

How to Turn Rural Europe into a Welcoming Space for Migrants

by Irene Ponzo

Attitudes towards immigration have become increasingly polarised over the last decade. A recent poll carried out by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and the Political and Social Analysis Laboratory (LAPS) of the University of Siena confirms how varying perspectives are deeply impacted by political affiliation and educational levels, a dynamic that has persisted during the current pandemic.¹

A large majority of 77.3 per cent of the electorate of the right-wing League party believe that migrants are stealing Italian jobs, while the percentage decreases to 41.7 per cent among the populist and anti-establishment Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle* – M5S) and further to 14.9 per cent among centre-left Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico* – PD) voters. A majority of

these opinions are held by individuals without upper secondary education (59.4 per cent), followed by a large 37.3 per cent who lack tertiary education (37.3 per cent).

Yet, aside from political leanings and education levels, another emerging cleavage should be taken into account when analysing popular attitudes towards migrants: the rising urban and rural divide.

Contrary to sociological theories which predict an intensification of negative attitudes in areas where a high presence of newcomers creates the perception of economic and cultural threat, the opposite is happening: the most negative attitudes and anti-diversity voting patterns are frequently found in places with few immigrants and low ethnic diversity.

These are areas that have generally suffered the most from globalisation

¹ DISPOC/LAPS and IAI, *Gli italiani e l'immigrazione. Autunno 2020*, Roma, IAI, novembre 2020, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12392>.

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and where the native majority has experienced a significant loss of status. Places that are often in demographic decline, as young adults leave in search for better opportunities, abandoning the countryside and small towns for the cities.²

The rural-urban divide

The opinion poll carried out by IAI and LAPS, while not allowing for a direct urban-rural comparison, provides disaggregated data according to municipality size. When comparing respondents living in cities with more than 500,000 residents and those living in municipalities with less than 50,000 inhabitants, the former appear less inclined to believe that immigrants steal jobs from Italians (42.1 per cent) compared to the latter (44.7 per cent) and, on the contrary, more inclined to perceive migrants as a relevant resource for several economic sectors (53 per cent vs. 50 per cent).

In the same vein, a recent study done by the Knowledge Centre for Migration and Demography and based on an elaboration of Eurobarometer data at EU-28 level, shows that in 2018 immigration from outside the EU was perceived more as an opportunity in large cities (21.9 per cent) as compared to rural areas (18.5 per cent).³ The urban-rural gap in attitudes towards

migration persist when accounting for education and age.

Despite the key role played by global socio-economic trends, policies are far from being irrelevant in shaping this emerging urban-rural divide. As a matter of fact, many recent welcoming initiatives developed in rural areas, although not linked to policies as a direct and intended outcome, have been a side-effect of reception policy choices implemented during the so-called "European refugee crisis".

Refugee relocation and its effects

Under migratory pressure following the 2015–2016 peaks in arrivals, many European governments started to set up reception facilities in remote areas. As a consequence, a significant number of rural municipalities were for the first time entrusted with the settlement of asylum seekers and refugees.⁴

In Italy, this relocation strategy was adopted in July 2014, when the Unified Conference State-Regions-Local Authorities, a coordination body for multilevel governance, signed an Agreement that promoted a more balanced distribution of newcomers and reception facilities throughout the country.

Initially, pressure due to the high volume of arrivals pushed the Prefectures, i.e. the local branches of the Ministry of Interior, to set up facilities without notice, thus raising

² Richard Alba and Nancy Foner, "Immigration and the Geography of Polarization: Immigration and the Geography of Polarization", in *City & Community*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (September 2017), p. 239-243.

³ Fabrizio Natale et al., "Migration in EU Rural Areas", in *JRC Science for Policy Reports*, 2019, p. 49, <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/node/183956>.

⁴ Maurizio Dematteis, Alberto Di Gioia and Andrea Membretti, *Montanari per forza. Rifugiati e richiedenti asilo nella montagna italiana*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2018.

understandable concern and protests by local communities. These negative reactions were intensively covered by the media, which on the contrary almost completely disregarded subsequent developments.

As a matter of fact, in several rural localities the initial opposition against top-down relocations gradually turned into more welcoming attitudes and even into truly innovative solutions to integrate newcomers. FIERI has investigated some of these experiences in the framework of the MIGLIORA project (*Migrazione e Integrazione: Generare Legami, Inclusione e Opportunità per i Rifugiati nelle Aree rurali e urbane – MIGLIORA*), promoted by the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation.⁵

Positive practices have ranged from initiatives aimed at improving sustainable tourism through environmentally and socially sensitive leisure, to the setting up of cooperatives made up of newcomers and locals to preserve the environment and the traditional landscape, restore mountain paths, recover uncultivated areas, resume traditional farming and crafting practices and develop food production from farm to fork.⁶

⁵ See the project website: <https://www.formazione-migliora.it>.

⁶ Some of them have been acknowledged as good practices in the European Web Site on Integration: *Humus* (<https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/intpract/humus-innovative-model-for-the-ethical-employment-of-asylum-seekers>), *K-Pax* (<https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/intpract/integrating-in-val-camonica-italy>), *Solidarity Walls* (<https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/intpract/solidarity-walls-asylum-seeker-inclusion-leads-to-rural-regeneration>), *Germinale* (<https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/intpract/germinale-an-intercultural-agricultural-project-in-italy>), *Bee My Job* (<https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/intpract/bee-my-job-asylum-seeker-integration-through-professional-development-in-agriculture>), *Nuove Radici* and *La volpe e il mirtillo* (<https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/intpract/agricultural-cooperative-for-asylum-seekers-in-ormea-italy>).

Shrinking schools for which the clock was ticking, could keep running thanks to new pupils coming from other continents. Local shops saw their clients increase and landlords of empty houses found new tenants. Concrete examples of integration and cross-fertilisation started to emerge. Remote and isolated localities were revived by “exotic” cultural initiatives and became competitive in soccer competitions thanks to recently arrived African players, celebrated as local stars. Quiet elderly natives acquired a fairly good expertise on migration laws and political developments of African states, and protested with local Prefectures when “their guys” became irregular after the rejection of their asylum claims.

Languishing local identities have thus been refreshed with a new blend that is hard to label cosmopolitan. It is still local, still rural but by no means parochial. A sort of new rurality is clearly, although unexpectedly emerging.

Dynamics of this sort concerned most other destination countries,⁷ although

⁷ Manfred Perlik et al. (eds), *Alpine Refugees. Immigration at the core of Europe*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019; Tiziana Caponio, Irene Ponzio and Leila Giannetto, “Comparative Report on the Multilevel Governance of the National Asylum Seekers’ Reception Systems”, in *CEASEVAL Working Papers*, No. 24 (March 2019), http://ceaseval.eu/publications/24_WP3_Comparative%2520Report.pdf.

remaining an exception in rural Europe. Nevertheless, they stimulate two important considerations.

First, rural areas are not doomed to be less welcoming towards newcomers than cities, as one could instead think when looking at opinion polls. Second, the observed processes of social innovation have not been the result of spontaneous and incremental dynamics, like the progressive settlement of migrant agricultural workers that generally raises little interest among local residents. On the contrary, they are the result of a breakup event that engaged local communities, the unexpected outcome of the asylum seekers relocation policies adopted during the “European refugee crisis”.

How to replicate success (and avoid perverse effects)

Unfortunately, these “rural islands of social innovation” have been largely overlooked by the subsequent policies and such virtuous outcomes can by no means be taken for granted. On the contrary, they are constantly threatened. In many countries, once the backlog of asylum applications that followed the 2015–2016 peaks was finally processed and policy approaches became more restrictive, many applications were ultimately rejected.

In the most innovative and responsive rural communities, this was experienced as a betrayal: locals have seen all their integration efforts frustrated and could not prevent many well-integrated but rejected asylum-seekers from falling into irregularity,

pushing them to head to the cities, the only places where informal economies and crowded streets can shelter them from expulsion and extreme poverty.

In the Italian case, these perverse dynamics were dramatically evident. Under the coalition government led by the M5S and the League (June 2018–September 2019), the Minister of Interior Matteo Salvini promoted a deep reform of asylum policies. The so-called Decree on Security and Migration (Legislative Decree 113/2018 adopted on 5 October 2018 and converted into Law 132/2018) narrowed the conditions to obtain residence permits based on humanitarian grounds (so-called “humanitarian protection”) and excluded its holders from reception services. As a consequence, in 2019 negative first instance decisions on asylum applications grew to over 80 per cent against the 62 per cent average among the EU-27.⁸

In the summer 2019, a new coalition government was formed, in which the League was replaced by the Centre-Left PD. In October 2020, the new coalition repealed some of the most restrictive provisions promoted by Salvini. However, for many rural communities it was too late as “irregularised” migrants

⁸ For the rejection rate by member states in 2019 see: Eurostat, *Asylum Statistics: Decisions on Asylum Applications*, data extracted on 16 March 2020 and 26 May 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics#Decisions_on_asylum_applications. For the analysis of the impact of the restrictive Decree 113/2018, see Irene Ponzo, “I costi sociali nascosti nel pugno duro sull’immigrazione”, in *Neodemos*, 11 June 2019, <https://www.neodemos.info/2019/06/11/i-costi-sociali-nascosti-nel-pugno-duro-sullimmigrazione>.

had already left for other destinations.

These developments are a clear warning to better assess the potentially perverse effects of restrictive migration policies. That said, how can policies promote the scaling up of such promising initiatives and turn rural Europe into a welcoming space for migrants?

Crafting convincing narratives would be one possible approach. In this perspective, focusing on rural areas could be a strategy to follow George Lakoff's suggestion of "not thinking of an elephant",⁹ namely reframing the issue at stake instead of contesting the frame of political opponents.

Promoting the new rurality illustrated above rather than passively countering the migrants-as-threat narrative could be a good starting point to foster welcoming attitudes in remote areas. Moreover, this narrative reversal could count – as shown above – on some concrete and powerful success stories.

As for EU policies, whereas rural areas are probably over addressed when it comes to the distribution of EU funds (e.g. the Common Agricultural Policy accounts for around one-third of the total EU budget), they have little say when it comes to migrant integration policies. Their innovative efforts have difficulties either to expand or feed the national and European policymaking process. As a matter of fact, the main EU-wide networks of localities dealing with migration issues are made up

⁹ George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate. The Essential Guide for Progressives*, White River Junction, Chelsea Green, 2004.

of medium and large towns (e.g. Eurocities, Intercultural Cities).

Even during the "European refugee crisis", cities like Barcelona, Paris and Athens were extremely vocal and partially successful in putting pressure on EU institutions to obtain more funds for integrating newcomers¹⁰ while requests from rural municipalities did not even reach the fore, despite their significant involvement in asylum seekers' reception.

In order to enhance the voice of rural areas, cooperation networks among small-size localities should be developed. Similarly, providing venues where small municipalities can connect with higher-level institutions and tackle the common challenges together would contribute to support the transformation of their welcoming experiments into standard inclusive practices and foster their acknowledgment in national and EU strategies for migrant integration.¹¹

In the absence of an institutional framework able to support the scaling up of social innovation blossoming in remote regions, these promising exceptions will never turn into ordinary

¹⁰ Blanca Garcés Mascareñas and Dirk Gebhardt, "Barcelona: Municipalise Policy Entrepreneurship in a Centralist Refugee Reception System", in *Comparative Migration Studies*, Vol. 8, Article No. 15 (24 April 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-020-0173-z>.

¹¹ See Elisa Agosti et al. (eds), *Fostering Pluralism as a Key to Local Development in the Alpine Space. White Paper of the Transnational Alpine Space Project PlurAlps*, September 2019, https://www.alpine-space.eu/projects/pluralps/results/t4-capacity-building/pluralps_-o.t4.1_white-paper_final_en.pdf.

and widespread solutions and rural areas will “on average” probably remain less welcoming towards foreigner newcomers than cities, thus losing out on a potential opportunity to improve integration policies while at the same time breathing new life into the many struggling rural communities in Europe.

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