutions and persons that had developed the 'Tuscan model' was united even more by this growing anti-migrant propaganda (ANCI Official).

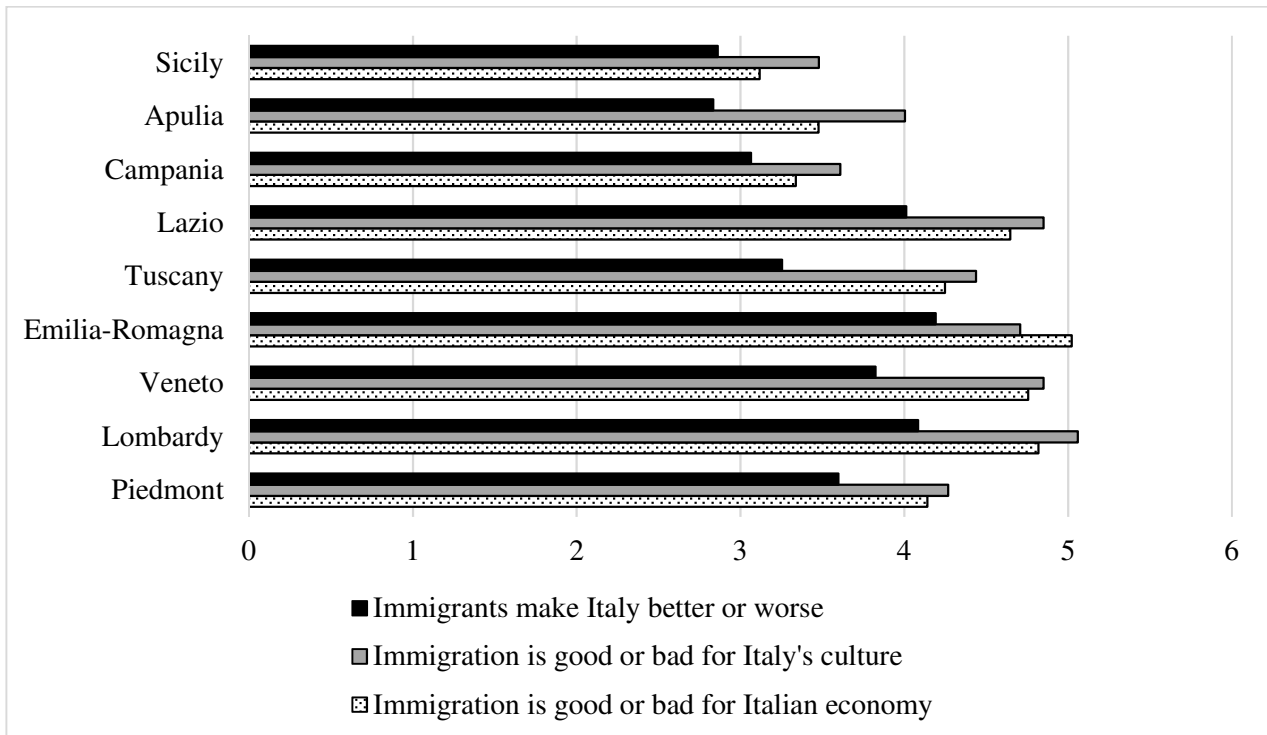
The case of Tuscan local and regional governments that adopted inclusive and proactive asylum policies is a highly puzzling one because these outputs cannot be merely explained by institutional, structural/contextual, and strategic factors. The number of asylum-seekers hosted in Tuscany is similar to those of other Italian regions, because asylum-seekers were uniformly dispersed across the country by national authorities (Figure 2). The formal distribution of competences on asylum-seekers' reception did not vary across regions, as also key socio-economic and contextual indicators, including the number of foreign residents (Anci et al. 2017), the (predominantly negative) public attitudes to immigration (Figure 3) and the (high) salience of immigration (Figure 4; see also Dennison, 2018). The number of anti-migrant protests that took place in Tuscany is close to the national average (Figure 2). And anti-immigration parties significantly increased their local consensus in the region, as in the rest of Italy, which, following Castelli Gattinara (2016), would have suggested a strategic convergence of centre-left parties towards exclusionary positions on migration that did not take place. The mere political affiliation of Tuscan local governments, finally, cannot alone explain the policy outputs produced, as far as exclusionary and/or passive approaches to asylum policymaking were adopted by centre-left governments in other Italian regions (Ambrosini 2018; Castelli Gattinara 2017; Pettrachin 2020).

Figure 2. Anti-migrant protest events and percentage of asylum-seekers hosted in Italian regions in 2016.



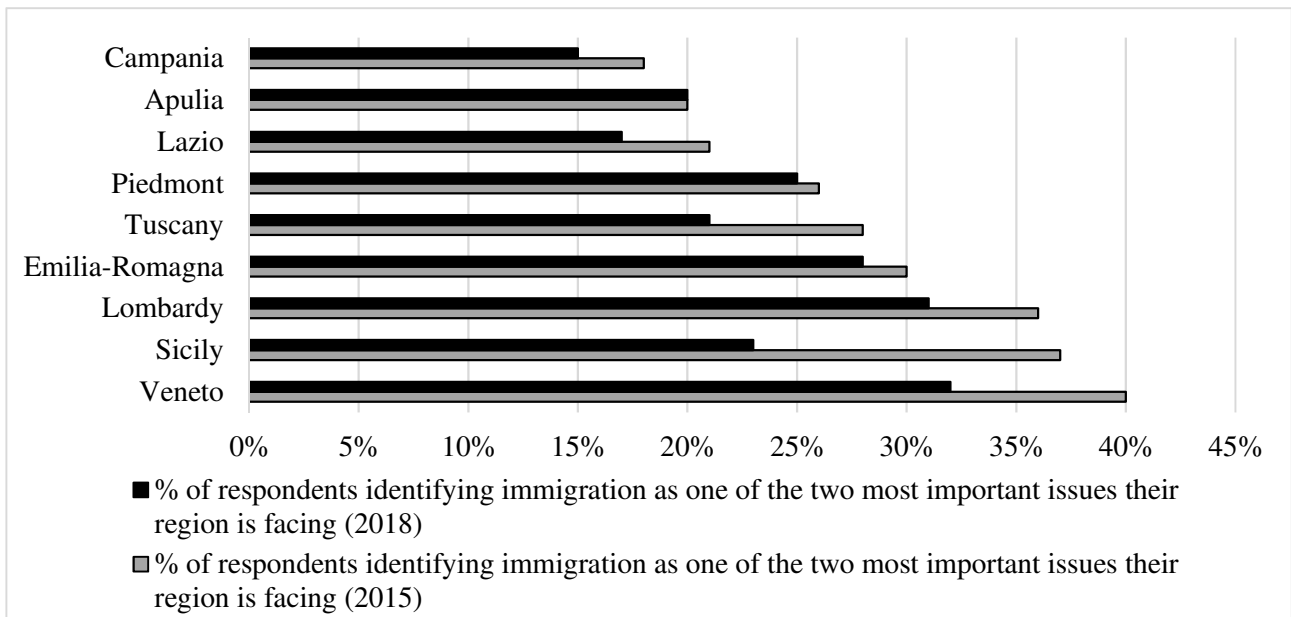
Source: Ministry of Interior, 2017; Lunaria, 2017).

Figure 3. Average immigration attitudes in the biggest nine Italian regions in 2016 - higher numbers mean more positive attitudes.



Source: ESS.

Figure 4. Salience of immigration in the biggest nine Italian regions.

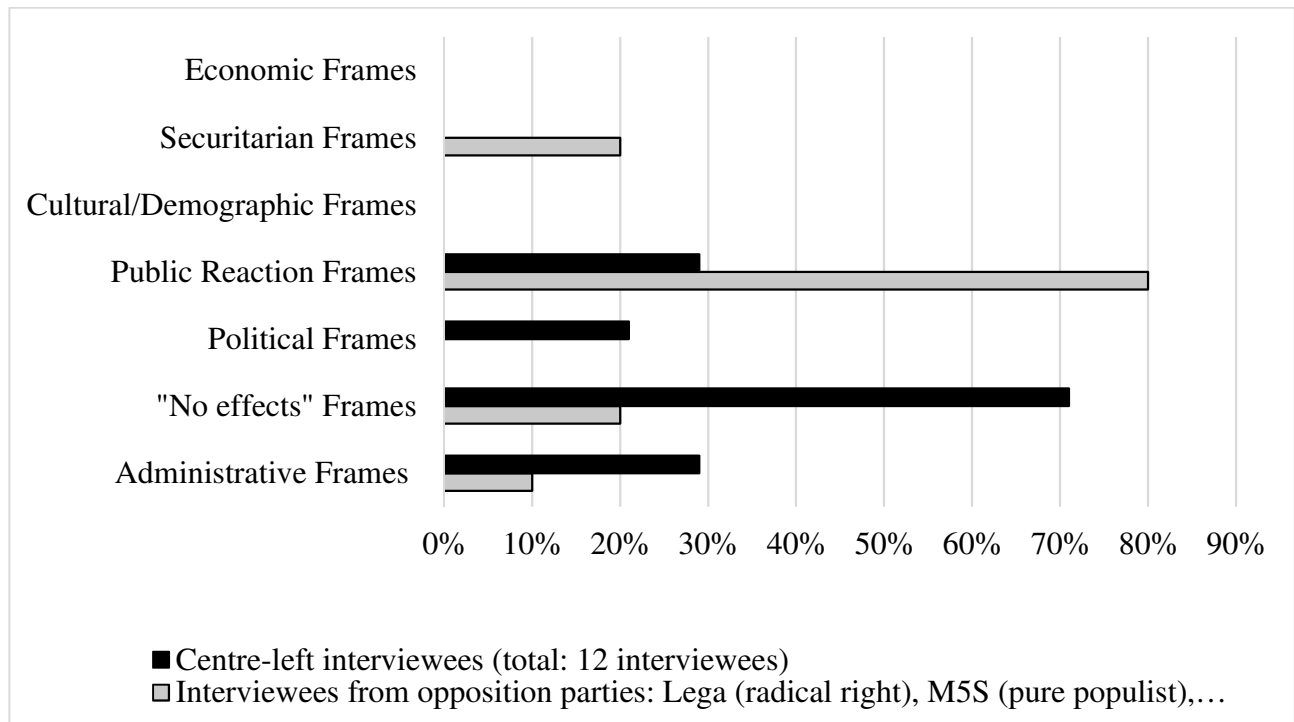


Source: Flash Eurobarometer (other sources reveal similar patterns: see Dixon et al. 2018:80; Genovese et al. 2016).

Framing Processes

This section addresses the first research question, analysing mayors’ cognitive frames and how these emerged. Figure 5 reports findings of the frame analysis of interviewees’ answers to questions about their perceptions of the effects of asylum-seekers’ reception. The figure shows that according to most centre-left decision-makers (as also the other centre-left actors interviewed) asylum-seekers’ reception did not have relevant effects. Centre-left actors rather framed it in a ‘technical’ way, as an issue that required policy solutions. Few centre-left interviewees describe asylum-seekers as a burden for local governments but none of them identifies problems in asylum management as a major effect. Remarkably, unlike interviewees affiliated to opposition parties, centre-left decision-makers did not perceive relevant effects of asylum-seekers’ reception on public opinion.

Figure 5. Percentage of interviewees using different types of frames when describing the effects of asylum-seeking migration in their municipality.



Notes: Analysis of actors' responses to the question 'Which were the effects of asylum-seeking migration in your municipality during the 'refugee crisis'?'. The figure identifies frame presence (rather than frame relevance), interviewees' responses could be associated to more than one frame. No differences emerged between mayors and other political actors with the same political affiliation, nor across different provinces.

When asked to reflect more specifically on the reactions of public opinion to asylum-seekers' reception, most centre-left mayors explained that Tuscans were tolerant or at least 'neutral' towards asylum-seekers:

I don't say that the local population was extremely welcoming, but they were substantially neutral and ready to accept asylum-seekers. Neutrality is the word that best describes the social and political climate, there was a general predisposition to receive asylum-seekers. It was the same reaction that we had when we hosted earthquake victims from Southern Italy: there were people in need, the fact that they came from Nigeria rather than Italy was totally irrelevant (centre-left mayor).

Centre-left mayors also proved to be very confident about their capacity to influence Tuscans' attitudes to immigration by developing efficient reception policies:

The topic of immigration is clearly conflictual. But if you develop efficient policy responses that work and do not create problems, then this potential for conflict

vanishes in the long-term and people reward you (centre-left member of regional government).

Importantly, these understandings of local public attitudes to immigration are decoupled from objective evidence suggested by available opinion polls shown in Figure 3 above, showing that Tuscans' attitudes were predominantly negative throughout the whole 'crisis'. It is therefore relevant to ask: how did these perceptions emerge? The interview material suggests that two judgment heuristics played a key role in this respect.

First, centre-left decision-makers' understandings of public attitudes to immigration in Tuscany, the interview material suggests, are grounded in pre-existing and deeply rooted preconceptions about local public opinion and its relationship with local elites.

To develop this argument, it is necessary to briefly refer to the relationship between elites and the local population in Tuscany's traditional 'red political subculture'. Ramella (2000:7) suggests that Tuscany in the Twentieth century was characterised by a specific form of 'civic culture', the main component of which was expressed in a form of 'local civicness', 'linked to values of solidarity and openness toward the external world' (p.19). Such 'civil culture' led to the creation of 'an upper-middle class public opinion, which expressed forms of solidarity and civic participation' (p.16). Florida (2010) argued that, after the collapse of the Communist Party in 1991, some substantial aspects of this 'local civicness' – such as the diffusion and strong organization of associations and high levels of 'both visible and invisible participation' – continued to be reproduced. Most scholars, however, agree that overall this 'local civicness' experienced a deep crisis. Caciagli in 2011 noticed that Tuscany's traditional 'forms of social integration' had been severely weakened, and that the Tuscan society was more and more characterised by 'individualism and fragmentation'. Ramella himself (2010:312) argued in 2010 that the traditional values of the 'red political subculture' such as

inclusiveness, solidarity and equality – which ‘had a strong ideological connotation’ – underwent ‘a creeping change’ after 1991.

Despite these transformations, most of the centre-left decision-makers interviewed motivate their perceptions of Tuscan public opinion as welcoming towards asylum-seekers by referring to the ‘local civiness’ that characterised Tuscany’s red political subculture. This suggests a strong ‘anchoring bias’:

My town is different, people traditionally give great attention to the values of democracy and solidarity, and has a strong presence of associations, it cannot be compared to other areas of this country where racism and fear of immigration are particularly strong (centre-left mayor).

There is a strong civic sensitivity here, which comes from our history, especially in the countryside where we still have strong interpersonal relations that resisted over time (centre-left mayor).

Another key component of Tuscany’s traditional ‘civic culture’ identified by Ramella (2000:7) refers to ‘the political matrix of local civiness’, rooted in the institutional network formed by the Communist party and its collateral organisations, which resulted in ‘the political construction of a collective identity’. Such a strong, shared, political identity and the presence of an organizational network that allowed its reproduction guaranteed to Tuscan left-wing parties a high ‘electoral fidelity linked to a strong party allegiance’, regardless of the nature of electoral competition (*Ibid.*). This stable relationship between voters and parties persisted after 1991, thanks to a combination of ‘family and locally-based forms of socialization’, the ‘adhesion to new cultural trends fuelled by the channels of mass communication’ and ‘increasing levels of education’ (Ramella 2000:17). This continuity, however, research has shown, hid important transformations in citizens’ political attitudes and in the bases for political consensus to left-wing parties. In particular, the vote for left-wing parties became ‘more autonomous’ from traditional forms of political and ideological identification and mobilization, and much more linked to local policies and candidates’ personality, which made the consensus for left-wing parties more unstable (Caciagli 2011:98).

Despite these changes, many centre-left decision-makers, unlike interviewees affiliated to opposition parties, describe public opinion in Tuscany as still characterized by a strong leftist identity and loyalty to left-wing parties:

Tuscany is a leftist region. The left here is deeply rooted in the conscience, in the families, in the people (centre-left mayor).

Tuscans are different. The fabric of the society here is different, people are left-wing, if you look at the electoral results you still see that (centre-left mayor).

The idea that public attitudes to immigration can be easily influenced by local policymakers seems to be also related to this persistent, strong, party allegiance of the electorate perceived by centre-left decision-makers. Interestingly, when, after the interview, I revealed to them available data about Tuscans' attitudes to immigration showing that Tuscans were largely hostile to immigration throughout the 'crisis', and more so than other Italians, most centre-left interviewees quickly disregarded this evidence as inaccurate. This seems to be an example of 'cognitive dissonance'.

The second heuristic bias that influenced actors' interpretations of the effects of asylum-seeking migration is related to the availability and visibility of pro-migrant and anti-migrant groups and public mobilisations. As shown in the next section, Tuscany has a well-established network of very active civil society organizations (CSOs), which have very close contacts with centre-left mayors, and this arguably contributed to provide to centre-left decision-makers a reassuring or false idea of 'the public', fostering their pre-conceptions about Tuscans' attachment to the values of the above-mentioned 'civic culture' ('availability bias'). The perceived absence of anti-migrant protests provided a powerful feedback that reinforced these assessments:

While in other regions the growth of the radical right and its anti-immigration propaganda had devastating effects (...) here I cannot remember protests or citizens' groups that opposed the creation of reception centres, maybe only very few and isolated cases (centre-left mayor).

Once again, these perceptions of public mobilisations – also shared by interviewees from opposition parties – seem decoupled from objective reality, because according to official data Tuscany experienced more anti-migrant protests during the ‘refugee crisis’ than many other Italian regions (see Figure 2 above). They seem to be linked to an ‘accessibility bias’: the Tuscan reception system, organized around small reception structures dispersed uniformly across the region, reduced the opportunities for structured anti-migrant movements to emerge (on this point see: Zamponi 2018; Pettrachin 2020) but also the scale and the visibility of anti-migrant mobilisations:

The widespread good practices in asylum-seekers’ reception and the so-called Tuscan reception model were not enough to prevent the emergence of anti-migrant sentiments and the growth of the Lega, but at least they avoided the *mass protests* that took place in other Italian regions (local journalist).

Sensemaking Processes.

This section addresses the second question of the paper, by developing four interrelated arguments, linked to the key properties of sensemaking.

The way centre-left decision-makers reconstructed their decision-making processes suggests, first and foremost, that these were decisively influenced by the signals and cues that they picked up from their environment, which is in line with *the first property of sensemaking*. More specifically, the interview material reveals that a key role was played by mayors’ established frames about public reactions to asylum-seekers’ reception. Centre-left mayors’ perceptions of public opinion as tolerant or neutral towards immigration enabled the proactive approach to policymaking that they adopted:

[During the ‘refugee crisis’] locals were substantially neutral and ready to accept asylum-seekers (...) and this general atmosphere *allowed* the regional government and local governments to develop inclusionary policies (centre-left mayor).

The interview material also reveals that centre-left mayors' repertoires of actions – related to the *second property of sensemaking* – decisively influenced their decision-making processes.

To develop this argument, I need to introduce another key element of Tuscany's political and administrative history. Tuscany's 'red political subculture' during the Twentieth century was characterised by a 'strongly interventionist' (or: proactive) policy style of local and regional governments (Pavolini and Vicarelli 2013), which led to a specific 'social model' characterized by high levels of local welfare and 'administrative efficiency' (Putnam 1994). After 1991, research has shown, such policy style persisted and Tuscan local authorities maintained a 'greater planning capacity compared to other regions', which allowed them to successfully respond to new challenges in many policy sectors (Pavolini and Vicarelli 2013).

All centre-left mayors interviewed referred to this deeply rooted administrative style and the beneficial effects it had in the past as a key factor that influenced the responses they developed to the 2015 refugee crisis'. The interview material therefore suggests that, while facing the new challenges of the 'refugee crisis', centre-left politicians largely 'replicated procedures that had been perceived as successes in the past' (Ansell et al. 2016:11). They adopted a proactive policy approach driven by the conviction that this policy approach tends to produce higher levels of administrative efficiency and that such administrative efficiency is a key basis for the political construction of consensus:

We decided to follow the strategy that characterized this region since 1945, and that has always been successful, which implied relying on our social model characterized by strong social organization and strong relationships between institutions and civil society (...). The prevalence of "spontaneism" risks to generate conflict, with a structured and long-term strategy you can prevent it (centre-left mayor).

The best reforms promoted in this region were developed when regional authorities faced new challenges and managed to convince our citizens that the policies proposed to face such challenges were in their own interest (...). [During the 'refugee crisis] we followed the same approach (centre-left member of regional government).

This points to Weick's argument (1995:18) that individuals, while facing new and unexpected events, rely on 'similar or familiar past experiences and the factors that have shaped their lives' to make sense of the current situation, meaning that 'reflective action and history' can facilitate planning, projecting and a proactive approach to action.

Importantly, the signals and cues about public reactions that centre-left mayors picked up from their environment – and particularly the perceived absence of anti-migrant protests – reinforced their pre-established idea that proactive policy approaches and efficient governance responses could foster local consensus, preventing anti-migrant protests. This positive feedback contributed to reinforce the policy approach adopted:

The way in which the reception system for asylum-seekers has been organized and managed in Tuscany contained negative effects and prevented protests. Many centre-left local governments did not modify their policy approach, mainly because there were no protests here (centre-left MP).

To explore the *third property of sensemaking*, according to which decisions in situations of crisis are contingent on interactions with others, I analyse centre-left decision-makers' exchanges with other actors. First, I identify the actors that interacted more frequently with mayors during the 'refugee crisis' and those that, sharing more similar views, could more effectively influence their choices. Then, I assess whether and how these actors influenced centre-left decision-makers' sensemaking processes.

To analyse mayors' interactions, I apply SNA. Figure 6 maps discussions on asylum-seekers' reception that took place within the Tuscan asylum governance system during the 'refugee crisis', based on the quantitative data collected during the interviews. The circles or 'nodes' in the figure represent groups of actors involved in Tuscan asylum governance; the lines (or *ties*) connecting two nodes indicate the existence of discussions on asylum-related issues between these groups of actors; while the line thickness is proportional to the frequency of these discussions, measured on a scale of

1 (=occasionally) to 5 (=daily). The value assigned to a tie connecting two groups of actors is the average of the values of all ties connecting individual members of those groups. While creating the network, a force-directed algorithm was applied, which keeps closer nodes that interact more frequently. The node size highlights actors with a more central position in the network (in technical terms: their ‘betweenness centrality’^v).

The figure shows that centre-left mayors, the centre-left regional government and CSOs are the most central actors in the governance system. Surprisingly, the Prefectures occupy a more marginal position in the network, despite them being the institutions primarily responsible for the organization of asylum-seekers’ reception according to Italian law. Importantly, the group of CSOs mostly include well-established big organizations, such as ARCI, Caritas and Oxfam, which have a long experience in the provision of social services and often integration services (Osservatorio Regionale sull’Immigrazione 2020). As a regional official explains, these CSOs, during the ‘refugee crisis’, played in Tuscany a three-fold role: ‘they did advocacy, promoting principles linked to the protection of human rights’, they ‘directly managed the reception centres’ and ‘were key partners in policy initiatives aimed at favouring asylum-seekers’ integration and social cohesion’.

Figure 6. Network describing the frequency of discussions on asylum-seekers' reception within the Tuscan asylum governance system during the 2015 'refugee crisis'. The weight of edges is proportional to the frequency of interactions (measured on a scale of 1-5). Node size is proportional to their betweenness centrality.

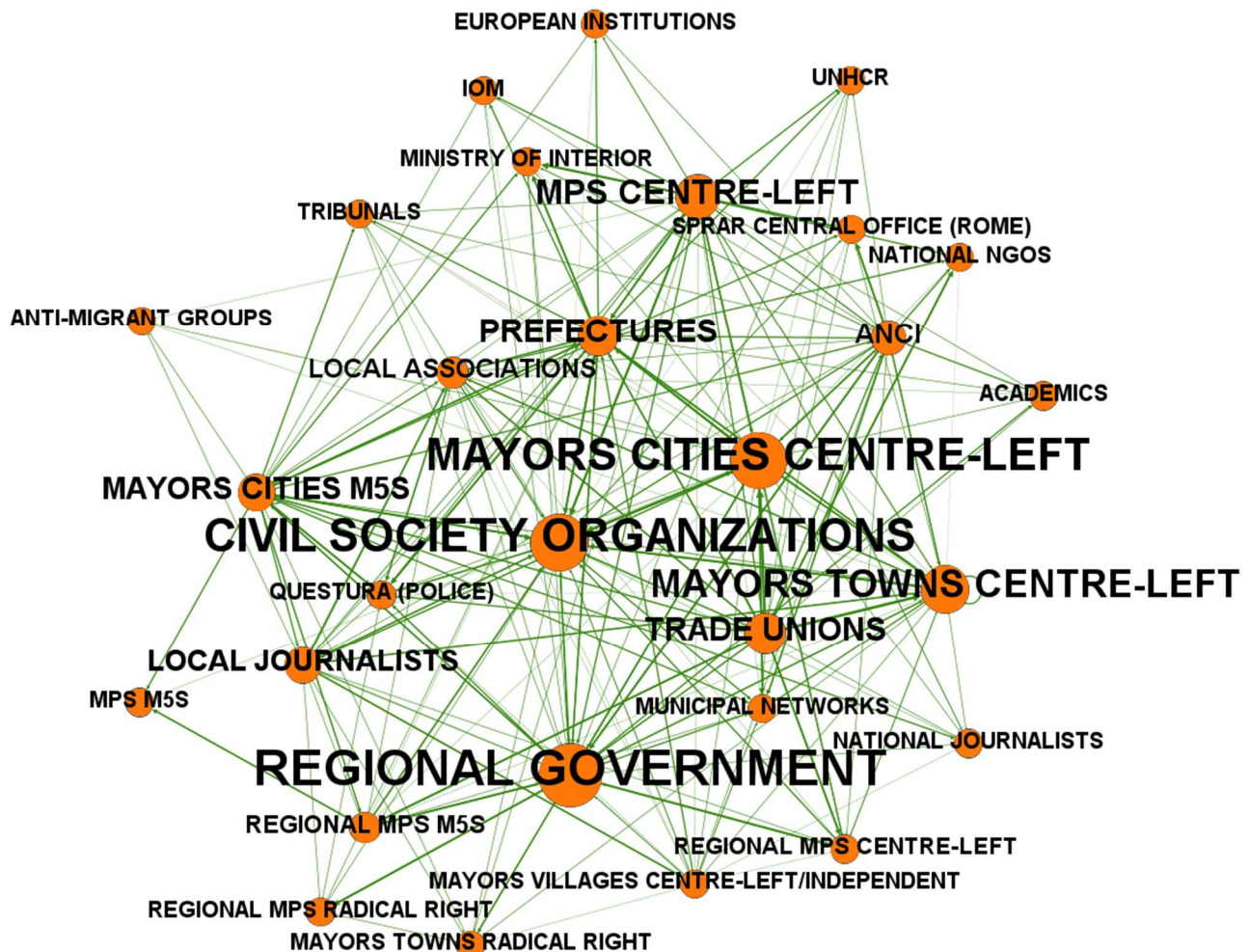
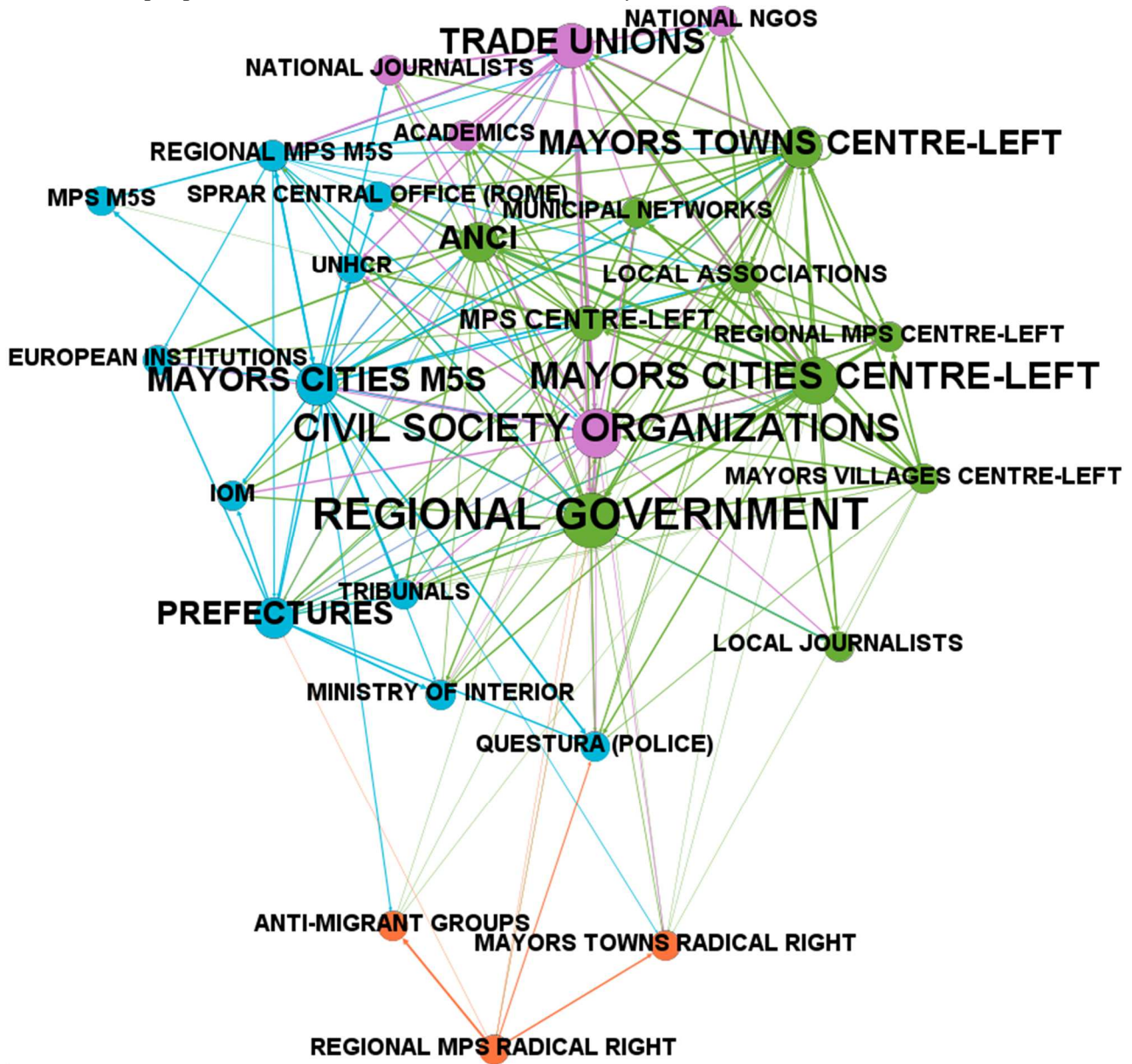


Figure 7, instead, maps actors' framing consonance. Here, the line thickness is proportional to the degree of similarity/difference of actors' views on the asylum issue (measured on a scale of 1-5). The same force-directed algorithm was applied, which tends to keep closer actors that have more similar views. In addition, applying Gephi's 'community detection algorithm'^{vi}, I identified four clusters of actors that share similar perspectives. The figure crucially shows that centre-left decision-makers' views on the asylum issue are very close to those of CSOs, local associations and trade unions. Interestingly, the views of populist M5S mayors seem to align more closely to international and

national institutional actors, while radical right mayors' views, not surprisingly, are more similar to those of anti-migrant groups.

Figure 7. Network describing framing consonance between actors involved in discussions on asylum-seekers' reception within the Tuscan asylum governance system during the 2015 'refugee crisis'. The weight of edges is proportional to the degree of framing consonance (measured on a scale of 1-5). Node size is proportional to their betweenness centrality.



The social network analysis shows that CSOs were both the actors that most frequently interacted with centre-left actors and those that shared with them the most similar views on the asylum issue.

These interactions, the interview material suggests, influenced the sensemaking processes of centre-left decision-makers at four different levels.

First, the ideological congruence between CSOs and centre-left party actors allowed CSOs to reach key powerholders in the regional governance system and directly influence their decisions. A regional official explained that, during the ‘refugee crisis’, there was a constant mutual exchange between CSOs and local authorities, which contributed to lead to the adoption of proactive and innovative asylum policies. The potential for CSOs to influence centre-left decision-makers is another legacy of the ‘red political subculture’, which was characterised by a strong and structural relationship between civil society and local authorities (Florida 2014). Furthermore, previous research has shown, civil society support became an even more crucial element for municipal governments to maintain electoral consensus after 1991, when the erosion of the strong ideological identification of the previous decades increased the influence of CSOs on policy processes (Ramella 2000:20).

Second, the interview material shows that the possibility to rely on a pre-existing structured network of CSOs with specific expertise in the provision of social services played a key role in helping mayors to define the situation around them and identify policy solutions. This relates to Weick’s argument that decisions are taken with the knowledge that these will have to be *implemented* by others:

In Tuscany the impact [of the ‘refugee crisis’] on local communities was much more sustainable than elsewhere, because here since well before the ‘refugee crisis’ there was a structured network of local authorities and CSOs involved in asylum-seekers’ reception (...). In 2015 Tuscany was ready, this network was already there, unlike in other regions where local governments didn’t have these close ties with civil society and couldn’t rely on such previous experiences (centre-left MP).

Many mayors reported that their trust in local CSOs played a key role in their decision to support the creation of reception centres, representing a guarantee that the reception system would have been managed efficiently:

It was crucially important to know that we were dealing with organizations that operated here since decades, and whose mission has always been that of favouring

migrants' integration and contrasting social marginalisation and poverty in all forms (centre-left mayor).

Third, civil society involvement helped to legitimate the proactive disposition of centre-left local governments, which relates to Weick's argument that decisions are taken with the knowledge that they have to be *understood* and *approved* by others. Centre-left actors, when promoting or supporting asylum-seekers' reception, counted on the fact that CSOs would have mitigated its impact on public opinion guaranteeing social cohesion and facilitating migrants' integration. The involvement of respected CSOs in the provision of services to asylum-seekers also allowed centre-left mayors to contrast claims raised by opposition parties that asylum-seekers' reception was turned into a profitable business (Castelli Gattinara 2017). This strong trust on CSOs' capacity to influence public opinion is, once again, a legacy of Tuscany's red political subculture and, interestingly, a local journalist interviewed suggests that such trust was very much overestimated by centre-left local elites:

We have several associations here that openly take positions on immigration and traditionally had some influence on public opinion (...). But nowadays they don't have the instruments to be really effective, certainly they don't have the power of tv programmes and social media (local journalist).

Fourth, as previously mentioned, the activism of Tuscan CSOs provided a reassuring idea of 'the public' that influenced mayors' perceptions of public opinion.

According to Weick's *fourth property of sensemaking*, sensemaking processes are influenced by actors' perceived identity, which can be redefined by interactions with others. The interview material in fact suggests that centre-left mayors' strong political identity decisively influenced their decisions to adopt proactive policy approaches and to stick to such an approach when the radical right increased its local consensus.

Members of post-communist centre-left parties – the interviews suggest – all kept being deeply attached to ‘some founding and evocative values (...) such as equality, solidarity, social justice’ (Florida 2010:8) and their strong political identity, defined by deeply rooted visions of the world, norms and social practices (Ramella 2010:310), decisively influenced their actions. As a centre-left mayor puts it:

We had to offer our solidarity to persons in need and being welcome was morally right, even though I’m aware that it doesn’t help from an electoral point of view. Local governments cannot exclusively act guided by the search of electoral support (...), we must accept the risk of losing the next elections to safeguard our values (centre-left mayor).

Two mayors defined their strategy during the ‘refugee crisis’ as one of ‘cultural resistance’ or ‘cultural fight’ against radical right parties’ attempts to ‘legitimise and promote wrong and dangerous values, which fomented rage, fear, individualism, and which are against our Constitution’ (centre-left mayor). Another mayor compared the approach adopted by his local government to asylum-seekers’ reception to the one adopted by his fellow citizens during the Second World War, who welcomed several internally displaced people.

While this idea of ‘cultural battle’ presupposes a view of the ‘refugee crisis’ as a constraint to the actions of centre-left parties, other interviewees even portray this as an opportunity, to reaffirm some fundamental values and ‘positively recreate a strong and shared identity’ (Ramella 2010:312), regenerating the tradition of the Italian left:

If you don’t constantly regenerate it, our left-wing tradition centred on persons and their rights risks to be lost. We must regenerate this tradition now, returning to our origins, to its core principles of addressing people’s need, especially of those of the weak and poor. The challenges posed by the ‘refugee crisis’ offered an opportunity to restore this tradition (centre-left member of regional government).

Conclusion

This article has explored the so far neglected role of cognitive factors in local asylum policymaking, with a specific focus on the 2015 European ‘refugee crisis’ and the ‘heuristic case’ of Tuscany. Local policymaking during the ‘crisis’ in this Italian region produced some apparently counterintuitive policy outputs – i.e. predominantly inclusive and proactive asylum policies, despite a restrictive turn in local and national politics – which cannot be convincingly explained by merely looking at contextual, structural and strategic factors.

The analysis conducted leads to three key findings, which link back to the academic debate on the drivers of local migration policymaking.

First, local decision-makers are not mere ‘passive recipients of information’, but active ‘interpreters and rationalizers’ (Mutz 2011:12). Other scholars focused on interpretations and framing effects when analysing national or supranational policymaking processes (Mayblin 2019; Hadj Abdou 2020). This cognitive dimension of migration policymaking has been, however, ignored by the literature on local policymaking. Few scholarly works have examined local elites’ agency during the 2015 European ‘refugee crisis’ but they did so by focusing on strategic and ideological factors, implicitly assuming that local elites are ‘rational’ actors (Liden and Nihlen 2015), and only rarely acknowledging that this rationality can be ‘bounded’ due to constraints on information, time and resources (Simon 1982). Conversely, this article shows that, at least in situations of ‘crisis’, mayors’ decision-making is not merely driven by their ideology or by attempts to minimise costs and maximise interests. Whether ignorant or not of the complexity of migration and its effects, local elites frame problems in a way which is not a mere straightforward assessment of facts but, rather, the result of cognitive framing processes. These processes are characterised by shortcuts or judgement heuristics, which lead decision-makers to highlight some aspects of the situation and dismiss others, especially evidence that questions prior beliefs causing emotional discomfort. In the case analysed, Tuscan mayors perceived the Tuscan population as progressive and neutral or supportive of asylum-seekers’

reception, despite available evidence suggesting that Tuscans had negative attitudes towards immigration. These perceptions were powerfully shaped by available narratives and fostered by actors' interactions with CSOs.

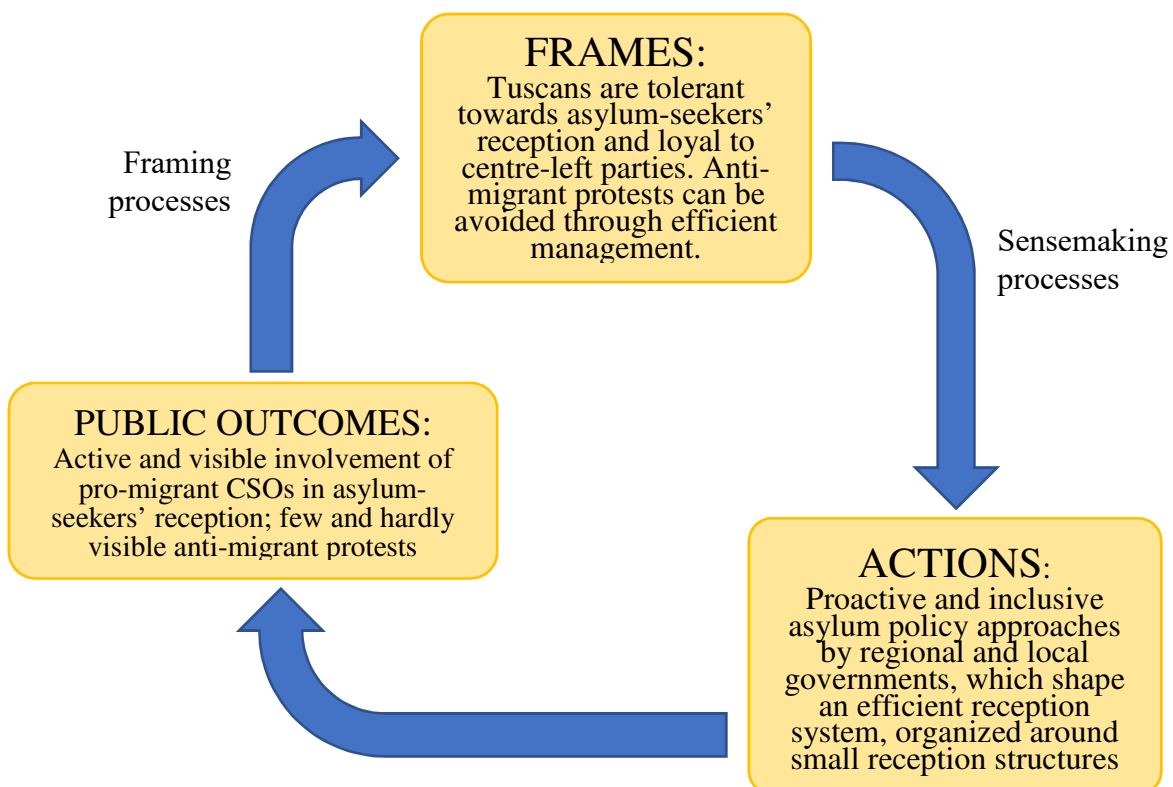
Second, this article has shown that subjective understandings can decisively influence mayors' policymaking approaches. Tuscan centre-left mayors understood asylum-seeking migration as a phenomenon that had primarily effects on public opinion and perceptions of locals as supportive of asylum-seekers' reception played a key role in their decisions to develop inclusive and proactive asylum policies, which led to an efficient reception system in the region. The enactment of these understandings of the situation was favoured, on the one hand, by a very strong political identity and available 'repertoires of action' (Bird and Osland 2005; Geddes 2020) linked to the deeply rooted idea that proactive policy approaches tend to produce efficient policy outputs and generate electoral consensus. On the other hand, it was influenced by mayors' close interactions with well-established CSOs which, at their eyes, could guarantee efficiency in asylum management and mobilise locals' support for inclusive asylum policies. All these elements are arguably legacies of the so-called 'red political subculture' that characterised Tuscany in the Twentieth century (Florida 2014:78).

Interestingly, despite the increasing politicisation of migration during the 'crisis' and the local growth of the radical right, these sensemaking processes and actions remained very stable over time. The analysis therefore suggests that initial environmental conditions can leave a persistent mark (or 'imprint') on local actors: they continue to shape their understandings and behaviours in the long run, even as external environmental conditions change (Marquis and Tilcsik 2013:45). I argue that such persistency of frames and actions, in the Tuscan case, is mainly related to a 'sensible environment' that was able to persist. Crucially, despite the growth of anti-immigration parties, understandings of the drivers of such political changes – and of public opinion more broadly – fostered rather than undermining deeply rooted ideas about the relationship between policy-making and public support

inherited from the ‘red political subculture’. A very strong political identity by centre-left actors – their deeply rooted sense of who they are as left-wing Tuscans – also contributed to foster asylum policy responses drawn from this very well-established regional script.

Without claiming that subjective understandings alone can fully explain local migration policymaking and its outputs, the analysis conducted clarifies that cognitive processes are a so far neglected and crucially important factor, particularly in situations of ‘crisis’. Future research on local migration policymaking need to analyse these cognitive factors, together with structural, contextual and strategic factors, and clarify whether cognitive factors also play a role in non-crisis situations.

Figure 8. The constitutive effects of local asylum policymaking in Tuscany during the 2015 European ‘refugee crisis’.



Third, this article has shown that local asylum policymaking processes can have constitutive or structuring effects. While it is an established finding that policy-making processes are not linear, and that decision-making dynamics can lead to a decoupling between ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’

(Brunsson 2000; Cohen et al. 1972; Kingdon 2014), this article has shown that local elites' actions can contribute to produce meaning (Figure 8). In Tuscany, an efficient reception system was produced as a result of actors' actions, which were largely driven by their understanding of public opinion as supportive of asylum-seekers' reception. At the same time, this efficient reception system reduced the scale and visibility of anti-migrant public mobilisations, providing a positive feedback to local elites about public reactions to asylum-seekers' reception, about their capacity to influence public opinion and the beneficial effects of proactive policymaking approaches in preventing social tensions. This suggests that, while making sense of their environment, decision-makers shaped it through their actions and by assessing the effects of these actions (Geddes 2020). This finding has important implications: while we tend to understand the 2015 European 'refugee crisis' as the result of exogenous factors, the analysis conducted suggests that more attention should be paid to endogenous dynamics within the governance system. Future research should further explore these structuring effects and correct a tendency to treat migration as a merely exogenous shock to local governance systems.

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ⁱ Ramella (2010:309) defines a 'territorial political subculture': 'a "system of signification" (visions of the world, norms, social practices, etc.) which helps to define the actors' political identities in the background of historically and territorially defined contexts'.

ⁱⁱ Questions were referred to the time period analysed (2015-mid 2018). Interviews, conducted in Italian, were transcribed and imported into Nvivo for coding. The selected quotes were translated in English.

ⁱⁱⁱ Municipalities could adopt a direct role in asylum-seekers' reception only by voluntarily adhering to the so-called 'SPRAR system', a parallel reception system based on small reception structures (partially funded by municipal

resources) which guaranteed higher reception standards. This network was mostly conceived for beneficiaries of international protection and hosted a very small percentage of asylum-seekers.

^{iv} See: <http://accoglienza.toscana.it/documents/882515/882891/PDF+LIBRO+BIANCO/f95ad8a5-0209-4482-81c9-a35251dba070>.

^v The betweenness centrality measures the number of shortest paths (between any couple of nodes) that pass through the given node.

^{vi} See Blondel et al. 2008.