Historical Layers of Refugee Reception in Border Areas of Italy: Crossroads of Transit and Temporalities of (Im)mobility

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Abstract

In border areas, time and space are constantly suspended from the usual rules along a liminal pathway transforming status and identity. In order to understand how different regimes of mobility and reception influence the experience of time and the subjective actions of both asylum seekers arriving via the so-called Balkan route and Ukrainian refugees fleeing from the war, the paper puts forward an analysis of the multiple scales of migration and reception policies as historically situated practices. How and to what extent has the increasing role of the humanitarian regime contributed to improving or worsening the lives of asylum seekers in borderland places where the memory of wars, civil conflicts, and experiences of refoulement is very much alive? Building on a multilocal ethnography of the temporalities of migrants' reception, the paper aims at disentangling the historical layers of hospitality in the northeastern Italian border areas of Trieste and Bolzano and the intersecting forms of (im)mobility at play. By addressing "reception" as an entanglement of spatial and temporal practices carried out by migrants, institutional, and humanitarian actors, we discuss not only how time reduces the existence of asylum seekers and Ukrainian refugees to an empty and meaningless human condition by exerting control over the subjective experiences, but also how the migrants' experience of waiting translates into an active state of being with the creative potential to trigger new forms of sociality, solidarity, and senses of belonging.

Keywords Asylum seekers · Hospitality · Immobility · Waiting · EU borders · Balkans · Bolzano · Trieste

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Introduction

Still labelled as an unexpected "refugee crisis" migrations along the "Balkan route" have challenged EU thresholds, in border areas where time and space are constantly suspended from the ordinary rules, along a liminal pathway transforming status and identity (Khosravi, 2019). The scholars' examination of the precarious conditions and vulnerabilities of migrants who are constantly subjected to "bordering, ordering and othering" measures (Van Melik et al., 2021) has paid limited attention to the intertwined, multiple scales of migration and reception policies as historically and locally situated practices, therefore failing to gain a more nuanced understanding of the experience of waiting and immobility of thousands of "institutionally" unrecognized migrants. The complexity of the current migration borderscape (Brambilla et al., 2015) calls into question the roles of and interactions between the national and transnational apparatuses, local public services and population, and the changing nature of these intertwined forms of mobility. The aim of the paper is to comparatively analyze the historical layers of reception policies in two localities in northeastern Italian border areas, in order to understand how different actors and hospitality patterns deploy and entail different regimes of immobility (Glick-Schiller & Salazar, 2013) and exercise control over asylum seekers' time and space, shaping their subjective experiences or triggering different forms of active response (Tazzioli, 2018). To what extent does the humanitarian paradigm contribute to improving or hindering asylum seekers' lives? How and to what extent has the growing role of mobility and humanitarian regimes promoted border practices and produced forms of migrant inclusion and exclusion in local contexts with historical legacies embedded in collective memories of past wars and recent civil conflicts?

We set out to analyze mobility and immobility in the European borderlands beyond the juridical shifts and geopolitical reconfigurations taking place in the global and national frameworks, progressively bringing in considerable numbers of asylum seekers in increasingly informal conditions (degli Uberti, 2021). We take a holistic approach that goes beyond a sole focus on individual trajectories to instead unpack the "complex relationality of places and persons" (Hannam et al., 2006, p. 13) along with the material, immaterial, and relational dimensions existing in migratory localities. The management of reception and hospitality, in terms of everyday practices and political representations, is studied in the city of Trieste and the Province of Bolzano, two localities on the borders of northeastern Italy. We will briefly compare the different transits of asylum seekers and refugees in the Italo-Austrian border and the Italo-Slovenian border, which have been the scene of displacement for at least four historical waves of refugees: Italians displaced after the Second World War; refugees from the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s; asylum seekers arriving via the Balkan route since 2015; and finally the recent flight of Ukrainians from the war in 2022. These different refugee transits across the same borderland require reflection on the temporalities shaping the migratory routes and border construction processes in order to take into account the more or less voluntary times of pause and immobility endured during the

migration, but also the temporal interweaving of these displacements in relation to the historical layers of the local refugee reception system (Anderson, 2014; Ballinger, 2017; Altin, 2024).

While focusing on "border crossing at multiple scales" (Bélanger & Silvey, 2020, p. 3425), we make a comparative analysis of the legal possibilities and constraints of mobility, the modes of reception and hospitality, the local networks and ties to the contexts of departure, the motivations for migration and horizons for moving or staying put. Within the reception regimes the experience of waiting comprises multiple dimensions that do not entail solely passive subjectivity; the condition of waiting can turn into a meaningful expression of freedom or a voluntary choice of immobility within an individual migration trajectory (Bandak & Janeja, 2018, p. 2).

In order to disambiguate these different functions of the time factor un the border area, we will use the terms "waiting for" as opposed to "waiting out" to distinguish between the asylum seekers' different agencies or constraints (Bandak & Janeja, 2018, p. 17). As Hage (2015, p. 41) states: "*Waiting out* is a specific form of waiting where one is not *waiting for something* but rather waiting for something undesirable that has to come, like a spell of cold weather or a disliked guest, to end or to go." A historical perspective on the local contexts and some individual life experiences will provide original insights into how the "understanding of mobilities [and immobilities] is embedded in unequal power relations and colonial legacies, occurring on different scales and temporalities, and being embedded in *longue durée*" (Wyss & Dahinden, 2022, p. 6).

Theory and Methods

The paper builds on the epistemological insights offered by the "mobility perspective" (Sheller & Urry, 2006) on migration research, which opens up an understanding of movement as an inner component of daily life and societies rather than as an exception to sedentism. By going beyond the predominant focus on migrants as the exclusive unit of analysis, the analytical gaze is expanded to the whole population (Dahinden, 2016), the intersections between multiple forms of movement and the experiential relationality between mobility and immobility (Schewel, 2019). We engage with the contexts of Bolzano and Trieste to explore "how different mobilities co-constitute these localities and, vice versa, how particular localities affect these movements" (Wyss & Dahinden, 2022, p. 7) as well as how they "become entangled and mutually constitutive" (Bal et al., 2017, p. 24). Not merely seen as a lack of mobility (Kleist & Jansen, 2016) or a negative drawback, we explore stasis and waithood as "socially negotiated processes" whose meanings are relationally co-constructed by encounters and interaction (Scott, 2019, p. 140). Attention is paid to the embodied "existential" dimension (Dwyer, 2009; Jacobsen & Karlsen, 2021) and how stillness and waiting take place in different times.

By assuming immobility to be a mutual, constitutive component of mobility, the paper sheds light on the challenges, ambivalences as well as the advantages often associated with the more or less voluntary decision to stay and wait plus the accompanying regimes of temporal bordering (Tazzioli, 2018; Donnan et al. 2017). As

Khosravi (2020, p. 206) remarks, "border waiting is not a static condition but rather a process and a practice." Thus, the subjective experiences of some asylum seekers allow us to shed light on how engagement in collective activities, investment in social relationships with caregivers and volunteers, and personal commitment to collective well-being are some examples of how waiting translates into a more complex affective, active and productive lived experience (Rotter, 2016).

This work is the further development of a previous comparative study started in the summer of 2015 to investigate the historical and local dimensions of the Italian reception system in relation to intersecting forms of (im)mobility (degli Uberti & Altin, 2022). The ethnographic fieldwork was conducted by the authors from 2015 until 2022 more or less simultaneously in both Bolzano and Trieste, among asylum seekers—mainly young adult men and unaccompanied minors from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Iran—and Ukrainian refugees—mostly family groups—along with institutional representatives, members of humanitarian and voluntary sector organizations, social workers.[1] We adopted mainly participant observation and qualitative interviews to collect the subjective and recreational time spent inside dormitories, makeshift shelters, walking the streets and waiting in line, and the timescapes spent in daily duties, at bus stops, in migration offices and personal encounters, along with an analysis of newspapers and the official data on migration flows, exploring the overlapping temporalities at work within and outside the reception facilities (Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021).

The Fragmentation of the National Political Reception System

Since the introduction of the "security decree" in October 2018 by former Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini, the management of refugees' reception has undergone radical changes. The law 132/2018 introduced many forms of restriction on access to security and inclusion in the reception system. As a result, in 2019, more than 180,000 people had already been left outside the system or were in an illegal situation.

Since 2015, in the context of Trieste, despite the closure of the European borders following the EU pact signed with Turkey in 2016, the area between Italy and Slovenia has been a crossroads in migration to northern and central Europe via the Balkans. The route has changed many times due to the complexity of the geopolitical situation and the need to use irregular, often unsafe and risky routes. In this border area, requests for humanitarian assistance have remained constant over the last 6 years (2017–2022). Since COVID-19, the numbers of asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and, more recently, Nepal and Turkey have increased. In 2022, 13,000 migrants arrived in Trieste, almost all of them young men under the age of 25; many of them do not seek hospitality, but just a "break" after the Balkan route before moving on.

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[1] For privacy reasons the names of the respondents are fictitious; their stories are not.

The most significant increase has been in unaccompanied minors (MNAs), almost all male and aged 17 on average, from Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Pakistan. Their presence is interesting due to the biopolitical implications and ambivalent factors involved, since most of them are not actually minors, but taking advantage of the only possibility of entering the European space in a "protected" way, following the militarization of the borders in Eastern Europe which forces migrants to remain "stuck" in the interstate border areas.

The resumption of the refoulement of refugees along the Balkan route on Italy's northeastern border is a good example of how "local" politics and international law are intertwined. The new Minister of the Interior, Matteo Piantedosi, calls them "informal readmissions" and claims that they are carried out on the basis of a 1996 cross-border agreement with Slovenia that has never been ratified by parliament. The bureaucratic phrase, however, fails to conceal its true nature: the handing over of asylum seekers found near the border to the Slovenian police prevents them from exercising their right to international protection and is therefore an illegal practice.

During the exceptional period of the pandemic, due to the "Piantedosi Circular," 2020 became a record year for readmissions to Slovenia. Blocked in 2021 by an appeal to the Court of Cassation in Rome, the initiative was resumed in 2022 with the ministry's request to the border prefectures to "take every initiative to give further impetus to vigilance along the border strip, with readmission procedures" for migrants causing a chain of rejections backwards along the Balkan route: from Italy to Slovenia, to Croatia, to a third country outside the Schengen area.

Cross-border rejections along the Eastern European route, border militarization and legal insecurity fuel forms of squatting, in informal camps or abandoned buildings, sometimes chosen, sometimes forced, which become permanent "temporary" shelters (Altin, 2017).

However, for those asylum seekers who manage to enter the reception system in Trieste, which still operates through *ospitalità diffusa* (grassroot hospitality) in small settlements, without concentrating the migrants in large reception facilities, waiting for documents can also become a strategic tool:

> *I work in a restaurant, off-the-books, long hours and not much money. I don't have the problem of housing yet, I'm still in reception because I'm waiting for my documents... So I'm taking advantage of this and studying Italian too. When I get my documents, I want to try my hand as a carer. T., you know him, he started with an old man, nearby. There's like an agency, you take your CV, but what they're interested in is that you speak good Italian and that you're a clean person, then they look for a lot of men for old men who can't get around very well... it's a safe job, T. is happy, even with this man's family* (Samir – Pakistan, 2021).

Similarly, the securitization of the Italo-Austrian border has become the answer to the crossing of hundreds of migrants directed to Italy through South Tyrol or moving from other Italian regions to the Brenner Pass to reach the northern EU countries. Since 2015, unlike those entitled to apply for asylum and to enjoy the Italian reception services because of their arrival through the Mediterranean routes, these migrants travelling along the "Balkan route" were deemed to lack the requisites to

be included in the quota of the Italian ordinary reception system. Labelled as *out-of-quota* asylum seekers (*profughi fuori quota*), they are mainly young adults from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and family groups mostly from Somalia and Eritrea (comprising women, elderly, disabled, and young people). Considered to be "legitimately excluded" from protection rights due to their autonomous arrival, the territorial and temporal obstacles to their access the South Tyrol reception system were further sharpened by the introduction of an additional local legislative directive—the *Circolare Critelli* (Critelli memorandum) (degli Uberti, 2019; see also Benedikt, 2019). Against this backdrop, the reintroduction of the (pre-Schengen) internal border controls by trilateral patrols (Italian, Austrian, and German police forces) along the railway lines and at border checkpoints, has meant that these migrants have got stuck in the districts of Bolzano. Prevented from moving and excluded by basic local welfare services they only found shelter in informal, makeshift camps around the railway station and under bridges or highway overpasses. The only facility initially made available to them was a seasonal center for homeless people, with limited access and a waiting list.

Numbering more than 400 in the summer of 2015, at the end of 2019 there were still 200 (Amnesty International Italia, 2019). Over recent years, the number of these "homeless asylum seekers" has remained stable though differentiated, with the arrival of Moroccans, Peruvians, Kurds, and Turks, and more family groups. Few have managed to find private temporary accommodation after learning Italian or German by themselves or working temporarily for local NGOs. This lengthy exclusion of most migrants from the reception system and their limited access to basic healthcare services worsened during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, causing them to transit between street shelters and different kinds of reception facilities (e.g., night centers for homeless people; extraordinary hospitality centers; refugee reception centers).[2] As if caught on Penrose stairs, they have ended up trapped in a daily experience of circularity, remaining constantly *in-between*, on the edges of the local Italian society (degli Uberti, 2019).

The progressive fragmentation of the national system of reception and integration of asylum seekers which has occurred over the last two decades regardless of the political color of the parties in power, has been further exacerbated by the specificities of the different historical layers of hospitality at work in these two Italian border areas.

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[2] Since these autonomous arrivals began to emerge, arbitrary policy practices have been enacted by local migration offices: migrants' formal requests for international protection, which grants them reception rights, have been tied to the submission of a "declaration of hospitality," namely a certification of their place of residence. However, this request, which according to Italian legislation enables access to the Italian social and welfare services, is devoid of a legal basis.

Post-Second World War Displacement (1945–1960)

After the Second World War, about 300,000 displaced Italians from Istria arrived in the regions on the northeastern borders of Italy, radically changing the local demography, especially in Trieste. They were "exiles," compatriots sharing the same language, despite their different territorial origins. The initial reception was organized in a few large centers, and then the exiles were dispersed to other parts of Italy or to the Karst plateau, inhabited by Slovenian-speaking minorities, in order to "Italianize" the areas. This first wave of migration therefore created links, contacts, and connections—real or imagined—with Yugoslavia, on the other side of the Iron Curtain, and when war broke out in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, a solidarity and hospitality network was relatively easy to organize.

During the long exodus, several thousands of refugees also arrived in Trentino-South Tyrol. Coming mainly from the areas of Fiume Pola and Istria, the Julian-Dalmatians numbered around 2500, including those who arrived in Bolzano between 1919 and 1940 and those who got there before 1945. In a survey among 519 family groups, the years 1945–1951 were marked by the highest number of departures (Mezzalira, 2005). The refugees who arrived in South Tyrol and initially sheltered in barracks and military facilities mostly belonged to the middle class, which helped to reshape a large part of the ruling class in the South Tyrolean capital in the immediate postwar period. Here it is important to underline that while, on the one hand, these refugees were granted preferential treatment for their arrival and insertion in the industrial and hotel sectors, on the other, the Istrian-Dalmatian exodus assumed an important political value in relation to the specific local context of South Tyrol. In fact the arrival of refugees became a major concern for the German-speaking minority because the exodus took place not only in the midst of bilateral negotiations between Italy and Austria to find a solution to the "South Tyrolean problem," but also in parallel to the unresolved issue of the South Tyroleans' reacquisition of Italian citizenship after opting massively for the Germanic nationality in 1939 (about 86% of the entire German-speaking population). Often German speakers, raised in multicultural environments and at the same time embodying the perfect representation of the Italian spirit, for the Italian government the Giuliano-Dalmatians and Fiumans could have been a perfect choice for full integration into South Tyrolean society. But the experience of similar circumstances to the South Tyroleans between 1939 and 1945—an attempted ethnic cleansing of the territory—turned out to have an impact on the difficult relationship that the refugees and the following generations still have with their past (Tonezzer, 2005). And this memory seems to reverberate on the ambivalent approach towards the reception of the Ukrainians on one hand and the asylum seekers coming via the Balkan route on the other. The formers are perceived as culturally closer because of their experience of fleeing their homeland becomes a *shared* experience with local population; coincidences with a local memory of foreign threat and escape fuel a stronger motivation for solidarity.

Exiled Communities from the War in Ex-Yugoslavia (1991–2001)

Not by chance the SPRAR hospitality protection system for asylum seekers and refugees (today renamed SAI) was experimented for the first time in Trieste. Here, Yugoslav refugees were hosted not in large primary reception centers, but in small flats and city-wide settlements (Bona, 2016).

Due to previous economic and family connections, as well as smuggling and cross border work and linguistic affinities, classic humanitarian hospitality management was used as little as possible. Hence, tents or large centers with all the resulting issues were avoided by organizing chains of solidarity with volunteers and a network of relatives and friends who retained ideals of a "socialist brotherhood." Most of the Yugoslavian refugees who settled in the 1990s were distributed throughout different parts of the city and the region. There was no large center, and so they directly went onto the second phase of hospitality, without nerve-wracking waits for documents, permits, checks, etc. In spite of the terrible experience of violence caused by the ethnocidal war, this influx, which was generally accompanied by a great deal of solidarity, integrated relatively quickly into local society and, above all, compatibly with its both practical and existential needs.

Longing for Refuge Along the "Balkan Route" (2015–)

The last migrants from the war in Yugoslavia were Kosovar refugees who arrived in the early years of the new millennium. Then came the Arab Spring and the war in Syria, and in 2014, the overland Balkan route was taken up again, with increasing intensity, by Afghans, Syrians, Pakistanis, Iranians, and Africans from the South and East of the world.

The peak of arrivals passing through Croatia, Slovenia, and transiting to central and northern Europe was reached in 2015–2016. The March 2016 pact between Merkel and Erdogan put a stop to the flows from Turkey and Greece in appearance only. What actually happened was that they were thinned out and externalized by filtering practices at the borders of third countries such as Serbia and Bosnia. Since the temporary halt due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the numbers of migrants crossing the Balkan route to reach Europe have grown exponentially. Immediately doubling in 2022, the official records count 5000 arrivals but informal data record almost 12,000 people transiting through Trieste: mostly young men, but also a growing number of ever younger unaccompanied minors. By now well documented, even in appeals to the European Court of Justice, violent pushbacks were carried out against these migrants in the border areas between the various Balkan states. After arriving in Trieste, many young migrants chose to stay because they distrusted the police or the institutional forces after the violent treatment they had suffered along the route when they were often detained in centers for migrants on the Croatian and Bulgarian borders.

Bengali boys pay anything up to 26,000 euros to arrive in Italy and then have to give this money back. Then… it depends on the journey, the people you meet, I've done the game 12 times. […] The problem for me now is work. I want to leave the (host) house where I am now as soon as possible. For me a year in the community is a lot! You can't go to school and stay in the community, the problem is work and money to send home. (Ryzwan, Bangladesh – 2021)

Sometimes they are hosted in communities for foreign minors until they turn 18, sometimes they decide to take a break from the humanitarian reception system, using an informal shelter such as the Silos near the central station of Trieste. In the first 2 weeks of June 2022, the Slovenian police stopped just over 380 people, slightly lower numbers than those stopped by the Italian police, making a total of 800 border crossings from the Balkan route. This primary flow from outside the European community is a flow of poor people, often consisting of potential breadwinners for the family who stayed at home and invested all their capital in the migration journey, trusting in the future remittances that would be sent back home.

It is indeed very difficult to draw a clear line between forced migration for political asylum and economic reasons.

Yes, many young Bengali men go to Milan, Rome, even Naples, to work in restaurants above all […] that used to be a real job, but now the employers send a lot of people away and then they call others, on short-term contracts... I didn't leave because the people I know are here, in Trieste. And to move you need a friend, a relative, otherwise it's like starting from scratch and you have even more problems with housing, a city you don't know, work... (Ryzwan, Bangladesh – 2021)

Since 2015, police check reportedly carried out through racial profiling—a practice banned by international conventions—only on persons with non-European somatic features, have become daily practice on the Italo-Austrian border too. Along with temporal controls, regular random trilateral—Italian, Austrian, and German—police inspections are carried out on trains and in train stations along the Brenner route. Italian and Austrian law enforcement agencies carry out informal readmissions (active and passive) on the basis of the bilateral readmission agreement signed in October 1997 and in force since 1 April 1998 (ASGI, 2022; see also Schmidt-Sembdner, 2018). In 2022, 36 migrants arrived in Bolzano and told volunteers that they had had their money and mobile phones confiscated, a deterrence practice that was not new but had not been seen for a long time. Seizing a mobile phone from someone who has been travelling for months, if not years, disorientates them, cuts them off all forms of contact, making a "journey" that is in itself dehumanizing even more perilous and difficult.

The violations against migrants also include the rejection of a significant number of minors; the confiscation of personal belongings, clothing, and telephones; fines with immediate demands for money; the absence of interpreters; and the impossibility of gaining access to legal defense. In addition to this, reception centers that had housed asylum seekers for more than five years have been

demolished in order to build car parks (Altoadige.it, 17 December 2022), along with the A22 motorway authority's decision to erect new barriers to prevent access for international protection seekers and homeless people to places where they could make beds for the night (Altoadige.it, 4 December 2022).

As Juri Andriollo, Bolzano's Councillor for Social Policy, has often said, the municipal administration "does not want to become a collection point" for those arriving from the Brenner Pass, while highlighting the alleged opportunism of those who sometimes prefer to stay in shelters "because they pay nothing." The councillor claimed that the city of Bolzano should be "less of a service provider and more of a field hospital", which is what it has become.

Following the recent evolutions in reception policies, migrants have become subjects symbolically and physically outside the social and identity boundaries of South Tyrol, both in the imagination and in reality.

Thus, it is not difficult to believe the words of a social worker, whose responsibility to grant the limited first reception to the out-of-quota asylum seekers was frustrated by orders from her superiors not to say or provide them with any information or explanation on the local welfare services or how they could be accessed. In the same vein, the forced relocation of asylum seekers to reception services such as ex-industrial warehouses in difficult-to-reach periphery areas that are unsuitable for collective hospitality, as well as the strictly regulated entry and exit times, are factors that help produce the migrants' spatial and temporal othering.

> There are always conflicts inside the centre and people have been thrown out onto the street! It's very difficult to think that a person could feel comfortable in a huge industrial warehouse, in the middle of nowhere in the industrial outskirts of the city… an unsafe space, full of bugs, where people steal from each other and often deal. Who would be willing to walk miles every day to reach a place where you feel in prison and with set times for every daily gesture? (Sonja, social worker, Bolzano – 2022)

Like many other migrants, Samiullah arrived dangerously, crossing the border hidden in the trailer of a truck. The obstacles to proving their physical and legal presence in the territory takes them round and round in circles, making them live in transit between the streets and various kinds of reception facilities. There are hardly any services designed for migrants transiting through cities and border areas.

> I asked for protection in Italy. They told me that I have to wait several months before I can get into a reception centre. In the meantime, they might decide to send me back to Hungary. I'm living in a kind of never-ending limbo. I don't know what awaits me. Now, I just have to wait, like so many others, with no chance to change my situation. (Samiullah, Afghanistan – 2016)

Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, those who lived in the warehouse could take advantage of treatment in a mobile clinic and a canteen service.

The few services available to them are relatively recent and (tend to) overlap with services for homeless people. Moreover, the recent influx of Ukrainians has further highlighted the extent of the support provided to the migrant and asylum-seeking population by volunteers and volunteer associations, in terms of accommodation and integration processes, among others.

> *I worked as fruit picker but now it's not the right time of year and I can only wait. Meanwhile the police have got my documents, which means I can't find a job. No job means no house. Some but not all of us have been hosted in farmhouses; I and many others still sleep on the edge of this river. COVID has worsened the situation and we don't know when and if it will end.* (Adama, Mali – 2021)

When we met Samiullah at the entrance to the center for the homeless in Bolzano a week after his arrival, he was still, like many other migrants, trying to apply for asylum. In a previous paper, we examined how local migration policies instrumentally use the categories of "homeless" and "out-of-quota" asylum seekers to foster bordering practices that reduce the rights of potential asylum seekers to access the reception system and basic social/healthcare services (degli Uberti, 2019). Thus, the importance is not only how locals welcome migrants but whether the latter are labelled "deserving" or "undeserving" when taken in.

We observe how in the antimigration discourse the deliberate aim to frame migrants' "time" as uncertain is a means to manipulate it. This use of time and the precarious "out-of-quota" status make migrants vulnerable to experiencing time in an uncontrolled way; time speeds up, slows down, and alternates with unwanted experiences of waithood. The migrants' physical presence in Bolzano is erased by the imposition of practices of temporal control that turn their existence into circular trajectories of "permanent temporariness" (Altin & degli Uberti, 2022).

The coexistence of the indefinite and temporality deprive these people of a sense of predictability of the self. The same flexibility inherent in the definition of time paves the way to actions which reframe the outlook of unpredictability.

Voluntary Immobility as a Practice of Agency

The temporal dimensions through which reception policies exercise control over migrants' subjectivity, bodies and emotions induce conditions of immobility or forced mobility, produced by experiences of stolen time caused by the welfare reception regime. Nevertheless, the migrants' narratives suggest a different understanding of this time and show how they redefine the perception of a missed future by breaking away from the structural times of reception.

For example, despite the harsh, wintry conditions, in reaction to the condition of exclusion, several Pakistanis and Afghans preferred to spend their nights together outside the reception facilities. The shared experience of sleeping turned out to be an active and meaningful time of waiting. This voluntary choice suggests that there are differences in how migrants translate their daily waiting into meaningful and productive time.

You won't believe me but at night I prefer to sleep outside, under the bridge with other people rather than being hosted in a container. At least we're together. (Abdul, Pakistan – 2017)

Similarly, in the unforeseen situation produced by the COVID-19 pandemic, several migrants took advantage of the condition of forced waiting in the reception facility to improve their professional and language skills as well as their sense of social belonging. In addition, the lack of the usual seasonal labor migrants from Eastern Europe became a professional opportunity for the asylum seekers to step in to fill the shortage of apple pickers. Spatial and temporal immobility turned into a position of agency.

Many asylum seekers don't receive any help in the reception centres. It's since 2016 that they've been waiting for a response from the Commission... not only due to COVID. Over these six years, many of them have worked hard, they haven't wasted time! They've learned to speak Italian or German; they've often found a stable job! They would have the money to live in a rented flat but they're still waiting for their papers! Without documents, they can't even reunite their families. (Social worker, Bolzano – 2022)

As noted by Jacobsen and Karlsen (2021), the condition of limbo needs to be understood from the migrants' point of view. Sleeping collectively and spending every night together becomes a creative answer to the enduring sense of precariousness produced by the temporalities of the reception system. The state of imposed limbo, experienced as a shared time, starts to be perceived as a voluntary choice. In the migratory experiences of Abdul and many others, their wandering is not just a space for killing the *waiting time* but an active component of their attempt to construct an alternative existence.

Making Affective Time

A good example of an attempt to challenge and reframe the waiting time imposed by the temporality of the reception regime, restore meaning to his existence and design alternative scenarios for himself and others is the experience of Izhar, a young journalist and local politician who escaped from Pakistan to avoid threats and the risk of being kidnapped.

I was very frustrated when I got a negative response. It looked like I was just someone left waiting and profiting from Italian system. I spent time collecting proof of my previous life in Pakistan… and my life was rejected as fake. So, I started taking notes of my life here and the stories of the people around me. In Italy many migrants have difficulties to learn the language so I decided to write a dictionary in Italian, German, English and Urdu of the most common words, expressions and questions. I believe it will be useful for those living "in reception" and also for those coming in the future. (Izhar, Pakistan – 2016)

The Izhar's decision to write about his personal experience and his commitment towards the collective well-being became a means to regain control over his present

existence. These emerging social practices gave the flow of time new meanings, enabling him to establish a new bond between his past and present life existence.

The Ukrainian Displacement Crisis (2022–)

In 2022, parallel to migrations through the Balkans, half of the 125,000 suddenly displaced from Ukraine, fleeing the Ukrainian war—67,000 people—arrived at the Italo-Slovenian border checkpoint in via Fernetti. Despite 3000 refugees arriving every day during the first period, along with a 300-euro monthly support allowance, in just a few days first aid and reception facilities were co-organized by the police, the Red Cross, volunteers, charities and humanitarian NGOs (e.g., UNHCR, Save the Children), supported by grassroot hospitality from the local population.

Interestingly, at the beginning of March 2022, the EU institutions exceptionally reactivated Council Directive 2001/55/EC, dating back more than 20 years to summer 2001, devised for the massive number of displaced persons from the war-torn Balkan countries.[3]

Similarly, along with the flows of "autonomous migrants," in spring 2022 South Tyrol faced the arrival of about 1500 Ukrainians. A provincial hub for initial reception procedures was created along with a task force coordinated by the Provincial Department of Social Affairs, comprising the Civil Protection Agency, provincial health authority, police, Red Cross and local third-sector volunteers.[4] A multilingual brochure— "Welcome to Italy"—was drawn up by the Ministry of the Interior containing information on regular stays in South Tyrol. The former St. Georg educational center in Bressanone was immediately made available for local reception (initially hosting 40 people), along with most of the hotels in Bolzano. € 1.5 million euros were drawn from the reserve fund to finance urgent measures and a fundraising website was opened, run by the Bolzano-Bressanone Caritas.

With reference to the positive experience of welcoming Ukrainians, which seems to have been favored or facilitated by memories of the shared traumatic experience of the Second World War, Vanessa, social worker, observes that: "We are looking at a *selective sense of sorrow* which shows that it is possible to organize and implement a "non-emergency" and "well-made" reception system."

Despite this warm welcome and strong public solidarity, a small proportion of refugees decided not to enter the reception system, mainly due to the presence of a large Ukrainian community, developed since the 1990s, mostly by female workers employed in families or in the care and assistance of the elderly or children.[5]

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[3] In the event of a mass influx of displaced persons from third countries, the directive aims to establish minimum standards for granting temporary protection to those who cannot return to their home country and to ensure that all member states come together to face the reception challenges (Carrera & Ineli-Cigler, 2023).

[4] At the time of writing, the provincial hub had been dismantled due to the reduced numbers of Ukrainian migrants arriving and willing to settle in the local territory. According to the official data, of the 419 people who applied for asylum in January 2023, 114 were from Ukraine and 305 from other countries.

[5] With 223,489 presences before the outbreak of the war in 2021, Ukrainians formed the fourth largest and most established non-EU community in Italy.

The important local community built up by the Ukrainian diaspora gave the refugees an indirect awareness and cultural knowledge of the context. Thanks to this former migratory flow, the new arrivals found immediate support and the enormous solidarity of Italians who wished to respond in some way to the many needs of those "brothers and sisters in humanity" by donating clothes, food, money, and other items.

It was fundamental that we knew a little of their life, all that they had left behind, and shared a very strong moment of pain, because if you know, you experience more empathy, you understand people's suffering better and this is also important for our personal and spiritual growth. (Volunteer at the border checkpoint, Trieste – 2022)

In Trieste, the local representatives of the xenophobic party talked explicitly about "true" refugees as opposed to other "bogus" asylum seekers even though the Ukrainians do not have to apply for asylum because they immediately receive a 1-year residence permit to move in the Schengen area. As suggested by the head of the local Caritas, from the political and media images, it seemed much easier to welcome Ukrainian women and children, even though it was much more complex in organizational terms. The threshold of tolerance beyond which refugees become too many and unmanageable seems to lie in how we look at things, rather than in the numbers.

Yes, look, people had heard that there was this welcome and they were bringing bags full of things: nappies for babies and sanitary products for women, snacks, juice, everything came with so much love and generosity. Things arrived at all hours and this moved and amazed us. It's still happening. In fact, we write in the WhatsApp group and everything that we need slowly arrives. (Volunteer at the border checkpoint, Trieste – 2022)

This flow of refugees is good and welcome, while the other flow of asylum seekers, bad or nevertheless unwelcome, is more subterranean but steadily increasing on the Balkan route. In 2022, the number of arrivals increased, however, most of them did not intend to stop, but continue their migratory journey to central or northern Europe, where they have relatives, friends or, in any case, better job opportunities.

The reception services are the same, even if the legal status is different, but suddenly the type of migrants changed: families, children, more complicated… school, integration. And the horizon and sense of time are completely different… (Head of the Caritas, Trieste – 2022)

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the reopening of the borders led to more arrivals from the Balkans, but above all to more unaccompanied minors, whose average age continued to fall.

The reason is that now only minors are guaranteed asylum and protection in Europe, so it is no longer young people but literally children who come along the route, arriving in Trieste at 16 after three or four years travelling alone through Turkey and Greece.

Given the refugees' mobility and immobility in these cases, the local network of fellow migrants already settled in this borderland plays a key role as possible hosts

and informants able to give advice. Like in the case of Abdul, an Iraqi asylum seeker who arrived in Trieste by train in September 2018 because a friend from Kirkuk was already living there and had told him that the reception system was good and that it was a good place to live, "but then it's all about luck: twenty days after I arrived in Trieste, asylum seekers were denied registration (residency)… and so it's complicated even to work…" (Abdul, Iraq – 2020).

Most of the displaced Ukrainian women with children were taken in or placed with Italian families thanks to the mediation of settled Ukrainian migrants. This recent influx is similar to the one from Yugoslavia in the 1990s, which was received by informal networks.

In Bolzano and Trieste, we can observe migrants' application of different tactical uses of temporariness and stasis, depending on how European and international management combines a humanitarian approach with a strict dichotomy of inclusion (based on the Dublin Regulation and the humanitarian apparatus) or exclusion (through the externalization of the European border and refoulement practices).

Temporary Protection

The immediate access to temporary protection granted to Ukrainian refugees produced a sort of implicit subdivision in reception management within the local third sector, between Asian and African asylum seekers on one hand, and the 71,940 (of whom 37,000 women) Ukrainians who received a Schengen visa in just 15 days on the other. The lack of real "fairness" and legitimization of a dichotomy in humanitarian assistance seems to be the most dangerous tendency infiltrating common European thinking about "us" and "them." At present, despite freedom of movement and temporary residence permits, most Ukrainians intend to return home.

Although the factors—the Russian-Ukrainian war—triggering the Ukrainian migration are different (though only partially) from the causes of forced migration of Afghans, Pakistani, Iranian, and Somali, it is interesting to note that if the incoming flow is left unhindered, the outgoing one increases too. As a result, there are none of the space–time "bottlenecks" between borders that are indirectly reinforced by European policies and the ambiguous system of the management of non-European asylum seekers. Refugees enter, leave and return, even (or especially) if their mobility is not interrupted.

The case of unaccompanied foreign minors is emblematic in this respect: while half of Ukrainian minors return, those of other nationalities, such as Afghans, Kosovars, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis, motivated by other needs, continue to arrive, because their minor status is the filter that allows them to enter Europe without getting stuck in transit.

The humanitarian regime protects foreign children, but it protects the border from the otherness they represent too. Migrants can cross because of their age (and biological evidence of a young and vulnerable body), not their legal status. From the perspective of many migrants, this is seen as a winning strategy to checkmate the increasingly rejectionist regime at Europe's borders. Having arrived as minors, they are entitled to assistance and the wait is not in vain: they receive a place to stay, Italian language lessons and even vocational training.

The migrants' state of waiting is therefore not passive, and in the meantime, they often create their own "parallel societies," relying on informal jobs and connections that are irrelevant in the eyes of the state, but not for their communities or projects.

Concluding Remarks

We have adopted the concept of "entangled mobilities" to analyze refugees' mobilities and their local and historical situatedness (Wyss & Dahinden, 2022). In both Bolzano and Trieste, the experiences of the two refugee flows from Ukraine and along the Balkan route provide empirical evidence of the humanitarian approach at work, swinging from hospitality to securitization and rejection at the internal EU borders, whose crossing can become a salvation or a painful embodied scar.

By addressing these migration processes comparatively as "total social facts" we have shown how diverse local reception regimes are at stake in the same reception system. A flow of "good" and well-received Ukrainian refugees, not compelled to submit to the asylum application process, enjoy free EU mobility permits; while the inland flows of "unwelcome" migrants are forcibly channelled through militarized borders along pathways of progressive political and social unrecognition and rejection.

In this framework, time has proven to be an effective key to understanding the process of bordering, the meanings and social practices displayed by migrants and local populations involved in the reception system.

The porosity of the northeastern border areas of Italy and the imposed deceleration of movement between states suggest that migrations are regulated more by time than by space (Tsianos et al., 2009, p. 8). Thus, liminality produces ambiguous positions and contradictory spaces, with "bordering" to maintain order and division or eliminate the impurity and visibility of the refugee bodies (Turner, 2015, p. 144), and temporality and waiting times that create new possibilities for encounters, new beginnings (Scalettaris et al., 2021) and hopes (Jovanovic, 2018, p. 256).

Indeed, while the localities of Bolzano and Trieste are co-constituted by the historical layers of refugee reception policies and mobility, they are also entangled with the differentiated time horizons and horizons of meaning of Ukrainian IDPs and non-European asylum seekers. While for the former, the horizon of sense is directed towards the past, towards waiting and trying to secure lives and family, for the latter the only hope is to dash forward towards a more uncertain future. While having to cope with a violent war, Ukrainian women and children enjoy greater solidarity and practical support. Conversely, as we have illustrated, for the many unaccompanied foreign minors, their age becomes the only decisive temporal factor enabling them to "stay" in this ambivalent border regime and receive solidarity. Indeed, they are only granted protection if their "proof" of age is verified by X-rays, fingerprints and biomedical checks.

Solidarity is undoubtedly connected to historical implications and previous migration chains, but it is also a temporal process. Refugees soon become a burden on the welfare system or competitors for the weaker segment of the population. Selective compassion for forced migrants is almost always a "temporal" process; a longue durée is never desirable. Moreover, solidarity is often hierarchical, gendered

and racialized: women are better than men; Christians and whites are more acceptable than dark-skinned and non-European people, especially if they are poor and colonized. Patterns of (im)mobility (e.g., stasis, waiting), experiences of rejection, violence, vulnerability, along with migratory projections and agency, are all part of the existential experience of migrants seeking entry to the European Union; they are all expressions of these people's efforts and capacities to pursue goals to improve their lives (Fontanari, 2017; Griffiths, 2014).

Recalling the initial distinction between "waiting for" and "waiting out," we have discussed how the practice of waiting can describe a state of blockage—waiting out—and limited influence over institutional control, in which resource availability and the timing of waiting correspond to the distribution of power. Otherwise, while "waiting for," one can choose when to wait and when to act, and when to momentarily "set aside," in a way of waiting that is a sign of agency (Bandak & Janeja, 2018, p. 21).

Empirical evidence has been provided to unpack the temporal phenomenon of "waiting" through the experiences of overstaying refugees in Bolzano and asylum seekers in Trieste. The study of spatial continuity—staying in one place—is methodologically challenging. This framework suggests approaching immobility from two perspectives: as resulting from structural constraints on the ability to migrate and/or as reflecting the desire to remain. The life experiences recalled here suggest that even if individuals manage to emancipate themselves from the constraints imposed by the "times of reception," they are still subject to the constraints of legal recognition.

Data Availability The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available due to reasons of sensitivity. Since this article expounds insights of the precarious lives of irregularized migrants, the data of this research is not available to protect the informants that provide us their informal consent.

Declarations

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