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Further to the bottom of the hierarchy: the stratification of forced migrants' welfare rights amid the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes how forced migrants have been pushed further down in the hierarchy of social citizenship amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on evidence from research in six cities of north-eastern Italy, we show that their welfare rights have stratified due to national immigration policies that imply unequal access to social protection. Local-level forces – including regional welfare institutions, municipal governments, and civil society organizations – have either magnified or mitigated such state-driven stratification. This process resulted in uneven landscapes of social citizenship, with a minority of migrants relatively well-protected and the others entangled into downward, pandemic-induced spirals of marginalization. In this way various forms of exclusion were activated, and accumulated on, one another – what we define as COVID-19's 'ripple effect'. These findings travel beyond Italy as an exemplary case of rampant nativism and urge post-pandemic host societies to emancipate welfare rights from the immigration policies to which they are so often subordinated.

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Introduction

The COVID-19's huge, planetary ramifications are making it increasingly evident how deceptive are the assertions about its 'egalitarian' or 'leveling' character. The available evidence demonstrates, on the contrary, that the pandemic is intensifying and accelerating pre-existing inequalities, notably along class, gender, ethnic, legal, and territorial lines. The condition of migrants and their descendants, as well as of racially minoritized groups, is a case in point. This is apparent from the disproportionate rate of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths across these communities – a consequence of assorted factors including poverty, residential segregation, low access and quality of health services, and high concentration in essential jobs that cannot be performed remotely (e.g. Solomos 2021, 723–725; Acuto et al. 2020; OECD 2020). But aside from direct health impacts, migrants are also subject to derivative forms of exclusion, most starkly in the realms of work and education (cf. OECD 2020), along with novel racist canards aimed at

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fueling nativist discourses (Stierl and Mezzadra 2020; Wondreys and Mudde 2022). In other words, the pandemic is marking a turning point for the ‘politics of difference’, by which ‘some lives are protected and helped to flourish while others are forgotten if not sacrificed’ (Lunstrum et al. 2021, 1504).

The aim of this article is to make sense of how noncitizens’ welfare rights have (further) stratified in the context of the pandemic, with a focus on a population that is particularly marginalized – that of forced migrants in host societies. Preliminary evidence shows that precarious housing conditions expose them to higher risks of infection (OECD 2020, 3–4), state-imposed mobility restrictions are making irregular journeys ever more perilous (Sanchez and Achilli, 2020), and the delayed processing of asylum applications is resulting in protracted periods of uncertainty (Crawley 2021, 6). In short, COVID-19 represents for forced migrants a ‘great amplifier’ of previous forms of exclusion (Crawley 2021, 4) and should thus be understood as ‘a biological descriptor for a political crisis of intersectional inequality’ (Donà 2021, 907). What is missing, however, is a theoretically informed, empirically grounded analysis of the complex *mechanisms* through which their ongoing exclusion from social citizenship is (re)produced under COVID-19 circumstances.

Although the plight of forced migrants may have exacerbated on a general level, our article argues that the impact of COVID-19 has been *uneven* across this population. First, the legal statuses allotted to forced migrants through national laws imply differential degrees of (un)deservingness in terms of social entitlements, and thus unequal access to welfare provisions (e.g. Crawley and Skleparis 2018; Bonjour and Duyvendak 2018). Second, when enforced ‘on the ground’, this state-driven stratification of welfare rights interacts with context-specific local factors that may either magnify or mitigate the ‘hierarchies of exclusion’ enshrined in national laws (e.g. de Graauw & Vermeulen, 2016). Overall, this results in highly diversified landscapes of social citizenship within a certain jurisdiction – arguably producing divergent, far-reaching consequences under pandemic circumstances.

We unfold our argument through in-depth research on the case of Italy, which neatly exemplifies how migrants’ welfare rights are restricted in times of rampant nativism, i.e. the ideological horizon informing stratification as a policy choice. COVID-19 has indeed exacerbated the effects of the immigration crackdown that the Italian executive enacted in late 2018 (the so-called ‘Security Decree I’). These provisions have restricted the access to, and the content of, international protection precisely on the basis of forced migrants’ legal status. Specifically, we analyze six medium-sized cities in the North-East of the country (Venice, Treviso, Belluno, Bologna, Ferrara, and Ravenna) that differ across the dimensions of theoretical interest. The study relies on assorted data, including 30 interviews with key stakeholders conducted in 2020–21 and secondary sources.

Based on our results, the pandemic and the draconian measures enforced to mitigate it have shed light on, and magnified, the fragilities and injustices of Italy’s asylum system. Such impacts, however, are contingent upon the legal status of forced migrants and the local contexts in which they are settled. The minority of them who could access the ‘ordinary’ (but in fact highly selective) reception system were relatively well-sheltered from the major obstacles they had to face, especially where there is a long-standing tradition of local asylum policy-making. But for the others, the pandemic has triggered an inexorable, downward spiral of marginalization, by which various forms of exclusion

have activated, and accumulated on, one another. This was especially the case in large-scale ‘emergency’ centers whose purpose is putatively humanitarian but often lack even the most basic provisions. There, the pandemic could spread with great virulence. In turn, such direct health impacts led forced migrants to lose their precarious jobs because of protracted periods of confinement, and thus to face poorer integration prospects – in a sort of *ripple effect*. Thus, not only forced migrants have been pushed further down in the hierarchy of social citizenship – inequalities have also risen *among them*. By providing a nuanced, fine-grained analysis of migration governance in pandemic times, these findings contribute to the cumulative scientific effort to scrutinize the COVID-19’s social reverberations (cf. Grasso et al. 2021, S18).

The article is structured as follows. The next section provides the theoretical background of the study. The article thus offers an overview of the Italian and local contexts analyzed, the rationale behind the selection of case studies, as well as of the methods and the sources of the investigation. The bulk of the empirical material is then presented. The results, the implications, and the limitations of the study are discussed in the conclusion, also to suggest avenues for future research.

Theory: the stratification of forced migrants’ welfare rights in pandemic times

National migration regimes and the politics of stratification

While the rights of refugees rest upon international and universalistic legal basis, asylum governance is de facto encapsulated in national migration regimes which, by definition, create hierarchical systems of rights (Crawley and Skleparis 2018, 51). The policy categories allotted to migrants through national legislations often fail to capture their complex lived experiences; rather, they are the outcome of floating political conditions and reflect to what extent migrants are deemed (un)deserving of international protection by the host community, and by the Global North more generally (e.g. Hamlin 2021; Carling 2015; Castles 2005).

This ‘politics of bounding’ has far-reaching implications in terms of welfare rights as a fundamental element of citizenship (Könönen 2018; Choules 2006). Migrants’ welfare rights are stratified by, and dependent on, immigration status – a selective process resulting in unequal treatment and discrimination between migrants and natives, and among migrants themselves (Bolderson 2011). Although the stated aim of integration policies is to *enable* membership, they are in fact subordinated to immigration policies that *impose conditions* on membership based on cultural, economic, or other criteria of deservingness (e.g. Goodman 2015; Nicholls 2020). As for asylum, migrants have limited access to public services, while they await the verdict of their application (Strokosch and Osborne 2016, 675) and, in case the request is eventually rejected, their status may even become irregular (cf. Sainsbury 2012). As Bonjour and Duyvendak put it,

[i]ntegration requirements are applied so as to select those expected to integrate smoothly, while denying entry or stay to those considered unlikely to “fit” in the host society. This represents a fundamental change, given that these selective policies are applied primarily to refugees and family migrants, whose admission is based on constitutionally and internationally enshrined fundamental rights’ (2018, 882).

The stratification of welfare rights tends to become more profound when the contentious politics of migration escalates – a trend that is apparent in recent European history. Faced with increased migrants' arrivals from the Global South over the 2010s, the EU and its member states failed in sharing the responsibilities of international protection and responded with highly restrictive measures (Bonjour, Ripoll Servent, and Thielemann 2018; Castelli Gattinara 2017). These latter have targeted both migrants attempting to enter (through the militarization and externalization of border management) and those settled or in transit across Europe (through deficient, exclusionary, and emergency-driven systems of reception). Exclusion and containment have been justified precisely through the deceptive, politically loaded dichotomy between 'deserving refugees' and 'undeserving migrants' (Crawley and Skleparis 2018; Hamlin 2021). The rise and normalization of far-right politics explain such outcomes to a significant extent (Mudde 2019). Far-right actors champion a nativist understanding of the social fabric, meaning that states should be inhabited exclusively by natives. Such tenets are often coupled with *welfare chauvinist* policy proposals, according to which natives and immigrants compete for the same limited resources and, subsequently, the needs of the latter are illegitimate, or at least to be subordinated to those of the former.

Importantly, hierarchies of social citizenship and the politics informing them have to be understood as multi-scalar phenomena. Local contexts are indeed crucial in producing the forms of welfare inclusion/exclusion that forced migrants experience.

Multi-level drivers of stratification and uneven geographies of social citizenship

The welfare rights of migrants, as well as the immigration policies on which they depend, do not materialize evenly over national jurisdictions. National-level provisions, in fact, heavily interact with the specific local context in which they are implemented. Over the last years, specialists on migration have adopted multi-level governance perspectives precisely to account for the assorted state and non-state actors located at different spatial scales that concur to shape migration policies (e.g. Bazurli and Kaufmann 2022; Campomori and Ambrosini 2020; Caponio and Jones-Correa 2018). Far from being 'policy takers' at the bottom of a multi-level hierarchy, local actors can set their own agenda, identifying "'local" problems in need of clear "local" solutions' (Scholten 2013, 220). This can produce significant discrepancies in the manifestation of migrants' social citizenship 'on the ground' (cf. Łukasiewicz, Oren, and Tripathi 2021).

On the one hand, local actors can magnify the selective logics inscribed in the policies descending 'from above'. Municipal governments can craft 'their own' exclusionary policies as a way to secure political rewards (cf. Campomori and Ambrosini 2020), even serving as laboratories for experiments later scaled up to higher tiers of government. But aside from these highly visible provisions, exclusion also comes in more implicit and informal fashions, as in the case of police forces and other local enforcement agencies that adopt discretionary practices of *local bordering* to obstruct migrant rights, e.g. by hindering the attribution of legal status to prospective asylum-seekers and blocking the renewal of refugees' documents (e.g. Artero and Fontanari 2021; Gargiulo 2017). On the other hand, the literature on 'sanctuary', 'solidarity', and 'refuge' cities show how local officials can craft policies and practices to include immigrants in public service provision, regardless of their legal status (e.g. Bazurli 2019; Darling and Bauder 2019; Mayer 2018;

de Graauw & Vermeulen, 2016), based on normative ideas of urban citizenship (cf. Varsanyi 2006). Regional governments, too, can play a decisive role in these policies and practices of local (de)bordering (Campomori and Caponio 2017; Pettrachin, 2020).

Not only sub-national authorities, but also civil society organizations crucially contribute to either deepen or flatten the stratification of migrants' welfare rights. Over the last years, volunteering and political activism by immigrants and their supporters have mushroomed even within extremely hostile contexts, with the goal of achieving inclusive social change (e.g. della Porta and Steinhilper 2021; Bazurli and Delclós 2021). A vast constellation of NGOs, trade unions, faith-based organizations, and social movements is often the driving force of pro-migrant policy-making at local-level and beyond, provided that these actors find the support of sympathetic public officials (e.g. Bazurli 2020; de Graauw & Vermeulen, 2016). Importantly, municipal governments can support migrants that are not formally entitled to access welfare services through 'shadow provisions' by NGOs (Spencer, 2018) – thus exploiting what Dobbs et al. (2019) define as *social welfare gray zones*. As shown by the literature on direct social actions (Bosi and Zamponi 2020), civil society organizations also provide welfare services 'from below' by their own means, ranging from 'food and shelter' amid humanitarian emergencies to more sophisticated provisions. In times of rampant nativism, bottom-up mobilizations against migrants have proliferated, too (e.g. Castelli Gattinara 2018).

Overall, assorted political and policy conditions at the local level can mitigate the stratification inscribed in national laws or, conversely, deepen it even further – thus contributing to craft uneven geographies of forced migrants' welfare rights. Within contexts of institutional decentralization, fiscal austerity, and poor inter-institutional coordination, these variable local conditions 'contribute to a "lottery effect" of unequal opportunities for refugees' (Łukasiewicz, Oren, and Tripathi 2021, 1). Based on the literature reviewed so far, Figure 1 displays how such inequalities of opportunities *for* and *among* forced migrants come about in host societies. In the next paragraphs, we make the case that the stratification of their welfare rights has escalated following the COVID-19 pandemic.

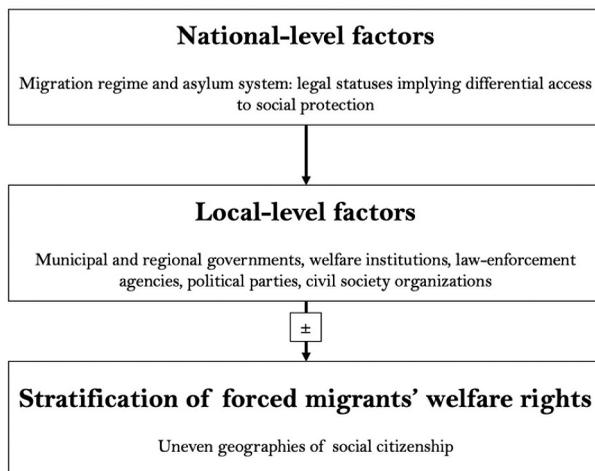


Figure 1. Stratification of forced migrants' welfare rights in host societies.

Mechanisms of stratification in pandemic times: an analytical framework

It is here contended that the stratification of welfare rights and the highly politicized landscape in which it is constructed had their most detrimental consequences following the spread of COVID-19. In their seminal study on Central Americans living in the U.S., Menjívar and Abrego (2012) use the term ‘legal violence’ to describe how immigrants with tenuous legal statuses are subject to distinct but *cumulative* forms of exclusion embedded in the laws. Such a cumulative effect is likely to exacerbate and accelerate amid COVID-19 (Donà 2021). Denied or limited access to public services (first and foremost healthcare) becomes, of course, a way more significant form of exclusion when daily life is carried out under pandemic circumstances. Indeed, preliminary evidence shows that policy coordination, social safety nets, and community workers have been crucial for enacting effective responses to the virus (Liu et al. 2021). Risks of exclusion are ever more acute for forced, irregular, and other ‘invisibilized’ migrants, who generally refrain from accessing even the emergency services they may be entitled to because too afraid to do so – a dynamic that has been observed in times of COVID-19, too (Pelizza, Milan, and Lausberg 2021, 70).

Against this background, we expect that the pandemic, as a crucial juncture, has intensified the driving forces behind stratification presented above (cf. Figure 1), thus precipitating complex mechanisms of forced migrants’ exclusion from social citizenship. Limited access to and poor quality of healthcare, community, and housing services are mutually-reinforcing drivers of exclusion that can enhance the risks of exposure to COVID-19 as well as to other health problems (e.g. psychological distress due to social distancing). In turn, deteriorated health conditions pose crucial barriers to economic integration, and thus to regularization prospects. Denied access to social safety nets, too, can prompt exclusion from the job market in pandemic times. Overall, these spiraling mechanisms of marginalization might become a serious bane for social integration more generally due to the limited chances for meaningful and non-exploitative interactions within the host society.

While these multifaceted, cumulative forms of exclusion are the by-product of state-imposed stratification of welfare rights, we also expect local forces to have a magnifying or mitigating effect. On the one hand, the pandemic has marked a nativist upsurge, with political actors at various levels exploiting the crisis to scapegoat migrants, e.g. framing them as a public health threat (Stierl and Mezzadra 2020; Wondreys and Mudde 2022) – a discursive strategy that possibly justifies an additional layering of their welfare rights. On the other hand, scholars have observed that COVID-19 have spurred new forms of pro-migrant activism and policy-making at the local level, rather than curbing them altogether. Sanctuary cities worldwide, for example, have guaranteed full access to healthcare services and poverty relief programs to all migrants residing in their jurisdiction (Bauder and Godoy 2020; see also Zajak, Stjepandić, and Steinhilper 2021). Figure 2 summarizes our overall analytical framework, which seeks to unpack the mechanisms through which forced migrants have been pushed further down in the hierarchy of social citizenship amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In the next sections, this analytical framework will be applied to the case of Italy.

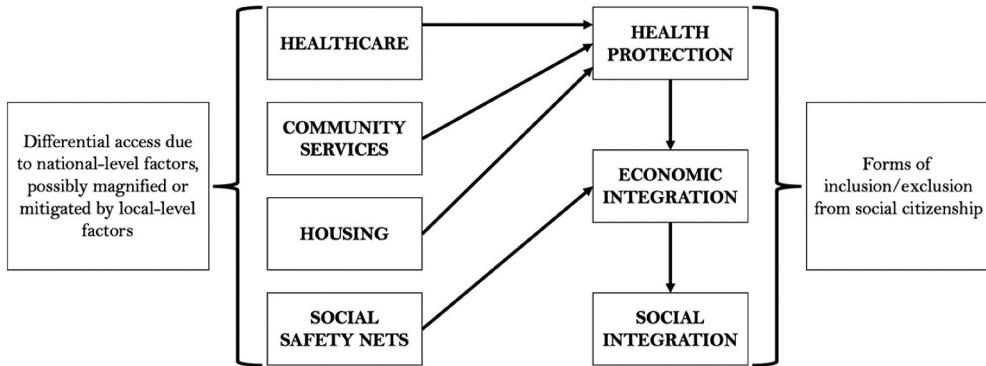


Figure 2. Analytical framework: mechanisms of stratification of forced migrants' welfare rights in pandemic times.

Context: Italy's asylum governance on day one of COVID-19

The recent history of Italy plainly exemplifies how the welfare rights of forced migrants are stratified in host societies as a consequence of rising political contention. Due to increased arrivals from the Global South, a poorly structured national asylum system, and the lack of cooperation among EU member states, humanitarian emergencies have mushroomed in this South European 'frontline' country over the 2010s. In face of these dynamics, the politicization of immigration has skyrocketed (Castelli Gattinara 2017). Especially since 2017, left-leaning national incumbents eroded asylum rights for the sake of competing with their right-wing opponents. The climax was then reached in 2018, when Matteo Salvini – leader of the far-right *Lega* party and newly appointed Minister of the Interior – authored the 'Security Decree I'¹ as a spearhead of his anti-immigration platform (Bazurli, Campomori, and Casula 2020). These new provisions restricted the access to, and the contents of, international protection based on the dichotomy between 'deserving refugees' and 'undeserving migrants'.

More specifically, this immigration crackdown has rolled out through a (deeper) *dualization* of national asylum governance (Semprebon 2021). On the one hand, successful asylum applicants, as well as unaccompanied minors, were entitled to access the SIPROIMI system,² which provides a holistic set of services for tackling multiple vulnerabilities. In addition to the immediate needs to be met, it aims at individual empowerment in the longer-term through 'Individualized Training Programs'. The SIPROIMI also ensures the involvement of local actors and a balanced pattern of settlement (the so-called '*accoglienza integrata e diffusa*', i.e., small-scale reception centers tied to local communities). For such reasons, it is widely praised as effective and respectful of human rights. Its main flaw, however, is the voluntary, bottom-up implementation mechanism. Municipalities, in cooperation with NGOs, may decide whether to apply for the Ministry of the Interior's public calls. This encourages free-riding by reluctant mayors and an uneven settlement of migrants across the country. Importantly, the 'Security Decree I' drastically reduced the chances to obtain some forms of international protection – and thus the access to, and the scope of, the SIPROIMI. The two-year

‘humanitarian protection status’ was in fact replaced with various ‘residence permits for special cases’ and a ‘special protection status’, which have illegalized the status of approximately 37,000 migrants as of July 2020 due to their more restrictive criteria.³

On the other hand, migrants with a pending application, as well as refugees that are not ‘lucky enough’ to be accommodated in a SIPROIMI center, have been entitled to access the CAS system.⁴ This latter was established in 2015 as an exceptional, short-term solution to complement SIPROIMI in cases of its temporary saturation, but eventually covered the lion’s share of migrant reception.⁵ The Ministry of Interior and its local branches, the prefectures (*prefetture*), manage implementation and then outsource services to private actors, usually NGOs or for-profit companies, with virtually no involvement of municipal governments and an overall lack of transparency. The ‘Security Decree I’ further deteriorated the already deficient quality standards of these centers, based on a minimalistic and emergency-driven view of international protection. Services related to the orientation to local services, Italian language courses, professional training, leisure, psychological assistance, and support for vulnerable individuals have become non-eligible costs. Also, resources devoted to legal support and cultural mediation were reduced and the possibility to engage in volunteering was abolished (AIDA 2019, 102–3).⁶ As a result, CAS centres are often poorly-equipped,⁷ large-sized, hosting tens or hundreds of recipients, and located in urban outskirts or other peripheral areas. Forced migrants’ integration prospects, moreover, were shrunk through their exclusion from municipal censuses (*registrazione anagrafica*), which ensures access to some basic welfare rights (cf. Gargiulo 2017).

Besides inflicting various forms of exclusion on migrants, the ‘Security Decree I’ also forced municipalities to shoulder a greater burden of welfare services, as they have to meet the needs of a growing, highly precarious population (e.g. migrants whose protection request is pending or rejected) while having shrinking prerogatives and resources at their disposal to do so. Conflicts across government tiers have thus escalated. Several (mostly left-leaning) mayors catalyzed the contestation of the ‘Security Decree I’ on humanitarian and constitutional grounds – yet rarely suspending its application in their jurisdictions. Civil society actors too have resorted to political protest and direct social actions to mitigate the detrimental effects of the new laws on migrants’ lives (cf. Bosi and Zamponi 2020). On the other side of the ideological spectrum, many anti-migrant actors at the local level chose to ride the ‘nativist wave’, for example by dismantling SIPROIMI in their municipality. Table 1 summarizes the main welfare rights to which migrants have been entitled based on their legal status.

COVID-19 has sprung within the context of such a restrictive governance regime and polarized political landscape. On 18 December 2020, the parliament passed a law¹¹ to partly reverse the exclusionary measures introduced by the ‘Security Decree I’.¹² All the interviewees participating in our research, however, agreed that the changes introduced by the law were not yet tangible ‘on the ground’ at the time of our meetings. In the light of these premises, the next sections explore in detail how the condition of forced migrants, and their welfare rights more specifically, have changed since the outbreak of the pandemic in the local contexts we analyze.

Table 1. Italy: Social benefits associated with legal statuses of forced migrants, starting from October 2018.

	Access to SIPROIMI (ordinary system of reception and integration)	Key features of reception centers	Job placement (e.g. internships, job training programs)	Health protection
<i>Migrants entitled with an international protection status; Unaccompanied minors</i>	Yes	Small-scale reception centers (<i>accoglienza integrata e diffusa</i>) tied to local communities (84% of accommodations are flats with 3–4 hosts) ⁸	Activation of job placement programs, with the support of a job tutor	Enrolment in the National Health System, including family doctor. The location of SIPROIMI centers in inhabited areas, as well as the presence of social workers who take responsibility for the well-being of beneficiaries, facilitate the access to health services.
<i>Migrants entitled with a humanitarian protection or 'special' protection status; Migrants with a pending application</i>	No, they can access emergency accommodation centers (CAS) only	Large-sized centers: 35% of centers are large (51–300 hosts) or very large (>300 hosts) ⁹	No integration programs nor job tutors. One social worker per 50 beneficiaries on average	Enrolment in the National Health Systems, including family doctor. The location of CAS centers in peripheral areas, as well as the lack of social workers, make health service difficult to access.
<i>Asylum-seekers whose access to CAS centers has been revoked due to disciplinary measures, or for other reasons¹⁰</i>	No, they can access 'generalist' night dorms only	N/A	None	Enrolment in the National Health Systems, including family doctor. However, family doctors can be assigned only if a legally valid domicile is declared.
<i>Irregular migrants (e.g. non-deported rejected asylum-seekers)</i>	No, they cannot access any public reception center	N/A	None (irregular migrants cannot access the labor market legally)	Irregular non-EU immigrants are not enrolled in the National Health System, but they can access urgent or essential outpatient and hospital care.

Research design, data, and case selection

To illustrate why and how the welfare rights of forced migrants have (further) stratified following the outbreak of COVID-19, we rely on case study research, which entails the rich and holistic description of a few instances of a social phenomenon (della Porta 2008). Small-N qualitative research allows us to make sense of the complex mechanisms and causal pathways through which welfare inequalities have deepened in the context of the pandemic.

The empirical analysis focuses on six cities located in north-eastern Italy (Venice, Treviso, Belluno, Bologna, Ferrara, and Ravenna) and relies on assorted data gathered in 2020–21. Since the beginning of the pandemic, we conducted

desk research through the analysis of official statistics, policy documents and government files, media reporting, and the existing literature. These secondary sources served as a basis to conduct 30 interviews with key stakeholders via online platforms between December 2020 and April 2021, a proper time to observe both the most immediate impacts and some medium-term ramifications of COVID-19. Interviewees were selected through a purposive sampling procedure so as to represent multiple perspectives and milieus (Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam 2003). They include elected officials, civil servants of both municipal and regional governments, welfare service providers, frontline social workers, and pro-migrant activists. Interviews lasted 1 hour and 12 minutes on average and entailed open-ended questions about the impacts of COVID-19 on reception and integration systems, migrants' access to welfare services, and local politics. All the interviews have been recorded, fully transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic coding. They will be cited by referring to a number representing the order in which the interviews have been held (cf. Appendix for the list of interviews).

Italy is an exemplary case of how migrants' welfare rights stratify in times of rampant nativism (see above), but is also one of the western countries where COVID-19 has hit the hardest and the soonest in early 2020, with authorities finding themselves relatively unprepared to cope with the public health emergency. The impact of the so-called 'first wave' was particularly overwhelming in the North of the country, where the six cities analyzed are located. Research conducted in May–June 2020 confirms that 98.7% of COVID-19 cases among migrants accommodated in reception centers were diagnosed in Northern Italy (Costanzo et al. 2020, 18).

But aside from these COVID-related aspects, we chose these municipalities based on a number of similarities and differences of high theoretical significance. They all are medium-sized, relatively affluent cities with rather large numbers of foreign-born residents, notably as compared to national averages (key figures are summarized in Table 2). Yet, critical cross-case variations also exist. Bologna, Ravenna, and Ferrara are located in the region of Emilia-Romagna, which is renowned for the long-standing hegemony of the Left, the advanced welfare system, the high levels of social capital, the robust infrastructure of civil society organizations, and the proactive role played by regional authorities in coordinating asylum reception and integration – a domain in which Italian regions have no formal competencies (e.g. Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1994; Campomori and Caponio 2017; Bazurli, Campomori, and Casula 2020). During the pandemic, the regional government, as well as Bologna and Ravenna, were led by left-leaning coalitions, whereas right-wing anti-migrant parties have been ruling Ferrara since 2019, after decades to the opposition.

The region of Veneto – where Venice, Treviso, and Belluno are located – is instead characterized by a very different political culture. Conservatives, and foremost the far-right *Lega*, have been the playmakers of regional politics for decades. The president Luca Zaia started his third mandate in October 2020 after obtaining no less than 76.8% of votes in regional elections. Anti-migrant politics has been one of the hallmarks of the regional government, as also testified by the restrictive and minimalist approach adopted in the domain of asylum (Pettrachin 2020). Among the most emblematic cases of right-wing

Table 2. Key economic, social, and political indicators of the cases analyzed.

	Emilia-Romagna (region)	Bologna	Ravenna	Ferrara	Veneto (region)	Venice	Treviso	Belluno	Italy
Population*	4,438,937	395,416	158,058	132,195	4,869,830	256,083	84,837	35,522	59,236,213
% of non-Italian residents*	12.7%	15.8%	10.9%	11.7%	10.5%	15.8%	14.1%	7.8%	8.7%
Taxable income per capita (€)**	21,957	25,596	21,225	22,385	21,077	22,521	25,695	23,370	20,075
Government color at the outbreak of COVID-19	Center-left	Center-left	Center-left	Center-right	Center-right	Center-right	Center-right	Center-left	Center-left
Available slots in SIPROIMI centers***	2,388	1,812	84	128	788	106	49	18	33,625
Number of beneficiaries accommodated in CAS centers****	8,285	266	303	419	6,169	103	417	44	66,595
Average number of beneficiaries per CAS center****	7.82	33.75	9.34	11.41	11.27	8.69	116.75	9.6	12.15

* Italian National Institute of Statistics, 2021.

** Italy's Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2019.

*** Atlante SIPROIMI 2019.

**** *Openpolis, Centri d'Italia, una mappa dell'accoglienza, 2019.*

dominance in the region is the city of Treviso, one of the historical strongholds of the *Lega* party. Observers have often used the moniker 'sheriffs' to describe how central law-and-order is to the agenda of its city mayors. Right-leaning parties have also ruled Venice, the regional capital, since 2015 – with the *Lega* supporting the governing coalition since September 2020. Belluno represents an 'outlier' within this regional context. Since 2012, the municipality has been ruled by a left-leaning, independent coalition, which has become renowned for its cutting-edge and inclusionary approach to asylum.

In a nutshell, the cases analyzed are 'most different' when it comes to *local-level drivers of stratification*, notably in terms political (progressive vs. conservative governments and subcultures), policy (expansionist vs. minimalist welfare and asylum systems), and civic (strong vs. weak relationships between civil society organizations and public institutions) contexts. These significant variations are mirrored in the number of available slots in SIPROIMI centers (cf. Table 2), which is much higher in Emilia-Romagna as compared to Veneto (as mentioned above, municipal governments implement this reception system on a voluntary basis). But aside from these local specificities, these cases vary significantly also in terms of *national-level drivers of stratification*. Table 2 also shows how each of the six municipalities host both SIPROIMI and CAS centers, ranging from small-scale to extremely large ones, meaning that the unequal access to social protection inscribed in national laws manifest itself within the local contexts analyzed, too. Overall, this strategy for case selection allows us to get a nuanced, in-depth understanding of the variegated landscape of migrants' welfare rights amid the COVID-19 pandemic due to the significant variations in terms of national and local factors.

Empirical results

The dualization of national asylum governance and its differential impacts during COVID-19

The beginning of the first lockdown on 9 March 2020, and the consequent economic slowdown, have raised major obstacles to the welfare of forced migrants. Due to their precarious or non-existent work contracts, many have fallen into a condition of unemployment or underemployment without significant social safety nets. Others have struggled to access the job market to begin with, also because most of training and work integration programs, such as internships (*tirocini*), have been interrupted (I09, I15, I17; I20). Many interviewees agreed that such a sudden break in job integration will soon lead to massive illegalization, being residence permits often dependent on employment contracts. But while these negative effects seem to cut across large sections of the forced migrants' population, we have observed fundamental differences depending on the reception centers they live in (i.e. SIPROIMI vs. CAS systems) – which, in turn, depends on the legal status allotted to forced migrants (see above).

The defining qualities of the SIPROIMI system – consisting of small-scale, high-quality reception centers – proved crucial to mitigate the most detrimental impacts of the pandemic. This owes, first of all, to its decent housing conditions. Living in well-furnished apartments with a low number of flatmates has allowed beneficiaries to limit the risk of infection, as well as to spend the periods of isolation in an enjoyable environment. Relatedly, this model of reception has been flexible enough to be re-organized based on the emerging health requirements, e.g. confirmed or suspected COVID-19 cases could be easily detected and thus isolated in dedicated apartments so as to avert the contagion among migrants and social workers (I04; I17). Thus – as one regional official put it – 'clusters have been extremely manageable' (I12). These centers, moreover, are generally well-embedded into the geography of host communities and their local welfare system – a characteristic that turned out to be a critical added value during the pandemic, because emerging health problems could be smoothly addressed (I04).

The variety of welfare provisions that are made available through the SIPROIMI have been of utmost importance, too. Interviewees especially emphasize the decisive role played by cultural mediation services. Since the beginning of the public health crisis, information activities have been carried out for giving instructions on the behaviors to be adopted and easing anxieties. As one service provider put it, 'in our centers we are doing our best to carry out mediation efforts with our recipients, not only to explain the need for prevention, but also to let them understand the meaning of all this [...] through continuous support' (I20). The practicalities of service delivery have been profoundly reshaped, for instance, by diffusing constantly updated video tutorials and written guidelines in multiple languages, activating new online channels of communication, and extending office hours (I04; I06; I09; I10; I12; I17; I20). During the lockdowns, moreover, social workers have sought to alleviate the sense of isolation experienced by migrants through domestic activities, such as gardening and home maintenance.

Overall, SIPROIMI has largely stood the test of COVID-19, meaning that the physical and mental health of beneficiaries has been protected to a significant extent. The

spokesperson of one third-sector organization operating in Emilia-Romagna expressed this sense of efficacy as follows:

'Don't forget that [...] this region has become a 'red zone' well before the rest of Italy, because we had very high numbers of contagions. [...] But still, there have been zero COVID cases in our SIPROIMI centers. Why? Because SIPROIMI's social workers have more time to devote to our recipients, there're many kinds of specialists working with them, so it's easier to earn their trust as compared to centers where the numerical relations are higher. This is important also when it comes to communication. At the beginning nobody understood to what extent things were about to change, how serious was the pandemic, and how dangerous our behaviors could become. Explaining to people coming from other places that, out of the blue, they must stay at home, wear a mask, wash their hands, and keep the social distancing has not been easy, because it's normal to distrust the imposition of such rules' (I15).

Precisely based on the SIPROIMI's success in safeguarding migrants' well-being amid the pandemic, the national government allowed municipalities (on a voluntary basis and upon approval of the SIPROIMI's central board) to broaden the access to any person in a 'state of need',¹³ regardless of their legal status, in case slots remain vacant (Giovannetti 2021, 45). The SIPROIMI's central board has also decided to extend the maximum period of stay in the centers until the end of the national state of emergency – an exceptional 'freezing' provision precisely aimed at protecting those people whose path to self-determination has been suddenly blocked by the pandemic. Finally, the SIPROIMI's central board has been crucial also in coordinating the local responses to COVID-19 in a systematic way across the country – a steering role that has not been played by any authority in the case of the CAS system (Tavolo Nazionale Asilo 2021, 6). As one CAS social worker put it, 'the Ministry of Interior and the prefectures have abandoned us to our fate' (I10).

With the outbreak of COVID-19, the structural flaws of the CAS system have indeed produced their most harmful consequences – marking a new pinnacle for rights violation. Migrants had to navigate the hardships of confinement periods within poorly equipped, spatially segregated, large-sized, often overcrowded centers, which have also become the ideal incubators for the spread of the virus (I08; I09; I14; I15; I21; I25; I28; I29). Promiscuity is unavoidable in such living spaces, especially in bedrooms and toilets shared by several people. According to the spokesperson of one third-sector organization, for instance, 'shared bedrooms with 8–10 migrants are the true problem [...] for the expansion of COVID clusters, because those are the only spaces where masks cannot be worn' (I09). Another service provider explained the situation as follows: 'all the critical situations we had to face have happened in [CAS] centers, which is umpteenth demonstration of the deficiencies of emergency reception. [...] In one center where we accommodate 40 people we had 37 positive cases overnight' (I15). A survey carried out in May–June 2020 across Italy's reception centers indeed shows that 82.4% of infections have occurred in CAS centers – and especially in those where infected migrants have not been isolated in dedicated facilities (Costanzo et al. 2020, 16–19).

But aside from their spatial configuration, a major shortcoming of CAS centers amid the pandemic has been the lack of services provided therein, especially cultural mediation, which proved essential to raise awareness among and provide guidance to migrants (I21). On 11 March 2020, the *Coordinamento Migranti* – a migrant-led organization

based in Bologna – wrote a letter to public authorities for denouncing the precarity of their living conditions:

'[...] CAS centers have become parking lots where asylum-seekers are crammed without an adequate number of social workers. [...] The confinement rules [that apply to the whole population] do not apply in the places where we work and live in overcrowding conditions. [...] More than 200 of us live in via Mattei [the largest CAS in Emilia-Romagna], where we sleep in bedrooms hosting at least five people, often 10, with the beds on top of each other. Many rooms don't even have the windows for changing the air. [...] Because of the Salvini's law, many of us are even deprived of the health card, as well as of the family doctor. We're forced to pay the full price for drugs and we often lack the money to cure ourselves.'¹⁴

These direct health impacts, in turn, had major implications for the integration prospects of those accommodated in CAS centers. One suspected COVID-19 case, in fact, is enough to force all those accommodated in one center into long periods of mandatory quarantine. But precisely due to overcrowding conditions and lack of services, these prevention measures paradoxically became the ideal circumstance for the disease to diffuse among migrants and social workers – a dynamic that has occurred also in other total institutions, such as prisons and immigrant detention centers. Mandatory quarantines, in turn, have implied the loss of job for many migrants, or the difficulty to look for one. The impossibility to show up for work, in conjunction with precarious or non-existent job contracts, have often led to the layoff of quarantined workers. Other workers have concealed their own COVID-19 infection precisely to avoid this scenario, yet further diffusing the virus among their social contacts. According to one civil servant working on migrant reception, this 'ripple effect' has been 'the most important impact of COVID-19 on migrants' lives' (I14). As one activist put it, 'this chain of problems had a very negative influence on the success of migration projects, on the chances to build a life in the city' (I08).

These concatenated mechanisms of exclusion manifested with special intensity in the so-called 'ex-caserma Serena', a former barracks converted into a CAS center located in the hinterland of Treviso. In June 2020, at a time in which confinement measures had been temporarily eased across the country, this reception 'hub' (the largest in the Veneto region) made national headlines for allegedly becoming – as one activist put it – 'Italy's greatest cluster of COVID-19 in summer 2020' (I29). The sequence of events can be summarized as follows. One infected social worker refrained from declaring his health condition and keep on showing for work. In two months, following two periods of mandatory quarantine, the virus had affected 250 out of approximately 300 migrants, who were thus forced to share poorly provided living spaces in the summer heat, often losing their jobs, while many social and economic activities outside were partly 'back to normal'. Migrants' growing discontent culminated in strong protests, triggering severe repression by police forces, which meanwhile had militarized the perimeter of the building. Four protesters have been arrested and incarcerated in solitary confinement with serious charges, such as abduction, devastation, and plunder. One of them, Chaka Ouattara, a 23-year-old Malian asylum-seeker, committed suicide in prison. By the end of the quarantine, many migrants chose to leave the center and live elsewhere, often in the streets of the city.

Civil society organizations widely agreed in allocating the responsibilities of such serious failures to the emergency model of national asylum governance, as well as to

the service provider to which the management of ‘ex-caserma Serena’ has been outsourced (a for-profit company that run also other large-sized reception centers across Italy, such as the EU Hotspot of Lampedusa and the CAS ‘Mattei’ in Bologna). Assorted pro-migrant groups denounced the complete absence of mediation services and preventive measures, extremely low infrastructural and hygiene standards, and rights abuses against both migrants and social workers. According to two of the activists who most closely followed the Serena case, personal protective equipment has been hardly distributed, infected migrants have not been accommodated in separated spaces nor informed about their own contagion, and the social worker who carried the disease in the center refrained from declaring his condition for fear of being fired (I08; I29). On 29 November 2020, their organizations have released the following statement:

'The Caserma Serena is nothing but a big business on the skin of human beings. [...] [What has happened is] the obvious consequence of Salvini's decrees and the dismantlement of small-scale reception, which [...] during this period of global pandemic would have guaranteed protection for all and the control of contagion'.¹⁵

Albeit with more moderate tones, faith-based organizations have made similar criticisms.¹⁶ Two interviewees in this milieu highlight how the lack of contacts with the outside environment, in conjunction with poor mediation services, played a major role in transforming the center into a 'pressure cooker' during the pandemic (I28; I20).

Last, the end of the reception period for migrants living in CAS centers could be postponed until the end of the national state of emergency, like in the case of the SIPROIMI (see above). The final decision on such postponements, however, is up to the prefectures – with no uniform interpretation of rules across the country. The spokesperson of one third-sector organization operating in Emilia-Romagna indeed reported that 'from September [2020] onwards [...] we are obliged to discharge people with vulnerabilities and leave them in the street in the midst of a pandemic' (I15). The further stratification of migrants' welfare rights is well-summarized by one social worker operating in both SIPROIMI and CAS centers: 'Out of the blue, you must explain to a group of people living together that they have different legal statuses and thus different rights. [...] This is a full-fledged form of institutional violence' (I15).

Local forces magnifying or mitigating stratification amid the pandemic

Although Italy's dualized asylum system has been the key driver of forced migrant rights' stratification amid COVID-19, assorted local factors made such an impact irregular across geographical contexts.

This owes, first of all, to the peculiarities of local welfare systems, especially in the domain of healthcare – which in Italy is in fact a prerogative of regional governments to a large extent. Interviewees based in Emilia-Romagna widely agreed that regional health authorities had the ability to respond effectively to both COVID-19 and its different implications for forced migrants (I01; I02; I05; I09; I11; I12; I15; I2). They reported 'an extremely close collaboration' (I15) with Local Health Units (*Aziende Unità Sanitarie Locali*) and other welfare institutions, which played a decisive role in the distribution of

personal protective equipment, the isolation and tracking of positive cases, as well as in the domain of cultural mediation and psychological support. These welfare services were delivered not only in SIPROIMI and CAS centers, but also in municipal dormitories accommodating migrants in most precarious conditions, such as rejected asylum-seekers (I05; I09; I15). Resources and expertise have been made available also through specific programs financed through the EU's 'Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund', such as the *StartER* project (I21).

This outcome also owes to Emilia-Romagna's proactive role in asylum governance and its 'integrated approach' to welfare services. Although Italian regions have no direct competencies in the area of international protection, Emilia-Romagna has coordinated reception and integration across its jurisdiction from as early as 2004, notably through the 'Land of Asylum' program (*Terra d'Asilo*). This policy approach has been deepened over the last decade, during which regional authorities have cooperated with municipalities, prefectures, and civil society actors to promote participation at the SIPROIMI system and limit the establishment of large-sized reception centers (I11) – in the perspective of 'governing social change' (I12).

The Veneto region has adopted a much different approach during the pandemic, here too a result of long-standing policy trajectories. Traditionally, the regional government has limited its endeavors within the mandate explicitly attributed by national laws – thus refraining from playing any steering role in the domain of asylum (I18; I25). In the account of one regional public official, 'we have decided to not make any decisions, because this is Ministry of the Interior's business' (I18). This 'legalistic' policy style has gone hand in hand with a restrictive approach to welfare services, notably by denying migrants with a pending or rejected asylum application access to integration programs. As the same public official put it, 'the Veneto region has always been oriented to consider the possession of a regular residence permit as a prerequisite to access any social benefits. The rationale is to support [only] those subjects that are going to regularly remain in the territory' (I18). Within this context, moreover, all regional funds originally earmarked for immigrant integration in 2020 (about €250,000) have been diverted to the general budget of health policies for coping with the COVID-19 emergency. In the account of one Treviso-based social worker, 'no [regional] service has been activated [...] to mediate the access to healthcare or disseminate prevention measures' (I28).

Significant variations could be observed also at the municipal level, especially as a function of local politics. The nativist turn in national politics that reached its peak in 2018 has continued to inform local debates and policy-making during the pandemic. This was apparent in Venice, one of the first Italian city to adopt the SIPROIMI in the early 2000s and to pioneer its establishment as a national policy. Following the local elections held in September 2020 and the subsequent entry of the *Lega* party into the governing coalition, one of the new administration's first decision was to curtail SIPROIMI from 77 to 44 slots – thus forcing 33 migrants to leave their accommodations. This outcome has to be interpreted in the light of the politicization of asylum over the previous years, as well as of the voluntary implementation mechanism on which SIPROIMI is based (I06; I17; I24). According to one long-standing local official,

'in a time of great difficulty due to COVID-19, the top priority of the municipal government was to put its hands on SIPROIMI. [...] But SIPROIMI works well, is well-established,

Venice has adopted it for more than 20 years. The reason to dismantle it is exclusively political. [...] Due to the Salvini's decrees SIPROIMI has become a *political object*, [...] an object of desire on which planting political flags' (I24, emphasis added).

Political competition is key to understand the case of the 'ex-caserma Serena' in Treviso, too. In framing both the COVID-19 clusters and the protests that broke out in the center, far-right forces have pointed an accusing finger at migrants, rather than at the precarious living conditions to which they have been relegated (I08; I20; I29). In the words of the city mayor, for example, the cluster 'brings an incalculable damage [...] to our community. [...] And it's not our citizens' fault'.¹⁷ One *Lega's* regional councilor defined migrants as 'ungrateful thugs',¹⁸ whereas the president of the Veneto region declared that 'five million of Venetians have been locked at home for months. I can't see why this should be a problem for 300 people'.¹⁹ Even the *Lega's* leader Salvini took part in the debate asserting that 'if the virus will be back, we know who'll be to blame'²⁰ – thus insinuating that migrants could pose a public health threat and that the pandemic was over as early as July 2020. Center-left parties opposed these hostile remarks, yet partly endorsing law-and-order narratives of their adversaries. One spokesperson of the national executive, for instance, declared that 'rules are rules and must be followed. We won't accept provocations nor rebellions'.²¹ Pro-migrant activists sought to break the 'us-versus-them' dichotomy and to oppose the 'slander' on migrants as 'plague-spreaders',²² also by organizing a demonstration during which migrants have recounted their own experiences in the center (I08).

Not in all municipalities, however, COVID-19 has paved the way for a nativist backlash. In fact, cities with a strong record of asylum policies have deepened their commitment even further in the midst of the pandemic. Ravenna is a case in point. The municipality government has launched a 'Register of Welcoming Families' so as to promote and coordinate home accommodation of forced migrants and other marginalized individuals across its jurisdiction.²³ Residents wishing to offer hospitality in their homes could already do so before the pandemic thanks to the intermediation of the NGO 'Refugees Welcome'. The register has been conceived as an instrument to institutionalize and upscale such a bottom-up initiative, notably by integrating it within the wider framework of local integration policies.

Solidarity practices in support of forced migrants have indeed proliferated during the pandemic. Civil society organizations have crafted novel forms and infrastructures of 'welfare from below', or adapted those already existing to emerging societal needs – whether in cooperation with or on behalf of state actors. Acts of solidarity include the provision of free COVID-19 tests and other healthcare services without access criteria in nonprofit clinics (I02; I03), poverty relief initiatives, such as food banks, bill payments, and solidarity funds (I03; I05; I20), opening of night dorms also in the daytime during confinement periods (I05; I08; I20), support to students facing barriers to distance learning (I03), and campaigns to protect (prospective) tenants against evictions (I03; I05) and racial discriminations (I05; I07). Another important example is that of the migrants incarcerated in solitary confinement after the turmoil at the 'ex-caserma Serena'. Thanks to an extensive network of supporters across Italy, detainees have obtained house arrest and, subsequently, hospitality by families that hosted them for this

purpose (I08; I29). Importantly, interviewees widely agreed that these solidarity practices have not only alleviated specific plights in and of themselves – they also worked as entry points to detect and possibly mitigate other distinct, but connected, forms of exclusion.

Discussion and conclusion: possibilities of forced migrants' emancipation in post-pandemic host societies

This article analyzes the consequences of COVID-19 for the welfare of forced migrants in their context of settlement, unpacking the mechanisms through which this already-marginalized population has been pushed further down in the hierarchy of social citizenship. The starting hypothesis is that, amid the pandemic, preexisting barriers to accessing healthcare, community, and housing services as well as social safety nets have entangled their lives in more severe forms of exclusion. Our central argument, however, is that such an impact has been *uneven* across forced migrants as a consequence of multi-level forces. Research on welfare rights stratification highlights that immigration statuses grant unequal access to welfare services and that the selective criteria behind these policies become ever more restrictive in times of rising political contention (e.g. Bonjour and Duyvendak 2018). Other scholarly contributions emphasize how assorted actors in- and outside of government across geographical scales may either magnify or mitigate this state-driven stratification (e.g. de Graauw & Vermeulen, 2016). Bridging these strands of the literature, we have made the case that COVID-19 has produced highly diversified landscapes of exclusion from social citizenship in host societies. To unfold our argument, we have presented in-depth case study research on six cities in north-eastern Italy (the main findings are summarized in Table 3).

The legal statuses allotted to forced migrants through national legislation had far-reaching implications amid the pandemic, as they imply differential degrees of (un)

Table 3. Main findings.

	Drivers of stratification	Observed mechanisms and outcomes amid COVID-19	Notable examples
<i>National-level</i>	Differential access to/quality of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Healthcare services ● Community services (esp. cultural mediation) ● Housing facilities ● Social safety nets ● Policy coordination 	'Ripple effects': Health vulnerability and confinement ⇒ Economic exclusion ⇒ Limited regularization prospects ⇒ Social exclusion	SIPROIMI vs. CAS systems of reception
<i>Local-level</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Regional healthcare systems ● Municipal governments ● Civil society organizations 	Mechanisms magnifying or mitigating state-driven stratification: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Inclusion/exclusion from regional healthcare services ● Spread of nativist discourses ● Bottom-up solidarity practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Emilia-Romagna's vs. Veneto's healthcare systems ● Anti-migrant policies and practices in Venezia and Treviso vs. pro-migrant policies in Ravenna ● Assorted solidarity initiatives

deservingness and, ultimately, unequal access to welfare services. The minority of forced migrants who were given access to the ordinary system of reception and integration ('SIPROIMI') were relatively well-sheltered from the major obstacles they had to face. Most of them, however, could only access the emergency reception system ('CAS'). The long-standing flaws of these poorly equipped, spatially segregated, large-sized centers have produced their most detrimental consequences under pandemic circumstances. Overcrowded living conditions, lack of cultural mediation and healthcare services, and poor inter-institutional coordination have made these places the ideal incubators for the transmission of COVID-19. Migrants, whether infected or not, have been forced into protracted periods of mandatory quarantine. This, in turn, has led to the loss of their often-precarious jobs or to the impossibility to look for one, yet without meaningful access to the social safety nets activated for other, often native workers. Economic exclusion has subsequently undermined regularization prospects.

In other words, the pandemic has triggered an exclusion-oriented 'race to the bottom', by which appalling housing conditions and poor welfare services have spilled over the domains of health protection as well as labor and social integration. Overall, these *ripple effects* have severely frustrated the prospects of achieving a secure and thriving life in the host society.

These variable forms of exclusion have to be interpreted in the light of Italy's migration regime and the differential restrictions it imposes on welfare provisions. Their impact 'on the ground', however, cannot be understood without looking at the local contexts in which forced migrants are settled. In Emilia-Romagna, the regional healthcare system proved relatively effective in tracing and treating COVID-19 cases, as well as the indirect impacts on physical and mental health, regardless of the accommodation or legal status of forced migrants. This outcome also owes to long-standing collaborative relationships among governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders in the domain of asylum. The Veneto region, instead, has traditionally refrained from playing any steering role in this policy sector and has long considered migrants with a pending or rejected application as undeserving subjects. As for the municipal level, the protection of forced migrants has remained a priority in the policy agenda of some progressive local officials, such as in the case of Ravenna's decision to promote the home accommodation of forced migrants among its residents. Right-wing policy-makers, especially in Veneto, have instead exploited COVID-19 to stigmatize migrants in public discourses, e.g. labelling them as 'uncivilized plague-spreaders', as opposed to victimized representations of Venetians. Last, solidarity initiatives by civil society organizations have mitigated the plight of forced migrants amid the pandemic – although neither evenly nor systematically.

Various theoretical and practical lessons can be drawn based on such results. Implications, we believe, travel well beyond Italy, a case that exemplifies how forced migrants' welfare rights are restricted and stratified across many other host societies in times of rampant nativism. First, we contribute to the literature on forced migrants' welfare rights by underscoring the importance of multi-scalar forces in either magnifying or mitigating state-driven stratification (cf. Łukasiewicz, Oren, and Tripathi 2021). Although the realm of asylum is the sole jurisdiction of nation-states, local actors proved crucial for shaping the enforcement of policies 'on the ground'. Our study highlights in

particular the decisive role of Italian regional authorities in the governance of public health during the pandemic. This finding can advance the scholarship on the ‘local turn’ in immigration (Bazurli, Caponio, and de Graauw 2022), which has paid much greater attention to municipal governments than to regional, provincial, and other ‘middle-tier’ ones (for an exception, see for example, Campomori and Caponio 2017).

Second, our study corroborates the hypothesis on COVID-19 as ‘great amplifier’ of preexisting inequalities (e.g. Grasso et al. 2021; Crawley 2021). We qualify this argument by showing that, due to assorted multi-level forces, the consequences for the lives of forced migrants have been *uneven* – thus giving rise to multifaceted, fragmented patchworks of rights violation within a national jurisdiction. The pandemic, moreover, seems to trigger *cumulative* forms of exclusion (cf. Menjivar and Abrego 2012), meaning that its impact is exponential and self-reinforcing rather than linear or static. One form of exclusion (e.g. overcrowded living conditions) could activate, and accumulate on, many others (e.g. infections, job precarity, police repression, loss of residence permits, stigmatization) – what we defined as ripple effect. Last, our results shed light on how essential welfare rights are for *giving substance* to citizenship through the protection and emancipation of those at the margins. In the face of COVID-19, the call for reclaiming independence of welfare policies from immigration policies (cf. Bolderson 2011) – and thus for dismantling existing hierarchies of social citizenship – becomes more urgent than ever.

Future research should delve deeper on the long-term effects of COVID-19 for refugee protection. The intertwined dynamics of economic deprivation, social stigmatization, and illegalization we observed in our study do not bode well for forced migrants’ integration prospect in the near future. But while the case of Italy is certainly insightful and helps identify crucial mechanisms of exclusion in pandemic times, we need to build a comparative research agenda to offer more generalizable lessons about the assorted ramifications of COVID-19. Our findings are, in fact, similar to those from other studies focused on different geographical contexts (e.g. Crawley 2021; Donà 2021; OECD 2020), but a systematic comparison would allow us to assess how the impact of the pandemic has varied depending on multi-level political, institutional, demographic, and economic factors. Also, since the main focus of this article is on how legal statues and local contexts have shaped the impact of the pandemic, future studies may provide more fine-grained accounts by adopting intersectional approaches to inequalities (e.g. based on social class, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, race/ethnicity, language, dis/ability), possibly including the testimonies of forced migrants themselves.

Notes

1. Decree-Law 113/2018.
2. *Sistema di Protezione per Titolari di Protezione Internazionale e Minori Stranieri Non Accompagnati* – Protection System for Beneficiaries of International Protection and Unaccompanied Foreign Minors.
3. See <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/migrazioni-italia-tutti-i-numeri-24893>.
4. *Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria* – Emergency Accommodation Centers.
5. Out of the 80,097 migrants hosted on 31 January 2021, 54,343 (i.e. 67,8%) were settled in CAS centers (Source: Italy’s Ministry of Interior).
6. These austerity measures were financially unbearable and ethically unacceptable for many service providers, which thus decided to stop participating at the Ministry of Interior’s calls.

As a result, many public auctions closed with no bids or have been won by less principled, if not criminal, organizations.

7. One social worker per 50 beneficiaries, on average. See <https://www.editorialedomani.it/politica/italia/eredita-salvini-sistema-accoglienza-che-genera-emergenza-migranti-crxib0z2>
8. See <https://www.openpolis.it/i-centri-di-accoglienza-in-italia/>
9. Ibid.
10. See <https://altreconomia.it/inchiesta-revoche-prefetture>.
11. Law no. 173/2020.
12. For example, see <https://welforum.it/il-nuovo-decreto-legge-in-materia-di-immigrazione-e-una-riforma-dellaccoglienza-ancora-lontana>.
13. Law 27/2020, art. 86bis; Decree Law 34/2020, art. 16.
14. See <https://www.meltingpot.org/Vivere-in-un-CAS-al-tempo-del-coronavirus.html#.YK0o2-vOOHw>.
15. See https://www.meltingpot.org/Ex-Caserma-Serena-Treviso-Per-Chaka-perche-la-sua-morte-non.html#.YK5D_-vOPjF.
16. See <http://www.caritastarvisina.it/questione-contagi-allex-caserma-serena-vicenda-che-pone-molte-domande/>.
17. See <https://www2.comune.treviso.it/nuovo-focolaio-alla-caserma-serena-129-migranti-positivi-al-covid-19-il-sindaco-di-treviso-mario-conte-ora-lo-stato-paghi-i-danni/>.
18. See <https://www.trevisotoday.it/cronaca/migrante-positivo-ex-caserma-serena-casier-12-giugno-2020.html>.
19. See <https://www.fanpage.it/politica/treviso-133-migranti-positivi-al-centro-accoglienza-zaia-caserma-zona-rossa-multe-per-chi-esce>.
20. See <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1288766813510270976>.
21. See <https://www.trevisotoday.it/cronaca/migrante-positivo-ex-caserma-serena-casier-12-giugno-2020.html>.
22. See <https://www.meltingpot.org/Treviso-129-contagi-all-ex-caserma-Serena-Basta.html>.
23. See <https://famiglieaccoglienti.comune.ra.it/sezione-adulti>.

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Appendix

List of interviews.

ID	City/Region	Date	Actor
01	Bologna	28 December 2020	Civil servant, metropolitan asylum service (SIPROIMI)
02	Bologna	8 January 2021	Social-movement activist and NGO spokesperson
03	Bologna	13 January 2021	Social-movement activist
04	Ferrara	14 January 2021	Civil servant, municipal asylum service (SIPROIMI)
05	Bologna	19 January 2021	Politician, member of the city government
06	Venice	22 January 2021	Social-movement activist and NGO spokesperson, former civil servant
07	Bologna	22 January 2021	Social-movement activists and NGO spokespersons [2 <i>participants</i>]
08	Treviso	23 January 2021	Social-movement activist and NGO spokesperson
09	Bologna	25 January 2021	NGO spokesperson, service provider (SIPROIMI and CAS)
10	Belluno	26 January 2021	NGO spokesperson, service provider (CAS)
11	Emilia-Romagna	29 January 2021	Civil servant, regional asylum service
12	Emilia-Romagna	12 February 2021	Politician, regional asylum service
13	Belluno	12 February 2021	NGO spokesperson, former service provider (CAS)
14	Ferrara	17 February 2021	Civil servant, metropolitan asylum service (CAS)
15	Bologna, Ferrara, Ravenna	18 February 2021	NGO spokespersons, service providers (SIPROIMI and CAS) [3 <i>participants</i>]
16	Belluno	23 February 2021	Politician, member of the city government
17	Venice	23 February 2021	NGO spokespersons, service providers (SIPROIMI)
18	Veneto	26 February 2021	Civil servant, regional immigration service
19	Belluno	28 February 2021	Politician, member of the city government
20	Treviso	9 March 2021	NGO spokesperson, service provider (SIPROIMI and CAS)
21	Ravenna	12 March 2021	NGO spokesperson, service provider (CAS)
22	Belluno	16 March 2021	NGO spokespersons, former service providers (CAS) [2 <i>participants</i>]
23	Ravenna	17 March 2021	NGO spokespersons [2 <i>participants</i>]
24	Venice	23 March 2021	Civil servant and social worker, metropolitan asylum service (SIPROIMI)
25	Treviso	24 March 2021	Politician, member of the city government
26	Belluno	25 March 2021	Politician, member of the city government
27	Venice	25 March 2021	Social-movement activist and NGO spokesperson
28	Treviso	14 March 2021	Social worker
29	Treviso	26 April 2021	Social-movement activist and trade unionist
30	Ravenna	29 April 2021	Politician, member of the city government