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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Infrastructures of differential inclusion: accommodation access for displaced persons in Italy

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Italian migration policies are translated in accommodation infrastructures at a local level. Applying the perspective of differential inclusion, it compares institutional reception pathways for people displaced from Ukraine under the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) with ordinary asylum procedures. Drawing on qualitative interviews with professionals working in migrant reception, the study identifies how legal categorisation, resource mobilisation, mobility governance and local discretion shape access to housing, mobility, and services. The findings highlight how reception infrastructures produce multi-tiered systems of inclusion.

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1. Introduction

Access to accommodation is a basic right and a prerequisite for socio-economic inclusion. This right is particularly important for vulnerable groups such as migrants, not only being a fundamental aspect of reception conditions but also a key factor in determining their health and well-being. It also mitigates various risks, such as exploitation and homelessness. Existing research shows that migrant inclusion is most effectively achieved through granting migrants' access to fundamental rights such as employment, education, and healthcare as early as possible following arrival (Woollard et al., 2023). Various studies also stress how immediate access to socio-economic rights can foster migrants' agency and self-sufficiency (European Migration Network, 2024; Konle-Seidl, 2016), to the benefit of both migrants and host societies (Council of Europe, 2023).

At the same time, evidence shows that migrants face significant barriers to accessing both emergency accommodation and autonomous, independent housing (AIDA, 2020; Murphy & Stapleton, 2024). There are also clear policy discrepancies in relation to the assistance provided to different migrant groups in order to access accommodation. This depends on the legal regime a displaced person falls within, the status of their application for protection and the types of protection they are granted, as well as the availability of resources at the local government level and in the civil society sector.

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The striking differences in legal and policy frameworks, as well as in the assistance provided to different groups of displaced persons needing accommodation, are particularly evident when we juxtapose the support offered to most migrants with that offered to the more than 4 million Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection (BTPs) (UNHCR Operational Data Portal, 2024), who have immediate access to legal status and socio-economic rights. The European Union (EU) triggered the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) (Council of the European Union, 2001) for the first time in 2022 in reaction to the displacement of people from Ukraine. This was in a context in which other groups of displaced persons (seekers and beneficiaries of different forms of protection) were subject to lengthy application procedures and precarious conditions and faced multiple barriers at all stages of the process: from the submission of their application up to the period following their being granted protection status (AIDA, 2020).

This research examines EU and Italian legal and policy frameworks regarding reception conditions and their potential implications for access to accommodation, a key precondition for migrant inclusion. It also includes a qualitative investigation of their local implementation, largely focused on Milan. The research examines the differences between the two reception pathways – temporary protection and the ordinary asylum route – drawing primarily on the situated knowledge of reception and assistance professionals and supplementing these accounts with interviews with BTPs. It understands accommodation not just as a material good or service but as an infrastructure of migration governance that shapes and regulates migrants' lives through offering differential access to services and mobility. The research questions are as follows:

- What are the formal differences between temporary protection and the ordinary asylum system in Italy in the area of access to accommodation, associated services and mobility?
- How are these formal differences translated into practice and through which infra-structural mechanisms do they shape access to these rights?

The main contribution of this article is to show that differential inclusion is not simply a result of different legal statuses: administrative acceleration, resource mobilisation and allocation, mobility governance, and local discretion mediated by civil-society and diaspora networks also play a key role.

The empirical data demonstrate the differentiation by legal status and nationality, and its relationship to broader racialised and geopolitical hierarchies of refugee deservingness, which are interpreted theoretically rather than claimed as a causal relationship. The article is structured as follows: Section 2 introduces the concept of accommodation as an infrastructure of migration governance, providing the theoretical lens that will guide the analysis; Section 3 describes the national policy and legal architecture, distinguishing ordinary reception conditions from that offered to persons eligible for temporary protection after the triggering of the TPD; Section 4 introduces the article's research design, data collection methods, analytical procedure, and limitations; Section 5 examines how legal categories, resource mobilisation, mobility governance, local discretion and intermediary networks operated in the settings studied; and

Section 6 concludes with a discussion of the findings, and their limits and implications for a more consistently rights-based accommodation policy for migrants.

2. Differential inclusion and accommodation infrastructures

2.1. Differential inclusion and multi-tiered systems of rights within the Italian reception system

This article draws on the notion of differential inclusion and the idea of multi-tiered systems of rights to reveal how existing protection regimes create different conditions for, and practices of, mobility and belonging. Applying this lens, it shows that different legal categories do not create a binary divide of inclusion/exclusion but instead produce a nuanced, stratified system of varied forms of access to rights and mobility. More specifically, Section 5 demonstrates how this stratified system operates in Italy, resulting in differing access to reception facilities, housing, material support, and mobility rights. The article particularly focuses on housing, which is the area of the Italian reception system in which differential inclusion is most evident.

There have been multiple studies of the differential responses to displacements of people in relation to law, race, nationality and politics (Camposi, 2018; De Genova, 2002; De Genova et al., 2022). The unprecedented response to the displacement from Ukraine highlighted the existence of a multi-tiered system and was widely studied in the literature (Bolzoni et al., 2024; Campomori, 2022; Ceccorulli, 2023; Lingelbach, 2024; Łysienka & Kurt, 2025; Vitiello, 2022). In this context, the concept of ‘differential inclusion’ can serve as a critical lens for understanding how states selectively integrate certain migrant populations while marginalising others through offering them different legal statuses and access to rights. For instance, Saskia Sassen has extensively analysed how global economic shifts and sovereign powers construct new hierarchies of citizenship, in which individuals are granted or denied rights based on their perceived utility or threat to the nation-state (Sassen, 2001). This leads to the emergence of multi-tiered systems of rights, in which different migrant groups are situated within distinct legal and social frameworks, granting them unequal access to fundamental resources such as housing, employment, and social welfare. These varying entitlements are thus not merely bureaucratic distinctions but actively shape migrants’ daily lives, influencing their mobility, settlement patterns, and opportunities to foster a sense of belonging in the host society. The selective conferral of rights often reflects underlying political narratives that categorise certain groups as ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’, thereby legitimising disparities in treatment and in degrees of access to rights. The concept of racialised deservingness, which the article uses as an interpretative lens, is not an independent finding of the interviews but is taken from the wider literature. The empirical data demonstrate differentiation by legal status and nationality, as well as the research participants’ perceptions of preferential treatment. Whether this reproduces broader hierarchies associated with race, religion or geopolitical proximity is considered through dialogue with the growing scholarship in the area.

The differential responses discussed in this article must also be seen within the context of the objectives of the TPD, which was designed to respond to a mass influx of people through collective and accelerated recognition and to alleviate pressure on the national

asylum system by removing the need for individual status determination. In addition, it is important to consider a number of additional factors, such as Ukraine's geographical proximity, visa-free mobility and established Ukrainian diaspora networks, as well as broader geopolitical factors or racialised hierarchies.

Applying this lens to migration governance specifically, Nicholas De Genova and Sandro Mezzadra highlight how the apparatus of border control and migration governance produces and reinforces these hierarchies, moving beyond a simple distinction between legal and illegal statuses to encompass a nuanced spectrum of legal precarity (De Genova, 2002; Mezzadra, 2010). The activation of the TPD for Ukrainian refugees starkly contrasts with the often more restrictive and prolonged procedures faced by asylum seekers in European countries under the 'traditional' rules of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). This creates a stratification of rights and access, in which immediate and comprehensive provisions for one group coexist with systemic barriers and limited provisions for others, thus exacerbating existing inequalities.

The multiple reforms of the standard Italian migration system, particularly during 2018 and 2020, made it increasingly restrictive. Various studies of these reforms have uncovered even deeper structural shortcomings in the reception of displaced persons, resulting in precarious living conditions, homelessness, discrimination, and limited access to other social rights (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Carnassale & Marchetti, 2025; Sanò et al., 2021). There have also been multiple failures of the asylum system to ensure the timely consideration of cases and efficient access to rights and services (AIDA, 2024). Cingolani et al. describe the impact of the current legal and policy framework on the experiences of displaced persons as 'protracted immobility' (Cingolani et al., 2022). They use this concept to stress the limits on the fundamental right to freedom of movement imposed by lengthy administrative procedures and extended periods staying in short-term accommodation.

The immediate granting of legal status and associated rights (although with certain gaps in implementation) (AIDA, 2023) to displaced persons from Ukraine as a result of the TPD, gave Ukrainian migrants access to all the forms of accommodation offered by the Italian reception system, and unprecedented freedom of movement, allowing them to choose an EU Member State in which they would enjoy those associated rights, as well as to travel to and from Ukraine. This is in stark contrast to responses to other displaced people (Costello & Foster, 2022), resulting in different standards of protection, as well as varying degrees of inclusion and mobility.

2.2. Accommodation as an infrastructure of migration governance

This article understands accommodation as an infrastructure of migration governance through which differential inclusion is produced. Drawing on critical migration studies (De Genova et al., 2022; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013) and the literature on infrastructures of care and control (Collier & Lakoff, 2015; Larkin, 2013), it analyses how legal regimes and material arrangements intersect to shape migrants' mobility, visibility, and belonging. Drawing on the idea of differential inclusion, accommodation is understood here not merely as a social service or a physical shelter, but as a core infrastructure of migration governance – the material and organisational system that structures migrants' experience (Larkin, 2013). The current system of migration governance in Italy defines who can access certain types of accommodation and under what conditions and determines the

rules governing related mobility. The infrastructure within the Italian reception system, which includes reception centres, hotels, co-housing schemes, cash-for-rent allowances and private hosting arrangements, is a non-neutral system that ‘manages’ displaced persons and distributes access to basic rights.

The existing work on governmentality and infrastructural power highlights the role of material and administrative tools in managing lives rather than simply in coercion (Collier & Lakoff, 2015). It sheds light on the migration governance found in legal categories such as ‘asylum seeker’, ‘beneficiary of protection’ and so on, and in policy decisions that determine how accommodation is allocated.

This infrastructural approach to analysing migration governance is particularly pertinent in Italy given its fragmented and ‘spatially dense’ reception system. The coexistence of the SAI, CAS, civil protection structures, and private hosting arrangements creates an uneven system in which different groups of displaced persons are subject to very different conditions.

These infrastructures, in turn, reflect policy choices and hierarchies of ‘deservingness’. As described in Section 3, under the TPD, Ukrainian displaced persons have direct access to legal status and associated rights, including access to diverse forms of accommodation and freedom of movement, in stark contrast to other seekers of protection falling within the CEAS. The latter are instead often confined to extraordinary reception centres – CAS (*Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria*), face long procedural delays, and encounter barriers to accessing independent housing. Theorising accommodation as an infrastructure of migration governance thus allows us to trace how a multi-tiered system of rights is materialised in space, mediating between policy and lived experience.

The existing literature explores the limitations of the Italian reception system for asylum seekers (Carnassale & Marchetti, 2025; Cingolani et al., 2022) and the specificities of the response to displacement from Ukraine, together with the re-organisation of the material and institutional structure of the Italian reception system (Bassoli & Campomori, 2024). This article has a narrower focus, examining how these parallel legal pathways are translated in local accommodation infrastructures and how actors within the reception system understand their implications for access, mobility and autonomy. It does not claim that the response to displacement from Ukraine led to the deterioration of the ordinary asylum reception system; instead, it analyses how this emergency pathway was layered onto a system already characterised by restriction, fragmentation and unequal regional capacity.

The analysis traces four interconnected tools of differential inclusion: first, legal categorisation establishes formal access and eligibility, timelines and access to associated rights; second, resource mobilisation and allocation determine what types of accommodation, financial assistance and institutional capacities are made available to particular groups; third, mobility governance regulates freedom of movement, including relocation; and, fourth, local discretion shapes how formal rules are implemented through municipalities, institutions engaged in migrant reception, civil society and diaspora-based support. Together these mechanisms provide the analytical structure for Section 5.

3. National legal architecture and differential accommodation channels

The CEAS guarantees the right to adequate housing for asylum seekers and displaced persons under a range of EU legal instruments. The recast Reception Conditions

Directive (rRCD) requires Member States to provide certain material reception conditions, including accommodation, for applicants for international protection. These conditions can take various forms – reception centres, private apartments, or hotels – depending on national arrangements.

Italy's national reception system is governed by Legislative Decree 142/2015, which transposed the RCD and initially envisioned a harmonised model centred around the reception and integration system – SAI (*Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione*). However, subsequent reforms have fragmented this framework. The 2018 'Security Decree' excluded asylum seekers from the SAI and reduced services. Later amendments in 2020 and 2023 partially reversed and then reimposed restrictions, allowing full access to the SAI only to international protection holders and vulnerable applicants. The CAS has also been used more widely, typically managed by prefectures (local offices representing the national government) in coordination with NGOs or private actors. They are generally larger and less integrated than SAI facilities, offering fewer services and integration pathways. The TPD enabled fast-tracked protection based on group recognition in the event of a mass arrival, removing the need for an individual status determination and affording its beneficiaries direct access to associated rights, including accommodation from day one. Adopted in 2001 in the aftermath of the wars in the Balkans in the 1990s, which caused massive human displacement, the TPD was triggered for the first time in March 2022 in response to the displacement of people from Ukraine and established a distinct legal and policy framework. Currently valid until March 2028, the TPD grants freedom of movement within the EU, suspending the so-called 'Dublin' rules on first-country responsibility. This has allowed Ukrainians to select their country of protection and exercise a high degree of agency.

At the national level, in response to the displacement from Ukraine, Italy adapted its reception infrastructure by granting BTPs access to a broader range of housing options as compared to the standard asylum track, including CAS, SAI, local community-based arrangements (*accoglienza diffusa*), and ad hoc hotel accommodation managed by the Civil Protection Department. This department, which usually deals with national emergencies (e.g. natural disasters), played a crucial role in managing the initial arrivals of displaced Ukrainians to Italy. They provided assistance in the form of humanitarian support and transportation, as well as setting up temporary hotel reception facilities. This exceptional measure highlights the flexibility and extent of resources and infrastructure offered by the Italian reception system in response to the arrival of people displaced from Ukraine.

As of December 2023, over 13,000 BTPs were hosted in reception centres and more than 5,000 in private accommodation (AIDA, 2024). As of 31 December 2025, 3,989 beneficiaries were accommodated in SAI facilities, while 2025 figures for CAS, hotels, and occupied places within private or community-based accommodation are unavailable (AIDA, 2026).

The figures in Table 1 do not include all displaced persons in Italy but provide an indicator of the limited capacity of institutional accommodation. Due to the lack of available data identifying the housing situations of those outside the formal reception system, the discrepancy between the general number of displaced persons and those benefiting from institutional accommodation is interpreted as evidence of the limited reach of the latter rather than as a complete measure of homelessness, exclusion, or informal housing.

Table 1. Accommodation by migrant group in Italy.²

Group	Type of accommodation	Duration of entitled presence at the reception facilities	Access to social housing	Number hosted in listed accommodation (Dec 2025)
Asylum Seekers	CAS, Government Reception Centres, SAI (subject to availability)	Throughout the asylum procedure	Depends on regional and municipal rules	Breakdown unavailable. In total: 101,106 in CAS and 41,475 in SAI (incl. 3,989 BTPs)
Beneficiaries of Protection	Primarily SAI	CAS: few days; SAI: up to 6 months	Eligible; subject to regional and municipal procedures	
Beneficiaries of TP (BTPs)	CAS, SAI, Civil Protection Department hotels, through local communities	At least for the duration of TP	Subsidised private accommodation (until April 2025)	

Sources: Asylum Information Database (AIDA) and Italian Ministry of the Interior

It is important to stress again that the measures introduced in Italy as part of the post-2022 response to those displaced from Ukraine did not create the structural deficiencies of the ordinary asylum reception system but instead created a flexible pathway alongside a system already characterised by restriction, capacity limitations and geographical fragmentation. The question is therefore how these pathways coexisted within the same local reception infrastructure.

Despite this response, contrasting trends are emerging at the EU level. Since June 2026, key instruments of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, including the Asylum Procedures Regulation (APR) and the new Reception Conditions Directive, have applied, introducing broader grounds for detention and allowing restrictions on freedom of movement. These measures risk reducing access to certain reception conditions, including accommodation, and may formalise ‘de facto’ detention.

At the national level, Italy’s February 2024 agreement with Albania signals a move toward the further externalisation of responsibility for migration management and protection. The initial agreement, which was subsequently subject to multiple judicial reviews, allowed the transfer of up to 36,000 asylum seekers annually to detention centres in Albania, institutionalising the offshoring and securitisation of the reception of displaced persons. Further restrictions at the national level were introduced with Law No. 187/2024, which limited access to reception for late applicants, prioritised sea arrivals over others, and imposed stricter housing requirements on family reunification.

4. Methods

4.1. Research design and territorial scope

Guided by the concept of accommodation as an infrastructure of migration governance, this study examines how accommodation functions as a network of governance and as an infrastructural system through combining an analysis of EU and Italian legal and policy frameworks with a qualitative investigation largely focused on Milan. Milan was selected as the principal empirical setting because it combines an established Ukrainian resident population, a developed municipal and third-sector reception infrastructure, and significant pressures on access to housing. These characteristics make it particularly useful for

examining how migrants' legal status interacts with local institutional capacity, community networks and housing-market constraints. The analysed material establishes the formal protection categories, accommodation channels, and institutional responsibilities applicable at the national level, whereas the collected interviews aim to contextualise the implementation of these national frameworks in relation to various groups of displaced persons at the local level. The empirical component is not intended to be a nationally representative study of the Italian reception system or to serve as a systematic comparison with other Italian cities.

Seven research participants were based in Milan, one in Brianza, one in Rome and one in Bologna. The interviews outside metropolitan Milan were conducted to gain supplementary insights rather than to provide a comparison with other localities. Prior to the 2022 displacement, the municipal register recorded 8,530 Ukrainian citizens resident in Milan in 2021 (Comune di Milano, 2026). The monitoring report of the #MilanoAiutaUcraina programme reports a network of 30 partner organisations operating across all municipal areas and shows a high number of accommodations provided by Italian families, Ukrainian relatives and friends or acquaintances in the context of the post-2022 arrivals (Codicci and Fondazione ISMU ETS, 2025). This is particularly important given the high housing pressure in the area: average rents increased by 22% between 2015 and 2021, compared with increases of 12% in average income and 13% in average wages (Comune di Milano, 2024). These characteristics make Milan an analytically important setting in which the legal status of migrants interacts with local institutional capacity, community networks and housing-market constraints.

4.2. Participants and data collection

The sample included ten participants aged 27-50. Eight held professional roles in migrant reception, accommodation assistance, casework, cultural mediation or project management. One of these professionals is herself a BTP. Two further participants were recruited due to their experience as BTPs. Six of the participants were Italian, and four were Ukrainian. No asylum seekers or non-Ukrainian beneficiaries of international protection were interviewed directly, as the study aimed to analyse the institutional differentiation between reception pathways rather than to offer a symmetrical comparison of the lived experiences of the two groups. The professional accounts were used to examine the operation and interpretation of reception arrangements, while the beneficiary interviews provided a more subjective, contextual perspective on the temporary-protection pathway.

Participants were selected because of their direct involvement in migrant reception, accommodation assistance or legal-administrative support, or because of their lived experience of temporary protection. The sample aimed to capture different scales of the reception system: municipal/local implementation; NGO and cooperative management; CAS, SAI and civil protection-related arrangements; and beneficiary experiences. The study does not claim to be statistically representative but instead uses expert and situated accounts to trace how national rules are translated into local accommodation practices. Annex I details the institutional location of each participant. The interviews were conducted in early 2025, took place both online and in person, and lasted approximately 60 min. Interviews were conducted in English and were audio-recorded with the

participants' consent. The anonymised interview recordings were transcribed using NVivo software to allow for thematic content analysis. The created codes reflected the discussed topics and recurrent themes, interpreted through the lens of accommodation as an infrastructure of governance and a multi-tiered system of rights. These topics included, among others: the different rules within the Italian accommodation system for BTPs and other migrant groups, such as those in relation to freedom of movement and the duration of stay in reception facilities; bureaucratic hurdles related to different legal statuses and procedures; and uncertainty surrounding the duration of temporary protection. The participants' names in this paper have been changed to ensure confidentiality. They have been assigned to reflect gender and cultural context, without revealing personal identities.¹

The research and data collection plan underwent a review and was found to be in line with the ethics guidelines of the Ethics Committee of the *Università degli Studi di Milano Statale*. The process of primary data collection was guided by the principles of informed consent, voluntariness, and confidentiality.

The study has several limitations. First, it focuses on metropolitan Milan, and so its conclusions cannot be extrapolated to the national level. Second, the predominance of professional participants means that the article examines institutional implementation more directly than the lived experiences of displaced persons. Third, the absence of interviews with asylum seekers, non-Ukrainian beneficiaries and public officials limits the capacity to compare beneficiary experiences, which could be a direction for future research. Finally, interview testimonies relating to resource reallocation and timelines cannot establish causal relationships due to the size of the sample, among others. The findings should therefore be interpreted as situated mechanisms and analytically relevant patterns, rather than as statistically or territorially representative.

5. Infrastructural mechanisms of differential reception

The following analysis examines how legal status and accommodation infrastructures intersect to produce differential trajectories of reception and mobility. The analysis is structured around several key topics through which differential inclusion is enacted within Italy's reception system. Drawing on the concept of accommodation infrastructures, accommodation is understood not just as a material condition but as a governance infrastructure that classifies, regulates, and organises migrants' access and mobility. Simultaneously, the analysis helps to unpack how diverse (state and non-state) actors and legal norms co-exist in ways that produce uneven access to housing and mobility. Each sub-section details how these conceptual mechanisms are materially enacted in Italy's fragmented reception system.

5.1. Legal categorisation and administrative acceleration

Legal categorisations are linked to different protection regimes that establish distinct procedural timelines, eligibility rules and access to associated rights. Whereas the interviews do not establish patterns across Italy, they do show how participants encountered and interpreted them in these specific settings. Participants described legal categorisation as a primary driver of differential inclusion, structuring who enters which

accommodation infrastructure and with what rights, waiting times and prospects for onward mobility. Legal status was described as a key mechanism determining the degree and mode of access to reception infrastructures, entitlement to reception, the type and form of material reception offered, and the duration of stay. The legal status granted to persons displaced from Ukraine under the TPD significantly shaped their access to and experience within the Italian reception system, often differing markedly from that of other migrant groups, particularly asylum seekers.

The activation of temporary protection created a dedicated and accelerated residence-permit pathway for people displaced from Ukraine. As Giulia, a CAS project manager in Milan said in her interview: ‘regarding access to housing and other rights, there were rules that facilitated access [to housing]. They [administrative bodies] turned a blind eye on many bureaucratic steps, and so there was a completely unnatural acceleration of the Italian reception system regarding the Ukrainian emergency situation’. Giulia’s account suggests a perceived relationship between the accelerated temporary-protection procedure and increased pressure on ordinary asylum processing. However, the study cannot establish that the Ukrainian response caused general delays, particularly because substantial delays and capacity problems were prevalent prior to 2022. Her account is therefore treated as evidence of front-line perceptions of institutional pressure at the initial stages of the response, rather than as proof of a national causal effect.

Giulia recounted how this acceleration meant that residence permits issued under the TPD ‘arrived within days’. This contrasted with the regular asylum system, in which bureaucratic processes could take anywhere from a few months to several years (AIDA, 2024). Furthermore, according to Giulia, the arrival of displaced persons from Ukraine ‘slowed down [the procedure for] everyone else’.

The delays in administrative procedures within the regular asylum system were reaffirmed by Sofia, a caseworker at an international foundation in Rome:

In general, within the reception system, when anyone from any country other than Ukraine arrives and asks for international protection, they are given quite clear timelines of what’s going to happen, especially in relation to accommodation. So you arrive, you ask for protection, you go into a CAS, a first-tier system, until you have done your commission, and you have your papers. This should take up to 6 months. It takes up to two years in Rome. That’s the gap between the written law and its practice.

The impact of different procedures and the speed of obtaining the TPD-based permit, compared with the administrative procedures of the regular asylum procedure, is reflected in the varied speed and modalities of access not only to accommodation but also to associated socio-economic rights. The post-2022 access to status and rights for BTPs ensured the right to work, exemption from certain healthcare fees, and facilitated access to education. Reflecting on these differences, Sofia outlined the following modalities: ‘Ukrainian people applying in Italy receive their *ricevuta*’ (receipt of application), so they can start working right away because they don’t need to wait for the physical *permesso*’ (residence permit), unlike asylum seekers’. The testimonies also describe how housing access defined migrants’ access to rights and mobility, creating distinct experiences and reinforcing differential treatment for Ukrainian refugees compared to other migrant groups.

Ukrainian nationals were granted immediate access to housing through the civil protection upon arrival, which meant that they had prioritised access to accommodation and

segregated facilities. This was described as a ‘special’ treatment. As Anastasiia, a caseworker in an international foundation working in Milan and a BTP from Ukraine herself pointed out: ‘although there are a lot of people with different backgrounds, only Ukrainians were picked up right away by the Civil Protection Department and brought to the reception structures’. Anastasiia said that reception places in Milan were reallocated during the initial response, with structures being ‘emptied for Ukrainians in 2022’. She argued that this happened while ‘there are people living in the streets: mothers with kids, men, elderly people of other nationalities, including Italians, who don’t have the means to afford accommodation’. This testimony highlights an exceptional practice in the context of the increasing difficulties in accessing accommodation for both migrant and local populations. Yet, this account of perceived reallocation of accommodation availability does not independently establish its scale, formal basis or prevalence outside the setting described.

Linking this back to the issue of differential treatment and procedures related to the residence permit application for migrants, and the way ‘spatial differentiation’ is enacted in this context, Anastasiia further stated:

At the police department for foreigners on Via Montebello 28 – I wish I didn’t know this place, but I do – have you seen how long the line usually is? So, for people with Ukrainian passports, there was a separate queue from the very beginning. They could enter right away without joining this queue, without making an appointment. Let’s say a ‘special luxury benefit’ we are very grateful for, but that other people don’t have.

Hence, within Milan’s administrative setting, nationality and legal status became materially visible through the organisation of access. The possession of a Ukrainian passport paved the way for an accelerated procedure, and legal – and nationality-based spatial differentiation. The interviews cited above illustrate how legal status functions as a powerful component of migration governance: far from being a mere administrative categorisation, it actively shapes and stratifies the reception system. Informed by the TPD regulatory framework and combined with operational practices such as expedited processing and existing infrastructures, the reception system produced distinct trajectories of mobility and inclusion, creating an accelerated pathway for one group and reinforcing a system of ‘protracted immobility’ for the others (Cingolani et al., 2022). Therefore, legal status actively constructed and reinforced differential conditions of existence within the Italian reception system.

5.2. Emergency resource mobilisation and accommodation allocation

This sub-section unpacks how various infrastructural dynamics – such as the interplay between the Civil Protection Department, reception centres, and policy exceptions – created in this specific situation differential regimes of mobility among different groups of displaced persons. While the capacity of the overall reception system (CAS and SAI) was increased due to the influx of Ukrainians, Ukrainians were also prioritised for available places.

Elena, a participant in Bologna, reported stricter enforcement of existing CAS exit deadlines during the initial Ukrainian response. She described cases in which residents approaching the applicable time limit were given less informal flexibility than had previously been customary in the facility she worked. She noted that while ‘usually, they

give a little more time in order to find other accommodation, they [the CAS administration] respected the time limit. So, they pushed other people to leave'. This account suggests that pressure on accommodation capacity may have narrowed the discretionary margin through which formal deadlines were usually implemented. Rather than introducing a new rule, the introduction of the TP regime appears, in her description, to have narrowed the informal flexibility previously available to residents approaching exit under the ordinary asylum procedure. At the same time, this interpretation stems from the participant's situated and subjective account of a specific local facility and cannot establish that the same dynamic occurred more broadly across Italy.

In addition, special accommodation arrangements, such as hotels and hostels run by the Civil Protection Department, were opened for the first time ever to house people displaced from Ukraine. Reflecting on this unprecedented procedure, Sofia, a caseworker at an international foundation in Rome, suggested:

There was reason to believe that many people would have arrived in Italy from Ukraine at the same time because of a large Ukrainian community already present here, with visas not required and the EU's temporary protection measures in place. Fearing that the reception system would be overwhelmed, the government set up these hotels, many of which had been used during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Civil Protection Department was asked to manage the accommodation at the start, setting up hotels in major cities like Milan and Rome. This was 'the first experiment' and, according to Sofia, although they were meant to provide temporary housing for a 'couple of weeks, maximum a couple of months', stays in these structures often extended to years. Sofia reported that the hotels received substantially higher payments than CAS projects, without offering comprehensive social, legal, or medical services, although the present study was not able to independently verify the rates she described.

5.3. Mobility governance and unequal temporalities

Another striking difference in reception policies and associated rights is evident in the mobility rules applicable to different migrant groups in Italy. Unlike other migrants, who often face restrictions on their movement and choices within the asylum system, Ukrainians, due to their temporary protection and freedom of movement within the EU, had greater agency regarding their mobility, as the research participants reported. This included support with transportation to various destinations in Italy, the freedom to choose which Italian region to reside in, and greater flexibility regarding the absence periods at the reception facilities. Marco, a SAI project manager in Brianza, stressed the unprecedented freedom of personal choice given to people displaced from Ukraine:

Generally, [the reception system] does not allow the migrants hosted to make personal choices. Especially when it comes to moving from one place to another. The law states in very vague terms that migrants might be allowed *to be moved*, not *to move*, but *to be moved* from one reception place to another or from one prefecture to another sub-district or province or region. This is seldom done even for humanitarian or family reasons. There was a derogation in the case of Ukrainian migrants.

Further explaining the high degree of agency and mobility that BTPs had in contrast to other seekers or beneficiaries of protection, Marco acknowledged that this was unusual,

as reception workers ‘are not used to receiving [these requests] from other migrants: ‘I would like to be moved to a better and nicer place’, ‘I’m tired of not meeting people,’ ‘I would like to be moved closer to the sea’’. A similar observation was shared by Chiara, a caseworker in a cooperative managing institutional reception in Milan:

In the CAS system, there were moments when rules applied differently to Ukrainians and other migrants. For example, migrants from all over the world in the CAS system can get permission to leave the camp for 3 nights. You have to ask for permission, and there must be very important reasons connected to your personal situation or asylum application. Ukrainians got permission to go to the seaside for vacation during the summer. At the very beginning, it was very difficult to see that things worked one way for some people and a different way for others.

This reveals how Italy’s reception infrastructure produced differential regimes of mobility and control. The rapid establishment of hotel accommodation for persons displaced from Ukraine, coordinated by the Civil Protection Department, alongside the CAS and SAI structures, created a novel infrastructure designed to accommodate a specific population with unprecedented speed and scale. Implemented through the use of emergency response methods, on the one hand, it opened new infrastructures for Ukrainian refugees, as well as giving them access to existing infrastructure, thus granting them significant agency over their movements and choices; and, on the other hand, it intensified the pre-existing limitation of reception mechanisms for other migrant groups. Stricter enforcement of reception-exit deadlines, as reported in one local account regarding CAS, was one of the most striking examples of this. The unequal ability of different migrants to navigate and shape their own choices and realities highlights how reception infrastructure operates simultaneously to enable mobility for some groups and to restrict it for others, directly reflecting the power dynamics and differential choices inherent in reception infrastructure.

5.4. Territorial discretion and the role of local actors

Local authorities and NGOs play a decisive role in shaping access to housing, leading reception infrastructures to take different forms in different areas. As the preceding examples show, these discretionary practices further reinforce differential inclusion within the Italian reception system. These examples point to the practical implications of the differential approaches (such as the availability and type of accommodation, the flexibility of exit deadlines, access to accompanying services, and the degree of mobility afforded to residents), and the role of local actors in the post-2022 response. Research participants also perceived there to be preferential treatment of Ukrainians over other migrant groups (asylum seekers and beneficiaries of other forms of protection), and revealed the partial overlap of the arrangements for BTPs with the pre-existing dual-track reception framework for asylum seekers (primarily based on the SAI network, co-funded by local and national authorities and managed by NGOs, and CAS facilities, in the event of sudden mass arrivals, managed by prefectures) (Bolzoni et al., 2024).

In practice, access to housing for migrants in Italy depends on the discretionary practices of prefectures. Existing analyses show that the beneficiaries of international and national forms of protection ‘might be allowed to stay in the reception centre a few months or a few days or until being granted access to a SAI project’, while ‘the majority

of prefectures allow beneficiaries of an international or national protection to remain in CAS only a few days' (AIDA, 2024, p. 240).

The post-February 2022 ad hoc emergency solutions for Ukrainians were coordinated by the Civil Protection Department, which also granted them access to all existing structures of the reception system – the CAS and SAI – expanding these existing structures to accommodate the new arrivals. In addition to this, co-housing arrangements with families were introduced alongside direct financial assistance of €300 per month for 3 months to adult BTPs in order to support their access to independent accommodation with private hosts (Bolzoni et al., 2024).

The decentralised governance of the reception system, exacerbated by different local interpretations and capacities, implied that different prefectures and local authorities were 'differently interested in the phenomenon' of displacement from Ukraine and had varying levels of preparedness and management. Marco, a SAI project manager in Brianza, explained that the rules and timeframes for reception were 'interpreted locally in very different ways'. This led to inconsistencies between regions regarding the permitted length of stay and the services provided:

CAS structures are meant for asylum seekers for the entire duration of their asylum procedure, and for the appeal phase if necessary. SAI projects have a different function, and they are meant to last 6 months. For Ukrainian refugees, there is still no indication of differences [between allocation to a specific reception facility], but in treatment, rules, ideas, and time frames were interpreted locally in very different ways. The accommodation offered by the Civil Protection Department and the prefectures, of course, was meant to be open just for [Ukrainian refugees] and to exist for them. The only time frame envisioned was that set by EU law.

The critical role of local actors in managing the reception facilities was another important differentiating aspect: NGOs and social cooperatives manage both SAI and CAS projects, and the quality and comprehensiveness of services (e.g. mental health support, Italian courses, job search assistance) varied significantly depending on the organisation and its specific project. In addition, fading private and diaspora solidarity is worth mentioning: initially, volunteer groups, churches, and organisations such as Refugees Welcome played a crucial role in providing private hospitality. However, as highlighted by Anastasiia, a caseworker at an international foundation in Milan and a BTP herself, 'fading solidarity' after 3-5 months often led to 'double displacement', as families had to enter the state reception system after being forced out of the private houses by people who previously hosted them.

This analysis reveals that the Italian reception system operates not as a uniformly applied national policy, but as an infrastructure of migration governance that translates legal categories into differential inclusion. This results from a combination of factors that, beyond mere differences in legal and policy frameworks, include decentralised governance, varying degrees of resource mobilisation, and the discretionary practices of local actors. Participants described local discretion and the changing availability of civil society support as contributing to precarious transitions, including movement from private hospitality into formal reception. The intersection of legal status, infrastructural allocation and discretion creates stratified forms of inclusion, shaping migrants' capacity to meet their humanitarian needs, access accommodation, move onward and transition out of reception. In practice, this produces highly differential and often precarious conditions in terms of accommodation and inclusion within the reception infrastructure.

Drawing on the local, mostly Milan-based experiences, the accounts of research participants suggest that legal status interacted with locally available organisational and diaspora capacity, meaning that local infrastructure was part of the explanation for differential accommodation outcomes for Ukrainian displaced persons under TP and other migrant groups.

5.5. Interpreting differential reception

The empirical material directly demonstrates differences organised through legal status and nationality in the settings examined, yet it does not show the explicit use of race, politics or gender as decision-making criteria. There are several non-exhaustive explanations for differential reception: the design of the TPD enabled collective and accelerated recognition; geographical proximity and visa-free mobility facilitated arrival and circulation; political will generated additional institutional resources; and the pre-existing Ukrainian diaspora and civil-society networks expanded initial accommodation. These factors help explain the speed and form of the response, which is particularly prominent in settings such as Milan, as the empirical material shows. At the same time, these institutional and geopolitical explanations may intersect with racialised hierarchies of refugee deservingness, including perceptions of cultural and religious proximity. The wider literature on refugee deservingness provides an interpretive framework for examining why some displaced populations become politically and socially legible as proximate, familiar and deserving of exceptional mobilisation of resources. The interviews conducted for this study, however, do not independently establish race or religion as operative causal mechanisms. Racialised deservingness is therefore a theoretically informed interpretation and a proposition for further comparative research, rather than an empirical finding of this study.

6. Conclusions

This article combined the analysis of the national legal and policy framework with a Milan-centred qualitative study of how differential protection regimes were applied within accommodation infrastructures. The formal differences between temporary protection and ordinary asylum reception concerned the speed and basis of status recognition, access to accommodation channels, associated financial support and the scope for mobility. In the settings represented by the interviews, these differences were reinforced by administrative procedures, the allocation of accommodation, rules governing absence from reception centres and relocation, and the discretionary practices of reception actors.

Four mechanisms were central to this process: first, legal categorisation establishing differential access to services and timelines; second, emergency resource mobilisation expanding accommodation options for BTPs; third, mobility governance creating unequal capacities to travel, relocate or exercise agency; and fourth, local discretion and intermediary networks, which shaped how formal rules were enacted at the local level. Accommodation therefore functioned not merely as shelter but as infrastructure through which migrants' legal statuses were converted into temporal, spatial, and material conditions of inclusion.

The findings provide evidence for how legal – and nationality-based differentiation operates within the migrant reception infrastructure at a local level. At the same time,

they suggest geopolitical factors and race might be among the factors potentially influencing institutional decisions. Thus, racialised deservingness remains relevant as an interpretive framework derived from the broader literature. However, the evidence presented in this article shows that it cannot be isolated from the effects of the aims and design of the TPD, emergency mobilisation, geopolitical proximity and the capacity of the pre-existing diaspora.

These conclusions are subject to certain limitations: the size and characteristics of the sample allow only for analytically suggestive, situated findings, not causal effects that could be extrapolated to analyse the situation across the whole of Italy. Within these limits, the article contributes to scholarship on differential inclusion by showing that legal status is not implemented automatically – it is negotiated through the interaction of legal frameworks, administrative timing, material capacity, accommodation design, local discretion and intermediary networks. The focus on accommodation infrastructure clarifies how the implementation of the formal rights can define access to a spectrum of services for different categories of displaced persons.

The local case within the Italian reception system that was studied here also serves as a cautionary example, highlighting the risk of institutionalising certain differentiating practices. These risks include unequal access to accommodation and services, greater territorial discretion, prolonged dependence on temporary reception, and reduced mobility and autonomy for less-favoured groups. This understanding, in turn, enables a more critical assessment of current policy trajectories, particularly the EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum, which threatens to further entrench the differentiation of migration governance, including detention, restricted mobility, and temporary reception.

Notes

1. See Annex I – Interview participants.
2. Sources: Asylum Information Database (AIDA). (2026). *Country report: Italy (2025 update)*; Dipartimento per le Libertà civili e l'Immigrazione. (2025). *Cruscotto statistico giornaliero*. Note: The table reports persons hosted in institutional or dedicated accommodation, not the total number of asylum seekers, refugees or BTPs present in Italy. The gap between legal presence and reception uptake is treated here as evidence of the limited and selective reach of the formal reception infrastructure.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Viktoryia Vaitovich**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Software, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Ethics and consent

The research and its data collection and management plan received approval from the Ethics Committee of the Università degli Studi di Milano Statale (no. 49/2025). Informed consent was obtained from all participants using written consent forms.

Data availability

The data collected and analysed in this study cannot be shared due to strict ethical and confidentiality requirements. The research is based on in-depth qualitative interviews with reception and assistance professionals, cultural mediators and BTPs within the Italian reception system. Given the sensitivity of the material relating to migrants’ precarious legal situations, experiences within reception facilities, and accounts of institutional practices, any disclosure of primary data, even in anonymised form, carries a substantial risk of indirect re-identification and potential harm to participants or organisations.

Notes on contributor

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Annex I. Interview participants

Pseudonym	Nationality	Gender	Age	Location	Participant Category
Anastasiia	UA	F	33	Milan	Reception professional with lived TP experience
Chiara	IT	F	35	Milan	Reception professional
Olena	UA	F	33	Milan	BTP participant
Kateryna	UA	F	50	Milan	BTP participant
Giulia	IT	F	32	Milan	Reception professional
Mariya	UA	F	50	Milan	Cultural mediator
Sofia	IT	F	30	Rome	Reception professional
Elena	IT	F	32	Bologna	Reception professional
Marco	IT	M	40	Brianza	Reception professional
Francesca	IT	F	27	Milan	Reception professional