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Collaborative governance in politicized times: the battle over asylum policies in Italian cities

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Abstract

Collaborative governance has gained momentum for its promise to deliver social inclusion, with municipalities viewed as ideal spaces for its success. However, little research critically examines the political conditions under which this is the case. This article theorizes why and how collaborative local governance succeeds or fails in today's divided democracies. It argues that politicization manifests in three dimensions of local governance—among stakeholders, across government levels, and in the framing of policy target groups. These dynamics often incentivize the exclusion of marginalized populations. For collaboration to succeed, it must be anchored in an ideologically cohesive network of stakeholders, with civil society organizations acting as political advocates for disadvantaged groups. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in 2018–2022, we compare asylum policies in two Italian cities: Bologna and Venice. Despite rising far-right politics nationally, Bologna's collaborative governance persisted thanks to the sustained commitment of local officials and civil society actors, all sharing ideological and strategic motivations in promoting refugee rights. In contrast, anti-migrant politics has increasingly informed the policy agenda of Venice elected officials. The politicization of immigration offered them powerful incentives to wipe out long-established collaborations and to frame refugees as undeserving policy targets, leading to their exclusion from public services. These findings extend to other geographical contexts and policy sectors, calling for a more political understanding of collaborative local governance.

Keywords: collaborative governance; local governance; politicization; immigration; Italy

Cities worldwide are on the frontlines in coping with the most pressing welfare needs of our age, such as housing, health care, and education. This dynamism spurs from collaboration among public authorities, civil society organizations, and other nonstate actors (Alcantara & Nelles, 2014; Pierre & Peters, 2020). Due to their proximity to social change, these local networks are best suited to experiment with innovation, tackle inequalities, and revamp democracy, sometimes driving policy change at higher government levels. This is why governance and social innovation theories see municipalities as the ideal institutional and social environment in which successful collaboration can thrive (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Dobbin et al., 2023; Koebele & Crow, 2023). Yet, existing literature has paid little attention to the political dimension of collaborative local governance—how partisanship, contestation, and power dynamics

shape its functioning and outcomes—arguably due to a normative emphasis on consensus-oriented deliberation and "good" governance (Verhoeven et al., 2022). This gap is particularly surprising in an era of heightened politicization across liberal countries.

This article theorizes why and how collaborative governance succeeds or fails in today's divided democracies. While prior scholarship has often assumed that the local level is intrinsically conducive to successful collaboration, we contend that politicization critically affects the emergence, sustainability, and achievements of collaborative arrangements in municipalities. Specifically, we argue that politicization manifests in three dimensions of local governance: (1) among local stakeholders (*horizontal*); (2) across government levels (*vertical*); and (3) in the social construction of policy target groups (*ideational*). When addressing highly contested issues, local governments have powerful incentives to transform policymaking in a political battleground, making conflict—not collaboration—the dominant mode of interaction. This in turn makes exclusion—not inclusion—of marginalized groups a politically expedient policy objective. For collaborative governance to succeed in politicized domains, it is crucial to forge a cohesive network of stakeholders who share ideological and strategic affinities. This also needs to include a vocal contingent of civil society organizations advocating the rights of target populations in local claims-making arenas.

Immigration provides a unique vantage point to illustrate this argument. While collaborative local governance is often praised in this policy domain, immigration also exemplifies an "intractable policy controversy," fuelling contestation over the very boundaries of community belonging (e.g., Bazurli & de Graauw, 2023; Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Bauder & Darling, 2019; Scholten, 2013; Van der Brug et al., 2015). Drawing on 41 interviews and other data collected in 2018–2022, we compare asylum policymaking in two middle-sized Italian cities: Bologna and Venice. Over the 1990s–2000s, both these cities crafted innovative responses to accommodate refugees based on fresh collaborative arrangements. Amid the 2010s "refugee crisis," however, Bologna's asylum policies continued to expand, whereas Venice's governance network gradually came unglued, leading to the dismantling of its policies. As asylum became one of the thorniest political topics in the country, Bologna's path-dependence was maintained by persistent collaboration among left-leaning officials, skilled bureaucrats, and like-minded civil society organizations. In contrast, the rise of far-right politics nationally has increasingly informed the political agenda of Venice elected officials; they dismantled decades-long collaborations, ultimately retreating from their responsibilities of refugee protection.

This article first reviews key scholarly debates on collaborative local governance and develops its main argument. Next, we offer an overview of Italy's asylum politics and policy, the rationale for case selection, as well as our methods and data. Empirical evidence from Bologna and Venice is then presented. The article concludes by reflecting on how the lessons learned from these two cities may inform research and policymaking in other geographical areas and policy sectors.

Understanding collaborative local governance in politicized times

This article focuses on *collaborative governance*, an umbrella concept describing "a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets" (Ansell & Gash, 2008: 544). This definition is general enough to accommodate different real-world instances of collaborative governance (e.g., Dobbin et al., 2023; Hysing, 2022; Koebele & Crow, 2023), which vary greatly in terms of: *who* collaborate (institutional actors, businesses, civil society, target groups, the public more broadly); *how* they do that (ranging from mere consultation to intense forms of co-design and co-production); and *to what ends* (participation, consensus, efficiency, equity, or a combination of those). In this study, we are especially interested in collaboration-intensive arrangements involving policymakers and community-based organizations and pursuing the social inclusion of disadvantaged populations.

Based on these premises, the aim of this article is to understand why and how collaborative governance succeeds (i.e., emerges, persists, and achieves its set goals) or fails in times of heightened politicization.[1] Departing from prior scholarship that sees the local level as intrinsically conducive to

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[1] To explain collaborative governance's success and failure, prior scholarship has demonstrated the importance of assorted drivers, such as shared ownership, performance routines, availability of financial resources, and many others (for a review, see the Introduction to this themed issue). Without neglecting the importance of these factors, this article adds a "political variable" to existing theorizations.

successful collaboration, we make the case that politicization is a crucial yet neglected factor shaping the outcomes of local governance. This argument is built by looking at one of the most divisive issues of our time—immigration.

Municipalities as incubators of successful collaborative governance: a myth to be debunked?

The rhetoric and practice of local governance has built momentum over the past decades (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020). With nation-states more or less actively devolving policymaking powers to local governments, these latter are more assertive in crafting their own policy agendas from the bottom up (Scholten, 2013: 220–221; Pierre & Peters, 2020). Rescaling trends, moreover, have led to a greater involvement of nonstate actors in the production of public goods (Alcantara & Nelles, 2014). Horizontal networking and self-rule are defining features of local governance, explaining why it is normally seen at the ideal incubator of collaborative arrangements (Dobbin et al., 2023: 375).

Indeed, institutional rescaling has been widely praised as an opportunity, if not an imperative, to improve the quality of governance. Much of this popularity stems from scholarship on governance and social innovation, which builds on the assumption that decentralization paves the way to collaboration among multiple, otherwise unconnected stakeholders in- and outside of government, at a local level and beyond (e.g., Ansell & Gash, 2008; Geddes, 2000; Klijn, 2008; Moulaert et al., 2005; Pierre & Peters, 2020). These autonomous yet interdependent actors are best positioned to collectively experiment with innovative responses to the complex problems of our age, in a way that "ossified" and conflict-ridden nation-states are unable or unwilling to (McGuirk et al., 2022). In this way, local policymaking becomes a laboratory of democracy (Kleider & Toubeau, 2022: 284)—the testing ground for scalable, inclusive policy solutions that can subsequently diffuse across other localities or levels of government (e.g., Shipan & Volden, 2006).

This scholarship, however, has been met with criticisms for its poor grip on political reality. This lacuna owes to a normative-laden conception of governance, conflated with the idea of "good governance" or, as Alcantara & Nelles (2014) put it, of a "negotiated order" among stakeholders. Their interactions are generally assumed of a collaborative nature, aimed at shared collective objectives, to be achieved through efficient management (Van Duijn et al., 2022). These assumptions, critics argue, conceal depoliticized, technocratic views of how governance works (e.g., McGuirk et al., 2022; Peters et al., 2022). Questions of power, hierarchy, and contestation are instead overlooked, urging scholars to "critically rethink current governance theories" (Verhoeven et al., 2022: 589).

Collaborative local governance in politicized times: immigration as a privileged vantage point

Politicization is an expansion of the scope of conflict within the political system (Hutter & Kriesi, 2022: 343). It is often operationalized in terms of salience (visibility) and polarization (intensity and direction), i.e., an issue is politicized when it ranks high on the public agenda and actors have conflicting views about it (Van der Brug et al., 2015: 5–6).

Immigration has become increasingly politicized over the past decades. As an intractable policy controversy, it fuels fundamental divisions within receiving societies on where the boundaries of belonging to the political community need to be set (Scholten, 2013; Van der Brug et al., 2015). Crucial to this is the rise and normalization of far-right politics, which prescribes that natives should be protected from "unwelcome intruders," viewed as economic, cultural, and security threats to the social fabric (Mudde, 2019). These nativist tenets are coupled with welfare chauvinist policy principles, according to which natives and migrants compete for the same limited resources, but the needs of the latter are illegitimate, or at least to be subordinated to those of the former (Careja & Harris, 2022). Scholars of migration policies are increasingly heeding politicization dynamics, while also offering solid arguments about collaboration among local stakeholders (e.g., Bazurli et al., 2022; Bauder & Darling, 2019; Kreichauf & Mayer, 2021, Pettrachin, 2024; Schiller et al., 2023; Triviño-Salazar, 2023; Spencer, 2018; Ataç et al., 2024; Alagna, 2024; Lambert & Swerts, 2019; Humphris, 2023; Mourão Permoser & Bauböck, 2023; Özdemir, 2022; Vacchelli & Roeschert, 2024). Building on these efforts, we contend that the politicization of immigration materializes along the three dimensions of local governance mentioned above: (1) *horizontal*, (2) *vertical*, and (3) *ideational*.

First, local pro-migrant policies are normally crafted through intense, meticulous processes of consensus-building, which can only thrive in propitious political environments. Left-leaning local officials may embrace the cause of migrants to galvanize their voter base, laying the groundwork for a large and cohesive coalition crafted around a progressive vision (Collingwood & O'Brien, 2019). Municipal bureaucrats are crucial to translate general political messages into viable policies and practices, based on their expertise, professional ethos, and discretionary powers (De Graauw, 2016; Nicholls & Baran, 2024). Immigrant and social movement organizations, labour unions, and faith-based groups are prone to profit from these favorable conditions, building bridges with ideologically-sympathetic policymakers for pushing their demands into the institutional space (Steil & Vasi, 2014). Local elites, in turn, are incentivized collaborate with such organizations, which can provide crucial material, cognitive, and human resources for enacting integration policies, while also energizing local government's pro-migrant agenda from the bottom up (Bazurli, 2019). Put differently, horizontal collaboration is not intrinsic to local governance, but contingent upon stakeholders sharing ideological affinities and strategic motivations.

Second, existing research recognizes that, in a context of government decentralization, policymakers operating at different spatial scales may have diverse, sometimes contrasting visions of immigrant incorporation, in a way that is conducive to multilevel policy conflicts (Scholten, 2013; Bazurli and Kaufmann, 2023). In this respect, collaborative local governance is sometimes protest-oriented, meaning that stakeholders back each other up to stretch, mitigate, or circumvent unwanted national policies—a strategy of "collaborative resistance" that scholars of policy conflicts define as *contentious governance* (Verhoeven et al., 2022: 590). To enact these pro-migrant policies, local officials and grassroots activists strengthen each other's positions in a "battleground" (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020) where the balance of power is structurally unfavorable to them. From this angle, the formidable innovations that some visionary local governments may come up with have to be interpreted as sporadic stopgap measures that provisionally compensate, on a limited scale, much wider institutional failures (DiMario, 2022). These multilevel dynamics, moreover, remind us that collaboration and conflict most often coexist in real-world policymaking (Koebele & Crow, 2023: 441).

Third, politicization stems from competing social constructions of policy target groups. Not all local policies targeting migrants are, in fact, aimed at their social inclusion. On the contrary, amid growing popularity of far-right politics, local autonomy offers electoral incentives to deny migrants basic rights and services, thereby showing that local governments are ideal breeding grounds for policy innovation, but possibly with exclusionary goals (Varsanyi, 2010). Scholars of social and urban policies similarly emphasize that local policymaking is not necessarily coordinated (Borraz & Le Galès, 2010) nor conducive to inclusive social change (Purcell, 2006). For instance, a recent study of homelessness in England argues that exclusionary dynamics are *intrinsic* to local governance, notably due to its tendency to disadvantage unpopular groups "apt to be viewed as 'undeserving' by local communities" (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020: 542).

In all, rising right-wing nativism and institutional rescaling make immigration a privileged vantage point to understand why and how collaborative governance succeeds or fails in times of heightened politicization. In the next section, we will unfold our theoretical argument through the case of Italy, a country where asylum governance is both informed by localist principles and increasingly politicized amid the rise of far-right politics.

Context: local governance and politicization in Italy's asylum policies

Although Italy's 1948 Constitution recognizes refugee protection as a fundamental right,[2] the first national legislation on refugees' reception and integration only dates from 2002,[3] when the Protection System for Asylum-Seekers and Refugees (*Sistema di Protezione Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati*—SPRAR) was introduced. This policy provides a holistic set of services for tackling multiple vulnerabilities. In addition to the immediate needs to be met, it aims at individual empowerment in the longer term through "Individualised Integration Programs," including language courses, job training, legal counseling, community activities, and other tailor-made provisions. Another SPRAR's salient feature is its high-quality housing standards, based on small-scale reception centers (usually self-contained apartments), evenly distributed within urban centers, and well-embedded into the geography of host communities and their
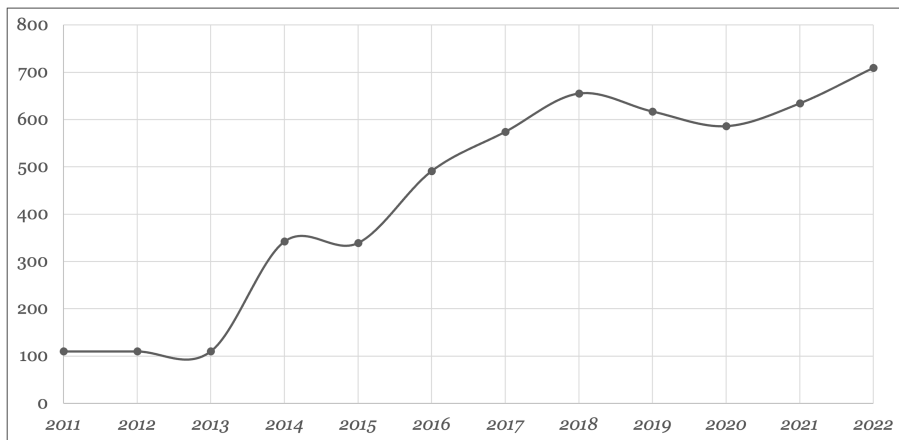
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[2] Article 10.3.
[3] Law no. 189/2002.

Figure 1. Number of Italian municipalities adopting SPRAR (*N* = 7905), 2011–2022.
Source: Authors' elaboration based on SPRAR Annual Reports, https://bit.ly/3WcMNUW.

local welfare system (so-called *accoglienza integrata e diffusa*, i.e., integrated and widespread reception). For all such reasons, SPRAR has been widely praised as effective and respectful of human rights.

Local autonomy has always been the trademark of SPRAR's governance design.[4] Local governments, in cooperation with NGOs, voluntarily decide whether to apply for the Ministry of the Interior's public calls. They have notable autonomy to formulate, submit, and possibly realize their own "integration projects," which are expected to capitalize on the context-specific capacities of local authorities and communities.

SPRAR's localist principles are the enduring legacy of its own genealogy (Marchetti, 2016). Faced with refugees' arrivals from former Yugoslavia and the legislative void of central authorities, some municipalities and community-based associations began experimenting with "artisanal" reception and integration services in the 1990s. These sparse bottom-up initiatives rapidly diffused, networked with each other, and bubbled up to higher levels of government. In 2000, the Ministry of the Interior, the UN Refugee Agency, and the National Association of Italian Municipalities reached an agreement to launch the National Asylum Program (*Piano Nazionale Asilo*—PNA), which eventually morphed into SPRAR in 2002. The localist nature of Italy's asylum system was then crystallized into the voluntary adoption mechanism which, as seen, is one of SPRAR's essential features. Despite a remarkable rising trend during the 2010s "refugee crisis," when unprecedented numbers of migrants sought asylum in the country, only a tiny minority of the 7,905 Italian municipalities have adopted SPRAR over the past decade (cf. Figure 1).

In this context of increased problem pressure, the politicization of asylum skyrocketed. As in other European countries, the "refugee crisis" in Italy became the crucial breeding ground for the rise and normalization of far-right politics (Bazurli & Castelli Gattinara, 2024), mirrored in the spread of moral panic in the public opinion (cf. Figure 2). This pushed center-left national governments (2013–2018) to gradually erode refugee rights, chasing their opponents as a strategy to neutralize them. The climax was reached in 2018–2019, when the newly-appointed interior minister and *Lega*'s leader Matteo Salvini authored the "Security Decree I"[5] as a spearhead of his anti-migrant platform. This legislation restricted the access to SPRAR by excluding migrants with a pending asylum application.[6]

The next sections will open the black box of these politicization dynamics and their consequences for collaborative governance in two cities that pioneered SPRAR's emergence, but eventually followed divergent policy paths: Bologna and Venice.

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[4] See https://rb.gy/5fz1c
[5] Decree Law no. 113/2018.
[6] Accordingly, SPRAR was renamed Protection System for Beneficiaries of International Protection and Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (*Sistema di Protezione per Titolari di Protezione Internazionale e per Minori Stranieri Non Accompagnati*—SIPROIMI). On 18 December 2020, the parliament passed a law (Law no. 173/2020) to partly reverse the exclusionary measures introduced by the "Security Decree I," thus renaming SIPROIMI as Reception and Integration System (*Sistema Accoglienza e Integrazione*—SAI).
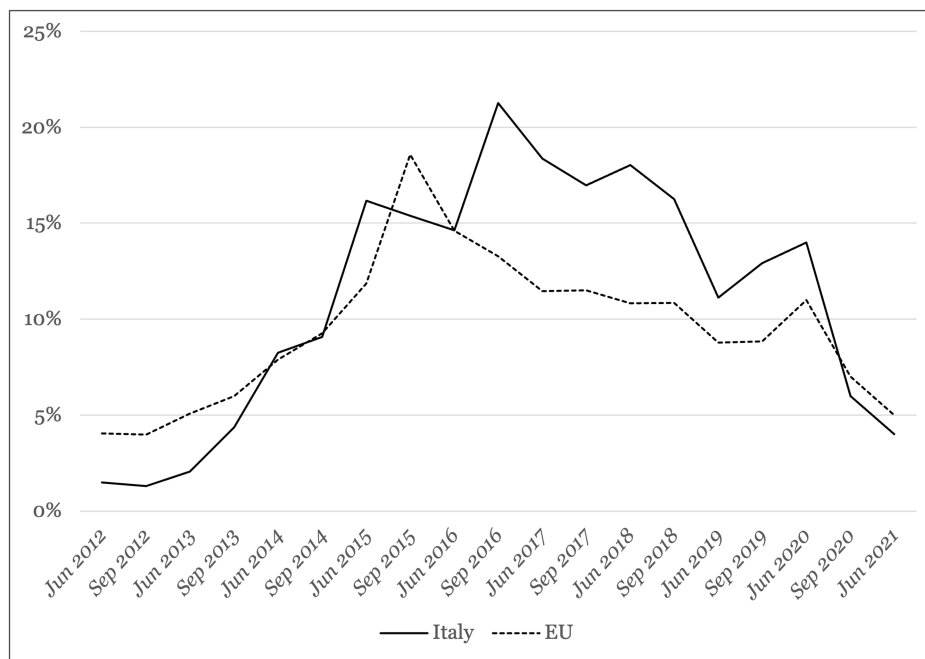
Figure 2. Share of people considering immigration the most important problem in their country, Italy and EU, 2012–2021.
Source: Standard Eurobarometer.

Methods and data

We compare asylum policymaking in Bologna and Venice. The analysis of these two cities maximizes the opportunities for theory-building that a comparison between most-similar cases can offer. Located in north-eastern Italy, Bologna and Venice are the capital cities of the Emilia-Romagna and Veneto regions, respectively—among Europe's most economically developed areas. Also, both cities are middle-sized, relatively affluent, and home to rather large immigrant communities (see Table 1). It is in these local contexts that, over the 1990s–2000s, municipal officials and community organizations in the two cities began collaborating to accommodate refugees through innovative policy responses. Amid the "refugee crisis" of the 2010s, however, collaborative arrangements have been persistently successful in Bologna, yet failed in Venice. This is reflected in the number of migrants accommodated in asylum facilities in 2018–2022, with a slight increase in Bologna and a drastic decrease in Venice (see Figure 3). Our findings will show that politicization is key to understand these divergent outcomes, especially given the similar departure points and policy trajectories of the two cities. For each of them, we discuss the evolution of asylum policies since their origins in the 1990s to the present day, shedding light on how relevant stakeholders have interacted with each other—in collaborative and confrontational ways—to address the condition of refugees.

Research sites

Bologna earned the undisputed reputation of "showcase city of the Italian left" (Però, 2005: 832) due to the long-standing hegemony of the Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*) and its more radical predecessor, the Italian Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano*). Although law-and-order has become more and more popular among center-left elected officials, a generous and innovative local welfare system is still a strong suit for Bologna's administrations. The city also has a robust infrastructure of civil society organizations that are very active in local politics and well-integrated into urban governance structures. The region of Emilia-Romagna is a progressive haven, too. Long considered the hardcore of Italy's "red belt," it has made a name for itself as an excellence in welfare institutions and public service provision (Putnam et al., 1994).

Table 1. Research sites characteristics.

	Bologna	Emilia-Romagna	Venice	Veneto	Italy
Population[a]	389,200	4,437,578	250,913	4,849,553	58,997,201
% of non-Italian residents[a]	15.2	12.5	15.6	10.3	8.7
Taxable income per capita (€)[b]	25,596	21,957	22,521	21,077	20,075
Government color, 1995–2022	Progressive	Progressive	Progressive (1993–2014) Conservative (2015–2020) Conservative and far-right (2020—)	Conservative and far-right	Conservative and far-right (1994–1995; 2001–2006; 2008–2011; 2018–2019; 2022—) Grand coalition (1995–1996; 2011–2013; 2021–2022) Progressive (1996–2001; 2006–2008; 2013–2018; 2019–2021)

[a]Italian National Institute of Statistics, 2023.
[b]Italy's Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2019.

The region of Veneto is characterized by a very different political culture. Conservatives, and foremost the far-right *Lega*, have been the playmakers of regional politics for decades. The president Luca Zaia started his third mandate in October 2020 after obtaining no less than 76.8% of votes in regional elections. Anti-migrant politics has been one of the hallmarks of the regional government (Bazurli & Campomori, 2022). Venice's political landscape has instead swung between left and right over time. Center-left coalitions ruled local government from the early 1990s to mid-2010s. In 2015, however, entrepreneur Luigi Brugnaro became mayor with the support of a center-right coalition and—since his second term started in 2020—of the *Lega* party. Touristification and gentrification processes have led to a massive population decline in the city center, with significant consequences in terms of loss of social capital (Zanardo, 2022).

Data

This article draws on data from a research project on asylum governance in Bologna, Venice, and their respective regional contexts, carried out in 2020–2022.[7] First, we conducted desk research through the analysis of official statistics, policy documents, media reporting, and the existing literature. These secondary sources served as a basis to conduct 31 interviews with key stakeholders between December 2020 and November 2022 (see Supplementary Appendix for the list of interviews). Respondents include elected officials, municipal and regional bureaucrats, frontline social workers, service providers, and pro-refugee activists. Interviews lasted 1 hr and 12 min on average, with open-ended questions about the origins and development of local asylum systems, the political context in which policy change unfolded, and the relationships that respondents forged along the way. Interviews were audio recorded, fully transcribed, and analyzed using thematic coding. After a first round of deductive coding aimed at gleaning comparative insights on the two cities, we re-analyzed data for this article, with multiple rounds of inductive coding reflecting between-author conversations. Some additional information on the case of Bologna was gathered during a previous project on refugee integration carried out in 2018–20, entailing 10 interviews with similar respondents.[8]

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[7] *De-bordering Activities and Citizenship from Below of Asylum Seekers in Italy: Policies, Practices, People* (PRIN-ASIT).
[8] *Integrating Refugees in Society and the Labour Market Through Social Innovation* (SIforREF).
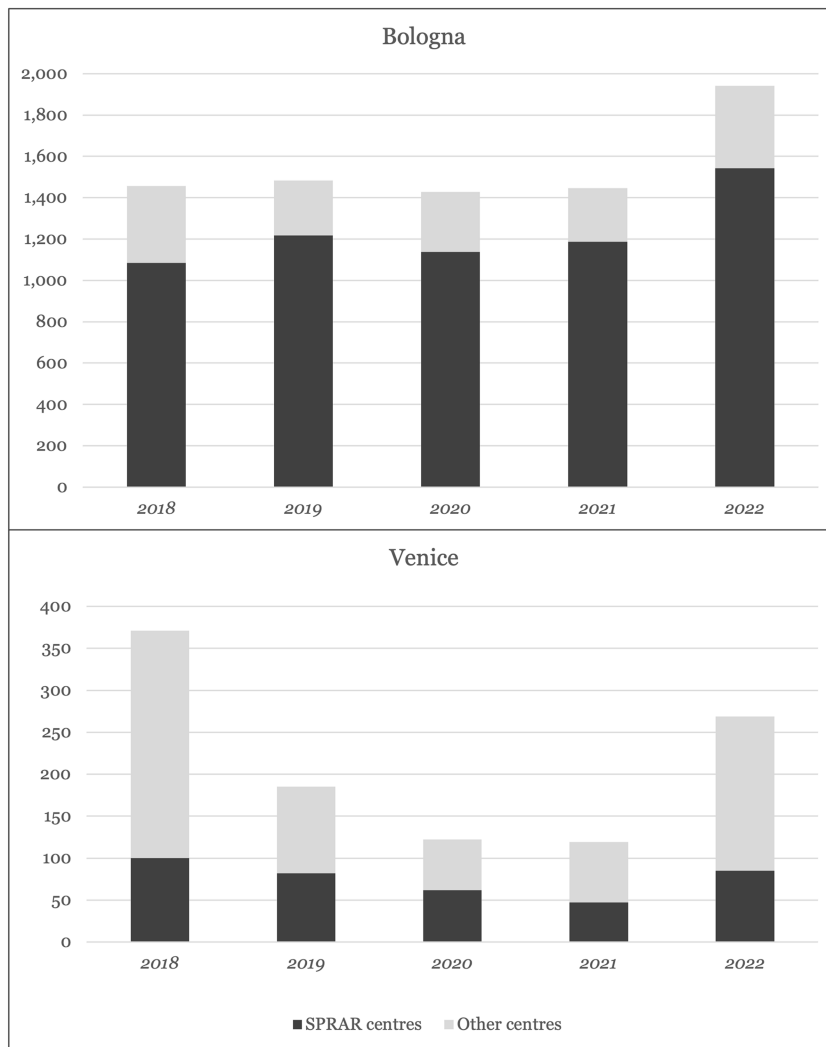
Figure 3. Number of migrants residing in asylum centers in Bologna and Venice, 2018–2022.
Source: Centri d'Italia.

Bologna: a leading and enduring "city of welcome"
Local asylum policies: genesis, development, and consolidation

Bologna was among the cities pioneering pro-migrant policymaking in Italy (Caponio, 2005). To cope with the emergent housing problems of a small yet rapidly growing immigrant population, city and regional officials inaugurated the first reception facilities in the late 1980s—well in advance of central authorities and most municipalities across the country. The very first asylum policies were crafted in 1991–1992, when some 1,000 refugees from former Yugoslavia settled in makeshift shacks along the city's river. Third sector organizations and individual volunteers were the first to give relief to these people, with local officials following their lead shortly after. After this humanitarian emergency, a new organizational unit focused on forced displacement was created within the local administration. More far-reaching integration programs were introduced as early as 2001, also with the support of regional authorities. In this context, the decision to join the SPRAR program in 2004, just after its national debut, was seen as a natural outcome.

While Bologna's SPRAR has been among the largest in Italy since the beginning, it has grown considerably in size and sophistication over the next two decades. The number of slots available have

increased from 71 in 2004 to 177 in 2013.[9] Another significant step forward was taken at the peak of the 2010s "refugee crisis," when the local SPRAR system was gradually extended to the whole metropolitan area, which includes other 44 municipalities besides Bologna. This metropolitan-level SPRAR—a unique experiment in Italy—was officially launched in 2017, providing 1,350 slots across 43 cities and towns (only two municipalities have chosen to not join the network).

The crucial coordination role is played by Bologna local government, which has entrusted its welfare agency (*Azienda Pubblica di Servizi alla Persona*—ASP) with the bulk of administrative tasks. The SPRAR's extension to the whole metropolitan area has mitigated the problems related to its voluntary adoption mechanism by creating a "bandwagon effect," notably overcoming the potential skepticism of some elected officials. Also, it has allowed involved stakeholders to share the technical skills that are crucial to submit and manage a SPRAR project, thereby making it possible for even smaller municipalities to adopt it. The "Security Decree I" adopted in 2018 has put these local-level efforts under severe strains, notably because it narrowed SPRAR's scope. Local officials, however, have sought to access alternative policy venues to maintain what they call the "Bologna Model" in place. As one leading elected official discussed, "our strategy is now to compensate government spending cuts on integration by joining projects funded by the EU Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund."[10] Importantly, Bologna is one of the few Italian cities whose SPRAR projects have expanded, rather than shrunk, following the 2018 "Security Decree I." In August 2022, there were 1,852 slots available at the metropolitan level, of which 1,053 in the city of Bologna alone.

Reasons for the success of collaborative governance

Bologna's large and far-reaching asylum system was built through a close collaboration between local institutions (43 municipalities of the metropolitan area, the Emilia-Romagna region, the prefecture, and police headquarters) and civil society organizations (cooperatives and service providers, voluntary associations, activist networks). This section analyses the main driving forces behind these collaborative governance arrangements, demonstrating the importance of politicization for their persistent success. Politicization materialized along three dimensions of local governance: (1) *horizontal*, with a broad coalition of local actors sharing ideological and strategic motivations in promoting the "Bologna Model"; (2) *vertical*, with local welcoming efforts breeding policy conflicts vis-à-vis national anti-migrant forces; and (3) *ideational*, framing collaborative governance as a mean to advance refugee rights and bringing stakeholders together based on that policy agenda.

The local government has been—as one leading official put it—"the true creator"[11] of the "Bologna Model." It has engaged in intensive networking processes with neighboring municipalities (to upscale asylum policies at the metropolitan level) and with the prefecture (to harmonize the services offered in different centers). Such a proactive approach to policymaking is the legacy of a deep-rooted leftist subculture. This is powerful in shaping local officials' understanding of their own mandates, pushing them to embrace "interventionist" stances when it comes to welfare and immigration issues (Pettrachin, 2024). More generally, city mayors have persistently projected a vision of Bologna as a "welcoming city." This image has been often framed in confrontational terms vis-à-vis anti-migrant national policies, championing initiatives to counter their impacts at a local level (Sabchev, 2022: 106–110). Following the adoption of the "Security Decree I," for instance, many migrants were no longer entitled to receive SPRAR services; but when the Bologna's prefecture tried to move them elsewhere, it "faced a strong resistance by the local government, which was eventually successful," one service provider commented.[12]

The local welfare agency (ASP) has given technical and legal viability to these principles and objectives. Its social workers, cultural mediators, legal experts, and administrative personnel have ensured on-the-ground coordination among the numerous actors involved in the metropolitan-level SPRAR. They did so by maintaining relations with service providers, monitoring the progress of reception projects, and crucially easing the bureaucratic burden that single municipalities would have shouldered otherwise.

Regional authorities, too, have played a key role in forging collaborative governance arrangements. Although Italian regions have no direct competencies in the asylum domain, the Emilia-Romagna government has orchestrated reception and integration across its jurisdiction since 2004, notably launching

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9   See https://rb.gy/1q4uf
10   Interview from SIforREF, 10 July 2019.
11   Interview B05.
12   Interview B07.

the "Land of Asylum" network (*Terra d'Asilo*).[13] During the 2010s "refugee crisis," such efforts were deepened through a sustained cooperation with municipalities, prefectures, and civil society actors. "Our idea," one regional official reflected, "has always been to […] build a regional-level SPRAR system, connecting it with our 'universalist' welfare policies."[14] In other words, the regional government has capitalized on its prerogatives in welfare domains, such as health care and labour integration, to have a clout over asylum policies—an approach that was crucial, for example, to support migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bazurli & Campomori, 2022).

The city and regional governments, however, would have not been able to develop Bologna's asylum system without a dense and robust infrastructure of civil society actors. The most influential ones (such as trade unions and social cooperatives) are the offspring of the city's leftist political subculture, but faith-based organizations, immigrant associations, and more informal grassroots groups are also important. These variegated networks have always been very active in local politics and well-connected to policymakers, notably driving policy experiments in immigrant inclusion since the 1980s (Caponio, 2005).

In more recent years, amid growing contention over immigration in national politics, civil society organizations have intensified their collaborative efforts, crafting a fully-fledged pro-migrant coalition named "Bologna Welcomes" (*Bologna Accoglie*). The city has experienced a remarkable proliferation of activism, with even charity-oriented groups increasingly engaged in protest actions[15]. As one activist put it, "the 'Security Decree I' spurred a major change […]. The response of civil society has been huge and we had an impressive increase of our membership […]. Everyone felt the urgency to do something."[16] Along the same lines, the spokesperson of one volunteer association stated: "with the 'Security Decree I' […], our mission became more political, beyond our usual purposes of immediate assistance."[17]

These politicization dynamics have further deepened the relationships between the local governments and civil society actors. Their collaboration has been increasingly aimed at opposing or mitigating the most detrimental impacts of national anti-migrant laws, based on a strategy of "collaborative resistance" (Verhoeven et al., 2022: 590). In such cooperative exchanges, local actors have combined their respective expertise to shape policies within an otherwise unreceptive, hostile context. One leading local official elucidated the mechanisms behind these synergies:

> Opposing the law by exploiting its grey areas to promote social inclusion is a rooted habit in Bologna. It's not disobedience, but a right-based interpretation of the law. There is a certain historical culture of this institutional choice […]. We embrace the inputs coming from civil society and translate them into a policy project, into a form of government.[18]

One notable example of such collaborative dynamics is the resident registration of asylum-seekers. This basic form of bureaucratic membership is critical for access to municipal services in Italy, but was abolished by "Security Decree I" in 2018. The Street Lawyer Association (*Associazione Avvocato di Strada*), with the complicity of local officials, has set an important legal precedent against this exclusionary provision, which was eventually declared illegitimate by the Constitutional Court (Sabchev, 2022: 108–109).

In a nutshell, Bologna local officials have pioneered refugee protection since the early 1990s, setting the ground for what was to become Italy's asylum policy a decade later. Capitalizing on their own policy freedoms, in some 30 years Bologna's administrations have built an extensive and sophisticated asylum system at a metropolitan level. Such phenomenal policy achievements could thrive thanks to a local context that is highly conducive for collaborative governance: local officials have progressive values and an "interventionist" understanding of their own role; bureaucrats are highly specialized and supportive vis-à-vis policymakers' administrative needs; the Emilia-Romagna region boosts and coordinates reception projects through its generous welfare system; and many community-based organizations are well-integrated into urban governance structures and advocate migrants' interests in local politics. The social construction of refugees as deserving policy targets served as the glue holding this panoply of stakeholders together. A sustained collaboration among them has driven not only the *development*

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[13] See https://rb.gy/suzwc
[14] Interview B08.
[15] See https://rb.gy/3w2ju
[16] Interview B03.
[17] Interview B07.
[18] Interview B05.

but also the *safeguard* of Bologna's asylum system, notably when faced with the threat of increasingly anti-migrant national policies in the late 2010s.

Venice: a path-breaking yet ephemeral "city of welcome"
Local asylum policies: genesis, development, and dismantling

Similarly to Bologna, Venice is among the first Italian cities that experimented with innovative responses to asylum issues (Zanardo, 2022). The earliest local policies date from 1994, following the arrivals of refugees from former Yugoslavia. This marked a crucial contribution in laying the foundation of the PNA, the very first national-level asylum policy and precursor of the SPRAR system. Venice's social workers—together with their colleagues in Bologna, Roma, and Turin—have in fact conceived the public services that later became SPRAR's essential features. Importantly, they drafted the first version of the SPRAR's manual (*Manuale SPRAR*), which still today sets the principles, objectives, instruments, and quality standards that every SPRAR project in Italy must comply with. A long-service social worker offered a vivid testimony of that experience:

> I don't want to brag, but … we were 'the top of the class'! That was an urgency, an intuition truly coming from the bottom up, from our public administration. And I guarantee that in 1997 asylum was an unknown object. […] The [central] state is supposed to have full responsibility of asylum issues, but it was absent at that time. So, some cities, like Venice, began to do it themselves. […] In the 1990s we went to [EU institutions in] Brussels to showcase our experience. The other European countries were looking with interest at the role that cities were starting to play on asylum. Our work was considered a best practice to be exported across Europe. That intuition is the keystone on which Italy's asylum system lays to this day.[19]

The first fully-fledged reception project, still named *Fontego*, was launched in 2001 as part of the PNA and later relocated within the SPRAR framework. Widely praised for its high-quality standards,[20] the project had the capacity to support 95 beneficiaries in two different reception centers. In addition, the local government used its own resources to arrange a "second-line reception centre" (*Squero* project, now terminated), in which former SPRAR's beneficiaries could live for some months before achieving full housing autonomy.

The victory of a center-right coalition in 2015 local election marked a sea change in the approach of Venice local government to asylum (Zanardo, 2022: 104–105). Law-and-order has become increasingly a priority in the new incumbents' institutional agenda, to the detriment of pro-migrant policies. The Office for Immigration and Promotion of Citizenship Rights (*Servizio Immigrazione e Promozione dei Diritti di Cittadinanza*)—historic incubator of experiments on asylum—bears the scars of this major turning point. After a downsizing of its staff, the office has been deprived of its specific mission through a merger with the office for homelessness and drug addictions, as sealed by its own renaming: Service for Social Emergency, Inclusion, and Mediation (*Servizio Pronto Intervento Sociale, Inclusione e Mediazione*). This change had an impact also on the number of slots made available through the local SPRAR, which were reduced from 95 to 77 in 2019.

But it is the beginning of Mayor Brugnaro's second term, with the far-right *Lega* party joining his governing coalition, that led to a deeper radicalization of this anti-migrant agenda. Shortly after local elections in September 2020, the administration closed the *Centro Darsena*, one of the two reception centers in the city, suddenly interrupting migrants' integration path in the Venice's community. Thus, the number of SPRAR slots available was further reduced to 44 (Zanardo, 2022: 108–109).

Reasons for the failure of collaborative governance

In a few years, Venice has gone from boasting one of the most innovative systems for refugee protection in Europe to dismantling it. Politicization is key to make sense of such a remarkable trajectory, affecting three dimensions of local governance: (1) *horizontal*, because the pursuit of anti-migrant politics by elected officials undermined prior collaboration with other local stakeholders; (2) *vertical*, as the spread

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[19] Interview V11.
[20] See https://rb.gy/677s5

of anti-migrant politics in the city was fueled by the rise of the far right at a national level; and (3) *ideational*, because collaboration collapsed due to the emergence of contrasting policy frames that conveyed incompatible visions of refugees' deservingness. This section sheds light on the main actors that drove the emergence of local asylum policies, what collaborative relationships they had forged along the way, and why these could not endure within a changing political landscape.

Frontline social workers and their managers have long been the most crucial players in this policy network, understanding the need for a local asylum system since the early 1990s. In their own account, they acted as "policy entrepreneurs"[21] when faced with the arrival of refugees from former Yugoslavia, paving the way to political initiatives down the road. Not only these bureaucrats urged politicians to take action, but also actively engaged in venue-shopping strategies; notably, they sought to craft embryonic asylum policies by applying for national and EU funding, thus minimizing the burden on the city budget. As one of them explained,

> The public administration was the one that kicked off asylum experiments at the local level, *period*. We were a group of social workers and other bureaucrats who were also activists, who belonged to a generation with a strong cultural and political background, and who had invested heavily in their profession. […] All this, moreover, was embedded in a political landscape made of people interested in innovation. Venice has always been advanced on this.[22]

Hence, Venice's collaborative governance was first prompted by bureaucrats who capitalized on their innovative thinking, professional ethos, and discretionary powers. The other stakeholders followed their lead. Left-leaning incumbents created a political environment in which inclusive experiments could thrive, whereas civil society organizations enhanced the implementation capacity of the local government. These collaborative ties have deteriorated at a rapid pace after conservatives took over city hall in 2015, and especially so since 2018, when controversy over immigration reached fever pitch in Italy. The politicization of asylum in national debates has prompted local actors to embrace contrasting policy frames, thus undermining the very basis on which collaboration had been built. The closure of the *Centro Darsena* in 2021 marked the tipping point, leading to a definitive collapse of decades-long relationships.

A rift opened, first of all, within the local administration itself. On the one hand, right-wing incumbents have repudiated the idea of Venice as a "welcoming city." Mayor Brugnaro has often expressed his favor to the "Security Decree I," for example by signing, together with other 29 Italian mayors, a letter of dissent toward their counterparts who protested against it (Fusaro, 2019). Also, he announced the hiring of 200 police officers "to chase Nigerians […] with guns and truncheons" (Carotenuto, 2018). SPRAR's voluntary adoption mechanism became the most expedient tool to translate this new political discourse into concrete policy change. In the words of one activist, "when a conflict escalates in national politics and certain messages become more resonant […], also local governments want to take a side. SPRAR became a 'leftist' policy and thus a political battleground."[23]

On the other hand, municipal bureaucrats tried to mitigate such politicization dynamics by putting forward technical reasons, yet without the independence needed to achieve this objective. One of them commented: "I opposed this decision with whatever means, but that was useless … I have managers above me, so I had to conform."[24] In the words of another bureaucrat: "At first, there were major negotiations, also from my side. […] But ideology prevailed at the end. In times of crisis, Italians come first: this idea, so widespread in national politics, has gained popularity also in Venice."[25]

The role of civil society actors, too, is crucial to understand the breakdown of Venice's collaborative governance. The post-2015 anti-migrant agenda of local officials sparked fresh protests by community-based organizations, especially after the closure of *Centro Darsena*. Their mobilization pushed all opposition parties in the city hall to sign an interpellation for the withdrawal of this proposal, but to no avail. According to a lifelong activist, the predominance of bureaucrats within the policy network has not allowed civil society actors to enhance their own strength and autonomy, and eventually to resist the dismantling of the local asylum system:

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[21] Interview V16.
[22] Interview V01.
[23] Interview V01.
[24] Interview V11.
[25] Interview V01.

> Over the decades, politics has delegated innovative thinking to technicians. […] This strong role of public administration has weakened … or, at least, has not allowed third sector organizations to grow. They have simply followed the approach adopted by the local administration, without any levers to impact on public policies.[26]

Despite the weakness of "conventional" civil society organizations, more informal initiatives have proved a greater dynamism, as in the case of non-profit reception facilities. These projects, one activist commented, provide "a 'soft' housing support, the prelude of independent housing solutions,"[27] to those refugees who have not reached full autonomy when leaving institutional centers. In 2020, 55 slots in 13 apartments were offered by two associations, *Di Casa* and *Casa di Amadou*. This latter also launched the "Jumping Project," which provides assorted services (e.g., legal support, job training, language courses) thanks to four social workers, whose salary is fully covered by private donations. According to one volunteer, these solidarity initiatives could develop also thanks to a sustained dialogue with municipal bureaucrats, but were instead met with hostility by the local government, "prompting us to work under the radar, in silence, to avoid further obstructions."[28] In other words, collaboration among community organizations and civil servants persisted behind the scenes to ensure the delivery of basic services for refugees, yet outside any institutional frameworks, without the support of elected officials.

Finally, regional authorities have long pursued an anti-migrant agenda, possibly making the policy environment in which Venice's pro-asylum actors operate even more unfavorable. Unlike Emilia-Romagna, the Veneto region has always limited its action within the mandate that is explicitly attributed by national laws, thus refraining from playing any steering role in the domain of asylum. As one regional official put it, "during the 'refugee crisis' of the past years, […] we decided to not make any decisions, because this is Ministry of the Interior's business."[29] This "legalistic" policy style has gone hand in hand with a chauvinist approach to regional welfare, to be reserved only "to those subjects that are going to remain in the territory with a residence permit," according to the same official.[30] From this angle, migrants with a pending or rejected asylum application are seen as undeserving subjects due to their uncertain legal destiny, and are thus excluded from regional integration programs (Bazurli & Campomori, 2022).

In short, Venice was also among the Italian cities that first experimented with path-breaking responses to the needs of refugees, with municipal bureaucrats opening the way in forging collaborative governance arrangements since the 1990s. The victory of conservatives at 2015 local elections, however, has truly been a game-changer. The new administration has increasingly embraced the anti-migrant policy agenda that was becoming rampant in national politics. With the far-right *Lega* party joining the governing coalition in 2020, the already-precarious grounds for collaboration have gone through a definitive collapse, leading to a partial dismantling of the local asylum system. Conflicts among stakeholders stemmed from their divergent social construction of refugees as (un)deserving policy targets. Civil society organizations proved too weak to have any clout over the choices of local officials—a fragility that owes precisely to the predominant role of municipal bureaucrats, whose administrative "neutrality," however, has not allowed them to effectively act as advocates of refugees' interests. This policy trajectory was possibly exacerbated by the Veneto Region which, unlike Emilia-Romagna, has long pursued a restrictive approach to immigrant welfare.

Discussion and conclusion

This article aimed to enrich the academic and policy debate on collaborative governance by interrogating the institutional and social setting most often associated with it—*municipalities*. We argue that rising political contention across liberal democracies makes local governance prone to policy conflicts and failures, urging scholars and practitioners to rethink how to achieve successful collaboration. Using immigration as a privileged vantage point, the article offered a framework to understand how politicization affects local governance. Notably, we highlighted the impact on three governance dimensions: the strategic motivations of local actors to interact in collaborative or confrontational ways (*horizontal*); the relationships among actors across institutional and geographical scales (*vertical*); and the social

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[26] Interview V15.
[27] Interview V06.
[28] Interview V13.
[29] Interview V07.
[30] Interview V07.

Table 2. Main comparative findings.

	Bologna	Venice
Outcomes observed: Collaborative local governance	Collaborative governance as persistent success: • Early emergence in the 1990s (asylum experiments as path-breaking innovation) • Sustained expansion in the 2010s (growing number of refugees accommodated in metropolitan-level SPRAR) • Persistence despite increasingly hostile environment (far right on the rise in national politics)	Collaborative governance, from success to failure: • Early emergence in the 1990s (asylum experiments as path-breaking innovation) • Gradual dismantling in the 2010s (decreasing number of refugees accommodated in SPRAR centers) • Unsustainable collaborative arrangements amid the rise of the far right in national politics
Explanatory dimensions: Politicization		
Horizontal dimension	• Broad coalition of stakeholders sharing ideological and strategic motivations to collaborate • Strong political leadership by elected officials • Civil society organizations as vocal advocates of refugee rights	• Narrower coalition of stakeholders • Municipal bureaucrats (rather than elected officials) as policy entrepreneurs • Weak civil society organizations • Anti-migrant politics undermining collaboration and fueling conflict
Vertical dimension	Contentious governance: local officials and civil society organizations jointly confronting national anti-migrant politics	National anti-migrant politics increasingly informing the policy agenda of local elected officials
Ideational dimension	Bologna as "welcoming city": resonant and univocal policy frame working as a glue that keeps a broad coalition of pro-refugee stakeholders together	Right-wing elected officials repudiating the framing of Venice as "welcoming city;" emergence of a competing framing of refugees as undeserving subjects

construction of policy target groups (*ideational*). We draw on comparative insights from asylum policies in Bologna and Venice, but our findings likely extend to other geographical contexts and policy sectors.

Our findings challenge governance and social innovation theories, which suggest that local governance is intrinsically conducive to collaboration (e.g., Pierre & Peters, 2020). This assumption clashes with the realities of Bologna and Venice, where politicization was pivotal to the success or failure of collaborative governance. In both cities, collaboration thrived when local elites championed an inclusive image of their own local community, framing migrants as deserving policy targets. This catalyzed intense networking among a wide range of actors, who built cohesive coalitions and pooled resources to promote refugee rights. It was precisely the emergence of a competing idea of social cohesion, which prioritizes "natives" over migrants, that led to the collapse of Venice's policy network. With immigration debates reaching fever pitch during the 2010s "refugee crisis," conflict spread both at a local level (horizontally) and across government levels (vertically). In Bologna, stakeholders' *collaboration* was in fact aimed to *confront* the central government, notably stretching, mitigating, and circumventing unwanted policies descending from above (Verhoeven et al., 2022). A more political understanding of local governance thus reveals how collaboration and conflict are equally crucial for policymaking.

By extension, our findings indicate that the role of non-state actors in collaborative governance should also be analyzed through a political lens. In our case studies, civil society organizations provided local officials with otherwise unavailable material, cognitive, and human resources, such as on-the-ground knowledge of social problems, organizational agility in the midst of humanitarian emergencies,

and legitimacy among policy target groups. But they also performed a more political function, representing refugees in local claims-making arenas (De Graauw, 2016). This explains why collaborative governance persisted over the decades in Bologna, but not in Venice. Bottom-up mobilization prompted Bologna officials to maintain these policies, seeing collaboration as a way to galvanize their base, secure electoral rewards, and avoid political retribution. In other words, the stakeholders in Bologna's policy network acted strategically, showing a mutual interest in path dependency. Collaboration was seen as a means to achieve political gains while responding to unmet social needs. Table 2 summarizes the main comparative findings.

In all, our findings highlight the ambivalence of the local level in collaborative governance. We concede that decentralization paves the way for inclusive policy collaborations with upscaling potential, transforming local institutions into laboratories of democracy (Kleider & Toubeau, 2022: 284). Amid heightened politicization, however, local "best practices" are more likely to become unsustainable over time and inconsistently implemented across space, thereby breeding unequal landscapes of social citizenship (Łukasiewicz et al., 2023). Capitalizing on their own autonomy, local governments have powerful incentives to fuel policy conflicts and pursue the exclusion of unpopular groups having little voice. Put differently, the common misunderstanding about collaborative local governance stems from a depoliticized and "pacified" view of local communities, which are instead sites of competition over seemingly scarce resources. This is true for refugees, but the same rationale can be extended to any population likely to be seen as an undeserving policy target, such as unhoused people, ex-offenders, and those suffering from substance misuse problems (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020: 542). As the failure to address their plight has essentially political reasons, a crucial condition for the success of collaborative governance is to craft vocal coalitions advocating their rights, at a local level and beyond.

Our analysis of asylum policies in Bologna and Venice offers initial ideas for a more politically-grounded theorization of collaborative governance. Future studies may want to build on, refine, and challenge our framework through systematic comparisons across cities, countries, and policy sectors, advancing our understanding of collaborative governance in divided democracies.

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Supplementary material

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