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## **EUrope's Uneven Geographies of Reception**

### **Excess, Differentiation, and Struggles in the Government of Asylum Seekers**

The article takes EUrope's uneven geographies of reception as a privileged standpoint from which to explore the ways in which EUrope is currently produced through the management of asylum seekers, as well as constantly contested by asylum seekers' movements. Drawing from qualitative research in Italy and Sweden, the article calls into question the notion of a homogeneous EUrope that is promoted by EU asylum policies through the idea of a common area of protection in which asylum seekers are treated equally and fairly regardless of the place of reception. Such presumed homogeneity is radically challenged by an excess of contexts of reception, which is explored along spatial, institutional, and temporal lines, and by excessive movements, through which migrants attempt to take advantage of the unevenness characterising the EUropean space. The article argues that an emphasis on the excess of reception and on the excessive character of movements points to possible ways for rethinking Europe in terms in which unevenness is replaced by equal possibilities, living conditions, and welfare.

**Keywords:** harmonisation of reception conditions; relocation; excess of reception; excessive movements; spatial unevenness.

### **1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

On 19<sup>th</sup> of April 2015, one of the largest shipwreck in the recent history of the Mediterranean Sea occurred. A boat with more than 800 people aboard, including children, capsized 100 km off the Libyan coast and only 28 people survived in what has been described as the deadliest incident concerning migrant boats in the Mediterranean

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on research fieldwork which was carried out during my PhD at the University of Warwick, Department of Politics and International Studies. I would therefore like to thank the Warwick Graduate School for funding my PhD through a Chancellor's Scholarship as well as the Department of Politics and International Studies for providing financial support for my research trips. I am particularly grateful for helpful feedback from the guest editors of this special issue and from one anonymous reviewer. I also wish to thank Vicki Squire and Maurice Stierl for their insightful comments on earlier versions of the article.

Sea to date (Bonomolo, Kirchgaessner, 2015). Only a few days before, on 13<sup>th</sup> April, another boat had sunk in the same area, causing the death of about 400 people (Scherer, Jones, 2015). In response to these tragic events, several summits of the institutions of the European Union (EU) followed one another in a quite short period of time, leading to the adoption of the European Agenda on Migration on 13<sup>th</sup> May 2015 (European Commission, 2015). The Agenda on Migration outlined a EUropean<sup>2</sup> response to what the European Commission framed as a “crisis situation”<sup>3</sup>. Such a response was organised around a comprehensive approach including measures for fighting against smugglers and traffickers; strengthening return policy; strengthening border controls; cooperating with countries of origin and transit; fully implementing asylum policies; and reforming policies on legal migration.

Besides defining some guidelines for the future, the Agenda on Migration also called for some immediate actions to be adopted to tackle the “crisis”<sup>4</sup>. In the domain of the reception of asylum seekers<sup>5</sup>, which is the one explored by this article, the most

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<sup>2</sup> Following the example of Maurice Stierl (2017a), the article adopts the terms “EUrope” and “EUropean” in order to problematise the widespread equation between the EU and Europe and vice-versa. This is also intended to emphasise that “EUrope is not reducible to the institutions of the EU” (Stierl, 2017a, p. 18). Along these lines, it is important to keep in mind that the EU does not coincide with Europe and it is rather “the most recent political project to speak *in the name of Europe*” (Walters, Haahr, 2005, p. 4, italics in the original). I will adopt the term “Europe” in relation to the attempt to rethink it, thereby suggesting a move beyond the EU. Besides that, the very idea of “Europe”, as a more or less homogeneous unit that can be clearly distinguished from the “non-European” rest, also needs to be called into question. There is no space for developing this critique here, but please refer to recent works on what Nicholas De Genova calls the “European Question” for a fuller discussion (De Genova, 2016; Tazzioli, De Genova, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> The term “crisis” is in inverted commas in order to question the presumed objective nature of “crises”. In this way, I follow some analyses of the relationship between crisis and migration, which draw attention to the discursive and non-discursive practices through which “crises” are literally produced in contraposition to a supposed ordinary situation (Nyers, 2006; De Genova, Tazzioli, 2016; Pallister-Wilkins, 2016; Jeandesboz, Pallister-Wilkins, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> These actions are the strengthening of Frontex joint operations Triton and Poseidon; the adoption of a temporary distribution mechanism for the allocation of asylum seekers; the establishment of a EU-wide resettlement scheme for 20,000 places; and the definition of a Common Security and Defence Policy operation in the Mediterranean against traffickers and smugglers.

<sup>5</sup> Given the focus on reception policies and practices, the article primarily refers to “asylum seekers” and only speaks of “beneficiaries of international protection” when referring to people with

important development concerned the definition of a relocation mechanism intended to distribute asylum seekers within the EU in a more equitable way. Relocation represents a temporary derogation to what is probably the key element of the whole Common European Asylum System (CEAS); namely, the principle of the first country of entry which is encapsulated by the Dublin system<sup>6</sup>. According to this principle, the member state through which an asylum seeker enters the EU is the one in charge for processing the asylum application and providing adequate support to the applicant in compliance with the directive on reception conditions<sup>7</sup>. Unsurprisingly, a prominent effect of the Dublin system has been an excessive pressure on member states at the southern external borders of the EU, which inevitably represent the first destination for those arriving in the EU<sup>8</sup>. To relieve pressure from these countries, relocation is meant to identify exceptional situations in which asylum seekers can be transferred from the first country of entry to another member state.

The definition of a relocation mechanism was welcomed by policymakers as a fundamental step in reforming the CEAS (European Commission, 2016a) and going beyond the Dublin system (Pelosi, 2015; Ricciardelli, 2015). Unlike these accounts, this article situates relocation in continuity with the overall rationale that has hitherto underlain the CEAS, which is based on the harmonisation of reception conditions as a

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refugee status or subsidiary protection or a form of protection based on humanitarian grounds. The more comprehensive term “migrant” is used to include also people who are neither asylum seekers nor beneficiaries of international protection, such as rejected asylum seekers, people who become “irregular” for other reasons, and people who have not claimed asylum yet. For the sake of clarity, I had to use these legal categories even if they are based upon an artificial distinction between forced and voluntary migration which does not correspond to social reality and therefore needs to be called into question (Crawley, Skleparis, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> I use the expression “Dublin system” to refer to the principle of allocation of responsibility for an asylum application to the first country of entry, which underpins the Dublin Convention signed in 1990 and the resulting regulations (so-called Dublin II regulation adopted in 2003 and the recast regulation adopted in 2013). It is possible to include these different instruments under the label of “Dublin system” because the main principles of the 1990 Convention have been maintained in the following acts.

<sup>7</sup> Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast).

<sup>8</sup> This is due to the nearly total lack of legal ways to arrive to the EU. Because of that, the only option for most of the world’s non-Western population is to travel to the EU in an irregular way and then regularise the legal position by applying for asylum.

tool for managing mobility. In this respect, relocation is thus consistent with previous attempts to govern asylum seekers based on the fiction of the smooth and even space of the “common area of protection” (European Council, 2010). As it is further specified in the following pages, the idea of a common area of protection describes a space in which asylum seekers are offered equivalent reception conditions regardless of the place in which they are received, thus projecting EUrope as a unit that is homogeneous and even.

Drawing from qualitative research in local contexts of reception in Italy and Sweden, this article calls into question such presumed homogeneity by focusing on the excess of reception. With this expression, I refer to the sheer heterogeneity of practices and experiences of reception existing in the EU, despite institutional efforts to present reception as an abstract and fixed procedure which can be replicated across the EU regardless of local contexts. In particular, the excess of reception is explored in relation to three analytical dimensions, which are the spatial, institutional, and temporal dimensions. These dimensions expose the fragmentation and unevenness characterising the EUropean space, thus challenging the notion of a homogeneous EUrope which underpins the idea of a common area of protection. If, on the one hand, the above-mentioned dimensions of excess operate as mechanisms of differentiation through which asylum seekers are governed in the EU, on the other hand, EUrope’s unevenness is constantly appropriated by asylum seekers’ excessive movements which therefore produce EUrope as a space of conflict in which mobility is a key element<sup>9</sup>.

In line with the theme of this special issue on “rethinking Europe”, the analysis of the reception of asylum seekers in the EU is used as a point of entry for reflecting more broadly on the EUropean project and on possible ways for radically rethinking it. In other words, the article takes EUrope’s uneven geographies of reception as a privileged standpoint from which to explore the ways in which EUrope is currently produced through the management of asylum seekers, as well as constantly contested by asylum seekers’ movements. The questions that the article seeks to address are therefore: What is the idea of EUrope that underpins the CEAS? What idea of EUrope emerges when viewed through the practices that govern asylum seekers in the EUropean space? How does the analysis of reception help us to rethink Europe?

Before addressing these questions, the next section offers some preliminary methodological clarifications and provides details about fieldwork, research techniques,

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the idea of excess in relation to migration, see Stierl (2017b).

and the choice of case studies (section 2). Section 3 addresses the first two research questions mentioned above by exploring the “ideological projection of a singular, unified Europe” (De Genova 2016) that is put forward by the CEAS. The following two sections move on to show how such projection is radically called into question by an excess of contexts of reception (section 4) and by excessive movements (section 5). By connecting the reception of asylum seekers and a critical reflection on the question of EUrope, the article contributes to two different, yet related, bodies of literature. First, the article contributes to the field of critical border and migration studies (Casas-Cortes et al, 2015) by focusing specifically on aspects of the EU border regime that have not gathered enough attention so far, like reception and relocation. In this respect, the following reflections also speak to the special issue on the experiences of asylum seekers and the forms of control targeting them in the EU, which was edited by Elena Fontanari and Barbara Pinelli for this journal in 2017 (Fontanari, Pinelli, 2017).

Second, the article also intends to call into question the presumed “givenness of this Europe” (Walters, Haahr, 2005, p. 2) by posing EUrope as a question rather than assuming it as a taken for granted point of reference. In this way, it contributes to studies which have tried to destabilise assumed interpretations of EUrope (Walters, Haahr, 2005; De Genova, Tazzioli, 2016). In particular, it suggests that the analysis of the practices governing asylum seekers in the EUropean space and the forms of mobility which subvert such governmental attempts offers a useful support for rethinking Europe in terms in which differentiation and unevenness are replaced by equal possibilities, living conditions, and welfare.

## **2. Preliminary methodological remarks**

The article draws from fieldwork which was carried out as part of my PhD in several locations in Italy and Sweden between January 2015 and February 2016. The two countries were chosen because of their significance in the current EU politics of migration management. Indeed, both countries are key sites of migration which were receiving substantial numbers of asylum seekers when I began my PhD in 2013. In particular, they received 19% of the EU’s total asylum applications in 2013 (Eurostat, 2014), 23% in 2014 (Eurostat, 2015) and 19% in 2015 (Eurostat, 2016). Moreover, while Italy is

regularly one of the main points of entry to the EU<sup>10</sup>, Sweden is often one of the EU countries with the highest percentage of asylum seekers per population. More specifically, Sweden was the first EU member state with respect to the number of asylum applicants per million inhabitants in 2013 and 2014, and it was only overcome by Hungary in 2015. In these years, as Eurostat reports demonstrate, the percentage of asylum seekers received by Sweden exceeded by far that of most other EU states (Eurostat, 2014; 2015; 2016).

Despite the shared importance when it comes to the number of applications received, Italy and Sweden present fundamental differences among themselves which heavily differentiate their role within the CEAS. These differences concern the geographical position of the two countries, which translates to different ways of entry for incoming asylum seekers and in turn to different concerns informing the organisation of reception policies; the history and consolidation of the respective reception policies; the involvement of state and local authorities in the provision of reception; the organisation of welfare measures and the consequent type of support offered to asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection beyond the mere provision of reception. While the share of asylum seekers received in Italy and Sweden guarantees their relevance as countries of reception in numerical terms, the differences between the two provide a strong basis for generalising diagnoses drawn out from phenomena and issues that are identified in both contexts. In this way, the similarities that connect diverse contexts within the two countries are interpreted as possible trends that cut across localities and are therefore ascribable to EU-wide dynamics, as in the case of the excess of reception and the consequent role of differentiation in the government of asylum seekers.

The choice of contexts within Italy and Sweden was equally driven by the necessity to combine representativeness and diversity in order to identify phenomena whose scope could be deemed general rather than context-specific. Following this intent, the sites that I visited are: Bologna, Bolzano, Caltagirone, Catania, Gothenburg, Kiruna, Lampedusa, Malmö, Milano, Palermo, Pozzallo, Rome, Siracusa, and Stockholm. These places were identified in order to ensure a degree of variety between reception measures provided in cities, towns and remote areas; as well as between places of arrival, transit

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<sup>10</sup> See for example data provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5205>; and by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) at <http://migration.iom.int/europe/>.

and destination. Local contexts were also selected with the aim of gathering information about different types of reception existing in the two countries, including emergency reception measures.

In these locations, I carried out 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews with a range of different actors in order to explore broader political processes investing the management of reception in the EU. Hence, the focus was not on local contexts in themselves, but on the ways through which they speak to EU-wide dynamics. The list of interviewees includes: activists providing legal advice to migrants as well as monitoring reception conditions; team leaders and case-workers at *Arbetsförmedlingen*<sup>11</sup> (Swedish Public Employment Service); team leaders and reception officers at *Migrationsverket*<sup>12</sup> (Swedish Migration Agency); a governmental official responsible for local emergency reception measures in an Italian *Prefettura*<sup>13</sup> (Prefecture); NGO workers providing legal and psychological support to asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection; social workers and project managers working within the national System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR) as well as in *Centri di accoglienza straordinaria* (CAS – Extraordinary Reception Centres) in diverse Italian locations; and volunteers providing various types of support to migrants. The interviews were organised around some main themes, such as: features of reception measures provided to asylum seekers in the local context, forms of support for those who are granted protection, shortcomings affecting measures towards asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection, and peculiarities of local contexts. Within this general

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<sup>11</sup> *Arbetsförmedlingen* is the Swedish agency in charge of ensuring the matching between jobseekers and employers as well as supporting jobseekers through labour market programmes. Since the reform of integration policies introduced by the Swedish Introduction Act of 2010, the agency is also responsible for support programs (*etableringsplan*) for beneficiaries of international protection.

<sup>12</sup> *Migrationsverket* is the Swedish central administrative authority in the domains of asylum, migration, and citizenship. With respect to asylum, *Migrationsverket*'s duties include the processing of asylum applications as well as the provision of financial support, information, and housing to asylum seekers. It is therefore the agency in charge with the reception of asylum seekers in Sweden.

<sup>13</sup> *Prefettura*, also known as *Ufficio territoriale del governo* (Local government office), is the local branch of *Ministero dell'Interno* (Ministry of the Interior) and represents the state in each province. It deals with migration, asylum, security, and public order. With respect to reception, *Prefetture* are in charge of *Centri di accoglienza straordinaria* (CAS), which are emergency reception measures whose features are discussed in section 4.



framework, the outline of each interview was tailored to the interviewee in order to get the most out of the specific competences and strengths of everyone.

Despite the lack of long periods of participant observation, my methodological approach implied an “ethnographic sensibility” (Shore, Wright, 2011, p. 15) given that immersion stood for a crucial technique of data generation as it happens with ethnography. However, in line with Gregory Feldman’s idea of “nonlocal ethnography” (2011, p. 33), I suggest that my research involved an immersion in a space of governmentality (Tazzioli 2015) aimed at decoding the functioning of an apparatus of power, as opposed to an immersion in a specific place or institution in order to study its daily life. Such a space of governmentality can therefore be imagined as a “spatially dispersed field through which the ethnographer moves – actually, via sojourns in two or more places, or conceptually, by means of techniques of juxtaposition of data” (Falzon, 2009, p. 2). In this respect, if local reception practices are to be addressed as part of broader configurations of power targeting asylum seekers, then the study of these practices in different locations accounts for an immersion in the same space of governmentality, which I define elsewhere as EU reception regime (Vianelli, 2017). To some extent, it can therefore be argued that the geographical breadth of the research “produce[s] a new kind of conceptual depth” (Mezzadra, Neilson, 2013, p. 10).

Furthermore, it is important to stress how my immersion in the EU reception regime started well before the fieldwork that I carried out for my PhD thesis, given my previous research (Vianelli, 2011) and a two-and-a-half-year work experience in a social cooperative providing support to asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection in an Italian town (Vianelli, 2014a; 2014b). Besides that, my immersion in the discourses, policies, and practices targeting asylum seekers in the EU has also been strengthened by the membership in the association *Asilo in Europa*<sup>14</sup>. This provided a constant connection with the “ground” by allowing me to stay in touch and share reflections with social workers and practitioners who work in several contexts within the EU. Hence, as long as time is one of the main variables through which a researcher

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<sup>14</sup> *Asilo in Europa* is an NGO based in Italy but including members who work, study and research in different EU countries. The main activities of the association include: advocacy; research on Italian and EU asylum law, member states’ reception systems and best practices; country of origin information; training for social workers and practitioners dealing with asylum seekers; organisation of seminars and workshops.

achieves ethnographic depth (Falzon, 2009, p. 7), this set of different experiences can be intended as replacing the ethnographic depth that would have otherwise been produced by long-term participant observation in one or more locations.

The immersion that I have just described, combined with the analysis of different types of data including policy documents, administrative guidelines, newspaper articles, press releases, speeches, and blogs, proved to be a fundamental source of triangulation, which allowed me to not rely uniquely on interviews. All these documents, as Annelise Riles suggests, “are also paradigmatic artifacts of ethnographic research” (Riles, 2006, p. 6), and their analysis as “ethnographic objects” (Riles, 2006, p. 7) therefore contributed to the ethnographic sensibility that I mentioned above. The next section is predominantly based on legal and policy documents relating to the CEAS and is necessary to provide the overall framework for the investigation that follows in sections 4 and 5.

### **3. The supposed smooth space of the common area of protection**

Ironically, the heyday of the “refugee crisis”, when unprecedented numbers of people succeeded to cross EU borders without authorisation, almost coincided with the completion of the CEAS. Indeed, July 2015 was the deadline by which member states were required to transpose the recast Reception Conditions Directive (RCD 2013) and the recast Asylum Procedures Directive into national laws<sup>15</sup>. The adoption of these two legal instruments brought to an end a process of harmonisation of reception conditions, asylum procedures, and refugee status, begun at the European Council meeting of Tampere in October 1999. In Tampere, the heads of state or government of EU member states agreed on the creation of a CEAS with the goal of defining “a common asylum procedure and a uniform status for those who are granted asylum” (European Council, 1999, p. 4). The CEAS is formed by a set of legal instruments which constitute the architecture of the EU asylum policy. Besides the two directives mentioned above, the other legal instruments are: the recast Qualification Directive<sup>16</sup>; the Dublin III

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<sup>15</sup> Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast) and Directive 2013/32/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection (recast).

<sup>16</sup> Directive 2011/95/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international

Regulation<sup>17</sup>; the recast EURODAC Regulation<sup>18</sup>; and the Regulation establishing the European Asylum Support Office (EASO)<sup>19</sup>.

Despite the appearance of an endeavour meant to enhance rights and guarantees for asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection, the whole process of harmonisation of asylum policies can be interpreted as part of a broader politics of migration management intended to govern the new borderless area created by the Schengen Agreement. The Dublin system is a key pillar of such politics of migration management as it has compensated the abolition of internal border controls with forms of rebordering specifically addressed to asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection (Guild, 2006). The rationale of the Dublin system is twofold. On the one hand, it aims to prevent so-called “asylum shopping”, that is to say multiple asylum applications lodged by a single individual in different member states. On the other hand, the objective of the Dublin system is to reduce asylum seekers’ mobility by preventing them from deciding where to lodge their claim and consequently where to be received. Hence, the Dublin system excludes asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection from the right to move and settle freely in the Schengen area.

The subordinate position of harmonisation in comparison with the goal of managing mobility is explicit in some of the legislative acts forming the CEAS. For example, recital 12 of RCD 2013 states that “[t]he harmonisation of conditions for the reception of applicants should help to limit the secondary movements of applicants influenced by the variety of conditions for their reception”<sup>20</sup>. Such an association between

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protection, for a uniform status for refugees or for persons eligible for subsidiary protection, and for the content of the protection granted (recast).

<sup>17</sup> Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013, establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person (recast).

<sup>18</sup> Regulation (EU) No 603/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013, on the establishment of Eurodac for the comparison of fingerprints for the effective application of Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 (recast).

<sup>19</sup> Regulation (EU) No 439/2010 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 May 2010 establishing a European Asylum Support Office.

<sup>20</sup> In the EU jargon, a “secondary movement” occurs when (prospective) asylum seekers or beneficiaries of international protection move without authorisation from the first country of arrival, which is the one in charge for their asylum claim and for the provision of reception measures. “Secondary

harmonisation of reception conditions and reduction of “secondary movements” was then reiterated in the Communication which started the reform of the CEAS in April 2016 (European Commission, 2016b). Here, the Commission identifies the persistence of “secondary movements” as a major weakness of the system, which needs to be addressed through a greater harmonisation of reception conditions and a fairer sharing of responsibilities for asylum applications between member states. In this respect, the whole reform outlined by the Commission appears as an attempt to deepen harmonisation *in order to* reduce “secondary movements”.

The process of harmonisation which led to the CEAS offers an interesting example of the ways in which the EU defines new spaces of government so as to intervene upon them. It can be helpful to dwell briefly on this feature of harmonisation, drawing from analyses which examine the policy of harmonisation through the lenses of governmentality (Barry, 1993; 1994; 2001 Ch. 3). Initially developed by Michel Foucault (2007; 2008), governmentality offers “a set of methodological and conceptual guidelines” (Walters, 2012, p. 40) for the study of the rationalities and technologies underpinning the activity of governing. In the perspective of governmentality, government is understood in the broad sense of “mechanisms and procedures intended to conduct men, to direct their conduct, to conduct their conduct” (Foucault, 2014, p. 12). In addition, by stressing the constitutive relation between forms of thought, knowledge and techniques of government, the notion of governmentality alludes to the ways in which objects of government are brought into being in the same process of governing. In this way, government is defined as a “problematizing activity” (Rose, Miller, 1992, p. 181), which is based upon a double movement of representation and intervention (Lemke, 2001, p. 191).

An interesting analysis of harmonisation through the lenses of governmentality is provided by Andrew Barry, whose definition of harmonisation can be fruitfully discussed in relation to the CEAS. Barry defines harmonisation as “both a project directed at reconstructing the European space in a particular form, and a means for establishing this space as a possible object of government” (Barry, 1993, p. 319). This definition presents two interconnected dimensions that are worth of consideration. Let me start with the

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movements” is in inverted commas throughout the article to dissociate myself from such a EU-centric institutional jargon which disregards that several movements preceded the presumed secondary one and many more are likely to follow.

latter, which concerns the ability of the policy of harmonisation to constitute objects of government.

In this respect, harmonisation is a key technique in the “governmentalisation of Europe” (Walters, Haahr, 2005, p. 10), whereby this expression describes the process through which EUrope is constituted as an object of government requiring a EU response. As such, harmonisation is “an essential element in the current art of European government” (Barry, 1994, p. 52). Indeed, a distinctive feature of the EU consists precisely in the attempt to constitute “Europe as a space where Europe-wide issues can be acted upon by agencies of the EU” (Delanty, Rumford, 2005, p. 122)<sup>21</sup>. A similar attempt has also marked the creation of the CEAS, whose necessity was made possible by the definition of the management of asylum seekers as a “EUropean problem”, deriving from the creation of an area of free movement and requiring a common and coordinated response (Walters, Haahr, 2005, Ch. 5).

The second dimension emphasised by the definition proposed by Barry concerns the spatial politics at stake in the process of harmonisation. Through harmonisation, EUrope is constructed not only as a space to be governed by the EU, but as a space having *a particular form*, and for this reason harmonisation is also a “spatializing project” (Barry, 2001, p. 67). Such a spatial dimension of harmonisation is particularly interesting in the case of the CEAS because it defines what is probably the fundamental assumption upon which the entire policy framework is based. Notably, the space of the harmonised CEAS is conceived as the smooth and even space of the “common area of protection and solidarity” (European Council, 2010), in which:

[I]ndividuals, regardless of the member state in which their application for asylum is lodged, are offered an equivalent level of treatment as regards reception conditions, and the same level as regards procedural arrangements and status determination.

(European Council, 2010, p. 32)

Put simply, the harmonised space of the CEAS is presented as a homogenous space in which the contexts of reception do not matter. Accordingly, given such presumed homogeneity of reception conditions, asylum seekers are obliged to accept the destination that is imposed on them through allocation mechanisms like the Dublin system and

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<sup>21</sup> Let us just think here at the increasing role played by EASO and the current negotiations on the creation of a EU Agency for Asylum.

relocation schemes. However, it is important to understand the smooth space of the CEAS not as mere ideological rhetoric or a legal-institutional reality; but, above all, as a “political project that endeavours to create a social reality that it suggests already exists” (Lemke, 2001, p. 203).

In this respect, the governmental reason underpinning the CEAS can be compared to the *raison d'état* analysed by Foucault in his history of governmentality. For Foucault, *raison d'état* was the first art of government specific to the state and it defined “the state as both its principle and its objective, as both its foundation and its aim” (Foucault, 2007, p. 286). The state was both a principle of intelligibility through which *raison d'état* addressed a set of practices and institutions and a goal of the art of government encapsulated by *raison d'état*. A similar governmental reason can be seen operating in the smooth space of the CEAS as well. Indeed, just like the state for *raison d'état*, the supposed common area of protection is at the same time a given to which specific measures refer (e.g. the Dublin system and relocation) and an objective to be constructed. In other words, the homogenous space of the common area of protection appears “at once that which exists, but which does not yet exist enough” (Foucault, 2008, p. 4).

Relocation measures introduced in the wake of the European Agenda on Migration confirm such projection of a singular and smooth space in which the specificity of local contexts is erased. Relocation provides for cases in which asylum seekers who are deemed “in clear need of protection” – those belonging to nationalities which have a minimum first instance recognition rate of 75% across the EU – can be transferred from the first country of entry to another EU member state. In particular, the Council of the European Union adopted two decisions in September 2015 providing for the relocation of 40.000 and 120.000 “persons in clear need of protection” from Greece and Italy<sup>22</sup>. These measures are therefore a temporary derogation to the Dublin system and are primarily intended to ensure a fairer distribution of asylum seekers among member states

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<sup>22</sup> The first is Council Decision (EU) 2015/1523 of 14 September 2015 establishing provisional measures in the area of international protection for the benefit of Italy and of Greece, while the second is Council Decision (EU) 2015/1601 of 22 September 2015 establishing provisional measures in the area of international protection for the benefit of Italy and Greece. The latter decision initially included Hungary, which decided not to take part in the scheme. Moreover, in September 2016, 54.000 places on the total amount of 160.000 were dedicated to the relocation of Syrians nationals from Turkey according to the infamous EU-Turkey deal. The remaining places were divided in the following way: 66.400 people had to be relocated from Greece and 39.600 people from Italy.

according to a distribution key calculated on the size of the population, the gross domestic product, the average number of asylum applications per one million inhabitants over the period 2010-2014, and unemployment rate.

Two years after the adoption of these decisions, with the end of September 2017 as the target date for the conclusion of the relocation scheme, relocation is far from living up to the initial goals given that only 27,700 people were relocated as of 4 September 2017 (European Commission, 2017, p. 2). However, my intention here is not to explore the reasons for such failure, but rather to stress that relocation does not call into question the overall paradigm upon which the CEAS is based. Indeed, despite the supposed reforming character, relocation preserves the presumption of the feasibility of an orderly management of asylum seekers to be achieved through their allocation to a member state without their will being considered. In this way, relocation continues the objectification of asylum seekers, who are imagined as objects that can be moved from one place to another according to criteria that respond to states' concerns. Furthermore, the idea of unity and homogeneity characterising the common area of protection is reproduced by relocation schemes, as they impose the country of destination on the basis of a presumed equivalence of reception conditions across the EU. Yet, such a homogeneity is heavily called into question by the situation on the ground, as the next section shows.

#### **4. The excess of contexts of reception**

In line with anthropological analyses of reception practices (Van Aken, 2008; Sorgoni, 2011a; 2011b; Pinelli 2013; 2015), I understand reception as a social practice which is embodied in specific encounters and entangled in specific contexts. To speak of *reception practices* involves an attention to the “localised, everyday, human, and thus unique, dimension” (Urru, 2011, p. 63) of the encounters that shape the provision of reception. In this perspective, despite the institutional attempt to present it as an abstract procedure that can be replicated in all member states, reception appears as constitutively in excess as it is open to multiple forms across as well as within states. Stated in different terms, what I suggest is a kind of “spatial turn” in relation to reception, to be pursued through an emphasis on the role of local contexts in the management of asylum seekers.

The focus on local contexts of reception reveals a great degree of fragmentation and heterogeneity, thus destabilising the projection of homogeneity put forward by the CEAS. Moreover, the acknowledgement of the excessive character of contexts of

reception invites us to move beyond the “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer, Glick Schiller, 2003), which often characterises studies of the reception of asylum seekers. Indeed, despite the relevance of member states in terms of institutional setting and transposition of EU directives, a national frame of analysis is inadequate to analyse what appears as a EU-wide regime of management of asylum seekers which operates by differentiating conditions and experiences both within and across national borders. For these reasons, it is misleading to refer to an “Italian reception system” or a “Swedish reception system”, as these are reifications that obliterate the extreme heterogeneity which informs reception at the level of practices, experiences, and local arrangements. Along these lines, my decision to carry out fieldwork in two countries should not be associated with the intention to propose a comparison between presumed “national systems”, because that would fail to account for the heterogeneity of forms of reception that exists even within the same country.

The importance of contexts in the field of asylum seekers’ reception is aptly pointed out by the ethnographic study of Heath Cabot who examines an Athens-based NGO assisting asylum seekers (Cabot, 2013). Cabot highlights to what extent Greece is considered by both asylum seekers and NGO workers “as a kind of liminal geography, a *perasma* (passing-point), a Europe that is not Europe” (2013, p. 149). Similarly, the belief that some places are more EUropean than others became quite clear to me as well, during my previous work experience in a project in charge of assisting asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection in a northern Italian town. Indeed, a significant number of the people that I met were quite determined to quit the support program and move to “EUrope”, as from their point of view the poor reception conditions and scarce job opportunities did not allow Italy to qualify itself as fully EUropean.

Notwithstanding the process of harmonisation started in Tampere, these examples remind us that EUrope is far from being a smooth space from the perspective of asylum seekers. A great heterogeneity results from the excess of reception, which materialises through a multiplicity of practices, institutional arrangements, local configurations, and forms of implementation. Such a heterogeneous excess undermines the very foundation upon which the CEAS is based: namely, the assumption that asylum seekers are offered an equivalent level of treatment regardless of the place in which they are assisted. I suggest that the heterogeneity of reception makes the presumed common area of protection look like a machine of differentiation, whose function is to multiply asylum seekers’ experiences along spatial, institutional, and temporal lines. It is precisely along



spatial, institutional, and temporal lines that I would like to draw out three dimensions by which I will briefly analyse processes of differentiation at stake in the ways asylum seekers are governed through reception in the EU.

#### 4.1. Spatial differentiation

The first dimension of differentiation that needs to be considered is the spatial one. Reception is experienced very differently according to the geographical location where it takes place. Besides the support provided within reception centres, it needs to be acknowledged that different locations are differentially equipped for assisting asylum seekers due to a whole set of reasons which might include: the availability of training opportunities and language courses; the quality of healthcare services; the provision of specialised care for people with specific needs, such as victims of torture or traumatised people; and the availability of social support measures beyond those specifically aimed at asylum seekers. These differences were very clear to a governmental official in charge of local emergency reception measures, whom I interviewed in an Italian *Prefettura*. While discussing the features of several CAS that were managed by *Prefettura* in the area, the governmental official admitted how:

Big cities offer much more opportunities in comparison with smaller places. Let us think for example at Italian language classes. In all the reception centres that we run, there are Italian modules organised by the organisation that manages the facility [...] But, clearly, asylum seekers that are based in the city are also enrolled in other courses organised by different actors in the city, which are free. Hence, if they want to seize this opportunity they can, while those asylum seekers living in small villages across the province cannot. [...] There, *the local context offers less options*.

(Interview with an official from *Prefettura*, August 2015, my italics)

Such a disparity between cities and more remote areas is even more pressing in a country like Sweden, which is very vast but has a low population density. Consequently, some locations in which asylum seekers are received are extremely isolated and this can affect negatively the provision of reception measures. “If you are in the middle of Sweden, somewhere where you have to drive 50 km to get to the next house, that can be a really big problem” (Interview with a case-worker from *Arbetsförmedlingen*, January 2015). This is what I was told by a case-worker from *Arbetsförmedlingen*, whose task

was to follow beneficiaries of international protection benefitting from the two-year introduction plan that is discussed in sub-section 4.3. The case-worker continued by observing that the main problems in remote areas concern the lack of “opportunities for work or access to Swedish language courses”; both of which are not issues in the city in which she works. There, instead, the primary problem concerns the scarcity of housing which complicates asylum seekers’ trajectories after being granted protection, thus highlighting the long-term consequences of contexts of reception that are discussed below in relation to temporal differentiation.

All these aspects are crucial and draw attention to the contextual dimension of reception, which tends to be obliterated by the policy of harmonisation and its related narrative of a common area of protection. Far from being a neutral and abstract procedure, reception is deeply contingent on the context in which it takes shape, thus calling into question the very feasibility of harmonisation. Paraphrasing the description provided by Christina Boswell and Andrew Geddes in relation to migration policy, I argue that reception policy is not just about reception because other factors that influence the provision of reception need to be taken into account (cfr Boswell, Geddes, 2011, p. 20). As the quotes above suggest, these factors include welfare provisions, healthcare services, housing policies, levels of wealth, and features of labour markets. These domains are anything but homogenised in the current European conjuncture, thus revealing an unevenness which is exemplary of the uneven geographical development which characterises the EU (Hadjimichalis, 2011). Given the contextual character of reception, “EU’s uneven geography” (Heller et al, 2016, p. 14) inevitably affects the space of the common area of protection as well, making it fundamentally uneven. For these reasons, it is possible to speak of EU’s uneven geographies of reception. Unevenness, however, should also be traced within each single context as the next sub-section shows.

#### 4.2. Institutional differentiation

The spatial dimension alone is unable to account for the multiple possibilities of reception that exist even within the same location, as such a multiplicity can be the effect of a second dimension of differentiation, which I define as institutional differentiation. Indeed, reception can be experienced in highly diverse ways because of different institutional arrangements, relating for instance to the type of facility and the nature of those managing it. Facilities include private accommodations, collective centres, and

temporary facilities created through the conversion of hotels, bed and breakfasts, former schools, and former hospitals. As concerns the managers of facilities, they can be public bodies like *Migrationsverket*, non-profit organisations like those running several SPRAR projects, or even private profit-making actors, which are involved in emergency reception both in Italy and Sweden. Let me explore institutional differentiation by discussing how it plays out in the two countries that I visited during my fieldwork.

In Sweden, it is possible to identify two main forms of “ordinary” reception: *Anläggningboende* (ABO – facility accommodation) and *Eget boende* (EBO – private accommodation). ABO consists in accommodation directly managed by *Migrationsverket*, in which asylum seekers are distributed according to a dispersal scheme based on the availability of places at the national level. ABO includes rental apartments, transit centres, and collective reception facilities. By contrast, EBO involves private accommodation and relates to asylum seekers’ possibility to live with relatives or friends by providing an address to *Migrationsverket*. In the case of EBO, asylum seekers remain under *Migrationsverket*’s responsibility and are required to be available for the agency, but they have nonetheless the possibility to choose where to live as long as they are able to find somewhere to stay.

Without going too much into detail, two main differences between ABO and EBO can be identified. The first difference concerns the possibility to choose where to live that is offered by EBO, which often represents the only option to live in a city, given that *Migrationsverket* tends to run reception facilities outside main urban contexts. In Gothenburg, Malmö, and Stockholm, for example, there were very few ABO options at the time of my fieldwork and therefore asylum seekers who wanted to live there were obliged to find their own accommodation. In the previous sub-section, I emphasised how the geographical location might have an impact on the reception of asylum seekers through the availability or lack of opportunities. Hence, the allocation of ABO facilities outside urban centres is not simply a logistical matter because it also works as a mechanism which differentiates reception conditions and provides an unequal access to opportunities on the basis of one’s ability to locate one’s own accommodation. In addition, this also shows very clearly that spatial and institutional dimensions of processes of differentiation intersect rather than operating in isolation.

The second difference between ABO and EBO concerns dimensions and typologies of facilities. Several reception officers that I met admitted that they would prefer renting apartments instead of big centres, as apartments ensure greater

independence and a “more humane way to live” for asylum seekers. However, this is not always the case and *Migrationsverket* also resorted to big facilities at the time of my fieldwork, which were significantly called “camps” by asylum seekers. In these facilities, besides being subject to a specific code of conduct, concerning for instance the possibility to have guests or to smoke in the premises, asylum seekers might also have to share a room with other people, thus enjoying a limited degree of privacy and autonomy.

With respect to Italy, the situation is even more fragmented, leading to extremely diverse experiences of reception for asylum seekers. SPRAR is the main national reception programme even if it has historically proved unable to accommodate all those in need. Its shortage of places has paved the way to the diffusion of emergency reception measures, such as those of *Emergenza Nord-Africa* (ENA – North-African Emergency), between April 2011 and February 2013 (Dal Zotto, 2014), and CAS from late 2013. SPRAR is made of local projects of assistance for asylum seekers, beneficiaries of international protection and beneficiaries of protection on humanitarian grounds, managed by third-sector actors in partnership with local authorities. These projects normally provide accommodation in apartments or small reception centres, as well as a whole lot of activities including legal advice, financial support, career counselling, and psychological support. However, despite the common institutional framework, projects present significant differences between themselves depending on the organisation or cooperative which is in charge of the activities, as there might be differences in relation to experience, skills, working methods, and dedication. Due to these disparities, asylum seekers might therefore be offered different types of support, which are also characterised by different degrees of quality, in a very random manner.

Furthermore, the long-standing shortage of places in SPRAR facilities has obliged many asylum seekers to spend the whole period of the asylum procedure in other facilities, which normally present lower qualitative standards. As concerns “ordinary” reception measures, these facilities are *Centri di accoglienza per richiedenti asilo*, the so-called CARA (Reception Centres for Asylum Seekers), which are first-reception centres run by organisations contracted by *Ministero dell’Interno*. CARA often consists of huge, crumbling buildings situated at the outskirts of cities or near border points, and they are often overcrowded and lacking or providing inadequate healthcare and legal support, as

it has been denounced by several reports by the campaign *LasciateCIEntrare*<sup>23</sup> and the monitoring group *Borderline Sicilia*<sup>24</sup>. From these reports, it emerges quite clearly how reception conditions in CARA differ significantly from those provided within the SPRAR network, not only in relation to living conditions in the strict sense, but also in terms of legal advice, psychological support, and access to language and training courses, as these are not necessarily provided in CARA<sup>25</sup>.

#### 4.3. Temporal differentiation

Differentiation can also be traced to a third dimension, the temporal one. By speaking of a temporal dimension of differentiation, my aim is to draw attention to the long-term effects of reception which concern the consequences over time of the Dublin system. By confining asylum seekers spatially and simultaneously denying the mutual recognition of positive asylum decisions, the Dublin system turns the first country of entry into a cage, the departure from which is also obstructed after the granting of protection<sup>26</sup>. Indeed, the lack of a mutual recognition of positive decisions between member states, combined with the limitations to the intra-EU mobility of beneficiaries of international protection, transform the first country of entry into *the* place in which asylum seekers are destined to

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<sup>23</sup> *LasciateCIEntrare* is a campaign against administrative detention in Italy, which monitors conditions in detention and reception centres as well as advocating for the rights of migrants. For more information see: <http://www.lasciatecientrare.it/>.

<sup>24</sup> *Borderline Sicilia Onlus* is a non-profit organisation which monitors reception conditions, provides legal support to migrants, and raises awareness on the condition of migrants. For more information see: <http://migrantsicily.blogspot.it/>

<sup>25</sup> In addition, in both countries, the picture has been further complicated in recent years by the significant adoption of temporary emergency reception measures, which I can only mention here due the lack of space (see Vianelli, 2017 for a detailed discussion on this topic). In many of the contexts I visited, temporary reception measures were set up by outsourcing the management of reception facilities to private profit-making contractors, who – often lacking the skills and the motivations needed for the job – had opened reception centres out of hotels, holiday resorts, former military barracks, former hospitals, and so on. As a result, this process has produced what can be defined as a second-class reception, on which basis asylum seekers might come across very different experiences of reception even within the same local context.

<sup>26</sup> The obstacles which hinder post-recognition movements are emphasised by Giulia Borri in relation to a group of beneficiaries of protection on humanitarian grounds who left Italy in search of better opportunities in other EU member states (Borri, 2017).

stay *after* the asylum process as well. Hence, the different types of support programs that each member state dedicates to beneficiaries of international protection, as well as the diversity of social welfare measures which they are enabled to, function as a differentiating tool in the management of asylum seekers.

The cases of Italy and Sweden offer a privileged standpoint from which to explore the unevenness that characterises the supposed common area of protection after the concession of the refugee status or the one of subsidiary protection. Such an unevenness is a consequence of the lack of EU obligations concerning the support of beneficiaries of international protection. Indeed, if on the one hand the CEAS is supposed to lead to the harmonisation of reception conditions, on the other hand, it does not establish measures to support those who are granted protection, thus leaving this domain to be regulated by each member state. As a result, every member state decides how to treat beneficiaries of international protection once they obtain their status and this works as a factor of further differentiation given that beneficiaries of international protection are not allowed to move freely and benefit from the supposed common area of protection. Hence, they experience very different levels of post-recognition support, depending on where they find themselves or, as one should better say, depending on the country of asylum that was imposed on them by the Dublin system.

So, for example, in Sweden, *Arbetsförmedlingen* coordinates a two-year program whose goal is to promote the inclusion of beneficiaries of international protection through the provision of a set of activities aimed at the introduction in the labour market. The program is called *etableringsplan* (introduction plan) and is offered to all beneficiaries of international protection aged between 20 and 64, plus those aged 18 and 19 who are unaccompanied, with the exception of the retired, the disabled and students. The activities of the program include: language classes, civic orientation, and employment preparation activities, such as training courses, internships, work experiences at a workplace, and entry recruitment incentives. In addition, the support program also provides financial benefits, housing benefits, as well as supplementary benefits for those with children.

In Italy, by contrast, not all those who receive a positive decision on the asylum claim are entitled to dedicated support measures and, for those who are, the type of support provided is far from being as comprehensive as the one in Sweden. Indeed, only the limited number of asylum seekers who are in the SPRAR network during the asylum process have the chance to benefit from the activities provided by SPRAR for further 6 months, which can be extended in exceptional cases relating for example to health reasons

or the completion of a training course. During this time, along with housing and a financial allowance, beneficiaries of international protection should be offered language classes, professional training, psychological support, and job-search counselling.

For all those hosted in CAS, instead, the situation is extremely unclear as only a small percentage of asylum seekers is transferred to a SPRAR project after the positive decision, thus having the possibility to benefit from SPRAR measures for 6 or more months. The problem here is that there are no clear criteria about who should be transferred to the SPRAR network as soon as new places become available and this leaves room for discretionary practices. With respect to those who are not allocated to a SPRAR project after the positive decision, the post-recognition treatment depends very much on the orientation adopted by the *Prefettura* which is responsible for the CAS. At the time of my fieldwork, very few *Prefettura* were following the same criteria adopted by SPRAR by giving asylum seekers the chance to benefit from support measures for 6 or more months after the positive decision. Because of the need to free spaces in reception facilities, most *Prefettura* required asylum seekers to leave accommodation centres shortly after the positive decision as in the case of the *Prefettura* that I visited:

As far as we are concerned, we have opted for a procedure which is quite brutal, but which is nonetheless necessary because with such a pace of arrivals it is impossible not to have a quick turnover in the facilities. The places in reception facilities cannot be multiplied like loaves and fishes, if you follow me! [...] We have decided that people must leave facilities 20 days after their permit of stay is issued. Unless they are vulnerable people, for whom an extension is granted, or they have to complete something, such as an internship or a training course, in which case they are given enough time to complete it.

(Interview with a governmental official in a *Prefettura*, August 2015)

These examples show that the presumed common area of protection can be experienced in extremely diverse ways depending on where an asylum seeker ends up. Indeed, while rejections to asylum applications are valid across the space of the CEAS, the same does not apply for positive decisions and beneficiaries of international protection need to apply for a visa if they want to settle in another member state after being granted protection. Hence, the effects of the contexts of reception extend well beyond processing times because the first country of entry turns out to be the place in which asylum seekers are required to stay after the positive decision. For these reasons, I contend that differentiation has a temporal dimension which relates to the long-term implications of

heterogeneous contexts of reception. Therefore, contexts of reception do matter, as some contexts might offer more opportunities than others, thus transforming the supposed smooth space of the common area of protection into a machine of differentiation, which imposes different conditions and future possibilities to asylum seekers without justification.

## 5. Excessive movements

The excess of reception discussed above is inextricably linked with a second type of excess, which concerns the incessant practices of movement through which asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection attempt to take advantage of the unevenness characterising the European space. Such an excess became particularly evident during the “long summer of migration” in 2015 (Kasperek, Speer, 2015), when hundreds of thousands of people subverted the Dublin system and overcame police blocks, walls, and barbed wired fences across and beyond the “Balkan route”. Yet, the unprecedented dimension of these movements in last couple of years should not lead one to fall into the trap of the discourse of the “refugee crisis”. As Manuela Bojadžijev and Sandro Mezzadra argue, the long summer of migration rather signalled a dramatic acceleration of the “crisis of European migration policies” (Bojadžijev, Mezzadra, 2015), which had long been under way.

The long-standing character of such crisis is demonstrated for example by several studies stressing the relevance of “secondary movements” well before 2015 (Schuster, 2011a; 2011b; Cabot, 2013; Brekke, Brochmann, 2015; Borri, 2017; Fontanari, 2017). These movements became particularly evident in several Italian locations from the second half of 2013, as I could find out during my fieldwork when I tried to follow the transit of those who escaped fingerprinting in order not to be confined to Italy by the Dublin system. In particular, I visited the railway stations in Catania, Milan and Bolzano, with the aim of grasping forms and implications of such excessive movements. In these locations, various forms of support for those in transit were developed as a response to practices of movement, whose frequency had been growing drastically since 2013 and specifically after the establishment of the naval operation *Mare Nostrum* by the Italian government<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> *Mare Nostrum* was a military-humanitarian operation launched by the Italian government with the aim of rescuing migrants as well as identifying smugglers. It was started after two huge shipwrecks



In Catania, I met an activist who had been involved in supporting migrants, predominantly Syrians, at the train station between the end of 2013 and the spring of 2015. In that period, as the activist underlined, “there was a tacit agreement between institutions, according to which Syrians were let go and other migrants were stopped” (Interview with an activist, October 2015). Accordingly, a group of people decided to provide some assistance at the railway station by “distributing essential goods and clothes, buying phone cards, and taking people to the internet point” (Interview with an activist, October 2015). “We were actually providing some kind of first-reception”, the activist admitted (Interview with an activist, October 2015).

The following stage in the journeys of those departing from Catania was normally the central train station in Milan, which meanwhile had become a crucial stop-over for those travelling towards northern and western Europe, given that from there it is possible to take trains to France, Switzerland, Austria and Germany. Since 2013, a growing number of people had begun to stop in the mezzanine of the railway station in order to have some rest, gather information on the next stages of the journey, or simply wait for the right moment to cross the border. The phenomenon gradually expanded to the extent that in the summer of 2014 a group of volunteers started providing water and food to those on the road. When I visited the volunteers in August 2015, they had been recently assigned a space near the railway station by the municipality, in which they could provide meals, internet access, and showers to those who needed it. Through such institutionalisation, however, their work had been transformed into a help-desk for vulnerable migrants in general, somewhat losing the previous focus on those in transit. Indeed, volunteers were backed up by a cooperative whose function was to register the migrants who still had to be fingerprinted in order to then transfer them to reception centres in the Milan area.

The examples of Catania and Milan were followed by another important manifestation of the excessive character of movements which took place at the Brenner

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which occurred near the island of Lampedusa on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> October 2013 and provoked the death of 636 people (Tazzioli 2016). The naval operation was carried out by *Marina Militare* (Italian Navy) in partnership with *Aeronautica Militare* (Italian Air Force), *Carabinieri* (Carabinieri Corps), *Guardia di Finanza* (Italian Finance Police), *Capitaneria di Porto* (Italian Port Authority), *Corpo Militare della Croce Rossa Italiana* (Military Corps of the Italian Red Cross), and *Polizia di Stato* (Italian Police). It operated between 18<sup>th</sup> October 2013 and 31<sup>st</sup> October 2014.

border between Italy and Austria. As reported by Brenner/o Border Monitoring<sup>28</sup> (Saltarelli, Weissensteiner, 2015), movements on the so-called “Brenner route” acquired a significance relevance between 2013 and 2015, while simultaneously being accompanied by an increase in border controls. Border controls at Brenner can be divided into two types. On the one hand, mobile and non-systematic controls are implemented according to a bilateral agreement between Austria and Italy which dates to 1997<sup>29</sup>. The agreement provides for the so-called “readmission” of those who are intercepted either within 10 kilometres from the border or in the Bolzano province (Italy) or in the Federal Land of Tirol (Austria), without satisfying the legal conditions for a regular entry or stay in the country (Saltarelli, Weissensteiner, 2015)<sup>30</sup>.

On the other hand, there are the so-called “trilateral controls” involving police officers from Austria, Germany, and Italy, who operate in the Italian territory on EuroCity trains directed to Munich (Germany) (Statewatch 2014). In place since 2000 to fight against pickpockets on international trains, these patrols were strengthened and reorganised in November 2014 to intensify cross-border cooperation between the three countries. Since then, the aim of trilateral controls has become to stop undocumented migrants, like those who avoid fingerprinting after the arrival in Italy, as well as asylum seekers who lack the travel document that is required to move to another EU country. If controls were quite sporadic before the agreement of November 2014, they have since become an everyday activity, destined to ensure that as much asylum seekers as possible could be “taken out of trains in Italy”, as declared by Joachim Hermann, the Minister of Interior of Bavaria (Statewatch 2014).

Monika Weissensteiner, one of the founders of Brenner/o Border Monitoring, highlights how skin colour is normally the first criterion adopted by trilateral patrols to identify undocumented migrants (Weissensteiner 2015, p. 38), as I could observe myself while travelling towards Munich in November 2014. A few stops before the border,

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<sup>28</sup> Brenner/o Border Monitoring is a monitoring group which was created in September 2014 to follow the situation in the Brenner area in relation to border controls, practices of movements, living conditions of those *en route* as well as forms of support provided.

<sup>29</sup> The *Agreement between Italy and Austria on the readmission of people at the border* (Wien, 7<sup>th</sup> October 1997) entered into force on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1998, that is the day after internal border controls between Italy and Austria were abolished following the coming into force of the Schengen Agreement.

<sup>30</sup> The so-called “readmissions” can be either “informal”, if they occur within 24 hours from the interception, or “formal”, if the time-frame extends to a maximum of 8 days.

Austrian police officers appeared in the coach where I was sitting and walked past me without saying or asking anything. As I had just heard about trilateral controls, I started following the situation and could see that police officers stopped three black men in the coach next to mine. Although they had a ticket to Munich, as I could hear from their complaints, they were forced to get off the train in Brixen, which is slightly less than 40 kilometres away from the border. This brief example shows how the mechanisms of control impact differently on people in relation to their racialisation.

The result of these controls was that a significant number of people was either sent back to Brenner, or stopped in the train stations of Brenner, Brixen, and Bolzano. Hence, in Brenner and Bolzano, some volunteers organised in the summer of 2014 in order to provide some basic support to those in transit, as for example clothes, drinks, blankets, and essential legal advice. Following from that, between the end of 2014 and spring 2015, two help-desks were opened in which migrants could stop during the daytime to have a chat with volunteers, rest in a warm place, and get some food, drinks and clothes.

However, the controls did not manage to achieve their primary aim of preventing people from crossing the border, as it is admitted by Mario Deriu, secretary general of Bolzano's branch of the *Sindacato Italiano Unitario Lavoratori Polizia* (SIULP – Italian Unitary Trade Union for Police Officers): “100% of those who try to cross the border succeed in the end” (Redattore Sociale 2015). As Weissensteiner also emphasises:

As a matter of fact, controls are not successful in stopping people in Italy. They have simply made the journey longer, more difficult, more dangerous, more expensive, and more illegal; namely, by sometimes leaving people with the option of paying someone who is willing to take them beyond the border.

(Weissensteiner 2015, p. 39)

Therefore, the case of Brenner shows well how increased border controls do not block movements but rather keep “people caught in mobility and [transform] border-regions into zones of heightened circulation” (Hess 2012, p. 436). As stressed by the quotes above, far from sealing the border, the strengthening of controls rather “irrationalises peoples’ movements as it interrupts their plans and trajectories and re-directs peoples’ routeways” (Hess 2012, p. 436).

## **6. Conclusion: beyond uneven geographies of reception and of Europe**

In the same way as the excess of reception discussed above, the excessive character of movements exposes the unevenness that characterises EUrope, thus contributing to the destabilisation of the image of homogeneity projected by the policies of harmonisation of reception conditions and relocation. With their movements, asylum seekers appropriate the EUropean space and operate as a “rating agency from below” (Heller et al, 2016, p. 14) through which EU member states are assessed on the basis of the presumed living conditions and possibilities. By doing so, they disqualify countries that they consider not “EUropean” enough, as in the examples from Cabot and myself mentioned in section 4, thus drawing attention to the differences between living conditions, levels of development, rates of employment, salaries, and welfare provisions, which are inherent features of EUrope. Such “unevenness over space”, as Costis Hadjimichalis observes, “is not a mere sidebar to how capitalism works, but is fundamental to its reproduction” (2011, p. 255). In other words, these differences underscore the “neoliberal geographies of uneven development” (Brenner, 2003) that inform EUrope, reproducing and valorising unevenness rather than levelling it. If considered from the vantage point of the government of asylum seekers, unevenness seems to serve the interests of capital not only as a spatial strategy of uneven development, but also through the promotion of “illegalised” secondary movements, which can in turn be exploited and valorised in economic terms.

Besides emphasising EUrope’s uneven geographies, the excess of reception and the excessive character of movements point to possible ways for calling into question EUrope and radically rethinking it. Such an attempt should begin from a radical critique of two key aspects of the current configuration of EUrope, which I discussed in this article by focusing on the reception of asylum seekers: management of mobility and spatial unevenness. With respect to the first aspect, the emphasis on the excess of reception and on the excessive character of movements calls for moving beyond the current policy framework which attempts to govern the mobility of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection through the Dublin system and the harmonisation of reception conditions. In this respect, to rethink Europe as an area of protection implies taking into consideration individual desires, expectations and family ties in the choice of the context of reception, thus rejecting any distribution mechanism that objectifies asylum seekers. In other words, this means giving asylum seekers the freedom to choose where to live in the common area of protection not only during the processing of the asylum claim, but

also after the granting of protection. In this regard, the mutual recognition of positive asylum decisions combined with the requirement for all member states to provide post-recognition support measures to all beneficiaries of international protection would make the idea of a common area of protection more credible.

As concerns the second aspect on spatial unevenness, this article has emphasised the entanglement between reception and the context in which it takes place, thus stressing the impossibility to detach the provision of reception from the broader social, housing, healthcare, and labour policies which constitute its setting. The analysis of the excess of reception drew attention to the unlikelihood of providing equivalent reception conditions in a space which is substantially uneven and fragmented like EUrope. In this respect, the attempt to create a common area of protection needs to be accompanied by a corresponding effort to reduce the unevenness which characterises EUrope. This can only be achieved by calling into question the neoliberal project which underpins the EU and by imagining Europe in terms in which unevenness is not exploited for capitalist interests, but rather tackled in order to provide a more equal access to possibilities for all. In this way, a critical examination of the homogeneous idea of EUrope that emerges from the CEAS provides an entry point for imagining a fairer and more equitable Europe, as a space which is truly smooth in terms of possibilities, living conditions, and welfare for everybody.

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