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Unravelling the multi-level governance of Ukrainian refugee reception in Italy: a focus on small and medium-sized cities

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ABSTRACT

The article suggests a shift in the understanding of the established concepts of *battleground*, *local turn* and *governance decoupling*, all of which have strongly influenced the framework of immigrant integration scholarship. It does so by looking at the puzzle of the reception of Ukrainians in Italy from the perspective of multi-level governance (MLG), which made it possible to identify the activism of small and medium-sized cities in contrast to the inefficiencies of the central government. Previous research has not adequately examined grassroots responses within the MLG framework, leaving a gap in understanding the interplay between local mobilisation and national policies. Despite the (seemingly) cooperative multi-level response to Ukrainian refugees, there have been numerous delays and poor performance in reception, resulting in smaller localities bearing the brunt of the challenges of the refugee influx. This research draws on 40 semi-structured interviews with representatives of third-sector organisations, local authorities and national agencies.

Introduction

As metropolises across the world grapple with the unprecedented challenges posed by mass migration, smaller localities come to the fore as critical players in the intricate tapestry of asylum policy-making. Small and medium-sized cities, with their unique socio-economic landscapes, become testing grounds for the resilience and efficacy of migration policies, often bringing to light the

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intricate dance between local agencies and national directives (Spencer 2018; van der Leun 2006). In situations in which there is a lack of action from national governments, they sometimes become the main actors, as in the case described below.

The escalation of Ukrainian migration to other parts of Europe has brought these dynamics into sharp relief. Over 7 million people have sought refuge in Central and Western Europe following the start of the conflict in Ukraine, with Italy becoming a sanctuary for many due to its established Ukrainian community. By the end of April 2022, the influx of refugees had surpassed the capacities of the national asylum and refugee reception systems, with over 100,000 Ukrainians seeking refuge in Italy (Protezione Civile 2023).

A short-term respite was found through the temporary protection offered by Directive 2001/55/EC of the European Union. The directive also highlighted the pressing need to grant refugees access to housing and labour markets, which required quick and comprehensive responses by Member States (European Parliament and Council, 2001). Towns found themselves at the epicentre of this response, navigating a policy maze that was exacerbated by delays, inadequate support in terms of accommodation, and the misallocation of resources. The initial response in Italy was overwhelming, including numerous offers of private accommodation for refugees and bipartisan political support. Probably the closeness of the war, the perceived similarity with other Europeans and the whiteness played a major role (de Coninck 2023). It recalled what happened during the crisis in former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, when there was a significant mobilisation of Italian civil society and the government introduced measures of temporary protection (law n.390/1992) (Bona 2016). During the most critical moments of the emergency, the *Protezione Civile*[1] provided hotel lodging for approximately 9,000 Ukrainians who lacked alternative support in Italy, while the other 160,000 found a solution at a local level. Numerous third sector organisations (TSOs), individual citizens, and local municipalities took the initiative to arrange private or shared accommodation for the refugees (Bassoli and Campomori 2022, 2024a).

In light of this consensus, we would expect cooperative multi-level governance (MLG) dynamics, with the aim of achieving the common goal of reception for people fleeing war. However, this was not the case: as time passed, the policy response revealed a landscape marred by failures and governance complexities (Bassoli and Campomori 2024b). Despite a rhetoric of cooperation and rapid response, national interventions were often delayed and ineffective. Municipalities had to bear the burden of the challenges posed by reception without receiving timely and adequate support from central government. The research behind this article is guided by two key explorative questions. Firstly, we asked *how the multi-level*

governance process unfolded in the reception of Ukrainians; secondly, as a follow up question, we wanted to look in depth into the *challenges faced by cities (with a focus on the small and medium-sized ones) in coping with the arrival of Ukrainian refugees, considering the state's delays in offering support.*

We use the MLG framework (Caponio and Jones-Correa, 2018; Kaufmann and Sidney, 2020; P. W. A. Scholten 2013) to try to dissect these complexities, exploring how the interactions among state and non-state actors at the municipal level, as well as the relationships among various governmental tiers, shaped responses to Ukrainians refugees. Unpacking the intricate interplay between grassroots activism, municipal bureaucracy, and national directives has led us to revisit some of the key concepts of the immigrant and refugee literature, including the 'local turn', i.e., the growing interest in local integration policy after a long-lasting tradition of scholarly focus at the national level (Caponio and Bokert 2010; Caponio 2022; Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, and Scholten 2017), the 'battleground', i.e., the emphasis on the conflict, competition, and strategic manoeuvring among the various local stakeholders of integration policy (Ambrosini 2018; Campomori and Ambrosini 2020), and 'decoupling', i.e., the lack of effective coordination and integration between different levels of government in policy implementation (P. W. A. Scholten 2013). While exploring the theoretical underpinnings, empirical analyses, and policy implications of the suboptimal reception, this article aims to contribute to the broader discourse on migration governance by offering insights that draw on the unique challenges faced by small and medium-sized towns and the lessons that can be learnt from their experiences.

In the next section, we look at the theoretical discourse surrounding the MLG framework, analysing how the related concepts of *battleground* , the *local turn*, and *decoupling* need to be reinterpreted in the face of the response to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees. Following this, a methodological section lays the groundwork for the empirical investigation, in which interviews were conducted with local, regional, and national key players. We then share our research findings, tackling the issues of how the multi-level governance process has been developed and which specific challenges the small and medium-sized cities had to cope. The conclusion discusses the implications of our findings.

'Battleground', the 'local turn', and 'decoupling' revisited

With the decline in philosophies of national integration (Favell 1998), MLG has become the dominant approach for studying migration policies. Initially conceived with the purpose of analysing the processes of European integration (Marks 1992) and federal systems in general, MLG then gained momentum in the field of migration policies (Caponio and Jones-Correa 2018).

Previous approaches that focused on a single level of government (national or sub-national) or a limited number of actors (public or private) were no longer considered sufficient to properly understand policies, given the 'crowded' nature of the policy arena at different stages of public policy. The MLG approach seemed capable of capturing the complexity of the migration policy process, highlighting both the vertical dimension, which includes the relations between the centre and the periphery within the public sphere, and the horizontal dimension, which includes the relations between state and society, with reference to the third sector and voluntary associations (Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, and Scholten 2017). However, the controversial aspects of the approach soon came to light, in particular its theoretical ambiguity. Peters and Pierre (2004, 88) argued that, as MLG can be applied to a broad range of situations, it creates a paradox in which any complex political process with various facets can be labelled an MLG process. In other words, if everything is MLG, then nothing is. Today the most significant criticism of MLG that has emerged in the context of migration studies concerns its understanding predominantly in terms of a 'negotiated order' (Alcantara and Nelles 2014), prioritising cooperative dynamics and therefore implicitly assuming that there is a large degree of convergence between the various actors in the question of the reception and integration of immigrants and refugees. The critics of MLG argue that emphasising cooperation and coordination means seeing only one side of the coin, thus ignoring conflict dynamics, the strategic games being played between actors, struggles, protests, and all other difficult interactions (Dąbrowski, Bachtler, and Bafoil 2014).They argue that the outcome of policy processes is actually the result of dynamics of conflict and mutual accommodation between actors with different interests and stakes. To address this limitation, the *battleground approach* (Ambrosini 2018, 2021; Campomori and Ambrosini 2020) was introduced, aiming to highlight and better understand the multifaceted relations at work in multi-actor dynamics. Following this conceptualisation, migration and asylum policies (with particular reference to reception and integration measures) were described as a 'battleground' in which different public and non-public actors compete, sometimes cooperating and sometimes in conflict, establishing alliances or tacit agreements, or attempting to attract public support and influence policies. The concept of battleground has sparked a lively debate in the literature and has been used in numerous studies, especially in relation to policies for the reception of asylum seekers and refugees during the 'refugee crisis' (Bazurli 2019; Caponio and Petracchin 2023), which led to a surge in the politicisation of the issue. One of the visible manifestations of this battleground in Italy was opposition from municipalities to accepting refugees sent by central government. Mayors felt supported in their opposition by the vocal protestors who contested what they called 'an invasion'. On the other side, many civil society actors took action to support refugees' right to reception.

Another influential approach in interpreting immigrant policies has been the *local governance turn* (Caponio and Bokert 2010; Caponio 2022; Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, and Scholten 2017). The MLG scholarship largely draws on this perspective, which since the 2000s has highlighted the crucial role of (especially) large and multicultural cities (P. Scholten and Penninx 2016) in shaping policies for migrants (rather than refugees), sometimes in contrast to national philosophies of integration (Favell 1998) and at other times in place of almost non-existent state policies. An often-cited case is that of French cities, which gave much more recognition to Islam than was foreseen at the national level (Karen Kraal, Martiniello, and Vertovec 2004). In the Italian case, the state more or less implicitly delegated subnational actors to carry out the integration measures, thus contributing to the creation of a variety of local public-private partnerships and the emergence of mainly 'local' enjoyment of social citizenship (Campomori 2008; Caponio 2006).

The third approach we would like to draw attention to is P. W. A. Scholten's (2013) theoretical framework for analysing governance in multi-level settings (see Table 1), and in particular the concept of *governance decoupling*. In Scholten's words (2013, 221), decoupling means the absence of effective coordination between different levels, which results in divergent approaches. He understands it as one of four perspectives on governance in multi-level settings, the others being: *centralist governance* (where hierarchy prevails); *multi-level governance* (where there are strong multi-level 'functionalist' structures); and *localist or devolved governance* (where central coordination is very weak and policies are framed in a bottom-up manner). Unlike the Netherlands, analysed by Scholten as an example of a decoupled mode of governance, immigrant integration policies in Italy in the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s were usually understood in terms of the localist mode of governance, as towns tended to make up for a lack of clear national indications and funding (Caponio 2006, Campomori 2008). However, this situation was disrupted in 2015 by the 'refugee crisis', which, in a context of extreme politicisation, led to a more centralised approach to governance in relation to the reception of refugees. The arrival of the Ukrainian refugees represented a further change in the dynamics of the MLG: as this appeared to be an essentially depoliticised issue, we might have predicted the activation of

Table 1. Perspectives on governance in multi-level settings.

Centralist governance	Multi-level governance	Localist or devolved governance	Governance decoupling
National political leadership, centralist political network.	Depoliticization, technical orientation, vertical venue shopping.	Politicization on local level, local leadership; problems defined as 'local' problems requiring 'local' solutions.	Political conflicts between different levels; problems defined in conflicting ways

Source: adapted from P. W. A. Scholten (2013), 221.

Scholten's multilevel governance mode (see Table 1). However, this did not turn out to be the case, with the process instead assuming some of the features of a local turn and clear elements of a decoupled governance. Considering all the points mentioned above, the main reasons why the case of Ukrainian reception led us to call for a revisiting of the concepts of battlefield, local turn and governance decoupling are essentially two.

The first reason is that the Ukrainian invasion triggered widespread support for Ukrainian refugees in European countries. This trend can be detected in the welcoming approach of countries neighbouring Ukraine (Pędziwiatr and Magdziarz 2022), such as Poland (Błaszczyk et al. 2024), as well as more distant countries, such as the UK (Burrell 2024). Therefore, although Ukrainians arrived as refugees in large numbers and within a short span of time, MLG did not take the form of a battleground as had happened with previous refugee flows. On the contrary, the entire chain of actors from the European Union (with the approval of the Temporary Protection Directive) down to the national and subnational levels, including non-state actors and civil society, declared their will to ensure the generous and prompt reception of Ukrainians. The institutional support was coupled by the societal one. There was a general growth in the desire of actively supporting the collective effort (Bassoli 2022) triggered by a general positive attitude towards Ukrainians. This attitude is linked to the specificity of this emergency, as well as some previously studied aspects. Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner (2016) suggest that Christians gather more support than Muslim refugees. Analogously the racialised nature of this support is confirmed also by de Coninck (2023). He recalled that 'Ukraine's ethnic and religious composition more closely resembles those of other European countries' (2023, 581). More generally, Ukrainians were preferred (also in 2015) for their age, gender, skills and educational level (Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2016).

The second reason is that in this unusually (declared) cooperative framework, urban communities took the initiative in providing provisional reception, demonstrating strong activism more comparable to the 'local turn' of the 2000s, than to the battleground approach or to Sanctuary Cities, i.e., cities (in Europe and USA) that declare themselves safe places for refugees, resisting the restrictive measures at the national level and offering protections to undocumented migrants (Ataç, Schütze, and Reitter 2020; Bazurli and de Graauw 2023). As time went on, however, latent conflicts became more apparent, revealing a hitherto unseen form of battlefield. The concept of decoupling is also very relevant here, as it highlights the distance between (weak) national interventions and (strong) local interventions, without any significant or effective coordination.

While the conclusions propose a revision of these concepts, the next sections will present the empirical research and findings which led us to suggest that conceptual update.

Research methods

In this study, we scrutinise the feature of the policy process regarding the reception of Ukrainian refugees in Italy, covering the period from March 2022 to August 2023. In this section we present our research stance, the rationale for our qualitative methodology, the sampling framework, our data collection, and analysis procedures (Ashworth, McDermott, and Currie 2019).

As professionals in migration policy, our engagement in the field is extensive, meaning we need to declare our positionality. One of us has founded and leads a third-sector organisation (TSO) actively involved in welcoming Ukrainian refugees. The other has studied migration policy for two decades and is a municipal councillor. This depth of experience, coupled with insights from prior research, informed our interview strategy aimed at uncovering latent aspects and elucidating ambiguities in the field, both of which guided our qualitative research methodology. Given the nascent state of the policy in question and the paucity of empirical studies, we embarked on an interpretive analysis centred on interviews and the examination of the secondary data.

Our case selection for sampling was intentional and strategic. Italy's prominence as a migratory destination, especially with the recent influx of people from Ukraine, has led to the development of a new migration approach. This policy, crafted at multiple governance levels, mirrors Italy's complex political and socio-economic landscape and serves as a fertile testing ground for the MLG framework. Moreover, Italy's migration approach, marked by contentious policy decisions and international scrutiny, offers a rich context for investigating the nuanced dynamics of migration policy when conflictual politics shift towards a more collaborative approach. Italy seemed to be the perfect place for collaborative multi-level governance dynamics to emerge during the Ukrainian crisis (P. W. A. Scholten 2013) moving away from the traditional Italian 'battleground' for asylum policies. Not only did the citizens show a positive attitude to the Ukrainian refugees (Wildemann, Niederée, and Elejalde 2023), but the national government also responded positively both during its centre-left (before October 2022) and right-wing periods (Bassoli and Campomori 2024b). Rather than a battleground, a highly cooperative and de-politicised scenario seemed to emerge.

However, upon closer inspection, latent conflicts surfaced that meant the reception of Ukrainian refugees did not meet up to this initial promise (see Bassoli and Campomori 2024b for details). But these conflicts differed widely

from those in the 2015–2027 refugee crisis. There was no disagreement on whether or not to welcome Ukrainians nor attempts by municipalities to avoid taking them in. Instead, a latent conflict became apparent particularly related to the different visions of two public actors (the *Protezione Civile* and the National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI)) on the role of municipalities, with the municipalities asking for a more prominent role in the local governance of (emergency) reception (Bassoli and Campomori 2024b). To explore the nuances of the policy process, we combined an analysis of secondary documents with semi-structured interviews. The document analysis spanned scholarly works, institutional reports, and related policy documents, which were rich in official content but limited concerning the reception of Ukrainian refugees due to this being such a recent phenomenon. We conducted semi-structured interviews with a selection of participants, including project managers, civil servants, academics, and policymakers, identified through key networks established in the initial bidding process. Two rounds of interviews were carried out: the first round (May-November 2022) provided a broad overview of national policy, while the second (March-August 2023) delved deeper into the municipal responses and the specific actions undertaken (Appendix 1). Following OECD (2024) definition, our in-depth interviews directly covered two medium-sized cities (Bari and Bologna), six small cities (Bergamo, Forlì, Modena, Padova, Piacenza, Ravenna) and two cities (Rome and Milan) addressing both civil servants and TSO working the area. Indirectly we covered also other small-sized cities exploiting TSO with a national profile and working also in smaller localities, as well as local TSO working in the aforementioned cities and nearby small cities: Altamura, Bitonto, Molfetta (near Bari); Anzio, Civitavecchia, Pomezia (Rome); Carpi (near Modena); Cinisello Balsamo, Legnano, Sesto San Giovanni, (near Milan); Faenza (Ravenna); and Imola (near Bologna).

Findings

Context: the outbreak of the emergency and the measures taken

A significant number of Ukrainians (23,872) arrived in Italy two weeks after the onset of the conflict in Ukraine (Protezione Civile 2023), rising to 170,000 people within the space of a few months. Ukrainian were dispersed themselves across the country, from large cities to small towns, this was driven by two factors. On the one side the dense network of Ukrainian citizens already living in Italy, the fifth largest community in Italy, with about 225,000 individuals, was a pull factor mobilising social connections (Hierro and Maza 2024). On the other, the institutional mechanism forcing refugees scatters asylum seekers and those entitled to be hosted in the national scheme across the country in order to have a provincial quota between 0,01% and 0,4% of the

Italian population (Openpolis 2023a). The combination of these two factors made the role of small and medium town centrals, being most of them the provincial capitals, thus the focal point of each province. The majority (80%) found shelter with relatives or friends from the Ukrainian diaspora who were already resident in the country, thus dispersing themselves across Italy (Openpolis 2023b). Some were taken in by Italian families, often due to existing employment ties, particularly in the domain of elderly care. Others secured accommodation and support through voluntary organisations and churches that had begun offering this service before the public institutions. This wave of arrivals ignited an outpouring of public support, prompting numerous individuals to reach out to local authorities, offering to provide homestay options or to contribute their skills, such as language proficiency.

Taking the financial support allocated to Ukrainian citizens (Figure 1) as a proxy for their local presence, they seem to be mainly concentrated in provinces in which the largest urban centre is fairly small. Without considering Rome and Milan (which each have a population of over 1 million inhabitants), as well as Turin and Naples (which each have a conurbation of over 1 million inhabitants), over 80% of Ukrainians were hosted in provinces in which the capital had less than 200,000 inhabitants. Italy's almost 8,000 municipalities are at the centre of this emergency. Thus, the impact of migration was largely dealt with at the local level.

In the first phase of the response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis in Italy, the national reception policy had a dual character. The central management of the crisis was formally assigned to the Protezione Civile, which initiated a series of specific activities (Bassoli and Campomori 2024b) for a small portion of those in need. However, in practice, the responsibility for addressing the crisis was given to civil society, in the absence of concrete action from public authorities. This approach aligns with insights from the literature on policy tools (Doern and Wilson 1974; Howlett, Ramesh, and Perl 2009),

Figure 1. Distribution of the financial contribution by provinces (Protezione Civile 2024), created with Datawrapper.

which suggests a deliberate strategy by governments of 'not taking action'. Civil society and local communities bore the brunt of the reception and integration efforts. The decision to heavily rely on societal actors can be seen as a strategic move within the policy framework, leveraging the agility, local knowledge, and networks of these groups to respond rapidly and effectively to the crisis. The choice of 'not taking action' is in line with the long lasting tradition of the Italian 'Familistic welfare system' (Kazepov 2008), where 'few resources are targeted to family policies (passive subsidiarity) and to other contributory and means tested schemes' (ibidem: 259). The direct consequence is that the TSOs and the family are given a central role, with little to none economic resources. This reliance on civil society was not merely a fall-back option due to the absence of immediate governmental action, but appeared instead to be a conscious and strategic choice integrated into the policy design, in which the strengths of civil society were recognised and utilised as a primary resource for managing the influx of refugees. This approach makes non-state actors central players in executing key policy objectives, especially in emergency contexts.

As for institutional activation, Directive 55/2001/EC mandated Member States to assist individuals fleeing conflict. In response, the Italian government declared a national emergency and asked the Protezione Civile with formulating a national reception and assistance plan (Council of Ministers Resolution 28 February 2022). This plan required regional authorities to coordinate with prefectures (territorial branches of the Ministry of the Interior) and municipalities, engage with TSOs, and possibly liaise with Ukrainian community representatives (Order of the Head of the Department of Protezione Civile, OCDPC n. 872/2022). At a later stage, the government expanded the Reception and Integration System (SAI) and the Extraordinary Reception Centres System (CAS) to accommodate an additional 9,000 people (Law Decree No.16 of 28 February 2022; Law Decree No. 115 of 9 August 2022; Decree of the Minister of Interior of 23 August 2022). Additionally, a financial allowance was set up for those who found independent living arrangements, offering €300 per month for adults and €150 for each minor for up to three months, ending 31 December 2022 (OCDPC n. 881/2022). Lastly, a comprehensive reception programme was established that included home-stays and independent living in private residences that was specifically tailored to Ukrainians, which was to be facilitated by TSOs and volunteer groups (Law Decree No. 21 of 21 March 2022, and then OCDPC No. 881/2022). The Protezione Civile anticipated potential delays with the SAI and CAS, and thus proposed a 'widespread reception' model akin to SAI. A call was made for 15,000 places, leading to 48 proposals, of which 29 were accepted, providing 17,012 places immediately. By mid-May, TSOs were ready to host refugees, having rallied to secure places and formal agreements from municipalities within a tight two-week window. However, there were various

procedural hurdles, with a huge amount of documentation required from all parties involved. The National Association of Municipalities (ANCI) insisted on a central role for municipalities, necessitating partnership agreements that, compounded by the local elections in June, further delayed proceedings. Consequently, contracts were not signed until 4 August 2022 (Bassoli and Campomori 2024b).

So between March 2022 and August 2022, municipalities and TSOs were at the forefront of the emergency with little to no backing from the Protezione Civile. The expansion of the SAI and CAS system only partially supported local authorities, with the number of Ukrainians hosted within the national system being only a fraction of the number of arrivals. Municipalities and TSOs had swiftly mobilised to address the urgent needs of arriving refugees without immediate governmental support or clear guidelines.

All interviewees told us that both public actors and TSOs mobilised, driven by the welcoming attitude of the whole society. This specific dynamic supported the activation of all subjects.

> In the very first days, we were bombarded with offers of availability, from private citizens both in their homes and making flats available either free of charge or in any case with very favourable conditions for Ukrainian citizens (Int.2, CM2, Head of projects area, TSO).

As a matter of fact, from the first week of March, individual citizens and TSOs began to host Ukrainians spontaneously and informally, that is, without any economic and organisational support from public authorities, as the latter were still trying to find a way to respond to the emergency. Reports from the CIAC association (2022) indicate that by the end of May 2022, 34% of the costs for hosting Ukrainian refugees remained unfunded by institutional sources.

Despite the challenges, these local responses maintained a high standard of care and support. They not only provided shelter but also facilitated integration into the community, ensuring that the refugees' immediate needs were met with dignity and respect. As a municipality representative noted, this showed 'a considerable commitment' (Int. 39, Int. FM, Municipality) requiring coordinated efforts across various sectors. A representative from a prominent TSO also shared their experience:

> Our initial strategy involved dividing these offers into two categories: domestic reception and independent housing solutions. [...] We strived to meet standards comparable to those of the SAI system, negotiating with the prefecture to align our temporary solutions with institutional standards (Int.2, CM2, Head of projects area, TSO).

This approach exemplifies the proactive and adaptive strategies employed by TSOs. Despite administrative and political challenges, they focused on providing immediate shelter while advocating for the expansion of established reception systems, such as the SAI. Their efforts demonstrate the crucial role

of local entities in managing emergencies, especially when larger institutional mechanisms are slow to respond. We also have to acknowledge the presence of a strong rhetoric of civic activation. This rhetoric, coupled with the wave of enthusiasm and the timing of our research, hides whatever drawbacks later surfaced.

Waiting for godot

During the first phase of the emergency, most local actors did what they deemed necessary without considering timeframes. The perception was that at some point the Protezione Civile (on behalf of the government) would step in. In the meantime, local actors struck a balance between autonomy and self-organised coordination. The situation was so unusual that a local government official told us:

> Normally, the very first reception is not the responsibility of the local authorities. Let's say that the very first reception should normally be the responsibility of the ministry (Int. 26 AB, Social service coordinator, Municipality).

However, in this extreme situation local actors also did what they could to coordinate the response both between public bodies and between public bodies and TSOs. Local governments rapidly established crucial support services, based on a 'one-stop shop' approach. This was exemplified by the municipality of Bologna, whose speedy and all-encompassing response included a comprehensive help centre near the central station offering health screenings, legal assistance, and social services. The help centre involved the municipality, the local branch of the Ministry of Health, and the local Prefecture (Ministry of the Interior).

> We decided practically on the spot to set up right in front of the central station [...] a one-stop shop responding to a number of needs that the Ukrainian community had. [...] Ukrainian citizens who arrived first found [...] health screening services. Straight away they had the chance to activate their STP card at the local health authority desk, which allows them [...] to access health services. [There was a] police desk [...] where people declared their arrival [...]. There was also another desk run by the social services from the international protection team of the municipality of Bologna [...] which obviously worked with the Prefecture in a joint desk on any requests for accommodation (Int. 27, LN, Councillor for social policies, Municipality).

Other smaller municipalities coordinated closely with the prefecture and the questura (police headquarters) although their intervention was less well-organised than in larger municipalities (Int. 39, FM2, Councillor third sector, Municipality).

But something that works in one place, does not necessarily work in another. At the local level, cooperation among public entities cannot be taken for granted.

> Because the problem was that [...] the Prefecture also asked to free up some apartments where there were people of other nationalities who were creating their own projects in those areas, because they had to accommodate the Ukrainian population, who, what's more, immediately showed that they had housing needs with higher standards [...] (Int. 21, MME, Councillor third sector, Municipality).

While local authorities were sometimes confronted with uncooperative public entities such as the local prefecture or questura, they generally had the full support of TSOs. A welfare councillor noted that 'we are never in deficit in relation to civic cooperation. Sometimes we even have a surplus' (Int.23, LN, Councillor for social policies, Municipality).

To conclude, while TSOs shouldered the burden of supporting those in need through relying on their own budgets, public institutions faced a more problematic choice. There was much apprehension about the sustainability of the response. The worry was that once the emergency phase had passed, and if national authorities did not intervene with more structured and medium-term planning, families might face displacement again, especially in cases where private accommodation was temporary, which in most cases it was (Int. PF, Head Department, Municipality).

> it was the state's responsibility to take charge of reception because the funds arrived at the Prefecture with the CAS, a situation was created where basically we were taking people in and the Prefecture washed its hands of it (Int. PF, Head of department, Municipality).

These accounts from various small and medium-sized localities demonstrate their vital role in responding swiftly to the crisis, often ahead of and complementary to national strategies. Local authorities did not passively wait for intervention (and funds) from the government, but, pressured by the multitude of requests and needs, engaged in collaborative governance dynamics with TSOs and civil society more generally. If they had not done so, TSOs and civil society would have been the only subjects taking action.

The protezione civile steps-in

As the Ukrainian refugee crisis unfolded, the national government used the Protezione Civile to implement a four-point plan: 1) lodging of Ukrainians in hotels; 2) financial assistance for independent accommodation; 3) expansion of the SAI and CAS systems; and 4) a focus on integrating refugees through homestay programmes. The latter point four was negotiated at the national level with TSOs. The Protezione Civile took the lead in co-designing a bold

innovative system (Int. 7, TP Deputy Head of Department, National Government).

On the matter of the key role of municipalities in the whole process there was broad agreement between TSOs, the Protezione Civile, and ANCI. Despite (or perhaps because of) this agreement, the implementation of the plan revealed two significant drawbacks, particularly regarding the size of the tender and the future of those already hosted.

> And so there was also a lot of pressure at the national level for the call [for accommodation places] to take a certain direction. And among the various things that were under discussion was the question of the size of the projects, in the sense that initially it even seemed that the minimum number [of places required] to participate in the call for bids was 1,000 to 3,000 places. [. . .] [at the end] the number has been reduced to 300 places (Int.2 CM2, Head of projects area, TSO).

However, the decision to reduce the minimum to 300 places was not enough. Logistical challenges emerged later on, particularly for those TSOs working with smaller municipalities. Indeed once it was clear that each TSO required not a letter of support, but a formal partnership agreement with each involved municipality. Generally, TSOs decided to reduce the number of required municipalities, focusing on larger one. A representative of a TSO pointed out the contradiction in this approach:

> Large municipalities were prioritized for partnership letters due to their capacity, leaving smaller ones behind [. . .]if I have to get a letter of partnership from [. . .] a small municipality it is more difficult [than getting one from] a larger one [. . .] where there is already a large number. [of available houses] (Int.3, VLT, Project Coordinator, TSO).

The latter problem emerged in many of the interviews, both in the first and second rounds. A representative from a TSO expressed concern about families already hosting refugees. Everyone noted that the call for applications seemed to require new, empty places, thereby excluding from support families already providing shelter to refugees. Therefore, those already hosting could not benefit from economic support nor relational support (e.g., social workers) coming from the Protezione Civile 's call.

> We asked ourselves, what about all those families who are already taking people in? Will they not be able to respond to this call? (Int.2 CM2, Head of projects area, TSO).

The same concerns were raised by the municipalities.

> Here there has been no support for host families. Even the call for applications that asked for empty places, therefore for new arrivals, and this was it (Int. CO, Head of department, ANCI).

Perceived mismanagement and its consequences

A municipal representative reflected on the broader implications of these challenges: 'We saw incredible solidarity from TSOs and individual families in initially welcoming refugees, but they felt abandoned soon after'. This abandonment led to reluctance on the part of TSOs to continue to participate in the response. The representative also criticised the management of the reception process, noting that it differed from the normal CAS system, which provides resources such as pocket money and mediators (Int. MC, Councillor for Social Policies, Municipality).

In summary, there were significant shortcomings in the aim to integrate national reception efforts with existing grassroots support. Pre-existing host families and organisations, initially enthusiastic about providing support, faced challenges due to the lack of continued assistance and recognition in the new system. This highlights the need for policies that not only encourage initial acts of solidarity but also sustain and support these efforts over time, ensuring that both new and existing reception initiatives are adequately resourced and integrated into national policy. While Protezione Civile's involvement marked a significant step in centralising the response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis, it also faced critical challenges. These included the need for a more flexible approach to transition from temporary housing solutions, problems in relation to the impact of tender specifications on smaller municipalities, and the integration of existing reception efforts into the new framework. These insights point to the importance of flexible and adaptive policy mechanisms to respond to evolving situations on the ground (Int.14, AF, Head of department. Region).

For us, it is impossible to think about emptying the CAS favouring a widespread reception, when we still have thousands of Ukrainians in hotels, that is, in the most extreme type of accommodation, which we absolutely have to end. From their [the national] point of view, first we will empty the hotels and then we will put the possibility of emptying the CAS on the agenda. That is the reasoning. [. . .] It is logical, but in practice, unfortunately, for months now we have not seen a significant reduction in the number of people in hotels. (Int.14 AF, Head of department. Region)

Discussion

Several key insights emerge from our research that are significant not only for Italy but also for broader discussions on migration policy and crisis management. Firstly, the response to the Ukrainian crisis highlighted the indispensable role of local entities, including municipalities and TSOs. Their swift, effective actions, deeply rooted in community engagement, were crucial in

bridging the gap left by the delayed national response. This grassroots activism, while admirable, also points to the necessity for a more integrated approach to crisis management, where local initiatives are seamlessly woven into the national policy and action framework. Secondly, the situation in Italy, marked by the absence of national intervention in the initial stages, led to a form of grassroots refugee reception. Each locality, in collaboration with TSOs, crafted its own policy responses, independent of higher governmental structures. This scenario extended beyond grassroots activism, showcasing a genuinely decentralised and community-driven approach to crisis management. Notably, our findings featured examples of collaborative practice among local entities and partially autonomous local branches of national institutions.

However, despite the admirable efforts of this grassroots activism, it faced various challenges, particularly in terms of making support sustainable and becoming integrated with national efforts. This highlights the need for a more cohesive and comprehensive approach to crisis response. The issues surrounding support for diaspora communities and the inclusion of grassroots efforts in national planning reveal gaps in policy design and implementation. Furthermore, this case study illustrates the importance of flexibility and adaptability in policy mechanisms, especially in emergency contexts. The initial response, while commendable for its speed and breadth, lacked the necessary support structures to maintain and expand upon the early efforts. This suggests the importance of policies that are not only responsive but also sustainable, ensuring long-term support for those affected by crises. Additionally, it points to the complexities of balancing immediate humanitarian needs with long-term integration strategies. Effective crisis management requires not only that the immediate needs of refugees be addressed but also that their long-term integration into society be considered. This involves a careful balance of resources, planning, and coordination across various levels of government and with multiple stakeholders.

Conclusion

The case of Ukrainian refugee reception in Italy, scrutinised through the theoretical lenses of Multi-Level Governance (MLG), not only highlights the pivotal role of local actors and civil society in emergency responses, but also reshapes our understanding of an established immigrant integration policy framework, in which the concepts of battleground, local turn and governance decoupling are all relevant.

The literature has often associated the concept of battleground with the MLG of refugee reception due to the extreme politicisation of the reception of refugees. However, our research shows that the reception of refugees is not always strategic and overtly conflictual. The level of

politicisation of a particular crisis and the different connotations of different refugees within the public discourse play a significant role. The reception of Ukrainians was depoliticised due to a significant external factor, namely the unjust invasion of a sovereign country in the heart of Europe that made Europeans feel directly involved, not to mention the ethnic factor. This made people feel that the reception of these white, European and Christian refugees was even desirable as it meant supporting ideals of freedom and democracy. And so, the cooperative dynamics observed in the reception of Ukrainian refugees deviated from the typical battleground narrative of recent years.

From this standpoint, the article provides an extension of the concept of battleground. The approach has usually highlighted situations in which different public and non-public actors compete, establishing alliances, and/or attempting to attract public support and influence policies openly (Ambrosini 2018, 2021; Campomori and Ambrosini 2020). Many scholars stressed the visibility of the conflict in the analysed context (Bazurli 2019; Caponio and Petracchin 2023). Nevertheless, as this article shows by looking at the Ukrainian reception in Italy, conflict may also not be declared, but expressed through bureaucratic delays, impeding conditions and general lack of collaboration.

As for the local turn, which refers to cities developing their own philosophies of integration in the 1990s, was mainly found in large and multicultural cities, such as Berlin, Frankfurt, Vienna, and London (P. Scholten and Penninx 2016). Moreover, in the literature prior to the 'refugee crisis', the local turn was almost exclusively associated with the integration of voluntary rather than forced migrants. The case of the reception of Ukrainians clearly highlights that smaller localities are also engaged in a 'local turn' during emergencies. Additionally, it demonstrated that a 'local dimension of migrant integration policies' (Caponio and Bokert 2010, 9) could be achieved even when the target group were refugees. Indeed, also in respect of this concept, the article offers an extension of its scope.

Finally, we turn to the concept of governance decoupling. Again, the empirical reference has always been the integration of immigrants rather than refugees, because refugee reception is generally coordinated at the national level. P. W. A. Scholten (2013) claims that decoupling occurs when problems are defined in a conflictual way, which did not happen in the case of the reception of Ukrainians in Italy, where, if anything, conflicts between the different levels of government remained latent, resulting in an espoused theory (Argyris and Schon 1974) oriented to mutual agreement and cooperation. Nevertheless, in the reception of Ukrainians 'local level policies have followed a very different logic of policymaking than on the national level' (P. W. A. Scholten 2013, 221) in line with the decoupled governance perspective.

In conclusion, the MLG dynamics of the reception of Ukrainians in Italy can be seen from the perspective of a latent conflict, in which much more bureaucrats and institutional actors (and their idea of 'who does what') were involved than politicians defending conflicting values or political interests. This shift in dynamics suggests a need to adapt and expand our theoretical understanding of immigrant integration to encompass a wider range of scenarios. The local context matters, along with the Zeitgeist on migration at the time.

While this study provides valuable insights into Ukrainian refugee reception in Italy, it also presents certain limitations that pave the way for future research. Its focus is geographically confined to Italy, which, while offering rich insights, also limits the applicability of findings to other contexts. Different countries have varying political, social, and institutional dynamics influencing refugee reception and the role the local level may play in it. Future research could expand this analysis to a broader set of contexts, comparing and contrasting how different national and local governments handle similar crises or sudden shifts in the migration narrative. Moreover, the analysis primarily relies on qualitative data from specific actors within the migration policy sphere. While this approach offers in-depth insights, it does not capture the full spectrum of experiences and perspectives, particularly those of the refugees themselves. Future studies could incorporate a wider range of data sources, including quantitative analysis and direct accounts from refugees, to enrich the understanding of the reception process, as well as its perceived efficacy. To conclude, while this study contributes significantly to our understanding of refugee reception in a specific context, it also opens up numerous avenues for further exploration. Future research in these areas could greatly enhance our knowledge and effectiveness in responding to similar crises globally.

Note

1. The national civil protection body.

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Appendix 1

List of interviews

We interviewed actors from various institutions and anonymised their identities. Below, each interviewee is listed with her 'identifier', the 'organisational scope' of her institution, the 'number of inhabitants' in the main operational city – in brackets, the 'date' of the interview, and her 'role'.

(1) TT. Municipal level (150,000-200,000), Interview date: 9/8/2022, Role: President – TSO

(2) CM. County level (150,000-200,000), Interview date: 10/8/2022, Role: Head of projects area – TSO

(3) VLT. National level (na), Interview date: 26/8/2022, Role: Project coordinator – TSO

(4) FM. National level (na), Interview date: 29/8/2022, Role: Vice president – Third Sector Organization

(5) MM. Municipal level (150,000-200,000), Interview date: 30/8/2022, Role: Project coordinator – TSO

(6) GZ. Municipal level (150,000-200,000), Interview date: 30/8/2022, Role: Head of projects area – TSO

(7) TP. National level (na), Interview date: 30/8/2022, Role: Deputy Head Department – Government

(8) SM. Municipal level (150,000-200,000), Interview date: 9/9/2022, Role: Social worker – TSO

(9) OF. National level (na), Interview date: 21/9/2022, Role: Head Department – TSO

(10) GC. National level (na), Interview date: 21/9/2022, Role: Programme manager – TSO

(11) UB. Municipal level (100,000-150,000), Interview date: 26/9/2022, Role: President – TSO

(12) PO. Municipal level (100,000-150,000), Interview date: 29/9/2022, Role: President – TSO

(13) GM. Regional level (na), Interview date: 7/10/2022, Role: Spokesperson – Government

(14) AF. Regional level (na), Interview date: 7/10/2022, Role: Head Department – Government

(15) CO. National level (na), Interview date: 21/10/2022, Role: Head Department – Public network

(16) BS. National level (na), Interview date: 21/10/2022, Role: Spokesperson – Public network

(17) IR. Regional level (250,000-500,000), Interview date: 28/10/2022, Role: Project coordinator – TSO

(18) CO. National level (na), Interview date: 25/11/2022, Role: Volunteer – TSO

(19) NP. National level (na), Interview date: 26/11/2022, Role: Volunteer – TSO

(20) JD. National level (na), Interview date: 26/11/2022, Role: Head Department – TSO

(21) MME. Municipal level (100,000-150,000), Interview date: 5/5/2023, Role: Councillor social policies – Municipality

(22) AM. Municipal level (1,000,000 and above), Interview date: 9/5/2023, Role: Area manager – TSO

(23) SCM. National level (na), Interview date: 16/5/2023, Role: Head Department – TSO

(24) MC. Municipal level (150,000-200,000), Interview date: 17/5/2023, Role: Councillor social policies – Municipality

(25) SB. Municipal level (150,000-200,000), Interview date: 17/5/2023, Role: Head of social services – Municipality

(26) AB. Municipal level (250,000-500,000), Interview date: 18/5/2023, Role: Social service coordinator – Municipality

(27) LN. Municipal level (250,000-500,000), Interview date: 24/5/2023, Role: Councillor social policies – Municipality

(28) AM2. Municipal level (1 m and over), Interview date: 9/5/2023, Role: Local chapter coordinator – TSO

(29) LR. Municipal level (150,000-200,000), Interview date: 29/5/2023, Role: Local chapter coordinator – TSO

(30) CdO. Municipal level (250,000-500,000), Interview date: 24/5/2023, Role: Local chapter coordinator – TSO

(31) MV. Municipal level (150,000-200,000), Interview date: 31/5/2023, Role: Local chapter coordinator – TSO

(32) IR2. Municipal level (250,000-500,000), Interview date: 30/5/2023, Role: Project coordinator – TSO

(33) MS. Municipal level (250,000-500,000), Interview date: 30/5/2023, Role: Project coordinator – TSO

(34) SM. Municipal level (150,000-200,000), Interview date: 1/6/2023, Role: Area manager – TSO

(35) BM. Municipal level (150,000-200,000), Interview date: 1/6/2023, Role: Project coordinator – TSO

(36) SC. National level (na), Interview date: 12/6/2023, Role: Spokesperson – TSO

(37) PF. Municipal level (150,000-200,000), Interview date: 20/6/2023, Role: Head Department – Municipality

(38) PpF. National level (na), Interview date: 20/6/2023, Role: Executive director – TSO

(39) FM2. Municipal level (150,000-200,000), Interview date: 22/6/2023, Role: Councillor third sector – Municipality

(40) FM3. National level (na), Interview date: 26/6/2023, Role: Manager – TSO